

The Blue Review



Spring Edition

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Austin Buehler

The mission of *The Blue Review* is to create an online publication that showcases the talents of the students of Hammonton High School.

Students have an outlet for creative expression as they may submit written and visual works for publication. All students are encouraged to electronically submit work such as prose, poetry, essays, photos, paintings, and sketches.

Twice a year, a team of dedicated students acts as an editorial board that chooses and edits their peer's submissions. By creating *The Blue Review*, students have the opportunity to share their creativity with their community.

For this edition, the editorial board also requested submissions from their teachers.

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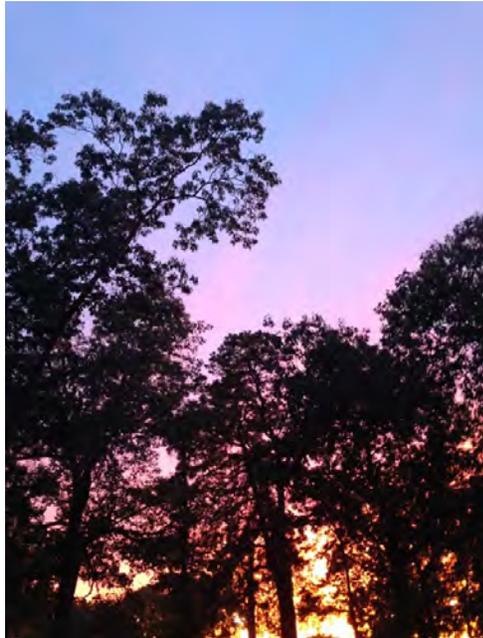
AURA

TAYLOR GEIGER

EVERY WORD HAD VIBRATIONS,
VIBRATIONS ARE TAKEN INTO CONTEXT,
WHETHER THEY ARE POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE
VIBRATIONS CAN CARRY THROUGH THE SKY,

THOUGHTS TRANSLATE INTO
ENGLISH
POSTURE,
TONE,
DICTION,
RESPONSE TO NEGATIVE EMOTIONS,
COMPREHENSION,
EYE CONTACT,

EMOTIONS COME BEFORE WORDS
LEAVE
THE TIP OF YOUR TONGUE
EMOTIONS BOTTLE THE STRESS OF THE
EVERLASTING GLOW OF YOUR MISERY,



ASIDE FROM THAT GLOW IS A BEAM,
A BEAM SO BRIGHT YOUR PUPILS

SHRINK AND YOUR CORNEA BURNS,
THE INNER YOU.
WE ARE ALL MISERABLE HERE,
BUT HOW BRIGHT DOES YOUR BEAM SHINE
CAN YOU SEE THE EVERLASTING GLOW AT ALL

TRAIN YOUR MIND,
BELIEVE AND ENLIGHTEN
YOUR MIND IS MY MIND,
WE ARE ALL ONE.

I BET OUR CONSCIENCE SOUNDS THE SAME,
I BET I'VE FELT ONCE HOW YOU HAVE BEFORE.

SMILE,
FOR YOUR BEAM OVERSHADOWS THE GLOW,
HEAL YOUR TE
MPLES WITHING YOURSELF,
STEADY BREATHING RELAX.
MIND AT EASE.



The Dance

Stacy Peretti

“What is life’s purpose?” This question often arose in my philosophy course in college and it has been one that has plagued me as a result for quite some time. Hamlet pondered this very question when he pondered, “To Be or Not To Be.....that is the question”. Philosophers have struggled for centuries in an attempt to answer this question. Aristotle decided that life was the ultimate, “pursuit of happiness,” and is the purpose for our existence. Plato added that life is about, “attaining the highest form of knowledge.” Some Chinese philosophers hold that finding the purpose of life is meaningless and that our life’s aim should be becoming one with nature to simply survive. Needless to say, studying philosophy, psychology, literature and even history did not give me the answer that I had longed for in my life. Unfortunately, it was with a tragic event in late May of 2013 when I received my answer loud and clear.

When the phone rang on this early Sunday morning during Memorial Day weekend, I expected an invitation for a barbeque or even a trip to the beach. Unfortunately, this phone call was not one that would express well wishes or offer invitations. Instead, it was a call to inform me that 2 of my students had been in a car accident the night prior, and one had died. It is difficult to express in words exactly what I was feeling in that moment. Having someone close to me pass away when I was a sophomore in high school from a tragic car accident, I felt like I was reliving this tragedy. Many questions swirled in my mind. How was I going to face my students in period 2, the class where Chris was such an energetic part of? What was I going to say to his best friends who I had in class? What would I say to the driver of that car who I also had in class? I struggled with these questions and shed many tears that weekend....and once again, the question that had plagued me for years continued to haunt me.

I decided to go for a drive Monday night to clear my head and think. That half hour drive is one that was life changing for me. The song, "The Dance," by Garth Brooks became the true answer to my prayers. As my car trudged along the highway, Garth Brooks began his song. Brooks sang, "Our lives are better left to chance; I could have missed the pain, but I'd have had to miss the dance..." I began thinking how life is full of unexpected turns, difficult falls, and traumatic moments as well as thrilling dips, breathtaking twirls and truly wonderful moments. Snapshots of my life played through my head, both the good and bad. I saw my husband's beaming face on our wedding day, the angelic face of my child the day she was born, my grandmother when she was dying from cancer, the faces of people at a funeral of my good friend when I was 17, and the beautiful beach that I love to enjoy in the summer months. I started thinking how we need to cherish each and every moment no matter how hard it is. It seems that life is about overcoming the difficulties so we can learn to embrace and truly cherish the good. At any time this gift of life could be stripped from us. Because of this, we need to truly live every minute, living a life with no regrets. In short, the answer to my question became quite simple. What is the purpose of life? The answer to this question was simply, "to live it."

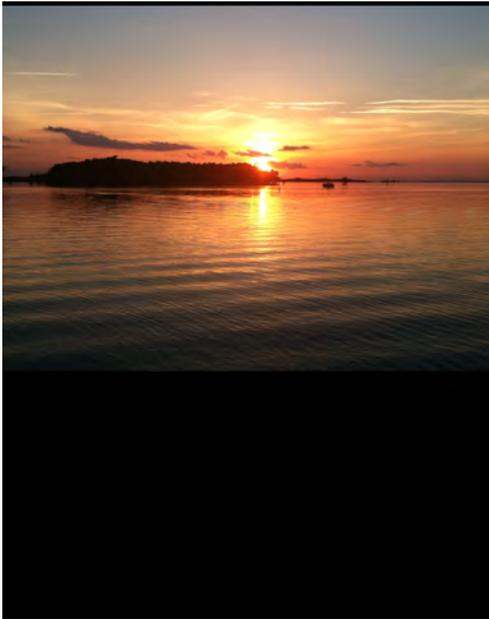
When I faced my students on the day after Chris' death, I told them this. Yes, we shed many tears. However, I know without a doubt that they received my message. I think I offered comfort to these students who were looking to me for direction. What we shared that year was truly special. We became a very special family, and these students will always have a very special place in my heart. In the days that followed, I witnessed my students band together and raise money for the family. I witnessed many of them courageously speak at the vigil held in Chris' honor. I remember telling them that I was not strong enough to get up and speak that night. I witnessed them provide comfort for Chris' extended family. I witnessed students talking and comforting other students who were not part of their peer groups. Cliques did not matter anymore. They were all in this together. I witnessed their strength and unconditional love for each other on graduation night. I walked off the field that night with tears rolling down my face. This is a snapshot moment that is one that I will remember with pride. My students and I learned the most powerful lesson that year about life....how to truly dance.

Endless Summer

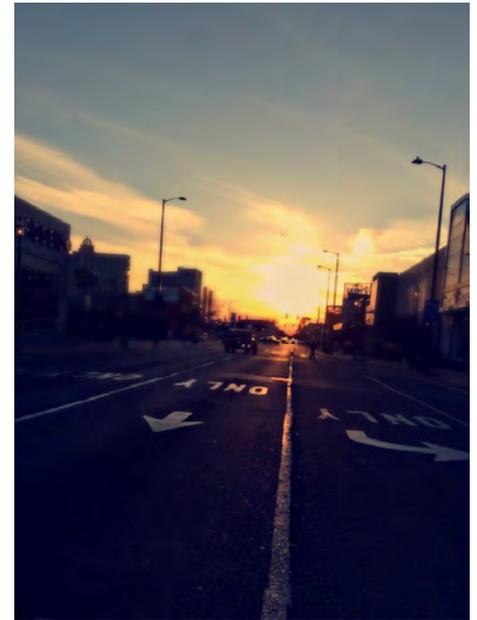
Katie Cushman

The late afternoon summer sun gleamed down on pedestrians as the streets of Asbury Avenue became more and more crowded, signifying that evening was approaching. Locals and shoe-bees paraded up and down the street, weaving in and out of shops or contemplating where to have dinner for the night. Each shore house that lined the street was a representation of not only summer, but the family memories made each summer, and memories that were still left to come. A glance off in the distance, and Ocean City's famous ferris wheel was in site, alternating between different colors and serving as a symbol that summer had officially begun in America's largest family resort.

As the sun makes its descent for the night, the Ocean City boardwalk is packed with families, young and old couples, and friends just wanting to have a good time for the night.



Children scream and wander in every which way, as they beg their parents to take them to the Wonderland Pier or greedily beg for more ice cream to fill themselves with. The smell of Johnson's homemade popcorn fills the air and the salt water taffy figure always eagerly stands outside of Shriver's, hoping to snatch a picture with a passer-by. Shops on the boardwalk, such as Henry's or the Islander, are always bustling with people coming in and out, picking out the new trends for summer.



Several feet in the air, sea gulls lurk, waiting to steal a nibble from the food in someone's hand or the hundreds of thousands of crumbs that lay scattered on the boardwalk. Off in the distance, small flickers of light glimmer from ships at sea or mile markers on the water. The waves crash, one at a time and the lights from the amusement rides last all night, as more memories are being made. Another endless summer is on the horizons in Ocean City, America's largest family resort.

I TOLD YOU SO

Shontiana Butcher

“I told you so.”

All my life, this phrase haunted me. From my mother constantly breathing down my neck about my decisions, to my friends trying to prove that they know me better than I know myself. I constantly fight to prove that I can live this life on my own, but still, at twenty three I cannot escape the dreaded “I told you so.”

So it comes as no surprise that I fled at my first opportunity. Right after high school I left New Jersey and went to college in Georgia. For the first time I had a life of my own. For the first time I did not have to hear “I told you so” after every choice I made. My life was not anything miraculous, but it was my own.

Some years after my time in Georgia I had a child, a baby girl. As soon as I told my family all of the judgement returned. Everyday there was a call from home; someone telling me how I should care for her, how I should feed her, how I should dress her, and what I need to do to raise a child well. It was all too overwhelming, this went on daily for first year of her life. I would go crazy if my life continued this way. Even though I live in Georgia and my family is in New Jersey, they still found ways to make my life miserable. My life is just beginning, and I want to feel good about it.



I decided that I would raise my daughter completely on my own. I would prove to my family that, finally, I don't need an "I told you so." I was so confident in my capabilities that I started a life without my family once again with a spring in my step. I was ready to take on this challenge and come out with an amazing, talented daughter that loved me. Back then, I never would have thought that 12 years later I'd be living with this disrespectful monster of a daughter that I have now.

"I told you so," A phrase that I had escaped for so long was coming back to haunt me. Taylor did not listen to me anymore, I have no control in my own home. There's no other option. I need help, so reluctantly my fingers begin to dial the number, I buy the plane ticket, and within a week my mother was standing in my driveway. And so it begins..

She walks inside my house, that looks as if a tornado had blown through the inside, and instantly she was murmuring to herself. I felt the judgement. Her eyes look from room to room at the disheveled mess in which I lived. It's almost funny; my house looks the way my life feels, in shambles.

.....

There was little that my mother could do to help, I guess it's too late for an outside force to affect my daughter. She was disrespectful and rude towards her grandmother, and she was rude to me in front of her. My mother coming down here in attempts to help was such an embarrassment. Something had to be done. So when my mother left I took away Taylor's phone. She yelled and screamed, tearing pictures off the walls. Glass shattered everywhere, I had never seen her so livid before. What have I done to make the girl that I projected to be my little princess turn into a violent beast that I did not recognize? She eventually tired herself out by locking herself in her room and, from the sounds of it, destroying everything in sight. I left her alone. I could not bear to go inside to see the damage she created this time around. I felt my insides twisted into knots as I staggered to the kitchen. I collapsed on the floor and broke down, I could no longer be strong. They were right. I can't do this on my own, what was I thinking? "I told you so," it rang in my ears, the room spun around me so I laid my head onto the floor to try to ease my pain.

.....

I awoke to a semi-clean house. This is no different from her usual routine. After a fight, Taylor will become a monster, but transform back to a princess soon after. She becomes my very own Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. But right now, I need to pretend that everything is alright and normal to avoid having a panic attack like the one I had last night. I can't allow her to see that she makes me weak, she can't know that she is breaking me.

I get up and she skips over with a mango smoothie, wearing the most adorable smile on her face.

"Hi mommy, I made you a smoothie if you're thirsty," she giggled and skipped away. I have to admit, the act is great. If I hadn't known that for years she was a devious, conniving beast, I wouldn't be so disgusted. I snapped and told her to go in her room and behave; I don't want to look at her let alone be made to look like a fool falling for her act. Her facade cracked ever so slightly at my words, but she skipped away. Nevertheless, I was thirsty, so I took a sip. The taste was off. I guess she just didn't rinse the cup well enough after washing it, the smell and taste of bleach was overpowering the drink. So I got rid of it. She kept peeking her head around the corner to look at me, I'm not sure why..

Day three without her phone and her act is starting to crumble. The sweet little twelve year old that came to replace my daughter is on her way out. Each smile she gives me looks like the equivalent of her being slapped in the face. I don't know if I'm ready for the real Taylor to return. Before I get out of bed I hear things in the hallway falling, or being thrown. Taylor is screaming threats at me as she destroys the little bits of the house that she has cleaned. Before I get up I drink water from the little jug I keep beside my bed. Instantly I feel sick. I spit all of the water onto the floor because the jug is full of bleach. Questions started running through my head. Did she really try to kill me? Were her threats serious? Who else could have done this? Where did I go wrong? Should I call the police?

I started to feel ill, partially because of the bleach, but mostly because I have no idea what on earth I should do. I locked my bedroom door, called my mother, and prepared for the "I told you so's."

The phone rang three times, each ring caused my heart to crawl up higher in my throat. She answered, so I just blurted out,

"Taylor tried to kill me."

“What?” she responded obviously confused. So I repeated my statement. I could hear my mother take a deep breath. She then said,

“Call the police. I know this is your little girl, and you tried to do all that you can for her, but she tried to kill you. Call the police, I’ll fly down tomorrow and we will handle this together.” This was not the response I expected, I was silent for a bit. So she talked again,

“Don’t leave your room until the police get there, if she tried to poison you I wouldn’t want to know what else she’s willing to try. Call the police now.” Then she hung up. I sat there for a while just thinking. No I told you so. She didn’t laugh or make fun of me for how much I failed as a mother. My mom finally acted like a mother, I finally felt like she really cared.

Now its time to call the police. I can’t live like this anymore. I can’t go on living in fear of my own daughter. Walking on eggshells trying to keep her happy because of the tantrum that will ensue if she doesn’t get her way. I’m tired. Tired of living in a train wreck of a home because she is constantly destroying things, tired of being embarrassed to go to her school because she is “That kid,” and I’m tired of having emotional breakdowns every other day because I don’t know where I’m going wrong. Now I’m not even safe in my own home. My life is at risk now and I can’t take this anymore. She needs help, and I can’t give it to her. I dial the number. As the police came and took my daughter away, I said to her,

“I told you to behave. I told you so, but you didn’t listen to me.”

Bridging the Gap

Stacy Gerst, age 20

Nestled on the coast of New Jersey and bordering the waters of the Atlantic Ocean is a family resort called Ocean City. The town encompasses its own island, attracting hundreds of vacationers each summer

to its beach and boardwalk. Because I live just 40 minutes inland, I religiously make the drive to the shore whenever the opportunity arises.

I wake up early in the morning and pack my car with the essentials: my beach chair, towel, and a bottle of water. After driving the windy back route through several small towns, I can see the green support beams of the 9th street bridge rise in the distance. I smile as the musky aroma of salt seeps through my air conditioning vents and overwhelms my sense of smell. At this point, I proceed to unroll my window and allow the thick ocean air to creep into my car. The moisture immediately rolls onto my hands and the steering wheel becomes sticky within seconds. Traveling on the mile-long bridge, I am surrounded by gray, choppy water to my left, my right, and even underneath me, as I pass over grated portions. Splashes of white spontaneously emerge across the span, as the wind pushes water into violent collisions.

Looking ahead, the island of Ocean City stretches across my entire range of peripheral vision; the light blue water tower stands like a fortress above the condos and summer homes, proudly declaring the town name in bold, black letters. I can see the Ferris wheel of the boardwalk amusement pier to the left, at rest after a busy night's work and anxiously awaiting the next round of tourists.

Before I realize it, the 9th Street Bridge has transformed into the two-lane central road of the island. The road is packed, with cars backed up bumper-to-bumper at every traffic light. Because 9th Street is the most traveled road for visitors, the prominent shops and restaurants occupy every inch of space along this strip. The fluorescent sign advertising the Beach Bums Surf Shop immediately grabs the attention of drivers and suddenly rows upon rows of colorful beach chairs come into view. Their red, pink, and green floral designs are reminiscent of the tropical beach scenes of St. Thomas or Martinique. Alas, the exotic atmosphere soon dissolves as the beach chair designs are soon enveloped by the surrounding ice cream parlors and pizza shops.

On the corner of 9th and Asbury Avenue, it is difficult to ignore the hot pink, four-story building that is home to the Chatterbox Restaurant. Inside, this family diner is filled with pink eating booths and has a jukebox in the center of the floor. Scenes of 50's memorabilia are painted on the walls, including an image of Elvis playing a fiery-red guitar that can be seen from the front entrance. From the road, you can look in the ground-level windows into the restaurant and view the activity going on inside.

As I pass by the Chatterbox, I can picture my whole family sitting in the back room, waiting for the waitress to push three tables together so we could all fit. I must have been about ten years old and my four cousins were there. After dinner, we begged our moms to let us share a "Belly Buster." A "Belly Buster" at the Chatterbox consists of five different flavors of ice cream in addition to your choice of five toppings. About fifteen minutes after we ordered, the waitress brought out this massive sundae that looked more like a cooking disaster than a dessert: green, pink, and brown rounded mounds of ice cream, strawberries, whipped cream, hot fudge, caramel syrup, and a variety of other ingredients all mixed and melting together in one bowl. The warm, velvety fudge tasted like heaven when combined with the sweet tinge of cherries and the cold, creamy sensation of the melting ice cream. The clanging of the five metal spoons violently digging into the ice cream could be heard above our laughter. Even my mom and my aunt couldn't help themselves from laughing at us.

I spent many summers vacationing in Ocean City and this is only one of the many memories that I keep close to my heart. Since then, things are different and we no longer go to the shore all together. College classes, summer jobs, and marriages are just a few of the elements that have affected each one of our lives. My mom and I will often take a drive along that well beaten path to Ocean City and talk about all the fun times we have shared there.

Reminiscing has an uncanny ability to strengthen relationships.



Predator of the Concrete Jungle
Anonymous

I can't help myself. I just can't help myself. The littlest thoughts that come across my mind about young girls transforms me into some sort of animal. Some would consider me a predator, others would see me as a petifile, but it's nothing short of passion and true love. I have a strong feeling of love when I see young girls all around me at the park, the store,

the beach, everywhere. I especially adore the ones that have shiny, long, blonde hair, sea-like blue eyes, straight glistening teeth, and a body like a supermodel. Feeding the animal that lives inside of me is a tough task. Not every girl that I come across fits the criteria perfectly which then fills me with rage and desperation. The rage starts to fill my body which then leads me off into the darkness to hunt for my beautiful prey. Tonight shall be the night where I feast on the perfect one.

As night falls, the hunger grows stronger and stronger deep within my soul. I feel it growing by the second as I prepare myself for the attack. I dress myself in black boots, black pants, a black zip up hoodie and a black baseball cap. This is the essential outfit for tonight's feast. As I step out of my domain, I lurk through the shadows as I make my way downtown. Hiding deep within the shadows gives me the perfect opportunity to seek out my prey. Making my way into downtown, I suddenly stop in my tracks. This is the one. I know it. As I follow this perfect contender, I begin to fall deeply in love with her beauty and perfectness. Suddenly, she turns the corner down a dark alley, which for me is the ultimate takedown place. I crept up behind her, being as quiet as a mouse, capturing her as I latch my arm around her neck. There's no escaping me you gorgeous creature. She began to kick, scream, and attempting to fight back which made it even more fun for me.

"Let me go, please. I'll give you whatever you want, just please let me go," screams the girl.

I replied, "Well you see my love, I want nothing else but you."

The crying and screaming became louder and louder, so I finally shut her up. I tightened up my arm around her neck, laid her on the ground and stared at her. My adrenaline is rushing through my body which then lead me to take her beautiful body back to my domain.

I brought her into my domain, tied her to a chair ducking taping her hands and legs together and sat her in an up-right position. My hearts racing a million miles a minute and my sweat is dripping down my body. Now is the time for me to lie and wait until she awakes from unconsciousness. I kept pacing across the room waiting impatiently for her to wake up. Sooner than I expected, her eyes slowly opened and her body started to shake. A huge grin went right across my face from ear to ear. I crept right up to her face, leaned over her and smelled the aroma of her body as tears ran down her cheeks. This has been the best one yet. The animal inside me came roaring out ready to take over.

Her blood is everywhere, all over the walls, the ceiling, staining the floor, and even all over our clothes. The animal that is trapped inside of me is finally content. As I scan over the room, I realize it's time to dispose of this precious body. I packed up my belongings, put on a new set of clothes, stuffed the body in a garbage bag and walked out of the building without anyone seeing me. As I make my way to the dumpster, I look down at the bag that contains the body and began sobbing. I can't believe I let the animal inside take over this whole operation once again. It feels as if I have to do all the dirty work. Why is it that I never get to have any of the fun.



My First Phillies Game

Brandon Gazzara

America's pastime became an amazing present day reality for a five year old boy who had a strong love and desire for the game of baseball. On April 7, 2003 I attended my first ever professional sporting event. It was my brother, Brian's, seventh birthday and we were both full of joy. As we entered Veteran's Stadium to attend an early season matchup between the Philadelphia Phillies and the in state rival, Pittsburgh Pirates, I could not help but be perplexed by the immense size and great energy that surrounded me. I could nearly taste a hot dog by its unbelievably welcoming smell. The awe of being in the same place

as some of my favorite players and childhood heroes made me feel like a million dollars. It was the best day of my life so far, I had never been so amazed by anything before in my life.

Prior to first pitch I recognized how perfect the field looked, and just how splendid it must have been to play on a big league diamond. The only thing that could have made the moment better would be if I was taking part in the game as a player for the Phillies. However, being inside the atmosphere of the stadium and noticing what it took to make a game occur was extremely intriguing and wondrous to be around at such a young age. As I munched on my first ever stadium dog the Phillies took the field and the crowd roared. Through the entire game I cheered every time the team reached base, scored a run, or recorded an out in the field. Following the top of the seventh inning we all sang “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” and enjoyed the seventh inning stretch. When we returned to our seats a man came and asked everyone in our section to sing my brother happy birthday. His face lit up and he was given a Phillies hat to commemorate the moment. The Phillies scraped up enough runs to defeat the Pirates, and the Manager, Larry Bowa was ejected for arguing a poor call by the umpire. The crowd yelled his name as he stewed with anger in his attempt to sway the stubborn umpire. Watching young, up and coming stars, like Chase Utley, Ryan Howard, and Jimmy Rollins gave me a glimpse of the future. When the Phillies won the World Series in 2008, I knew that I had watched the team develop for the previous five seasons.

All in all, my first Phillies game was spectacular and it will never escape my memory as long as I live. Nothing can compare to the atmosphere, smell, and high level of superiority you receive from entering the stadium. The pure fact that I was able to spend the moment with my family on my brother’s birthday made it even more special.

BALL IS LIFE

Jake Ellington

I never liked many sports,
I always liked playing forts,
My friend limit was around 10,
We always hung in my father's den.
Then one day we found a game,
That i thought would bring us much fame,
It had a ball and two little baskets,
But this was played without any rackets,
You shoot the ball up in the air,
and contend for the miss always fair.
Whenever you have a little bit of strife,
Just remember this quote, Ball is Life.





Dust in the Wind

Aly Oren

Each syllable that passes from their lips raises in volume, piercing through the thin veil of slumber and waking the product of what was once love in his stiff cot, beneath his scratchy, thin wool blanket that he clutches tighter with each shrill and screech about money and water and how President Hoover is the reason they're void of those things because he refuses to help. The wool scrapes his skin as he drags it over his head, trying desperately to block out the argument, to erase the discontent and hatred that has transpired between his parents, to try and fall back asleep despite being so far out of its reach now. He's heard it before. Every single night, without fail, since the fields dried, the anger, the despair, and the desperation has boiled in his parents' blood until it exploded into screaming matches that neither one ever wins.

And their eight year old son must bear.

The house creaks, groaning as the wind outside stirs and shakes the small wooden shack his father had built their tiny family on this small patch of what used to be farmland.

He vaguely recalls the sounds of a hammer on wood, a shovel breaking through rich, damp dirt, laughter as his baby sister sifted her hands through a nice, thick puddle of mud and dumped it on the front of her dress and watching as their parents grinned and shook their heads at her before returning to work, his momma back to planting flowers, his papa back to hammering wood to the roof.

The boy misses the flowers.

They don't grow anymore.

Now, he knows nothing but fiery arguments that burn through the night, that refuse to cease regardless of the screams of his baby sister in the room beside him or the howling of the wind outside as it kicks up the dry, infertile, useless dirt that once generated their only means of income.

Though he's still in some form of infancy, the comprehension that he's able to muster from the bits and pieces of the shrieks that pierce through the thin walls is strong enough to make him aware of what needs to be done to put an end to this. If only he had a way to find a job, to try and give his parents the money they needed. But what work was there in the middle of Oklahoma? Nothing but dead, parched fields surrounded them, nothing but land that could do nothing for them except contribute to the heat of the summer by tenfold.

The baby screeches, attempting to match the volume of their parents, and the boy sinks further into his cot, tears stinging in his eyes as if each word was a physical knife slashing and tearing at his skin and leaving those scars that would never heal. No one moves to tend to her. The screaming match persists, and at some point, the boy's sobs exhaust his body to pacify his mind for a transient moment, enough for him to fall back into the weak grips of slumber.

Something wakes him once more, but this time, no voices are to be heard once his mind has dug through the thick grogginess of sleep. His face aches ever so slightly, burning, irritated by the coarse wool he'd fallen asleep under, but there's also a whistling in his ears, as if a powerful gust of wind was whipping through his skull, breaking from the confines of the outside world and daring to enter their home and loom and threaten its inhabitants. Something sounding like pebbles litter the air outside, tapping on the windows of the boy's room, and no longer than a minute passes before the baby's wails begin to echo through the house, screeching at the

top of her lungs to the point of coughing, choking, then crying again. The wind howls resiliently, shaking the house, throwing rocks at the windows, filling the house with noise, scratching at the glass, tearing at the wood, and the boy's heart plummets into his stomach.

'Monsters,' is his only thought, 'Momma and Papa woke them up and now they're coming for us.'

Trembling, the boy dares to venture out of his scratchy blanket cocoon, the baby's hollers beginning to be more frequently interrupted by sounds of choking, and the second his skin is exposed, the dirt slices it open, leaving his flesh screaming more than the wool already had. His eyes struggle to focus, struggle to see anything through the thick cloud that has filled the room, that rips through him, bringing tears to his eyes and a cry in his throat.

The baby is tossed into another coughing fit in the room next door.

After, she doesn't cry again.

The boy opens his mouth to cry out for his parents, but the dust fills his mouth, scratching his throat, collecting in his lungs, sending him into a coughing fit that he recovers from soon enough and learns not to try to open his mouth again. Tears cut through the grime already smearing across his face as well as the blood that wells up from cuts the sand and dirt leave behind, and the boy muffled his cries as he presses his blanket to his face, protecting himself from the storm, blocking himself from the wind that creeps so easily into the house, but adding to the pain of the wounds already on his raw skin.

His momma's tired voice carries from the other room, calling for him, then increasing in power when she yells at his papa to get the baby, and he blindly runs for her, slamming into walls, sobbing into his blanket, confused, enveloped in dust, choked by wind, grasping for her, unable to see through the thick veil the dust storm has produced.

He can't find her, not until he hears another wail, but not from his baby sister, and a choking sob that finally guides him to her. He crashes into her, burying his face into her stomach, but she doesn't grab him, she doesn't wrap her arms around him and try to soothe him, protect him. He grasps at her, crying, asking her to save him from the monsters, but all he can feel is her chest rising and falling, sobs racking her lungs, tears occasionally dripping down and wetting his face, screams tearing through her throat that she tries to cover with her hands. He can't see, he doesn't want to see. The monsters are here. His momma is too scared to protect him.

His papa is silent, he can feel him find him and his momma, stand beside them silently as the wind continues to rip through, slashing at their skin, but soon, he pulls them both into his grasp and covers them, protecting them as the monsters continue to loom closer and closer and closer.

The boy doesn't look.

The next morning, it's a while before his papa is able to dig through the sand and dirt mountains that litter the fields, unearthing the car that his momma, with tears still leaving tracks down her cheeks, packs to the brim with their things, the baby's blanket strung over her shoulder. The boy doesn't know where they're going. But he knows they're leaving.

Papa says goodbye first. He kisses the baby's forehead before handing her to Momma, who bursts into tears once more and only holds her long enough to leave tear stains on her dress before Papa takes her again. The boy cries because his momma cries.

He hopes that his baby sister makes the flowers grow again.

Letters

Courtney Mateo

"Only one year babe," Derek whispered to me as he fell asleep. Except it's not only one year, it's 365 days, 52 weeks, 8,649 hours, and 31,136,400 seconds. One year is an eternity without him. Sadness instantly filled my body as my shoulders started to tremble. Never in a million years would I think I'd fall so deeply in love with someone in active duty. As unwanted thoughts of my love invaded my mind, I tried to force myself into sleep. Minutes turned into hours as I began to drown in my thoughts of Derek. There is no way to know at anytime if he is safe, or even where he is. Then, I begin to think of what life would be without him, but the next year will be just that.

Just as I felt my body relax and fall into a deep sleep, I felt Derek move from the bed. I forced a small moan out as he opened the curtains letting the strong August sun dance around the bedroom. As I sleepily turned to face him I saw him getting his bags in order, it looked as though he was double checking to see if he had all his main essentials, which was really all he was allowed.

Laying there staring up at his beautifulness I just wanted to run my hands through his wet, freshly showered, dirty blonde hair. I decided to do it, for it will be the last time I'll be able to for the next 365 days. As I heaved my exhausted body up to rest on my knees he stopped packing, I could tell he sensed my absolute sadness. I slowly began to reach for his hair, but he had another idea in mind; seconds later I found myself being thrown against the bed and held down into the most warming bear hug I've ever received from him. Then, I was almost happy again, until I realized this could possibly be the last bear hug from him, ever, which sent a chill down my back. I instantly squeezed him tighter than ever.

"Someone's been eating their wheaties," he said jokingly reacting to my roughness by squeezing me closer. In that moment it was as if nothing else mattered, it was just me and him and the microscopic space between us, I wish it could be like this forever, but I know it can't. Moments later I felt him start to loosen his arms around me and I knew it was time. I stayed laying on the bed looking over at him as he threw his bags over his shoulder and put his little Army hat on. I did always have a thing for men in uniform, but why does he has to look so damn good in it? Slowly but surely I pulled myself out of bed and walked with him through our cute little rancher to the screen door. I knew this was going to be hard, but nothing could prepare me for this. I quickly threw my head down to try and hide the tears as he pulled me in for one last embrace.

"I love you," I breathed blinking fast to keep the tears away. "Come back to me, okay?" I whispered looking up at him, but he said nothing, he simply kissed me on the forehead which I knew meant he loved me too, then grabbed under my chin planting a beautifully soft kiss on my trembling lips, and walked out the door, maybe forever. But just as he was about to get into his '98 Camaro, he turned and shouted, "I'll write to you everyday Kris, I love you, forever," and just like that he got in his car and drove away.

It's been four months without him, and I think the only thing that keeps me going is his consistent letters. But I've also obtained an amazing friend, my mailman Brenden, who everyday asks me about the last letter he delivered from Derek as he's handing me the next. Occasionally after he gets done work he'll come over for some coffee and pie. Nothing brings me more joy than when he and I sit in my kitchen for hours talking about everything. Since I have a lot of alone time I've taken up baking, and I've found that I'm rather good at it, at least Brenden confirms. He reminds me so much of Derek; it's almost as if he's filling the void he left for when he was deported.

What scares me the most is that when I get the letters my sadness no longer derives from missing Derek, but it's that I know I have to wait 6 more hours until Brenden comes over after work. This feeling sometimes keeps me up at night. Is it possible that in Derek's absence I've begun to fall out of love? But that isn't fair to him, his letters are so romantic, although they

have been coming less and less lately. I suppose it's extremely hard for him to always write me. I feel as though I'm so incredibly torn inside anymore, when I'm with Brenden I don't even think about Derek, but I get the same sensations I did five months ago. It has come to the point when I open the door to get my mail, I don't even want the letters he's giving me, I just want him. I want his company, his love, and his warm embrace he gives me just before he leaves every night.

I wish I could say that these thoughts weren't pleasant, and that I'm ashamed, but I'm not. It's been eight months now that Derek is gone, and frankly I'm numb to the subject, I don't care. I stopped looking forward to the letters weeks ago, now I look forward to Brenden's company. As bad as this sounds there has been a few nights where he's stayed over because I told him it was too late for him to leave, but I think it's time to tell him why I really want him to always stay.

"I hate when you have to go," I said sheepishly. I could tell my comment caught him off guard because he quickly snapped his head away from the TV and looked down at me with a confused grin that showed his perfectly straight white teeth. He really did have the most beautiful smile I've ever seen.

"Oh yeah," he said nudging me with his elbow, "why's that? You afraid of the dark or something," he said jokingly putting his arm around me. I giggled grabbing his hand that hung from the shoulder and pulling it over my head turning to face him.

"You know why I don't want you to leave, I think you've known just as long as I have," I said taking a deep breath before continuing. "And I see the way you look at me when you think I'm not looking, and I feel the way hold me when you think I'm sleeping," I explained looking up, first at his gorgeous emerald green eyes, then at his perfectly round lips. I waited for him to answer but I could tell he was searching for words to say. He always scrunches one eyebrow inwards when he's really thinking. Just as I was about to reach up and run my fingers through his soft dark brown hair, he stopped me, grabbing my hand and pulling me in to the kiss I've been anticipating for months. I knew by kissing him back, I had already made my choice. Then I felt him pull away,

"Why are you crying Kris?" Brenden said, pushing my tears from my face.

"What am I going to do? How am I going to face him Brenden? This is our house, our lives were started together in here," I said looking around my cute little rancher. The thought of telling Derek pulled all life from my body, making me collapse into Brenden's lap like a child.

"I have an idea," he said with little confidence, "but you may not like it."

"At this point, I don't care, as long as I'm with you," I said childishly.

"Pack a bag," he said sternly, standing and walking into my bedroom, "you're leaving."

“Should I bring the letters?” I whispered while hurriedly packing my essentials. Without saying anything he grabbed the letters and threw them into the fire that was roasting in the living room. “Time to go,” he said grabbing my arm and pulling me out the door.

THE ARTIST

Courtney Mateo

“DID YOU HIDE THE BODY?!” the hooded figure screamed, “DEBRA, DID YOU HIDE THE BODY?” the figure screamed once again as it descended from the dark shadows that lurked atop the stairs. “DEBRA” it screamed as it grabbed for my neck...seconds later I found myself staring at the same ceiling I’d been looking up at for the past two decades.

My chest was rapidly moving up and down as I was trying to catch my breath and slow my heart rate. Just a dream, I thought. Then again, it did remind me of the way the police treated me all those years ago when I was first interrogated. It seems as though I’ve had this same dream in so many forms.

Even now, decades later, I still wonder how my plan went wrong, how could I, Debra Milke, get caught? As if I was a probie, but I’m not, this wasn’t my first rodeo, but it was the most exciting. Waiting on death row, all these years later, is like waiting for a train at the station. Just when you think your time is up, or you see your train, you realize it’s not YOUR train, it has not been my time. But I know I still have a chance, which excites me, I could still get out. This thought brings a smirk to my chapped lips.

BANG BANG BANG, “WAKE UP TIME INMATES”. Damn these guards, they’re always ruining my wonderful thoughts. I always make sure to learn as much information about these imbeciles so that one day, when I’m out, I get my revenge. Being a women of course makes it all the more exciting. Today was a day just like the rest, first I start with crying, because I’m so very good at crying, I pretend to miss my little baby boy and scream about how I’ll find who killed him one day, dead or alive. The more dramatic, the better, of course. Then, I usually have to be dragged out of my room because I am so disheveled with sadness and brokenness and blah blah blah. Let me tell you, if there were acting awards for us inmates, I’d be getting Grammy’s for the past twenty years.

The look of sympathy I catch on the cafeteria help makes my adrenaline pump, I'm too good at this. I try to make sure I eat only every couple of days, you know because I'm sad about my dead son and all. It works so well I almost start to feel bad for myself. Some days I have to bite my lip not to smile about how ingenious I really have become. My father would be so proud, he himself got away with over 100 murders, but I know not even he could make prison help feel sympathy for him. I quickly threw my head down so no one saw my smirk.

"Milke," one of the main guards yelled, "Where is Debra Milke."

Showtime, I thought to myself. As I slowly and shakily rose from my seat in the cold grey cafeteria, I ever so gently said, "Here sir." Then shuffled over to where he was standing, God I'm good. Many would call me a sociopath, but I like to call myself an artist. An artist of killing, deception, and acting.

As I pathetically looked up at him, something in me thought he was about to tell me what I've been waiting two decades to hear.

"It's your lucky day inmate, your case has officially been dismissed as of today," the warden said coming around the corner. At that very moment I could hear the crowd going wild as I received my last Grammy for incredible acting. But, still staying in character I grabbed his hands and fell to my knees sobbing. After the warden made me release my grip he told the guard to bring me back to my cell to ready my things.

Once in my cell it took everything in me not to jump up and down celebrating, but instead I decided to sit and write a speech, because I knew a press conference would occur. As sat there searching through my sinister mind I came up with something perfect. As I wrote a sinister chuckle escaped my lips.

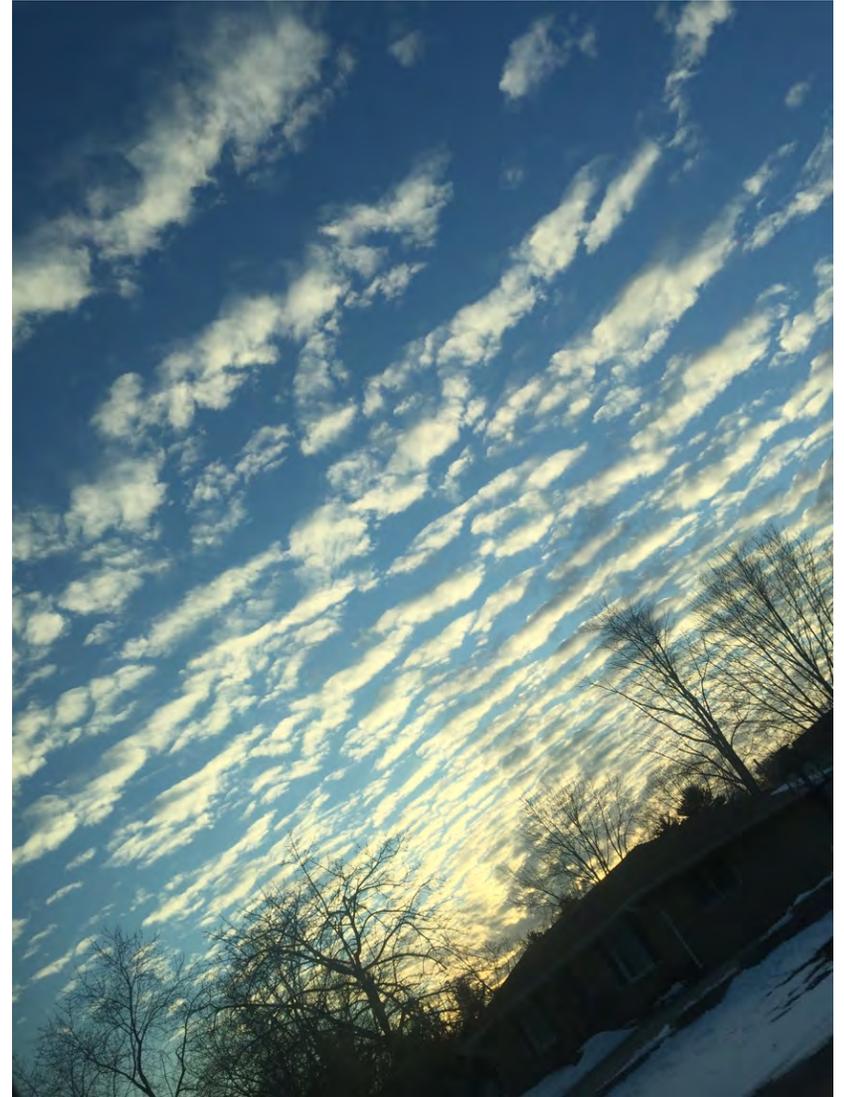
I had absolutely nothing to do with the brutal murder of my son. The only thing equally worse than losing a child, is to be falsely accused of the death of your child....

The Memorable Miracle

Kayla Ferrara

Playing outside on the farm with brothers is one of my favorite things to do when the sun is shining and there's not a cloud in the sky. Today was a special day because we realized after a long, freezing winter, it was finally spring. The tulips started blooming, the grass was growing green, and the birds were flying across the sky. After I finished my scrambled eggs and bacon, I ran into my room, put my sneakers on and ran right for the door that leads to the backyard. As I see my brothers running behind me, I realized that I've forgotten the football in my room. When I went back in the house to get the football, mommy reminded me to be careful and not to get too close to the water. I gave her a little attitude and said, "I know mom I'm not a baby."

Once I returned outside to meet my brothers for a catch they ran towards me, tackling me to the ground and capturing the football from my arms. They had a catch with each other while I was standing in the middle of them trying to participate but they kept taunting me. I soon filled with anger and frustration that caused me to scream and cry. My brothers then felt bad for me and decided to finally include me in the catch. We started in a close triangle throwing it back and forth, taking turns throwing each other the ball. Slowly the triangle began to expand, farther and farther apart. After just a few minutes my back was facing the creek, my one brothers back was against the house, and my other brother had his back to the trees. When the ball was thrown to me I saw it going farther than where I was which caused



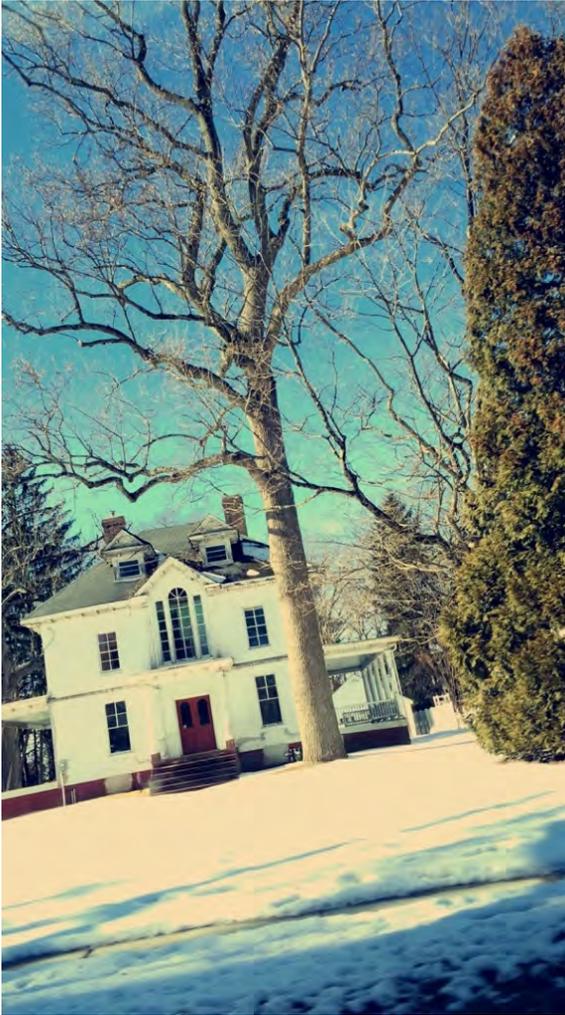
me to back up quickly just to catch the ball. Just as the ball was going to land in my arms I soon began to feel water fill my lungs.

This feeling is something that one should never have to experience. Once I noticed that my surroundings were engulfed by water, I tried to swim with the current to catch a breath but it kept pulling me under further and further. It felt as if I was just about to reach the surface but in reality I was getting deeper and deeper into the darkness watching the light fade. I slowly lose consciousness after just a few seconds and started to feel my heart beat slower and slower. My eyes then began to close and my body felt weightless and lifeless. Memories began flowing through my mind like how much I love playing with my brothers and my mom's dinner that she makes every night. Even though at this point my eyes were closed, I saw things beginning to get darker and darker.

"Breathe baby breathe. Fight for your life, you can do this, Jaxon." I heard that same phrased get louder and louder as I heard, *thump, thump thump*. I couldn't believe what was happening. I thought I was dead for sure but a miracle happened. I soon started to feel several people talking, pounding on my chest, and beeping noises. There was so much chaos going on which caused my eyes to pop open. My pulse became stronger by the minute and as I looked around the room, the faces that I saw had a relieved and shocked look across their faces. Once I was aloud to talk and interact with my family, I was told that my heart stopped for thirty minutes. They were calling it a true miracle. My mom came over to my bed-side and gave me the biggest hug and whispered,

"I love you with all my heart Jaxon. I'm so glad you're okay."

Those words that my mother said to me gave me a warm feeling inside. Later on throughout the next couple weeks, I was checked up on by the doctors and as shockingly as this sounds, I was doing better than ever. Did I die, or was I just taking a nap? Miracles really can happen.



WAR, WHAT IS IT GOOD FOR

Aly Oren

“К р о в а в ы й ч е р т в о з ь м и !”

Her fists balled in anger, her nails pierced through the skin of her palms, her heart raced. Her face flushed with color, warming with boiling blood. Her throat burned from the bitter curses she spat. If she lacked the intelligence, if she didn't know any better, the wall beside her, as the roof echoed with the sounds of drumming rain, would be littered with holes, and her knuckles would be even more bruised and bloodied. Her fingers ached to be curled around a trigger, to fire off an entire clip into the nearest tree. She was more than desperate to find a way to relieve this fury, this fire that ate at her insides.

She wasn't the target. She wasn't the one who had deliberately adhered to the wishes of the enemy. She wasn't the one who had gone out into the field with a gun strapped to her hip and shot one of their best men point blank in the back of the head, execution style. Yet, she was their main suspect. *Her*. Why her? Is it that hard of a concept to accept a woman being at such a high standing position, even if only *temporarily*?

Her fists slammed down on the nearest surface, an exasperated groan pushing its way past clenched teeth. How dare they believe her to be the culprit. How *dare* they believe for a second that she would be at the head of such treason.

Agent 13 forced her anger to cool, now spiralling into the boggling concept of what was causing this extrinsic behavior of hers, what had changed. She compelled herself to stop pacing and sit on the edge of a metal chair beside the table. Strewn across the table, the map of the battlefield loomed over her, reminding her of the larger picture. Nothing was more important than the larger picture. Yet, all plans had been put on hold. For *this*. For this absolute *rubbish*.

The frigid metal glued to her warm skin, grounding her and forcing her to collect her whirling, hazy mind. Something had ignited this new, roaring fire inside of her, and that assumed “something” drove her to an instantaneous state of denial.

Emotion effectively clouded her judgment. After such a long period of time spent building the blockade around her mind, barricading against such strongly willed emotions, here she was succumbing to them. And for what purpose? What had been instilled in her to cause this chain reaction?

Her knuckles ached, the bruises purpling beneath the dry, smeared blood that was caked to her skin. The sound of the soldier’s, one of the many that had mocked her, nose shattering rung in her ears, but yet, through it all, she heard one voice. *His*. Not the soldier she broke the nose of. *His*.

Brooklyn.

She heard his voice. Soft. Polite. Respectful. So much different than the others.

So much more admirable than the others.

So much more valiant and resilient than the others.

And perhaps she had her answer as to why she was changing.

Hours before...

The bitterly cold, bitterly wet, massive fields of Russia whistled with biting winds, shaking the temporary tents violently that then threatened to blow over and leave the soldiers inside exposed to the elements.

“**П о д к р е п л е н и е п р и б ы л о,**” A distant voice bellowed from the opening of her tent, rousing her from a light, questionable slumber. *Reinforcements have arrived.*

The relief from the thought of help was quickly crippled by pain.

Trembling from the cold, she pried herself from the hardened cot, crying out beneath her breath as her hands brushed the coarse wool blanket over her, immediately thankful that her commander had taken leave and did not wait for her. Her hands shook as her deep brown eyes struggled to focus on them in the slight early Russian morning light, expecting the worse.

And finding the worse.

But she had to keep going. She had to begin the day, meet the recruits. Train them. Prepare them. Then send them off to war like all the rest.

Agent 13's mind whirled as the anguish of her discolored fingers echoed through her veins, sending aches and agony all through her, every inch of her screaming as the beginnings of frostbite pressed into the familiar curves of her gun. Her head throbbed, her face contorted in pain, and she sunk her teeth into the flesh of her cheek, tasting blood. But it pulled her thoughts from her fingers, keeping her distracted, redirecting her focus. There was a war to be won. Encouraging the pain was not an option. Not when there were so many suffering far worse than she. Not when she knew she would be sending some of these new recruits right to their deaths.

Holstering the gun at her hip, she proceeded to pull on layer after layer, saving the gloves for last, careful when she was finally forced to drag the cloth over the raw, angrily blushing skin of her fingertips, careful not to scream. She was nailed to her cot for a few transient seconds, anchored by the feeling that radiated from her fingers, feeling her hot blood pulse painfully behind the the pads of them. She took a deep, shaky breath, giving herself time to recollect her bearings before venturing out into the frigid, stale air where roll call would begin.

“Detroit, pretty lady. You know what they say about guys from Detroit.”

“Birmingham, Alabama, sweet cheeks. Can't find a finer man. ”

“Baby, can't you tell? New York, New York, baby. How 'bout I show you the pretty lights sometime, huh?”

“I gotta show you Chicago sometime, darlin', the wind here ain't nothin' in comparison, and you could wear a nice, pretty dress.”

“Let me buy you a drink after the war down in D.C. We'll go dancin', have a few beers. Maybe I'll even show you the White House. I got my connections.”

“If I tell you where I'm from, do I get to tell you where I'd like *you* to *be*?” A cocky smirk engulfed one of the recruit's thin, pale lips, stretching until the corners of them just brushed his ears. Pride burned in his eyes as they stared down at her with almost a challenging gleam. Brown eyes met the degrading ones that so daringly mocked her, a delicate smile of her own spreading across her smooth, blood red lips.

“Step forward, please.” Agent 13’s voice was calm, inviting, yet, it lacked depth. Though that couldn’t be terribly obvious to the man standing in front of her.

A snicker tumbled past his lips, the recruits behind him following suit with a quiet chorus of chuckles, and he closed the distance between them with a small step, now having to look even further down to meet her eye.

He murmured, “Are you sure you want to do this in front of all the fellas, sugar?”

Nothing was more satisfying than the crunch of his nose as her fist connected and the thud of his arse slamming to the frozen turf beneath him. Her frostbite stung, but the pride that raged on inside of her overpowered it as she simply shook out her wrist, adjusted her grip on her clipboard, and continued down the line to the next recruit.

“Brooklyn, New York, ma’am,” He said smoothly, calmly. Politely. Without prompting. Without hesitation.

Her eyes shot up from her clipboard, discovering icy blue eyes, slightly hidden beneath a helmet, peering into her own, and she watched as they shyly fell to the frozen earth, as his cheeks flushed with more color than the bitter wind already caused. It made her uneasy, much more so than the tense silence her bit of violence induced, and she subconsciously switched her weight back and forth between the balls of her feet out of nerves while she jotted the city down and avoided eye contact once more. She was glad, when she caught herself, that it looked as if she were just trying to keep warm before she moved on to the next recruit, wondering why it seemed that a tiny, hot ball of lead now singed the inside of her stomach, clouding her head. That shade of blue filled every inch of her vision, even when another recruit dared to sneer at her just after she’d just knocked one of the others out.

Brooklyn couldn’t have been a finer man. He was precise, dedicated, strong. He looked forward rather than hanging back and letting the other men trample over him, especially for breaking the line of ridicule they’d drawn for Agent 13 that morning. He kept going. He wasn’t trying to prove anything to anyone. He was just doing what he was trained to do: fight, and fight because it was the right thing to do. Not because holding a gun made a person seem important in this world, made them feel powerful.

He caught her eye more than once over the next week. When he sacrificed himself in a bomb exercise. When he outsmarted the others, quite a few times. When he glanced over at her briefly, sharing a shy smile. When he politely greeted her and politely bid her goodnight.

Not wanting to acknowledge it, she began to admire him, aspiring to model herself after him, to follow in his footsteps and be a better woman as he is a better man.

Her heart thudded loudly at the thought of him, seeing those icy blues as clear as day every time she closed her eyes. Unless it was a side effect of the agony as she pried the gloves off of her peeling, even more raw, exposed skin of her fingers, but she hardly felt it. The thoughts swirling around in her mind kept her numb, kept her distracted. What was happening to her?

But she had hardly a minute of the time needed to ponder such a question, when a cry broke through her haze.

“И з м е н а! Treason!” Someone screamed in the camp, the shrill voice piercing through the night and the heavy sounds of freezing rain, the panicked footsteps nearing the camp, pounding against the dirt. “И з м е н а!
И з м е н а!”

The commander was dead. Shot, point blank in the back of the head with what looked to be an American rifle. Treason. Someone in their ranks had killed the commander. And with her rank, all fingers pointed to her. Treason. No one hesitated to suspect a woman having done it.

Days passed. Higher officers flocked to their camp, weaving in and out of tents, searching for the missing murder weapon. More eyes fell heavy on Agent 13, looking at her with the abandonment of the idea that all suspects are innocent until proven guilty. Even higher officers even glared when they passed her. When they swept her tent and came up with nothing, still, they glared.

Two weeks passed. A letter calling her to a mandatory interrogation was thrown at her one morning by one of the colonels, one that didn't miss the opportunity to spit out as many insults as he could, some he expressed without having to say anything, before he stormed out of her tent. Agent 13 had fumed, face flushed with burning color as she tore through her

tent, finding her as pressed as possible uniform and dressing, anxiety boiling through her at the thought of being practically put on trial. She supposed it was now or never.

But the fuse was already lit

Which brings us back to the beginning...

Brooklyn.

Her heart felt as if it might burst into flames at any given moment.

Brooklyn.

She'd taken notice of him. He seemed to have taken notice of her.

Brooklyn.

Her skin stung as she stood from the freezing metal chair when she heard the shuffle of the officers as they neared the tent. Her hands balled into fists at her side, a poor attempt at channeling the anger into something that didn't involve someone's nose being at the other end of her fist. But, oh, how she so desperately wanted to do so much more than break the noses of the men that immediately looked down at her as they stepped into the tent, already decided that she was guilty.

Brooklyn, what have you done to me?

Agent 13's palms were slick with sweat as they asked her to take a seat. Her mind was clouded, her heart was beating faster and louder with each second that passed. She almost wanted to pick a fight that she knew she wouldn't win. Wanted to land a few good punches, a few good kicks before they threw her out. She almost wanted to pick a fight that would ruin her. Her emotions ran rampant, dancing in freedom as they breached the wall in her mind she spent so long building. This was her breaking point.

Brooklyn, you've broken me.

It could take weeks, they said, to prove that she was guilty. But they would find a way. Who else would have been the culprit? Who else would have had motive to murder their higher up in cold blood with the hopes of taking their place? Legitimately or not. They would find a way. For now, some other officer would take control of being the temporary commander. She wasn't to even touch a map before the investigation concluded.

Those weeks passed. Every night, Agent 13 trembled, not with cold, with fear, with anxiety, depression, desire, fury, joy: every emotion came crashing down on her, the walls now long crumbled. Her entire being to crumbled. Tears cleared through the thick layers of grime and dirt that smothered her face, leaving trails, leaving evidence. It was over. Her career was finished. And she had no one to blame but herself: For not being strong enough.

And one night, one of the first ones without rain, sleet, hail or snow, someone uncovered the evidence.

Brooklyn.

"Excuse me, ma'am, I have a le—" His boots glued themselves to the entrance of her tent, eyes curiously examining the tears that trickled down over her chin, his eyebrows furrowing in concern. She shamefully swiped at her face, trying her damndest to erase it all, but to no avail. He'd seen. She was exposed, completely vulnerable. And why wouldn't she be in front of the person who started the chain reaction that caused it?

"Set it on the table, please, soldier," She responded robotically, hoping to avoid the inner turmoil she was experiencing spilling out even more so than it already had. But he didn't budge. Rather, he took a step closer, and that one step made her obligated to catch his eye, despite the strong desire against it. Only when she looked and him did she realize that it was the first time that they'd ever been alone together. It was the first time that anyone had looked at her like a normal human being, not an evil criminal bent on destroying the world. And it was the first time in a long time that she could breathe despite the drowning emotions filling her head.

Her heart drummed a bit quicker, responding to the hand he cautiously, subconsciously raised, aimed at swiping away a tear that she had missed before he came to and let his arm fall to his side. It was him. He was her trigger. He was her kryptonite, her one weakness that immediately crippled her. Those icy blue eyes hypnotized her.

"S-sorry," He stammered, retreating a step, increasing the distance and lessening his hold on her. *Brooklyn, come back.*

Agent 13 snagged her lower lip with her teeth, gathering the nerve to dare and speak through the bundle of nerves in her stomach that tugged at her with every syllable that rolled off of his lips. "It's quite all right. You were, hm, you were saying?"

“I was say.. Right!” Somewhat excitedly, he reached into his breast pocket and fished out a folded envelope, a bit of a shy smile finding its way to his lips as he smoothed it out before holding it towards her. “Right, I, um, I saw this on the table of mail earlier, saw the guys hanging around it, looking for...” His cheeks reddened, and his head bowed slightly before he continued, “Looking for your mail to try to probably vandalize it somehow. I grabbed it before they saw it. Figured I’d keep it safe until I could, um, give it to you myself. I-I, sorry, I read it,” Her eyebrows shot up, heart lurching into her throat, sounding incessantly in her ears. “...because of where it’s from, and it’s part of the reason I.. I should just shut up.”

A quiet laugh broke the silence. An ever so quiet laugh, hardly audible, filled the gap between words as she dared to retrieve the envelope from his hand, inviting him to take a seat while she opened it and ignoring the return address.

The letter was slowly unfolded, crinkling with the bit of wear it had seen from being in his pocket. As she soaked in the words typed boldly across the paper, something within her clicked. Something missing finally found its home. A piece long forgotten completed the puzzle. Her deep brown eyes fell from the page and raised until they found the slightly shy, but ever so icy blue hues that peered down at her anxiously. Though she normally wouldn’t care to admit it, shock of warmth shot right up her spine. He’d done this for her. Something completely out of turn, yet he’d done it. *Why?*

Suddenly, there was no air in her lungs. She gasped for a moment before it all came rushing forward, slamming into her like a solid brick wall. The tears that were once in her eyes, they returned. The racing heart in her chest, it pounded quicker. But the cold fear was replaced with something much warmer. Balance. Content. She tightened her grip on the letter.

Impulse compelled her forward. Emotion won. With him here, there was no fighting. And she didn’t want to fight anymore. Her mind settled. Her lips brushed his smooth cheek.

“Thank you,” She whispered hurriedly as she reeled back, cheeks flushing with embarrassment, though a smile dared to pull at her lips. And for the first time, she allowed her voice to break with emotion freely. “You-you hardly had to do any of that, nor should they have listened to you. You must’ve been convincing.”

A quiet chuckle rumbled in his chest, his own cheeks colored, and he rubbed at the spot her lips had left a soft red print. “It’s a little hard not to be convincing when you’re talking about what a wonderful leader you are. And how you couldn’t possibly have been the one to murder the commander. Not when, uh,” He paused, scratching the back of his neck with a sheepish grin, “You were watchin’ me make a fool out of myself in front of all the other fellas.”

“You’re certainly not a fool.” Her smile, now fully stretched across her face, was more radiant than ever. Now, she was now a woman finally at peace with herself, with her ability to feel, indulge, and express in emotions without restraint. They locked gazes once more. “Or I don’t believe I’d be your commander now.”

Brooklyn.

Brooklyn, you've made me whole.

**WHAT WE PERCEIVE
ANDRE HANDABAK**

**PEOPLE EVERYWHERE AROUND ARE DEPRESSED
DEPRESSED FROM THEIR MESS SO THEY'RE CONFESSING
THAT THEY GOT NO MORE TO LIVE FOR
THINKING THAT IN LIFE, THEY CAN'T GET ANY MORE
THEIR WIFE IS A WHORE, THEIR LIFE IS A SNORE
THEIR SON STILL AIN'T BACK FROM THE WAR
WHERE AMERICA NEEDS OIL
SO THEY CAN KEEP THEIR PEOPLE SMILING
BUT THE PROTESTERS KEEP PILING
BUT THEY KEEP ON BEGUILING
THAT WE NEED TO
STOP THEM, HELP THEM, LIBERATING THEM
BUT OUR TROOPS, WE REALLY NEED TO GET EM
OUT OF THE DESERT, OUT OF THE THE DIRT
BACK TO AMERICA, WHERE THEY CAN'T GET HURT.**

**AMERICA, THE LAND OF OPPORTUNITY
WE GOT A JUNGLE OF METAL
WE HAVE TO KEEP THIS COMMUNITY IN UNITY
A REAL NICE PLACE THAT WE CAN SETTLE
IN SO LYING AND IGNORE THOSE WHO ARE DYING
KEEP BUYING MORE SUPPLIES SO PEOPLE CAN BE
COMPLYING.
WE NEED TO SEE PEOPLE STILL BEAMISH
CAN'T HAVE THE PEOPLE BE SQUEAMISH
WE CAN'T TELL THEM: WHY WE ARE IN THE WAR
WHAT THEY ARE LIVING FOR
WHAT IS REALLY YOURS
WHAT'S BEHIND THAT DOOR
AND EVEN THOUGH I KNOW IT'S TRUE, I HATE TO EXPRESS
THAT PEOPLE EVERYWHERE AROUND ARE DEPRESSED.**

A Walk in the Rain

Tyler Morgan

At first, it all seemed clear to me
that what we had was no longer there.
But from my perspective you cannot see
that what you've done was not fair.

Though my anger has overwhelmed thee,
like a fire which consumes the surrounding air,
now both our hearts can roam about free
and our heartbreak we have our fair share.

Please, however, accept my apology
in which I stutter my syllables
and speak so sloppily
that it is the least bit lyrical.

Although we are now two halves of a whole,
the feeling refuses to demise;
I know deep down in my soul
that our love now flutters in clearer skies.
The pain will sting and even burn
but that I must learn to deal with.
To find love now, to take my next turn
feels like it's a myth.
We stay close, yet keep our distance
and that is how it will remain.
And though my heart yearns for your presence,
I must learn to walk in the rain.

McDonald's is Life

Tyler Morgan

A flavor so sweet like hitting the lottery,
But so unhealthy it clogs your artery.
I go to the golden arches instead of my kitchen
My stomach craving a tasty McChicken.
With a side of fries so salty and fried,
One can deny the pair, but can only say they tried.
The food is delicious one can assert
but not without a shake or pie for dessert.
McDonald's may be bad for you, people may say.
But the only thing that could make it worse is adding Old Bay.

Changes Among US

Rocquel Doughty

Life is different now
everyone has their heads down
in these tiny devices and I-
well, I don't know how.

In my day,
all the kids went out to play
the mothers, they stayed in all day
working like busy bees to churn butter
there were no "bae's"
and there were no lovers.

What are these inventions on wheels?
There are more of them than there are
fathers working in the fields!
Surely there must be a horse somewhere
I would ask someone but I wouldn't dare.

The sun is far too bright
and everything shines
something is just not right
perhaps, I'm losing my mind!

Once a president,
now just a sad old man
who can not fit in
with life's new floor plan.

I may have chopped down
a ripe cherry tree
but at least I dare not stay inside all day
and watch TV.

Has anyone seen Jefferson?

George Washington

Grandpa

Hannah Drawbridge

I never thought i'd say this

I really never did

Picture life without the man

Who always called me kid

To me you were like a god

I'd thought you would never die

Yet here I am

Looking at the casket in which you lie

I know you didn't believe in Heaven

But for you I know there's one

Where you can sit with grandma

And whistle to your favorite song

You two can sit on a cloud

While singing songs from the music man

Or you can go chasing daisy and rosebud

running as fast as you can

I hope you two are happy

Even though I cannot be

Because I will not have you

To share the world with me

I'm sorry

Es'cense Porter

I hope I never have to use the word sorry again,

I'm sorry that,

I made you mad,

but even sad.

I know I broke your heart

I pray that this does not cause us to part.

Take me back, and I promise to never lack any
affection towards you.

Hold me close and embrace me tightly.

Look into my eyes

as I say sorry

kiss me,

hug me,

I wanna be with you for all eternity

I'm sorry.

DEAREST FRIEND

ES'CENSE PORTER

OH WHAT A JOY IT IS TO HAVE A FRIENDSHIP WITH YOU,

YOU ALWAYS SUPPORT ME AND GIVE ME STRENGTH

THE WAY THAT YOU DO.

OUR FRIENDSHIP IS A PRICELESS GIFT,

IT CANNOT NOT BE BROUGHT, NOR SOLD.

IT HAS A GREATER VALUE THAN GOLD.

WE ARE THE FLOWERS IN THE GARDEN OF LIFE

YOU GUIDE ME THROUGH ALL THE BAD TIMES AND STRIFE.

I'M SO THANKFUL FOR YOU ALWAYS BEING THERE AND

HELPING ME GROW.

YOUR FRIENDSHIP MEANS THE WORLD TO ME

TWO TO A HOME

Austin Buehler

**Strange faces fill up the space,
A man in a broken land.
Wind blows away long faced trace,
Taking her by her hand.
A lost mind yet to be found,
to take away the pain.
What a soothing flow of sound,
I open up to retain.
When time is fixed with two,
No need to rigidly roam.
In a broken land with you,
I still call it home.**



Thanks for reading! Don't forget to submit again next year.