

The Catalyst



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The Catalyst is a student-run creative journal of the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse,
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Sofie Hammen / Growing Into My Mother's Body

The soft smell of your 2009 revlon colorstay powder.
Coating each fine strand of gold
on the peach that is your face.
The bathroom vanity's light
turning you into a crystal sun catcher,
as your hairspray showers down like fairy dust.

I sit with little pretzeled legs on the cool tile floor.
The tarsier eyes I haven't quite grown into yet
staring up at you in awe of your beauty.
Praying that one day I would be so lucky.

Ants don't know the difference
between a shadow cast by a tree,
and a shadow cast by a boot.
When you're small all you care about
is comfort from the beating sun.

It's not until you grow that you notice
the cracks in the pavement of your skin.
I never held a magnifying glass.
Not once did your insecurities peak my attention.
All I saw was the woman I call home.

So who am *I* to disrupt womanhood?
To question her changes in me.
To judge her route.
To try and stop myself from growing
into the body that grew me.

Seeing your emerald eyes

staring back at me in the mirror.

Feeling the cushion of my hugs
like the ones my doughy face used to bury into.

The softness of my Vellus hair
as I run my hands along my face.

All gently remind me to cherish the features I wished for
on birthday candles and dandelion.

Lyd Voss / Rainy Streets / Pastel and color pencil on micaceous iron oxide toned paper



Sydney Kletecka / That's A Great Question

For my day job, I work remotely recruiting people who are interested in purchasing franchises (ideally). A good amount of the time, a slew of people click the “I understand this is about franchise opportunities” acknowledgement check box without actually reading it. Then they continue on to select their appointment time, which often they have already forgotten about by the time I will my finger to hit “call.”

Unprofessionals looking for a job-- no wonder you don't have one.

See, every morning I open my laptop having woken up exactly one minute before, refuse to extract myself from bed, and begin moving my way through a list of appointments in increments of ten minute time slots.

Each call I make I hope they do not answer. I'd prefer to save my breath, and each time I give my scripted spiel I feel energy physically expel from my body like it's being sucked out by one of those ghost vacuums from ghost busters.

Whatever the hell those are called.

Something nerdy and made up probably.

What agony, this is. A good amount of the time they do answer, ones who have read the box and ones who haven't.

They ask questions, I answer them. The ones there's answers to. But at some point I'll get a question framed as if they're trying to pull one over on me. Something that really doesn't have anything to do with franchising at all.

“What does this have to do with AI?” The short answer is nothing.

“Is this an MLM?” They ask. Did I just describe an MLM to you? Do *you* know what an MLM is?

“Can I call you back in thirty minutes?” No, my schedule is full. If you booked an appointment, why do you think no one else did? Don't you know the world doesn't revolve around you? You probably don't qualify anyways. (They suddenly find the five minutes to spare, and no they really don't qualify).

But that's not what I really get to say.

What I get to say is: “That's a great question.” And duh duh da da dah.

“That's a great question.” Is a two second reprieve of time I use to come up with a tactful and completely bullshit answer to a question I don't have an answer to.

“That's a great question.” (Hold my breath for a pause, die inside).

“And duh duh da da dah.”

Then on and on with the hum drum of a business student trying not to rethink their life choices.

On the side I complete a minor that has nothing to do with the demands of my major; creative writing. Please do not ask why. Sanity, maybe?

One day my English professor asks me, “What is my studio?” That’s a great question. (Imagine I just slit my own throat.)

The answer: I don’t have one. I just have me, and the truth-- and they meet somewhere on this page. I solemnly swear to not bullshit, for this sweet piece of paper. No, dear page for you and you alone, I will be honest.

I planned on answering my professor blandly. I’d write an essay, I’d be straight forward. My studio is... here or there... sitting in this chair... at this time... maybe it’s raining out? I’m not sure.

But that wouldn’t be true, both of word and of voice.

Also an impossibility, I find the creative stuff flows better, sounds better. Let me use the words “dick” and “fucker” in an essay on Shakespeare just once, please. I promise you’ll love it. Ol’ William probably would too. If he were still to be, and wasn’t well... not to be.

When the words I want to say start shaping in my mind, my real “writer” voice starts interjecting.

Typically she cuts through a perfectly good sentence with a joke at the end of it. I tried to think of one to go right [here] but she’s suddenly MIA, which I guess is the joke. More often than not, once she starts she cannot shut up. She’s got something to say and it must be said in exactly her way.

And no, it isn’t like some sort of alternate personality or a shadow that follows me around till I start clawing at yellow wallpaper warning everyone about “The voices! The voices!”

The sky is falling, or whatever.

Nope, none of that. She’s just me. Me but older, a little more cynical, a little more artsy. She wears a turtle neck and has bangs. Smokes cigarettes and is always in some sort of moody burgundy lighting.

She’s funnier. More self assured.

She’s honest in a way that I am not outwardly.

My friends would describe me as *brutally* honest. They’d describe her a tactfully honest. They’re both just me. One’s just more thought out.

She is If And Or But. A Wish or Witch.

She haunts every narrative. Bridges the gap between here and there, and when she’s quiet I can’t get any of this done.

She has all the answers to every great question, reminds me a bit of my mother. Shocker.

Everytime she’s vanished I don’t notice till I can’t find her-- or till she makes a sudden reappearance and starts making demands. It’s almost like losing your sense of smell. You don’t really

notice it's gone till it's back and suddenly everything you'd been smelling faintly before, you realize was in actuality much more pungent. (People do not shower enough; candles smell so good).

I don't know where she goes. Somewhere that always feels like a heart squeezing I assume.

Somewhere in between the dullness of "Hi! This is Sydney with Franopolis. We had a scheduled call at this time?" And a story.

Day to day I am on an unknown recon mission for content till she emerges from a bush, or a shadowed glowing corridor, or a backlit curtain.

Sometimes dropping completely out of the sky (still falling) with an opinion formed, a feeling palpating, and says: "I have something to say."

"What do you wanna say?" I ask.

"That's a great question. Let's write it down." She says.

They're called Proton Packs by the way.

Have I answered all the questions?

Halla Schulz / Little Keepers / Ceramic



Hannah Wadholm / The Way It Seemed

In the driveway, Mason shifts his car into park. The sound is small, but my chest tightens. For a moment, neither of us moves. The lake house sits in front of us, and it hits me. This is it. We're here. I feel his hand near mine again, close, but not touching, like he's giving me the space to choose it.

"Hey," he says softly. I turn to him. "You're okay."

It's simple. Sincere. Not something that I can argue with, even if a part of me wants to.

"Okay," I say, and this time I almost believe it.

He gives me a reassuring smile and leans across the center console to kiss me. I relax into him. *Maybe I can do this.* He pulls away, looking at me, his eyes seeking to reassure me. Then, he reaches for his door. I do the same, stepping out of the car. The air outside is cooler than I expected; crisp autumn air. I shift my weight, feigning confidence. But there my thoughts are, gathering quietly in the background. Mason walks around the front of the car to meet me and takes my hand in his.

"Eve," Mason says, "You ready?"

I swallow, nodding, and this time I take a step forward with him. Up the driveway. toward the door. However, before we reach it, it opens, and a golden retriever bursts onto the porch, tail wagging wildly, paws thudding against the wood as it darts straight for Mason.

"Hey-hey, silly Millie!" Mason says, laughing and crouching down to greet his dog. Millie is clearly used to this type of welcome as she whines excitedly, unsuccessfully attempting to lick his face.

I crouch down next to Mason, and Millie shifts her attention to the stranger next to her boy. Thankfully, she seems to accept me, almost knocking me over with her excitement. I'm caught off guard, laughing as I steady myself. She's warm and eager and entirely unguarded, and for a moment, I wonder what it would feel like to be that carefree—no thinking, no adjusting, just existing and being accepted.

"Finally," Kristin says, smiling from the porch, her voice warm and amused. She stands in the doorway, sweater sleeves pushed up, looking effortlessly put together. "You made it."

I stand, brushing my hands lightly against my jeans, suddenly too aware of myself, the way I'm standing, the way I'm smiling. Every little detail of me is on display. Mason stands up beside me, and his shoulder brushes mine, grounding me.

"Mom," he says, "This is Eve."

Kristin steps forward without hesitation. I try to mirror that. Easy. Open. Approachable.

“Hi,” I say, offering a small smile. “It’s really nice to meet you.”

Kristin smiles; there’s no hesitation at all on her end. “It’s so good to finally meet you, Eve,” she says, pulling me into a hug before I even have time to prepare for it. It’s quick, but genuine and natural, like she’s done this a thousand times before. “We’re so glad you’re here,” she says as she pulls away.

Glad. I hold onto that word as it settles in my chest before I can start to wonder if she means it the way I need her to.

“Come on in,” Kristin says, already stepping back and opening the door wider. “We’re a little bit all over the place, but that’s normal around here.

I nod, offering a small smile, and follow them inside.

Soft light fills the entryway, warm against the darker wooden floors. There’s the faint smell of something cooking, garlic, maybe, and the murmur of voices coming from somewhere deeper in the house. I step inside and slip my shoes off a second after Mason does.

“Greg’s in the kitchen,” Kristin says, glancing over her shoulder. “And Iris...” she lets out a small breath of amusement. “Is around here somewhere.”

“Somewhere causing problems,” Mason adds, smirking.

“I heard that!”

The voice comes from down the hallway, fast and sharp, and a second later, she appears. She slows when she sees us—when she sees me. Just for a moment.

“Iris, this is Eve,” Mason says.

I smile. “Hi.”

Iris looks at me for a moment, and her eyes seem to narrow slightly, like she’s taking me in. Then her expression shifts, a smile pulling at the corners of her mouth.

“So, you are real,” she says, grinning at Mason.

I let out a small laugh. “Yeah, I guess I am.”

She steps a little closer, crossing her arms as she does.

“You’re prettier than I thought.”

“Oh my... Iris” Mason groans.

I feel my face warm. “Thanks,” I say a little quickly. “I hope that’s a good thing.”

Iris glances at Mason, then back at me. “It is.”

Mason nudges me. “Ignore her.”

“What? I’m being nice,” Iris says.

“I can tell.”

I glance between them, experiencing the natural rhythm of their banter. They fall back into it so easily.

Kristin moves deeper into the house. “Come on, you two. Dinner’s almost ready.”

I follow Mason toward the kitchen.

Inside the kitchen is Greg, taking lasagna out of the oven, his back toward me. I hesitate, unsure if I should say something or wait. Before I can decide, Kristin steps in.

“Honey, I have someone for you to meet,” she smiles and guides me up to him. “This is Eve.”

Greg turns around, brushing his hands along the front of his shirt. He studies me for a moment, a quiet, assessing look, before reaching his hand out.

“It’s nice to meet you, Eve,” he says, his voice steady and measured.

I take his hand, returning the shake. “You too.”

“You caught us right at dinner,” Kristin says, stepping in next to Greg to begin cutting up the loaf of garlic bread. “Greg does most of the cooking around here.”

Greg gives a small shrug, already plating slices of lasagna, “Just when you need a break from it.”

Mason leans against the counter beside me, “Which is... often.”

Greg laughs quietly, still focused on the plates.

“It smells good,” I add, the words coming out carefully.

Greg glances back over his shoulder, just briefly. “Thanks.”

There is a beat of silence before he adds, “Hopefully it lives up to it.”

“It always does,” Mason responds.

Kristin comes back, holding two bottles of wine.

“Eve, do you like red or white?”

“Oh, either is fine,” I say swiftly. “Whatever you’re having.”

“Red it is then,” Kristin says, beginning to pour.

Not knowing what to do with myself, I move toward Greg and grab a few plates of lasagna, heading toward the dining area to set the table. Mason falls into step beside me, automatically.

“You don’t have—” I start.

“You’re our guest,” he says, brushing against me, “*You* don’t have to.”

Greg begins carrying the garlic bread and salad toward the table, quiet and efficient, setting them down with minimal words.

“Careful,” Iris warns, leaning in the doorway. “If you do too much, they’ll start expecting it.”

Mason glances at her. “You’re one to talk.”

“Exactly.” Iris concludes, as if that proves her point.

She steps into the kitchen a little more fully now, watching the table as it’s set. I can feel her watching, even before I look up. I glance at her, then immediately back down toward the table.

“She’s kidding,” Mason murmurs beside me.

“Am I?” Iris responds, smiling mischievously.

Once the table has been set and all the food is laid out, we settle around the table, chairs scraping softly against the floor. Having Mason right next to me settles something in my chest, and I let out a slow breath I didn’t realize I was holding. The food looks incredible, and I don’t hesitate before taking a bite. It’s every bit as good as Mason said.

A voice cuts through my thoughts,

“Eve, we always say grace before we eat.”

Oh. I freeze mid-motion, my fork hovering halfway to my mouth. I know that. I set my fork down quickly and fold my hands, bowing my head. Mason shifts beside me, and I follow, settling into the silence. As Kristin begins to pray, I try to focus, but my thoughts drift anyway.

How were you not ready for that?

I keep myself still, trying to look like I belong here. I whisper a quiet amen when they do, a second late, but close enough. When I lift my head, I keep my expression neutral and pleasant, like nothing just happened at all.

“So, Eve,” Kristin begins, once everyone has dug into their food, “I hear you’re studying education.”

I nod. “Yeah, I am.”

“What do you want to teach?” she asks, coaxing me to expand.

This time, the answer comes easier. “Middle school English,” I say. “I’ve always loved reading and writing, so I know that’s where I want to be. I considered high school, but I think that age is a little more intimidating.”

“So, you’re saying that *I’m* intimidating?” Iris asks, a hint of challenge in her tone, and a smug smile on her face.

A small laugh escapes from me. “Maybe slightly.”

Mason lets out a quiet chuckle beside me.

Iris tilts her head, studying me, then nods. “Fair.”

“I think you’d be good at middle school,” Kristin adds, kind and certain.

“Thanks,” I reply. “I really hope so.”

“You will be,” says Mason, brushing my leg under the table.

Greg, who has been quiet, adds without looking up, “You sound like you’ve thought about it.”

I nod. “A lot.”

“That’s a good sign,” he says.

And for a moment, things don’t feel as heavy.

Everyone has about licked their plates clean when Kristin shoots up out of her chair.

“I almost forgot dessert,” she says, moving quickly to the kitchen and returning moments later with a ceramic dish in her hands. The bowl is set down in the center, and as she removes the lid, the smell of warm apples and cinnamon fills the air.

“Apple crisp,” she says fondly. “We always used to make this in the fall.”

Iris leans forward, already reaching for the serving spoon. “Claire’s favorite.”

There’s a small smile in her voice; she’s said it without thinking.

“She’d make sure I made it every year,” Kristin says. “Even if she wasn’t here, she’d ask about it.”

Mason smiles slightly beside me. “Yeah, She really wouldn’t let us skip it.” He takes a bite of the crisp, nodding to himself. “Still the same,” he says.

Once some of the dessert is on my plate, I reach for my fork. The apple crisp looks warm. Soft. Sweet. I take a bite of it.

I see why Claire requested it. *Her* dessert. “Yeah– this is delicious,” I say. My voice sounds normal, at least, I think. Mason glances at me, smiling faintly, before turning back to his plate.

“You have to try it with the ice cream,” Kristin says, already reaching for the carton.

I nod and take another bite. *Claire*. The name sits there now. I set my fork down, then pick it up again.

“She really liked it?” I ask, keeping my voice light.

Kristin glances up, surprised for a second, then nods. “Oh, yeah. She was the one who made it happen around here.”

“Every year,” Greg adds.

Mason nods once, still eating. I watch him for a second longer than I mean to. He does not look at me.

“That’s nice,” I say. The words come out smaller than before.

I take another bite, even though I’m not really tasting it anymore. The conversation is flowing around me—plates clinking, small bursts of laughter, and warm voices. I try to follow it. I nod at

something Kristin says. I smile when Iris laughs. Something tightens in my chest. I leave it there. Mason brushes his hand against my leg under the table. I shift it away. I reach for my wine glass. I sip it. It tastes more bitter than it should.

The conversation shifts again. They're saying something about the lake. Something about next weekend. I look down at my plate. The apple crisp sits there, mostly untouched now. I think about grabbing my fork, but I've lost my appetite.

"Eve, are you still hungry?" Kristin asks.

"No," I say quickly. "I'm good."

Mason shifts slightly beside me. His arm brushes mine, then settles. I don't lean into it this time. I just sit. *I need to get out of here.*

"Excuse me," I whisper. My voice is steady. I push my chair back.

Mason turns slightly. "Eve?"

I do not look at him.

"I'll be right back," I say, already standing. No one stops me. I walk out of the room before I can think about it too much. The noise from the table fades behind me as I move toward the back door. I open it and step outside. I walk. Past the porch. Through the yard. Toward the dock.

* * *

The dock creaks under my feet as I walk out, the sound too loud against the quiet around me. I don't stop until I reach the end. I sit, pulling off my shoes and socks, and slip my feet into the water. It's cold. Sharp enough to make me inhale. The lake stretches out before me, smooth and still, like nothing's been disturbed. I focus on that. The way it doesn't move. I try to do the same. It doesn't work. *Claire.*

I press my palms into my eyes for a second, drag them down my face, then drop them back into my lap. It wasn't even an important thing. Just a name. A story. A tradition. I exhale. She was part of that. I look back toward the house. The windows glow warm against the darkness settling in. Nothing stops. I turn back and drag my foot through the water, breaking the surface. It settles at once as if nothing happened. I try to picture it, here, at that table. Knowing when to speak. When not to. Knowing them. Knowing where everything is. I stop. *I wouldn't even know where the extra plates are.* I'm not sure there's space for me in it.

I pick at the edge of the dock, splintering a small piece of wood beneath my nail. I showed up and sat in her chair. I press my lips tightly together. They weren't comparing, I know that. It sounded like remembering, which is worse. I shake my head. The house hasn't changed. The lake hasn't changed. Everything is the same as before I left. I try to imagine staying. Letting this become normal. I can't quite get there. I just don't know how I belong in it.

The dock begins to creak, and I don't realize he's come out until I hear the footsteps stop a few feet behind me.

"Hey," Mason says.

I glance back at him, then look out toward the water again.

"Hey."

He doesn't sit right away. Just stands there for a second, like he's watching the way I'm holding myself.

"You didn't even grab a coat; you're probably freezing," he says as he wraps a jacket around my shoulders. He exhales and lowers himself onto the dock a short distance away.

We sit in silence for a moment.

"You disappeared," he finally says, breaking the silence.

"I just needed a minute."

We continue to sit, and the water ripples as I move my feet in little circles.

"You're thinking a lot," he says.

It isn't an accusation. Just an observation.

I swallow. "I always am."

Mason chuckles softly beside me, shaking his head.

"Yeah," he says. "But not always like this."

I don't answer.

"You got quiet back there," he adds. "And then you just... left."

"I didn't want to make it weird."

“It wasn’t weird.”

I shrug, “It felt weird.”

Another pause.

Mason leans back, looking out at the lake.

“Was it something they said?”

I hesitate. “It wasn’t—” I start, then stop. “It wasn’t anything they did,” I say instead. “It’s just...” I trail off.

Mason doesn’t rush me. He just waits.

“That whole conversation,” I say finally, “about Claire... it just...” I shake my head a little, like I can’t quite finish my thought.

“Got in your head?” He finishes gently.

I nod. A small one. He gazes over at me then.

“Hey,” he says, “you’re not competing with her.”

“That’s not what I’m trying to do,” I say. “It just felt like she must’ve... fit here. Like she knew how to act, how to be here without trying.”

Mason is quiet for a moment.

“You don’t need to be her. I want you to be you.”

I sigh. “I know that.”

“Do you?” He asks.

The question isn’t sharp; it’s real.

“I don’t know,” I admit to him quietly. There it is.

Mason nods. “Yeah,” he says. “I get that.”

He shifts closer, not touching me, just closer than before.

“But you’re not trying to take her place,” he says.

I look at him finally.

“You’re allowed to be here and just be yourself.”

“I don’t know how to do that,” I admit.

“Then we figure it out,” he says.

Not like it’s simple. Just like it’s possible.

* * *

The screen door creaks as we step back inside. Warmth wraps around me all at once, voices rising and falling from the kitchen. I pause just inside the doorway. Mason moves beside me, close enough that his shoulder grazes mine.

“Hey,” Kristin says. The room suddenly feels further away.

For a second, I’m back at the dock. *Just stay there.* I don’t. I take a breath and step fully into the room. Not to disappear into it. Just to be in it. A conversation is already going, something about the lake, about summers, about things that stretch back longer than I’ve been here. I listen for a second. The thought flickers. *You’re not part of this.* I let it pass.

I sit down. The conversation moves from one end of the table to the other, the quiet rhythm of eating, glasses being set down and lifted again. For now, I stay.

Lily Messman / Young Love / Charcoal and Graphite



An authoritative narrator spoke through a Bluetooth speaker.

'Almost every religion has its own lore regarding spirits that can interact with the world; some are demonic, some angelic, some former human souls who, for one reason or another, have stuck around, lingering in our presence.'

"You know," Chad mumbled through his popcorn, "I thought my grandma's house was haunted as a kid. Creaky staircase, shorting light switches, noises in the walls. Then we found out she had rats."

Gus gnawed on blue gummy sharks and planted his bare feet in the cool, dewey grass. His lawn chair let out a creak. "I always thought ghosts could only be tied to a residence," he said, "like they'd run out of available housing and have to join a waitlist."

Devin snickered as he scribbled in his notebook and brushed eraser bits to the ground. "I think Hindu theology has interesting lore. People in pivotal periods of their life are recommended to take precautions against vengeful spirits looking to feed off of their energy, such as expecting parents or newlyweds." He paused. Frogs and crickets filled the silence. "Speaking of which, how's Hannah?"

Gus cleared his throat. "She's good. We're going to a concert tomorrow, actually."

"Which one?" Chad asked.

"DubWarp."

"Oh, shit, I saw him last year." Chad sat up, eyes wide. "Is he still stupid expensive?"

"Kind of, yeah. Hopefully the hipsters don't stampede us on the way in, or we'll be on the front page of the paper," Gus chuckled.

"Gus, you're just a hipster with extra self-esteem," Devin quipped without looking up from his notebook. Gus stuck out his tongue since he wasn't looking.

Chad laughed. "Better watch out. If you walk too close to the wrong tent, you'll have a contact high for a week if you know what I mean."

A tremor built in Gus's legs, then seeped down into the dew at his feet. Devin stopped scribbling and cut Gus a silent glance.

An itch in Gus's throat brought up a laugh. "I don't think I'm choosing to partake in that. I've already had my fun, if you know what I mean."

Chad nodded. "For sure. I'm California sober, personally."

"Chin-Hae," Yu-Jun called from the patio door, a stained apron tied around his waist. The aroma of soy sauce and rice noodles wafted into the yard. "I made japchae if you and your friends are hungry."

"What's that?" Chad asked.

"Uh, it's kind of like stir-fry," Gus explained. "It's--"

"See y'all inside." Chad's lawn chair toppled over as he ran to the patio. "Nice to meet you, sir," he said, shaking a confused Yu-Jun's hand and entering the house.

Yu-Jun remained for a moment on the patio, taken aback. He pointed towards the eager young man who'd bolted inside and shot Gus a look. Gus shrugged. Yu-Jun shrugged back, equally confused and flattered, and followed Chad inside.

Devin closed his notebook and tapped Gus on the forearm with his eraser. "You all right?"

Gus took a swig of his soda. "Living the dream."

"No, actually."

Gus tilted his head. "Yeah, I'm all right." He set his soda can down. "Why do you ask?"

"Just checking in. Tomorrow's a big day, huh?"

"I guess." Gus sipped his soda. "It's gonna be pretty freaking loud, is all. You bet your ass I'll have my headphones with me."

Devin raised his eyebrows. "Have you thought at all about the type of environment these events usually foster?"

"You mean an environment where people are actively doing drugs," Gus chuckled.

"I suppose I do mean that."

"Yeah, Dev, I've thought about that." Gus's hands turned clammy. "I've been clean for almost two years. I think I can finally say I'm at the point that I can handle being near it."

Devin nodded. "Have you talked to Ryan lately?"

"Ryan?" Gus scratched his neck. "Maybe a few months ago."

"You're lucky you aren't in there with him."

Gus stared at the grass between his two feet. "Yeah, I know."

Devin removed his glasses - an event so infrequent that Gus did a double take to ensure it was him - and tucked them into his buttoned collar. "Look, I'm aware that I am not an especially warm and fuzzy human being, but I am proud of your accomplishments."

Gus tilted his head and smiled. "Thank you, Dev."

"I may not have ever been in the position of an addict, but it doesn't take a genius to know that it's not a cakewalk to get out of. The chance of you quitting cold turkey on your first try with no relapse was essentially zero."

Gus nodded. "It was hard, but... I put myself in that position in the first place." He leaned back in his chair. Treetops intertwined above him, dimmed to black in front of the night sky. A couple stars sparkled between the branches.

"Hannah seems to be a good influence on you," Devin chimed in.

Gus rubbed his temples. "She was never part of that scene, you know? She doesn't have those ties. She tried a cigarette one time and moved on with her life." A scoff escaped his throat.

"Have you guys set a date yet?"

Gus ran his fingers through his hair. "Not yet. She's thinking next summer, I'm thinking fall." He picked at his fingernails. "She has a huge family, so we're going to need to rent out a ballroom or something. Her side of the aisle is going to be packed to the brim. My side's probably going to be you, my dad, and like, three cousins from Korea I see twice a year."

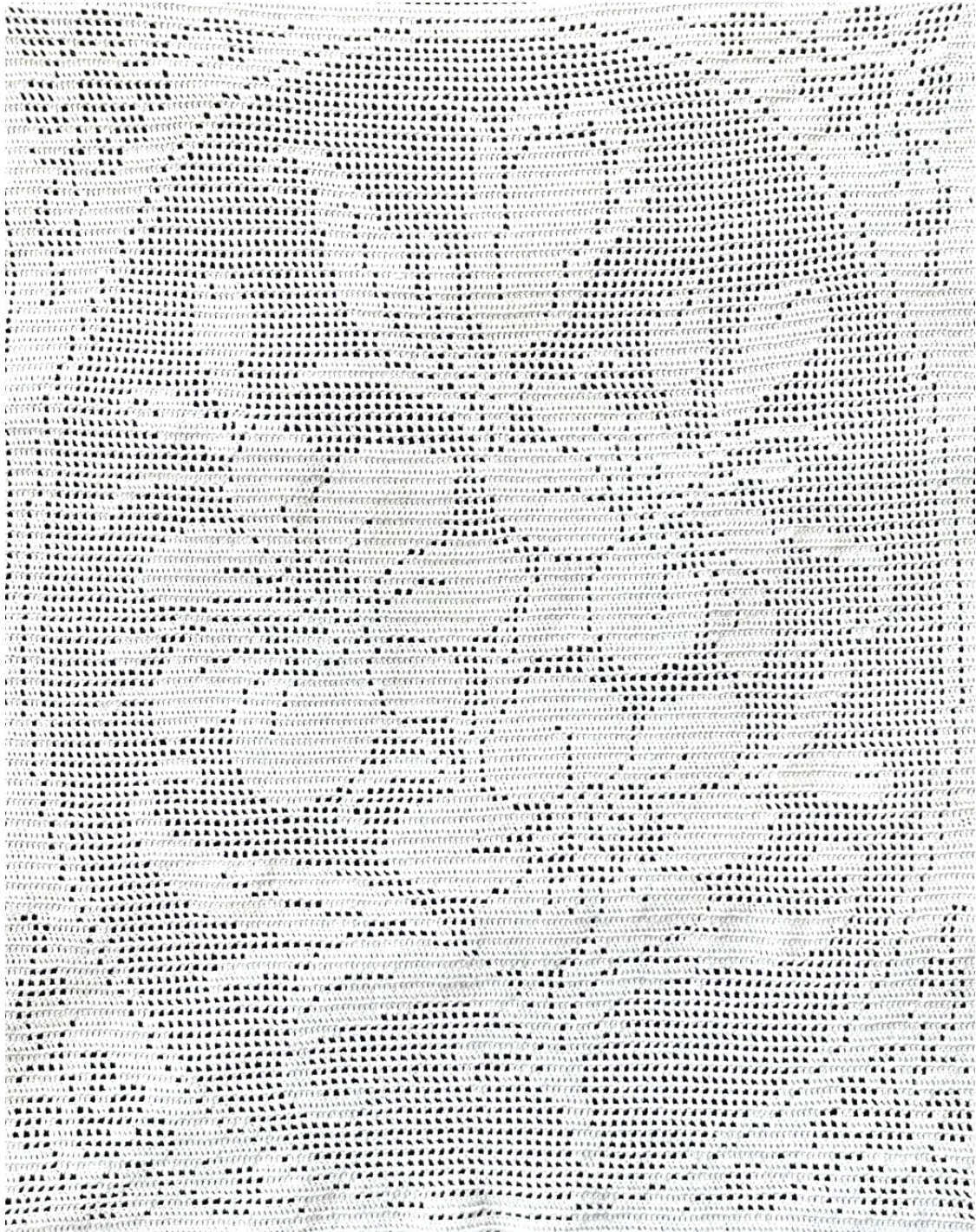
"All that matters is that you're marrying the person you love."

Gus did a double take. The word '*love*' hadn't come from Devin's mouth in the entire history of their friendship, not even to describe how he felt about objects or food or films. One time, he and Gus went to the museum together on a free admission day. Devin stopped at one particular painting for longer than four seconds, then turned to Gus and asked *Who did this?* That was the closest he had ever come to saying he loved something.

Gus leaned forward in his chair, narrowing his eyes. “Are you getting warm and fuzzy right now?”

Straightening his spine, Devin put his glasses back on. “I most certainly am not.”

Gus took one last swig of his soda and smirked, standing from his chair to go inside for dinner. “Whatever you say.”



“Tanner!”

Hands grabbed my sides and shook me hard enough to rattle the teeth in my head. “Dude, wake up. We totally passed out in here last night.”

Miles always woke me up like that — too loud, too close. I used to think he was just being extra; that it was just who he was. Eventually, I realized he hated being alone more than anything else. Maybe that’s why we always clung to each other.

For a second I had forgotten where I was. But the familiar stench of the place — sour, damp, and metallic — stung my nose. The light leaking through the cracked windows was that gray-blue of a morning that hadn’t quite decided whether it wanted to be kind. My throat felt like I’d eaten sand, and my mouth tasted like old pennies.

I launched upright, landing on my knees in what I would barely call a room. Broken glass glittered across the floor like a warning, and used needles lay everywhere. The grime was so thick I wanted to gag when I realized I’d just been sleeping there. I spun towards Miles, my best friend.

He was half-smirking, half-wincing, rubbing sleep from his eyes with the palm of his hand. His dusty Yankees cap sat on top of his shaggy, dirty blonde hair and it shadowed a fresh bruise under one eye that hadn’t been there yesterday. He looked like a kid pretending to be invincible, and if you didn’t know better, you might have believed him.

Miles’ mom split when he was young—early enough that he barely remembers her face, just the smell of cigarettes and floral perfume lingering in the house long after she left. His dad works double shifts at the plant and does delivery driving on the weekend. On the occasions he was home, he slept. Our home lives weren’t that different; I think we learned early that any noise is better than silence.

“What happened?” I groaned, rubbing my temples. “My head is killing me. Dude, what was in that stuff?” I dug into my pocket and pulled out my cracked iPhone 11, the screen was smeared with dirt, but I could still read the time, 7:42. “We are definitely getting truancy for this. I told you we need to chill.”

Miles just laughed. “I told you, don’t be a pussy! So, it was a little more than we thought but we’re still alive, aren’t we?” He reached into a hidden pocket he’d sewn into his Yankees cap and pulled out a dime bag. “I saved just enough to help us bounce back. Let’s start the day, shall we?”

The bag caught the pale light like a tiny, terrible snow globe. Part of me wanted to burn it in front of him. The other part — the louder part — wanted what the bag promised: a bit of softness and understanding between me and him.

“We need to go to school.” I tried to sound firm, but it came out tired. “Seriously bro they’re going to start cracking down on us.”

“Relax,” he said, brushing it off with that stupid grin. “We graduate this year anyway.”

That grin always got me. He was always so excited, I felt like I couldn’t let him down. I at least couldn’t let him do it alone. I snatched the dime bag from him before he could say more, dumping the powder onto the back of my phone and dividing it into four, even lines.

I’d known Miles since we were seven, about ten years. I liked to think he’d be the best man at my wedding. I thought about how innocent we used to be. How he used to knock on my window with a flashlight shining underneath his chin. The first time he lied for me and the first time I lied for him; two kids who spent their whole lives together, set on the idea it’ll always be that way.

“I knew you wouldn’t let me down Tan,” he said, smirking like he had just won some game we were playing.

My dad used to say that Miles was good trouble — the kind that made life interesting. He died two years ago. Since then, my mom hasn’t really been around. She works nights and sleeps all day. On the rare occasions we did cross paths, we moved carefully, like if we spoke more than a few words, we would break something between us. I think Miles helped fill that quiet.

Miles once told me that if nobody was going to watch us, he was going to make sure they couldn’t ignore us. I think that was the day I realized he needed me too, the day I realized I couldn’t back down. I think that’s part of why I don’t fight Peyton harder, being anywhere else felt easier than sitting in a room full of things we don’t know how to talk about anymore.

I lifted the phone to my nose; the smell came sharp and chemical. With one swipe and inhale, the world shook. I was used to this feeling by now, I’d done it enough, but the idea was still jarring, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that we could stay this safe forever.

On the way to school I stopped home. Sometimes I went just to prove it was still *my* home. My mom’s shoes were by the door, untouched. I stood in the kitchen longer than I needed to, listening to the refrigerator hum. I thought for a second about waking her, but I left without saying anything. Silence had started to feel heavier than lying.

*

Friday night bled into Saturday morning like it always did—too fast, too loud, too bright. We hit our usual spots: the convenience store where the cashier never checked IDs, the riverbank where no cops patrolled, and the basement at Jordan’s where the music was loud enough to drown out second thoughts.

Miles was electric — bouncing from group to group, tossing back drinks, and cracking jokes that made everyone laugh harder than they should’ve. He absorbed attention and threw it back twice as bright. In rooms like these, he looked like the best version of himself. I hated that the “best” version of himself needed the worst things.

I caught him scanning faces sometimes, like he was taking attendance, making sure everyone was still there. When the attention dipped, even for a second, his smile sharpened. That was usually the part of the night where he reached for something stonger.

I just trailed behind him, feeling like some lost puppy. The word puppy made me angry at myself, which made me drink more, which made me feel like a puppy again — loyal beyond sense, following a person who split danger into smaller pieces and handed them to me like treats.

Around midnight, someone brought out pills. Someone else had stronger powder. Miles looked like a little kid on Christmas.

“Tanner,” he said, voice low, urgent, “this is the good stuff. The *real* good stuff.”

“I don’t want to go hard tonight,” I tried not to sound like a bitch. “Let’s just chill this time,”

The room sloshed with bodies and bass. There was a beat between what he offered and what I knew I should say that felt like a window I could climb out of if I moved fast enough. I didn’t move, I never do.

“We can chill after dude!” He shoved the bag into my hand. “Come on! Don’t leave me hanging Tan.”

I hated that he said it like that — like our friendship was based on these stupid bags. But I followed him anyway.

The night folded around us like it wanted to keep us here. Time turned elastic, then brittle. I told myself I was keeping an eye on him; it felt loyal for about five minutes and selfish the rest of the time.

*

By Saturday afternoon, everything was foggy. We drifted from house to house, wherever people welcomed us with open arms and bad decisions. Every house felt the same, a room with a poster curling off the wall, a plant someone forgot to water, and too many people.

We fought that night — the fight that we'd been sidestepping for years now. I could feel it building the way you can feel a storm before it attacks. People laughed too loud, someone had dropped a bottle, and everyone cheered like it was a victory. It started with something stupid, it always did. He'd disappeared for over an hour at a party, leaving me in a room full of strangers. I found him slumped on the bathroom floor, pupils blown, skin pale.

"Are you trying to kill yourself?" I snapped, yanking him back on his feet.

He shoved me away. "Stop acting like you're my mom."

"I'm acting like someone who gives a shit!"

He laughed — mean, sloppy. "Oh please. You need me more than I need you."

That sentence stabbed through my heart, sharp and deep. It was the dull knife type of sentence that still drew blood. He wanted to hurt me, I hated that it worked. I hated that I almost believed him.

"Fine," I scoffed. "Do whatever you want then."

I left him there. He didn't come after me.

I spent the rest of the night outside on the curb, head down, shivering despite the warm air around me. I kept waiting for Miles to stumble out. To find me. To apologize first.

He never came out.

At 3 a.m., I finally went back in. I found him asleep on a couch, with some random jacket thrown over top of him as a makeshift blanket. His mouth was slightly open; his breath came shallow and even. He looked younger like this — like the boy who hadn't figured out how to get around the world yet.

I sat on the ground beside him and rubbed my eyes. The carpet smelled like old beer and oranges, and I kept hold of the cuff of his sleeve. Sighing, I layed my head back and fell asleep.

*

Miles woke up groggy, blinking at me through crusted lashes. “Hey.”

“Hey.”

We stared at each other for a long moment before he cracked a weak smile. “We’re idiots, huh?”

I nodded.

He nudged my shoulder. “Still love you though.”

My throat tightened. “Yeah. Same.”

That should’ve been it. I should have insisted we went home right then, change our ways and graduate. The words lined up in my head but fell apart at my tongue. But habits were habits after all, and Miles wasn’t done yet.

“Let’s finish the weekend right,” he said, already reaching for his bag.

I wanted to say no. I wanted to grab his wrist and tell him that I’m scared — I’m scared we’re going to kill ourselves like this.

But he looked at me like I was the only person in the world you really understood him. I knew that no matter how scared I was, I couldn’t walk away. Not from him.

*

Sunday evening came, setting the town in a dull orange haze, the kind of fading light that made everything look more dangerous than it was.

Miles kicked an empty can on the side of the road as we walked. “Dude, this guy’s legit. Jordan told me he plugs half the seniors and even their parents!”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

He shot me a grin. “Come on, live a little!”

We turned the corner, crunching gravel under our sneakers, and saw him. The new dealer leaned against the rusted frame of an old loading dock, a cigarette burning low between his fingers. He looked older than the guys we usually bought from — maybe mid to late 30s — with hollow cheeks and eyes that didn’t blink enough.

He flicked the cigarette away. “Jordan send you?”

Miles took a step forward. “Yeah. You got the stuff?”

The guy nodded once. His gaze swept over us, lingering on the way Miles still swayed slightly. “You two look like you’ve already had a weekend.”

Miles laughed. “That’s kind of the point.”

I shoved my hands in my pockets, trying to swallow the unease prickling up my spine. Something about this guy felt weird. Too calm, too practiced.

The guy reached into his jacket and pulled out a tiny bag filled with powder so white it almost glowed in the dim light.

Miles’ eyes widened. “Yo, this looks clean.”

“It is.” Marcus held the bag between two fingers like a magician presenting a card. Marcus looked me up and down before returning his gaze to Miles. “Hope you guys have fun.”

Miles slipped the cash into Marcus’ hand. He pocketed it, gave us the bag, and turned to walk away.

We walked towards the abandoned warehouse outside of town. It was disgusting in most spots, but we’ve never seen anybody else out there. The building sat like it had been waiting for us — same busted window we broke one day with a soup can, the old, peeling paint. The door dragged when we pushed it; the metal groaned like it was tired of keeping us.

“Hey man, I don’t-”

He cut me off. “Relax, we will be fine. We always are.”

But for the first time ever, his voice seemed to quiver just a little. I should’ve pushed more, instead I let him drag me into the warehouse one more time.

*

The air inside was still and stale. Dust floated in the light like slow snow. Miles raced to our designated spot, a rectangle of clean concrete we had decorated with two makeshift rugs. He immediately lined up the powder on my phone again.

His hands were quick, practiced. The lines formed with little effort, tidy as chalk. He laughed as he looked down at it; the sound bounced off the metal walls around us.

But something felt different, wrong. This batch really did look strange — too white, too fine. My stomach twisted.

“Hey dude,” I said shakily, “maybe we shouldn’t—”

“You’re worrying again,” he teased. “Relax. We just haven’t gotten this guy’s stuff before.”

I thought about grabbing his wrist. About saying something real instead of something careful. The moment passed anyway. It always did.

He went first. I didn’t go at all.

It took less than two minutes. His head whipped back up, and he stared blankly for a second. And then his grin faltered. He swayed back and forth. His eyes rolled back.

“Miles?”

I caught him as he crumpled to the ground. His weight surprised me — how heavy a person is when they aren’t helping you hold them up.

“Miles! Hey—hey, wake up, come on man please.”

His body twitched in my arms before going terrifyingly still. I shook him, just like he had shaken me awake in this same spot just a few days prior.

“Miles! Dude please—please, don’t do this you have to wake up.”

His lips were already turning blue.

My fingers fumbled over the buttons on my phone. I dialed 911. The numbers blurred through the tears in my eyes. The sound of the call cut through the air like a wire.

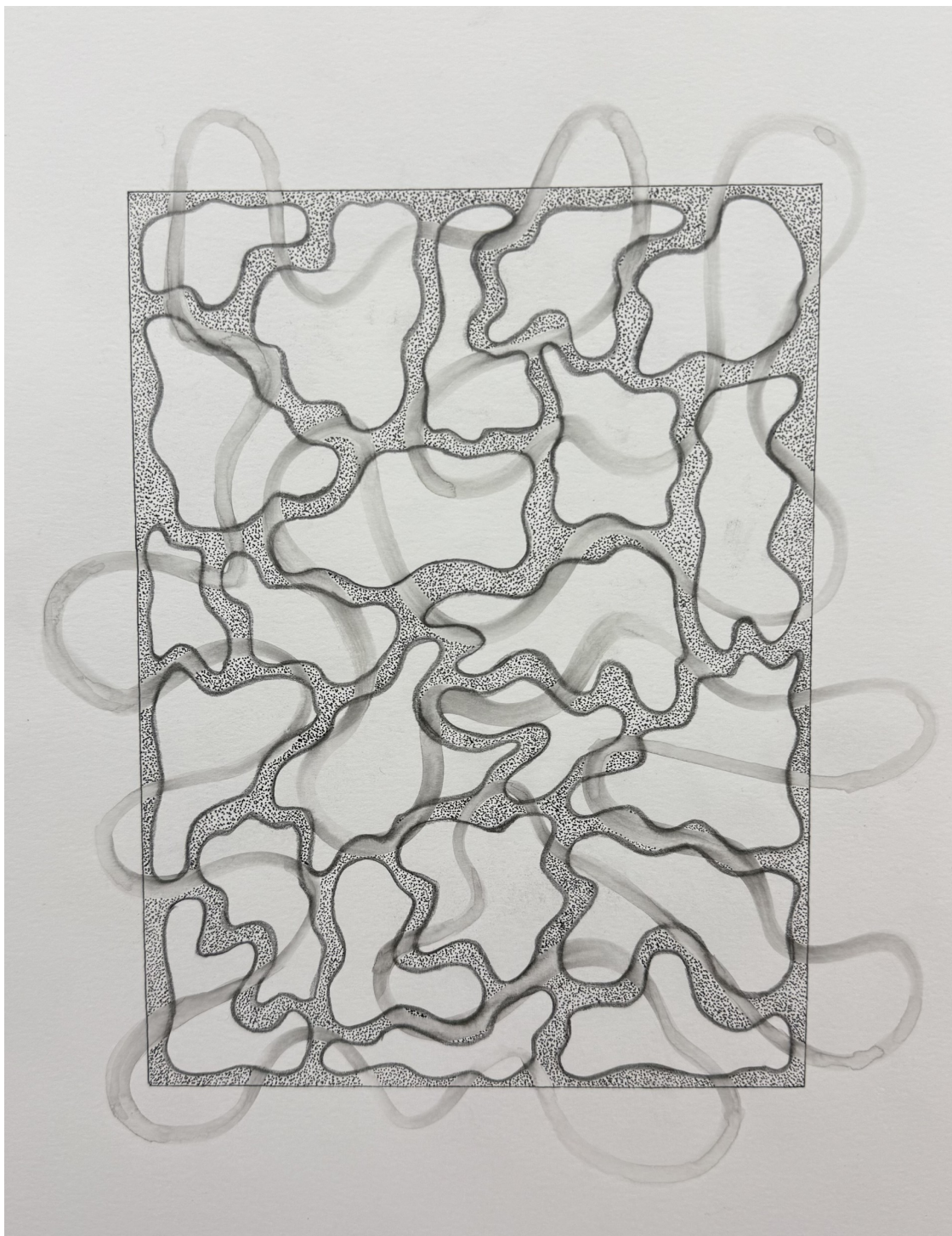
My voice cracked, pushing the words out. “My friend he isn’t breathing — he’s not — he took something — I don’t know — please you have to hurry!”

They told me to lay him flat. To check his pulse and start compressions. The instructions echoed in my head. Palms stacked. Center of the chest. Press. Press. Press.

I tried, God, I tried.

I screamed his name over and over. I promised him repeatedly that he would be okay. I was begging him to be okay.

By the time the paramedics arrived, I already knew. His hand had gone cold in mine.



Adreana Kosobuski / The Long Drive Home

She wiped the mist from the motel bathroom mirror and squinted in an attempt to see her reflection. Ronnie knew that this would likely go wrong. Too bad she didn't care. She was doing this for Teddy, and although she had a pit in her stomach, loyalty heavily defined her character. If this was what he needed, she would help in whatever ways were necessary. Water with a slight metallic tinge fell sporadically from the rusted shower head just minutes before, failing to rid Ronnie of the persistent anxiety gnawing at her stomach. She knew the feeling well. It was the same feeling she got whenever she lied to her parents, Cindy and Jeff. The feeling she got when negativity and anticipation soiled the air. Teddy had eased her out of a mess a time or two. Okay, more like fifty. Standing idly by in the lives of her own family was not a comprehensible option, let alone her own brothers. After all, he was the only person who showed up to her seventh birthday party. The only problem was that he popped the castle bouncy house and made the clown cry (but it's okay, he brought a gift). She got herself dressed, raked her fingers through her dark waves, and hung her towel on the back of the door just before she inched it open. A dark room was revealed, with only the light from the TV somewhat guiding her. She grabbed onto the dresser as she made her way to her bed for the night.

Teddy was fast asleep on the couch by the window. Mumbling in his sleep like he always had, something Ronnie had never been able to stand throughout their years of living together. Sitting upright against the bed frame, she examined her wrist, still bruised and throbbing. The skin rippled from a nearly undetectable blue color to a faded green. She had smacked it on a metal pole in the parking lot when she intended to smack her brother's shoulder. He had just informed her that his lodging of choice for the night was known for both bed bugs and many "minor" electrical fires. Teddy felt that the motel was a "bang for its buck." However, Ronnie could not stand the confidence he had in everything.

Easing herself back, she rested her head on the one pillow she had. Teddy had stolen her other one while she was in the bathroom. He already had two, but he had a knack for making even the slightest of inconveniences feel maddening. A creak from the couch rang throughout the motel room as he flipped to his back. That adjustment had made the curtain draw back slightly, allowing a sliver of light to flood in from the streetlamp outside, revealing a scowl on his face. *What could you possibly be pissed about while you're sleeping*, Ronnie thought. She closed her eyes for a few minutes before Steve Harvey's voice from the TV drowned out her constant train of thought.

Ronnie wasn't sure how long she'd been sleeping when she heard a loud thump come from across the room. She sat up, her bruised wrist protesting the sudden movement. The culprit making themselves known rather quickly.

“The couch not good enough for you?” Ronnie said. Teddy rolled his eyes in an attempt to respond. He had managed to make his way onto the floor. Not by choice, evident through his wincing as he forced himself into a sitting position.

“I can only be a gentleman for so many nights; I’m over it. We’re switching.” Teddy groaned.

“Alright, you’ve literally claimed yourself that chivalry’s dead, but, anyway, too late. You made your choice. I’ll take the couch tomorrow,” Ronnie said rather frankly.

“Fine.” He sat in silence for a second, waiting for her to change her mind. Spoiler, she didn’t, “Okay, yeah, fine.”

“You do realize that it’s like five in the morning, right? We have to get up in two hours.” Ronnie said.

“Yeah. I don’t think I’ll be getting any more sleep.” He responded

“Since when have you had trouble sleeping? This is coming from the kid who refused to wake up on Christmas morning even after I released Peggy into your bed.” Peggy, being Ronnie’s pet lizard, lived for only 3 months.

Teddy shook his head. “I don’t know. Every night since we left, I’ve been so restless. Every dream I have, I’m fighting this random thing, and when I swing, I’m the one that ends up on the actual floor.”

“Uh. Weird. What are you fighting?” Ronnie asked.

Teddy knew the real answer was that it was always something stupid. Either a clown or a ninja, or a creepy guy wearing a ski mask. However, he was not even remotely in the mood to get into that right now.

“Oh, just, you know... whatever, that’s not the point,” Teddy said, trying to switch topics.

“Okay well, maybe it’s the nerves,” Ronnie claimed.

“Believe me, it’s definitely the nerves,” He admitted.

“Did you ever actually email or call him, or anything to make sure he knew you were coming, or why you were coming?” she asked.

“No. I’m still struggling to believe this shit, let alone find the guy who supposedly still thinks that he’s my uncle. I hardly know the guy. I’ve seen him like five times in the past eleven years.” Teddy said

as he rested his head in his hands. “Knowing that my mother couldn’t take care of anyone, not even herself, and couldn’t find the way to tell me, EVER, that my ‘father’s brother’ was my father this whole time. If a therapist heard me tell this story, they’d have a field day, like come on now.”

“I still don’t understand how your mother never told him. The cheating is already a goddamn mess, but then not telling the guy you cheated with that he’s the father of your child, is quite literally psychotic,” Ronnie said.

“Thank you, Ronnie. For explaining my life to me. You’re hitting the nail on the head.”

“It’s not like I wasn’t there, Teddy.”

This is where Ronnie knew she should shut up. Teddy got off the floor and walked over to the couch to sit down.

“You are fully aware that I had a lot happen in the first five years of my life. Even the two years before you guys took me in. I love you all for being my support system, but no, you weren’t *there*.”

They both knew this was the end of that conversation. Teddy closed the blinds that were beginning to let in the morning light and lay back down on the couch. Still feeling the spring in his lower back poke and prod as he adjusted to a tolerable position.

Ronnie stared at the ceiling while the room remained somewhat dark, falling asleep briefly before the sun rose.

Road-tripping across the country in search of a relationship that’s both fractured and barely present was crazy to Teddy. The home he had been given by Ronnie and her family meant everything to him. He had decided he didn’t need anything else. Blood to him was not thicker than water, because he’d found a family that chose him. He was put into foster care at the age of five and started public school that same year. Kindergarten single-handedly brought Ronnie and Teddy together. Show and Tell Day brought them together through the sharing of comic books, specifically the *Green Lantern*, where, at the time, they just loved to look at the pictures. After two years in the foster system, being paraded from house to house, none of them seeming to be the right one, there was a new option. Ronnie’s parents had always wanted to adopt a child after having her, due to her mother’s struggle with carrying more children. Teddy was right in front of them. Their daughter’s very best friend, who needed attention, love, and a family.

They were his foster family until he was around nine years old, when they then chose to legally adopt him. Only now, fast forward to Teddy being eighteen, he decided to meet once again with his biological mother, who had been in and out of rehab since she lost custody of him. He didn’t want much,

just to forgive as best he could and try to move on (or that was supposed to be the idea). He always lets his emotions get the best of him. Acceptance of his father's absence was easy since he had never had a man to place that expectation on. He knew his uncle, who'd been around casually throughout his life, and he knew that his supposed father was his uncle's brother. However, he never knew him, so there was no tangible face to be angry at. He had never allowed himself to feel that loss until two weeks ago, the day he reconnected with his mother.

The hazy afternoon sky had felt suspiciously low that day. Teddy walked down Main Street in the small town of Bristol in Vermont, picking at his jacket pocket while waiting for a familiar face to come into view. It's blurred in his memory but not gone. He passed by the brick buildings and the community park, together, that made up his surroundings. The rounding of the corner left him finding the local cafe buzzing, yet his mother, Halle, was still nowhere to be seen. Wafts of coffee and pastry flooded his senses as he shoved the rickety door open. Only one chair was empty in the entire shop, and coincidentally, the person sitting across the table from that very chair was his mother. She was looking down at her hands and twiddling her thumbs. Clearly, he was not the only one nervous and feeling jittery about this interaction, but he needed it. He'd done the necessary research about her. Once he had turned eighteen, he dug a little more.

"Hi, Halle," Teddy said, not entirely sure about how he should address her.

She lifted her gaze to meet him. Eyes glossed over, seemingly unable to go too long without blinking.

"Theo! God, it's so good to see you not just through a picture."

"Uh, it's Teddy now," he responded.

Halle smiled weakly in acknowledgement.

Teddy's birth name was Theodore. It was a family name on his father's side, given to the eldest son. This happened to be his uncle's first name due to him being two years older than his father. Theo was what his mother had always called him as a boy. But Ronnie was the one who coined Teddy as his nickname. He never went by Theo from then on.

"Not trying to be rude... but could we possibly just skip the awkward 'Hi's' and 'How are you's' and talk about why we're both here?" Teddy said in the nicest way he possibly could.

"Yes, yes, I suppose that'd be for the best," Halle said.

“Ok, uh.” He paused. Feeling slightly nauseous. “Are you sober?”

Halle choked on her coffee, shocked by the sudden shift in conversation. “Oh ok, so we're just going for it,” she said as she placed her mug back on the table.

“It’s been thirteen years,” *leaving me with VERY little knowledge about you*, he thought before he continued. “I know you were always drunk, you couldn’t really take care of me, and I also know you didn’t want to. What else is there?” He said blatantly.

“Theo, I did want you. But I was not capable of managing both myself and you. That sounds like a cop-out, I know.” She said as her voice started to tremble. “You had a family who loved, supported, and cared for you. And... I’m sorry. But I could’ve never given you that. Even if I tried.” Teddy quite literally had no response to that.

She continued, finally. “Anyway, I need to tell you something, I can’t sit here without acknowledging it. You have the choice to do what you want with it.”

“Okay...? What is it?” He said as anticipation burrowed deep into his chest.

“You know your Uncle Theodore. He wasn’t around all that much when you were little, but I hear that you have kept in touch throughout the years.” Halle looked sick, perhaps from the alcohol abuse, but also from the fact that she could hardly muster the strength to keep saying one word after another.

“I wouldn’t call five visits in the past eleven years keeping in touch, but sure. I guess”

That response resulted in slight relief to reveal itself on his mother’s face. Only for a second. And then it was gone.

“Theo, your uncle helped me care for you in your earlier years because he and I cared for each other. My boyfriend, Eddie, and I began to drift.”

Teddy quickly interjected. “You mean my father. You can just say it.”

“Well...uh, Eddie left after he found out, which was while I was pregnant with you. He never knew that Theodore and I were seeing each other for long, or that he even had a possibility of being...” She paused.

“Being what, Halle? You’re losing me, I’m honestly confused.”

“Theodore isn’t your uncle, sweetheart. He’s your biological father.” She said, staring intensely at the young man across the table. His eyes glossed over, and he appeared to be in shock.

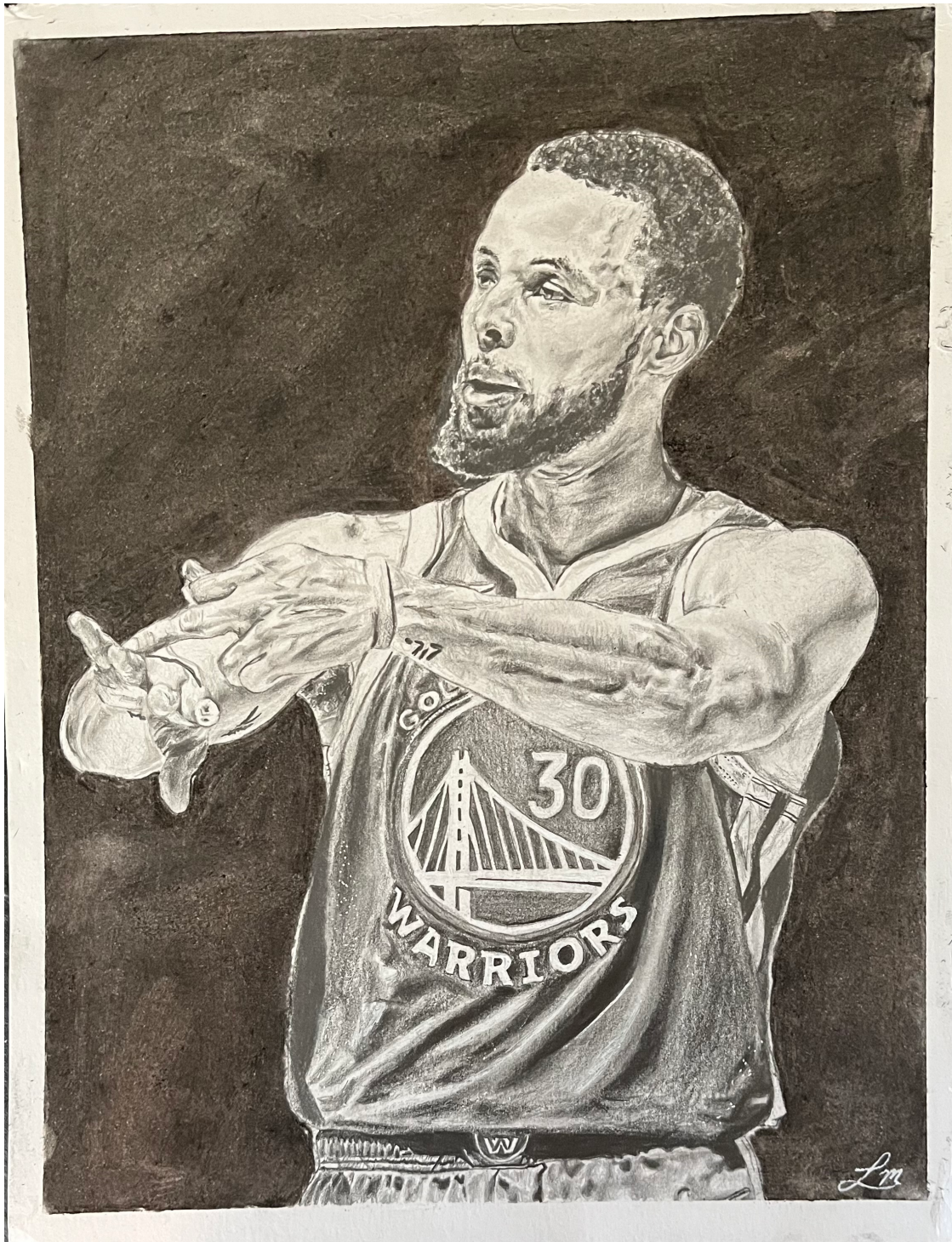
“Hold on, I...” Teddy was working hard to find a single clear thought in his head. “So, Theodore knows about this. He’s known this whole time?”

Halle continued, “I don’t know for sure. He never mentioned it if he did.”

“Not to be blunt, but literally HOW on earth would he not know?” Teddy snapped.

Halle explained that Theodore had left briefly to work as a truck driver for six months before coming back to find that she was pregnant. She had let him believe it was Eddie’s child when, in truth, he and his brother became estranged, and Eddie had left months before Theodore thought he had. The new reality that Halle created for herself was that she was a single mother whose boyfriend had walked out on her. She had Theodore (someone she previously been involved with) become her right hand when it came to taking care of her child. After three years of her new version of life had passed, Halle and Theodore began to drift. Arguments ensued, and tension was evident. He rarely came by after that and had almost fully left the picture by the time Teddy had turned five. Around that time, the drinking had fully set in for Halle, and CPS was called after Teddy was found asleep in a frost-covered minivan in the middle of a Walmart parking lot. His mother, in the front seat, passed out unconscious, with an empty bottle of Jim Beam in her hand.

Lily Messman / Champion / Charcoal and Graphite



I was a sweet 12-year-old *darling* of a girl when I first encountered the Beast.

A regular Wednesday night, I had reassured myself. *Wednesday*, a wonderful day of the week: the middle beacon that people look forward to, so I liked to think. Middle means average, and average means normal. Everything about today is normal, average, and regular. *Everything is fine*.

I shakily raised myself from the smooth tile of the bathroom floor, my legs untucking at odd angles from the tight fit. *Normal*. My hands curled into the porcelain sink, slick and slipping from sweat. *Average*. Slowly, I scanned the ridges on the tap that had surely collected filth, my body swaying to the rhythm of the piss yellow light above. *Regular*. The Mirror, chipped in the corners and ragged at the sides, glints ominously.

With a deep, unsure breath, I lift my head and meet my own eyes.

The Beast stared back: yellowed teeth bared, eyes wide with rage, body twisted at odd, cruel angles. Tufts of fur jut from its withered skin, its' ribs gaping wide like a vast maw. It snarls, a sound raw and primal that it closed my throat, and it lunges for me—

My head snapped away without a thought. I let it. Even from that brief exposure I could feel my bones warping to mimic what I had seen. My fingers clawed against the sink in a pitiful attempt to anchor myself once again. My heart slammed against my chest — prey eager to flee from what was surely a predator. My lungs burned as the Beast's hold on me lingered, and I squeezed my eyes shut. I willed it away with all the strength I pathetically held and gasped for air as my lungs finally expanded, my muscles relaxing as my bones rounded and softened to what I once was. What I was supposed to be.

I did not look into the Mirror for a very long time after that.

6 years later, a party is in full swing. I am freshly 18 — officially an adult, according to popular belief — and I am staring at the Beast. Years of sobering up from the high of innocence has dampened my senses, my emotions now a dull drip of tar.

The Beast is staring at me, and, this time, I stare back.

Fear doesn't consume me, but disgust. Not because I had once been afraid, but because we looked the same. I could feel the Beast's hatred and how it reflected my own.

With morbid curiosity, I reach up towards my breasts, watching as the Beast did the same to the gaping jaw of its' ribs. I flatten the protruding flesh with practiced ease and the Beast takes a relieved breath, the jagged edges smoothing. Next, my hand travels upward, to where my soft, silken hair had been curled carefully for this special occasion. The other hand reaches to the cupboard to fish out a pair of barely-used scissors. Both the Beast and I feel the tension lift off our scalps as the blunt shards of metal do their work. *Snip. Snip. Snip.*

Sigh.

Before me in the Mirror, chipped in the corners and ragged at the sides, is a Boy. We stare at each other with newfound interest, disgust fading into awe and wonder. I look at him, fingertips feeling over foreign skin. I trace the freckles on my cheeks and the curve of his jaw. I stand straighter and his face firms into one of confidence. I smile, and he smiles back.

My heart tightens — the Boy has pits beneath his eyes so sunken I can swim in them, sloppily hidden by cakey concealer. I help him, carefully wetting a towel and wiping more than makeup from my cheeks. His ears are weighed by glinting gems, gifted by a peer and pressured to be put on. I help him, letting out a deep breath as I remove the crystal studs from my ears. His skin itches from the delicate dress that clings to the flaws of his body, everything he resents accentuated for the public eye. I help him, shedding the scratchy silk before shrugging on a better fitting linen shirt, the dark blue hue an ironic chance.

We let each other take in the moment, now free of cage and chain. Recognition flows through me, then relief — a wave of warmth swaddling me in a sea of comfort. The Beast is forgotten, the Mirror finally showing me what is right. Not what is normal, average, or regular, but right. *Real.*

I am finally looking at myself.

Halla Schulz / It's Always Just Roses / Plaster and roses



George Subra / (S)'ere the Noon, En the Evening: Another Poem for Seren

“(S) ‘Ere the Noon, En the Evening: Another Poem for Seren” is an original poem about Seren Adams written by George Subra (b. 2003). Composed throughout February 17th & 18th, 2026, the two-time roommate of Adams shares a comparative journey through the appearance, demeanor, and activity levels of Adams throughout the day in driving, rhythmic iambic poetry.

The Seren ‘ere the noon compared to Seren in the eve
Shows the starkest diff’rences that one man could achieve
When Seren sleeps it’s surely so a freakish change takes place
For his return from slumber shows the horrors on his face

Conditions and the curses haunt our poor dear Seren so
In that his life expectancy may run a tad too low
This fact is most apparent in the early break of morn’
When Seren’s clad in cardigan and fuzzy pants adorn.

He brews his coffee then he sips and squints as light comes in
His big wet eyes a hapless victim of the day’s begin
Though well-worn slippers block the blow of gritty unswept floor
He hangs his head in great defeat: he wished he had slept more.

Though when the sun is set a’sudden see his vigor soar
and now his merry feet could dance upon the sparkling floor
But long day’s end is only time for Seren’s work to start

The tapping of his keyboard twins the tempo of his heart

He studies his psychology and therapies with art

(But socializes frequently with all of his sweethearts)

He bakes and cooks and works and talks a-reaping jub'lant joy

He's focused as a scientist but boist'rous as a boy

The Seren 'ere the noon cannot be Seren in the eve

For Seren's soul was not shaped so to see the sun's rays weave

The man it seems must wage a battle every day and night

But I'm for certain Seren's soul will never lose the fight

Contributor Bios

Dan Dillard is a Criminology and Media Studies major who spends his free time making music, writing fiction, and spending time with his wife and three kid

Sofie Hammen is a full-time student, writing tutor, Managing Editor of *The Racquet Press*, and a fine-dining server. When she's not writing, you can usually find her crafting with friends, creating digital media content, traveling, or frolicking. Sofie will graduate in Spring 2027 and plans to pursue TV journalism and broadcasting. As always, she reminds readers to, "Savor it."

George Subra is a recent graduate from the English Education program at UWL. As a newly minted teacher, he plans to have as much fun as he possibly (and ethically) can.

Casper Tan (he/they/she) is a Malaysian student studying English with a Creative Writing minor. They often enjoy writing about their own experiences, especially the topics and stories that don't get told often enough. When not writing, they gather inspiration from horror games, folklore, and their friends and family.

Hannah Wadholm is a junior majoring in Elementary/Middle Education with a minor in Language and Literature. In addition to writing, she enjoys swimming, running, exploring new coffee shops with friends, quality family time, and reading. Someday, she hopes to inspire students as a teacher.

Lyd Voss is a Psychology student graduating in Fall 2026 with minors in both Spanish and Art. Lyd has enjoyed working and experimenting with mixed media and hopes to continue to build a consistent art practice outside of academics and work.

Halla Schulz is a student who graduates in May of 2026 with a major in Psychology and minors in art and art therapy. She is a multidisciplinary artist who works in ceramics, sculpture, and drawing. She loves to explore emotion and movement through her art and tends to focus on creating something that the viewer can feel a connection with. She describes herself as a serial hobbyist and loves to spend an afternoon crafting.

Owen Custar is a Junior studying Business Management with a newfound passion for crochet. Although much of his time is consumed by the repetitive nature of the craft, music production and spending time with friends also occupy his leisure.

Lily Messman is a Marketing Major and an Art Minor.