Serendipity
—2020—

Ser-en-dip-i-ty (ser’ en dip’ e te) n. [coined by Horace Walpole (c. 1754) after The Three Princes of Serendip (i.e. Ceylon), a Per. Fairy tale in which the princes make such discoveries] an apparent aptitude for making fortunate discoveries accidentally ----

Ser’en-dip’ i-tous adj.

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Cover Image: Christian Stapert, *Flowers*
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“John F. Kennedy” by Pat Pickering
John F. Kennedy, I will always remember, was killed on the 22nd of November. He rode down the street happy and gay as Lee Harvey Oswald fired away. We will always remember his smile and wave and how his ended life in an Arlington grave.

“Flower in the Rain” by Christian Stapert (Digital Image)
“Facing Discrimination” by Julie Silkworth

I stepped out of the bathroom and saw my four-year-old cousin holding a shotgun propped up on the wood stove. With a grin on his face, he pulled the trigger, and all I could hear was the ear-piercing boom that followed. I had been shot! I glanced down at my arm and all I could see was it hanging by a thread of skin. Everything felt numb. I grabbed the phone and stepped outside to dial 911. I sat on the porch awaiting their arrival, slipping in and out of consciousness. That story, the one that my father told me, has replayed in my mind over and over as I grew up. How could someone do this to him? At the age of 16, my father went to his cousin’s house to babysit. What should of been an ordinary day, instead was turned into chaos. When my father was shot his arm became permanently disabled. He could still use it. It just didn’t look like everyone else’s. Furthermore, because he no longer looked the same, his life has turned into a lifetime of being discriminated against.

One of the biggest things my father was discriminated against for was because of his arm and how people perceived his work ethic. He had a family and wife to support. He wanted to work and was good at it. Unfortunately, he was never given the chance to prove himself. As soon as he would get into the room for his interviews, their eyes would travel down to his arm and a wave of disapproval flashed across their face. It was almost as if they were asking “How could someone with a hand disability like his work for us?” Often times, they ended the interview with “We’ll give you a call.” Unfortunately, there was never a call. My dad even had friends working there and overheard others talk about how he didn’t get the job because of his hand. Knowing that it was the reason he wasn't getting hired, he purposely hid his hand in his pocket to prove a point at his next interview. Guess who was hired? Although as soon as they did see his hand, he was fired the next day with no reason given. Little did most people know, he could do most things anyone else could do with that arm, if not more.

As a little girl, I never looked at my father and saw a difference in him. He was completely normal in my eyes. Unfortunately, that wasn’t the case for others in our community. People looked at him and remembered the poor boy who was brutally shot, not remembering that he was still the same person as before. As people gazed at my dad in local grocery stores, they would often stare at his arm. We understood people were curious, but all my dad wanted was to go somewhere and not be looked at as if he was some science experiment. Most people offered him a helping hand or asked him if he needed assistance with something. People acting as if he was some helpless human being. When in all reality, he had no issue with doing everything on his own. He wanted to be treated like everyone else. As a little girl in school, often times I would hear other kids talk about my dad. They would point and laugh when he came in for school events or make snide jokes about him to me. Often times, this would send me home with tears in my eyes. I never understood why because I never saw that difference in my dad. He was completely normal to me. He was my hero no matter what he looked like. Furthermore, because my father’s appearance looked differently than others, he was always looked down on and treated differently.

Due to my father not being able to work because of the discrimination when it came to the way his arm looked, he was forced to apply for Social Security Benefits, which of course, was another thing he was being discriminated for. Due to my father not working and having to receive SSI, my mother had to continue to work, which lead to people to think my dad was some low life who sat at home and did nothing while my mother worked. Unfortunately, that was not
the case. He was just unable to do so. Just because the roles were switched, it did not mean my dad just sat around. It just meant we had more home time with him. He still did whatever it took to make sure we had everything we needed or wanted, and so did my mother. Although there is a lot of discrimination when it comes to a woman working and not the men, my father still looked past everyone’s opinion on his life and took care of us with stride. Therefore, no matter what my father did to prove himself to others and to take care of his family, everyone still had their opinion. Even though other people thought my father did very little, he was a stay-at-home dad who did whatever it took to take care of his family.

As somebody once said “When something bad happens you have three choices. You can either let it define you, let it destroy you, or you can let it strengthen you.” That is something I contemplated for a long time when it came to my father. How could someone be so cruel to pass judgement on someone that had absolutely no control over what had happened to them and still continue to be so strong—not only for himself, but for his family as well? I am sure that if the roles were reversed, he wouldn’t think twice when it came to treating someone how they should be treated, no matter what their appearance showed. Though my dad was discriminated for numerous things such as his working ability, assistance he may have received, or the fact that my mom is working instead of him, he still manages to live a life full of joy and success while wearing a smile on his face. Therefore, despite the tragic event that took place over thirty-five years ago, my father still manages to overcome and look past the discrimination that is thrown his way.

“Untitled” by Gabriel Gaudino (Digital Image)
“Thoughts on Grief” by Julie Burie
LAND Winner, Poetry 2nd Place

Sometimes we are forced to walk through a season of heartache and grief.
Sometimes we don't have all the answers and that can make us feel nuts.
Sometimes we are not sure when we will wake without that lump in our throat or when we'll stop Loving someone or randomly crying.
Loss sucks.

When will our heart catch up with our head?
We tell ourselves, this is what is supposed to be, for a reason that must be good, right?
But we don't always believe it.

We may have to cocoon ourselves for a while to regain our footing.
We may have to be more tender with ourselves or keep cheering ourselves on until it's ok.
Until we're ok.

The world around us goes on.
People are happy.
People can see their glass half full and we,
Despite our bravest efforts,
Cannot see a moment past what is deeply hurting us.

The question of why.
I've been told, there is always a purpose behind our pain,
A reason, and sometimes we are unable to understand even though we are willing.
The in-between.
In between what once was and acceptance.
In between grief and our joy is a lesson we are supposed to learn.

There is work to be done.
There is supper to make and a home to care for and children to bathe.
Yet our pain is there every minute, every second, weighing on us like an anvil.

If we could just numb the ache, we could concentrate on being productive and possibly be more comfortable waiting for the answers, or better yet move forward.
Yet it remains.

Making every task harder and the days longer than they should be.
Robbing the smile from our daily experiences.
Despite our striving to refocus, despite our wanting to get back to a time we felt ok,
We simply remain.

I can't help but think something is being worked out in us.
Something greater than what our minds can imagine.
Something so profound and significant to our future that it could potentially change how we see things forever.

They say time heals all wounds, but does it?
Or does it just lessen the memories as we attempt to forget?
I know one thing; I look forward to the day I can wait for a prescription listening to "Where are you now?" and not tear up.
“Untitled” by JJ Delfossem (Digital Image)

“Untitled” by Alexia Mercier (Charcoal, Ink)
“The Colors of Life and Death” by Samantha Gaudino

The crisp leaves fell blue this year. Like the depth of the waves crashing along the shoreline, the frost covered branches released their grasp, the colorful blades drifting downward until they consumed every sidewalk and lawn. The rich hue of cerulean still dances in my mind. How beautiful it was. Except, my mother swears they were red. My psychiatrist tells me they were orange. I know they are mistaken, so I ask them, “What does your red and your orange look like?” To which they couldn’t respond.

They tell me that I am struggling, that there’s something about the way I think that isn’t ordinary. I don’t want to be ordinary, so I take this as a compliment and sit through the therapy sessions to appease them. I could think of a million places I’d rather be but I return each Wednesday to sit down and listen to the sheep doctor talk in circles before I detach myself from the brown leather seat and escape, taking nothing from the session but a laugh stuck in my throat. I plan to one day speak up and plead my case, but for now my energy is needed elsewhere.

It’s nearing December now. I can tell because I can see my breath frolic in the air and occasionally fluffy snowflakes of yellow fall down. This is my favorite time of year because I can comfortably sip hot chai tea and wear thick bulky sweatshirts that were made for a man. I’ve had this neighbor for a few years now who heats up their home with firewood and the smell wafts through my apartment window. Anybody who says that smell doesn’t do something to them is lying. Just like the smell of a lilac flower warms your soul, the smell of firewood smoke warms your mind. It breeds new life into me.

Tonight, my mind is burning embers of green and as I sit to write this, I glance at my cat who’s performing circus tricks for me. For a moment, I think back to how different everything was when I was a child, before the incident to which my psychiatrist and mother deem me of needing guidance for took place. It was a cold February morning when my father died in a drunk driving accident on his way to work. His black Ford pickup truck collided head on with a silver Chevy Impala driven by a purple man. I say purple because that was the color he was after he died, and I cannot picture him being pink. Trust me, I’ve tried to but to no avail.

You may think that must have been pretty traumatic for an eleven-year-old, to which I’ll say it was not. While my mother cried, I carried on unbothered. Sure, I missed him, but not enough to soak my pillow with wet stains the way people expected. “Everyone grieves differently,” my mother was told over and over again. Still, she wanted me to be just as distraught as her, so here I am, 19 years old and still attending therapy. Go figure!

Now let me get my head on straight. Where was I again? Oh yes, I think back to how different everything was. Except I don’t recall a certain time when everything was different because there is none. Time bleeds into itself, a blackness of moments all combined. Forever changing but forever staying the same. So, what is it that I’m thinking of? Am I thinking of anything at all? Likely not. Nevertheless, the leaves weren’t always blue, I admit. One year they were grey. I think I preferred them grey because when they fell, they looked like paper. Paper that was cut and shaped so perfectly that even Mother Nature herself probably thought she created them.

Ah yes, my cat is done doing its tricks now. She trots away singing her merry little song she always sings, her tail bouncing back and forth like the pendulum of a grandfather clock. I take a
final look outside and see the yellow snowflakes making their descent. Just then, a cold draft pushes the window open, my lungs inhaling the fresh air like a good puff of cigarette. My heart races in my chest, pounding so loudly that I can hear it. I look down at the paper which I’ve been writing on and find a white paper staring back at me, the words that I have wrote and still write do not exist. Afterall, how can my words exist if I do not? The room falls silent.

END

“Deception” by Beth Gannigan (Charcoal)
“Numbers” by James Baker

As I sat in my plush four cornered padded room with the walls so bright you would swear you were in heaven, I thought to myself “Does this really matter?” I spent many days tied to that bed thinking this very same thing as the evil people in the white coats came in and fed me purple and green circles on a daily basis. “Why am I here? Do I have a purpose?” Everything that mattered to me had gone away and all I was left with was this incredibly comfortable off-white suit with all of the bells and whistles that included three tight straps and arm sleeves that connected to each other. “So, this is what fashion has come to now, huh?” I laughed to myself.

Sometimes I lay on my luxurious cot strapped down and ponder on how I truly got here. Here in the Twin Cities Psychiatric Hospital, I have nothing but time. Many days, I sit here with my thoughts and dreams. I spend much of my time attempting to count the dots on the old-fashioned drop ceiling tiles. Top left has 643, which is really off-putting since it is an uneven number. I have a real issue with numbers not lining up. I will count and count and recount until I see what I want. Some people say this is a major flaw, yet I believe I would be one hell of an accountant.

They say that I had done some really horrific things to my family to land myself in this predicament, but I must disagree. I am a good guy, one of the ones who would always stand up for what is right and help old ladies across the street. I am the man who would lay his jacket over the puddle so that a woman would not get her fancy open-toed shoes wet, the one that you would blindly trust because the atmosphere of my actions were entirely noble.

The last thing I remember was watching Jeopardy with my mother. This was something I had done with her weekly since I was a child. Alex Trebek always could brighten our day. He was my favorite television game show host. I would dye my hair gray and slick it back every Halloween and get myself a three-piece suit and do my best Alex impression.

Typically, it was just me and my mother watching every week. My father had left our family when I was a child. I had three siblings: Frank, John, and Susan. Well, that’s what I called them. Their real names were Sally, Jerry, and Todd, I think. All of my siblings were much older than me and never really came to visit besides on the occasional holiday whenever they decided we were important enough for them. Frank was 35, John was 40, and Susan was 41. Many of them looked down upon me for still living with my mother at the age of 24. Frank was a very ornery man with a big ole belly that made him look like Louis Anderson. His demeanor was something out of a horror movie. He reminded me of Jack Nicholson’s character in The Shining except much rounder. John and Susan were very well put together and often looked down on Frank, my mother, and me. They were the perfect people and had perfect jobs and perfect families. Well, excluding the fact that John had developed a secret drinking problem and his wife had just filed divorce papers. They moved as far away from us as they could but somehow were still able to put their noses up at us from afar.

I loved this time with Mother. Some days she was really stressed out and having trouble being confident in life. This was always a great escape for the both of us. As we were watching Jeopardy, laughing and enjoying ourselves, my brother John walked into our studio apartment. My mother stood up and screamed at him “John! Oh my god, what are you doing here?! You didn’t tell me you were coming!”
“Yes, I did, Mom. You must have forgotten. I am not surprised.” John said, in his typical rude demeanor.

“Oh, still watching Jeopardy I see. Some things never change. I’m surprised Alex Trebek is even still alive. Didn’t he die a few years ago?”

“Obviously not, John, he is right there on the TV!” I said, mocking him.

“Oh, you boys stop. I am just happy my John came to see me!” my mother said.

Why would he come here? He never comes here. It has been me and Mother for years now. I did my best to ignore whatever it was that they were talking about and just focused on Alex and the next question. Jared, the contestant on Jeopardy, chose “nicknames from Tony Stark for 200.” The tile behind that selection was “Tony’s name for this web-slinging hero is underoos.”

“Who is Spiderman!” John yelled out, while I simultaneously said “Batman!”


As my mother and him both laughed at me, Susan and Frank walked into the apartment.

“Oh my god, all of my children in one place. This never happens!” Mother said.

As Susan approached my mother to give her a hug, she said, “I know mom, it has been so long! But it’s Thanksgiving and I missed my family! So, what were you guys laughing about just now?”

As John proceeded to inform Susan of my answer to Alex’s question and she and Frank joined in on the laughter, I could feel my patience depleting. Who were they to come into our home and insult me in front of my mother? This was our show that we watched together. They don’t even care about us.

“Well, he always has been kind of special! Ha-ha-ha,” Susan said, in her annoyingly high-pitched voice that sounded like it was ripped off of The Nanny.

“Yeah, what an idiot! Do you even remember what our names are? What did you always call us? Wasn’t it Fred, Jim, and Tabitha? He’s so dumb he doesn’t even know his own siblings’ names,” John said.

“Yeah, he always has been my special little boy. Don’t you remember how he slept in my bed with me until he was fifteen? Or how he would make me stand by the bathroom door when he went because he was scared something was going to get him?” Mother added.

“Ohhh, yeah, I remember that! You probably still climb in bed with Mom and make her stand by the door when you go to the bathroom, don’t you, idiot?”

“At least I don’t have a drinking problem and my wife isn’t leaving me,” I murmured under my breath.

All went quiet when I said this. I just wanted the laughter to end.

“What the f--- did you just say to me?!” John yelled, lunging toward me.
“The answer was Spiderman,” I said.

“I’ll f---ing kill you stupid!” he yelled as he grabbed my shirt with one hand like one of my bullies in elementary school. Mother, Frank, and Susan tried to restrain him and the moment he touched me everything went black. It was like every care in the world I ever had completely and utterly disappeared. I had never felt so free.

The next thing I knew, I woke up in a room strapped to a chair. The doctor asked me if I knew where I was and I said, “no, what happened?” For months, this occurred over and over until they finally answered my question. They claimed that when they found me, I was sitting in Mother’s studio apartment watching Jeopardy, covered in blood. They say I stabbed each of my siblings and my mother many times. Sally 20 times, Jerry 25 times, Todd 30 times, and Mother 35 times. I insisted I didn’t do it, but they didn’t believe me. I tried to tell them that they must have done it to each other, but they didn’t buy that either. To this day, I still do not believe I could have done such a thing to my own family. However, I do have a thing for numbers.

“Faces” by Olivia Capodilupo (Charcoal, Conte)
“Untitled” by Sarah Mosca

…the voice of anxiety, tragedy, and trapped souls…

I don’t want the noise
It’s too much to take
The talking, the laughing, the sounds that they make
It doesn’t even matter if it’s happy or sad
It’s the weight of the noise, that makes it all bad

Another night
Another moon
Tucked away
Inside my room
Cannot sleep
Cannot wake
Thoughts too deep
Cannot shake

I feel sick in my stomach
My hands begin to shake
My voice disappears as the adrenaline starts to take
The memory, of tragedy, it rises to the top
I close my eyes, but to no surprise, I cannot make it stop

Another night
Another moon
Tucked away
Inside my room
Cannot sleep
Cannot wake
Thoughts too deep
Cannot shake

I’m pulled underwater, surface out of sight
Reality is washed away, and I’m dragged back to the night
The knives, the guns, that look of lethality
My fears, they run, and away slips reality

Another night
Another moon
Tucked away
Inside my room
Cannot sleep
Cannot wake
Thoughts too deep
Cannot shake

It has me now, it has me tight
It’s against all logic, it isn’t right
Say your prayers, look for light
Time feeds the day and starves the night.
“She Was A Friend” by Jordan Belleville
She was a friend,
So compassionate and sweet,
But she became dark and mean.
She told the world several things,
Like the secrets I told her to keep,
When I told her not to say a thing,
She cried to me,
She lied to me,
I thought her feelings were so deep.
She made me think all this time it was me,
And now I lay in my bed as I weep,
as my sorrows don't allow me to sleep.

“Untitled” Alexia Mercier (Ink)
“One Day at a Time” by JJ Delfosse

“No… No… No… N—" I paused my swiping. “Wait, he’s kind of cute.” I swiped right and was shocked when it matched. I immediately received a message from him. Should I wait? If I send a message back right away, would I seem desperate? Screw it. I opened the message; he had only sent “Hey” with a smiling emoji. Well I already opened it, so I might as well reply, “Hello!”

Was the exclamation point too much? A few minutes went by with no reply. Maybe it was too much and too soon to reply. I placed my phone, face down, on my kitchen counter and decided to ignore it.

An hour or two passed and I began to make dinner, trying to distract myself from the lack of a reply. Boys are stupid anyways; I don’t need them. Another thirty minutes pass as I finish dinner and I had almost completely forgotten about a reply. As soon as I turned the stove off, my phone went off, within a fraction of a second I was on my phone. He replied, asking to meet up for a date. I mean of course! Who would reject someone as good looking as him?

I tried playing it cool by replying with, “Maybe…” but decided to send another message as well: “Haha, kidding! Of course, you pick where?”

This time he replied immediately with a restaurant I’ve never even heard of. I, of course, Googled it to see where exactly it was. It turns out the place was only three blocks away from where I live. He said he wanted to have dinner and to meet him there at 8pm tomorrow night. This date seemed a little sudden, but I really didn’t want to miss a chance with someone like him, maybe we’ll just click and hit it off!

I had gotten so excited, I forgot I had made food and went straight to bed to make tomorrow come faster. All I could think about was possible scenarios, like what if he’s even better in person? But then again what if we don’t like each other? I’m kind of single for a reason. I don’t blame him, but then again why wouldn’t it work out? I’m awesome. All this thinking made me tired and I fell fast asleep.

I jolted awake as my alarm beeped away at nine in the morning, just like every morning. But this morning felt better than most because in just under eleven hours I would be going on a date. As if she knew, my friend texted me asking what I was doing tonight. I quickly texted back about the date and probably misspelled some things, but I’m sure she’d know what I was trying to say. I started to get ready for the day ahead—work and running errands.

After getting ready, I was about to head out the door when my phone buzzed. It was my friend again, asking where I’d be for the date. Is she being nosey or cautious? I told her the place anyway. It’s not like she was going to show up. I headed off to work, hoping today would go by faster than usual.

Finally, my shift is over and it’s five o’clock, which meant I only had two and a half hours to go shopping and get ready. I sped off to the grocery store. As soon as I got there, I noticed something strange. When I was at work, I noticed a man hanging around, but didn’t think much of it, but he’s here too. Maybe it’s just a coincidence, I’m probably overthinking.

I proceeded to the checkout and couldn’t help but notice that man was now staring at me, almost like he was waiting. I bagged my groceries and rushed to my car. I threw everything in
and locked myself in the car. I looked around, expecting to see the man again, but there was nothing but other cars. Maybe I am being paranoid. It’s now almost seven, I need to get back soon so I can get ready.

When I arrived home, I put the groceries away and ran to my bedroom to get changed. Dress or blouse? Flats or heels? Natural makeup or going out makeup? I finally got an outfit together, but I just stared at myself in the mirror. I was particularly interested in all of my flaws. I began to rethink going out. Why would someone like him choose someone like me? Whatever, if it’s not meant to be then it’s not meant to be, I’m going to go. Who cares how I look…? Well, besides me. I threw on some heels and headed out the door, checking my phone one last time before I left. It was now 7:45 and I had only one message from my friend saying, “Please be careful!” with at least six kissy-face emojis. I smiled but didn’t reply. I put my car in reverse and off I went.

As I arrived at this restaurant, I realized it was incredibly sketchy. But being blinded by the opportunity of meeting “the one,” I decided to go against my anxious thoughts and got out of my car. I walked up to the restaurant and realized there was barely anyone in there and not a single one of them was the guy I was supposed to meet. My heart sunk. I turned around to head back to my car when I saw him. The man I saw at work and at the store. My heart began to beat hard and fast. I don’t think I’m being paranoid anymore. I started to jog to my car, hoping he didn’t see me. I got to my car, but realized my doors were locked. I reached for my keys. Before I could grab them out of my purse a hand grabbed my arm. I tried to pull away, but they were too strong. Another hand reached around my head and covered my mouth so I couldn’t scream. I tried so hard to get away. Everything went black.

I opened my eyes but couldn’t see anything. I could hear muffled voices and my head was throbbing. My whole body hurt. I could hear footsteps that seemed like they were coming closer. A door in front of me busted open as light shone through the doorway. A silhouette of a man stood there, just staring. I tried to stand up but was immediately pulled back to the ground, into liquid, by chains that were attached to my ankles. I looked down to see a puddle of red underneath me, is that blood…? Is that my blood? The man came into the room and toward me. He was carrying some zip ties. He approached me and zip tied my hands together and unlocked the chains. Without saying a word, he lifted me up and brought me outside the room. I could feel the blood trickle down my legs. As I stumbled alongside this man, I couldn’t help but look around at the gloomy, concrete walls with mystery stains all over them. We took so many turns, I got lost just being dragged by this man. We finally stopped in front of a door. He opened the door and shoved me in. There were showers. Without notice the showers turned on and a man came in through another door. He quickly approached me and began taking my clothes off, I tried fighting back. He slapped me across the face so hard that I fell to the ground. He picked me back up and continued to strip me. My whole body was sore, but especially my stomach and below. As I was pushed under the shower, I looked down to see immense amounts of blood coming from me… But I wasn’t on my period… What did they do to me?

After being violently scrubbed down by that man, I was dragged back to a room. There were no windows. No lights. There was just a camera in the ceiling and a gross mattress to sleep on. I had no concept of time; I don’t know how long I was out for. What if no one knows I’m missing? Before I could question anything else, another man came in, following him were three more men. One had lights, another had a camera, and the last had a computer. The first man
started whispering to the other men. The man with the lights turned them on. I could see the whole room now. It was quite gross. Everything was concrete. They turned the computer and camera on. What were they doing? My question was answered all too soon. The first man stripped down. I pushed myself up against a wall, trying to get away from him. The camera just followed. The man picked me up and threw me on the mattress and ripped my clothes off. I tensed up. I couldn’t move. He just did what he wanted as the other men encouraged it. It wasn’t over soon enough. They left the room and I escaped to my thoughts.

This happened for what I can assume was once a day. I lost track after twenty times. Every time was just as violating as the first. I was there for a long time. Barely getting fed, I was practically all skin and bone. Usually the men have come in already, but today was different. No one came to the door, no one slid food underneath the door, no one even walked near the door. I felt relieved to get a break for a day. But I couldn’t help but think they’re doing this to other girls. Every time I thought about this, my stomach turned. How could someone do this and be okay about it? I decided to sleep instead of stay up and anticipate them coming.

I was awoken to yelling. They didn’t sound like the usual men, though. I couldn’t make out what they were saying. I went closer to the door and pressed my ear against it. I immediately heard gun fire.

One…Two…Three…Four shots.

I heard someone running and it was coming toward here. I threw myself backward, waiting for someone to come in the door. There was another gun shot and the door flew open. One of the men approached me, gun in hand. I could hear other footsteps. The man grabbed me by the neck and turned me around, he had the gun against my temple. The other footsteps were from cops, who were now surrounding the doorway, all with guns pointed toward me and this man.

“Let the girl go!” One officer yelled.

“She doesn’t have to die if you leave!” The man shouted, practically deafening my left ear.

I looked down for a split second and as soon as I did there was a final gun shot. Blood was splattered all over me. I couldn’t move. All I could hear was my ears ringing. I fell to my knees and just began bawling. I felt an arm around me and for once in a long time I didn’t jump or fight it.

“You’re alright… We’re going to get you home now.” A female officer comforted and reassured me.

What would my family think? Did they even miss me? How many other girls were there? Will I ever be the same…?

I ended up being in counseling for a little over a year. But it wasn’t enough. I couldn’t scrub the memories from my brain or body. I never went back to work, never went back to counseling and I never talked to my family or friends because I was ashamed. I was so ashamed that I never left my house.
My family and friends became concerned and I was admitted to a mental health institution. This is where I reside, still trying so hard to remove the memories and physical imprints they left…

“Untitled” JJ Delfosse (Digital Image)
“Fluid” by Halle Gustafson (Steel, Fabric)
“In the Night” by Ally Schultz

She came in the night
And stole my love.
Now I lie alone.

She came in the night
And stole my bundle from the crib.
Now I live alone.

She came in the night
To steal my joy but found none.
Now I weep alone.

She came in the night
To steal my life.
I went willingly.

Tonight, I died alone.

“Confrontational” by Beth Gannigan (Charcoal)
“Spider” Web at Dawn by Christian Stapert (Digital Images)
“Grit” by Jared Howell

Twenty-eight.
I was close. Closer than I had ever been before.

Twenty-nine.

Grunts of exertion and the counting of the instructors filled my ears. I could feel the cool earth beneath my hands and the grass tickled my face as I descended once more.

Thirty.

Only six more to go. Just six more and I would finally pass. No more intensive training, no more disappointed drill sergeants, and no call home to Mom to tell her I wouldn’t be graduating on schedule. All I needed was six measly push-ups.

My body was not on board, though. My arms were wobbling as I rose up and a dull pain was starting to make itself known. Doubts started to cross my mind. Could I actually do this? I had failed every other test.

Push-ups, sit-ups, and a two-mile run. Those three are what the Army fitness test consisted of at the time. I knew I could pass the sit-ups and run; I had done so multiple times. The push-ups were my weakness. I did better at them each time, but I was not improving fast enough. This was the last fitness test before graduating Basic Training. Those who failed would be sent to a fitness training unit for at least a month before they could move on with their careers. In effect, this was my last chance.

Thirty-one.

“Twenty seconds remaining!” the grader’s voice called out.

Twenty seconds. Was that time enough for another five pushups? I had to pick up the pace.

Thirty-two. Thirty-three.

My arms were straining even harder than before. It took me a few seconds to come up each time, but only three more to go and I could rest.

“That’s time! I’m sorry, Howell. You failed.”

It took a few seconds to sink in as I sat there in push-up position. The next person up behind me coughed, snapping me out of my fugue state. I got up and hurried to the back of the line. Even though I had failed the push-ups, I would still need to complete the other two portions of the test.

They passed by quickly. I succeeded in both, just as I had in every test before. I was numb. All I could think about was my failure. I would not graduate on time. I would be stuck in basic training for another month. I would not graduate with the people I had been training with since the beginning. I would have to call my parents and tell them to cancel their plans to come see me. My thoughts continued in that direction as we returned to our barracks.
When we arrived, all of us who had failed were told to stay back. I could feel everyone else’s looks of pity. The shame of my situation was firmly pressed in my mind, and I felt my face heating up. I had failed, and it was my own fault.

As I was falling into deeper despair, the drill sergeants explained what would happen to us. For the next two weeks before graduation, we would train as normal. When it came time to graduate, we would perform duties to assist in the ceremony. I was assigned to be a crossing guard. I would be out working on the street as everyone else marched in graduation.

By the time we returned to the sleeping area, I was in quite the mood, equal parts angry at myself and depressed about my situation. From the look on the other two failure’s faces, they were feeling the same. But when we walked in the room, that was reversed.

“Don’t worry guys; you’ll get the next one.”
“You were so close, Howell!”
“We’ll help you guys train for next time!”

Support. Camaraderie. A smile crept itself onto my face. I had others who would support me. Two months of spending every waking moment together builds friendship quickly, and that was showing itself here. Then and there, I made a resolution to myself to not mope or fall into despair. I would train until I could easily pass the fitness test. And for the next week, I did.

It was the day after our final field training that the drill sergeants once again separated those of us who failed. I expected it to be a meeting on our duties during graduation, but I was met with a pleasant surprise. As a special consideration, we would be given one more chance to pass the test and graduate. One of my fellow failures pumped his fist in the air and gave a shout of excitement, and I felt the same way.

The next day, it was time.

I needed thirty-six. The first twenty-five always went quickly, but every test before I would reach muscle failure shortly after. I told myself that this time would be different.

Twenty-eight.

I was getting close again. The shouts of encouragement from my classmates only spurred me forward faster.

Twenty-nine. Thirty. Thirty-one.

That familiar feeling of strain was creeping its way into my arms, but I wasn’t going to let it stop me this time.

Thirty-two. Thirty-three. Thirty-four.

I had passed my previous record. Victory was within my grasp.

Thirty-five.

Thirty-six.

I collapsed to the ground, letting the cool dirt catch me. I had done it. After so many tries, I had finally passed. I would get to graduate with everyone else.
I could have given up after the previous failure. I could have given up and gotten complacent, but I did not. I kept working hard, I kept training, and I passed. From then on, I knew that even if I failed, I would keep trying and succeed.

“Untitled” by Gabriel Gaudino (Digital Image)
“Comedy” by Jordan Belleville

I saw the theatrical comedy
Of my generation destroyed.
How I mourned the tragedy.
A tragedy is exaggerated,
A tragedy is overdramatic,
A tragedy is attractive, however.

I cannot help but stop
I look at the silly charade.
Down into the darkness of the mockery.
Softly goes the confused,
The empty-headed,
The slap happy.

Why do you think the comedy is great?
The comedy is the tiniest theme substance of all.
Now minutes is just the thing to get me wondering
maybe the comedy is smaller.

“Superior Fury” by Colleen Everson (Digital Image)
“Petite Bacon Cheeseburger” by Lindsey Slifka

“Wow, look at her,” I say to my friend, Michelle. We were sitting at work and enjoying lunch while scanning the Internet for anything interesting. We had come across some figure/physique photos and we were, albeit, jealous. I would love to compete like that. Our lunch, on the other hand, was constructed of a heavy, porous and chewy ciabatta bun, no less than eight slices of salty, deliciously smoky bacon with the meat to fat ratio at a premium, full fat mayo, provolone cheese, crisp dill pickles and a side of BBQ kettle chips. We were the type of girlfriends who newly refused to watch Giada’s cooking show because she once cut a vegetable and giggled with the comment it was “Petite like me” while we were eating cheeseburgers. Bad move, Giada. Moving forward, I never forgot how I thought that would be an obtainable goal. I was convinced that I could just hit the gym quick and make it happen.

Fast forward six years and two kids later; I still thought about it. To say I was thinking about it would be lightly suggesting that I did not spend hours watching YouTube, posing, and scanning Google for competitions and performance pictures. I was downright obsessed with the thought of being successful. I wanted to be up on stage, under the lights, and, mostly, I wanted to do it because people said it was too tough. I would breeze the idea past different people in my life and it was mostly met with “Starving yourself and exercising all the time, sounds great.” Terrible attitudes towards these athletes. That is really what they are, right? Athletes. In fact, body building competitions, whether it be figure, physique or body building are, in fact, a science. After hearing enough, I decided… Pick a show and start telling people you are doing it. That way, you have to train and have to be successful.

The show I picked was close to home and only 20 weeks away. Normal people (I am nowhere near normal) would take 20 weeks to pre-train and then 20 weeks to train. Besides having a 20-week countdown, I had a Trifecta (running race) in just four weeks. Without a doubt, the fun thing about running races is you can eat whatever you want when you are training. You are working a muscle group that is for endurance. However, when training for a figure competition, you eat a quite specified diet and work a muscle group that is designed for bulky show muscles. Why am I telling you this? Because, in the short 16 weeks that I was to train for this and completely refigure my body I was to have A) no beer, B) no sugar, and C) go on vacation for 14 days and stick to A and B! I could do it, though; everyone was supporting me by listening to my meal plans, exercise plans and even giving me advice. The supporters I had were in my corner no matter what.

Therefore, I should plan a routine, start a routine and stick with a routine. That is the name of the game. So tough. So mentally challenging. I was just about to straight up quit with 14 weeks to go, and then I started to see changes. Changes in what I craved; instead of sweets and beer, it was now blueberries and nuts. I had changes in how I looked and even how I felt. I was gaining strength and bulking muscle. My shoulders were to die for. They were tan, lean and toned. This was a high that I really liked. I was a total gym rat—not that I spent a lot of time there, but I was there every day. These types of competitions are 80% what you put in your mouth and 20% exercise. I didn’t even want cheese. Yea. Did not want cheese. Weeks 13-8 I felt so powerful. I was in the best shape of my life. People were taking notice. They would stop and watch how much weight I could lift, how perfect my form was.
Now, the home stretch is before me. I have this routine down. I can totally rock the last eight weeks. Except, I am tired, I am cold, and I am hungry. All the cutting has now left me drained. It has left me weaker than before. My super strong body and attitude is just pushing through each day, each meal, and each workout. My body fat percentage has dipped under 10%, and I am certainly feeling it. I look old and tired. I feel old and tired. My face is haggard without makeup, my hair has stopped shining like it did before. Although my body looks almost like those girls on the Internet that had started this whole journey, I have lost my zing. All I do is talk about food, exercise, and food... Did I mention food? All I do is eat. Seven meals a day. Counting proteins, fats, sugars, fibers and ounces. I get the overwhelming feeling that no one wants to talk about what I eat anymore. Maybe, they don’t mind, but maybe they would like to beat me with my six-inch-tall stage stiletto. Either way, I can feel they are as ready as I am for this to be done.

Today is the day. The stage is brighter than I thought it would be. Look at all the girls here. Everyone is beautiful, lean, tired, hungry, and mostly dehydrated. We all pumped our muscles in the dressing room, ready to compete against each other. We shared stories of how awful and how funny parts of our journeys were. We got onto the stage. My palms sweat and a nervous tremble hit my body. I could hear my heartbeat over the auditorium music. My faithful supporters were there, cheering me on in the crowd. I felt that all the hard work, sacrifice, grit and determination were completely worth it. Even though it seemed unobtainable, I started the journey and, although I did not win, I had successfully done what I had come to do. That was enough for me. Oh, and a not so “petite” bacon cheeseburger in celebration.

“Untitled” Alexia Mercier (Watercolor)
“Drew” by Nicole Knueppel

The warm, faint glow of the full moon bounces across the subtle waves of Lake Superior until it reaches the sandy beach. She watches as it glides over the sand to where she sits with her arms wrapped tightly around her bare knees. A cool fall breeze traipses off the lake and finds its way to her smooth, olive skin. She shivers as the breeze swirls around her. There’s a mint green hoodie on the sand besides her, but she doesn’t have the strength to reach for it. Her amber eyes don’t break away from the view of the waves despite the sound of a car coming to a stop somewhere in the distance behind her. She knows it’s only a matter of time until she’s found. She doesn’t mind, but right now she just needs a break.

She feels the tears she’s held down all afternoon race to the surface, threatening to push past her thick, black eyelashes. There’s no way she can fall apart now; not yet at least. If she lets herself cry now, she knows she’ll never stop. Hold it together. Don’t let yourself feel that pain. Before the tears can escape, she squeezes her eyes shut and thinks back to the moment she knew she’d fallen for him, the man of her dreams; the love of her life...

Drew smiles so big she swears she can see all his perfect, pearly white teeth, and his bellowing laugh follows. His arms are wrapped around her loosely and when he laughs, he shakes her too. She likes the way it feels when he holds her like this because she feels like she is experiencing his happiness, too. Drew looks down at her and stares a second longer than he should, which makes her nervous and causes her to blush. Drew notices.

“You’re beautiful,” Drew whispers into her ear, his voice low and smooth. “I hope you know that, Callie.”

Callie doesn’t know that, but she knows better than to disagree with Drew. He finds her beautiful and that’s all that matters. She gives him a small smile, not nearly as confident as his, and leans into him until her head rests against his chest. Callie admires how perfect the weather is for their afternoon beach date in Marquette, and she admires her date even more. The warm summer sun beats down on them, but that’s not why her skin feels like it’s on fire. She likes the way she fits inside his muscular arms. If she believed in it, she’d call it fate that they found each other.

“Thank you,” Callie tells Drew, though her tone makes it sound like a question.

She waits for Drew to say something—anything—but he doesn’t. Instead, they sit there on the sandy beach, wrapped up in each other, in silence for several minutes. She closes her eyes and listens to the sound of families playing in the water, the waves crashing against the beach where no one is to break them. She digs her toes into the beach as if it will anchor them into this place, this moment, for forever. She wonders if she should say something to him but decides against it. She likes when he talks first. She’s not as confident as he is, but she admires how he doesn’t make her feel bad for it.

“There’s no place else I’d rather be,” Drew finally says. He gives her a gentle squeeze, brushes aside the loose strands of her blonde hair, and kisses her forehead. “It may seem early, but I’ve been wanting to say something to you for a while now…”

Drew pulls back from her and gives her his signature smile. She swears she sees a glisten of something in his big blue eyes that draws her in and makes her feel butterflies. Could it be
love? Drew grabs her hands and leans in close; she tries to prepare for him to say something she isn’t sure she’s ready for...

“Last one to the water is a loser!” Drew calls out.

He drops her hands and races to the water, turning around to smile at Callie when he sees he’s thrown her off. She watches as he runs through the shallow water until he’s far enough in he can dive, which he does. When he comes back and realizes she hasn’t chased after him, he looks at her with a half-frown and waves at her to join him. She stands up from her spot and makes her way to the water, smiling from ear to ear the whole time...

The memory brings a small smile to her face. Drew was many things, but unpredictable had to be her favorite trait of his. He swept her off her feet and grounded her at the same time, and she loved that about him. It was in that moment on the beach two years ago that she knew she loved. Only seventeen and I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you. I’ll never have that chance now.

“Callie.”

She opens her eyes at the sound of her name being spoken behind her. She knows who it is, or more so who it isn’t, and she doesn’t bother to turn around to see him, nor does she glance over at him when he makes a seat for himself beside her.

“Callie, it’s after midnight,” he says, stating the obvious. “You shouldn’t be out here all alone.”

She nods. She can feel the tears on the verge of spilling over and prays she can hold them in longer. She isn’t sure she can.

“Talk to me,” he pleads. “Tell me where your head is at.”

She admires he came here, that he searched for her, because it’s what Drew would expect him to do. It made sense to her now more than ever they were so close, something she both envied and admired. She may have been his girlfriend, but he was Drew’s best friend. Their connection was something special.

“My head is lost,” she whispers, her voice cracked with heartbreak. She searches in the dark for his familiar brown eyes. “He’s gone, Alex.”

_We had plans, Drew. You had one more semester before you finished college, we were going to get a place together... Why did we get in that Car? Why did you have to leave me so soon? Why?

“I know,” Alex whispers.

She hears the heaviness of his pain in his voice. It breaks her.

“He’s dead,” she cries. “I play that night over and over in my head. I see the car coming, hear the crunch of the metal as it crumples up around us. It should’ve been me who died, Alex. He was going places. He’s the one who should be here.”

Alex doesn’t say another word. Instead, he helps her to her feet and walks her up the sandy path to his car. When they get to the apartment Alex and Drew shared, Callie crawls into Drew’s bed,
wraps herself up in his blanket (which still smells like him) and buries her face into his pillow. She cries herself to sleep.

“Untitled” by Alexia Mercier (Graphite)
“When the Mist Turned to Rain” by Hope Lantagne  
*LAND Winner, Fiction 1st*

In my earliest memories, back when my world was the simple green of the rolling pastures and the rich blue of the sky, I would often find myself in the stables buried up to my nose in fresh hay. Snuggling into the straw, I watched as my mother cooed to her prized Friesian mare, Okkazara.

Compared to the 12 other horses within my parents’ stable, Okkazara was one of a kind; none but my mother could ride her let alone befriend the feisty mare. However, in the dusty haze of my memories, I remember tottering from the safety of my hay-hideaway and approaching the mare while she obediently stood by my mother’s side. The Friesian bowed her head and gently nudged my cheek with the soft velvet of her muzzle. With a squeal of delight, I ran and clung to my mother’s leg. I glanced back at Okkazara and saw the mare gazing intently at me. At that moment, a bond of a lifetime had formed.

Growing up, I spent all my free time within the walls of that stable. Every day after second grade I would run to the stables, toss my backpack and lunchbox to the side, and throw open the latch to Okkazara’s stall. The Friesian would watch over me as I strained to lift her leather saddle onto her back and gingerly slip the loop of her bridle over her nose lest she decide to bite me. When every last piece of tack was assembled, I would climb onto the stepstool, plant my foot onto the left stirrup, hoist my body on top of the massive Friesian, and just pretend in that moment we were running free across the fields.

I got away with this routine for a good month or so before my older sister caught me. I remember Soleil’s smug grin at the dinner table once she told the whole family. As usual, Dad was speechless, but I did not expect the same from Mom. Her gaze was steady and her expression neutral. I remember the sinking in my stomach when I was sent to bed early and how that foreboding feeling refused to go away the next day. The school day dragged on, but when the bus rounded the corner to my house at the end of the day, Mom was there with Okkazara’s reigns in her hands. On that crisp, red-apple day in September, I rode ‘Zara properly for the very first time with Mom at my side and my very confused sister behind us.

My confidence riding and caring for Okkazara grew, and by the time I was 10, my folks deemed me ready to have a horse of my own like the rest of my siblings. ‘Zara was bred with my father’s Palomino stallion, Solstice, in June, and for the next 11 months I was in charge of feeding, brushing, running, and monitoring the mare. The following May, Dad shook me awake excitement in his whispering voice. ‘Zara was in labor.

I flew from my bed and ran out into the crisp, indigo twilight. The stuffy interior of the barn was a stark contrast to the outside, but my bare toes were grateful for the warmth. A lone lantern cast a yellow glow onto my mother kneeling besides Okkazara’s shivering form. My mind raced as I slowly approached the pair. What if the foal didn’t make it? What if Okkazara didn’t make it? What would Mom think if I killed her prized horse?

I remember the warmth of my ma’s hand on my shoulders. She smiled and told me to stay close to ‘Zara. I brushed my fingers against the Friesian’s damp coat, praying that she would be alright. By the time the sun broke the horizon, a gorgeous Buckskin filly lay next to Okkazara’s side. Her head wobbled and her body shook, but as soon as I extended my hand to
pet her muzzle, she gave my fingers a hearty chomp. The tension of the night melted away as my folks burst into laughter. Even I could not help but giggle as the filly continued to nibble my fingers. She had her mother’s fighting spirit, and she was all mine.

I called her Daybreak. All throughout the following summer and fall, I was by her side as she explored the stables and greeted the changing seasons; winter was her favorite. I would ride Okkazara across the snow-laden hills in December as Daybreak would toss her black mane in excitement and kick the snow beneath her hooves with every step. When my siblings visited for the holidays, we would race each other across the fields and build campfires in the woods as we swapped stories about the joys and mishaps of raising foals. The fire of our laughter kept us warm throughout those frozen winter days. I was no longer just a little brother, and they were no longer just my apathetic siblings. We finally saw each other as equals drawn together by the love of our horses.

The holidays ended, family left, and the snow melted. I kept in touch with my siblings and sent them videos of me lunging Daybreak on the line, Daybreak accepting her saddle for the first time, and me finally riding her with Mom and ‘Zara at our side. That summer was the warmest in my memories. I began to look forward to my siblings’ visits as they would always have some new word of advice for me. When I decided to try my hand at horse showmanship, my siblings couldn’t keep to themselves; they eagerly showed me the best way to braid Daybreak’s mane, quickly trim and polish her hooves, and easily maneuver her by my side.

In February, my brothers took off of work to see Daybreak and I perform at a small-town showmanship competition. I remember straining my neck to see Daybreak in the trailer, rattling behind Mom’s truck, and how my hands trembled as I brushed the last specks of dirt from Daybreak’s coat before we were pulled to the show ring. I remember scanning the audience and giving a sheepish wave to my family, whooping and hollering from the bleachers. I felt ready to faint at the sight of so many people, but the warm velvet of Daybreak’s nose steadied me, and it was thanks to her gentle heart and the support of my family that I held the second-place ribbon in my hands by the end of the night.

I gazed at the red ribbon with a smile on my face during the ride home. Suddenly, the squealing of wheels, grinding of metal, and shattering of glass brought me back to reality. The frozen asphalt burned the raw skin of my arm. My head pounded and my stomach churned as I lifted my head to the pitch-black of the night sky. With clattering teeth, I cried out for my parents. I remember the silence. Not even Daybreak responded to my call. The gray of the distant snow faded to black, and when I awoke in the hospital two days later the news came: my parents were gone. Daybreak was gone. That reality was now a memory.

My siblings, grandparents, and uncle kept each other company while I recovered from a fractured arm and several broken ribs. Time stood still during those overcast days as everyone placed their lives on hold. The will was declared, and each member of the family was at a solemn peace with their share of my parents’ belongings, except for me. I was entrusted with the ranch. Was I supposed to be happy? Were those words supposed to make me feel lucky? The rolling fields beyond my bedroom window no longer felt like home. Without Mom besides me or Pa happily watching us from afar, the ranch had no purpose, only memories.

After two months I was back on my feet and my family, save for my grandparents, parted ways from the ranch to resume their lives. Every morning at 5, I dragged myself from the
warmth of my bed and trudged into the gray April mist. Every morning, I paused by Daybreak’s stall, now empty save for one red ribbon pinned to the doorframe. Every morning, tears welded at the corner of my eyes as I tried to remember the feeling of the mare’s muzzle against my cheek or the nip of her teeth against my fingers. I thought the pain would go away. I thought weeks of being alone with my thoughts in the hospital would be enough time to move on.

It wasn’t.

Adults are supposed to move on from losses; life goes on and responsibilities have to be attended to. There was a disconnect, it seemed, between me and the rest of the world. My siblings’ horses greeted each day not caring that their sister was gone, my grandparents spoke to each other as if my dad was just on vacation without us, and my siblings casually responded to each text of mine as though our parents’ were not buried under the old cherry tree at the cemetery. Life went on, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t pretend everything was alright, but I couldn’t accept the reality of my life either. I wanted to tell someone, to cry into their shoulder, to hold onto them and refuse to let go. Yet, I was too tired, too exhausted to cry again. I had to look forward and forget about what could never be mine again.

It was the first of May when I found Okkazara’s stall empty. Countless sleepless nights clouded my judgment, so it was no surprise I had forgotten to latch her door. It was no surprise that I had forgotten her in general. Watching as Mom’s prized horse refused meal after meal and wasted herself to skin and bones made my stomach drop. She was a lost cause and helping her would only be a losing battle. That was my reasoning at the time. That was the reasoning that made us strangers during her final days.

However, I found myself trudging into the mist to find her. Part of me wished that I wouldn’t find her; I could just pretend she died peacefully in the woods. That would hurt less, right? When I saw her standing silhouette against the gray rain, my heart sank, and my knees gave out. I knew what was coming and I wasn’t ready.

Not again. I couldn’t do it again.

‘Zara silently hobbled to my side and bowed her head. For the first time in months, I looked into her eyes. It felt…familiar. I could almost smell the fresh hay. I could almost hear Mom humming to herself. I did what I kept telling myself to avoid: I remembered, and I didn’t hold anything back. Tears fell like rain, silent and steady first, then torrential and unyielding. Memories played over and over. I lost track of time, but ‘Zara waited. She waited for my cries to settle and only then did she sink to her knees and rest at my side.

There, we waited out the rest of the falling rain together.
“Droplets” by Christian Stapert (Digital Image)

“Untitled” by Halle Gustafson (Digital Image)
“Blameless” by Natalie Hansen

Amanda was the type of girl that people gravitated towards. She was beautiful and kind, and willing to do anything for anybody. She was selfless like that. Though she knew she was pretty, she also knew that her empathy and her willingness to give were more important than the hazel eyes and long, black tresses she sported. Amanda was a teacher, and her love of children grew with each hour she spent in the classroom. She’d often come home after a long day and tell me of her students’ accomplishments. Yet somehow, she never took on the attitude that they were her accomplishments, too. Her hazel eyes were warm and inviting and her dark curly hair was always done up for her class. She loved wearing bright colors for the kids. I couldn’t and still can’t understand why anyone would want to do her harm.

She was my roommate and my sister. I loved her until she took her very last breath. Then I buried her and everyone but me forgot. Everyone but me wanted to forget that she didn’t look the same in her casket as she did in the living room of our apartment at the parties she loved to host. Everyone but me wanted to forget that they warned us not to move back to South Side Chicago, but we both felt a need to help the community we grew up in. Everyone but me wanted to forget her killer, how they left her in the street on her walk to work after missing the L, shot dead right between the eyeballs. Nobody else wanted to remember every second of her existence, because nobody wanted to feel the pain that accompanied it. But I feel that pain every day I look for who murdered my sister.

I was the first officer to arrive on the scene. The call came loudly over the radio, “Shots fired, all available units requested. Suspect is armed with a handgun and traveling on foot. According to witnesses, the suspect is a 6-foot-tall, black male, in his 20’s, wearing a gray hoodie and black sweatpants.” Same shit, different day. In my head, there were two scenarios. Either a domestic or a gang fight was the purpose of the call, knowing this part of town. I was nearby so I drove there straightaway.

I couldn’t have been more wrong about the scenario if I had tried. Before I even parked my squad car, I knew. I saw her, lying motionless on the ground. She had dressed up in a powder blue skirt with a sparkly sequined blazer for parent-teacher conferences. I was a kaleidoscope of colors when I sprinted to her side and found her unresponsive. You truly don’t realize how sequins twinkle in the early morning sun until you see it for yourself. No pulse, no breathing. The concrete stayed silent, but in my head, I was screaming, my heart was pounding, and I lost my breath because there was so much blood. Before I even parked my squad car, I knew she was gone, yet I still desperately did CPR until the reinforcements arrived. It took every officer from my department to tear me away from her body, and in that moment, I promised myself I would find who did this to her, even if it killed me too.

It killed me. Not my body, but my soul. I belonged on the streets in a cop car. Every time I drove my car, with the sirens blaring and the lights flashing, I felt alive. When Amanda died and I stopped feeling anything at all, I quit my job at Chicago PD. There wasn’t any of me left to give to the community, so I bury myself in finding my sister’s killer.

And that leads us here. Today, I plan on finally cleaning out Amanda’s room and making myself an office. It’s been three years and I haven’t been able to move a thing. Everything still sits exactly as it was. Her worn copy of Pride and Prejudice still lies on the end of her white bedspread. The soft gray walls are still covered in polaroid pictures of her friends, her students,
our family. The ugly, cream colored lamp still sits on her wooden bedside table, because she couldn’t bear to return a gift from our mother. I feel her presence when I walk in. Once again, as I have every day since she died, I sigh and close the door behind me. It seems like a betrayal to move her things out. It feels like I’d be admitting that she’s gone and forgotten like everyone else in my life. I refuse to do that to my sister.

I shuffle into the kitchen and make myself a pot of coffee, kicking the papers and pictures out of my way that are strewn across the floor. When the coffee maker starts to hum, I close my eyes and ground myself before returning to work. My hands shakily grab the papers from the ground and place them back into their designated piles. Two piles for two more suspects. I was proud of the research I’d done to narrow it down from a city of people to two, but still felt the familiar twinge of disappointment and desperation when I thought about the fact that I could be wrong. Her killer could either be one of the people I had chosen, and justice would be served, or I could be wrong and have wasted the past three years of my life investigating innocent people. It’s not the loveliest way to start your day, but I’d do it all over again for her.

A satisfying ding from the coffee maker shook me out of my miserable thoughts. I threw cream and coffee in a travel mug, threw on my black jacket and beanie and hustled out the door, determined. Today is the day that I find the truth. Today is the day Amanda gets the justice she deserves.

My first suspect was Thomas Jones. Black, 24-year-old male. Active member of the Gangster Disciples, known on the streets as Lil TJ. He’s the father of one of Amanda’s students who was given a punishment for fighting that he didn’t agree with. He filed a complaint with Amanda’s boss and tried to get her fired over the incident. Now, Amanda didn’t get in disagreements with people, because she was the charming type. With his gang associations and his issue with Amanda, I think it’s possible he would’ve killed her.

I pop open my glove compartment and peek just to make sure nothing happened to my pistol. I’m not the murdering type, but I want him to feel just a little bit of the pain I’ve felt every second since I lost her. Singing softly along with the radio, I turn onto Lil TJ’s street and park next to his house. The pistol feels almost natural in my waistband while I walk up to the house slowly. A black flag flies in the wind, nearly hitting me as I walk up the stairs to the door. I don’t flinch. I feel nothing as I prepare to confront who may be my sister’s killer. A calmness has washed over me, and nothing, not even his stupid gang flag will distract me from my one true purpose. I need to get justice for Amanda.

Three loud bangs with the gold knocker gets Lil TJ to answer the door. When he opened it and saw my face, he had no reaction. I suppose my sister was always the prettier one, but I always figured we had at least a resemblance. “Hi, can I help you?” TJ said plainly, as he looked down on my face. I tried to read him, but I couldn’t. It’s almost impossible to tell what other people feel when you feel nothing yourself. “I am here to get justice for my sister. Do you know who I’m talking about?” I reply, spitting the words from my lips like a cobra spits venom on its prey. He stares at me, confused, for a moment before recognition swept across his face. It was almost relieving to know that he saw some of my sister in me. That he had to stare her in the face after what he’d done. “You’re the sister of my son’s teacher who went missing,” he gasped, “the one who’s on the run from the police.” I couldn’t help but giggle with my reply, “You recognize me. So, you know what I’m here for, right?” He whispered his reply, “Yes, I know. You’re going to shoot me. Please don’t. You know I have a son.”
“I can’t have any fun with my surprise if you spoil it ‘Lil TJ,’” I sneered. Before he could shut the door, he had the barrel of my pistol up his nose. I reveled in the sight of the fear in his eyes while I played with the trigger, lamenting “You’re going to pay for what you’ve done, and your death will give Amanda the justice she deserves.” “I hope they catch you this time. I hope you rot for what you’re doing to innocent people,” Lil TJ grunts out angrily before I shoot him right between the eyeballs. He looks like Amanda when he falls to the ground. I start to feel the pain of losing her again, but I shove it back down. There are no feelings in the business of revenge.

Whistling “Happy” by Pharrell Williams, I stride towards my car to continue my day, when I’m suddenly bombarded by the officers. Blue uniforms and tazers are hitting me so fast I can’t even see or feel them hit me before my vision goes blurry with pain. I fight back with my fists before finally realizing I needed something drastic if I was going to get away. I’m short and small, and I know I won’t be able to overpower the stronger officers. My last-ditch attempt to save myself was to steal one of the guns from the duty belts surrounding me and fire a round into the mob of them attacking me. The metal is cool while I slip my hand around the handle of the handgun, and then I feel a burning hole in the back of my head, and everything goes dark. I feel her. Amanda is here. I smile as the warmth of her love washes over me once again, and for the first time in years I allow the happiness to consume me. The lead officer checks for a pulse. “Time of death, 11:27 AM,” he says.

“I can’t believe we finally got her,” the chief said in disbelief. The deputy next to him asks, “What made her go so crazy? Andrea’s killed five innocent people for absolutely no reason.” The chief chuckles sadly to himself and explains, “Amanda, her sister, killed herself in her bedroom at their home. She held a pistol to her forehead and pulled the trigger. Andrea created these issues with people who ‘wronged’ her sister in her mind that didn’t exist in order to blame them for Amanda’s death. She couldn’t wrap her head around the fact that Amanda would kill herself, so she imagined that other people killed her instead.” “Damn,” the deputy sighed. The chief chuckled again and turned his back to the lights and sirens of his officers’ squad cars to look at the blue sky. Nobody knows what happens to you after you die. He wondered if both sisters were somewhere, reunited.
“Untitled” by Emma Tebo

Death is but a messenger
On fleet wings and sandaled feet
His scythe is held low
His eyes filled with sadness

He is brutal and fierce
Only when He has to
He would much rather
Be peace
He is always there
Standing in the background
Though some places He lingers
And shows himself much more plainly

He plays chess with old men and woman
In the game room at the retirement home

He watches surgeries at the hospital
Sometimes handing the doctors their tools
“The Surrender” by Sophia Wessel

She had done all of the things she had ever wanted to do. She had loved all of the people she had ever wanted to love. She had all the memories that she could withhold. Yet, she was still kept frozen within the cruel grasp of the world. It was as if she hadn’t done everything that the world had wanted her to do. When her children grew and moved on, she was ready to be let go. When she retired, she was ready to be let go. When her husband let go, she was ready to also. Every time she thought the world would let her go, let her be a spirit free in the air, it merely clutched her tighter.

He was also trapped within the atmosphere of the Earth. He longed to escape, not because he felt that his life was complete, but because he felt as though his life was hopeless. His memories were filled with trauma and his loved ones had left him long ago. The loved ones who stood by him, but eventually got tired of standing. The new friends who helped him get up but grew tired of holding him. The ones who he thought would stay, left. They weren’t dead, they weren’t waiting to escape, they weren’t counting down their days, they were living. They just wouldn’t live with him anymore. He was nothing more than a disappointment. He used to be the life of the party, but then he was an alcoholic. He used to be their hook up, but then he was an addict. He used to be their friend, but then he wasn’t.

The concept that these two would meet is nothing short of peculiar. Who would have fathomed that two people waiting to die would cross paths, when their lives were on such different ones? They were completely different, a lady of old age who had lived and a man of young age who had felt as if he had missed his chance. Yet, they did for they were exactly who each of them needed.

It was a brisk morning in the early days of May, and she was taking a stroll when she stumbled across his shaking body. She knelt down and felt his sweating forehead. She held his clammy hands. She was shocked to see someone so debilitated. She didn’t quite know what to do, but she whispered, “I am going to help you, even if it is the last thing I ever do.”

She called the ambulance and she sat with him until it arrived. She then followed him to the hospital where she was asked if she knew his name and she said she did not. She was asked if she knew what was wrong with him and she said she did not. She was asked if he had a way to pay for his recovery and she said that she would.

When he awoke his eyes met with a kind pair. The pair of eyes that met his were filled with sympathy and he felt ashamed. He saw her frail figure and her wrinkled fingers. He saw her slight smile and smelled the faint scent of cotton floating off of her body.

He asked, “Do I know you?”

“No, but you will.”

“Why are you here?”

“I believe it is my last purpose to help you, before I can leave this old body behind.”

When the day came for him to leave the clinic, she welcomed him into her home. When he was hungry, she fed him. When he was cold, she bought him clothes. When he was tired, she let him sleep. She was patient. She had time.
As he became stronger, she grew weaker. He began to be the one who fed her. He was the one who dressed her. He was the one who watched her sleep.

He managed to put all the pieces of the puzzle where they belonged. He was sober. He had a job. He had a place to sleep at night. He had food on the table. He was no longer waiting for the day where he could simply surrender all who he was. He was no longer finding happiness within a syringe. He was no longer surviving, he was living.

When the next May came along, she was nearly gone. She had arranged her last belongings to ensure he could stay on the right path. She left him everything so he may live as she had.

When he asked her why she did all that she had done, she responded, “I am a cloud. I will shelter you. I will give you drink, but soon, I will float on.”

When he asked her why she had to leave him, she responded, “I have done what I needed to do. There is nothing left here for me.”

When he asked her how she could leave him, after he depended on her for so long, she responded, “Even a dead tree has deep roots.”

She let go, knowing that he could carry on. She submitted her body to the dirt and her soul to the sky.

The man who covered her body in the soil of the earth, whispered a promise to the wind, “I will love as you loved, if you give me peace. I will be patient with others as you were with me, if you give me time. I will carry on and live as you did, if you give me strength.” She gave him all that he asked, and he kept all of his promises. He lived.

Love needs not be romantic to save a life.

"Untitled" by Pat Pickering (Wood Carving)
“Time to Let Go” by Nicole Knueppel

There’s this pain in my chest;
in the depths of my soul.
A voice inside my head,
Tells me, “Time to let go.”

But I cannot let go,
See, I just don’t know how.
He’s all I’ve ever known.
How do I move on now?

Now that I’m tied to him,
Through finance and child.
He says that he loves me,
but love isn’t this wild.

Wild in how he holds,
My wrists above my head;
His face inches from mine,
His distance in our bed.

Our bed, it’s where we lie;
With our words and our pride.
Where he promises change,
But they’re only implied.

Implied; that’s all he gives.
There’s still fists in the walls,
And he still makes his threats.
Once more, I’ll take the fall.
The fall for loving him,
For then choosing to stay.
There are threats on my life,
Am I scared? I won’t say.

Say the words I want to;
Or tell him this is through.
I guess it could be worse,
Still, I don’t know what’s true.

What’s true is this voice here,
Screaming inside my brain;
Reminds me of the past,
And how he causes pain.

Pain that’s invisible,
But still very much there,
The voice is asking me,
“Do you really think he cares?”

Cares, but about himself,
Four words thought, but not said.
And then the voice whispers,
“He won’t stop ‘til you’re dead.”

Insane, how he hurts me;
It’s just to gain control.
When no one’s ‘round to see,
I watch it take its toll.
The toll on who I am,
And on who he should be.
He says that he is scared,
Next time he might hurt me.

Me; the woman he loves,
The one he loves to scare.
Gives pretty promises,
But his anger’s still there.

There like pain in my chest;
in the depths of my soul.
A voice inside my head,
Tells me; “Time to let go.”

"Untitled" by Gabriel Gaudino (Digital Image)
“Their Roots Have Reached Me” by Julie Burie

There are many varieties of oak trees. Did you know that the white oak can live for hundreds of years? While its branches can stretch one hundred feet high and wide, its roots travel even farther, providing the stable foundation necessary to carry out its purpose. Once established, the oak tree’s strength, beauty, and will to survive proves its identity. Although its growth is slow and steady, the oak is resilient and determined to flourish, despite challenges, to one day share all that it was intended to provide to the world. Specifically, the fruit of an oak is a source of food for animals, insects and humans. In addition, the oak offers shelter and protection, while boasting one of the world’s most beautiful and useful commodities: hardwood. Known for its longevity and strength, the oak has become a living legend representing wisdom, truth, resistance and stability. In the same way, I have been blessed to have witnessed generations of independent, strong, and determined women in my family who were rooted in faith, rise like the oak, and overcome obstacles to fulfill their dreams and intended purpose.

Born in 1911, my paternal grandmother, Leonilla (Nell) Burns, overcame decades of hardship to fulfill her purpose by pursuing her dream of teaching. Immediately following high school graduation, Nell went on to complete the nine-month certification that was required and began teaching kindergarten through eighth grade in a one-room schoolhouse. Since her favorite part of teaching was watching the smile splash across a child’s face when their mind’s “light bulb” would go on, the mixture of subjects and ages brought her a tremendous amount of joy and deep satisfaction as the children were able to work at their own pace. Although she was rooted in deep faith and loved the man she married, her path was riddled with obstacles. First, she was regularly met with harsh words, demands, and jealousy from her husband who only possessed a 6th grade education. Second, she raised five children over the span of seventeen years while teaching full time and attending classes every summer. In addition to her obligations, she was an amazing baker and grandmother, always helping and always teaching. Even though her marriage lacked support and her challenges were vast, she still found time to volunteer in her church and community and be a stellar example for her children and grandchildren. In fact, Nell was the only one of eight siblings to graduate from college, receiving her bachelor’s degree from Northern Michigan University at age fifty-nine. In total and despite hardship, Leonilla taught for almost fifty years, leaving a legacy for those who followed and fulfilling her inner purpose.

At the same time, the other side of my family tree holds an equally successful woman. Marjorie Olson, my maternal grandmother, was gifted in music and business, but faced many challenges of her own. While still in high school, her talent and love for music landed her a job at a local music store where she taught piano and violin to many children in the community. Also rooted in deep faith, she had a heart to teach, to lead, and was motivated by her commitment to this passionately held purpose. Shortly after graduation, Marjorie purchased the music store where she had worked for several years. Although she had no money, she had a good reputation and work ethic which caused her banker to fully fund her purchase of this business. Soon, she began to work out her vision by transforming the music store’s basement into studios that she later rented to music teachers who would use these rooms to teach their students. Although she was married, my grandfather worked long hours at both the sheriff’s department and farming. As a result, her business, household duties, as well as raising four children, rested almost solely on her shoulders. In addition to a wife, mother, and business owner for more than 20 years, Marjorie created Shawassee County’s first orchestra. She later started the county’s first
community choir where she performed for many years. After selling her business, she continued to teach students at her home until she was well into her eighties. Therefore, this woman rooted in faith, aware of her purpose, and willing to overcome challenges left a measure of admiration that was felt not only by her family but by everyone who knew her.

However, perhaps the most impressive woman I have witnessed overcome obstacles and difficulty was my mother, Anastasia Hale. Born in 1947, married in 1969, and also rooted in faith, Anne’s love for farming and family was deeply ingrained in her. Although she shared her mother’s passion for music and the arts, my mother was perfectly content raising livestock, sewing our clothes, and making our home a wonderful place. Blessed with a husband she adored, four children, and an eight-bedroom farmhouse that sat on one hundred twenty acres, Anne was happy.

While their farm began to flourish, both my mother and my father held outside jobs. My father worked for Michigan Milk and my mother worked for her best friend at a local flower shop. In fact, my parents were even part of a country band and would play on the weekends to afford the extra amenities. Some of those amenities included a large pool, six horses, and endless tack supplies for 4H. As a family, we were all very happy. However, after they’d return from playing a gig at the bar, there was often crying. One night my father hit my mother so hard it dislocated her jaw. Although she regularly experienced this kind of abuse, she did whatever it took to hide this from us and tirelessly worked to hold her family together. When my father left, he told my siblings and me that he was going on a business trip, leaving my mom to explain the truth. Subsequently, with one income, and the bank ready to take our farm, Anne moved the five of us a few miles away to a one-bedroom house which she could afford. My mom slept in the glassed in front porch with a space-heater, my sister and I shared the bedroom that housed the washer and dryer, and my brother and youngest sister had bunkbeds in a small area off of the tiny living room, but this didn’t matter, because we were together.

Although we left many items behind, my mother worked two extra jobs to keep our most cherished possessions: our horses. Even though he was ordered to, my father didn’t pay child support. Nevertheless, my mother was very resourceful and could often make something great out of very little. Since we had more strength than riches, we picked rocks all summer, put up a fence, and bought hay from the neighbor. However, even with the extra jobs, we were left with very little money to live on. Regardless, Anne worked every day at the flower shop and several nights per week at a dry cleaner. After she would tuck us in, she would work into the night in our unheated garage creating wreaths and silk arrangements. On the weekends, she would drive to Petoskey and sell her arrangements wholesale to various shops.

While we were settling in the little house, my mother met my stepfather, Lewis. I remember finding groceries on the steps when the bus would drop us off, only to find out later that they were from him. He was a good man but was not without trials of his own. He was a recovering alcoholic and, within just a few years of knowing us, experienced the tragic death of his son. This deeply affected us all. In his effort to cope and refocus, he encouraged my mom to open her own flower shop. Although she loved the idea, she had no money and didn’t want to be in direct competition with her best friend. After sharing her ideas with her father, my grandfather mortgaged his cows to give her seven thousand dollars to open her business seventy miles away in Crystal Canyon, Michigan. At first, Anne commuted three hours a day, listening to Christian radio and daily deepening her relationship with God, but after she rolled her car on the slushy
ride home one night, they decided it was time to move north. This time, we had to sell our horses and start completely over, but it was ok. In my junior year, we relocated from Greenwood County to Crystal Canyon, where most of us still reside.

Although Anne’s flower shop, The Green Room, has been serving the Crystal Canyon area for over thirty-one years, she has never missed a moment to be there for us as a mother. She faithfully stood by her children through every difficult situation: her daughter’s teenage pregnancy, her son’s narcotic addiction and recovery, my deep depression, divorces and unexpected pregnancy, as well as her youngest daughter’s attachment disorder and severe introverted behavior. While she never recouped a penny of the child support, and continued to work six days a week, she still found time to make it to every game, cheerleading event, track meet, play, and parents’ night. I don’t know how she did it, but looking back, my only explanations are her will to survive, her determination to provide for her children, and her commitment to fulfill her purpose as a mother as well as a woman. As the years passed, her relationship with God deepened and she became a living example of Christ, of forgiveness, of joy. She raised us to know Him and this would prove to be the greatest gift that I have ever been given. Despite obstacles, pain, loss and grief, despite abuse,-commutes, and a pregnant teen, Anne pressed on with courage and adaptability to carry out her purpose.

When I reflect on the impact made by the strong determined women in my family, I’m reminded of the oak. Besides being tall and confident in stature, the oak is continually striving for new heights, despite its challenges, with its branches stretched wide like the arms of a nurturing mother protecting and providing for those closest to it. While its core is strong, the strength of its roots is stronger. Though it’s easy to see the wonder of the tree above ground, the beauty and influence that flows through its roots is immeasurable. I have been blessed to be born of the same roots. First, my paternal grandmother who fulfilled her dream of teaching and earned her degree much later than her peers, showing me that I could do the same. Second, my maternal grandmother who was a fantastic businesswoman and born entrepreneur. And finally, my strong and courageous mother who would stop at nothing to provide for her children and be a living example of Christ. As a result, I, too, have just celebrated my twenty-second year in business this year. I am also in my third year of college, with a 3.67 GPA, at age forty-six. Lastly, as a single mom, I cling to my relationship with Christ and hope to raise my son with all the courage and determination that has been shown to me by the amazing women in my family. Like oaks, they stand rich in love and the pride of their accomplishments, yet humble enough to relate to anyone who would dare to believe that they were created for more than what life has handed them. Therefore, these strong independent women, rooted deeply in faith and committed to fulfilling their purpose, left a valuable heritage as they rose against the obstacles that were intended to defeat them. They won!
“Trannies VS the Genderqueer” by JJ Delfosse

Not everyone who claims to be transgender is actually transgender. I know that’s common knowledge, but there’s more than one way that that statement can be interpreted. Some people simply go through a questioning phase, but even more common, people mislabel themselves.

Transgender is when someone is born one sex but identifies as the opposite (someone born a female now identifies as male) and makes masculinizing or feminizing changes to their bodies via hormone therapy and body modification surgery. To be transgender, means you’re transitioning from one binary gender to the other – boy/girl. Nowadays, transgender people have become trends and the word has been thrown about like it doesn’t have a defined meaning. Between the “Transtrenders,” questioning phases, and mislabeling, transgender people have been subjected to jokes and made to look fake. Let’s start by addressing “transtrenders.” These people are people who claim they’re transgender to get their 15 minutes of fame. They’re attention seekers. These people, especially, make transgender people look bad because “transtrenders” use the internet to gain all the attention and then just all of the sudden stop being trans when the attention dies out. This makes it seem as if transgender people are just doing this for attention instead of their own happiness. Next is the least harmless of the reasons: the questioning phases. Lots of people try to imagine what it’s be like to be their opposite sex, even just for a day, but some people take that farther. These people typically experiment with clothes that are nonbinary or meant for the opposite sex, cut/grow their hair, act more feminine or masculine, and hang out with the opposite sex more frequently. The only time a problem arises is when this person decides that they’re cis, then there’s people who call them out for being “fake” (This is much different from transtrenders, questioning people don’t usually go about social media spreading the word). Lastly, mislabeling is the primary reason transgender people and people who identify outside of binary genders are at each other’s throats. People who identify outside of the binary label themselves as transgender (not everyone does but most do) because they’re outside the binary and in most cases modifying themselves to match how they feel—which is not being transgender, it’s having gender expression.

Gender and gender expression are not the same. Gender expression is a technical spectrum, with the two binary genders at each end. No one is exactly binary; no one fits every description that comes with being a man or a woman. There are only two genders (not including other culture’s third gender). These genders are based off of the sex of someone assigned at birth, but sex and gender are not the same. Gender is a socially constructed idea of how to act based upon your genitals, where is sex is based off of what genitals you have when you’re born—knowing this information will help you better understand what to imagine. Imagine a line with male (boy) and female (girl) written on each end of that line, in the middle of said line lies gender expression between the two genders, a grey area if you will. On each of the ends lie cisgender (born one sex and identify with gender associated with said sex) and transgender people. In the grey area is where gender expression is; people who identify as genderqueer, nonbinary, agender, etc., anything out of the binary that doesn’t identify with either boy or girl. These people who are in the midst of changing themselves to better match how they feel tend to call themselves transgender, as if nonbinary or agender are actual genders. In order for these to be genders, they’d have to be widely accepted and integrated into society as new genders because, as stated before, gender is socially constructed. Unless society has a change of heart, people who aren’t binary to the two genders are not transgender, they’re simply expressing how
they feel. Because of these people, along with “transtrenders”, transgender people get a bad reputation.

Years of mislabeling and faking being transgender has built up a lot of stigma and backlash from both outside of and inside the LGBTQIA+ community. Outside of the community, you have uneducated people who don’t understand the concepts of gender, gender expression, and sex (like they’re so hard to understand) who belittle transgender people because of the nonbinary people who frequently identify themselves as other genders (and sometimes other species). I’m all for people expressing themselves and becoming themselves, but they could at least label themselves correctly and in a way that doesn’t impact people that you’re falsely identifying as. Because of the increase in nonbinary individuals, more push back has been put toward transgender people because it’s automatically assumed, they identify outside of male or female. This leads to the insults about genitals and transgender people being mentally ill. “Transtrenders” don’t help either; they make it seem as though transgender is just a phase because they need attention, which obviously leads to insults of transgender being fake. As for inside of the LGBTQIA+, there’s conflict between the nonbinary and transgender communities. Nonbinary people claim to be transgender so they can fit into a category that already has an easily explanation and because they firmly believe that there are more than two genders. While most transgender people believe in the binary genders being the only ones and refuse to let nonbinary people identify as something they’re not. This conflict sort of forces the rest of the LGBTQIA+ to “pick a side” because if you believe in the wrong thing, you may have just lost friends, family or any chance at making new friends in that community. Because of these conflicts, there are LGBTQIA+ members turning their backs on one another instead of coming to a compensation and living happily amongst each other.

There are so many uneducated people trying to push their opinions in this situation where they don’t even belong. Identifying as something you’re not is like stealing someone else’s culture or identity. You’re claiming to be something that you don’t fall under in terms of description and societal norms and it becomes offensive at some point because you’re pretty much making a mockery of people who actually identify with what you’re pretending to. Transgender people are getting the bad end of this issue and people refuse to educate themselves and admit that this statement is true.
There are some people who appear in your life by happenstance. Some may call it fate or destiny, while others may call it pure luck. These people are often just blips in our lifetime, going unnoticed. Other times, they impact us in ways that shape who we’ve been, who we are, and who we will someday become. For me, Bill is one of those people in my life. Bill is my landlord. He rents me a beautiful home for my husband, baby boy, and I that sits on top of a hill overlooking the water. There’s a large fenced in backyard for our dog Daisy to explore and a patio for family cookouts in the summer. The backyard is filled with a variety of plants that Bill has grown. Upon moving in, this is something I learned about Bill. His love for plants. Throughout the first summer that we spent living here, he would occasionally come spend time with his plants, pulling weeds and watering them. The green shrubbery, unique trees, and rose bushes make the yard inviting and warm. They are the home to bees and butterflies in the summertime. There’s a bonsai tree at the gate’s entrance. He would spend time trimming the bonsai tree to create perfect little branches and then use one of the many hoses tucked in the basement to wash away the trimmings from the patio. Last summer, however, he began trusting us to care for his plants, a task we willingly took upon ourselves.

In the basement, aside from the hoses and sprinkler systems, the basement is filled with his other possessions. A vintage dog sled stands up high in the corner, seemingly untouched in years, but well worn. It is made of lightly colored wood and is formed with planks. A torn rope is attached to the front. Next to the sled, a beautiful white hammock, perfect for relaxing in the sun, lays folded on the floor collecting dust. We were told we could use it if we’d like but never have. In the center of the room, there’s a children’s cotton candy machine. It is painted with beautiful rich colors of purple, blue, green, and yellow. It doesn’t work, he told us, yet he still holds onto it for reasons unknown to me.

In a separate room of the basement, dozens of names, dates, drawings, and quotes are written in colorful marker on a white concrete wall. Young handwriting, I assume from parties and childhood friends of his. There are inside jokes, funny drawings, and hearts filled with unknown initials. Against the wall, there is a weight bench, perhaps used very long ago. There’s a stray baseball in the center of the room, a dusty glove sitting next to it. It is hard to imagine them being used once, likely to play catch or practice pitching. Bill has not been very forthcoming with these types of stories, yet you can see in his eyes the memories this home brings him.

My first interaction with Bill was not as his tenant. I met him when I was just ten years old. Our encounter was brief, and I never imagined that we would ever bump into one another ever again. It was a morning in June of 2006. I was living at home in Gladstone with my mother. I woke up on the couch, where I had fallen asleep the night before. I could feel the AC blowing out cold wet air and could hear the hum from the fan. The sun was beating in through the window. It was probably around 10 a.m. I looked over to see my mother laying on the floor. She appeared to be passed out but was babbling gibberish words. I tried to wake her up, but as her eyes opened, she was still unable to form words. I was scared, my little heart pounding out of my chest, unsure of what was wrong or what to do about it. I ran outside to my neighbors’ door, knocking and sobbing, calling out their names. Nobody answered. I stepped off of their porch, frantically running back to mine. A kind mailman, likely in his forties, stopped me to ask if
everything was okay. I shook my head, unsure if everything was okay. He seemed friendly to me in that moment, a short old man with curly hair and permanent wind burned cheeks.

I told him my mother was on the floor and wouldn’t wake up. I invited him inside, still sobbing. He dropped his bag and ran over to my mother. He gathered himself calmly and asked if I had a phone to call 9-1-1. My mother took away the cell phone she occasionally let me play with, but I knew she had hid it on the top of the entertainment center. I grabbed a chair and reached up to get it, handing it to the mailman and listening to the call. My young ears heard him explain to the dispatcher on the other line what was happening, using words like unconscious and unresponsive. He waited with me until police arrived and then went about his workday as usual. His name was Bill. It turns out, my mother had suffered from a stroke that morning, making it to the hospital just in time to survive and then eventually recover. I had never gotten to thank that mailman.

In March of 2017, more than ten years after my mother’s stroke, my husband and I responded to an ad for a house to rent. We toured the home with a lovely couple, decided we wanted it, and sat down with them to fill out the paperwork. While filling it out, we made small talk about the winter and how we all couldn’t wait until Spring. The man chuckled and told us how he was used to it because he’s been a mailman for 20+ years. The entire tone of the conversation changed, as I began sharing about my mother’s story and how appreciative I am of all mail carriers now because of it. The man’s face went blank. He walked out of the room, not saying a word, and returned a few minutes later crying. We all sat around him, confused, until he spoke up and told us that it was him. He was the one who had helped me, who had saved my mother’s life. He remembered me as a child, barefoot and sobbing in my neighborhood. I embraced him with a hug tearfully. My husband stood in shock, as he knew the story and knew how much it had affected my life. Bill’s wife Amy stood there, still confused. It turns out that Bill never told anyone about that day. He humbly thought he didn’t do much at all, just dialed a phone. This speaks volumes of his character.

Now, I rarely see Bill. Sometimes, I will pass him on the road as he’s out delivering mail, a job that still to this day fills his heart. Sometimes, he will come to fix a leak or a broken toilet for us. When he does come, he brings a pocket of treats for our dog Daisy, his face lighting up when he sees her excited and waiting. We have never talked about our past since the day we signed the lease. We have an unspoken connection with each other because of that day so many summers ago. Although we’ve hardly spoken, he has been in my life through every big defining moment. From when I got married, gave birth to my son, and celebrated another one of my mom’s birthdays, he has been a person on the sidelines going unnoticed.

I don’t know much about Bill, but from the few encounters I have had, I know this much. He is a man full of stories that sit too close to his heart to tell. He is a lifesaver and a lover of nature. He is a dedicated man who is humble and adores dogs, brought into my life not just through happenstance, but by fate. I believe that we are meant to be a part of each other’s lives, even if only in seemingly small ways. He is a symbol of hope for me, exuding a light in my life that I am unaware of most days. So, if by chance, long after I’m moved out of his home, fate brings us together again, I will smile.
"Untitled" by Gabriel Gaudino (Digital Image)

"The Dark Dusk" by Christian Stapert (Digital Image)
“*The Stars Danced By*” by Samantha Gaudino

He laid on the ground  
Looked up at the sky  
And one by one  
Saw the stars dance by

The moonlight gleamed  
Inside he sighed  
For how pretty it was  
When the stars danced by

He laid on the ground  
Where crickets jumped high  
And listening softly  
Deciphered their cries

The wind blew fierce  
Inside he sighed  
For how pretty it was  
When the stars danced by

"*Untitled*" by Pat Pickering (Wood Carving)
“Experiences” by Alyssa Groeneveld

It was our fourth time meeting together and generally our third date. I never dated anyone before but I’m sure he has. He was a very pretty boy and I was a quiet girl who liked books, our likelihood of being together was slim and I felt blessed to receive his attention. I’ve also never had anyone treat me in the gentleman-like way he does, holding doors and paying for lunch. I felt like a queen, stuffing my mouth with buttery French toast that morning. Then he was my king, making my heart flutter and leap out of my throat.

We parked the car in front of the house but we both waited, wanting to say something to confess to another but waiting for the moment to arise. I stared forward and listened to his breathing and I could hear his mouth open, no noise coming out. I had not the courage needed to stare into his eyes until I heard him thinking. I looked up into his face to guess what he was trying to say but couldn't get out. The thrumming between my breasts was immense as I stared into his eyes. His sparkling brown eyes held a magnitude of joy and smiles reflecting off them and they were shining straight into the depths of my undoing. He opened his mouth and hesitated once again, forming an expansive and oblivious portal of possible explanations. Then he looked me in the eyes, studied mine, and broke free of all his inner restraint. His soft pink lips formed the question I have been wanting to hear for hours.

Can I kiss you?

I looked away as the blood rushed into my cheeks and my ears. I pictured myself in such a prospect. Intense and awkward silence ensued as I imagined the experience, but I was only wearing his patience thin as anxiousness met only the sound of my breathing for a response. I was trying to calm myself down, breathing slow and through the mouth.

I explained my situation of ignorance of the situation and averted eye contact as I was embarrassed from having no such experience in the matter. I hesitated again. Then as I looked up into his joyous topaz eyes. I made my decision. I only said, “I think so.” I could never be certain in that moment that the intensity wasn't the culprit to my brash desires, but my heart guided me to face him with nothing but desire and honesty. I saw him begin to lean in and so I too moved naturally towards his handsome freckled face. He closed his eyes and the next sensation was unlike any other I’ve felt.

Darkness filled my vision as I turned off all senses but one. I felt the plumpness of his mouth, open and ready for the moment but I once again hesitated, pulling away after a quick smack. I wasn't expecting the passionate French kiss he was offering. I laughed out loud and opened my eyes to see the floor of the car and felt even more blood pressure itself to my face, filling it red. He laughed as well and assured me that this was okay.

My heart pounded in my head with embarrassment as I just realized what I'd done. I looked up to find him staring at my eyes once more, concerned, but wanting more. I slowly brought my face to his visage once again but with more understanding of what's happening between us.

My tongue swiped his lip as I drove into his mouth. Then all senses disappeared, and we were one person. I could feel the inclining desire between him and myself and the ability to pull away at any time. We continued and felt each other's mouths with passion and hesitation at the same time. Nothing else seemed to matter in that moment but to make the quick kiss meaningful.
I felt his tongue hit my tooth and I realized the kiss continued for long enough. I pulled away and stared into his eyes for a moment longer, taking in the morning sun glistening in his eyes. Then I averted my eyes once more, being conscientious of my ability to assert self-control. I wanted the moment to continue but I knew it would be just more special awaiting the next moment our innermost desires could intertwine. So, we backed away and listened to our breathing, our lips taking in the tingles of endorphins and moisture. We sat for a moment taking in the situation and once more becoming two identities, his goal finally accomplished, and my goal finally realized. We were in love.

"Untitled" by Alexia Mercier (Oil, Acrylic)
“He Is Here” by Ally Schultz

He is here
In the songs I sing,
The lyrics I speak,
The melodies I hum.

He is here
In the words of men,
The laughter of children
The tears of my eyes.

He is here
In the weeping of my sadness,
The smile of my joy,
The despair of my hardships.

He is here
In all that is good,
In all that is bad.
Always.

"Poppies" by Honora Seppanen (Oil Pastel, Colored Pencil)
“Him” by Spencer Robinson
LAND Winner, Poetry 1st Place

Him.
There he sits in our little red café booth
His head propped on my shoulder, knees pressed together
A hand planted firmly on my leg,
Rubbing soothing circles into the muscle with his thumb -
He laughs at some silly video on his phone.
And he’s not afraid to touch me, to be seen with me.
My heart thrums in my chest
He pulls my hand into his, pressing a chaste kiss to my knuckles
He tucks a finger under my chin - like they do in the movies and…
I swear, we are the only humans in the world
As he kisses me with more love than anyone has ever dared
Pure Celestite eyes stare back into mine
He rambles on about science, or anime, or nature, or whatever
Passion is laced in every word he speaks
That secret, special twinkle in his eye as his mind runs free
I pray it could always be like this
He is kind and he is patient as I work through the bad of the last
Never daring to step too far
But I let him test the boundaries set before him,
The one's forced up by others.
It has been so long since I let someone step closer.
Even now, he bombards me with his compliments
Smart, cute, funny - even beautiful
Words I could never associate with myself
Until now that is.
It's hard to believe he'd want me - all of me
But I'm starting to believe that he does
With him, all I have to do be is me.
Nothing more, nothing less, nothing louder or quieter, and nothing smaller.
Just me.
I can’t remember the last time I could be me.

"Untitled" by Alexia Mercier (Watercolor, Ink)
It was winter, but the waves still beat at the old lighthouse’s walls. It was snowing, but that light still burned in the high tower. Every lighthouse needs a keeper. And as everyone knows, being a lighthouse keeper can be a dangerous job. For that very reason, every lighthouse keeper needs a dog. Hugo was that dog.

A pale sun rose over the dark sea. Waves crashed against the cliff, the rocks were slick with the salty surf and fog swathed everything, giving the lighthouse an eerie feel. Seabirds wheeled above the cliff, squalling a good morning to the world.

It was a normal day. Hugo started his day as normal. He woke up with the sun, and stretched, opening his huge jaws with a yawn. He blinked a few times and hopped up. He trotted out into the yard, leaving paw prints in the speckles of snow.

Hugo’s house was made out of an upturned boat, half-buried in the ground. It left plenty of room for the chubby wolfhound to come and go as he pleased. Hugo was sleeping much more as he got older, his old bones drained of energy much faster than in his younger years.

Hugo rambled around the yard, sniffing here and there. Sometimes stopping to bark at the gulls where they sleepily perched.

The big gray dog returned to his house, and put his mouth around a thick rope, and pulled once, twice, three times. A large bell mounted to the old boat rang each time Hugo pulled it. It was the start of the day in the lighthouse.

Trotting across the lawn again, Hugo entered the looming lighthouse. He meandered through the house at the bottom of the hulking structure, making his way to the small kitchen. In the kitchen, there was an oven and a set of cabinets and drawers. He maneuvered the bottom one open. Inside of it was a large bowl of dog food, put there the night before by the lighthouse keeper. Hugo quickly ate his breakfast. He wagged his tail back and forth and wandered around the house again.

Usually, the keeper was awake by this point, but Hugo couldn’t hear his footsteps on the metal stairs. He couldn't smell the pungent oil that the lighthouse keeper would refill the huge torch with.

Hugo padded around the house. On his way, he stopped at each doorway, his ears perked and nose quivering. At each doorway, no keeper met him, but he continued on his way.

When Hugo had made his way around the entire house, he was quite sad that he couldn’t find his lighthouse keeper. He whimpered softly and put his nose to the ground. Maybe he could sniff out his keeper.

He could smell his keeper; his smell was old like it was from that night. It had the smell of salt, tobacco, and damp wool. Hugo could smell the keeper’s night meal of smoked fish, faint now. There was no trace of the keeper’s normal breakfast of seabird eggs, black coffee, and pickled pork.
Hugo looked up the daunting stairs and heaving a sigh, he started up the rickety iron wrought stairs.

The dampness from the fog hadn’t reached the inside of the lighthouse yet. The wood fire in the basement of the lighthouse had warmed the iron of the stairs under Hugo's paws. The salty ocean smell got stronger as Hugo made his way up the stairs, spiraling up, up, up.

He was panting by the time he got to the second level of the lighthouse, his joints clicking and creaking. The small room was about halfway between the floor level, and the sky-high torch. This was the keeper’s bedroom. His smell permeated the air all around Hugo. The big dog quietly stepped around his keeper’s room. A small white bed pressed against one wall, a desk against another.

The desk was dark wood and messy. It was an organized mess, covered in stacks of beautiful, neat, books and maps rolled and clasped. A row of candles stood away from the papers, a puddle of wax around the one that burned the night before.

Behind the candles on the desk, lovingly cared for, was a set of picture frames. The lighthouse keeper had bought them together on one of his few trips to the small fishing village across the water. The frames themselves were tarnished silver and the pictures inside were old and fading.

One was a picture of the keeper and his family. He was younger then and had his arms around a beautiful woman and their young daughter.

The second picture was of Hugo as a puppy. Hugo was on the keeper’s lap, licking at his face. The keeper’s wife had taken this picture and Hugo remembered their laughter.

The lighthouse keeper’s family was gone. They hadn’t come around in a very long time.

The room was very still—so still that Hugo could hear the birds caterwauling through the stone walls. He could smell the lighthouse cats above them. The cats never ventured down the stairs, and Hugo couldn't go and greet them now that he had found the keeper.

With soft steps, he approached the small bed. His keeper’s smell was strongest there, but he couldn’t hear him.

Hugo huffed happily and sat quietly next to his master’s bed. His scraggly tail thumped against the floor.

The lighthouse keeper didn’t roll over. He didn’t chuckle and pat Hugo’s heavy head. He didn’t show his face for Hugo to kiss.

Hugo whined, his tail ceasing its happy rhythm. The room was silent.

Hugo sat there, waiting for the keeper to wake, to move, to start about his daily routine.

But the keeper didn’t move. He lay on his stomach, the blanket pulled up to his ears, and his battered flat cap pulled down over his nose.

This would’ve been a very normal day.

But Hugo’s keeper didn’t wake up.
But Hugo would wait.

…

Hugo always waited.

"Unidentity" by Halle Gustafson (Image Stills from a Performance)
“In A Year” by Sydney Timbrook

We spend most of our lives waiting. "Once I'm done with high school and in college, then I'll be happy." Out of nowhere you find yourself in college just waiting to move on to the next phase. "Ugh, I can't wait to get out of here and have the job of my dreams." You finally graduate, get the job you've worked so hard for, and suddenly you find yourself counting down the days until you get to retire. This, I believe, is why so many people feel like their lives are flashing by. Society is constantly just looking towards what's next. Instead, we should appreciate what we have because nothing will be the same in a year.

So much can take place within a year. The days paint themselves onto the canvas that is your life. Each stroke unnoticeable until 365 days pass by and the painting in front of you is almost unrecognizable. So much has changed. All the people you painted over have been replaced by new ones. Weddings, funerals, job offers, natural disasters, and whatever other life-changing events take place over the year have been splattered all over your painting. You think back to what your canvas used to look like—with the feeling of nostalgia on the tip of your paintbrush. You begin to miss some of the people you painted over. You begin to long for the places you used to be. Change is inevitable, so savor each moment you’re apart of because the day will come when you wish you had.

I’m only eighteen and have already experienced this predicament. High school dragged on and on. Each day I just wished I were somewhere else because I was tired of the routine of seeing the same people and having the same conversations. If I could go back, I would take a deep breath and an honest look around me. The simplicity of greeting my parents each day before school and rushing out to the bus in a panic is a memory I long for. The peacefulness of relaxing on the bus with my favorite music flowing through my earbuds while watching the seasons change is something I thought I’d never miss. The innocence of meeting up with my group of friends between classes or lunch and just laughing about whatever nonsense appeared throughout our day is something I shouldn’t have taken for granted.

I’m in college now and I miss some aspects of high school. But on the bright side of this transition, new friendships are being born, new routines are being formed, and I’m appreciating every single one of them. Because by this time next year, it will not be the same. So, I urge you to just stop and look around at what the universe has presented in front of you with the utmost appreciation. You are where you are meant to be, so enjoy it. This I believe, will make for a happier, more fulfilling life.

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