

# Voices Through the Flickering Pixels



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English Department

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# Voices Through the Flickering Pixels

A Pandemic Anthology by

Professor Hoen's Creative Writing Class

The University of Detroit Mercy English Department

Due to the pandemic, this class anthology will only be accessible through the web. We invite you to use technology to better enhance your reading experience and to stay safe. Hyperlinks are included on the table of contents for your reading convenience.



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## How Eight? — Zeinab Ahmad

There is quietness to the room, even in the midst of chaos,  
On my computer the teacher is chomping away, lecturing about  
    some useless topic,  
I sit in my black leather chair staring out in space,  
I try to process, what has brought me to this moment?  
How did the world just stop like this?  
I was only joking by saying I wanted the world to stop,  
A moment to breathe.

We were only supposed to stay home for two weeks,  
We all thought it will be a longer spring break, where we can all  
    stay at home,  
Little did we know what was coming.

My mom and I headed to the grocery store,  
People wearing masks, gloves, shields,  
Lines of people waiting to get in the stores,  
Abandoned buildings and parking lots all around us,  
It looked like a scene from an apocalypse movie.

Signs filled the store,  
“ONE PER HOUSEHOLD,” “TWO PER HOUSEHOLD,”  
I look over to my mom, I can't see her face through the mask,  
But the fear in her eyes can be seen from miles away,  
We only went out a couple more times that month for necessities.

At this point all the days started merging into one,  
Like a dream that keeps repeating itself,  
I am back to that quietness, a new teacher chomping away at  
    something,  
It is now almost December,  
Almost eight months since the last day that felt real,  
I sit back in my chair, the number eight is spinning around in my  
    head like a carousel,  
Time is moving but no time has passed,  
How eight?

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## Goodbye Isn't Forever — Selena Alyass

After three months of being alone, this house no longer feels like a home. The farmhouse once sat on four acres of lush grass he once took care of, with a single large leafy tree sitting in the middle of the field. Every Sunday I'd wake to the fresh green scent of the grass cut and the joyous laughter of our daughter riding with him. I now look out the kitchen window and see how the grass has lost its vibrant color once he left us. I got the chance to say goodbye and told him countless times we'd be okay, but that was just another lie. We had named our daughter Willow, after the tree in the yard. It was his idea and when I finally had agreed his cheeks dimpled, the corners of his eyes wrinkled, and he got up to run outside around the tree. He was always goofy in that way and my world was so much better when he was happy, so I went along with it. It wasn't till now, four years after she was born, that I truly have grown to love the name. Now each day she goes outside, crosses the dead field to the tree, and lays there for hours. I watch her from the window but can barely make her out as the leaves hang down and shield her from the outside.

We had agreed Willow shouldn't see him, that she may get scared, cry, not understand what was going on with her daddy. He said he didn't want her to remember him that way. She waited with the kind nurse in a playroom as I held his cold hand. As I sat there staring into his eyes, I thought about when I first met him, how I used to believe his blue eyes were ice-cold, that they knew no warmth. Now I knew that it was the hottest fires that always burned blue. I left that day, a piece of me broken, missing. All I had left of him was Willow. When we got home, I let Willow go outside to play with the dog and I sat on the couch, where we had endless movie nights, cuddled up with the fire-burning, in the cold Maine weather. It had just occurred to me how I'd never have another moment like that, never get to feel his warmth again.

Later that evening, Willow approached me and looked up and asked me when daddy would be home. All I had decided to tell her before was that he was sick, but then I told her, while holding in

my tears with every ounce of energy I had left, that daddy was too sick and he wouldn't be coming home.

She looked at me with a puzzled face, "No, he's outside. When is he coming inside?" My eyebrows came down and together and I glared at her. I wanted to scream he was dead, to admit it out loud, but another part of me believed her and so I got up and ran to the back door. I opened the porch light and stood on the porch staring out into the field, looking for him. It was then I fell to the floor and cried for the first time, with my hands covering my face and elbows on my knees. I always told myself I wouldn't cry about him in front of her, to not scare her or confuse her. However, she just stayed quiet and pushed her head through my arms and put her head to my chest, and hugged me.

"It's okay mama," she whispered into my ear.

I stopped and looked at her with tears streaming down my face. She wiped each one and gave me a big kiss on the cheek.

"Mama all better."

"Yes. Mama all better," I said, trying to accept it.

As the days grew longer and the nights became shorter, I did not know what to do with myself anymore but tried to come to terms with our new reality. I'd wake up Sundays and put on a fake smile for my Willow and make her favorite chocolate chip pancakes. I gave them to her with a glass of milk as we sat at the dining table and I read through the paper.

"No, I don't like it," she told me, pushing her plate away from her.

"Why not honey, that's just how you like it. I even put extra chocolate in there."

"No, daddy makes it better."

Instantly my heart throbbed and the story about the poet who passed away was no longer interesting. See, I never cooked, it was

his thing. I finally lowered my paper to see her face and the pout on it.

“I know honey, I know he does. But I have to make them now. So what do you want me to do? Do you want to make them together? We can make more.”

“No, I want daddy to make them.”

She continued to repeat, “I want daddy,” over and over and I just stared at her while I clenched my teeth and the paper in my hand started to crumple up, her yelling and chanting was giving me a headache and I was never good with children, but he always wanted one so I said okay and went along again with his idea and-

“Enough!” My fists loosened and her screams halted, but tears began to fall on her soft rosy cheeks. Shit, I thought to myself.

“No, baby wait. I’m sorry. Mommy didn’t mean to yell.”

She had gotten up and left and I heard the back door open. I quickly grew dizzy and light-headed as I got up to follow her. Our golden retriever quickly passed by me, bumping into me to follow her out. I followed them, down the porch steps, holding on to the railing, feeling like I just may fall. I saw her running to the tree and disappearing behind its leaves like always. I sat down on the step and thought about how we got to this moment. I knew what I had to do. We needed somewhere new, somewhere fresh to start over. This was the only home she had ever known and I knew he would hate me for leaving it, but every day had dragged on and every day was filled with pain. This home was painful, the tree was painful, her name was painful. He would have to understand that it’s not a home without him anymore.

Selling the home has been hard. We have some money saved, but not enough yet to start over in a different state. We chose the simple life, living in almost the middle of nowhere. Over the past month, there have been three potential buyers, and one offer that was just too low. Today someone is coming to look. I cleaned up around the house, making it look nice like from the magazines I

have seen. I go upstairs and to my room where Willow is sitting on the floor playing with her doll and our dog curled up next to her.

“Willow, please clean up your toys, someone is coming to see the house in a little.” I grab a black long sleeve shirt from my closet.

Willow listens now. She does not scream or cry and I think it’s because I scared her that one morning. I’m not sure. She still goes out to the tree and says he’s there. I have walked by the tree and have heard her talking to herself. I moved the leaves out of the way one time and I peeked in, but it was just her lying on dead grass and the dog.

The man is older, in his 60s, maybe even 70s. He says he’s looking for some farmland. He takes himself around the property while I stay indoors looking out the window. Willow begged to accompany him and so she did. I meet them outside once they arrive at the back porch.

“It’s beautiful, truly is. The land is exactly what we want. Not too large or too small.” He gestures with his hands pointing around the land.

“I’m so glad you liked it.” I smile, knowing we may finally get to sell the house.

“It’s a shame about the tree though,” he turns to me.

“I’m sorry?” My smile disappears.

“Oh, it’s just that it’s a beautiful tree, but it’s in the middle of the land so we’ll have to take it down.”

I look away from him and down to the ground. “Oh.”

“What he mean take it down. That’s my tree.” Willow keeps on tugging my hand.

I give a small smile and look at the man—“Sorry.”

I crouch down to Willow and look at her piercing blue eyes.

“Remember we are going to move, somewhere fun, and there will be lots of trees there too, don’t worry.”

“But daddy is here! We can’t leave daddy!”

The man looks at me surprised. I slowly stand back up and look at her. “Willow, go inside with Charlie please,” I say with a wave of slight anger in my voice.

The man stands there and I walk to the edge of the porch and look out to the tree, the dead grass, and turn back around to the house. Our home, with so many memories, before Willow and after.

I look at him and sternly say,

“You can’t cut down the tree.”

He looks at me unsure if I was just saying it because of my daughter or if I truly meant it. “Are you for real?”

“Yes, I am. If you buy this house you can’t cut the tree. If I come back in a year or five years I need to see that the tree is still standing.”

“Well, I’m sorry ma’am but I can’t promise that. I apologize if the tree has any significant meaning to you, but it wouldn’t do well in the middle of my farm. I still am interested in the property though.”

I let out my breath, “Well, thank you for your time and visit, but I’m not selling anymore. I’m sure you can show yourself out.”

He looks stunned and tells me to have a good day and once he’s gone I go inside. I look over at the fireplace mantle and I knew he did not belong in this ugly black urn anymore. I go down to the tree and enter its leaves. I look at the trunk and see the names we carved six years ago. I take him and spread him around the tree as evenly as possible. I lay down, the same way Willow does. There is no breeze inside here, just a calmness. I see why Willow likes it now. I look up and see the leaves up above make a face and when the leaves move it’s like the face is talking. So, I close my eyes and

I hear him. It feels like I can hear him whispering right into my ear, telling me to stay and not to leave him. I open my eyes, with tears having now fled them. Maybe Willow isn't just a child with a loud imagination. Or maybe I'm just crazy. But perhaps staying here is how we'll get to be with him forever and never lose him.

It was when she said that daddy was still here that I knew we weren't done. We haven't lived enough, grown enough, in this home. There was still so much love for it to be shown. And I never wanted to leave him behind, I just wanted to leave the pain behind. But now I know, there is no escaping the pain, but that the pain will subside eventually and all will be better. I know now what our future holds. All of us here together, forever. Never apart and never leaving this home.

I find Willow inside and ask her if she wants to do her favorite thing and have a tea party. She squeals with excitement. I got the tea ready and she placed her stuffed animals out around the table. The kettle whistles and I mix in a special ingredient. I pour the tea into our small pink teacups. I hold my teacup and my breath as I watch her as she struggles to pick hers up, but before she takes her first sip I remind her, "Goodbye isn't forever Willow."

Willow's eyes shut and her body begins to tremble and hang over the side of the chair. I stand and go to her feeling a few tears shed now from my eyes. I know this is for the best. I struggle to pick her body up and almost fall a few too many times, but I get her out to the tree as quickly as I can. I lay her on the grass like she always did herself. I hurry back inside and find Charlie standing at the door. I kneel down and give him a kiss and take his collar off and let him outside. I take my teacup from the table and go back outside to Willow and sit down next to her and with one hand I hold my cup and with my other I hold her hand. I can't keep them waiting. I drink my whole cup quickly and fall laying next to her under the dreamy leaves of the willow tree.

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## Man-Made—Monica Anderson

Out of the front passenger window appeared the two dim headlights of a Ford focus approaching at high speeds, breezing past cars and weaving between buildings. Chasing directly behind were the furious red and blue lights of the law.

Rio was just looking at them, that was his first day on the job. He had never seen action like this before. He's only seen it in the movies. He now finally got a chance to look at action up close and personal. He froze. He had always prepared for this moment in the Academy, this was his chance to shine and he was watching his chance flee. He was just sitting in his car, panic building, heart racing, the speeding car approaching. He and his partner, Steve, were parked in a parking lot watching the action as it came barreling towards them, waiting for the signal. Loud voices were coming in and out of his walkie-talkie, "Suspect heading east on Oak Park Drive, traveling at high speeds, turning right onto Eastwood Boulevard." Rio watched as the bright headlights of the racing car ran across his windshield.

Steve, began to yell, "Rio, go! Cut in after Sanchez, follow close behind!" Rio, retorted with, "Give me a break man, I'm going, let me get in behind him and let Sanchez block the guy in." He put his foot on the gas and started to pull out of the parking lot, hesitating as regular traffic had begun to fill the streets. He flicked his lights on as he slowly pulled out of the lot. Why couldn't he do it? Steve had a point.

Being a police officer ran in the family. His grandfather had been a cop for Sunrise County and his dad was a cop for the neighboring county of Wayne. His older sister was a police officer for Wayne County as well. His mom had been a police officer for York County before she died in the line of duty, a sharp twist of fate, getting killed trying to help, to do good, but alas, a part of the job. The thought of his mom reverberates through his head as he watches the car slip beyond the officers as it takes a sharp left.

Rio looks to his right to see Steve screaming at him, his face

contorted and bent, creased lines appearing and spit flying, yelling at him to do his damn job. But Rio can no longer hear anything. He sees Steve, but it's like he can't really see him, the outline of Steve's face beginning to blur. His heart already racing, begins to pound, his chest heaving, palms sweaty. Suddenly, it's as if he is standing still on the sidewalk, a passerby to the chase, watching it all pass by in slow motion as the laughing of the crowded sidewalk turns to frightened screams. Today is a different kind of day. One he hasn't ever experienced before during his time training in the Academy. Today feels off, like something is stirring and he feels as if he's walking straight into the fire.

Traffic is at a standstill as he pulls out after the speeding car, a fleet of red and blue lights blazing in front of him. He begins to pick up speed as the car continues to lead the chase, traffic melting away before the red and blue glare.

“Suspect starting to veer! Suspect is heading straight on Redgrave, weaving between the left lane and the turn lane!” voices yell through the walkie-talkies. Steve is antsy, shifting around in his seat as he gives feedback through the walkie-talkie. Despite the chaos, Rio's head feels clear as his sense of foreboding grows.

Rio is picking up speed, advancing to the middle of the police pack following the Ford Focus when the suspect jerks the wheel, plowing head-on into a car sitting in the turn lane. Everyone begins to slam on their brakes as the two cars seem to burst with the impact. The screeching is deafening as the metal twists and bends, the airbags of both cars cutting off the view of the drivers. About ten police officers get out and run to the suspect's car while five more run to the driver of the car that just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Rio wrenches his door open, his call to help overwhelming his nerves from before. He sprints to the car that was in the turn lane. The head of the group, Mike, begins to bark orders, “Eric and Beth, you two try to get the door open, Hope, go back to your car and get the jaws of life, go quick!” Rio stands there noting his name wasn't called. “Mike, what can I do, what do you need me to do?” He feels useless just standing

there. “Just stay where you are for right now, it’s your first time, right? This is a serious one, just stay put for now.” “I could do something, anything, the girl is still trapped in there, we need all hands-on deck!” He notices the broken glass of the windshield, the chilly night air making a strange sound as it rushes through the gaping hole. Blood splatters the windshield, creating the kind of horror scene shown in videos he watched during his training at the Academy. He had never experienced an accident so destructive. “Mike, I’m heading back to the car to call an ambulance.” “That’s fine, just let me take care of this.” Loud yells grow louder in the background.

As Rio is finishing his call, a cracking sound fills the night and it feels as if the air is tight and deadly still, like the air has been sucked out of a room and one is left gasping for breath. Rio slowly wheels around to see Sanchez lying quietly on the ground, his chest slightly moving. The suspect had made it out of the accident seemingly achy but ok, as the other driver had taken the majority of the hit. Everyone is silent and it once again feels like everything is happening in slow motion, like the world is at a standstill. That was the igniting point of the battle. A parade of gunfire begins, and the ensuing scene appears like a game of paintball, with the suspect and the officers dodging behind and in between the parked cars. The suspect has half the men down with only a shot to the arm when he begins to run, calling someone as he goes.

Rio is frozen, crouched, and shivering behind his police vehicle. He’s the only one who didn’t shoot. It all felt too real. He’s not sure what to do. As he looks around, surveying the damage, he realizes that Steve was one of the many shot and killed by the suspect. But this is just his first official day on the job. Personally, he feels like he’s seen enough to last him at least the entire first month. He doesn’t know why he keeps freezing, this didn’t happen in training. Maybe it’s because this just feels too real, it reminds him of his mom and seeing all this loss is creating a shine on his cheek. This isn’t how it’s supposed to be. But the suspect is still at large, and he has work to do.

He gets up and walks around the side of the car to see the five men remaining standing in a tight circle discussing the options. The suspect is probably at the end of the street by now. “Well, look who decided to show up?” “Where were you man?” He replies, saying, “I just needed some air, I couldn’t breathe.” “Whatever man, it’s over now.” A pit forms at the bottom of his stomach.

“We should go after him,” “we should wait for back-up,” the group is battling it out, shouts filling the air until someone yells, “enough!” leaving a heavy silence behind. The growling sound of an engine hums nearby, breaking the silence of the still, waiting air. All of them, Rio included, takes a stance and points their gun towards the blackness at the end of the street. A blackness that seemed impenetrable. It was deep and unknown. They couldn’t see anything at the end of the street. It’s quiet for a few minutes. They begin to look at each other, worry and fear creeping in to fray their already stretched nerves. They’re all questioning whether they should be doing something else when they are suddenly blinded as bright white lights illuminate the dark. The white lights press against their eyes. The suspect is back along with a woman, presumably the person he had been calling, each with a gun in hand, the doors of the white truck left open in the crisp night. The crew begins to run back to their vehicles as a new round of shooting begins. A barrage of bullets hits the cars as they try to shoot back from around the side. The woman gets hit in the shoulder and two more of the officers go down.

Rio begins to yell to the suspect, “you don’t have to do this, why are you shooting?” Why are the two shooting in the first place? The suspects says, “We had no other choice, no other choice,” while shaking his head. “You already got us, it’s our turn. An eye for an eye. You ruined our family already.” He appears to be trembling. With fatigue? With fear? With anger? What does he mean, we’ve ruined their family already? Shots ring out as Mike decides to shoot at the still suspects. They fire in return, killing the remaining officers all except for Rio as the first suspect gains an injury to his shoulder. Rio remains on the side of the car, breathing heavy. He hears the man ask, “Is there any left?” and a

woman's voice whimpers, "I don't think so." They say this as they begin to walk towards Rio.

The man walks around the corner and immediately points the gun at Rio. "Wait, wait, I never shot!" Rio yells. "It doesn't matter, you made your choice when you became one of them. You say you help, but you only destroy lives, even if you chose not to end mine. It's for everyone else that gets lost in the process of you attempting to help, the ones that get lost and left behind." Feeling overwhelmed, with adrenaline coursing through him, Rio shouts, "I've never shot anyone, it's only my first day, I don't know what I'm doing. I didn't shoot at you, I don't want to hurt you, but I want you to stop hurting us." The suspect follows that by saying, "See, that's what you still don't get, people are always dying under your watch, but you have a blind eye to anyone not in front of you. It's too late, you already killed my baby and you almost killed my wife, it's too late..." The suspect begins to shake, tears streaming down his face, chest heaving as he slowly raises the gun at Rio. With his heart pounding, his head throbbing, and the adrenaline flowing through his body, Rio thinks of his mom as he tries his last attempt to prevail against the suspect. He didn't want to shoot, but he didn't want his life to end either. He didn't want to die on the job like his mom. He wanted to have a family and live his life, he still had so much to do. He felt he had no other choice. He raises his gun at the suspect, but it's too late. The suspect pulled the trigger, shooting Rio in the chest before quickly retreating to the truck. The lights of the police cars still flash, illuminating the havoc of the scene, as the truck tires screech and disappear. More sirens can be heard in the distance.

\* \* \* \* \*

The man, Brett, looks over at his wife as he speeds away in the white truck, noticing the tears rolling down her cheeks. He reaches over and brushes them away. He notices that her shoulder is bloody. "We did the right thing babe, don't worry, we did it for Noa." "I know, I know, we never even got to meet her," she chokes out. "But where does this leave us now?" Brett looks at the

speedometer and increases the speed. He knows of a friend they could stay with for a while, but they might have to stop somewhere to get help for her shoulder. Why did they do this? About a month ago, he and Margo were on their way to the hospital, her water had broken like a half hour before, and they were rushing to the hospital. Brett had looked in the rearview mirror to see bright lights with red and blue flashers on behind it. They were flying, seemingly gliding over the cement in their haste. As the suspect flew by them, the cops seemingly lost control and smashed into their car, sending their car spiraling into a 360° turn. The cop car swerved and rocked a bit but was able to get back on track. He and Margo took much of the hit. They ended up crashing into a streetlamp, with the front of their car smashed in and smoking. Someone else called the ambulance. He and Margo were ok, walking away with bruises and a lot of stiffness, but they lost their baby girl that night. The impact was hard enough for her fragile unborn body. What the cops did wasn't ok. They didn't even spare a glance at the ruined car, at the little life that they just killed. Someone had to pay, an eye for an eye.

So, he started a chase of his own. They did exactly what he expected them to do and he was in the lead. Adrenaline pumped through him, knowing he was in control of the situation, that he was avenging his baby girl. After he crashed, he just started shooting. He couldn't stop. He felt angry and sad for all that had happened. But it was going to end here.

Margo was looking out of the window as he continued to drive. They needed to lay low for a while. They killed a lot of people. The thought of the poor girl hit in the process makes him wince, but he was at peace now with the situation. It needed to be done. He turned the radio on low and turned on the heat. All was fine for now. Sirens could still be heard in the distance.

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## Undiagnosed — Chanel Bashi

I lie on the table, across from you,  
and await yet another disappointment.  
You sit in that chair, mere feet away,  
yet my presence is completely ignored.  
I don't need to turn, to know your face  
is twisted in annoyance and impatience.

The garish lights shine into my eyes, blinding me,  
but they give me a momentary distraction  
from the contrived atmosphere, swirling around us.  
I tug on my paper-thin gown, attempting to retain  
what little dignity I have left.

I was poked, prodded, and probed,  
until I could handle no more.  
Your judging hazel eyes, burned into the side of my head  
as I spoke to the doctors,  
making me question every single answer I gave.  
Making me wonder, could this all have been avoided  
if I told someone sooner? Was it my fault?  
Did I deserve this?

The piercing screech of rolling carts snap me back.  
They walk in heads held high, and tell me  
with forced sympathy leaking from their voices,  
the same thing I hear every single time.  
They don't know. They never do.

I blink away the dark rings engulfing my vision,  
and stand up. Walking out with you by my side  
no longer gives me the same comfort, it once did.  
Your frigid voice does not soothe my worries.  
Your maternal instincts have seemingly vanished. Now  
your apoplectic mutterings only serve to remind me  
just how alone, I truly am.

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## Forgotten Planet — Bella Corey

Everyone already knew the 2 girls were inseparable  
The classic blonde and brunette best friends  
They were Jupiter and Saturn  
If you were to miss them you were a fool  
But Jupiter and Saturn aren't the only planets  
There is the little planet Pluto too  
Isolated from the rest, yet still part of the solar system  
Which is why no one ever noticed the third girl  
The one who slows her pace when the halls get too narrow  
Repeatedly to having to catch up when her shoelace unties itself  
She never fails to answer every hysterical phone call at 2 am  
She replies to every text about a boy or the heartbreak that  
follows  
The one who was the shoulder to cry on  
But why was it that no one knew who she was even if she was  
consistently there?  
Because Pluto is not considered a planet anymore  
She will always be alone in the outer reaches of their solar system  
Tucked behind the radiant Jupiter and Saturn  
She never had a shoulder to cry on  
Jupiter and Saturn never listened when Pluto's father comes  
home clutching a whiskey bottle  
They never answered any of Pluto's calls as they were too busy  
partying  
Or noticed when the bruises peek through her long sleeves in the  
middle of June  
Not a single planet knows that her showers burn

Stars see her pain but are light years away  
The silent tears she sheds is the only way the truth is set free  
Pluto—melancholic, forgotten planet  
Planet who will forever be lost in space  
*And no one knows that I am Pluto*

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## Head Through the Mat — Preston Cornelius

It's Friday night and the house is full at a two-thousand seated wrestling venue in Australia. Kris *The Carnivore* stands still in the center of the humid locker room, staring through his own eyes in the mirror. The other wrestlers are not so still. *Mad Dog* curls fifty pound dumbbells, while singing *Bang Your Head*, Jack-*The-Ripped-Ripper* paces wall to wall as he swings his arms front to back, and *Bushwacker* swears at himself in the corner.

“Fuck! Shit, fuck you! You asshole,” *Bushwacker* whispers.  
Then he screams, “fuck you!”

*Mad Dog's* shoulders tense and he asks, “You good, man?”

“Yeah, I'm cool. Just getting into character,” *Bushwacker* smirks and replies. Kris still has not moved. He doesn't even teeter. He breathes heavily at a slow pace. As he breathes in through his nose, his massive shoulders rise an inch and fall when he exhales. His frame is wide, but short in stature. What he lacks in height, he more than makes up for with an impressive physique. For twenty six years, since he was eighteen, he spent most of his life in the gym. “Harder! Harder! Don't train like a pussy,” he would tell himself. Even when he felt his muscles begin to ache from tearing. Every workout, he never pushed the weight to the air. No, he pushed the weight through the air. He always trained harder than last time, no matter what.

“Fuck-ah-doodle-doo!” *Bushwacker* bawks loudly like a rooster, as he pounds on his fat chest as if he were an orangutan.

Kris's eyes soar to *Bushwacker* in the corner. Kris's facial expression is blank. He doesn't appear happy or pissed. He turns his head back to the mirror and leans in. He studies the deep scar in the right side of his hair-line caused by seven brass-knuckled punches he received in a hardcore match six and a half years ago. On the other side of his head is a dent on his temple. It was caused by a dozen, steel-chair shots Kris went unconscious from about

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two years prior. Eventually, again, his eyes meet each other in the mirror. Kris raises his right hand, balls it into a fist, and punches through his cheek. He sends his fist through his cheekbone again, but harder. With his left hand, he aggressively tears the sweat down his leathery face, and leaps in place twice. His muscles bulge without a single, intentional flex.

“WOO!” Kris howls. He picks up a small, black case from the floor between his feet, conceals it in his gym bag, and tucks it away in a rusty locker on the other side of the room. With steps he plants firmly, Kris exits the locker room.

Kris stretches his neck, while backstage.

“Crack . . . CRACK!” His neck pops on each side.

His face is blank with big, bugged eyes looking down. As Kris waits, the announcer warms up the audience for the main event. She taps the mic and holds it in front of her face. Holding a card with her other hand, she reads aloud:

“making his way to the ring: standing at five-foot-nine, weighing in at two-hundred-and-forty-five pounds, from Battlecreek Michigan, the walking wood-chipper, Kris *The Carnivore!*”

Metal music cues and Kris charges with a purpose to the squared-circle. The fans chant,

“Carn-i-vore! Carn-i-vore!”

His face has no smile, no frown. Nothing, but big eyes focussed on the ring ahead. He dominantly approaches the apron, and baseball-slides in the ring. Quickly, he is on his feet. It is impressive how fast he moves, considering how large his upper body is and how skinny his legs are. The announcer introduces the contender:

“and his opponent: standing at six-foot-eight, weighing in at three-hundred-and-twenty-six pounds, from parts unknown, *The Missing Link.*”

No music cues at all and enters an enormous shape of a man from behind the dimly lit curtain. He is bald, with a bushy, unkempt beard and a smile with missing teeth. *The Missing Link* takes slow and powerful steps. Clearly, Link is more in his prime than Kris is. Kris displays no reaction. Kris stalks the ring with hands on his hips and never takes his eyes off this monster. Link is just outside the ring and able to make near perfect eye-level-contact with Kris. With two spacious steps, Kris's opponent enters the ring over the top rope. Now, Link is looking down at Kris. Kris is still. He does not sweat or step away. He just stands there. Link points at Kris, then drags his sausage-size-thumb across his thick throat.

“DING! DING! DING!”

With the velocity of a polar bear, Link goes in for a grapple and Kris slides under the beast's long legs. Kris grabs a cankle with two hands, and forces Link forward through the mat. Link lays on his stomach, while Kris twists the foot of the beast until Link's ankle begins to snap. Link's face scrunches together and he screams a great deal. Link kicks Kris off his ankle. The kick is so strong it knocks Kris down. Link can only get to his knees before Kris is up again. Kris rushes towards Link, but Link throws a fist into Kris's temple causing a knot to swell. Kris's face is blank. No emotion. Link tilts his head and raises a brow. Again, Kris charges towards Link and sends a headbutt straight through Link's face. The knot on Kris's temple bursts and blood pours out onto the musty-stinking mat like a faucet. Link goes down hard on his back and yellow dust goes airborne from the mat. Blood spews from Link's broken nose. Kris's face is completely painted red. He stumbles around, holds his forehead with his right hand and struggles to grab a hold of something with his left. Kris cannot open his eyes. While stumbling, he trips over Link, falls down, gets on top of Link and pins him.

“One! Two! Three!” The referee counts with a striding hand that smacks the mat at a moderate rate.

“DING! DING! DING!”

Kris's heavy metal theme is playing loud through the speakers, but seems faint

because the crowd drowns out all noise. Kris rolls out of the ring and stumbles down the walkway with uncoordinated footing.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the morning Kris looks through the window of a jet. The golden sun is just rising. He sits tightly together with his arms in his lap and his shoulders hunched to make room. On his left is a mother and her daughter. The mother is in the middle seat, and her six-year-old is seated closest to the aisle. The child is staring directly at Kris's stitches on his temple. She points at Kris's head and tugs on the magazine her mother is reading.

"Iss tat a booboo, moma?" She asks.

"What did I tell you about pointing, Isabella?" The mother turns to her.

"Don't worry, I git-et all the time," Kris quietly mutters.

His voice is a deep and raspy one that buzzes like a fridge. A kind smile with chipped teeth expands on his face. Kris's face is full of scars, especially his brows and forehead. The mother turns to Kris and her eyes are drawn to his scars. Her eyes grow big for a second, then suddenly she looks away and doesn't make eye contact. The daughter smiles at Kris, while waving. Kris waves back and laughs.

"You are too cute," Kris says with gentle, blue, bloodshot eyes.

The mother looks back at Kris.

"Thanks. You have children?" She asks.

Removing his cell-phone from his pocket and finding a picture, "Yeah, I have a son. This's Devon." He holds the phone between them. The boy in the picture, who looks no more than four years

of age, has lengthy, dark-brown hair and a pale, skin complexion.

“Very handsome.” She replies.

“Didn’t get his looks from me. That’s all his mother’s side,” he says while shaking his head with a pleasant smirk. The woman rolls her eyes and chuckles lightly. Kris looks at the picture with endearing eyes.

“I’m on my way home to see him before I have-ta’ go back to work.” Kris says at a low volume. His face incrementally twitches. At first, soft. Then at a rapid pace, he forces his eyes shut, and he jerks his face back towards the window on his right.

“You okay?” Asks the woman, as she leans away.

Kris lifts his left hand and sends it through his own cheek.

“OH, MY!” She gasps, as she picks up her daughter and finds another seat. Then, again and again, he sends his fist through his cheek twice more. Each time is harder than the last. Kris’s cheek bleeds. Kris looks around with his mouth open and his brow squeezed tightly. The other passengers stare at him with wide eyes. Kris continues to look through the window.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day, in the late afternoon, Kris is home with his wife, Cathy, and son in the living room. Devon, is playing with a toy train on the carpet.

“Crash! Boom! Dey oll’ died!” Devon shouts.

“Devon! Not so loud, my head is killing me,” Kris screams. The grey walls lightly quake. Cathy is rubbing Kris’s back on the couch with her bony hands, but she stops to gently slap him on the side of the head.

“Don’t yell at em. Talk like a human.” Kris jolts and a vein on the side of his neck jumps.

“Ow! Were ya able ta’ schedule me a doctor’s appointment like I asked ya to?” Kris breathes slowly. Cathy kisses Kris’s stitched temple.

“Not yet, baby. But, I will later. What’s wrong with your head, hun?” Kris closes his eyes and shakes his head.

“I don’t know. I think I black out an’ hit my head.” Cathy looks up at the ceiling, hesitates, and pulls Kris’s face towards hers.

“I think it’s time you try finding a . . . a different job. Something where you aren’t headbuttin’ people. You used to be so sexy an’ ... and now, your face is all bust up.” Kris rises from the couch. Cathy won’t let go of his arm. Kris licks his upper lip, while looking down momentarily at the floor and then at her face.

“I don’t know . . . I uh . . . as long as Dr. Chen keeps getting me my shots, I can keep working at least another . . . uh . . . five years.” Staring Kris in the face, Cathy’s expression is blank for a second. Slowly, her brows raise.

“I love it too much. I can’t just . . . let it go. Ya know? I worked too hard to let it go,” Kris responds. Cathy’s grip is now firmer.

“But, what about us? Wha-what a-about the people who love and worry about you while you’re gone? You ain’t Superman, hun. You ain’t no young buck no more.” Kris cautiously pulls his arm from her.

“I can *have* it all because I *want* it all.” Kris points aggressively to himself with his thumb, “I paid the *cost* to be the *boss*. Don’t worry bout’ what I do. You and Devon have everything ya need. I made damn sure.” Kris turns his back to Cathy and starts to walk away. The sound of keys jingle in Kris’s right hand. Cathy leans to Kris.

“Where’re you going?” She asks. Kris pats Devon’s soft

head of hair and never looks back at Cathy. She waits for an answer without breaking her brown-eyed gaze on his mountain-like back.

“I’m going to the gym,” Kris says, goes upstairs, and shortly comes back down with a gym bag and hurries through the front door.

In the gym locker room, after Kris’s hour-and-a-half-long workout, his face is buried in his locker. The bag zips open quietly with anticipation. He pulls his face out the locker with little patience and surveys the locker room. He throws his face to his right, then to his left, and turns around. There are only lockers. It is quiet; no showers or sinks run.

No one is there, but him. Without hesitation, Kris removes a small black case from his gym bag and hides himself in the nearest toilet-stall. He sets the case on the toilet lid, pulls down his pants and underwear, opens the case and lifts a lengthy syringe and a small bottle from it. Kris’s hands shake and he sweats more than he did during his workout. He fills the syringe to its maximum capacity, and then he is finally able to breathe as he injects the fluid into his right buttocks. Kris bites his bottom lip and groans. He breathes rapidly. His eyes start slowly closing and he falls to his knees, as he pulls the empty syringe’s needle from his glute. The tiles are cold. His breathing dies down.

\* \* \* \* \*

It is eleven past two in the morning of the following day. Kris’s hands and arms are covered in a deep-crimson, thick liquid. The warm blood on his hands creates a translucent-steam in the cold, moon-lit, master bedroom. His face has a new cut that wasn’t there before.

He stumbles out of his bedroom doorway, and nearly trips over the broken-hinged, wooden door on the floor. Kris’s dragging legs manage to lead him to the upstairs hallway. He utilizes the wall to keep himself on his feet. The bathroom is on his right. Before he

enters, he holds the wall and wraps his arm around the doorway to flip the switch on. With great effort, he throws himself into the bathroom and uses the sink to hold himself up to take the weight off his skinny, weak legs. His elbows lock with strong hands gripping the sink.

Looking in the mirror, through his own reflected eyes, “I hate you.”

He leans in closer, “hear me?”

He swings his head backwards, and then he sends it through the mirror. A loud crash of broken glass. Followed by, many quieter crashes of shards falling and breaking on the tiled floor. Kris falls back, but catches the sink and swings himself to the toilet seat. Many tiny shards protrude from his leaking face. The blood weighs his head down towards the floor. Kris cannot open his eyes. He makes an effort to stand. His legs still tremble, even though he has the sink to assist his poor balance. He takes a step. Shards of glass crunch, as he presses his foot down.

“AH!” He screams.

Losing his balance, he falls to the toilet again. Snot and tears run down Kris’s face and get entwined with the blood. He tries to pull a piece of glass from the center of his brow. He is shaky, his fingers are slippery and he cannot extract it, so he gives up. Blood begins to spew harder than earlier. He opens one eye at a time, with his head towards the floor. On the tiles, are the hundreds of pieces of the broken mirror. His reflection is captured in all of them. Everywhere he looks, they are looking back at him.

“I hate you! And you! AND YOU, AN’ YOU!”

Kris sets his sight on a larger shard and gazes through his reflected eyes.

“I hate *all* of you. Especially you!”

He balls each of his shaky fists, sends them through his head, one

at a time, and he keeps repeating. Beating himself harder with each blow.

\* \* \* \* \*

It is dawn in an outdoor, Greek arena. Surrounding the arena are pines, mountains and acres of grass that seem to have never been tainted by man. Kris, in his red-and-black-spandex ring attire, stands in a wrestling ring made for Gods. The four-pillar-posts are gold, the ropes are braids of silver and the ring is a solid, stone slab. Kris holds his head high. He can hardly open his eyes because the white sun is so blinding. The cool breeze is strong, but it doesn't push Kris. No, Kris pushes the breeze. Kris inhales the purest air through his nostrils. The air's scent smells of sap from the pine trees. He frees the air from his mouth. His breath twirls like a tornado in front of his face, and fades away. The sky is painted red, orange and yellow with hints of pinks, blues and purples in the cotton-candy-clouds. Kris throws his hands through the air and spins himself gracefully. His theme-song is echoing faintly from no distinct direction, but is distant. No one else is visibly present. It is just Kris, but an audience's chants bounce throughout the vivid sky:

“Carn-i-vore! Carn-i-vore!”

As he spins faster and faster, Devon appears behind him wearing a grey and black, checkered suit. Right then, all sound seises. The sky bruises to a navy blue. The sun blisters and bursts. Whiteness engulfs the ring and submerges the father and son in light. Kris stops spinning. He stands still for a brief moment. Devon is still too with his chin angled up towards his father. Kris's eyes are as round as quarters. A bead of sweat trickles from a trench-like scar on his forehead to the corner of his wide, open, shivering mouth. Without breaking his gaze, Kris kneels down to his son's level.

“What are ya doing here, my boy?” Kris asks.

Devon looks up at his father with eyes collecting tears.

“You bring-ded’ us here dada. Mama’s here too, but she no wanna see you because you make her sad,” Devon says with a jittery frown.

Devon’s tear ducts cannot collect anymore tears, and are full. The tears begin to roll down Devon’s pale cheeks. Kris pulls Devon into him by the shoulders for a potent hug. Devon’s bones break with a popping-noise and his limbs fall from their sockets. His tiny arms slide out of his sleeves. Devon’s head collapses backwards and shatters like glass on the stone ring. Kris holds the checkered suit, but nothing is in it anymore. Kris is still. His eyes are stationary and gazing through the suit in his arms, as if he were trying to figure out what he had done.

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## The Right Fit — Sara Knotts

Building is crowded for Sunday afternoon.  
Bursting with adolescent shoppers  
Trying to shuffle through minuscule crevasses  
Not bothering trying to remain six feet apart.  
Scent of sweat fills the room.

Animated chatter of teen girls over raucous pop music  
Neon yellow signs placed about  
Screaming “50% OFF EVERYTHING!”  
Shouting of store clerks mimic the message on the sign.

Apparel starting to clear out fast  
Shelves bare of attire  
New dust settling onto the place that was once occupied.

The sale is too good to miss out on.

I grab anything that looks appealing  
Ranging from a pale orange romper to a too short jean skirt

And a gorgeous emerald green shirt that I put me in a trance  
Fitted lace with slender straps to reveal the shoulders.

Girls scouring the place to unearth the latest styles  
Trying to impress boys they adore.

Stack of clothing under my arm grows an unearthly size  
Softness rubbing against my limb, but heftiness causing  
discomfort.

I scan through the next rack, hearing two girls to my left  
Young, maybe fifteen years old.  
Sideways looks show me two slender girls with glossy, golden hair  
Picking up an emerald shirt with longing looks.

“I love this shirt, but it’s too tight for my fat body to look good in.”

“At least you don’t have man arms like me, I could never wear  
shirts without sleeves.”

“But still, this would look so bad on me.”

Putting the shirt down they shift over, looking for the next gem to be discovered.

Glancing down at the dense mound under my arm  
The emerald green sticks out like a sore thumb.

If those two girls wouldn't look good in that shirt, how could I?

Top placed back into its pile with a disappointed feeling, I walk away.

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## I Wish I Knew You — Erin Letourneau

**O**nce lived a Little Girl  
she was a white orchid  
pure as the descending snow  
untainted and innocent

**O**nce lived a Girl  
strawberry dipped hair with no care  
personality molds, sharp edges form  
eyes caught by a blank page  
wallflower she wasn't  
she dared

**O**nce lived a Young Lady  
growing became hard  
boulders were falling  
her environment scarred  
without a care, her attitude flaring  
uphill battle, her rebellion dared  
setting a fire, nothing feared  
weight of the world, couldn't burn her out  
pressure of animals  
assertive and hostile  
sweet honey they talked  
bringing white roses  
a young lady in age, but a woman she became

**O**nce lived a Woman  
she grew five flowers  
they were picked for different bouquets  
growing her sadness spilled out her eyes  
illness and pain brought more cries  
Her flame not as fiery, began kindling down

**O**nce lived a Little Girl  
**O**nce lived a Girl  
**O**nce lived a Young Lady  
**O**nce lived a Woman  
she died.

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## The Ocean Cantabile — Andrea Sandoval

He breathed a deep sigh. A young man, no older than 20 years old laid down on the sandy beach, alone; there was no one in sight. He wore a crumpled white button up that was two sizes too big, half untucked from a pair of faded black slacks. His shoes, black, were tearing from the soles and had holes in them, and subsequently sand was falling into them. His pale skin shone in the dawn, the sun just above the horizon, which was contrasted by his dark black hair.

“Oh Maksymilian, what have you done?” the young man lamented to himself. But despite being in a predicament, all he could do was sigh and lay down, letting the sand fall into his hair, clothes, ears, everywhere. He closed his eyes and contemplated. Just a few hours earlier he had been in his hometown in Poland getting prepared to leave and somehow, he had ended up alone on a sandy beach, with nothing but the clothes on his back.

He decided to rest on the beach. There wasn't much of anything else he could do. He let his supple wrists and long fingers tap in the air as he hummed a tune. His hands felt light in the air bouncing around and it felt natural, like he had made these motions so many times before. Far from home and no where to be, he let go, without a care in the world, forgetting why he even left in the first place. He closed his eyes and could see the bright lights of the stage, the hollow sound of shoe hitting a wooden floor, the sweep of a coattail over a bench and letting his hands imagine the rest.

His eyes snapped wide open, forgetting his daydream and started to face reality. He was somewhere new and rather than dwell on what

Marta loved the beach and reveled in the clear waters that lit up and glistened in the light of the sun. She always enjoyed taking long walks on the beach alone in the morning and today was no different. She took her time, carefully picking out the perfect outfit. A light purple sundress that complemented her wide hips and small waist.

Not a soul in her house was awake, just the way she liked it. Living in a large family she craved time to herself and the best time for it was early in the morning. She headed out to her lovely beach, ready to start the day fresh.

However, upon arriving she was surprised to see a young man asleep on the beach. He looked poor, perhaps even homeless, his appearance leaving much to be desired. However, he had no physical deformities of which to speak of and perhaps it was the way the morning light had hit him, but Marta couldn't help but blush upon getting a closer look at Maksymilian. His complexion was fair, and his skin even toned. He had oval shaped eyes and deep, sharp features. His eyes lashes were long and curled up in a most feminine way. His lips were full and bright red. He was unlike any man she had ever seen. Marta stood shaken. It was as if she had been hit by a thunderbolt. She had an overwhelming feeling of possession but did not dare dwell on it too long.

“Pardon me but are you ok?” asked Marta nervously. Maksymilian sighed. What a pain. He had hoped to have a bit more time in peace, but it appears he had been interrupted. Opening one eye, he answered, “Why, yes. I am quite alright. As you can see, I am simply resting. You see, I have had quite a long trip and it seems I have lost all my belongings and ended up at the wrong destination. Or perhaps... I am right where I belong. Yes, its fate. The unstoppable force that brings the world into being. Whether that's God or Buddha, whomever or whatever, its fate.” Maksymilian sat up and turned to Marta. “My apologies it seems I went off on a tangent. I am clearly not in my right mind.” He softly smiled at Marta. He had an accent when he spoke. She couldn't quite place where he could be from, however. She bit her lower lip and cast her eyes downwards. “Ah no, that's quite alright.”

Maksymilian stood up and dusted himself off. “Well, I really must be going. Maybe I will see you again miss.” “Wait!” Marta exclaimed, grabbing Maksymilian's wrist. “You can't go like this! You look like... well how should I put this...” “Gently I hope,” Maksymilian smiled wryly. “You look awful,” sighed Marta. “Let

me take you back to my home. I can't leave a poor man just walking the streets with close to nothing. You can get cleaned up and I'll get you some food and clothes."

Maksymilian stood there examining the young woman. She certainly wasn't any older than him. She had soft oval-shaped eyes, dainty almost like almonds. In fact, everything was ovals from her eyes, the bones of her face and to the contour of her brow. Her skin was an even olive complexion and she had small, light freckles on her nose and cheeks. Her hair was a rich dark brown. Her eyes were the most eye-catching deep blue. It was probably the reflection from the ocean, but her eyes were fiercely blue, as if you were drowning in them. For a moment, Maksymilian found himself mesmerized and drawn in. He quickly shook the feeling.

"I wouldn't want to impose on you miss." "Please, call me Marta and its no trouble at all, Mr. ..." "Maksymilian, but you can call me Max," he winked. She cleared her throat, "Yes, well, come with me then." He followed her home, like a small puppy, not sure where he was going, relying on her to reach their destination. The sun was steadily rising now, and an ocean breeze was gently blowing, catching Marta's hair, her attractiveness only growing.

They arrived at Marta's family home. Before stepping in, she stopped Maksymilian. "Please prepare yourself. My family is quite large and loud and will ask many questions." Unbothered by this Maksymilian simply nodded, reassuring her. Marta sighed and walked through the door. Inside, was lively and cheerful. Children were running around and playing in the modest stone home. While the house wasn't decrepit or falling apart, it wasn't extravagant and overdone. It was the peak of middle class. "Marta! Where have you been and who have you brought? Another mouth to feed! Ahimè!" "Mama this poor man has no where to go and I just wanted to let him clean up and maybe get a good meal. Please mama." Marta's mother sighed. "Alright, but only because this estraneo looks like he really needs it."

As Maksymilian cleaned himself in a hot bath outside, Marta washed his clothes and prepared him a clean set of clothes from

her brother. He changed into the fresh clean clothes and for a moment he panicked.

“Marta! Did you see a tool inside my jacket pocket? Please it’s very important.” His eyes were desperate and pleading. Nervous, Marta responded, “Yes. I found it while I was cleaning.” She handed him a small tool with a long, thick wooden handle and at the end metal bent at a 90° angle and had a hole at the end in the shape of a square. “What is it for?” asked Marta. Clutching the tool tightly, not taking his eyes off it, Max responded quietly, “... It’s to tune a piano.” “Do you know how to use it?” “Of course, I do.” Marta smiled wide and took Maksymilian’s hand and ran to a corner in the house. There, stood an old piano. It was an old grand piano which had clearly not been properly been taken care of. Dust settled on the strings inside and the wood was dull and looked brittle, like it could just snap in half. Excitedly Marta asked, “Can you tune this?” Maksymilian almost wanted to laugh but as he was a gentleman; he held his tongue and sighed. “I could certainly try, but I make no promises. All I need is a cloth to dust the piano.”

Maksymilian got to work, cleaning, dusting and finally tuning the piano, checking every note was in tune. He had done this so many times. He only needed his ears to tell whether he had tuned correctly. He took his time, slowly enjoying the act and being reminded of his home in Poland. He became increasingly emotional as he finished the job, remembering how his father had taught him how to do this and how many times he had to be shown and practice to get it right. Tears threatened to fall, and he suddenly stopped. Marta who had been watching the whole time looked with concern. “Max... are you alright?” Maksymilian quickly sniffed his nose. “I am fine. Just some dust.” Thoughts of his homeland persisted but Maksymilian finished up without any more interruptions.

Once he had finished, Marta looked at him expectantly, waiting for him to start playing. But he just sat at the piano stool, his hands unmoving. After what seemed an eternity, Maksymilian silently

lifted his hands onto the long black and white keys.

His hands started jumping and bouncing around, free, yet under control and every note beautiful. The power of his musicality drew Marta into his world instantly. It was song like a beautiful moonlit night and countless joyous memories, delicate and light. Suddenly, the song changed. It became a noble and flamboyant rondo, seemingly based on Polish folk dances. The song became more complex as it went on and Maksymilian was going all out, making no mistakes and keeping a high tempo. And just as soon as the song had built up, it burst and ended.

Marta was speechless. Such a prodigy had simply washed up on the shore of a small Sicilian village. He had transformed the old and humble piano and made it sing like never before. After some time passed, Maksymilian looked up at Marta, his eyes filled with tears and she immediately understood; he had no home to go to. Marta gave him a soft look and filled with an unknown love. “Will you play another for me?”

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## My Mind Is a Sponge and Social Media Is a Power Washer — Antonio Segura

The shade scattered through the leaves,  
Benevolent pinholes of light sneaking through.  
A prickly warm, poking my skin and beliefs.  
A chorus of chirps and my mind is subdued.

But it doesn't last long.

My eyes are drawn to something more stimulating  
Fantastic convolution, so easily percolating.  
The light refracts and my retina retains it,  
and the visual to my brain proceeds to maim it.  
The colors flood into view, fervent reds and righteous blues  
blasting away any quiet truth in favor of the thoughts from you.  
The smog of that spectrum, wets eyes with false tears  
(Like a crocodile who really loathes the fear),  
smearing my glasses with indifference and apathy.  
A spewing of turmoil scented supposedly affably,  
with the sickly-sweet perfume of the status quo.  
By that connection I'm pulled and am required to go.  
Each unfortunate sentiment pulling my eyes,  
making every thought and prayer more and more dry.  
A supposed clarity, through over abused lens,  
I feel I'm walleyed, focused on the wrong present tense.  
With the details I'm smothered, the sensation overcomes me:  
The world is too nuanced to be wholly viewed sanely.

The details hurt my eyes; I'd rather close them. Be numb.  
The world stifles with blank sincerity.  
To checkered boxes, pins and needles I succumb,  
mental static to return to singularity.

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## Pain — Sonya Simmons

I use pain as a vessel.

I find stories in tragedy  
while life begs so greatly to be loved.

I think the devotion scares me.

The bluebirds sing to me,  
yet I only hear the calls of a siren.

The tides coax me to a new place,  
but I fear the waves will only drown me.

I use pain as a vessel.

It's familiar, I think.

And familiar has a flow,  
similar to the lines of this verse.

I think that's why tragedy commands the story.

The pain flows as easily on paper  
as it does the tear-stained vessels of my cheeks.

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## Midnight Flowers — Logan Tague

Lavender, mint, blue, and gray  
These are the flowers I see all day  
I walk in at night, to the opposite of my delight  
Thousands of gold flowers in my sight  
They come in bags, that we open and sort  
Inside these flowers a liquid like port wine  
And that's fine you can see right through them  
These flowers stack into a rack, creating meadows  
Each one from a different person for a different reason  
Sometimes they change with the season  
The reds are sparse, and the yellows don't come many  
Sorting these flowers brings pain a plenty  
My eyes start to burn, and my nose scrunches up  
The brown and yellow flowers make me want to throw up  
Their smell is like a sewer  
After they're all sorted, we put tags on them  
Just so we know who brought them  
The fairies who use these flowers are often quite rude  
Hovering over my shoulder often in a mood  
When all the flowers are sorted and labeled  
I leave the midnight flowers and their endless sorrow  
Only to return again, "See you tomorrow!"

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## Lullaby — Allyson Zeigler

When I first moved in to Apartment 210, I would lay awake  
to the sound of the couple below me arguing

Yelling

Name calling

Door slamming

Screams consisting of “You bastard!” and “I hate you!”  
became a part of their nightly routine

I would toss and turn, throw my pillow over my head in an  
attempt to block the noise, and wonder when it would  
come to an end

As the days went on, their routine became integrated  
into that of my own

It was like a record being stuck on loop, only,

I began to like it that way

Overtime, I adapted and began to grow comfortable  
with the commotion.

It was like listening to the noises of the ocean,  
allowing myself to drift away  
into a deep sleep

One night, things below me sounded  
more chaotic than usual

Suddenly, I heard the sound of the door slam,  
followed by the cries and screams  
from the girl below me

I crept to the window and peered over the sill  
into the moon lit parking lot

Hyperventilating and choking on her own tears,  
she chased him to his car,

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begging him not to leave  
“Please, please, please - I love you!”  
But he did not seem to care  
The engine revved, the tires yipped,  
leaving behind skid marks,  
leaving her to be seen less and less  
in his rear view mirror  
If he was even looking  
Alone, her knees slowly sunk into the ground of  
the concrete parking lot  
Sobbing, she finally walked back into the apartment  
For the first time in a while,  
I hear the door gently come to a close  
When bedtime came around, there was nothing but complete  
and utter silence as I lay awake in bed  
The type of silence that would allow me to hear the  
tears of the girl below me hit the floor,  
as they endlessly roll off her face

Strange thing was,  
I found myself unable to fall asleep again  
Tossing and turning, endless thoughts raced,  
beginning with tomorrow’s to-do list, traveling  
through the rest of my life and circling back again  
The next morning, I woke to the sound of my alarm clock  
As I turned it off, I was left again with silence  
I could not help but wonder if things had come to an end  
If they had finally realized the virulence  
of the relationship they shared  
Then, I hear the door open and quickly come to a close,

as the girl below me cried out  
I look out my window and see that he came back  
They ran to each other,  
meeting halfway in the middle of the parking lot,  
and throwing their arms around each other

Later that night, I hear the sounds of their  
commotion sparked up once again

Yelling

Name calling

Door slamming

I crawl into bed, feeling relieved at the sound of  
arguing once more

I drift into a deep sleep with ease

They have become my bohemian lullaby

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