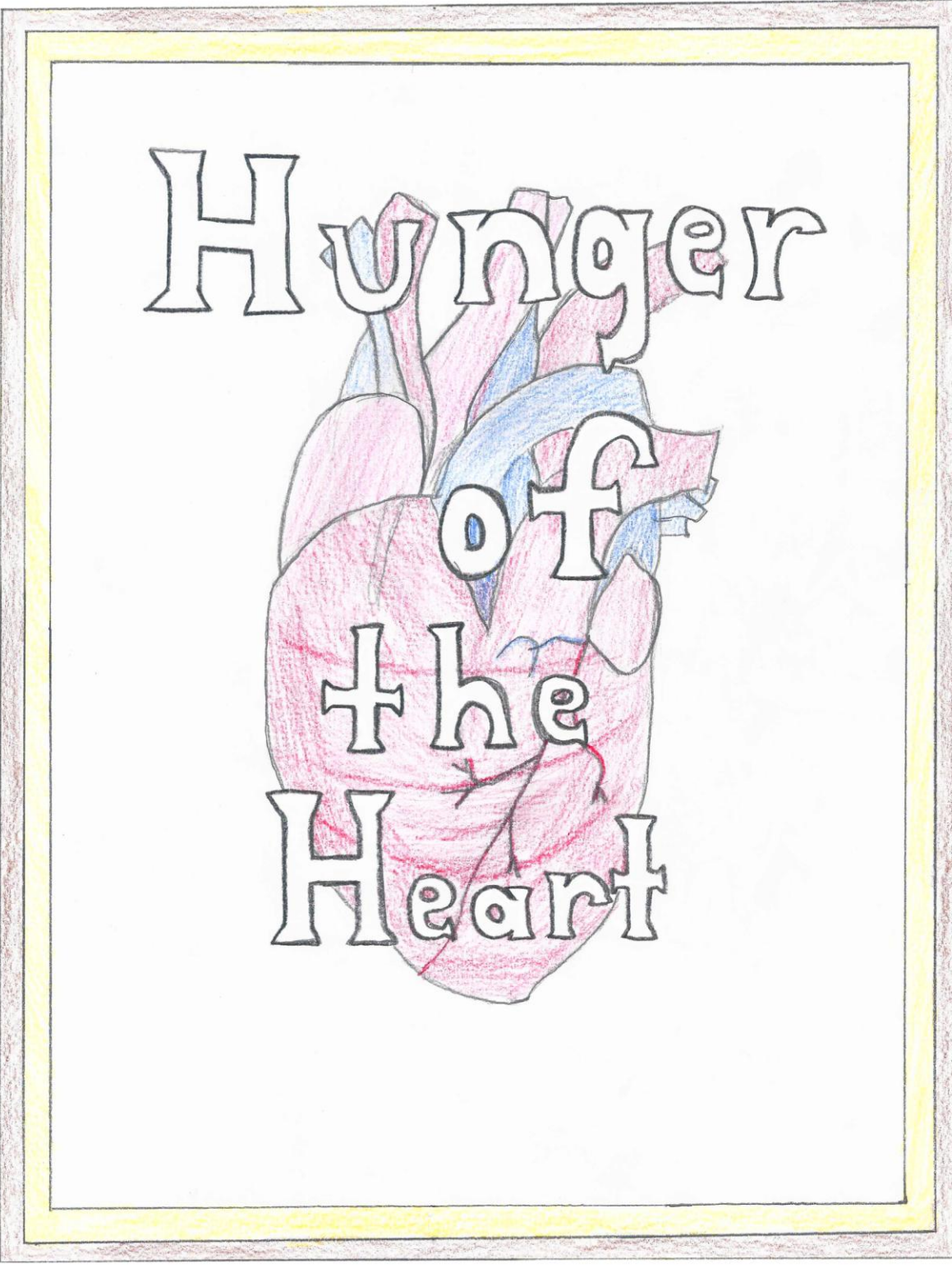


*Creative Writing II/Creative Writing II Honors
Passion Anthology*



Hunger
of
the
Heart

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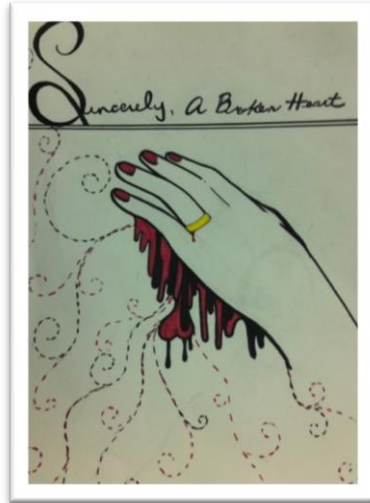
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Lack of Feeling

SINCERELY, A BROKEN HEART

By: Amy Zheng



Sincerely, a broken heart

The alarm clocked flashed 4:21 a.m. Jess returned from the closet, a suitcase in hand. She sat down at the small table by their bed, where he was sleeping soundly. Jess took out a piece of parchment and a black pen. She began writing.

My dear,

“Hi.”

That’s when the sparks flew and my stomach swarmed with butterflies. A beautiful smile graced your lips when you spoke. Words had never sounded so good. It was a delight to be near you. That was all I wanted to be. It might have been all I needed.

“I love you.”

Those were the words you said when you touched me. You touched me like no one has ever done so before. Those soft fingertips of yours ran up and down my back, searing my skin. It was like nothing I had ever felt before. And I craved your touch every day, every minute, every second. Like a beast, I fed off your love. Now you have slain that beast.

“Forever.”

You promised me. I was dressed in white and you were waiting for me at the end. Where are you now?

“I’m sorry.”

That was what you said when you reached out and tried to hold me again. But never will I allow your hands to taint my skin. The truth has been uncovered. No use trying to bury your secret. Nothing is the same anymore. You meant everything to me, didn’t you know? Wasn’t I enough for you? Now you mean nothing to me. No medicine could cure the pain you have caused me. Everything you say sounds like an un-tuned piano. No matter what keys I press, no music will sound as it should. This band around my finger

has never felt so wrong. It's too tight. And the bruise it leaves never seems to fade away.
You have destroyed me.

So now,

“Goodbye.”

This will be the last you hear from me.

Sincerely,
a broken heart

It was 5:26 a.m. Jess took one last glance at the man that she once loved. The man that was once her everything. She picked up her bags, grabbed her plane ticket, and headed towards the door. She stopped as she reached towards the door knob. Jess' eyes fell on the ring. She slid it off her finger and delicately placed it on their dresser. The tears didn't start falling until the biting wind whipped around her and she disappeared into the night. Never to return again.

SHATTERED

By: Aleah Fieret

Her eyes lingered on the ring that I had given her seven years ago. She was so shocked when I got down on one knee at the park and proposed to her. I remember her face from then so clearly. I remember her shocked stillness, how her eyes brimmed over with tears, and how she lept into my arms while crying “Yes!” over and over again.

She looked up from the ring and back at the TV. She didn’t know I saw her longing glance, but I did. We were both thinking the same thing. Only seven years ago did we say “I do” to each other, but that love was lost now. It had been dropped somewhere along the way.

Maybe we lost it when we moved across the country. Maybe we lost it when she had the miscarriage, or after when we completely stopped trying. It could have been lost when she started drinking again, or because of her sister’s death. Who knows.

“Mary.” I called out to her, and she sleepily cut her eyes over to me, sweeping her hair behind her ear.

“Hm?”

What was I going to say to her? Why did I even call out my wife’s name?

“Um...what are you watching?”

She rolled her eyes to the screen, then back at me and lazily waved the remote at the TV. “I dunno, some nature show.”

I nodded my head and slowly sat down next to her. She didn’t move and kept her eyes on the screen.

“Honey...” I began to say, before Mary cut me off.

“You never call me that.”

My words choked in my mouth and I searched for what to say. “No, but I used to call you that.” I hadn’t called Mary a pet name in so long that she completely forgot that I ever did.

She pondered my words before calmly nodding and taking a sip of wine.

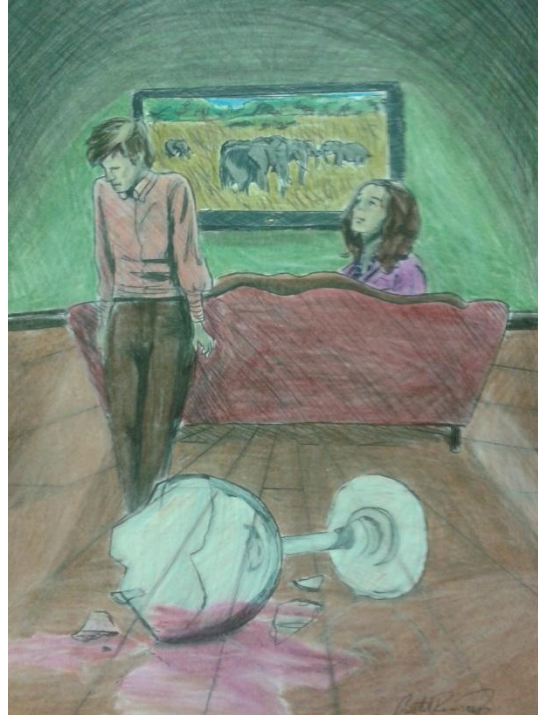
We sat there in awkward stillness, watching elephants graze on the screen. How could this have become our life? We used to have the passion of a burning sun, but it’s flickered down to nothing. How did we let this happen?

“Mark.” She said my name and I snapped to attention, only to see her hold her glass in front of my face. “Can you get me some more wine?”

I nodded obediently and gently took the glass from her hand, then walked to the kitchen. There was a bottle of cheap looking wine already open on the counter and I frowned at it.

The glass was heavy in my hand, the weight of despair sloshing around in the bowl. I didn't jump when it fell from my hand and shattered on the ground, but I saw Mary jerk in her seat out of the corner of my eye.

"You broke my glass." She muttered.



My eyes glanced down at the broken glass on the floor before turning around to look at my wife.

"And you broke my heart." The words tumbled out of my mouth through shaking breaths, and her eyebrows raised in questioning surprise.

"What do you—"

"Mary...please, just listen to me." I said, pleadingly.

I moved across the room and sat beside her, taking both her hands in mine.

"What happened to us?"

"Mark, what on Earth are you talking about?" Her words slurred slightly as she leaned in closer to me.

"I'm talking about us, our relationship. Do you remember how we were when we first got married?" She looked at our clasped hands and nodded. "Do you remember how happy we were? How much love and passion we had?" Another nod from her, but she didn't meet my eyes. "I want that back! I want us to have that spark again. I hate coming home, seeing you, and feeling nothing. You feel it too, don't you?"

She shifted in her seat. "Yes." Her voice wavered and her head dipped lower.

“Then you know what I’m feeling! We used to be completely in sync that we could practically hear each other’s thoughts, but now I look at you and...and it’s like I’m looking at a stranger.” The tears that had welled up in my eyes had finally fallen and I quickly wiped them away with my sleeve.

My wife remained quiet, and I tried to look into her eyes but her hair had created a curtain around her face. The stillness hurt and the silence burned. “Say something, Mary. Please.”

Her face rose and her eyes met mine. I searched for a distinguishable expression, but her face was devoid of any emotion. Then, completely monotone, she uttered, “I’m sleeping with your boss.”

CAN'T SEEM TO COME HOME

BY: GABBY ESTEVA

He could barely remember what she looked like and it was killing him, driving him insane. *Damn it, what color were her eyes again?* He continued to try and recollect the features of the girl he was once so in love with. It was as if in five years her entire countenance was erased from his memory. He could barely remember her voice, but he remembered he found it soothing. He could recall the way she would sing to Andrew every night; he had fallen in love with that voice of hers just as quickly as he had fallen asleep hearing it so many nights before. Fast asleep with the lullaby she would sing to the one year old latching on to her arms. It had become his lullaby too. But it wasn't the same; five years had passed since then. Andrew would be six by now; his son, would be six by now.

His lullaby was no longer brought to him by the lovely hum of his wife Lillian, his lullaby now consisted of the dull roar of heavy wheels on dirt roads and the sound of men yelling out commands. It would sing from the distant sound of constant gunfire and the sensation of heat waves hitting his body. His life could no longer revolve around Andrew and Lilly but around his men; the men he had to keep alive. Home was now where his family was; only his "family" shared no blood with him. He found comfort from the feeling of heavy equipment on his shoulders. His happiness was not from hearing he would be free to go back to North Carolina; it was from hearing he would be deployed the following week. He never went home anyways, not on Christmas, New Years, or the end of his leave. He always chose to stay.

Daniel had always found it hard to write to Lilly. He could never explain to her why he wouldn't be coming home that year. He never had the heart to tell her he was already home. *How could I ever tell her I didn't have the desire to leave Bulgaria?* His men needed him, how could he leave them? He knew Andrew would be without a father and Lilly would be patiently waiting for his return. He had served all the terms he was required to serve; he was free to return to North Carolina at anytime. He was choosing to stay. He was choosing the fight, the rush of being pushed and carried to the point of death. He could barely remember Andrew at all. He at times would be alone in his tent, after a night rave and he'd feel disgusted with himself. *She'd die if she knew.*

Around 3:00am every night the vile of his body would build up. He couldn't comprehend why he was still here, why stay? He has a family who needed him; well in his case he had two. But how could he willingly pick a life of death and chaos over the peaceful home with his wife and son. What was so great about marching miles and miles night after night, sleeping on cold ground in a small tent, sharing meals and bathrooms. Everyday he stayed he risked his life, and the chance of never seeing Andrew again. Every now and then he wondered how tall Andrew

would be; 3'5" 3'8"? He just couldn't help it; he loved the rush and the constant movement, the pressure of being a soldier, the adrenaline that came with it.

His term was almost up. *A week from today, I'll be heading home.* He thought it was about time for him to meet his son, for him to fall in love once again with his wife. It was time for him to come down from the constant adrenaline high, it was time for him to stop risking his life and start living one. Five years was enough for his men, it was enough for his country.

"Commander Daniel Floyd, will you be staying with us for the up coming term or will you be heading home?" Officer Jarred asked.

"I will be staying sir".

I couldn't help it.

Another year would slowly pass by; Daniel would spend another year disgusted with himself. Another year spent aching for his son, for the soft touch of Lilly's hands. Yearning for the silk voice of the one he loved but it was also another year of the rush, another year of the reckless life Daniel craved. He spent the sluggish days fighting his emotions and thoughts. The incessant fight of what his heart and mind wanted vs. what his body insisted it must have. *Just one more year, only another year, another year, another year; almost there, almost home.*

3:45am and the sound of worn down boots crashing against the gravel echos through the air; another night rave. The air itself seemed to be dark. The view of two tall buildings came into his line of sight. Huddled together, the men walked toward the first building. Back to back they searched for any sign of a threat.

"Clear".

Daniel's shoulders relaxed. His heart was pumping and the blood was soaring through his body; this was what he lived for. Carefully exiting the dingy structure, they walked towards the next building.

"One down, one to go." Daniel said under his breath.

With Daniel's newfound rush he walked a little faster than the rest of his men. By the time his men caught up to him all they saw was Daniel's face; pale. All the life was drained from his skin. His eyes were bulged and they held fear; fear his men have never seen in their commander before.

"Jacob, take the men and get back".

Jacob and the nine men behind him were puzzled; at first they didn't react.

"NOW"!

This time all ten men reacted to the harshness of his voice stepping back and turning to jog away. With a saddening look Daniel looked down towards the circular shape under his right foot; he knew what it meant. He had walked into his own death. After checking to make sure his men

were far enough away he took a deep breath. In his last moment he couldn't decide which of his families he should say I'm sorry to. "I'm sorry boys." he said lifting his foot.

The sound waves of the explosion erupted through the sky; the impact knocked the remaining men down to the ground. They all turned around to see the building consumed in roaring flames; the building that held their leader.

"Another year" had been Daniel's last year.

It was his last year as one of the strong, his last year as one of the brave. It was his last year as a father, his last year as a husband, his last year alive.



Commander Daniel Floyd 1972-2003, proudly served 1997-2003

Memories

By: Shelby Breneman



“Maddilyn, please get up, talk, do something, anything!” my caring adopted father cried.

But how could I? The one I love just left me, never to return. I felt broken. Like a piece of me was missing. It felt like when Richard left he took some of me with him. I can never be complete without him.

“I’m going to erase my memory of him,” I said.

“What?” I my father replied.

“Erasing my memory if the only way I feel I can be happy again. So, that’s what I’m going to do I going to purge my mind of him,”

Much to my father’s dismay that is what I did. I threw out all of his things. I got rid of everything he gave or reminded me of him. My father but me into a hypnotic state and erased him completely or so I thought.

“She’s actually happy!” my adopted brother Nick told my father in an amazed whisper.

“I know,” he replied, “It’s like ‘the incident’ never happened”

That’s what they call it ‘the incident’, though I’m not quite sure what ‘it’ is. I do know that they are two words that are said a lot in this household. But, they are only said in whispers between my parents and brother.

The whispering doesn’t bother me. Its the fact that its a secret to only me what they are whispering about. And I know the secret is about me.

There was a knock at the door. And I, as I always do, jumped up immediately and yelled “I’ll get it!”

I wonder who it could be. People don’t normally visit us on Thursday afternoons. I opened the door and there standing was a boy.

He was looked about 18 but something told me he was a little bit older than that. He was tall, fit, and had shortish black hair and emerald green eyes. I was drawn to him even though I had never seen before. It was like I had known my whole life but couldn’t remember anything about him. It was strange. No one had ever made me feel that way before and it was scaring me.

He said a quiet “Maddilyn?”

He seemed so familiar to me. But, I couldn’t know him. Surely, I would remember a boy as cute as him. Still, I couldn’t shake the feelings he was making me have. I was scared, confused, happy, and really sad all at the same time. It was like I had been longing for him before we had even met.

“I’m sorry have we met before?” I asked him timidly.

He replied with an astonished “Yes!” and then after a moment “You don’t remember me?”
“I’m afraid I don’t, sorry,” I said feeling pretty freaked out. Why can’t remember this boy? He remembers me!

“I don’t even look the slightest bit familiar to you?” He asked desperately.

I lied, “No.”

“Oh, well I’m sorry to have bothered you,”

I turned and closed the door. He obviously couldn’t have been that important. If he was I would have remembered him. I went back to the living room and resumed my usual post in front of the TV.

1,2,3

By Michael Springer

Up until 1

Grasping my gun

Awake still at 2

I'm thinking of you

Pull the trigger at 3

Cut myself and I bleed

Where were you when I needed your love?

You were away, chasing red doves.

Where were you when I needed you most?

You reject me when I try to get close.

I love you so much, but my pain is too bad.

All your evil charades are driving me mad.

The clock strikes 12

I'm writing blank pages

My feelings melt

And die in short stages

An hour later, and I'm thinking of you

The thoughts I'm thinking; if only you knew

What happens now that the clock has reached 2?

3 years of my life you effectively slew.

1,2,3

Years stolen from me

Years wasted on love

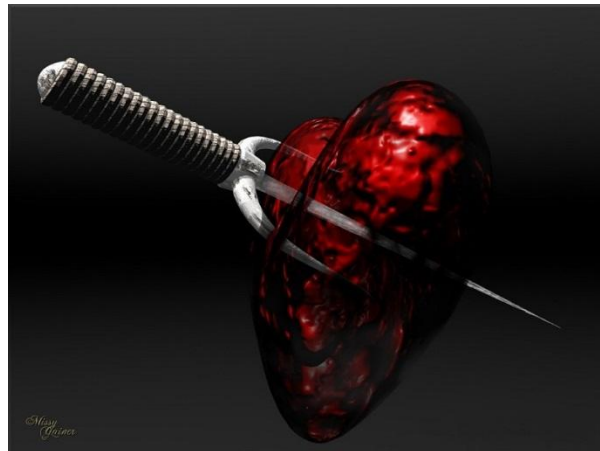
Years chopped like a tree

Fly away, my red dove.

She chopped down your tree.

She slew our love.

She lied to me.



Hate

BOUNDARIES

By: Kelci Dinatalie



Melanie looked around the room, becoming aware of her surroundings. It was dark. The only light to see was beneath the crack of a door leading to who knows where? Where exactly was she anyways? Trying to stand, she let out an unintentional scream. Something was chaining her hands and feet to a wall. ‘What the Hell?’ was the first thought running through her mind. Instinctively, she started screaming, foolishly hoping someone would rush through the door to her rescue.

“Hello? Who else is here?”

A voice resounded off the damp moldy walls on the other side of the room, followed by what seemed to be a gruff older man’s voice and the soft breathing of a younger child.

“Someone, let us out! Please! We didn’t do anything!” Melanie screamed, and continued to scream until her voice ran hoarse.

Instantaneously, a light bright fluorescent light turned on, stinging her eyes it’s yellowish glare. Melanie knew whatever was going to happen next, it wouldn’t be too good. Looking over everyone else in the room, she noticed a middle aged, balding man on the wall in front of her. She guessed he was in his 50’s, probably with a moody teenage daughter, and an unhappily married wife. To the left, there lay what looked to be a 3 year old boy, still asleep from whatever drug their ‘host’ had given them. Tears started to well up in her eyes as she thought of the frantic parents that must be missing him. There truly is no worse feeling than that of losing a child. Turning away, she looked up at the last wall to see the person laying there wasn’t chained up at all, but a gaunt pale faced man with the same blonde hair and blue eyes Melanie had. A cruel masochistic smile began to spread across the lower half of his face, and a long stocky body held it up.

“Now hello children I’m sure you’re all very curious as to why you’re here today. Not to worry though, I just want to play.”

‘Don’t say anything rash Melanie. For once, don’t try to be the hero.’ She must’ve repeated those lines among others in her head a thousand times before. “So...” Se spoke up, “What do you want to play?”

“I’m so glad you asked! Well you see, it’s my birthday! So we simply must plan a party!”

“Oh really? How old are you?” She awkwardly laughed, trying to play along with what the strange man psychopathic man was saying.

“The same age as you my Dear, 19! What a splendid number 19 is indeed!” The psychopath continued to say.

“Cut the crap, you lunatic! Just let me out of here!” The middle aged man finally spoke up.

“I have a name you know; and it is not lunatic, it is Henry.” In the next second, the middle aged man was dead.

Melanie could feel her eyes open wider at the psychopath as she tried not to scream. The 3 year old still slept, and it was probably for the best. They were already down one person, and she really couldn’t bear to see a toddler, of all people, brutally murdered.

“now,” the strange man finally spoke up, “as for that game...” The look that shrouded his eyes made Melanie’s blood freeze in her veins. “Don’t you just love hide and seek?”

“Hide...and seek?”

“Yes Darling, you have 1 hour to come and find me, or else.” He winked.

“Or else what?”

“Let’s just leave that part to your pretty little imagination.” That was the last memory Melanie could recall before everything went dark again.

When she awoke, she was in a new room. It had those mats they lay out in day care to protect the children from falling, all in an array of different colors on the floor. The walls were painted in a very nostalgic jungle style, with all different types of animals you’d see at a zoo smiling happily, unaware of the dangers happening in the real world. ‘This room...it looks incredibly familiar,’ Melanie thought; but right as she started to think about why it looked so familiar, a sharp pain rang out in her head, as if someone was sounding off a fire alarm. ‘No, no, no, my Dear,’ the psychopath’s voice whispered softly in her mind, ‘we mustn’t return to these sad memories.’

“What sad memories? Why are you in my head? Who are you? Why do you know me so well?” Melanie’s voice trembled, afraid of the answers soon to come.

‘Darling, relax, all the answers will come in due time. Right now all you need to know is I’m on your side, I’ve always been on your side...’ And with that, the voice disappeared, and Melanie was forced to move on.

She walked through a door into another room. Each room was different, but all of them had the same creepy childlike appearance. ‘Who was this guy?’ Was she in some kind of Saw movie? As she moved through the rooms, each got a little darker. The delightful colors and different child characters started disappearing only to be replaced with horrifying demons and fire painted on the wall.

Pondering over these thoughts, she came upon a dead end; the last room in the creepy two storied building. It was white. Everything; the carpet, the walls, every last detail in

the room was white. All except for one word painted in very small letters on the wall. *Melanie*. Why? Why was her name there? What had she done to deserve all of this? What was this guy trying to get at by doing this to her?

“Well, well, well, it looks like you’ve lost Melanie. Your time is up.” A voice approached her from the door.

“What are you going to do?” She tried to swallow the lump that was forming in her throat.

He pulled the body of a limp three year old from behind him, “What do you think?”

“No! Don’t kill him! Take me! My life is obviously more valuable to you, right? What are you trying to prove!” She screamed, falling to her knees.

“Oh Melanie, my sweet Melanie. What could I achieve from killing you? What could I achieve from killing someone who lost their sanity so long ago. In our heart you know who the real killer is. I’m nothing but a hallucination; a mere figment of your poor pathetic imagination.”

“But...but...but the chains! You kidnapped me! You killed that man, and you sent me on a walk through the rooms representing your life!”

“Did I? Was this really about me? Look again Melanie. The rooms, they were all painted according to YOUR life. The childhood you lost, the abuse you suffered every single day for the first 18 years of your life. The chains weren’t to protect you from me, they were to protect you from everyone else. You’re a monster Melanie, no more human than me.”

Suddenly, all of the lost memories she had been blocking out for oh so long came flooding back; the house she was in-her childhood house, her parents beating her, her boyfriend, the love of her life dying a brutal bloody death right before her eyes, and the murders, the murders of them all... She did it. They died because of her. Melanie had created this hallucination and blocked out those painful memories. She truly was insane, no more than a monster, a killer, *amurderer*.

“No! No! No! No! It can’t be true, it’s not true! Shut up!” She closed her eyes, preventing more tears from pushing through and walked forward. “You’re the monster, not me!” She pushed forward, not realizing what exactly she was doing, but knowing if she just got rid of this man, everything would be ok, and so...she strangled him. She watched with malice and satisfaction, as the man who had tortured her mind slowly took his last dying breaths.

“Melanie you’re the real killer. You’re the monster, who lost her sanity so long ago.” He smiled as he said that last sentence, knowing something she did not, and then just disappeared.

When she looked down, the body she was holding was not one of a man, but a little boy. She thought she had killed a demon, but the only thing dead was a 3 year old boy, along with the rest of her humanity.

THE KILLINGS

By: Kim Kikendall



I remember it like it was yesterday. No, like it was today. Like it was still happening right now. He would mock people like me. He would vandalize our things and beat us up. No more.

There, I can see him. He looked the same, like the jock who tormented the helpless. Nothing had changed for him since high school. But it will. I got strong and powerful while he stayed weak. Now I just have to con him into following me back to my hotel room. Coffee. Spill the coffee on him then invite him to the hotel to get cleaned up.

I “trip” and dump my boiling hot coffee all over his arm. “I’m so sorry. I’m such a klutz.” Would he recognize me from the nickname he gave me? Nope. He has no clue. Good.

“No, it’s fine. It’s not even that hot.” Liar. I can see the burn forming on his arm.

“At least come with me to my hotel room. I can bandage your arm up.” I smile. He agrees, I must be pretty convincing.

I open my hotel room. I give him ice. Then I take out my butterfly knife. Flick it, open, shut, open. It tumbles over my fingers, innocuous, to me at least. He looks uncomfortable. Good.

“Don’t mind me,” I move closer to him sitting on the hotel chair, “I’m just reminiscing about high school.” I let the insanity of waiting flow from my eyes, and let a grin creep across my face. Recognition flashes. He knows who I am... NOW! I lunge and slice through his skin. I hit the artery and windpipe in one swoop. Score. Something needed to be done. He couldn’t be allowed to live.

“Bullies don’t deserve to walk among the living.” I whisper above his fading body. He tries to speak. It only made his throat bleed faster. I watched him slip away. It’s satisfactory to watch justice. He made people like me drag themselves away from this world to escape him. Now I drag him away.

He stops making gargling noises and his head lolls to the side. He’s gone. I pick up my bags making sure my wig and sunglasses are secure. I leave. Throw my things into the last one’s car. I tore up the cards from her and abandon the wig after sterilizing them. I can’t be traced. I can’t be caught. Who would want to catch me anyway? I wipe the red goop off my knife and throw it in the glove compartment.

I'm off to Denver, Chicago, then Indianapolis. They will all be brought to justice. No bully deserves to be in this world. No bully deserves to be happy. I pull out of the parking lot and down the highway. To the next small hotel without cameras. To the next city for vengeance. To the next one.

I crank up the radio and sing along to pass the time. Soon she would pay, then her friend. Overwhelming joy, immense glee, and one less evil, one less to go. I feel my butterfly knife whining from the glove compartment. "Shh," I coo, "Only five hours until the next one." It continues to complain and whine. I guess I could give it a snack before we get to Denver. I just have to stop off at a bar and find someone tormenting someone else. "I'll get you another one."

CLIENT #243 OF THE DAY

By: Nichole Solera

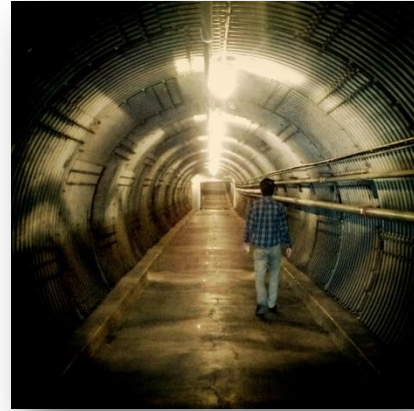
I was on my way to see Client #243 of the day. This day was not any different from any other day really. It held the consistent mediocrity of any other. And like any other day I followed my routine. I arrived at my client's house. It was plain and simple in the most dreadful way possible. I hoped it looked at least a little better on the inside. I walked through the back door. Not my usual entrance, but my client was in the back of the house, more specifically in the garage. I walked towards him silently; his back was towards me. I looked around and realized that it was not very different from the outside. The walls were a light shade of grey and held the same dullness I had witnessed outside.

I then moved my gaze towards the man standing before me. His hair was a crew cut. He had a slightly muscular build but he carried it awkwardly. He was putting away some old stuff in cardboard boxes. I disregarded them. I wasted no more time on unimportant observations and got straight to work. As ritual, I laid my hand on his head gently. Immediately, there were sharp flashes before my eyes, almost as fast as lightning. They were memories and I looked into the past that would explain this miserable man.

His story started all the way back in college. He had first seen her in the dining area. He had thought she was beautiful. Day after day he tried to gather enough courage to talk to her and sometimes it seemed as though he never would. But he did and they had hit it off. They had managed a healthy relationship for some time too. They had even moved in together. But all that had happened seven years ago. As the years progressed I saw how his love had grown for her over the years. I could easily tell that he loved her more than anything but I could also see how over the past couple of years he had become desperate.

At first she wanted a bit of "alone time" and then later she was distant. Then she was completely detached, as if overnight, she had stopped loving him. No matter what he tried, no matter how hard, he could not rekindle the relationship they had once had. He could not make her stay. He couldn't make her love him. Now, he was being forced to move out. I looked down at the cardboard boxes he was packing.

The memories stopped abruptly and I was once again in the garage. I examined him. He had not noticed me. I made sure he didn't. I thought of all the different angles I could take with this client and I decided to be his buddy. I removed my hand from his head and laid it on his shoulder. I decided I would let him see me. As my hand touched his shoulder a milky substance glazed over his eyes. He could see me but he would never remember me. I guess you could say he couldn't process me. He would never be able to recall my visit. I leaned towards him and whispered kindly into his ear, "Hello Mark, my name is Passion." He acknowledged me with a dazed nod. I spoke kind, meaningless words to him for a few moments more and then I decided to dive right in.



“How you loved her,” I whispered. He shuddered trying to restrain his tears, “How you would give anything for her... wouldn’t you?” He shuddered once more, this time more intensely.

“Shhh, it’s alright. Sob. It’s alright.” On my order, he shook fiercely as his sobs racked his body. I only allowed him a little less than a minute to cry. “You would give your life for her; you would do anything to keep her...” I allowed a small silence. I love dramatic pauses.

“...”
And how she doesn’t love you... Well, she doesn’t *hate* you... But she feels *nothing* for you, indifferent... *passionless*.” I hissed the last word in disdain. How could someone be so heartless as to be passionless? Passion was the drive to everything: work, love, family, talent. To think that there could be humans devoid of passion disgusted me.

I gripped his shoulder more tightly and I leaned even closer, “You couldn’t live without her. You *can’t* live without her.” He sobbed even more and I felt sorry for him. I felt a sort of kinship with him. He was so passionate. So full of life and I felt so sorry that he had to be stuck with someone who was, in my opinion, empty of any human feeling. Passion was at the root of everything.

I let him shudder for only a second before I gently pulled him upright once again. “Come,” I said gently. I led him to the kitchen where he could see her sitting in the living room up ahead. She was just sitting, watching TV. Her back was to us. At the sight of her he let out a small, sad, tearful sigh. With my hand still on his shoulder I once again leaned closer and spoke the words in a fierce, blunt tone, “But *she*... can live without you.”

I left that thought to simmer within him. His tears stopped and he seemed to come to a brilliant conclusion. His mind became clear and there was a sudden peace in his heart. The sort of peace you feel when you finally find the solution to a problem, a problem you have been tortured by for so long. Seeing this, I knew I had gotten my point across. He had caught my idea like a contagious disease. He was quicker than the others and I couldn’t help but feel a bit of admiration for him. Some of the others took hours for them to catch on to my meaning.

I watched him as he slowly moved to the counter where he took the nearest knife. As he moved away from me my hand fell away from his shoulder, but the milky gaze remained. He walked into the living room the same way I had just minutes ago; silently and unseen. I didn’t stop to watch. My work here was done and I still had other clients waiting. As I walked out to my next destination I felt no guilt for this particular case. Besides, to live passionless is to not live at all.

Love

I Love You Dearly

By: Shelby Counts

Every day we follow the same routine.
I sit at my lovely table number sixteen,
And you come to my table repeating the same verse.
If it didn't feel so perfect I would think it a curse,
But as the pattern ensues and the repetition sets in,
It feels all new, like a story ready to begin.

-
A tale of our beautiful life,
How I met you, my beautiful wife.
Though, I haven't told you yet,
But it is only a matter of time before that date is set,
And we are wound eternally together,
With love that will never wither.

-
Though I must say that today is like no other.
Your smile is facing to that of another.
It lingers and your eyes are gripped to every word he speaks,
And a bright blush rises to your cheeks.
Do you still think of me?
Or is he all that you can see?

-
There is no other choice,
So tonight when you think you're alone and safe, you will hear my voice.
But I promise it's only because I love you dearly,
That I had to prove this to you so clearly.
My feelings that seem to fuel this illusion,
And fill you with terror and utter confusion.

-
After all you don't even know my name,
You haven't the slightest clue of who I am or my aim.
But it's all going to end the same.
With my clothes drench in your red stain,
And your corpse six feet under in a wooden coffin,
To be left and forgotten.

-
I promise it's only because I love you dearly.



Blue Thread

By: Josh Freeman



My heart is a spider's nest.
It has no feelings or regrets.

But there is this little spiders.
That is nothing like the rest,
For one its painted blue,
The same color as your eyes,
and it knows your favorite songs,
so it often sings along.
It knows the features of your face
that I could never replace,
and I dont know the reason why
But it makes a special kind of thread,
That reminds me of you.
So I guess I should feel bad
But I couldnt help my self, you see
I had to string it through your hair,
and wrap it around your waist,
Tie it to your thumbs
and kiss it on your face.
Till I saw it in your eyes,
and I couldnt tell you why,
but that put me on cloud 9
So now I must appoligize
For I simply cannot leave your side
Or it'll pull my heart away
So please, just stay

My Cigarette

By: Allyson Gower



My love,
You are my cigarette.
You burn my lips
With your bitter taste
That is oh, so sweet
Going down.
I breathe you out,
To breathe you in.
Suppressing regret,
Only to feel
You linger
On my skin.
My fingertips ache
To hold on to you.
My body craves
To choke
On your tenderness.
You consume me.
Stinging my lungs,
Though soothing my mind.
Smoke surrounds me,
As if I'm blinded
To anything
But you.
I keep you near,
As you bring me
To a state of oblivion.
Knowing now,
I don't have the strength
To let your light
Burn out.
My love,
You are my cigarette.

Corner

By: Tori Klenn

I don't expect you to love me
That's not what I'm asking for
I just want your respect
You always pass me in the hallway
My heart is in your hands
Even though you don't know it
I feel raw and cut to the bone
When I see you smile my heart quickens
You do something to me without even trying
But you'll never notice me
I'm not the popular girl
My figure isn't perfect
And I don't dress like a model
All I have is a full heart
I try not to show it but on the inside it hurts
I come off as cold and pious
But its just that I don't want to be judged
No one has ever seen the fire inside of me
I stand in the corner and watch you go by
But you never take the time to stop and look
It really hurts that you don't love me
But I don't expect your love
What I do expect is your respect
So here I'll stand in my corner



I know you won't see me
But I see you up in your tower
I know you won't love me
But please love someone in a corner
Maybe a gorgeous girl that someone overlooked
But I know you'll never love me
How could you ever love the girl in the corner?

The Darkness We Share

By: Ashley Molesworth

Now quiet this talk of darkness,
Trust me the light is harmless.
In the night my soul departed,
In the light our love was started.
I never knew how quickly a life could be taken,
Until that night I could not waken.
I can see you weep in the dark,
Sitting exposed and alone in a park,
Contrived in the solitude of your heartache.
You have fabricated a fortress that no one can break,
And detached yourself from the world around,
Left with only your sorrow, you have drowned.
I can see you now, lost in despair,
But your agony I cannot bear.
To know that I am the fault of your woe,
Fills me with a pain I have never known.
Do not cry for me a moment longer!
Surviving this will make you stronger.
You are young, and have a long life to live.
So savor your life, as a gift I give
To you, my love, you'll be strong I know.
And one day soon your eyes will glow,
They'll twinkle and sparkle with brilliant shine.
And all the stars in the heavens will align.
Why do you still not listen?
Why do your blue eyes still glisten,
With quiet tears? You still cry,
And look longingly to the open sky.
But if you are looking for me up there,
You will find I am here with you everywhere.
I am neither in heaven or hell,
Because here on Earth I still dwell.
As a specter I guard you wherever you may go.
Because I know that you feel so alone.
I know you can hear their voices too.
Watch their scrutinizing eyes follow you.
They see on your arms, the scars you hide.
They see on your face, the tears that have dried.
But what is it that you are doing!
Why is this the path you keep pursuing?
I know you do not want to die!
You do not want to say goodbye,
To a life you have only just begun!

There is still so much you have left undone!
Do not die on me!
Please, listen to my plea!
Because of my unexpected death,
You too, will now take your last breath.
I will not bear the burden,
Of drawing the final curtain,
On your young life barley lived.
To save you now, my heart I will give.
But as your life is bleeding out,
I am beginning to doubt,
That there is any hope in life.
Perhaps we are all just doomed to unbearable strife.



Look at the guardian angel I am.
Letting you go like this I might as well be damned.
I was supposed to take care of you,
But even that I could not do.
In death I had one duty,
To make sure no darkness touched your beauty.
Look now you are dead!
The last cloak of light has been shed.
What a pair we are, you and I!
Unable to live no matter how hard we tried.
Hand in hand through the darkness we stroll,
Two young lovers who can never be whole.
Two lost souls that can never touch the light,
And cursed forever to tread the night.

Brothers

By: John Cordero

My mother was crying. My father was holding her in a gentle manner trying to calm her. The sight of my brother made her uneasy. As I looked around countless faces of our family members and our friends all had a blank countenance. Closing the casket, they put him in his grave and slowly began to bury him. My mother in all her agony started to scream and yell, yet everyone was unperturbed. This continued on until my brother was gone. Everyone put their flowers atop his grave and started to leave one by one. Then there was me. I gazed upon the gray gravestone, thinking. *What the hell did they do?* Trying to keep my composure I walked away to my uncle's car.

We drove for what seems like an eternity in silence. We approached our old red brick house. As I was about to leave the car my uncle said something, in an almost whisper.

"Try not to piss off your parents, you know how they feel about his death."

"I know." I whispered back

"We all loved him, you know that right?"

"Yea, I do".

Walking in our house the sorrow and melancholy in the air seemed to choke me. I glanced at my parents. Anger shot throughout my body. I trudged upstairs to my room. I layed on my bed staring at the picture of me and Roman. Even though he was only a year older than me, he was as inspirational as someone like Martin Luther King Jr. or John F Kennedy. He was always had a leader type presence, when news of his death came I couldn't believe it. Part of me knew that something like this could of happened, because of what was happening to him. It angered me that the killer weren't put away. I put the picture back on my night stand. *Why man, why didn't you just.....* I couldn't think anymore. My anger and sadness have taken away all my energy. I feel asleep

I was awoken by the sound of someone calling me.

"Jacob, come downstairs please." Yelled my father from downstairs.

My teeth and fist clenched. I went downstairs to see that my parents were sitting at the dining table.

I went to grab food when my father said "Before you eat can we talk to you for a second?"

"Fine."

I grabbed the farthest seat away from them.

"Look Jacob, I know they teach you this stuff all the time at health class, but we want to talk to you about it. We know Roman had some problems, and we know that he wasn't always on top of it, but suicide is a selfish act."

As the phrase came out of his mouth, my head got hot and my fist grew into a ball.

"Selfish act? Selfish act. If you guys would of just let Roman follow his dream he wouldn't have done this!"

Tears started to stream down my eyes.

"Look Jacob just calm down, it wasn't us Roman just listen, he choose to be an actor, that's impractical, if he want's to make a living he should of don--"

I cut him off before the lies and the bull ran from his mouth.

"There was nothing wrong with Roman, he never had any problems. If you guys didn't pressure him and constantly mock him for his passion he would have never done this. It's all your fault!"

“Shut Up! Shut Up! Shut Up!” My mother was out of her seat yelling at me, her face redder than blood. “It wasn’t our fault!”

My father seeing that he couldn’t reason with me tried to calm my mother down again.

“No Jack we aren’t going to let our son disrespect us like this!”

Angrily I started to yell “Me disrespect you? You made Roman kill himself, and you’re going to call me disrespectful?!”

I could see my dad started to get angry.

“Look George, Roman wasn’t being rational. All teenagers have crazy ideas, they don’t know what the real world is like, so stop yelling at your mother and sit down.”

“No.”

I got up from the table and walked away.

“Jacob!” Yelled my father in his anger tone.

I stopped in my tracks.

“Jacob get back here right now!”

His angry voice reminded me of all the times he put down my brother. I turned back and went to the table.

“Jacob, look I know you’re having a hard time but you can’t yell at your mother.....”

His voice trailed off in my ears. I started blankly at him until he finished talking.

“Do you understand Jacob?”

“Yea.”

I went to my room. Seeing the dilemma my brother had faced I went upstairs and set my alarm and went to bed.

RING RING RING. 12:30am. I got up from my bed. Still wearing my suit, I walked downstairs. As I walked through my house, the pictures on walls seemed to stare at me with expressions of fake happiness. I walked out the front door. Looking both ways I crossed the street and continued walking. I reached my destination. I Climbed the guard railings of the road, overlooking the river. I wondered whether my cowardice would kick in and I would stop. The only feeling I felt was a little sense of relief. Taking one last look at the sky, I jumped into the river’s cold embrace.



LOSER

By: Crystal Ramirez

Humming that only an affectionate person could produce, pitches of airy highs and gentle lows, echoed in Zac's ear. Oppressive lassitude left him in visual darkness, except for a lashed-blurred slit of bright white when Zac forced his eyes to open. Cold, slender fingers stroked his forehead that was elevated by something covered in gossamer. It seemed the gentle hand responded to his awakening, dutifully lulling him back to sleep. Zac felt like he could rest there forever. The hums turned to barely incoherent whispers of some sort of berceuse, sung by a female voice. But he had long drifted into oblivion to notice.

* * *

Zac looked at the girl across the room from him, bitterly staring at her, agitated that she was still asleep. But thinking about it, perhaps it was better that she wasn't awake yet. She'll probably freak out, worsening Zac's foul mood.

He had awoken about an hour ago, displeased with the fact he was alone in a cement room, no sign of the source from his first semiconscious wake, except for the possibility that it was Matilda, who he lately noticed huddled in the corner. Her underdeveloped chest rose, which provided Zac with enough reassurance that she was fine. However, the idea of Matilda laying a finger on him made him want to vomit; being touched by that disgusting loser would be the most degrading thing to ever happen to him. His head felt heavy and irritated as if her hand were diseased, laced with the germs of an outcast. Zac just wanted to get out and wash himself; he just wanted to stop sharing the musky air with Matilda, poisoning it with every breath. There was a door that Zac had vigorously attempted to open. A tiny light-bulb hung on the center wooden beam that ran across the ceiling. The diminutive, ancient light source was being smothered by decades-accumulated dust. Rust stains and water-damage scarred the floor. Heavily-taped cardboard boxes, that required something sharp or lots of effort to open, were stacked in the room; Zac had managed to open a few but found nothing but photo negatives of him and Matilda. Their ghostly images with the dim illumination disturbed Zac, *who had taken these?*

Matilda stirred, head lifting off the stone wall and sleepily fixing her unkempt, dirt-colored hair so she could see. The tangled brown curtain unveiled the same sight Zac had been looking at for the past hour except with Zac in the picture. Her dull brown eyes darted back and forth, a quelled whimper emanated from her. She brought her arms close to herself, cowering behind two bonelike limbs.

"Hey, calm down. I didn't drag you into this," Zac scolded, thinking that Matilda was panicking because she saw *him*. "This isn't a prank I'm pulling on you." He laughed. "I wouldn't do anything this tortuous to myself," Zac muttered. Matilda's hands slowly rested in her lap and her thin shoulders surrendered to their normal position of a kyphosis-like slouch. She had the same amount of reason to touch him as he would to touch her; Zac chuckled at his brain for that insane antic it pulled on him. Matilda stared at him; her eyes seemed to trace his situated and laughing form like he was something foreign to her. She had no right to look at him that way, she was the freak. His body lurked forward, directly and aggressively pointed at her, "Don't—"

A gargled voice shook the room, its origin resonating from everywhere, "Zac and Matilda! Oh, vile Zac and fragile Matilda!" the voice screeched. Zac stood up, he had reached his limit.

"What do you want, huh?" Zac demanded, wishing that the owner's voice were there so he could strangle it into silence.

“Tiny Mat not worth wiping your shoes on,” it sang, its scratchiness mimicked that of a gramophone. “Sing it for her, Zac. Sing it for Matilda!”

Zac laughed, “So, this is what it’s all about, then. Some sort of reconciliation between *vile* Zac and *fragile* Matilda.” She rose, clumsily pulling herself up with the help of a box. Zac glared at her, directing his anger toward her as if she were the voice. “Well, you can go—”

“Sing it for her, Zac! Sing it for Matilda!”

“Fine! Tiny Mat not worth wiping your shoes on!” Zac yelled. Matilda shriveled back into the corner as if the words pushed her. Zac knew where this thing was going. He had to control the animosity he felt toward Matilda if he wanted to get out. But something about her just irritated him, just made him hate her. Seeing her wince as those words came out of his mouth made him feel *good* about himself. The high he receives from insulting her was satisfying, a remedy that slightly nullified the hate. Perhaps, he could indulge in this private roast before he abided to the voice’s main intentions of asking for the forgiveness of Matilda.

“Do you see how your words make her feel?”

“Yes,” Zac answered, watching Matilda come out of the corner once again as if she recovered. She was hugging herself, her head was lowered, and she was slightly hunched forward. Matilda’s body trembled and bobbed with every shaky breath she took. Faint hiccupped weeps emitted from her, this was the first time he’d seen her ever really react to an insult. She always displayed an apathetic demeanor, thought she was above them to even acknowledge her peers’ taunts. However, someone noticed that Matilda did cringe when Zac said something. So, he led the attacks upon her. But crying was a major sign of any actual damage—it was more satisfying!

“What is she to you?”

“A loser,” he answered in a choked whisper, result of trying to suppress the jovial tone and smile. “Our—”

“What is she to *you*?”

“—My pet freak, that I don’t have the stomach to put down because I don’t want to touch that repugnant thing,” Zac finished. “My loser to torment for my enjoyment.” Matilda’s crumpled to the ground to her knees, forehead resting against the rough concrete that was stained with tears. Her body jerked in violent heaves as if she were being consumed with sorrow.

Was this the reason for locking me up with Matilda, so I can bully her without any public restraint? Or else the voice’s plan is just backfiring? Zac thought, walking away from Matilda.

“Loser... *Your loser?*”



“Yes,” Zac mumbled, puzzled with the lowness of the tone. He turned toward Matilda, who was standing up. She was still hugging herself and looked up. Her dark-circled eyes were wide open, redness from weeping was absent, and a thin-lipped smile stretched across her face. She wasn’t crying, she had been laughing all this time and any tears produced were from laughing.

“Your loser?” Matilda repeated in a giggle, echoing that of the low tone of the last statement. Her sharp cheeks were blushed red and she fixed her hair again. Her right hand rose to her forehead, index finger and thumb forming a right angle that opened mostly skyward.

“It took me a while... to figure it out,” Matilda confessed.

“I’m sorry,” Zac blurted, hoping those two words would be enough to protect him.

Her face went pale and her gleeful countenance contorted to worry, “Oh no, no-no-no. You don’t have to apologize,” she assured; hands clasped together and situated themselves upon her heart.

“What?” Zac confusedly whispered.

Her pigeon-toed feet raced across the room toward Zac. He instinctively treaded backwards, back hitting the wall. She was so close to him, the only thing that kept them apart was her intertwined hands. Matilda was much shorter than Zac; her frizzy head went up to Zac’s chin. He shouldn’t be afraid of her; Matilda was like a malnourished rat. *He* was a strong, teenage boy. However, her large eyes held him in place. He barely felt the needle slide into his neck.

She broke away from him and pulled out a small controller. Her thumb pressed one of its black buttons.

“Sing it for her Zac! Sing it for Matilda!” the room said.

“God, that one was my favorite,” Matilda happily sighed. “Do you know how many times I had to retake those recordings? I couldn’t help but laugh. Then there’s that weird voice distortion thing I used. Don’t I sound scary, Zac?” she rattled off. She pranced to the opened boxes, rummaging through the negatives. A reminiscent smile of a photographer appeared on her narrow face. “I could never get a picture of the two of us. I guess that’s the disadvantage of being a solo photographer,” she sadly whispered. Zac let out a protesting whimper and Matilda glanced at him. He had slid down the wall and was on the ground. The injection was doing its job. Zac could have been taken as a corpse if it wasn’t for the visible rise and fall of his chest and his eyes that trailed after Matilda.

She gracefully retreated to Zac’s side. She stroked his forehead. Zac weakly jerked his head away from her but Matilda turned it towards her again; it matched the feeling from before. Her hand rested there for a while and then he felt her move her fingers to form an L. “Loser,” Matilda whispered.

“Why... are you doing this?” Zac managed to mutter.

“I wanted you to say anything to me, an unrestricted exchange between us,” Matilda replied. “Did you mean every word you said?” Matilda asked. “Answer truthfully, it will determine what happens next,” she cooed.

Zac squirmed a bit, he wasn’t certain for what answer she was looking for. He hated her and if she was going to kill him for that than he wanted her to know that. “Yes.”

Her arms wrapped around his skull, she was going to choke the life out of him now. “Yay,” she giggled into his ear as she gently hugged him. “Don’t you ever notice the smile I have on my face when you talk to me?” Zac’s chin was pushed together by Matilda’s bony arm so he only let out a hum that could be interpreted in any way.

“I never felt anything, except for your words. Then I felt pain, a bittersweet pain that I love. But *you* know that words hurt more than any form of physical pain. And this,” bringing the hand-

formed L in front of his eyes. “You’ve always held it up opening up, making it into a V. It took me a while to figure out,” she said.

Zac attempted to wiggle out of her grasp. “You’re... insane.”

Matilda’s face flushed red and she giggled. “Enough, Zac, you’ve said enough harsh things to fulfill a girl’s need.”

Matilda brought her forearm to Zac’s attention. Healed, jagged scars spelt the word LOSER but the S was clawed away and a V floated above the scribble. “Lo—Lover,” Zac read.

She enthusiastically nodded, pleased by hearing the word from Zac. Matilda rose, gently propping Zac up against the wall. She scurried to a box that was in the corner she was first in and she eagerly carried it to Zac. The box was closed in a way that had the tabs overlapping each other, locking them in place and wouldn’t call for tape. Matilda pulled them apart and revealed a jumble of tools and other common miscellanies.

“I’m not very good with words like you are Zac. So, I’ll show my love through physical pain,” she whispered almost apologetically as she reached for a spoon. “You should be able to feel everything,” Matilda reassured. She pulled out a Zippo lighter and rotated the flint wheel, the small spark ignited the gas fume and the fire was held under the spoon, heating it until the bottom was coated in black soot. Matilda brought the spoon to his left eye that was spread open with Matilda’s hand. Zac couldn’t even move anymore and he inertly watched the hot utensil near, feeling the imminent heat radiate from it. “You can feel all my love for you, my loser.”

Sweet Goodbyes

By: Ayo Covington

Your broken smile,
And lonely eyes,
Tell tales of plans they'll soon devise.



Wherever you go,
Take me with you.
Your silent tears and pretty lies,
Sing everlasting lullabies,
Of whispered prayers and sweet goodbyes.



Wherever you go,
Take me with you.
But as the razor kissed your flesh,
Those lovely eyes were laid to rest.
A final breath escaped your chest,
But you didn't take me with you.

Objects

THE CRIMSON DRESS

By: Liz Capps



“One and two and three and four, releve, two and three and four. Lift. Point your toes ladies; you must be graceful and beautiful. Jayana, don’t just throw your arms in the air like that, keep a natural curve to your arms, but stay tall; lean back into his hands as he lifts you. Let’s try that again.”

My breathing was rapid, and my heart nearly leapt from my chest. I wiped the sweat from my brow and returned to my first position. A dancer must move in harmony with her partner, after all, the choreography forms one complete picture. Our snowy white costumes shone in the lights clearly contrasting the dark and empty stage. The moment when a dance finally starts working, when the work has been done to learn it and the moves come naturally, is so peaceful. The heat of the stage lights, as I am lifted high into the air, warm my skin. The trust shared between two dancers is something I’ve never seen in any other environment. Sure, people are good friends and enjoy each others company, but dance creates a deeper friendship.

I was eight years old when I saw my first ballet. My friend, Darien, and his family had tickets for The Nutcracker that they were unable to use, and gave them to me. My parents had never considered performing arts for my future, and were more interested in sports and business, which was the route they had taken. However, they took me to The Nutcracker, despite their view that dancers and other entertainers were just a bunch of uneducated people that weren’t good for anything actually useful in life, or stuck-ups, or people just seeking attention because they are secretly very insecure about themselves.

From the moment the ballet started my eyes were glued to the stage. The costumes, the movements, the lights, the music. It was all so much to take in. My senses were overloaded with this new form of entertainment. My heart nearly leapt out of my chest when the mouse king and his army seemed to have defeated the nutcracker, and a wave of relief flowed over me as the mouse king’s lifeless body hit the floor. Through the land of snow, and the land of sweets my mind journeyed. The costumes were enchanting, the

emotions were captivating, and the dancer's movements were simply spellbinding. I closed my eyes as the curtain closed and longed to feel the fabric of Clara's white nightgown on my own body as I twirl and fly through the air held up by the strong nutcracker prince.

"Please Mama, why can't I be in The Nutcracker?"

"Ana, darling, you don't know how to dance, how can you be in a professional ballet?"

"I can learn! Mama, will you teach me?"

"Ana, don't be ridiculous. You should use your time for something more worthwhile."

"Like what?"

"Sports, or school, or something that you can find a REAL job in."

For months I begged, and only after a failed attempt to sign me up for soccer did Mom finally agree to let me take a beginning ballet class. Class was everything I dreamed it to be, and the more advanced the class got the more I fell in love with the art of dance. However, the more I fell in love with dance, the more and more my parents became concerned about my future. They threatened that they would take away my dance classes if I did not keep up my grades in school, if I did not do all my chores around the house, if I didn't join other clubs at school. By the time I was in my junior year of high school I was juggling service for the National Honors Society, the National French Honors Society, Book Club, Math Club, and Key Club. On top of that I had a schedule loaded with AP level courses.

Dance class was my only escape. I felt free as Darien lifted me into the air and I pointed my toes to the floor below. I would not trade the feeling of executing a princess dip or a death-drop for anything in this world. Movement was the only way left which I could truly use to express myself, yet I knew that I had to put more effort into other areas of my life in order to be able to continue dancing. Despite this knowledge each day remained to be a struggle.

I watched the clock in Calculus class every day. The hands of the clock moved too slowly, if only they could be lifted from the face of the clock and placed in the desired place. In AP English I doodled, always feeling the corners of my papers with silhouettes of different dancers. In AP Chem I would close my eyes and imagine the dance I was working on, and review the steps. In French IV I would write adjectives describing the emotions of dances. In AP Psychology I would let my fingers trace the edge of my black tee-shirt, as I daydreamed about the different costumes I had worn in dance recitals. I couldn't focus. My heart just wasn't into those things. How can I force myself to do schoolwork when all I can think of is dance?

There was no doubt in my heart that dance was what I was meant to do. It was the only thing I was good at, the only thing I could ever focus on doing. My instructors had always been very impressed. I had not only a natural talent, but an eagerness to learn as much as I could as quickly as I could. Even though I started later than most of the kids in my original classes, I was the first to move on to the more advanced classes. My instructor even singled me and my good friend Darien out for private instruction. My mom was initially against it, but she decided to let me do it as long as I was willing to work a part time job so I could pay for the lessons myself. My time was already limited, but I could not resist the opportunity, so I added yet another thing into my workload.

After years of private instruction the opportunity I had been waiting for arose. I was called to audition for Juilliard. They expressed interest in accepting me into their dance program when I graduated from high school, and wanted to see an audition from ME! I had two months to prepare. My teacher prepared a selection from The Nutcracker for me to present as my audition piece and even sewed this beautiful dress, layered with different shades of white, and sparkles covering the bodice. It was perfect. Tears streamed down my face and I gave my instructor a huge hug. She, unlike my parents, understood how much this moment meant to me.

There was a skip in my step all the way home. However, when I opened the front door, the look on my mom's face as she stood in the kitchen between me and my room, wiped the smile from my face.

"Jayana, your French teacher called me today."

I tried to slip past my mom and into my room where I could slam and lock the door, but she caught my wrist and pulled me around to face her. My eyes traveled slowly upwards from her hand where it grabbed my wrist to her cold gaze.

"This is serious Jayana, you can't just let your grades slip like this. Your schooling is important. This is your education, your future. How are you ever going to get into a good college with grades like this? How are you going to get a good job, if you don't go to a good college?"

"You don't understand," I muttered looking at my feet.

"You try so hard at your dancing, yet your effort in other things just doesn't compare. Your Father and I have been talking, and have decided that..."

"Mom!" I screamed raising my head to look her straight in the eyes. "You can't take away dance...you just can't. Not when..."

"Well, think about how much you want to dance, and pull up your grades, because you are not going back to dance until you have pulled your grades up to straight A's."

"A's? But that's impossible! I hate you!"

I pulled away and slipped into my room slamming the door behind me. I dropped my bag to the floor and fell across my bed. Tears streamed from my eyes and my arms swung repeatedly at the pillows in front of me. Finally, I lay my head down on the beaten pillows and breathed deeply a couple times. Each deep breath was interrupted by a series of shorter ones. Eventually I fell asleep, the tears dried, and when I awoke it was as if all the energy had been drained from my body, and my eyes were so heavy, that it was a struggle just to keep them open. My limbs felt like they were full of lead.

I held my head in my hands, and tried to think about what to do next, but the throbbing in my head made thinking impossible. Everything felt so unreal, as if I were in a dream. Fog filled my head, and things around me were blurred. I held my hands before my eyes; they were shaking. My whole body seemed to be crumbling. I returned my hands to my head and pulled at my hair frantically, wishing that pulling the strands of hair from my head could also pull the troubles from my life.

Taking a deep breath I stood and opened the bathroom door. I slid off my clothes and stepped into the warm water of the shower. The water caressed my face, and lifted some of the fog from my brain. After fully washing my hair and body, I slid down to the floor of the shower and sat, letting the water fall on my head and roll down my face and body. Dance is all I have. It defines me. It is who I am. My parents can't take that away from me. How could I go on without my identity?

Eventually the water began to turn cold, so I shut off the water and slowly stood up. I dried myself off. I walked over to the mirror and bent over to my bag and pulled out the beautiful costume my instructor had made me. Slowly I pulled it on and gazed into the mirror. I went through some of the moves from my audition piece, always gazing into the mirror, my eyes wide and a single tear rolling down my cheek. It was my dream. I was so close to my dream.

I returned to my room, and walked over to my dresser. Opening the top drawer I found what I was looking for. I held the dagger out in front of me, closing my eyes tightly. My hands jerked forward plunging the blade into my heart. Blood spurted out of the wound, staining the costume, staining my dream. Soon it would all be over. Perhaps my parents will like me better in a crimson costume rather than white. Maybe white was too bland for them, too normal and neutral. Maybe now I'll be interesting, maybe now I'll satisfy them. Now at least I will be free to dance. Without the constraints of my body, I will be free to twirl and spin like never before. The weight of the world is gone, I am light, and free. I spin and my crimson dress swirls around me. This is the only life I know. I dropped to the floor, as dead as the wretched mouse king after he was hit by Clara's bedroom slipper.

Embers

By: Jimmy Zak



In a distant, hazy memory I can recall
Finding Roman pottery in a fallow field.
Cracked grey cast about the crumbling loam,
Now shrapnel from a potter's burst of passion,
Coherent as a hurried scrawl.

A tale, told in a language long forgotten,
Of dreams, now obscured by cold black mud.
Of the potter, inert shards now the only sign,
Even martyrs are mundane with time.
Other memories, once rich with life and blood
Crimsons, purples, all fading to grey
No matter how bright, how clear today,
Soon, to nothingness it shall fade away.
So polished, burnished steel may brightly shine,
But rusting metal turns the hue of mud.

RUNNER

By: Eric Vasold

Looking out I can see the helicopters' blades slowly pick up speed as their pilots wake up and warm their vehicles. Soon enough the night's patrols come in and land their crafts; I look across the rooftops and grip my satchel, leaving the overlook I set off to complete my job. Jumping from rooftop to rooftop, I make my way through the city; it isn't till I pass the third checkpoint that I hear the helicopter's hum and feel the pressing of the wind on my body. I quickly scan the area, and see the fourth checkpoint's green window frame; dodging bullets and grenades, I dive into the open window, without stopping to catch my breath, I change directions and jump out of the westernmost window. As I exit the window frame the helicopter passes and, realizing that I don't have enough speed to make it across the road, I grab onto the landing skids and swing myself through another, green lined window. The helicopter passes and searches the empty building, as I hide in the opposite one; after an hour the helicopter gives up and returns to its patrol, when I am clear of it, I climb the fire escape and continue to my destination. When I arrive to the apartment building, I look for my sign: a window opened with a red poinsettia, turned three degrees south of the rising sun. When I see the flower I carefully climb into the building and see my contact waiting by his television.

"Perfect timing, the news is about to start," the figure says, slowly standing, "what did you bring me?"

"On behalf of the Mojave Express, I, Ocelot, present you with this letter," I say as I pull a small piece of paper from my satchel, "I was told I would receive payment from you."

"And you will, once I get the letter," the figure says, stepping closer.

"Payment now or now letter," I say, reaching behind myself to grip the pipe tied to my belt.

"If you must, then I can still arrest you. If not for treason, then for trespassing." The figure says, drawing a military grade stun-gun, "I will get all of your little courier buddies arrested to, then executed."

Hearing this I jump at the gun, smashing his hand with my pipe, shocked by what happened, my contact leaves himself open and I take advantage of this, by slamming my pipe into his jaw and grabbing his arm behind his back I effectively grapple him.

"Whom do you work for? The Crimson Snakes? The Steel Soldiers?" I ask, pressuring my pipe to his neck, "Tell me."

"No...The military." He says, struggling to escape my grapple, now I can clearly hear the helicopter rotors below the window line, annoyed I bring my hostage to the window and force him over, careful to not let him fall out.

"Tell me why you were ordered to arrest me, and how did you get a hold of my information."

"President Kimball ordered the arrest of all persons whom are suspected of suspicious activity." He says, trying to escape and get away from the window and helicopter blades.



“And how did you know how to set up my contract?” I ask, pressuring him further out of the window.

“You know your little girlfriend Cathrine?” he says, smiling wickedly, “We got it from her.”

“What did you do to fox?” I ask, forcefully pulling him back in, just so I can hit him again with my pipe.

“So much; first we beat her, then electrocuted her, broke her limbs, starved her, drew her, and now she is set to be gutted.” Full of rage, I send his head into the wall, and my metal into his shoulder,

“Go ahead and finish me, we can add murder onto your sentence.” He says, though blood, and teeth.

“unlike you, I am no murderer.” I say, releasing him with a kick.

“Last mistake” I hear as I feel a sharp pain in my side, I look down and see three metal prongs in my flesh and as the current flows I black out.

My head is cloudy as a bucket of ice water is thrown on my face,

“I am only going to ask you this once politely, who are you?” A familiar voice asks, familiar, but unknown who it belongs to.

“If you want me to talk, then you better do your worst, then maybe I will talk.” I respond and a heavy fist meets my jaw thrice, before the voice asks again, but this time much angrier.

“Who are you?” I spit a bloody tooth at him as my answer, “not talking then?” He asks, getting a cattle prod, “don’t worry, I can fix that.”

As I am tortured, I cannot help but let out a psychotic laugh as the voice and his minions try to pry my name using violence.

“You done yet?” I ask, spitting another bloody tooth out, “I can go like this for days, this is actually quite fun; we haven’t used the salt in a while, mind pouring that on my wounds.”

“You’re psychotic.” The voice says, stepping back, “utterly psychotic.”

“Psychotic?” I respond, looking into the man’s face, whom I recognize as ‘President’ Aron Kimball, “or determined to make sure you don’t get even the time of day from me?”

“We will get what we need from you, somehow.”

“You could always be polite, we haven’t tried that yet? Just punching.” I recommend. Aron sits down across from me and, as if humiliated, asks for my name, “Much better, my name is Ocelot.”

“Ocelot?” Aron asks getting closer, “tell me your real name.”

“I don’t have one.” I respond.

“You have a name now tell me.” Aron angrily demands.

“I have no name, no past, and no future, at least of my own design.”

“What are you talking about? Everyman has their own future. And a name.”

“A future of what? Domestic Slavery? Oppression? Fear?” I say, raising my voice, and noticing that the leather straps that hold me down are wearing out from the stress from the torture, “You control everything, from when we are born to when we die, no citizen can even think their own thoughts without being arrested and executed, we are all slaves for you.”

“If you have no future why do you run then? What will it accomplish?”

“Tell me Aron, why do you eat, sleep and breathe?”

“To survive.” Aron responds.

“That is why I run, to stop means death for not myself but for the idea of a free city; I run not because I have to, not from anyone, but for freedom and to end your reign of oppression.” I say, staring him in the eyes.

“You know as much as anyone that freedom brings uprisings, chaos, and death; by controlling them I am saving them.”

“Freedom is life, imprisonment is death!” I yell at Aron, as he hits me, I start laughing, “You know, what I said about not having a future, well I did not tell you the truth entirely; What I said was if I stood around and waited.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Aron asks, getting closer.

“Only the weak wait for their future, the strong make their own.” Breaking free from the binding leather, I punch Aron in the face and thrust my knee into his gut. As he slowly gets up I pickpocket the cell keys and throw him into the wall opposite the door. I then run to the door and kick it open, locking Aron Kimball in behind me as I start to leave the cell block.

“This prison seems to be broken up into 8 blocks, A-H.” I say to myself, “I guess I should look for Fox, hmmm...the warden should have the master list.” I see a ventilation shaft a few inches off the ground, I carefully climb into it and head off towards the Warden’s tower.

Eventually I reach the center of the prison with the Warden’s tower, it is lightly guarded with only three guards, but each has a rifle and a bandolier of brassed ammo; I look around for a weapon or a way around them but all I see is a rusted pipe clinging onto the wall, I try to rip it off but make too much noise and lead starts to fly through the vent, knocking off the cover and forcing me to press myself down. The Bullets suddenly stop flying, I wait a moment before snaking up to the edge and looking down; the guards are being held up by some masked men.

“Ocelot you can come down now, the guards are subdued.” A loud voice calls out to me and I see Fox in the tower waving to me. Smiling I jump down and run over to the tower, “You must really like me to come all the way out here to rescue me.” Fox says, hugging me.

“You know I don’t care for other’s company.” I respond, pushing her away, “people get in the way of missions.”

“So you didn’t send these men?” Fox asks, confused, “then who did?”

Suddenly the iron doors burst open and an army of the masked men rush in, securing the area, followed by a tall, stern looking man. “Solidus!?” we both say in unison, surprised by the legendary courier’s appearance. “Hello children, you have a nice time in Château le Locker?” he asks, sarcastically as he reaches the tower.

“How did you find us?” I ask, shaking the hand of the fastest courier to have lived a man’s life.

“I followed the helo as it passed my route, I saw you unconscious and decided to help, so I gathered the rest, and here we are.” He says, smiling to be out of his mundane schedule, turning to face the corridors he says, “This place contains all our runners, it was designed to interrogate and murder us.”

“When you said you gathered the rest...what do you mean?” Fox asks, looking towards the masked men, “who are those men?”

“There is one thing only I can do, what you see here is every courier in the time zone, both ours and where you are right now.” Solidus responds, lifting his overcoat to show the Mojave Express insignia, “The steel soldiers, Crimson snakes, even the Scarlett Herons all joined to reclaim their couriers...but there is one problem.”

“What is this problem? You have men, more than there are guards” Fox responds, motioning over to the guards.

“That switch will cut the power to every cell, they will open, but the alarm will sound, alerting every guard; we don’t have much of a chance against every guard in the prison, plus we are underground, so an escape is...complicated, but not impossible, however if we don’t pull the lever we can escape and comeback with more men, maybe more guns even.”

“so we decide if we fight or run?” Fox asks, spitting on the floor, “Ocelot?”

I stand there, pondering my options, “So I decide life or death?”

“More like death in a prison cell or in battle, you don’t know these men, and you won’t, but you have to decide to leave or to fight” Solidus replies, looking into my eyes, “you have to choose, you can’t run away from this. I close my eyes and reach out to grasp the lever, inhaling deeply I open my eyes slowly,

“Freedom is life Imprisonment is death.”

ROAR OF THE CROWD

BY: RYAN DETTLER

In the city of Plaus, there were very few ways of entertaining yourself throughout the area, however an old spectator sport was seeing a rebirth. The people of Plaus loved to watch people compete in the Arena, where voluntary combatants fight and climb ranks to earn prizes. Fights were intense, cheap to watch, and brought up good memories for some citizens when Arenas originated 30 years ago, but they fell out of popularity after the economy picked up, people no longer needed to fight for money and rewards. Poor neighborhoods, being so isolated from the rest of the city, have not heard the news of the Arena resurgence yet. A man named Garx had created an Arena near these slums, however, and hoped to find some fresh fighters.

Draven's family had become quite poor since Draven's father passed away. Ever since that day Draven had been the man of the house with just him and his mom. His typical days involve searching for ways to find money without becoming a thief.

One day Draven's mom, Jacquotte, was on her way back home from getting supplies for dinner when she saw an intriguing poster nailed to a wall, it read, "Join the new Arena! Test your might and climb the Ladder for Glory and Prizes!" Jacquotte reminisced about her days as a fighter when the first arena was built. The Arena's rewards made her early adulthood very comfortable. She continued walking home, now humbled realizing her best days are most likely behind her.

Draven was walking to the marketplace hoping to find some odd-jobs, when suddenly he heard a voice from an alley, it sounded pleasant, and called his name, he curiously and cautiously walked towards the call. "Hello Draven, I wanted to know how you would feel about joining the Arena said the voice. Draven mumbled, "What's the Arena?" The voice chuckled and showed him the poster from the wall, Draven reviewed it as anticipation covered his face. "This sounds incredible how do I get in?" he asked excitedly, the cloaked figure stepped forward and told Draven to follow, and within minutes they arrived at the gates.

"Wow there sure are a lot of people here," thought Draven. Draven eagerly entered behind Jackie and asked the man at the welcome desk how to sign up, The man at the welcome desk chuckled, "Sign up? You think your re..." Jacquotte quickly lifted her hood to show the man who she was while Draven was listened to the man. The man recognized Jacquotte from her Arena days, and realized this must be her son. "If you wanna "sign up" you gotta compete against another rookie," the man told Draven. Draven glanced back at Jacquotte, her hood now covering the features of her face again, then turned to the man and asked when he could fight. The man pointed to the armory and told Draven that all he had to do was find a weapon he liked

and move on to the next room. “Thank you, Mr. uh... what was your name again?” asked Draven. “Garx, call me Garx,” he replied. Draven thanked Garx and continued to the armory.

Jacquotte told Draven that once he selects his weapon she would move to the stands to spectate, Draven nodded and kept inspecting his bloody battle assistants. After scanning all the weapons he decided to choose the mace. He then walked up the staircase to the Fighting Area and told his Cloaked Companion he would meet her in the entrance hall after he won. She smiled slightly and said “Make me proud,” as she walked to the stairs leading to the stands.

The gates were very tall and dramatic, encrusted with Jewels and covered in elaborate spike and wave designs and sort of reminded Draven of a rose stem. He quickly forgot about this though to avoid distracting himself as the announcer began to talk. “Ladies and Gentlemen we are here with this Arena’s very first match! We got two rookies competing this afternoon, we hope you enjoy. In just 10 seconds the gates will rise and our combatants will begin.” Draven could feel his heart pump faster as the excitement flew through him. As the announcer got to 3 seconds in the countdown the gates slowly began to lift and he could now see the field and eventually the crowd. The Arena was packed with people all anxious for the fight to begin. 3...2..1... The Gates rose and the fight had begun...

Draven’s opponent was a scrawny kid about 14 or so, Draven was surprised the kid could even lift the sword he had chosen. He overpowered and outmaneuvered the poor kid before he could even get a single blow onto Draven, the fight was over before it began and the crowd was pleased they had a new person they could cheer for, Draven didn’t realize just how large the Arena was until now, he turned and looked at the crowd losing himself in the bath of glory. His opponent staggered up and lifted his sword attempting to catch Draven off guard, the crowd’s sudden gasps broke Draven’s hypnotic state and he quickly dodged the sword, and whacked it right from his opponent’s hand with his mace. The crowd cheered again as the fight was now over. Draven couldn’t stop relishing in the thoughts of victory as he descended the stairs back to the entrance hall, There Jacquotte was waiting, still cloaked and unidentifiable. “Well, did I do it? You proud of me?” Draven asked almost yelling. Jacquotte laughed and asked him what he could be proud of. All he did was beat up a kid half his size and 2 years younger. The thrill faded from Draven’s voice, shocked from her statement. Draven now turned to Garx and asked about his reward.

“Reward? For your first match? Your going to need a lot more victories then that for rewards, but trust me they’re worth it,” Garx said motioning at the pictures of Champions from previous Arena’s. Draven’s face lit up with awe, its like he was looking in a mirror of perfect dreams.

He looked back at Garx and asked when and what he can expect from rewards. Garx replied if he wins again he would receive 20 gold pieces.

Jacquotte spoke now, “20 gold pieces? That’s a lot more than I ... expected.” Garx mentioned that the Arena business had been real popular in other cities and they could now offer much better spoils. Draven coming back down to Earth remembered he was supposed to go to the market and wondered how he could explain what happened. Jacquotte giggled and told him his mom would understand that he was just trying to make some money.

“Yea, I hope you’re right Mrs. Uh... what do I call you,” Draven asked.

Jacquotte stuttered a bit, “You can call me Ja... Jackie,” she said.

Draven thanked Garx and Jackie as he left the Arena amazed and excited, he couldn’t wait to return.

Draven was nervous. He was terrified that his mom would not understand how great the rewards from the Arena could be, and how much he enjoyed himself. He crept up the stone stairs to his door, and opened the door slowly and prepared for his scolding. To his surprise his mother welcomed him with a warm welcome back. She asked how the job hunt at the market went, Draven sighed and began to describe his near magical day. At the end of the story Draven optimistically asked if he could continue competing. Jacquotte smiled and told Draven, that if he felt like he could earn more from the Arena than from favors he should go for it. Draven expressed his gratitude with a long hug, and went upstairs to shower. Jacquotte and Draven were both eagerly awaiting his next visit to the arena.

The next day Draven returned to the Arena and met up with Jackie at the entrance gates, she warned him not to get cocky while competing, as it has been the downfall of so many rookies, Draven reassured her he would stay focused and sprinted towards Garx’s desk to begin the match.

Draven swept through the Arena like no one before, he quickly became a crowd favorite and began to notice flags with his name imprinted on a mace in the crowd. Every win felt like a dream and he never wanted to wake up, everyday consisted of constant victories and cheering. Pretty soon he began to take down bigger and more famous names in the Arena, defeating even previous champions. He brought home gold like his family had never seen before, they were living comfortably, and Jacquotte thought her plan had gone perfectly. After his latest victory however, he asked Jackie a question she never expected, “So, how did you know I would be such a legend in the Arena Jackie?” She quickly announced that she herself was a Arena Champion when she was younger. She instantly realized what she had just inspired. “Really,” Draven questioned, “Well then you know what that means.” Garx, realizing how much people would love, the new Champion against his teacher, told Draven how Jackie was one of the best ever. Draven asked her if she would fight, she only did one thing. She removed her cloak that concealed her true identity, Draven was stunned. He couldn’t believe this whole time his mother had been the one coaching him through the ranks. Garx snarled, “Aw come on Jacquotte, you

ruined the fun, I just finished making these posters for the big match.” Draven glanced at the poster and saw the Arena full with screaming fans and flying mace flags with his name on it. He looked at Jacquotte and said, “We will fight mother, we cant just disappoint the crowd.”

Jacquotte thought about it, she saw this as a win-win, no matter who wins they get gold and lots of it. Jacquotte stared Garx in the eye and said “Put up those posters, we’ll fight tomorrow at noon.” Garx smiled and anxiously awaited the excitement of tomorrow.

Draven and Jacquotte walked up to the gates, Jacquotte donning her cloak to represent her Jackie identity. Garx welcomed them and told them the crowd was waiting. They both retrieved their weapons of choice, Mace for Draven and sword and a bow and arrow for Jackie. They walked to their respective gates as they waited for the match to start. The crowd was cheering Draven’s name before the match had begun. After some long intros and a lot of hype the match began.

They took it easy on each other at first, but the crowd saw the act and demanded a real fight, Draven looked his mother in the eye and nodded, the fight had begun for real now. Draven blocked incoming arrows with his mace and swung his mace at the bow. The crowd fueled him as became more and more aggressive. Jacquotte realized he wasn’t holding back and started aiming for his legs, he blocked all the arrows and had finally got in range to strike, he swept his mother’s feet with the mace and she fell down. Her bow had flew across the field and the match had pretty much been decided, but the crowd wanted more. They chanted and screamed and



demand a finisher, Draven had never killed anyone in the Arena before, but he had always listened to the crowd. He hesitated for a second until the screams of the crowd overwhelmed him, he lifted his mace, and struck his mother in the head. The match was now officially over. Draven stood in the center of the Arena and drowned

himself in the roar of the crowd. He had never felt more alive. He finally walked off the field and back to Garx at the desk, and asked if that was entertaining enough. Garx was shocked, Draven had let the pressure from the crowd do something truly evil. Draven left without even thinking about the gold reward, he just wanted to be loved by his fans that waited outside of the Arena, after signing autographs and accepting his praise he went back home and wondered... “Where’s mom?”

Positive

SPRINGTIME SUNSHINE

By: Morgan Johnson

She picked up the trash bag and slung it over her shoulder, making her way towards the next shelf. The bag was heavy due to being encumbered with old relics, such as journals full of late-night ramblings and unread greeting cards. Each one Monica tossed into the pile felt like a step closer towards forgetting the past, and letting go of the memories that had once consumed her. This is why she decided to initiate spring cleaning.

Springtime had always made Monica happy. Rainbows of colorful flowers and budding trees bordered yards, parks, and sides of highways. One could smell the fresh scent of new life outside. She thought her home deserved to be the same way – Glistening and dynamic.

The living room and kitchen had been exhaustively sifted, and fresh tulips were arranged upon every table surface. The windows and doors were cracked to push out the damp winter air, giving the room a brightness and breeziness that reminded of a cloud drifting lazily on a temperate afternoon.

All that was left was the bedroom. Monica made the first step down the hallway and swallowed hard. The path in front of her suddenly became twice as treacherous, and she became light-headed at the thought of what resided inside her bedroom closet. She stared at her destination intently as her feet drug across the floor, heavy as lead.

After a rigorous hike, Monica arrived. She placed her hand on the metal doorknob, its frigid temperature sending a shock up her arm. She shook her head, eyes squinted tightly shut. With a, “*Come on, you’re being an idiot,*” to herself, she performed the few motions it took to get inside.

This room’s color scheme was murkier; the walls were a deep shade of purple, and her bedding a light gray that reminded of a gloomy rain. At first glance, the room was quite clean. A hamper kept clothes from being strewn onto pieces of furniture, and a secret compartment in her nightstand held all of the electrical cords. This lack of clutter, however, was quite contrary to what was held inside the closet.

The closet wasn’t a residing place for clothes; that’s what her immense, oak dresser was for. No, the closet was where painful things were shoved away. All the mess that was too unbearable to face was pushed inside.

Monica delicately opened the sliding door to the closet, handling the matter as she would a fragile newborn. The space was too dim for eyes, so she opened the window’s blinds just enough to let in delicate streams of springtime light. The sunshine brought warmth and made her relax, if only for a moment, before she returned to the task at hand.

She knew every inch of the closet, for each piece inside locked together to complete the picture of her insanity. “*One box,*” she told herself. “*One box, and that will be good enough.*”

But even the thought of peering inside made her stomach churn violently. Any mention of him caused flashes of red to streak across her clear vision. The deep color would trickle into her thoughts and become a tyrant; it blocked good judgment of how she should live her life.

Monica reached inside, and blindly searched for a box. She pulled one out shakily with help from both arms, and plopped down on the ground. Her pulse thundered in her ears and scalding tears streamed down her face. Could she really do this?

His screams filled her thoughts, and once again the red lights glared. She found her hand resting on top of the cardboard container. Its scratchy surface was not assuaging.

"Five years," her mind whispered, *"Isn't it time to let go?"*

Their afternoons spent together filled with boisterous laughter washed like a cool breeze over her mind. Monica thought of his soft wrinkles and how ironic they were; they had aged him at least a decade, but they were caused by his unfaltering ability to smile.

He never would have wished for her to live this way.

Taking a deep breath through the nose, and out the mouth, she lifted the tape with her finger. It made an earsplitting rip; the seal was broken, and now she would have to face her fears.



Inside was the collection of picture books and letters, old and new. Without lingering or wistfully remembering the past, Monica dumped the contents of the box into her bundle of junk. The bag was finally filled, and with one swift motion, she tied the red strings together firmly.

After closing the closet door, she noticed a cloud of dust had erupted from her cleaning. The particles floated in the air, swaying side to side. In the springtime sunlight, the unsettled settled, glistening all the while.

Art

By: Emily Hickey



He was art;
all incoherent lines
and multiple colors,
creating something beautiful.

He was in the sunsets;
the pinks and oranges and purples,
strewn over a vast canvas,
constantly spilling over each other.

He was her reason to paint;
allowing her to forever express
the things that made him *him*,
through her perspective.

He was abstract,
made of things that didn't make sense.
He was her art,
and her imagination.

THE SHOT.

By: Christian Mercado

This piece is based on a true story. (YES, it really did happen.) And, yes my story is about basketball. I want to say sorry in advance because a lot of my stories will be about sports. Also, I tried posting this last night, and I couldn't figure out how to post it onto the theme page. So I just decided to post it on regular with a note that this is my first passion entry. Also, I'm not sure why the spacing of all of my pieces mess up when I post them.

Basketball isn't a game a team can simply win with skill. A team must have knowledge, love for the game, and most of all, the team must consist of players with huge hearts. Usually, people look for these qualities in professional and collegiate teams. But, one doesn't have to look that far for evidence. Teams that understand how to win can even be found in Fuquay Varina's Community Center.

My team, the 76ers were the supposed number one seed in the league. With great players and decent back-ups at almost every position, our team literally was set to be undefeated. But, this was just our fourth game together. We had won our first few games almost by default, but our chemistry wasn't even close to where we needed it to be for the challenges that we would face. This flaw showed during one particular game. We had been facing the number two seed, the Celtics. This team was a group of kids who had been playing together for their whole lives. Not particularly as stacked as us, but with a mixture of chemistry and great defense, the team created a huge problem for us.

Our team's problems started at tip-off. Our usual offensive attack plan was to pass until a clear lane appeared, then drive through the lane in an attempt to draw fouls in order to get easy points off the free throw line. This plan, designed for teams that lacked interior defense, didn't work. The Celtics center was extremely skilled at protecting the rim; he knew exactly where to move to evade defensive foul calls. This great interior wall the team had, threw my team off. We had no secondary option, we did love to shoot three pointers, but even only the best of our shooters, rarely made them.

Somehow, my team stayed in the game. We didn't have the lead, and we weren't particularly so far behind that coming back was impossible. But, with major let downs that occurred through the game (Like their point guard hitting a half court buzzer beater before half-time) really drove our team down. We had been in a game like this before, but the lead wasn't nearly as big, and that game our three pointers were actually going in. I didn't want to give up, I'd never been the type of guy who quit when things were going the way I wanted them to. So, a solution had to be found. Someone had to step up.

As I heard the ref's call for my team's final timeout, I peered up at the clock. With two minutes and thirty-eight seconds remaining, the Celtics were up by thirteen. I ran to my team, and as my coach went through his regular speech describing how we needed to do this and do that, I thought to myself. How much of a disgrace would it be to loose to this team? We were the 76ers, the number one seed, how could this happen? Due to the reason that heart played a huge role in how I play the game, I knew coming back wasn't impossible. But because this team was supposed to be so great, cockiness wiggled itself into my personality on the court, and in order to win this game I had to shake it off. All I needed to do was to play the game how I knew how to play it. This meant playing with passion, and with a will to win no matter what.

When our timeout was over, I walked onto the court and watched my teammates. Each with different skill sets, and personalities, but they all shared something, the determination to win this game.

The next minute and thirty eight seconds went by in a flash. I started the run by driving directly to the hoop and receiving a much deserved basket (My first of the game). After this, my team knew that we needed to send the Celtics to the line due to their incapability to shoot free throws. After my first drive, I realized that driving would be an easy way to get back into the game, so I selfishly, drove time, and time again. Each time the ball went in, a quick foul was made. After one of the Celtic's had missed both of their free throws, this process was restarted. A quick pass-in and drive was all we needed. Four of my five attempts went in, this cutting the lead to just five points.

With only fifty-eight seconds left on the clock, it was truly time to shoot in desperation. For some reason, my team decided to stop our technique of fouling and let the other team run out the clock twenty seconds. Surprisingly, I made it across the court in time to foul the other team by the time the clock was at twenty-five seconds. After my quick foul, the Celtics player missed both free throws. But, as I said this team was good, and finally caught on to our plan. While they double teamed me, my teammate decided to throw the ball into our center, which was already half way down the court. As I sprinted down the court screaming for the ball, he hoisted up a three pointer. For my team, it seemed as the ball rolled around the rim one hundred times, but after its rolls, it softly went in. With this luck shot, the Celtics lead was cut to only two points. After one last quick foul, the Celtics best player was sent to the line. As I screamed to my coach asking if we had any timeouts remaining, the Celtics point guard missed his first free throw. At this moment, I took a mental break. I looked at each and every one of my teammates, proud and happy. We had turned this blowout game into something exciting, something great. But, reality soon hit as he missed his last free throw. The ball luckily fell out of bounds; therefore the clock was stopped at five seconds. Being triple teamed; I wove my way through my defenders in an attempt to catch a pass.



When the ball landed in my hands, I felt like I had been shot. With five seconds on the clock, the game was up to me. There was no longer any chance of getting a quick pass and having one of my teammates hoist up a shot. At this moment, the game was

truly mine. As I sprinted down the court as fast as my legs would let me, my teammates screamed in desperation for me to shoot. But, due to the fact that I was being triple teamed, running across the court was a difficult task. After what seemed like an Olympic race, I saw that I had passed half-court. I can remember dribbling at least two or three steps and then coming to a complete stop. I quickly peered up to the clock which read two seconds. Of course, like every other youth basketball player I loved to shoot threes. But at this time I was at least five feet behind the three point line. I didn't have any time to run a few more steps and get a two pointer or an easier three pointer. I had to shoot this ball.

The shot felt somewhat like lifting a car off trapped body, and watching it go through the air was indescribable. The ball was very close to approaching the rim when the buzzer sounded. Almost fainting, I watched my shot swish through the net. I had won the game with a buzzer beater. The crowd erupted in amazement, and at first, I couldn't believe the shot went in. Watching something like this happen, especially to you, is unbelievable. I felt like I was going to faint, and I probably would have if it wasn't for my teammates running to me on the court. As they ran to me, reality hit me, I began screaming and cheering.

While my teammates were either hugging or congratulating me, I looked through their eyes. All of them were as amazed and happy as I was. It was at this moment, I realized basketball players shouldn't play the game by themselves just to make themselves look good, or to try and do crazy moves. Basketball players should play the game with their team, and with a passion and desire to win, no matter what the score. If you truly love the game you shouldn't ever give up.

THE FLAME AND THE ACOLYTE

By: Nicholas Babb

Is one's safety really worth the cost of their life? A life that is full of personal experiences and memories. According to the government, apparently so. Those people think they know what is best for us; they think they have the right to sell off what we own if they are able to make a convincing excuse. Humanity is not perfect but, is that necessarily a bad thing? This imperfection is what makes us human.

Many years ago, all of human society decided to join together under one government. Adapt one language, one mentality and all for the sake of something called world peace. The newly formed government could not stop their mission of world peace there however. They wanted to not only make human society peaceful, but the interaction between humans as well. With these hopes, mankind built machines; machines that were able to "fill in" or so for humans. Machines that were still controlled by the person who replaced themselves in life but, also machines that ended human interaction and completely stole a person from reality and placed them in a world that they could call their own. In order to fund the project, government officials allowed users to change the features of their humanoid replacement to their likings. This worked for most and soon all humans on earth were using this interface and living in a dream world. No one was required to switch and some even denied it, as I did. We kept ourselves attuned to the reality that all of humanity used to know, while the others continued to live in their mind in a dream that they never wanted to wake up from.

The new day began. I awoke free from the suppression of a false reality, unlike most of the world. In fact they really did not wake up at all. Their bodies lay dormant whilst their mind dreamt of how they began the day; how their replacement would begin the day. I tried not to think about this constant threat of a diminishing society but it was of no prevail. Every day I would be forced to watch these machines wander the earth, controlled by humans who willingly gave up their life just to protect themselves. However, if they no longer have their life, then what is there to protect? I exited my home and began my daily walk to a diner I enjoy. It's been a habit of mine for quite some time. Most likely not the best, but it's better than staying cooped up in that house of mine. As I meandered about my quest on the sidewalks of the city I noticed a certain young man, or machine, that seemed to be having difficulty walking. He probably just started using that machine today, I thought to myself. After children grow up from their smaller child-like machines, they are up fitted to an adult model.

"Still getting used to the fresh pair of legs?" I said with a smile. The young man looked at me with confusion.

"What do you mean? I have had these legs since I was born."

My friendly grin soon turned into a face full of pity and sorrow. This boy, hardly even an adult, won't even admit to himself that those really are not his legs. He hides in denial of his true self who has been sitting in his room since the day he was born, being kept alive by life supporting equipment whilst he dreamt a life-long dream that he never dared to wake from. This sorrow turned to anger. Not anger at the boy of course, but at the society that had raised him. Most likely, he will never see the light of day again.

From now and until his brain dies, he will remain a prisoner inside of a machine. He will remain a prisoner not solely out of his own will, but for the sake of his alleged safety.

I finally made my way to the diner. As I entered, a waitress quickly greeted me and showed me to a seat. The menu on the table did not appeal to me: the contents of the menu were nothing but disappointment. Nowadays, since humans rely on life support for their nutrients, restaurants are not as common. The ones that exist, such as this one, sell food or scannable cards that can alter a human's senses into making them feel as if they are eating. This diner is special however, because it still offers food for humans or non-machine users. I read a small section labeled "REAL" that stood segregated into the corner of the menu. I proceeded to order my food and made sure to tell the waitress that I wanted the "REAL" food. As I said REAL, silence swarmed and suffocated the once lively diner, while cold and hard stares came from the artificial corneas that resided in all the machines. I cannot believe that I, a human who refused to give up his humanity, is judged and shunned by the people who ignorantly sold their life. I finished my accursed food and proceeded to leave, closing the chrome finished door behind me.

"Hey... Hey you!" said a mysterious figure in the alleyway. "Me?" I responded, pointing to myself. "Yea come'ere, I got something for ya." I proceeded to walk towards the figure, still having caution and keeping my distance. As I grew closer the mysterious being came into light. It was a man, slightly shorter than me and with brown and worn clothing. Most machines dress fairly decent, but this one was raggedy and seemed like he hadn't been to a mechanic in ages.

"You ain't one of them machines are ya?" asked the man, while poking my arm with a magnet.

"No, I'm human." I responded. The man grew a small smile.

"Good, I ain't one either and that'll make this thing I got for ya ever specialer."

"What do you have for me? Are you some kind of mail-machi...man?"

"You could say that I suppose." Contested the man while slightly raising his brow. "I take it you weren't as easily taken by the government to get one a them fancy machine people. A scam, all it is. Wanting to take away the life of a man, just so the old man has it easy and don't got to protect his citizens."

This was a relief, finally someone who shared my pain of this worldly dilemma. Maybe all hope is not lost in the world yet. There are still people who didn't fall prey to the government's actions.

"So, what is it that you wanted to give me?" I contested; breaking out of my daydream.

"What do ya think about this world we live in kid?"

"Life still continues I suppose but it was wrong for the government to do what they did and technically imprison all of humanity."

"If given the power.... Would you stop it, stop all of this madness and return mankind to the reality that the government censored them from?"

"Yes! Of course I would! I would rid man of this plague that has cast them into this foul and deep sleep. Of course there is no way though. This race that once powered the world is now dead. All that remain are soulless machines that are manipulated by the minds of the once victorious society."

The man grinned whilst his eyes were shaded by the alleyways darkness.

“But your wrong kid, there is always a way. A light in the darkness that has not yet been overcome by the shadows that wishes to diminish it.”

Silence suffocated the air; only to be interrupted by the slight icy breaths that came from the man. The man lifted his arm and tossed something towards me. As it landed in my palm, the man said, “I’ll give you the responsibility. Be this world’s acolyte and strengthen the diminishing flame that can save this race.” I looked up, not knowing what to say. Thank you maybe? The man had however, already dispersed and was nowhere to be found.

What would I thank him for though? What did he actually give me? I exited the curtain of darkness that expanded over the alleyway and reentered the reality of light that overflowed the streets. I looked in my hand. It was... a flash drive? A flash drive? What could possibly be on here that would let me light the candle of the world, or whatever that man said. I released a small smile as if to unbind the confusion of what had just happened. Putting the mysterious drive into my pocket, I continued my retreat home.



I had returned home now and night had encompassed the city. Light shone through the balcony window from the city plaza outside. My computer hummed and beeped as I stared at the cryptic drive and tried to ponder the arcane things that it could hold. With a gasp I broke from my pondering and inserted the drive into the computer. It whirred and buzzed as the enigmatic drive unraveled its true identity. On the drive was a program labeled with two capitalized words; “WAKE UP”.

What was this? Wake up? What could this program possibly do... A light in the darkness that has not yet been overcome by the shadows... Be this world’s acolyte... Strengthen the diminishing flame. I moved the computer cursor over the program and with a resistant yet yearning click, I executed the program. Text appeared on the screen. “Are you the Acolyte? [Y] or [N]” Reading the prompt, I hit the “Y” key on the keyboard. A candle now appeared on the screen. With a bright spark it lit and read the words, “Corrupting Human-Machine Data and Support Network...”. Shocked yet full of overbearing suspense, I ran to the window that viewed the city plaza. The machines that once walked across its cobbled tiles now stood dead and lifeless. Wondering what I had truly done, worry began to swell inside of me. However, at an instant it flew away. Across the plaza, in other homes, I began to see movement. People... real people... began to emerge from the darkened window frames onto their ledges. The candle that had been lit; it had awakened man. The machine’s now dreamt in their exchanged, eternal sleep while man had once again gained his grasp of reality. Man no longer lived in fantasy.

I MISS YOU

By: Lily Duquette

Dedicated to Jason Kim. 1/1/97-3/3/14

Funny.
Smart.
Patient.
Forgiving.
Your best qualities.



Fast flowing tears
Falling down my cheeks.
Heartbroken.
Crushed.
Alone.

Gone.
That's where you've disappeared.
Dead.
Passed on.
In a better place.
I can't listen to my music

You've caused me this.
Depressed.
Crying.
Missing you.



I'll see you again.
I love you.
I miss you.
"I'll see you in NYC."
Okay.

Music

By: Cici Lawes



My passion is music,
it calms me down when I think im going to lose it
I can do anything off the top of my head,
its crazy how many young people are dead
How many people are doing drugs
just because they didn't ever get a hug
See what I just did?
I just told the truth with rhymes
because that's the only way people will understand

Music is my passion and I do it everyday,
no matter what people say everything goes my way
or we do it over again because they always said no pain no gain
So how can I have gain if I don't put myself through the pain
Rap to me is like that main vein
I need it because it keeps me alive
To the point where I want to dive,
head first in the ocean and drown my thoughts so then people will understand See?
I just did it again Gave you my thoughts on how my world began
Music is my passion,
not for the money or the fashion, but its how I block out reality;
its how I become me the only person I want to be
When you have a passion nothing gets in your way,
this is what I say and this is my day and it always will be
Just hope people have passion like me.