



A QUICK HAUNT

Thank you to the students who submitted their creative writing selections and to Kaitlyn Amborn for her artwork on the cover. For most of these students this is the first time they will see their writing in publication. Their emotions are often raw and honest, and their uses of language and subject matter are fearless. I encourage these remarkable and imaginative writers to continue to seek clarity in their expressions of feelings and ideas as they strive to understand themselves, others, and the world around them.

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Professor Joy Lyle, Editor

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Kaitlyn Amborn

The Lonely Ant

As I pull out of the driveway
In my 1999 Honda Civic
I notice something
It is not the small boy behind me
Riding his little blue bike
It is an ant on my windshield
And how it does not know
That it is traveling so far from home
The little boy screams
And I flinch as I think about the lonely ant
I hear yelling as people run my way
I tell them it is okay
The little ant will be just fine
He knows how much he is loved

Kaitlyn Amborn

That Summer

One summer I worked at a crematorium and kept the soft scent
of death always on my collar

It was the summer I saw cardinals everywhere

The summer where every time I heard "I love you" all I could hear
was "this is it"

That summer was the last time you heard your own voice on earth
Raspy, with some leftover breath from all the moments you kept
stored up in your lungs

That summer was ice chips from death cups

And a lesson in permanence

That summer covered in grayscale hues

Cold to the touch and blue

That summer burned down to bare bones

Introduction to *The Hollow*

Hello. My name is Saden Marie Addams. I was born a very long time ago. A very, very, long time ago. Let's say at least five billion years. Look, I know what you are thinking: no human was born that long ago; you must be joking. Well, truth be told, I'm not human. In Christianity, they, humans that is, labeled me Mammon. Essentially, I am the child of the Devil. However, my name is not Mammon, it is Satan. Now, I know that there's a common misconception about the Devil and Satan being the same figure. There is a big difference between Satan (me) and the Devil (my father). First of all, the Devil is a man and Satan is a woman. Second, I am so much nicer than my father, or at least by my standards. Third, I look way better than him. I mean, I got the luscious black hair and lavender eyes while he got stuck with a bald head and red eyes. In other words, I got the tall glass of water look while he looks like a stout tree trunk. But, don't get me wrong: I prefer my father over my mother. God, I hated Her (pun intended).

God had a lover. She had fallen madly in love with my father, who at the time was a holy angel with no sense of wrongdoing. It was before I was born, however, that my father, now commonly known as Lucifer, fell from God's grace. He became a madman. She had cast him out of heaven for loving Her more than the humans She created to fill the vast emptiness that was the Earth. He became drowned in his own anger and lust for he had loved Her so much, or at least, I like to think he did. That was when I came to be. When my mother realized that I would not be an angel but instead a demon, She cast me down to the Earth where I fell through to Hell. That spot where I hit the Earth is where the gates of Hell lie. As a small baby, I had no idea how much that would change my father's future. He decided selflessly that he had to put his emotions aside that had spawned in the wake of his demise. However, he didn't just put them aside. He created seven beings to contain these emotions: Pride, Wrath, Lust, Envy, Greed, Sloth, and Gluttony. And in so doing, God created seven equals to these emotions: Modesty, Tranquility, Chastity, Content, Temperance, Persistence, and Restraint. These equals were created to keep their counterparts in check.

But, back to me. After all, much of history really does include me. As the years flew by, I began to notice small repertory events.

Nothing major to you, an “all knowing” human. What you read in history class as a kid was only half of the full story. Tell me, did you ever learn about the Vampire and Werewolf battles that took place? What about the Great Mythical Wars? Over the course of history, there were twelve. Creatures joined with other creatures to fight common enemies. I didn’t think you had heard of them. But, humans have heard of us. How can we tell? The movies of course! Frankenstein (not a bad fellow if I might add), Dracula (Transylvania is nice this time of year), and of course, those shit Twilight movies. (Which, by the way, Vampires do not sparkle, they are not “allergic” to sunlight, and they definitely are not capable of lifting things ten times their weight. I would know. I was friends with a whole family of vampires; and trust me, Dennis couldn’t beat me at arm wrestling if his life depended on it.) One thing the movies did get right is that they can survive off the blood of animals. Hell, that’s how the Bailey’s got along. My point is that humans have created this idea that we “mythical” creatures are these horrible, vicious animals who are thirsty for human blood. Well, not all of us are like that. There are a select few, but they tend to keep to themselves. Mermaids, now those things are creepy.

When I was eighteen years old, I was given a job by my father. My job was to record major events in creature history as they unfolded before me. I only ever recorded one event which revolved around a human and her husband. The reason I recorded this event was that it had ended with the product of True Love, the most magical event to ever be witnessed. Now, back to the fact that I had started to notice repeating events, this was not the first time I had met the girl. The first time I met her, was back in ancient Egypt. Every so often, I’d emerge from Hell and live the history instead of watching. Although, I would often sit and root for different sides down in Hell when it came to wars. It was like football season to me. Anyway, I became one of her servants and eventually served her until her death. When I worked for the Barton family, somewhere in the 1700s, and I saw Thomas bring her to the mansion to be his maid, I couldn’t believe my luck. But it was after I realized that she was no longer the same girl that I would have to gain her trust all over again. Soon after, Thomas asked her to marry him. In the end, she did marry him and life went on. They died a very happy couple. The 1950s was when I met her again on the street, but once more she was a different person. She didn’t remember me, and our time together was so short that I never remember the name of that form. In the year 2013, I met her once again. That was when Kayla first came to our town. This is the story of the Hollow. A safe haven for the lost and lonely creatures.

Bryan Brain

Westerville

Twelve hour drive today, my brain is fried, oh,
Car crash in Illinois, road work here in Ohio.

Thankfully I paid for this nice hotel,
Because driving today was like driving through hell.

The front desk clerk was very nice and polite,
But she recommended next time, that we catch a flight.

We thanked her and took all our bags to the room,
It would be cool and clean, at least that's what I assumed.

The remote was sticky, there were stains on the floor,
I saw a crack in the mirror, and a broken lock on the door,
But this wasn't the worst, when to my horror,
I walked to the bathroom, and opened the door.

There in the middle of the white tile floor,
Was a used pair of underwear that chilled me to the core.

Now this may sound like reason to be mad,
But sleeping in the car isn't all that bad.

An Excerpt from *Flaxen Walls*

I take in one deep breath. As I exhale an intense wail forces its way out of my body. My knees hit the floor and I am forced to be grounded. Holding myself in the center of what feels like hell is my haven.

Two Months Earlier –

I stare at the “Beware of Dog” sign that is duct taped to the screen door. The plastic covering shows its age as it begins to curl in the upper left corner. I roll my eyes and take a deep breath. Maybe she’s awake? Maybe she is on the couch crocheting and he is watching Jeopardy in the recliner next to her. There is a possibility she’s not on day three of swollen eyes and numb finger tips. He could be cooking her dinner for once and watching anything, but the news. Fuck, I know as soon as I open this metal “siren” they use to guard the opening of dim lighting and the smell of mold that their tiny black fur ball will wake with an instant fury. I guess an aggressive lap dog compensates for not having children. I reach for the cold handle and turn it. BOOM, sensory overload. Dog barking, metal screeching, television so loud I close my eyes and take a second to collect myself.

I step in the door and immediately shoo away the dog as it nips at my ankles. It backs away and growls under raised whiskers. Shutting the door behind me I prepare myself for the immense sensation of isolation to take over my body. As I turn around my naïve fantasy of white walls becomes a salutary reminder of my reality. The room is filled with second hand furniture, hoarded paintings on each wall, and brown matted carpet that is clearly lying on top of another shitty looking carpet. Slumped over the arm of the couch is my aunt. There is hair covering her face, but it does not mask the deep snoring through the oxygen tubes in her nose. I go to say her name and attempt to wake her up gently when I see a cigarette in her right hand burning a hole into the couch. I run over to her, quickly take the cigarette from her hand and put it out. I sit down next to her and shake her arm lightly, “Jesus Iona. Your oxygen is on.”

Diary Entry #005

I was 9 when I first saw him.
It was at my birthday party,
his stature over my father was laughable.
My father, the tower of muscle, looked as dainty
as a child with their parent.
I did not talk to him at first,
nor did I even think to threaten him with a gaze.
His plans for me, however, were sinister.

My mother was sweet.
She knew the attention was too much for me.
She would let me hide in my room when the crowd
made me anxious.
Under my covers,
sheltered from the world,
I saw him. It.
At first, I thought it was a shadow over my blanket.
It was too twisted to be my mother checking on me.

I cannot remember leaving from the cover.
Sometimes I fear that part of me, the real me, remained there...
in his shadow.

Rowdy Curry

Terrifying Tales of the Post-Tree Dilemma

I am a napkin.

I am useful.

People appreciate me, but I am doomed to an unsavory fate.

For those hygienic do not require my assistance.

My coarse hands shall never touch your smooth cheeks,
nor your supple lips.

What life is that?

I may as well just take the plunge into that hot breakfast drink
myself.

But I am a napkin.

Who cares about me anyway?

Michael Davis

Your Soulmate Said Yes

It had been three hours of this... foreign feeling he couldn't describe before he finally figured it out.

He had been pacing around the living room, straightening things here and there — fluffing a pillow, correcting a tilted picture frame, wiping a smudge off the glass table — when it started, a sharp, intake of breath followed closely by some type of vertigo effect; not knowing whether he was floating or falling had him a bit terrified. The dizziness passed just as quickly as it came, though, but it had left a pocket of unease inside his chest. What was that?

Over the next two hours and fifty-nine minutes, he would break out into several cold sweats, become winded at the subtlest of movements, and experienced black dots and light spots in his vision. At the three-hour mark, he found that his mind was repeatedly drawn to the TV remote no matter how many times he focused on other things. Turn on the news. The premonition wouldn't leave him alone. So, he did.

The anchors had been reporting a car accident. Live footage from a helicopter flashed on the screen. EMTs and their flashing purple lights illuminated the road, revealing rubble and loose car parts that were scattered about. The wreck looked bad. Then came in the update.

One dead.

Seeing the words. Hearing them spoken. It ignited that feeling he had been enduring for three hours and brought it to the surface like hot lava. Bubbling all over and consuming everything in its wake, leaving the face of the landscape changed forever.

In therapy, days later, Griffin would come to find out that his inexpressible feeling from that night was commonly referred to as the “Reaper Effect”, a strange phenomenon only observed in widowed soulmates.

“It's almost like... you can feel a piece of yourself — of your spirit — being torn in half and ripped to pieces, and it just leaves this gaping hole inside of you, one that you know will never ever be filled again; and there's nothing you can do about it.”

“Griffin? Griffin? Mr. Cohen?” Griffin's head snapped up away from his phone. His therapist—Dr. Bedon—stared at him with wide eyes over the frame of his glasses. “Is everything okay, Griffin?”

Dr. Bedon had a nice, smooth flick of the wrist that barely went noticed when he made notes on his notepad unless you had actively trained yourself to notice it; he never took his eyes off of his patients so it was pretty tricky

to spot. However, training himself to notice was exactly what Griffin had done, so when he spotted it, he forced himself to sit up, shoved his phone in between his thighs, and mustered up a courtesy smile.

"Sorry about that. I was just... talking to a, uh, friend."

Dr. Bedon chewed on his lip as he scribbled down, *Embrssd?*

"We can talk about them if you like?" Dr. Bedon said, voicing Griffin's ominous concern.

"No!" He cleared his throat when Dr. Bedon tilted his head ever-so-slightly. "We don't have to," Griffin chuckled. "We're not here because of them, right?"

Dr. Bedon narrowed his eyes and Griffin lifted his arms a little to let his armpits breathe.

"No, go ahead; tell me about this friend of yours. If they're making you happy, then I would love to hear. We're here because of *you*, Griffin, so let's talk about *you*."

Griffin cocked his head the same amount of degrees and smiled sweetly. *Too sweet.*

"Well, I mean *if you insist*." He faked giggled. Just like his mother did with her friends from church. *Friend* on Sundays, *that homewrecking whore* every other day.

"Umm... we met on a dating site—er, app, I suppose." An awkward chuckle. "Oh, but we aren't interested in each other like that," Griffin explained seeing the surprised eyes his therapist had given him. "We're just... talking? Apparently, a lot of people just like to talk on a dating app..."

He tapped his fingers together while Dr. Bedon pondered carefully over his response.

"So, you're..." Dr. Bedon licked his lips and shifted in his seat, crossing his legs in the opposite direction. "...making friends off of a dating app?"

Griffin winced. "Yes? Does that sound bad? That sounds bad, doesn't it? Well, I suppose I am. It was... Well, I saw somebody had recommended it on some online forum—a coping forum." Griffin chuckled again, forcing his gaze *not* to focus on Dr. Bedon's fine movements.

Griffin wondered how many times had he laughed already? Dr. Bedon would have noticed if he'd done it more than twice already, especially if he wasn't telling a funny story — which he wasn't. Griffin's eyes fell to Dr. Bedon's hand which had stopped moving.

"What have you guys talked about so far? The topic of conversation must have been interesting to have had it impede on our session, no?"

Griffin's cheeks hurt from how much he had been smiling. He was sure Dr. Bedon had been jotting that down, too (the man was sneaky like that), but he was a warrior. If his mother could keep it up every Sunday, then so could he.

"We..." Griffin cursed himself for all the pauses he had been taking. He definitely wasn't the most suited for this kind of thing—*lying*—and it was probably why nobody as children had told him their secrets. "...talk about whatever comes to mind, basically. Honestly, we could carry a conversation about the weather or the big pothole down on Main Street. It's very... *chill*."

Griffin took a deep breath. *That was better.* More natural. Like his mother.

Dr. Bedon hummed while he scratched out what he had written earlier and added next to it. *Hidn smth? Susp behav ovr frnd.* He underlined it twice.

"I see. Sounds like a good friend, then," Dr. Bedon said, uncrossing his legs and manspreading, a power play that told Griffin that his therapist was onto him. "How long have you had this dating app, Griffin?"

Griffin smacked his lips and threw his head back letting out a high-pitched, drawn out, nonchalant, "Um!" He reclined in his seat and manspread, too. When he peeked at his therapist again, he could have sworn he saw his eye twitch. How was *that* for a power play, Doc?

"About six or seven months?" Griffin eventually answered. "I forgot I downloaded it until I was emptying my phone's storage the other day. Thought I'd check it out and got sucked in."

"Sucked into a dating app, you say?"

Griffin shrugged. "Like I said, a lot of people just like to talk." His hope that Dr. Bedon wouldn't ask *why* he was emptying his phone's storage lived on to see another day.

Dr. Bedon tucked his pen in his hair and clasped his hands together. "Mr. Cohen? I would like to ask you something personal. Is it okay if I do that, now?"

Oh, crap. Griffin swallowed before giving a small nod. "Yes."

"Perfect! Thank you for your permission. Now... what is it that you're hiding from me? Or, *at least attempting to?*"

Griffin had to come to a decision — *and quick!*

Was he going to smile, laugh, or hesitate?

Miraculously, he did all three.

"Wow, that is *so* hilarious, Doc. *Super.*"

While Dr. Bedon wrote, *Chk Phn*, Griffin created a mental note of his own: *Delete Messages.*

Sav Ford

The Middle of Nowhere, Iowa

Smoke mixes with breath in a puff of white
We climb in the car together, and yet
We are alone.
Snowy country roads blur in the darkening light.
He sleeps in the back as the cloud soothes his head,
And her music plays loud,
Louder than the thoughts she shovels past.
I drive.

The car shakes on unstable ground.
It should lull me, but my mind wanders,
A puff of smoke.
My eyes are focused, my feet aware,
And hands responsive to the car,
But I am elsewhere.
I am the floating breath of thought.

Carried by bitter gusts across my windshield
Are hundreds of weightless flakes
Tossed far from the rattling car,
Far, far from my little, human body.
But I follow them.
I dance with the deadly, biting wind
Into nothingness
Where nothing really matters anymore.

But soon our breath will dissipate,
As breath does,
And we will force our loneliness
Into a pale puff of smoke.
I will drive forward.
And we will be
Alone
Together,
A couple of nobodies
In the middle of winter
In the middle of nowhere.

Sav Ford

Eve's Forbidden Fruit

The tempter's gaze
Is neither demanding nor oppressive
As they had once told me.
It is sweet,
Sweet as the apple she holds
Extended out as an offering,
An inviting gesture,
A forbidden fruit.
I take it.
Endless warnings,
All rehearsed and insistent and violent,
Shout from inflexible voices
Steeled in the back of my mind.
But then,
When my lips touch the smooth skin,
My teeth sink deep,
And the overwhelming bitterness
Is gone,
Swallowed up by the sweetness
Of Eve's forbidden fruit.

Sav Ford

Chapter 1 of Sav's upcoming novel:

Stray

Two stray dogs circled each other, tense, watching and waiting, searching for an opening, a mistake, a weakness to exploit. The larger of the two dogs made the first move. He lunged forward impatiently, barreling headlong toward the other stray. The smaller dog yelped and lashed out. A bad decision, as it turned out. The large stray landed on top of the other dog, snarling and biting. They struggled. They growled, yelped, and tore into each other's flesh, barbaric and unforgiving until...

At last, the violent flurry died. One dog lay whimpering and trembling in surrender, his blood highlighting the branching veins of the crumbling concrete ground. The other dog, the small one, straightened his battered frame. He was alive. He was standing.

He had won.

The crowd roared with approval, but the stray could hardly hear their booming over the deafening thunder that already pounded - *tha-thump* - in his ears. He was lucky he hadn't died. The other dog had been stronger and bigger and had made the better first move. If he had just gone for the stray's neck when he was first knocked down... It wouldn't have been too hard, not at all... And just like that, the stray would have been dead, another cold, unfeeling corpse rendered lifeless in the very place his trembling feet touched the broken ground.

But even if barely, the stray *was* alive, so he forced his head to clear and his heart to slow. He couldn't afford panic, not now. The money for one fight wasn't nearly enough. It would cover a week's food if he was lucky, a couple days if he wasn't, and shelter from the bitterness of winter wasn't even a remote possibility yet.

The stray would have to fight again.

The second fight was far quicker, the stray beating another small, scraggly dog, one that was jumpy and skittish and seemed to have had very little experience fighting. She fought to unconsciousness.

The stray continued.

Three more fights. Four. Five. The stray was injured and filthy with blood. Everything in his body pounded, throbbed, ached, but coursing adrenaline kept him standing. He pushed forward recklessly.

On the eighth fight, the stray's luck began to dwindle, and his throat was nearly slit.

On the ninth, a large gash was torn in his side, one that he had to thread together himself with hasty, shuddering hands once the fight was over. He was lucky, though. The tear hadn't been deep enough to cause much internal damage.

But that's where the stray's good fortune ran dry. When the small dog stumbled into the arena to begin yet another fight, an immediate whirlwind of panic took rise in his chest, and his head spun with the storm's wild gusts. He stared. Before him, the stray's opponent lumbered forward, a large, hulking figure, more of a bear than a dog, really. An angry bear that clearly wasn't in the fight for the money.

The two didn't circle; they stood. They both looked the other up and down, sizing even though a single glance made it obvious that the stray was dangerously outmatched. Still, the stray kept his head held despite all fear. The bear just snorted with amusement. She charged.

The stray fumbled out of the bear's way as fast as his current condition would allow, but she shifted her direction immediately, plowing directly into his small body. It was almost effortless. He was flung limply and collided straightway with the high-reaching arena wall. His skull rattled in pain with the resounding solid *thud*. And before the stray could even hope to regain composure, the bear had gripped him and slammed him again, again, relentlessly into the wildly abused concrete.

The stray's world blurred and edged on blackness. The fringes of his vision were already gone. His lungs felt small. And the bear just perched atop his starved body, crushing him, killing him, amused as he desperately thrashed about.

But the stray wasn't dead. Not yet.

The afternoon shadows shifted in their shapes, like grey mist blown by a rogue wind as they neglected the outlines of their opaque creators. Then suddenly, the bear began to struggle for breath, clawing hopelessly at her throat, and....

She fell limp.

Wearily, the stray shrugged the bear's massive weight off his body. His joints ached with exhaustion, and his trembling legs threatened to give. But still, the stray stood.

The crowd cheered joyously as the stray staggered out of the arena, but he still struggled to register their sound. He grabbed his bag from where it waited outside the gate, scanned his ID chip, and left.

The stray just hoped he wouldn't get mugged on the way back to the apartment complex.

At the apartments, the small dog was still a stray, but perhaps less canine. To the apartments' lord, he was a desperate money source, like a miserably hungry fish, willing to fight for mere scraps of dry bread. To his neighbors, he was something like a lone wolf who avoided the company of others. In the nearby marketplace, he was seen as a skittish mouse, eating nearly anything to sustain life. And in the busy streets, he was only another simple sheep in the herd.

But always, always, wherever he went, the stray was nothing more than a lowly, little animal.

"Hello again," said the lord at his secretary desk, hardly glancing at the stray's bloodied condition. He completely ignored the unsightly purple and yellow already peaking through battered skin and didn't even notice the

dingy bandage hiding stitches the stray had done in such a rush. None of that mattered to the lord.

“Survived for another tournament day, I see. Here for the rest of the season?”

The stray nodded and pulled out a bundle of thin, plastic rectangles with neatly printed numbers: IC, the international currency. The lord counted the pieces with slow, hungry eyes. He nodded.

“Very nice, very nice. You can keep the flat until the next tournament day, then.” The lord stuffed the IC into a tired, cord-drawn bag and handed over the key the stray had turned in just that morning. He didn’t bother to thank the stray, and the stray didn’t bother to thank him either. He just turned and fumbled his way up the stairs toward apartment #327.

The stairwell was thankfully empty as the stray approached the third floor. His legs still shook, though more from exhaustion at that point than from pain. He was too tired for pain. He was too tired for anything. The stray knew he still needed to clean his wounds, of course, but he didn’t feel strong enough for much else that night.

Just as the stray had finally placed his dragging feet on the third floor landing, however, he noticed a problem: just outside of the stray’s apartment, a young man with fiery red hair leaned against the hall’s fading stripe-covered wall, a lit cigarette in hand. The stray watched as he lifted the cigarette, wrapped it in his curved lips, and inhaled deeply. He was casual, confident... waiting.

Uneasily, the stray closed the distance. He hoped the young man would just allow him undisturbed entry into his own apartment. It was hope against hope, but after ten rounds in the arena, the stray desperately didn’t want another fight.

“Evening.”

The stray flinched when the young man spoke. He nodded in return, but his entire body tingled with tension. Those renting the apartments rarely spoke to one another. After all, most of them participated in the tournaments and would likely be pitted against one another in the future. Any neighbor could be your killer. So if a neighbor bothered speaking to you, they wanted something. It was only common logic.

The stray began to unlock his apartment door. Whatever trap, whatever setup, game the man was trying to play, the stray wanted nothing to do with it.

“Is that your apartment?”

The redhead smiled pleasantly. A trap. Definitely a trap. The stray turned the handle and pushed his door open.

“I guess we’re neighbors, then, aren’t we?”

The young man had a lean frame, but the stray could see his muscles move distinctly as he calmly straightened and pushed himself off the wall.

The stray quickly stepped himself into his apartment and-

“Hey, I-”

He slammed the door, locking it immediately. The stray calmed himself with a slow exhale. And though the man knocked insistently, the stray simply turned away.

“What an idiot...”

Free from the threatening redhead, the stray threw his ragged jacket on the bed, set his bag against the wall, and rested himself cross legged in front of the wash basin. He glared at the large, dingy rust bucket. It was hard to wash himself well when the stray had to constantly be wary of the orange edges the basin had gained over time. A single cut could risk him - what was that they called it? Tetanus? - and treatment for that would put him out several meals at least. The basin was definitely not worth what he had paid for it.

In fact, despite costing so much, the entire room was in quite poor condition, at least compared to apartments he had rented for other tournaments. The bed was a thin cot, the creaky wooden floor was splintering and rotting, and the window let in a severe draft. Not to mention that the locks were rather shoddy, and the stray often worried that someone would break in while he was sleeping. Occupants had to pay for water by the pump too, and the toilet required IC to flush, like a vending machine.

But it didn't matter anyway. Comfort was a luxury the stray didn't bother with. And who cared if the lord was trying to drain residents of all their money? Wasn't that just business?

The stray wedged the rubber plug in the basin's drain and inserted four grey IC into the slot above the pump. Two pumps of water. But as the stray pushed the pump's lever up and back down, nothing came out. Scowling, he tried again. Nothing. And the lever wouldn't push up a third time.

The stray's breath hissed through gritted teeth. It seemed like the pump only worked one out of four times he tried to use it. He'd have to speak to the lord about the issue. Again.

But as soon as the stray opened the door to his apartment, his eyes landed on the young, red-haired man. Immediately, the stray thrust the door between himself and the smoke of the burning cigarette. As soon as he went to lock it, however, he discovered that someone on the outside was holding the handle turned, preventing the door from latching.

Well... shit.

Sucking in sharply, the stray yanked the door open, pulling with it the young man attached at the handle. The stray took advantage of the movement and slipped behind the redhead, sliding his knife from his pocket and to the young man's freckled neck.

“What do you want?” the stray asked coldly.

The young man just laughed.

“You're so threatening for someone so small!” he remarked. “And pretty rude too, you know. What if I just wanted to be friendly? What if I just wanted a nice talk?”

“Then you're wasting your damn time.”

“Oh, come on! What'll it harm you?”

“Just tell me what you want,” the stray demanded impatiently.

“Not very good with introductions, are you?” The young man's voice danced playfully, but the stray's grip only tightened.

“I'm going to cut your throat.”

“Oh, but... No, you aren't.”

The stray started. The young man had spoken so nonchalantly despite his position... Did he have no honest fear at all?

Clenching his jaw, the stray drew his knife even closer to the man's vulnerable neck. Beads of blood glistened on its silver edge.

"You shouldn't be so sure."

"Buuuut I am. I saw you in the arena today, you know. And even when you had the chance, you never killed anyone."

Tha-thump.

"So?"

"So if you wouldn't kill in the arena, why would you kill now?"

Tha-thump, tha-thump.

"Don't be an idiot. If I can win without killing in the arena, it's best to keep my opponents alive so I can do it again. But that's in the arena. I don't need to keep *you* alive."

The young man laughed again, completely undisturbed. The stray's heart began to fill his ears.

"Yeah, yeah. So you say, but I'm not buying your shit. I would say prove me wrong, but... You won't."

The stray gritted his teeth and tried to steady the racing beat in his chest. Who did that man think he was? Did he really have a death wish? The red beads on the stray's blade became a small trickle as he dug the dull edge a little further into the man's neck.

But then, the stray wavered. He looked at the young man, whose sharp blue eyes glittered mysteriously. He watched as his chest rose and fell with each living breath, as the pointed bone in his throat bobbed slightly with a small swallow...

It wasn't worth it. The stray pulled away and slid his knife back into the sheath in his pocket.

The young man turned around, a playful smile curling his lips upward again.

"I knew you wouldn't."

"Yeah, well, it's illegal outside of the arena, and I don't need the law on my back. You're not worth that much," the stray retorted. "Just tell me what you want and get out."

"Geez, still so feisty! You just caught my eye in the arena today, so I wanted to talk to you..."

The young man paused as if expecting the stray to chime in, but the ensuing silence forced him to continue.

"I know how you did it, you know."

"Did what?"

"In the last fight how you strangled that woman without even touching her neck. You've got a connection, right?"

The stray stiffened, but only for a half second.

"So? What of it?"

"It just made me curious is all. Who is it?"

"Is that what this is all about? It doesn't matter. End of discussion. Leave."

The man rolled his pale eyes and sprawled dramatically on the floor, like a spoiled child who wasn't getting his way.

"Are you always this impossible to talk to?"

"You ask too many questions."

The young man propped his head up to look back at the stray. His high-arched lips snaked mischievously upward.

"Okay, then. I'll talk a bit. I've got a connection too. Masos. Master of pain and pleasure. Quite the star, really. And of course, Masos really plays more of a role during sex, but the connection can also be pretty damn useful in the arena. Crippling agony? Hard for an opponent to push through that one, eh?"

The stray's hand clutched the hilt of the knife still concealed in his pocket, not that the small weapon could really help much at that point. Still, the sturdy grip helped steady the stray a little. He looked at the young man evenly.

"And? Are you trying to threaten me?"

"Am I?" The man slid back onto his feet with a smirk. The stray unsheathed his knife just as quickly and pointed it threateningly in his direction.

"Don't get too comfortable. Just because I won't kill you doesn't mean I won't maim you."

The young man snorted, dismissing the threat with a wave of his hand.

"No need, no need. I'm not here for any kind of violence, just a friendly talk. I just have to settle my curiosity, you know?"

"...Fine. Leona."

For a minute, the young man's eyes bugged in surprise. Then his face crept back into a grin. The stray scowled.

"You don't mean, *the* Leona, do you?"

"No, one of the other hundred Leonas, dumbass."

A loud laugh erupted from the man's dripping throat, surprising the stray yet again.

"Sarcastic too? I like that. Tell me, what's your name?"

"Didn't you say I caught your eye in the arena? You should know it then."

"Maybe. But I want *you* to tell me."

If irritation grew as a plant, the stray would have an entire Birchwood forest springing at his feet. But his heavy-limbed exhaustion forced him to relent, and he gave in to the freckled man's game with clenched fists.

"Inu."

"Inu, huh?" Mischief radiated from the young man in a playful aura, and he extended a welcoming hand.

"I'm Damean."

The stray eyed the slender hand before him and found himself another step back.

"Right," the stray mumbled. "Well, goodnight. See you sometime maybe."

"Tisk! Still so rude to your neighbor!"

But the amusement woven into Damean's smooth voice kept the stray from believing he was really mad.

"Anything else you needed, then? A cup of sugar?"

Damean shrugged.

"I've got a note here for you." The redhead pulled a carefully creased paper from his pocket and offered it to the stray. Hesitantly, the stray reached out with bony fingers. He took it.

"Some guy approached me in the hall before you came. He was asking about you, said something about a job offer. He gave me that note and asked it be passed on to you. And so here I am, your good and gracious neighbor. You're welcome."

Damean paused, seeming again to expect an answer. When the stray remained silent, Damean cocked a single, carefully tailored eyebrow.

"Aren't you going to read it?"

"Probably not."

Damean chuckled. His voice danced lightly with the air.

"Your choice, I suppose." He then turned gracefully on his heel and began back toward the hallway, speaking as he walked. "I'll be seeing you later then, neighbor. And... I'll be waiting to hear your real name. Dog."

As soon as Damean had exited, the stray shoved the door closed and locked it. He double checked the latch, just to be sure. It was secure. He was alone. Finally.

The stray practically collapsed on the apartment's ridged cot, exhausted deadweight as he glared at the ceiling above. The lath and plaster was bowed and moldy and just as wonderfully shitty as everything else.

"Dog," the stray muttered as his dark eyes fell closed. "Fucking dog."

Shannon Garrels

To His Lover

Why do I love him
When I know I can't
Or I guess I shouldn't

Is it the way he looks at me
Like I'm the only other one
In the world when we talk

Or maybe it's his voice
The thought and passion
I hear it when he speaks

It could be how he moves
He is so confident
So visibly sure of himself

And then there are his looks
His hair and eyes and smile
And even the small imperfections

But I know that it's hopeless
And maybe we could be together
If he didn't love you

MicKayla McCarty

August 2019, Thursday

I stepped into a freshly bedded-down stall,
A little sorrel mare stood there,
Her coat shiny and soft,
Our eyes met,
The sense of determination was around,
Grabbing her halter, I snapped her lead,
Then tacked her up,
The used leather smell,
The sweat and tears showed on the saddle pad,
I climbed onto the little mare,
We rode into the Jacob Arena at the Iowa State Fair Grounds,
We waited....
Then silence,
We stepped into the arena,
27 seconds flat,
The little mare and girl ran,
A blue ribbon was awarded,
A bond between a girl and her horse,
Something that is never broken.

Overload

Pack me into your least favorite suitcase
Until I'm shoved under the dusky stairway
Store me in the back of a molded den
Until you forget about my presence
Keep me in a drawer overflowing with junk
Until I become just another waste of space
You can no longer make room to keep

Feed me lies and promises that you can't fulfill
Until you're filled with boredom
Turn your back on me and your own promised words
Walk away with absolutely no remorse
Erase me from your memory to find another

Then tell the next girl
You couldn't do her any worse

Goodbye

Broken down like a musky car
You left me stranded.
My feet were parked in the
Middle of the road abandoned.

I thought if only I could put myself in neutral,
maybe then could I move, if not, move on.
But this is what you do, what we do,
when things go wrong.

Cold with nothing more than a breeze
I sat and waited for you to claim me.
The sound of nothing rang my ears
As the sight of darkness left me numb for years.

I'll wait here where you left me I suppose
Because if I leave, where you left me,
I will never know. Though you never came
back so you would have never even known.

Samuel Pederson

The Ocean

My relationship with my siblings is like the ocean.
It can be smooth sailing,
Or rough waters.
But whatever happens,
I know one thing will remain the same;
Just like the ocean, our love for each other will last forever.

Kjierstin Ridgway

The Tornado of Words

The sky is calm, much like you a lot of the time.
It is peaceful, almost enjoyable, much like the moments we share.
However, there is a time when the wind starts to pick up.
Your words start to come out.
You start to say things that I can never forget.
Your words spin around and around in my head much like the winds.
Things are thrown around, destruction happens.
Words destroy the environment I have to live in.
But when the wind dies down
And the words settle into a less destructive path
Everything is good again
And the sky is calm, much like you a lot of the time.

Haylee Saad

Ivy

You rose up like the ivy that wouldn't die
No pesticides, tonics or home remedies could stop your tangling
limbs
The invasive way you climbed up and over my walls
Your green and white tentacles breaking down the rock and mortar
meant to protect
Eventually giving in and allowing the walls to crumble
Surprisingly, your ugly limbs became beautiful flowers
Reds, pinks, and purples
I'll allow you to grow and become one with me
As long as you promise not to squeeze and hold on too tightly

Hilary Shackleton

Ode to the Wind

Not all power can be seen.
Yours is shown by feel and effect
Ruffling the leaves on a tree
Whisking through long locks of hair.
So weightless, yet wrathful
Ripping apart objects with destruction
Raging within the waters angrily
Aiding the fire to grow with might
Beautiful you are to distribute the seeds
Giving life to joyful sounds
Generating electricity to share your energy
And transporting smiles from sea to sea
The whispering of the wind to calm the cool skies
Beautiful dancing in the sails.
Changing fate with a kamikaze
Eroding the masses externally
You are always touching, moving, and flowing
Taking, giving, slowing and growing.
Running the game, the power contained
Bumps on our skin from the flow of the wind.

Kira Smith

Ode to Rudy

Death made me love you,
But you love her.
You love her unconditionally,
Yet you don't know her at all.
What she's been through or what she's seen

You never give up on her
Yet you left her behind.
You were never shy yet,
You never got to know she loved you back.
She wanted that kiss more than you.

You never knew she was scared to kiss you.
To love you.
She told you but couldn't hear.
You make her cry, you make Death cry.

She made me love you, too.
Through her words delivered to me by Death.
Through her, you became my best friend too.
As you were hers.

Tyler Trigg

Jax

The day was bright and warm.
I stretch as I remember.
It's August 11th,
Today is the day.
The bed is ready, the bowls filled high.
Will he like me?
The trip seems so long,
but we finally made it, The Animal Rescue.
So many sad faces,
I wish I could take them all.
Paperwork that never ends.
I hope he likes me.
My knee won't stop bouncing.
A happy bark,
He's actually greeting me.
So much energy,
A ball is thrown far.
What a good boy, Jax.
One sloppy kiss.
He really loves me!

Drive

The coarse bark of the ruined tree stabbed into my back as I slumped against it and slid down to rest onto its exposed roots. With an absent mind I unclasped the strap of my sidearm holster and gripped the comforting wood paneled handle of the handgun that rested there. With a practiced form I smoothly slid the handgun out of its snug home and rested it against my left upper thigh. My hand relaxed and a soft glint came from the steel barrel reflecting the moonlight. It caught my attention.

I pulled the slide back of the handgun and watched as a loaded shell casing ejected from the left side of the gun. *Four. It'd be messy, but it'd be fast.* I pulled the slide back again and watched as another loaded shell ejected from the gun, the sharp pain in my back fading as I processed what had happened. *Three. One pull. One shot. No pain.* I closed my eyes and sighed, letting my head roll back to rest against the tree with a soft thud. Again I ejected another cartridge. *Two. It'll cost me my ticket to Heaven.* The carnage of the past few days replayed in my mind. I pulled the slide back once more. *One. I know it would be a one way ticket to Hell.* The loss and the bloodshed that played in my mind made me want to open my eyes, but the harsh reality that would face me made me clench my eyes shut even more. I pulled the slide on the handgun back a final time, listening as the final cartridge landed softly on withered leaves. *Zero. At least in Hell I'll be with my brothers and sisters.* I raised the handgun and placed the end of the comforting, cold steel barrel against my left temple and pulled the trigger.

Click.

"But that would be selfish wouldn't it?" I sighed. I placed the emptied pistol back into the holster. "Even though I lost everything. If I came to you guys so soon, you'd know. And you'd be mad."

A soft crackle interrupted my thoughts and I found where the sound came from. A helmet.

"Please, please somebody answer" a frightened voice called through the speaker. I went to respond but saw that the mic was broken.

"Please." I could tell the person on the other side was close to crying.

"Right. The mission isn't over yet."

Luis Valverde

A Marine's EGA

Strangers from all around
Begin their journey
For many different reasons
But end with finding a shared goal

To improve themselves
And find the motivation to endure
The hardest months of their lives
Feeling lonely, and feeling small

Only to find they are not alone
For they endure hardships with strangers
They come to call brothers and sisters
Who motivate and improve each other

Inspired by each other's tenacity
Knowing they are not the only ones
Being punished
Being ridiculed

Bonds are formed
And strengthened with trust
Friendships dissolve and a
Family is born

At the end of their journey
After enduring it all
Not a single tear is spared
When they step up to receive
Their Eagle, Globe, and Anchor
Earning the title of
Marine

Autobiographies

Kaitlyn Amborn is a twenty-four year old sophomore at Indian Hills Community College. After receiving her A.A., she will attend the University of Iowa in the fall of 2019 with a double major in Art and English. Her hobbies include creating art, reading literature, writing, and traveling.

Lily Arney is a nineteen-year-old student at Indian Hills. She is in her first year and plans to major in English. She is currently working on a fantasy novel and plans to get it published.

Bryan Brain is from Hedrick, Iowa. He has studied in the music and graphic design programs while at Indian Hills and will be transferring to the University of Iowa for Cinema and Writing.

Bianca Cardona is twenty years old. She is a second year student at IHCC. She plans on attending The University of Iowa in the fall of 2019 to receive her B.A. in Cinema Studies.

Rowdy Curry recently graduated from Indian Hills last February and has been accepted to attend Augsburg University in Minneapolis, Minnesota. As with any piece of art, he believes that the goal of poetry is centered on the experience of the reader and what emotion the writer can connect with the reader.

Michael Davis is a nineteen-year-old, first-year student at Indian Hills planning to pursue a career in Creative Writing. Although his main interest is in fiction, he enjoys writing for a variety of media including but not limited to poetry, songwriting, screenplay, and reviews. He also has experience in journalism. A sort of jack-of-all-trades, Michael writes nearly daily in hopes of honing his craft and molding himself into an adept storyteller.

Sav Ford is both a writer and photographer who has lived in Ottumwa, Iowa, for nearly a decade and a half. Despite being in one place for so long, Sav is a wanderer at heart who believes anywhere can and should be a new adventure- including the different pockets of time, feeling, and ideas created by the art of language. Along with poetry, Sav is a writer of scripts, short stories, music, and several unfinished novels. Pineapple is not the worst thing you could put on a pizza.

Shannon Garrels is currently nineteen years old and attending Indian Hills Community College in her first year. She will continue her education after she receives her A.A. and plans to pursue degrees in both English and Music. She is very involved in the Fine Arts program here at Indian Hills and loves it.

Mickayla Lyn McCarty is from small town Williamson, Iowa. She considers herself a tomboy. She will help anyone before she helps herself. All of her writings come straight from her heart. Most are past experiences or things she wants to experience. She just wants others to see that writing is a way to get out what a person has to say that may be difficult to put into words.

Tyarra English-Paulson from Minnesota is twenty years old. She attends Indian Hills where she runs track and plans to transfer to a four-year college in hopes of studying Broadcast Journalism. She always enjoyed writing as a kid, and it never seemed to leave her as she grew up. Along with writing, she enjoys the outdoors, staying fit and active, modeling, singing in the car, social media (unfortunately), and spending time with family and friends. She also enjoys her time alone so she can think outloud and brainstorm. The amazing thing about writing is that there are no limits. The more Tyarra experiences, the more words she can put side by side, and the more she has to say.

Samuel Pederson is currently studying at Faith Baptist Bible College in Ankeny, Iowa, to earn his degree in Secondary English education. Samuel graduated from Indian Hills in 2017 and has enjoyed being able to take an online poetry writing class this trimester through Indian Hills.

Kjierstin Ridgway is a senior in high school who enjoys writing and reading. Her plans after graduating from Indian Hills in May are to attend a four year college where she will major in English and minor in Education. Her poems are personal to her life and relationships.

Haylee Saad graduated in 2005 from Oliver M. Hazen High School located in Renton, Washington. At age 21, she moved to Dallas, Texas, and then to Ottumwa, Iowa, at age 29. Although a city girl at heart, she has enjoyed the peacefulness of the country and learning how to garden. When not working or completing homework to obtain her Associates of Arts degree, Haylee enjoys reading, trying new foods, and playing with her three dogs.

Hilary Shackleton is a student pursuing a degree in Health Information Technology. Born in Mason City, she thinks Des Moines (or somewhere warm with a beach) will be a near future move following graduation at Indian Hills Community College. As a mom to a three-year-old and a new miniature Goldendoodle puppy, she stays busy and consumes a lot of coffee! Positivity, love, and kindness are the words she lives by.

Kira Smith is a junior at Pekin High School also taking college credit. She works at North Hy-Vee in Ottumwa, Iowa, as a cashier and a pay station clerk. She plans on going into education for high school students.

Tyler Trigg is finishing his Aviation Maintenance classes this year. Before taking the Creative Writing Poetry class, he had never written a poem. He hadn't been much of a writer at all before taking the class. He discovered he actually really enjoyed the writing. Tyler lives in Des Moines.

Luis Valverde is graduating from Indian Hills this year with a degree focusing on music. He is part of the Marine Corps Delayed Entry Program and will be heading off to basic training in August. After his service he plans on furthering his education to become a music teacher. He has written several pieces of poetry, screenplays, and short stories of various genres.



Life. Changing.

Kaitlyn Amborn

Lily Arney

Bryan Brain

Bianca Cardona

Rowdy Curry

Michael Davis

Sav Ford

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