

The Roaring Muse

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In the Orangery with the Blossoms by Dakota Bond

Little Orange sitting on a bench,
I see that you have a friend,
A woman contemplative,
A blossom under her chin.

Why don't you return to us on the tree?
My friend resting by the woman,
She is reading her thoughts, books
That no longer includes your attention.
My friend, Orange, separated from our orchard,
Little friend, lost and sullen, without our community,
Please, turn back, see our lovely blossoms,
New oranges, new friends, to dance among the wind.

My friend, lonely Orange, why leave us?
The blossoms are in full swing, crowning us in savor,
Yet, you sit on stone, white and spotless, no variety.

Little friend among man, don't you understand yet?
The life you get with her is not like it is
With me, the blossoms bloom and bear fruit,
They join me along webbed branches,
Then fall and bear new saplings midst the roots
of groves again to dance with the breeze.

Art Referenced: In the Orangery (Charles Edward Perugini 1878)

After the Land's End by Dakota Bond

“Do you think that the steam from those ships

In the sea could reach us here on this edge?”

“How could they? The steam flies

Into the sky, not bound

By land or sea or this cliff's edge,

How could it possibly stand to return here,

At Land's End?” “Now, Now, sure,

The kid is imaginative; ain't that what's needed

When coal ash flies to the sky

With sea spray on an overcast day?”

“You're insane!” “That's what I was going to say!”

“Shush! The ships are passing

Us a'by!” “Don't you think

It would be better if we were louder,

So that they could take us

From this crusty rusty land?”

“What's going to be better

Beyond the end, where we're already at?”

“Shush'm and watch the ships float by

As if they're leaves floating on

A slow-moving, darkness-oozing river.”

Art Referenced: Land's End (Dong Kingman 1939)

Time Allotted for Something Else Lou Divine

A whisper of spring breath begins to thaw the Northland, and the birds celebrate until the sun sinks low and they return to their nests heavier than before.

I wander here to mimic these trees,
to longingly reach toward the life around me.
Believe the effortless blue sky has made the world green again.
But my eyes stay trained on my muddy sneakers staked in the snow
on someone else's chosen path it seems I have to follow.

This is still the winter's forest.
Nothing to say that the shivering timbers haven't heard before
and gratitude is locked in the brawling grasp of worry.

Anything is a poem when it's as careful as my footsteps.
When any second I might jolt knee deep
and get my hands wet and dirty.

I try to rest.
Attempt to find peace in the flood of the sun. But thoughts
like sparklers buzz in the head behind my eyes, relentless.

Different from the fly that dances around my ankle lethargic,
seeking foreign warmth. Soon the swarms will come
and I fear what their biting teeth may carry.

Staying here forever would turn me to filth that harms.
My eventually rotten body another piece of littered garbage.
Perhaps I would feed the flies and mushrooms.
Or fill the noisy head of the next poet who walks in my sunken footsteps.

near.

letting go was never something i was good at
despite doing it every waking moment

i've always wanted to say goodbye for good, forever
but it is unrealistic
the thoughts of you being near consume me

the what if's
the questions of what i did wrong
why i left
why you didn't stay
the aching pains
the shattered path my heart left as you walked away
the chill i feel when i know you're near
so close yet the farthest apart we've been

wanting to know...
how you are?
when you'll be back?
what you are doing?
when we can try again?
and wondering who she is
is she better than me? shorter? skinnier? smarter?
and when you will be near again

i am stuck in a state
of grieving in silence and waiting more patiently than ever before
for when you are near me again

all alone with my thoughts and emotions
rethinking
overthinking
apologizing
for all the words i wish i never said and all those i wish i did
and all things we could've done,
what we could've been
the regrets and the memories that i will forever cherish
of when you were near

the true feeling of joy i felt
a reason for breathing, living
thoughts of true comfort when you were near
a feeling of never being able to hurt again
at least not by you
lies and betrayal

as the rain is a constant tapping on my window
waves of light flash and color the sky
i await your name on my screen

the tears leave a cool stream down my face
your voice speaking louder in my heart than you ever have
just as if you were near

for maybe one day
when you are near again

our eyes will finally meet
and the beat of our hearts connect as one
for when you are near
and i am again met in the warmth and comfort of your arms

the sound of your heart cutting through the noises of the world
making it a peaceful place once more

for when we finally see each other again
and all the changes we've made

all for the feeling we felt
when we were near.

butterflies

the butterflies flutter around my stomach
as he pulls me close
our eyes meet and a jolt of electricity floods my skin
as his hand meets my face, i could feel the butterflies beat fast, then faster

my heart skipping so many beats, i was afraid this was going to be the end
so much i'm worried i'll stop breathing

a tingling sensation overwhelms my entire being
when he brings his soft lips to mine
in slow, synchronous movement
like a little dance

the smile- unable to leave my face from pure joy
soon a feeling of nervousness- but the good kind
like i found where i should be until my last breath

as the butterflies escape with every minute i spend in his embrace
moving closer and closer together
until we're one, inseparable
and in love

or at least i thought
soon the butterflies faded for him
he didn't love me, but rather her

i felt the butterfly wither
sinking in the hole where my heart once was
and now is shattered on the ground where we once walked before

linearity by Josie Manning

today my grandma cried over a document
Confirming the purchase of his old boat
that we sold to someone
and i realized
that grief is not and will never be linear.
it has been four entire years since
he's been gone and
grief still stalks and
attacks from the shadows without a warning.
one second she was laughing, showing
me old papers, *this is from 1994 -*
why the heck do i still have it? it's not like i still
audit for the local papers! and then
she went silent
, and when i looked up her
face was contorted by pain and tears and
she tried to hold it back but like always,
it takes over for a few seconds. she cried
onto my shoulders, and i went and cried
in my room alone ,
my tears a quiet
betrayal to the future that i'm trying to find,
and once our faces were dry, we both
continued throwing away
old papers of the past.

a memoir from forgotten reminders by Josie Manning

the blaring of a t.v. set too loud
draws me from slumber as chittering
voices from *The Today Show*
let me know what's hot and what's
not for the week. *that doesn't matter*,
i think, *what matters is where that*
recliner once sat is now occupied
another, and there my grandmother sits,
laughing and

an old coffee mug that has been
filled by a k-duo keurig is now
neglected, forgotten -
only the single cup side has been
used, as the pot is too big
for a party of two. *what a waste*,
i hum to no one while i

throw on a maroon flannel,
fingering the rips made in the
fabric from both him and i.
the thermostat sits at a
blistering 72 - a measly
replacement for the warmth
now gone with the body that
had once radiated it and

an array of baseball caps
sit in dust in the closet,
no longer worn on a daily
basis. smells of grease and
oil, of lakes and playing cards
still linger among neglected
winter jackets. those doors
stay shut and locked and

four years, and it still
refuses to leave us alone

incessant ambivalence

this question i raise: how do i let go? the cherry
maple cabinets in the kitchen, the ever-changing
needlepoint above the couch accompanied by decor
of metal, the back deck's porch swing and it's
flitting hummingbird companions are engraved into my
skin, embedded into the flesh of my emotions.
i want - need - to find a way to continue forward.
i'm wavering in my decisions - the ghosts of a lost tooth,
a broken bone, laughter of yearly family gatherings
remain in my ear; shadows of a hospice bed and it's
occupant gone, the yard where decades of dogs have
created their own trails (here, mine now leaves paw prints
over ones left by my grandfather's dalmatian, my mother's
shepherd, my uncle's lab) - they grasp at me, tie me
down into a bed of memories that won't fade, and
the door refuses to close. the future spurns to wait for
this acceptance just as i yearn to grasp at what i do
not yet know the answer - how do i ever move on?

- please, i'm begging you.

Cafés that Inspire: Microtexts from Madrid

Prepared by students enrolled in SPAN 4090: Madrid: City, Community, History in Spring 2023

Benito Pérez Galdós, a prolific writer in Spain in the 19th century, spent most of his life in Madrid. One of his recurrent fictional characters, José Ido del Sagrario, describes the vibrant Madrilenian public life when he declares, “Madrid sin cafés es como cuerpo sin alma” / “Madrid without its cafés is like a body without a soul.”

In the 19th and 20th centuries, literary and artistic figures would meet in cafés in Madrid to discuss art, politics, literature, and more. These meetings, known as *tertulias*, allowed for ideas to be shared and for creativity to flow. It is precisely in cafés in the Spanish capital where Ramón Gómez de la Serna would first get the idea to create the new literary genre of the *gregería* in the early 20th century. *Las gregerías* were short one or two lined poems or sayings often inspired by the ridiculousness or whimsy of the human experience. The simple format of a *gregería* allowed for a lot to be communicated in only a few words. Below you will read a collection of *gregerías* penned by SPAN 4090. Enjoy!

“La luna es gran queso en el cielo” / The moon is a big piece of cheese in the sky.

“Superior es océano por las hormigas” / Lake Superior is an ocean for ants.

“Una mosca sin alas es un paseo” / A fly without wings is a stroll.

“La vida puede ser una carrera o una aventura” / Life may be a race or adventure.

“Planetas se experimentan el amanecer y el atardecer a su propio tiempo” / Planets see dawn and dusk at their own beat.

“Un gorro es un apartamentito para tu cabeza” / A cap is a house for your head.

A Dance With The Sunlight by Caroline Santas

The first time he ever saw her, he made a declaration in his mind that she was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. She sat in the shared space of the apartment complex with a book in her hand and was bathed with all the energy the sun had to offer her. Surrounded by a halo, pointing to exactly what he was meant to find.

The book she was reading, he figured, was some romance novel that as a novice reader himself he had of course never read. He never liked to read in general but maybe she liked it simply because it was a romance. He could be that for her, he thought, he could be her great romance. He closed his eyes and imagined speaking to her. In his mind, her presence is warm and welcoming. Her smile dazzles, and her demeanor polite and shy. He needed to speak to her more than anything in the whole world.

He smiled and approached the reading woman.

“Good book?” He asked.

The woman smiled and peered up over the top of the book. “It’s my first time reading it but it’s pretty good! It’s for a class.” Her voice was exactly what he expected it to be, sweet and soft, like a perfect batch of cotton candy. She swept her hair behind her ear. He liked how her hair moved so effortlessly and freely. “Would you like to sit?” She motioned to the chair across from her.

The man looked down to see that there was in fact a chair right behind him. He floated into it and looked up to see she had a wide smile on her face waiting to speak to him as eagerly as he wanted to speak to her.

“I’m Miles.”

“Emily. Pleased to meet you.”

Miles knew instantly: this was the perfect girl for him. “So you’re a student?”

Emily nodded, “Yes, just at the college here in town. I’m a senior. Are you in school?”

Miles told Emily his short story, how he graduated in the last spring semester, where he’s from, who his roommates are, just a brief synopsis of him. She then did the same thing. She was studying psychology and wanted to be a therapist eventually. “I guess I have always taken care of people, I practically raised my little brother and just always wanted to support as many people as I can!” She said,

Miles felt so connected to her. He loved her company. And from the way she looked at him, he concluded that she liked his company as well.

“Emily, I know this is kind of fast, but would you like to get dinner toni-”

“Yes. I would love to get dinner with you.”

The pair went to a nice Italian restaurant and then walked the boardwalk of the beautiful city where the two of them lived. The moon shone off the water of the lake, illuminating her face for him so clearly, the perfect view right before she leaned in to kiss his soft lips in the middle of their promenade.

They talked for hours, not even realizing how far they hiked the trail. She was more than he imagined. Emily was easy to talk to, graceful, funny, and he felt such a connection to her.

Miles had never felt like this before. He had never felt *for* someone like this before. On every date they went on, he felt like he knew her more and more, but he craved to know every part of her.

Three months after they started going on dates together, he asked her to be his girlfriend. She happily said yes, Emily felt as if she was falling in love with Miles, which she confided in him she had never felt before.

The couple did everything together, including traveling the state to walk as many trails as they could, which always reminded both of them of their first date. Emily introduced Miles to her favorite books, which he would then read. Miles took Emily to concerts, and she genuinely enjoyed them, which was something she never wanted to do.

On their one-year anniversary, the two of them figured since they do everything with each other, they might as well live together. They found a lovely apartment downtown that had perfect natural light and a view of the lake.

They brought out the best in each other. Miles allowed himself to be emotional and sensitive in front of her. He loved to get her flowers, and when he had a bad day, he knew he could come home and cry into her arms and she could comfort him. When she graduated college, they had to move a bit out of town to be closer to where she was hired. He didn't mind. His job could be done completely remotely and no matter where he was, she was his new home.

Miles's mother loved Emily as much as he did. They were fiery together and treated each other like mother and daughter. He liked the dynamic they had when they visited his family. She would help his mother cook, and Miles' dad likes to pick Emily's brain on the newest psychology fact he would memorize just to impress her.

Emily's dad was a bit scary for Miles, but eventually, he loved him as well. Her father even gave him his blessing to propose to his great love. He gave Miles his mother's wedding ring. He told him that Emily always wanted it, and this would be the perfect opportunity for her to receive it.

At the start of three years of dating, he asked Emily to marry him on the very boardwalk where they had their first date. She enthusiastically accepted his proposal. They loved each other so much. Their great love story was in a beautiful place.

The two planned the entire wedding without any help from a wedding planner. The challenge of working together on a project worked like an exercise for the couple. After all they were soulmates, disagreements didn't last long and were easy to get through.

After months of planning, and a year and a half on the waitlist for their dream venue, Miles and Emily had their wedding in the summer. It was highlighted as the best day of their lives, *but there will be better for you both*, Miles's mother would say.

The two families gathered in the city where the couple met. The day was shared with laughter and drinks. It didn't feel like a massive stressful day, like everyone said it would be. It was a celebration. Miles danced with his mom; she told him how proud of him she was. He had grown into a man. Strong enough and good enough to be a husband.

At the end of the night, Miles took Emily's hand for an end-of-wedding dance. They planned that they wanted a dance, just the two of them in the venue. No one but each other. The time in the world had stopped just for them, and the moon watched and lit their way as they spun together in the room.

Miles would feel Emily in his arms and sigh happiness as she melted into the dance. They fit together. The years together made Miles realize so much about himself. She was the very definition of a soulmate.

Marriage proved to be an illustrious part of both of their lives. Miles grew more and more in love with Emily every day. Even as she got busier with work as her career

got bigger, all the time apart made Miles just miss her more. It made him crave her air when she came through the door. She would come home and Miles would run to her side, and not leave it until she would leave for work the next morning.

He spent all of her free time with her. The comfortable silence was something he never envisioned enjoying with anyone. She would read her books and he would play his video games. Hours upon hours. She would even tell him to go out with his friends, he hadn't done that in a while. He would always tell her she was the only friend he needed.

The months grew and the days got longer. Miles saw Emily only at the end of each day. She started having to leave early for work, far before he would even wake up. He knew this made her sad. His mother gave him the advice to send flowers to her office with a note every day, saying how much he missed her. So Miles would do just that. Emily would always come home and thank him for the flowers by returning the favor with his favorite flavor of energy drink. Everything was going great.

One day waking up Miles was greeted by the welcoming face of his wife. She was sitting on the chair in the bedroom right next to the window. The sun bathed her similarly to the day he met her, with the light he saw a stone cold face he had never seen before.

"We need to talk." She started.

Miles sat up, concerned for his wife's feelings.

"I'm leaving you."

A shot of ache hit Miles' heart. The room got cold and he felt his face grow hot. Suddenly his chest tightened, his throat was closing. He shot out of bed, hands on his hips, pacing the bedroom thinking of what to say next. "Where is this coming from? We have been nothing but great."

“What are you talking about? We both have been miserable.”

Miserable. That is not a word Miles would use to describe his marriage. “Em I am so incredibly happy with you. I don’t know what you mean.”

Emily sighed. “Miles we’ve grown apart. I know you’ve talked to your mom about it. She’s called me and has berated me. Many times. I know you told her I’ve been working early, and she told you that I’m not doing enough as a wife.”

She put one of the notes that came with the flowers he sent to her office on the bed.

One day your hard work will be done and we can be a family.

Miles looked at the note, and then at Emily’s blank expression. “I still don’t understand. Don’t you want to be a family?”

Emily’s expression hardened. “I told you when we met that my work was my life mission.” She said, “I can’t work if I feel like I have a lost dog waiting for me at home just hoping that one day I’ll be done. I won’t ever be done, I love my work. Miles we already *are* a family. If you would occupy your time with someone other than me I think you would be a hell of a lot less lonely.”

Miles looked from his hands to his wife’s face. Ready to fight for her. “But, you’re my best friend.”

“I’m your *only* friend. I’m tired Miles, I’m your wife. I’m sick of feeling like I’m supervising you. I miss my life outside of you as well.”

Miles was taken aback. He never realized any of this was a problem. She felt trapped, and he was the one who had her ensnared in his own issues. He was the summoner of her own unhappiness, and now his own.

She didn’t love him anymore, and she was brave enough to admit that.

Miles closed his eyes and allowed a single tear to drop out of his eyes. 7 years ago he could not have cried in front of her.

“Are you ok?” an unfamiliar voice said.

Miles opened his dry eyes and shook himself out of his daydream. He was met face to face with the woman he knew as Emily.

“You’ve been standing there with your eyes closed for a while, are you feeling, ok? Do you need me to call you an ambulance?”

Outside of his fantasy, she was caring and worried about the people around her. Miles showed her a meek smile, “No, I’m fine. I was just really deep in thought.”

“Ok,” The woman said, her voice sounding concerned. Back into his reality, he focused on his surroundings once again. The sun still hit her just so in the apartment complex lobby.

Miles looked at her hands and saw she was still carrying the book she was reading, which now he sees clearly is *The Days of Abandonment*.

She met his eyes again, “I’m Jane. Are you sure you’re ok, you look lightheaded. Are you hungry? Would you like to go get something to eat?”

He looked at the woman who brought him heartache in memories belonging to him that didn’t even exist, but here in the real world she was known as ‘Jane’. She scared him. If their great love could possibly end in a broken heart, he wanted nothing from her.

He turned and walked away from Jane, never to see her again.

TW: Violence

Hiking with Tigers

The stranger drops down to block me on the snow-covered trail so I have to skid to a halt.

“Where did you come from?” My breath clouds the cold air. Beside me, chickadee’s sing out, ‘Hey Sweetie’ from the alder brush.

“Aren’t you going to say hello?” he says.

He towers above me so I step back to look him over. *Amber eyes; alert and hungry. Beard; ragged, red, striped with tobacco stains. Back watch cap squashes stiff hair. Tattooed neck, powerful shoulders, camouflage jacket. Huge hands, wrists raw, fingernails dirty. Jeans are snow-caked from plowing downhill. Work boots show steel toe caps.*

He reaches and flicks the pompom on my wool hat. “Cute.”

Swiftly retreating, my feet fly out from under me, and I’m an upside-down turtle. Quickly, I roll on my side and get up. He doesn’t offer help.

“I’ve been watching you all day,” he laughs. “Ever since you parked your car. My pickup was the one with the junk in the bed.”

Old beater truck, crushed beer cans and Playboy magazine’s in the back? Hadn’t wanted to meet that owner.

He says, “You peeled off the main trail to go on this side one. Thought I’d join you right about now.” Bright red cardinals call ‘Cheer, cheer, cheer’ from the top twigs of a sugarplum.

I wriggle my shoulders to adjust my 40-pound frame pack. He has a grimy canvas ruck sack. Stains of dried blood smear the bottom. I try edging around him, he shifts. Stepping off the path makes me post-hole two feet down so I have to crawl back onto the packed trail .

“Where you going?”

Ignore him and piss him off? Remember the tools. Three watchwords from the therapist: Focus- Check- Choose. And the extra thing I didn't tell her about. Check the right parka pocket. It's there. Choose to treat him as a human being. "I'm practicing, getting ready to hike the whole Superior Hiking Trail."

He reaches behind and boosts his pack. "I'm already practiced. I take snares and hit these trails every day. Out in the woods you never know what you're going to catch."

"What are you after?"

"Rabbits. With snares they have no idea what's caught them. First, they struggle, then they squeal, then they give up. I think they're mighty tasty. Satisfies a man."

"Is trapping legal in the city limits?"

His jaw juts. "None of that legal stuff matters unless they catch you. I've gotten rabbits ever since I was a kid. My sister and I were good at it. Rabbits are harder to catch now; they're smarter or there's less bunnies in the woods."

Break eye contact. "Well, good luck. I have to get back before dark."

He doesn't budge. "My luck has already changed."

My watchwords stop my urge to pee in panic. "Excuse me."

He lets me sidle by, then falls in behind. I hustle as much as the rutted trail and melting snow allows.

"How far are you going today?" His voice booms across the forest. "We'll probably end up in the same place."

His long legs crowd me, stepping on my heels, as I scuttle forward. Crows call, swooping above this valley. *A group? A cluster? No, it's called a murder.* A murder of crows caw in alarm. I talk to them in the wide blue sky, "My dog's gone off on me. Where could that dog be? Maybe it's up the trail with my husband." Speeding up, my boots slide sideways

He says, “No dog. No husband. Remember, I’ve had eyes on you. I’m trapping and you’re hopping along the trail. Think you can make it home?”

Choose conviction. “Yes. Absolutely.” *Can he tell it’s shaky?*

The route veers downhill, leading to the eventual end. We pace along in single file until I put my boot on a log to tighten the laces. I peer through the openings between the trees and see a fox flit along the creek. Then there’s only the plate-size prints of his big feet on the path behind me. I pretend to adjust the other bootlace.

He flips out a cell phone, stabs at it, thrusts it back in his pocket. “Battery’s dead. Hey, you have a cell phone? I need to call my girlfriend.”

Avoid his eyes. Make obvious move in left parka pocket.

His hand whips out. Triumphant, he snags my cell phone. “Thank you, ma’am. Look, your battery is fading at a cold 15%, too.” He punches a pattern on the phone.

It’s not even unlocked.

He continues his charade. “Hello? I don’t know when I’ll be back tonight. I’ve caught at least one bunny. Love you, bye.”

Total fake. I know it, he knows it. He pockets my phone.

A juicy stream of tobacco splatters by my boot. He jerks his hand towards the back of his jeans. I jerk with it. Cupped in his large palm something glints. He plays a waiting game, then shows a can of Copenhagen. He tucks a new wad of snuff in his cheek. “Want some?”

“No, thanks.”

“Aw, come on.” he puts the can away. “You’re not one of those ‘I don’t smoke, I don’t chew, I don’t go with the boys that do’ kind of gal, are you?”

Sit on the log. “I think I’ll rest. You should head on up the trail.”

He sits too, sucking dark spit between his teeth. “I was in the woods a lot with my little sister. She felt safe with me. Do you feel safe with me?” He puts his hand on my knee.

Slide away. Let him talk, that buys time.

“She’d do anything for me.”

Can he hear my heart’s hammering like a woodpecker?

He shoots me a sly look and shrugs his shoulders. “Where is she, now? I wouldn’t know. She was only thirteen but got an older guy for a boyfriend. I didn’t like sharing, then she disappeared.” He sits.

My watchwords flutter like moths toward light. *Focus: he’s not going away. Check: for help. Choose: not to be a victim, again.*

He stands when I do. “You don’t mind me walking with you, do you?” “

Choose: “Yes, I do. Stop it.”

He grins. “Well, I’m not going to stop. It’s a free country.” A jay jeers from an oak tree.

Talk loudly about that book you just read. “Do you know about Siberian tigers? They live where China and Russia come together.”

The guy blinks, his eyes open wide. I clamber up the trail, shouting about tigers. Maybe someone will hear me. “Siberians are the biggest tigers in the world, 700 pounds. They hunt in woods that look a lot like these. Their paw prints are as big as platters! ”

Push yourself. He keeps up. I yell, “Tiger heads have strong jaws and a big ruff of fur around their head. They’re camouflaged with black stripes on orange hides to hunt invisibly.”. Scrambling over another log I race up the path, “Tigers hide in the brush and plan. They hunt things like deer, moose, and rabbits.” *Go faster.* “They stalk with patience, then pounce.”

“Huh,” he says.

I turn to face him, “The roughness of their tongues can scour meat off bones.” I look down the trail behind him. *No one in sight. People won’t be caught on the trail after dark, especially on this one; it ends in huge boulders of basalt. Running out of time. Sun setting, temp’s tanking, trail’s hardening. Speed it up.*

Lunging into the late afternoon, words fly as fast as my desperate feet. “Old Russians say that if you cross a tiger they will come after you and kill you. You don’t ever want to mess with a tiger.”

He butts in, “It’s getting dark. Where’s the parking lot?”

Not soon enough. It’s half a mile past this boulder field. The wind has stilled, the trees don’t move, and the low sun casts a net of shadows over me. From the silhouettes of white pine, an owl hoots, “Come-come, come- a-way.” Bracing myself on the icy walls, I inch along between rocks higher than my head.

Abruptly, he shucks his rucksack, grabs me, wrenches me around, pushes me against a slab, and rips down the straps of my pack, pinning my arms at my elbows. *He’ll kill me. Bloody slaughter with boulder headstones. Focus: be present. Check: trapped. Choose: wait.*

I stuff my hands in my pockets, and wrap the right one around my secret, and clench my fingers into fists.

“Now, shut up your bullshit about tigers.”

His mouth is close enough to fleck my face with tobacco specks. Frost from his breath whitens the fringes of his hair and beard.

Be here now. The moon is cresting in the eastern sky. *Speak.* “Stop it!”

“What? I can’t hear you.” He grabs my glasses, stomps them under his boots, and shatters them.

Everything is blurry. Wait.

His pelvis jams against mine and he growls, “A man has his needs. You be nice like my other rabbits.”

“Stop.” A lost whisper. “Stop.”

“Aren’t you going to start squealing, ‘No-no-no? Please, please, please?’”

His tone triggers a new fierceness in me. *The boo-hoo routine? Been there. Done that. It changes nothing.* “Stop.”

“No. I’m not going to stop.” He spits out his wad.

My arms are numb and my fingers, cramping. *Watch. Wait.*

“This won’t take long. I’ll look, feel around a bit; like with my sister. Be nice and I won’t knock you on the head. Other ones dropped like a sack of potatoes and weren’t any fun.”

Focus: a squirrel nest in that birch, silvered like everything, by the rising moon. Baby squirrels sheltered and warm. Then a snake crawls in.

He unzips my parka.

Do something. Fingernails cut into my palms, and scratch along the metal.

He tugs at my flannel shirt until the buttons pop off. Cold smacks my skin. *Choose: not yet.*

“Okay, little bunny.” He opens his camouflage jacket to his bare chest. Suspenders hold up his beltless jeans. He mashes himself closer.

My childhood voice weeps. *Hide.* Instantly, I leave my body and watch this scene from above, safe. *Focus: Not a victim. Prowling tigers.* Females eviscerate any male that subdues them against their will. Inside my parka, I clench the steel. He kisses me.

Stinky breath, sour saliva. Close mouth to smothering slobber.

His panting and pawing match each other in their demands. My hat falls off when he grabs a wad of hair on each side of my head, arches my neck, and licks his way down.

Now. My hands drop out of my pockets, I move in, then twist away.

He doesn’t respond. Not at first. He blinks, his eyes open wide. Hot blood blooms, seeping down his thighs, soaking through his jeans. *Box cutters slice clean like that.*

He looks down and whimpers, “No-no-no. . .” using his hands, his hat, to try and force things back the way they were. He falls to the ground, landing on his rucksack where it’s bright enough to see his blood blacken the collected stains of long dead rabbits.

Throw the sticky box cutter. Watch it somersault and bury itself in a shining smoothness of snow.

Focus: gather shirt, rezip parka, replace hat, open backpack. Put on headlamp, use beam and find extra pair of glasses. Spare box cutter in right parka pocket. Resettle backpack, snug in shoulder, waist, and chest straps. Tighten. Adjust lamp to light path.

Speak to his darkness, “Crawl to your truck. Make another fake phone call. Tell how I told you to stop, and you wouldn’t. Tell them about female Siberians.” I start down the trail under stars that are wide awake. “And don’t worry. There aren’t any more tigers out here tonight.”

“Please, please, please. . .”

I don’t stop.

(Content warning: human trafficking, sexual assault [mentioned only briefly])

Another Dies Away by Tyla Maddock

Women always know when something is amiss. It's a sudden pins and needles sensation on the back of their skulls. The buzz of a hornet in their chests. A dry mouth. They know when they're being watched or followed, when they need to bolt or prepare to kick, flail, scream, scrape, crawl, claw, punch, stab, hide, duck, tase, bite, spit, grab, push, knee, castrate, maim, kill.

They also know when they're being made the fool.

It's almost supernatural, this ability. But the tragedy of it all is that it's a learned behavior. And sometimes, it isn't enough.

Unfortunately, when prey adapt to survive predators, predators become more ruthless. They must adapt too, to satiate their hunger. Honor their desires. But—as with any species—there are exceptions to this cycle. *Outliers*. Otherwise, every living thing would perish until Earth is as barren as the gas giants. There are prey that learn the ways and whims of their opposition. That, against all odds, cheat nature. That conquer.

I lurk in the darkness pondering all of this, knowing that I'm an outlier. One of many women responsible for keeping my subclass of sexual species from floundering in a patriarchal cesspool. It sounds so complicated, but it's only science. When you exist in a world out to get you, when you wake up to more news of harassment, rape, domestic violence, transphobia, femicide, then go on to experience it for yourself, you adapt to survive. Then you adapt to conquer. Humans think human-exclusive concepts like morals and ethics and beliefs trump billions of years of natural processes. I'm proof they don't.

Floor sixty-seven of The Rosemont is calm tonight. New York City white noise still manages to penetrate the high-rise—sirens, squealing tires, music leaking out of nearby clubs. But like its owners, nothing can disturb the carefully curated manner of comfort in which it exists. Not truly. Not yet.

Every home tells a story if you look at it right. There's some ulterior motive behind the placement of every picture frame, every vase or lamp; in the decor hanging on walls and sitting on flat surfaces. There's a message in clutter and the lack thereof. The contents of a fridge or closet. A medicine cabinet. Nightstand drawers. People will say eyes are the windows to the soul, but I disagree. It takes me all of five minutes in a stranger's home to determine the exact shade of theirs.

This particular stranger's is darker than the sky at the peak of night. Floor sixty-seven is a museum exhibition on obscene wealth. *Greedy* wealth. There's an original Pollock over the marble fireplace, a multi-thousand dollar rug laid out in front—white as the day it was purchased. Both the sofa and wingback chair that separate the living area from the rest of the airy main floor are custom-made.

Bookshelves lining the far wall parallel to the floor-to-ceiling windows display antiques worth more than a public schoolteacher's yearly salary. There are mid-century modern gold table clocks, hand-crafted Victorian pottery, first-edition classic novels, and my personal favorite, several black velvet busts holding necklaces of diamonds fit for royalty. They shine in the dim lighting as I back away from them, keeping my steps light and not caring what my shoes may do to the rug, stopping when I feel the hard surface of the window behind me. I tilt my head and squint my eyes at the items until they're one blurry mass of pretension and absurdity.

“Excuse me, who are you?” a voice emerges from somewhere outside the distortion. Across the room stands a middle-aged woman in a silk robe, her silhouette framed by the city lights. Her eyes are wide and frightened, glazed over like those of a nocturnal animal ready to flee.

“Elaine Darmond,” I say.

“I *know* who I am, I asked who *you* are. And it would be best if you told me before I call the police.”

It always starts like this. With fear and gallant threats. It’s become a dance to me, a repetitive two-step. They hesitate at first, resisting the urge to be led, but eventually fall into rhythm and allow me to ease into a waltz.

I push off the cool glass and take a few slow, echoing steps toward Elaine. The woman is frozen in place. Her hands hang by her sides, longing to feel the shape of a phone, the hilt of a knife. Anything to defend herself against the stranger in her home that’s stalking toward her. It would be no use.

“You’re not Elaine tonight, I’m afraid.” There are mere feet separating us when I stop, close enough that I can feel her shallow breaths on my face. I smile sadly. “You’re my penance.”

Elaine Darmond is a classically beautiful woman. Once upon a time, she’d been a high-fashion model. Gianni Versace’s rumored muse back in ’93. Elaine—then, Elaine Marsella—had opened both the Milan and Paris shows for the spring collection. Critics from the likes of Vogue and Harper’s Bazaar compared her look to that of Gia Carangi and Janice Dickinson. Sad eyes, tan skin, dark Italian features. She was a rising star.

I can see this famed history in her now, even thirty years later. Her shoulders are pulled back, making the visible line of her collarbone more pronounced. She’s taken to

dying the gray out of her hair so it's still the same silky black. Cosmetic surgery has kept her looking younger than she is, but the thin wrinkles around her mouth evidence a long-held smoking habit.

"Your penance?" she asks with a lineless frown. "I don't know you. Is it money you want? Jewelry?"

Whenever they start bargaining, I want to laugh. Because other than my presence, there's nothing that suggests I mean danger. No threats or aggression. No accomplices. Only one weapon on me that isn't yet visible.

I shake my head. "No, no. Nothing like that," I say. Her frown only deepens. "Elaine, where is Mr. Darmond tonight?"

"What is this about?" I stare at her blankly until she's forced to continue. "He's in Tokyo on business. Then he'll be in London for a week."

"He's gone a lot?"

"Yes," she says. "He's a very powerful man, which is why you should leave before you find yourself in a lot of trouble."

I nod and sigh. "I wish I could, Elaine. I want to leave. Desperately. But I can't quite yet. Will you take a seat, please?" I motion toward the dining table behind her.

She hesitates, eyes flicking toward the stairwell exit to the left of their private elevator, wondering if she could reach it before I catch up. Her gaze moves back to mine and I shake my head. Forlorn, she turns and walks toward the nearest chair. I take the one across from her. For a minute, we sit there and assess one another.

"Are you sleeping with him?" she eventually asks, as I knew she would.

"No, I'm not."

Her model's posture doesn't ease. "Are you... Is he your father?"

“No. He’s just another man.”

“So what is it you want from him? From me? If not money or some equivalent.”

Here we arrive at the hard part of this gracious dance. To be an outlier is to sacrifice most of your compassion. I can’t waste time feeling sorry for all these women. Nonetheless, I do. Deep inside of me, tangled in my guts like a hot wire.

I’ve just grown to ignore the burn.

“He’s not in Tokyo, Elaine,” I say. “But you know that.”

A shaky breath leaves her, her inkblot eyes fluttering. “I didn’t know that.”

“But you had your suspicions.”

“I suppose...” She’s toying with her robe’s tie. The material almost sparkles in the blue-orange fluorescence of the surrounding skyscrapers. “He doesn’t tell me much about what he gets up to when he’s gone, and I don’t ask. His work is his work. He takes care of me,” she states. “How do you know this?”

“Because he’s just another man. Give any man enough money and they’ll always want more. And they’ll invent new ways to get it. It’s my job to...” I wave my hands in front of me, trying to find the right word. “*Manage* these inventions. Do you know Darren Oster?”

“Henry’s business partner?” I nod. “Yes, they get along well.”

I laugh humorlessly. “Funny you should say that.”

Now, the hard part of the hard part. I reach into the interior pocket of my jacket and retrieve the stack of photographs I had printed just hours ago. I lay them out in front of her on the table, one by one like I’m dealing her into a game of solitaire. Elaine’s gaze is immediately drawn to the images with Mr. Darmond as the subject. They’re nothing too damning—covert shots of him and Oster exiting a warehouse in Bolivia.

Him and Oster shaking hands with two unidentifiable men wearing tactical vests and carrying assault rifles. Him entering the warehouse in Bolivia. Him greeting the driver of a semi as it backs into a shipping port in the back of the warehouse in Bolivia. In each, he wears a designer suit.

The other photos are harder to contextualize upon first glance. They're dark and grainy. Turning the camera's flash on hadn't been an option, and the victims' pleas made it difficult to get a clear shot. But you can still make out what they consist of: cement floors, rusting steel bars, newer chains welded to them, and at the end of their links, captive women, girls, and boys.

Elaine reaches forward with two shaking hands and grabs a photo in each—the one of her husband and the semi-truck, the other the shadowed face of a girl, her mouth agape and tears dangling from her delicate chin. Elaine's horror-stricken eyes move between them.

"That's Carmen." I tap the photo of the girl. "She's the youngest of the current group. Eight. She was recently orphaned. It made her an easy target, out there all alone. And that"—I point to another photo on the table—"is Maria." Maria's gaunt but bold face stares back at me. "She'd just been traded in from some rival for a younger girl, but she's been trapped most her life. Miguel as well. Him and his older sister were split up a couple years back, and he's desperate to find her, if she's still out there."

We so often associate grief with death, but like love, it's rooted in so many things. There's more than one way to lose a loved one: betrayal, heartbreak, catastrophe. There are many ways to react to it. I've seen almost every variable display of grief possible, on the faces of every wife, mother, daughter, sister, and partner. And every time, I somehow manage to see a new one.

Elaine starts off as a talker. “No... This isn’t—Look, what am I supposed to be seeing? Am I supposed to believe these photos are connected somehow? He runs a tech company, the company stores their merchandise in various countries. This is just one of them. Inside that building is the technology he creates and manufactures and that’s it.”

When I don’t say anything, when I tell her with my face that she’s wrong and no amount of lying to herself will change that, she devolves into a crier. Lines finally appear on her face as it pulls inward and flushes red. The sounds that escape her are quiet, choked gasps, and repetitive strings of, “No, no, no, no, no.” No longer holding the photos in her hands, she threads her fingers in her scalp and pulls at it, rocking back and forth where she sits. Her face is wet with tears and snot when minutes later she states, “I just thought he was cheating on me. Oh my God, I thought he wanted a *divorce*. He’s never here. I thought he didn’t love me anymore.”

Soon, she’s exactly what I need her to be: an outlier. “I need to turn him in,” she rasps out in between heaving breaths and sniffles. “I need to—Why didn’t *you*? He needs to pay.” She runs a finger over the photo of Carmen gently, like the girl is in the room with us now, begging to be set free. Elaine has no kids of her own, or so most online biographies and articles told me, but I wouldn’t have guessed it watching her now. “Oh, *Carmen*. Fuck. You just left her there?”

“I did,” I say. “But for the next twenty-four hours, they’re safe. And after that, nothing will ever hurt them again.”

“How?”

“Last evening I called your husband and told him you had been in an accident. That you were in critical condition. That you were being monitored closely. His private jet couldn’t clear for early takeoff. Very inconvenient for something meant to go where

you need to when you need to, I must say. A ticket home was purchased on his company's credit card soon after. First class. It departed twenty hours ago and will be arriving in five. Before heading to the hospital, he'll stop here to grab your medications, which means he'll be here around eight in the morning. I said the hospital needs them to confirm dosage requirements, and he believed me because men never know as much as they claim to.

"And two hours after he arrives, the FBI will receive an anonymous tip and the same images we have here. They will find exactly what it is they show, and every child and adult your husband planned on trafficking will be rescued. His logs will lead the FBI to those he's currently moving, those he's traded to others. And soon enough, the entire network will crumble. But it will no longer be an issue for him."

Elaine's mouth bobs open, shut. Her robe has now fallen open with her erratic movements, but I don't mention it. "What do you mean?"

Almost every sentence she's spoken has been a question. This is how I arrive at the point best—when they push me to it.

"Because, Elaine," I say, reaching into the opposite pocket of my jacket and pulling out my one weapon: a dagger of the Shakespearean sort. The kind they may use in a production of *Macbeth*. But this one is no prop.

I place it on the table and push it forward, disrupting the even rows of photographs. Elaine looks at it dumbly. Her eyes move over the engraving on the alloyed steel blade. *And so with men*. She won't know what's meant to follow, its significance. Her mind won't conjure thoughts of mortality and solidarity and the replenishing of generations. She won't know I've given hundreds of copies of the same dagger to others just like her.

But she knows what the dagger itself means and she needs one last push.

“Maria hates the way your husband smells,” I say. “She says it’s like sweat and tobacco drenched in cologne. She says he’s a crueler client than keeper. He likes to hit her, call her his ‘best whore.’ There are scars on her wrists from where he binds her with rope and cable wire. He knows she will fight him if she isn’t tied up. He likes that about her.”

With that, I stand. Elaine’s shuddering body stays where it is. She doesn’t watch as I round the table, doesn’t react when I kiss the top of her head. When I reach the exit, she doesn’t stop me from walking through it and out of her life forever. She opts out of chasing me down the street. Days later, she isn’t waiting beside the newsstand as I stop to pick up a copy of the daily paper. The headline reads, *CEO OF DARMOND CORP. SLAIN IN HIS HOME, NO SIGN OF WIFE.*

The police will find the dagger wherever she hid it, if she attempted to hide it at all, and add his death to the long list of those committed with the same one. They will alert the FBI, who have already rescinded the warrant they requested for Henry Darmond’s arrest upon receiving my photos and freeing the captives, and continue their aimless investigation into the elusive vigilante who travels the world bleeding the life out of corrupted men.

They won’t know that we’re a growing network. They won’t know that it’s just science, that we’re adapting to survive. They won’t look for the outliers who triumph against the odds. And we will continue to conquer.

Later, I pin the newspaper on the corkboard inside my Staten Island storage unit and back away, stopping when I feel the hard surface of the wall behind me. I tilt my head and squint my eyes at my collection until they’re one blurry mass of retribution and reckoning:

ROBERT EILIFF STABBED TO DEATH—

FLORIDA SENATOR FOUND DEAD—

DEATH OF UMASS PROFESSOR—

—TWENTY-FIVE WITH SAME WEAP—

—REFERRED TO AS THE “DAGGER CURSE”--

—FOUND MUTILATED—

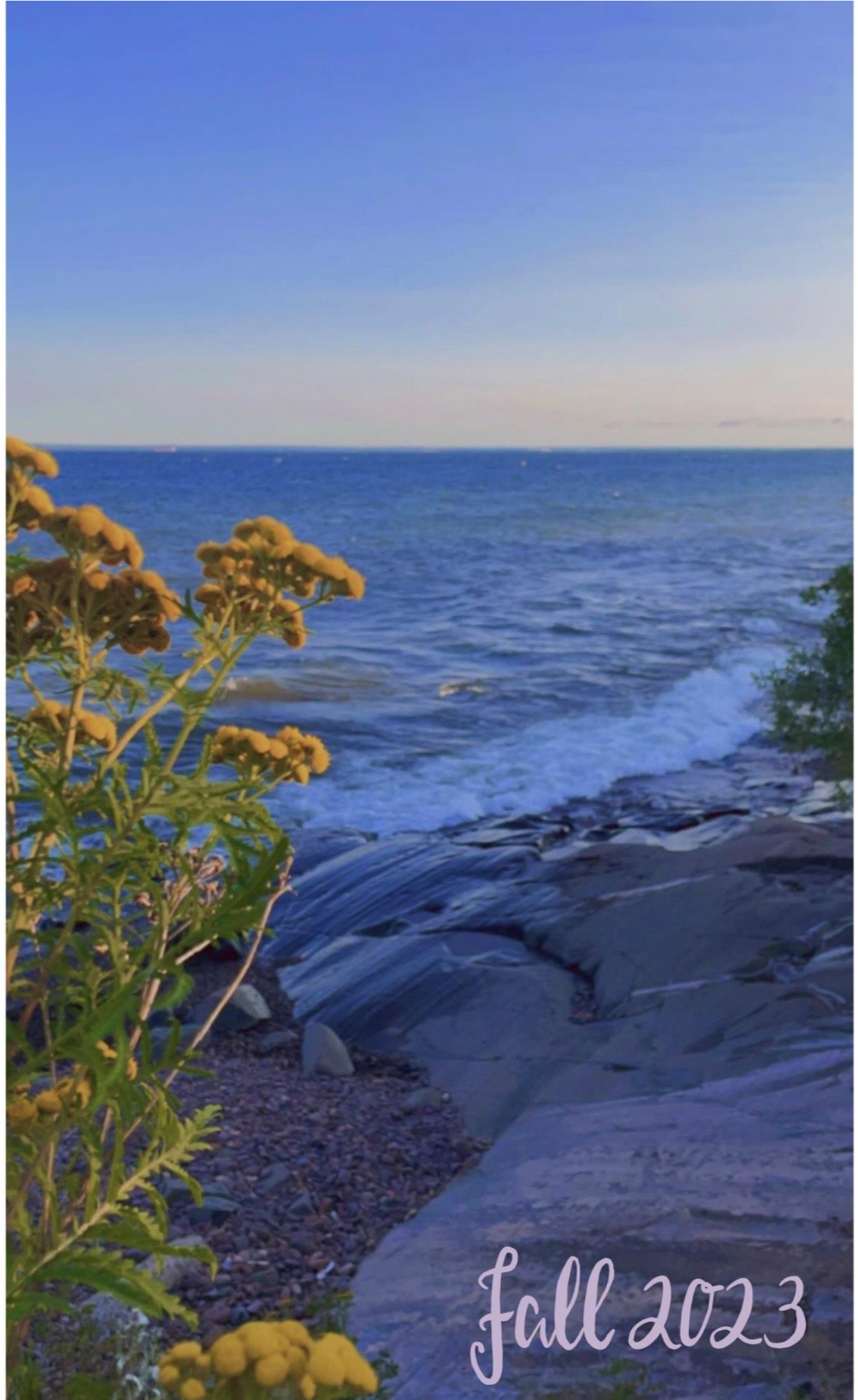
—NINETEEN KNIFE WOUNDS—

—PREMEDITATED—

—DISMEMBERED—

—GORY MESS—

“MORE WILL FOLLOW,” SAYS POLICE CHIEF



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