

*The  
Roaring Muse*



*Fall 2025*



# The Roaring Muse

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# The Roaring Muse Is:

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## Crystal

By Zaraely Adams

Crystal was the kidnapper.  
She didn't take me,  
but everything surrounding the good,  
including my childhood.

She stole my mom from her spot on the chair,  
a dip in the seat where she would do nothing but stare.  
She stole the soul right out of my dad,  
and that turned him screaming mad.

She stole my spoons, turned them black.  
Stole our food right off the rack.  
Gone were my clothes right from my drawers.  
Stripped my house right down to the core.

She stole my young, happy life;  
dumped it in an alley, killed by a knife.  
No more memories were made,  
and the happiness in our house decayed.

All that remained was her residue,  
and all the bills on the counter that were due.  
Yes, Crystal stole it all, even what was in our trashes,  
She left our house an old pile of ashes.

## **america study #1**

by CJ Davis

When the night comes, the dogged man  
in his suit of bones will raise his flag.  
Underneath the blood-red leaves drooping  
in the fall air, he'll wave his flag and dance  
his billowing dance. Without a word,  
he commences The Leveling.  
Underneath unfettered moonlight,  
the sweet smell of Rot will leave  
his mouth in labored chortles  
as he closes his eyes to the fire

## **Shared Leaves**

By Brooke Eibensteiner

As I sit here in the dark,  
I know for certain the  
crickets are speaking  
to each other.  
I imagine they discuss  
all Matters of Import.  
The plants with their  
cracked lips.  
The cars that swallow the  
road without chewing.  
The warm stirring of tender  
air beneath shared leaves and  
how wonderful it is  
to rub one's legs together.  
Sometimes I think  
I might be the loneliest person  
in the universe.

## **A Botanist's Anatomy**

By Kat Garvin

Splinter my skull atop a tabletop  
And ease inside my brain  
Carried deeper into liquid thought  
Roots grow thick in these veins  
– Twisting, Twisting  
Turned back, a work of clock  
Your spirit buds through cerebrum  
My muscles gawk and sputter  
In decaying basements  
I find you in an old tape recorder  
Thought you were gone, brushed aside  
Wooded brush inside  
A jaded stem stemming through brain stems  
Flowers in my mind  
Wilting and rotted  
Have you been growing here this whole time?  
Twisting, Twisting?  
Tearing through tissue  
Winding through memory-laden synapses  
Find me waiting aching  
Nervously amidst nerves  
Your roots rooted ravines and canyons grating  
It seems you're still mine  
Hiding where my vessels glide  
I've been missing missing pieces, insisting  
Was I growing there this whole time?  
Deep in the recesses of your mind?  
Moss like memory  
– Twisting, Resisting  
Splinter your skull and ease inside your brain  
Where does my budding spirit reside?  
My skeleton shaped shadow against unfamiliar membrane  
If I can be found here, am I still Mine?

## **Weather or not**

By Ella Hatfield

It's gone six with a storm watch and  
Everything is happening softer than you'd think  
Thunder that doesn't boom But murmur  
Like the cars so quiet on the road.  
It's a slow road. And the tires don't peel  
But pass like paper. Somewhere sirens are  
Calling, not screaming but crooning. The trees  
Don't lean ominously but gentle, like  
Those wooden bones want a nap. Like they matter  
To each other.  
As for the crow, well it can't help itself.  
It's gloomy. It's ominous.  
It calls and caws and croaks  
But it's a bird. And I don't put much count in them  
Anyways. Drops of rain land, one after another  
Softer than you'd think

## **Fourth-Wave Feminism**

By Kimberly Hodgman

Don't worry, it's not going to hurt you.

Close your inner eyelids:

Marquis de Sade,

upscale emo,

shimmery top coats,

silver rings, promises

to do better. Look gently; don't burn yourself.

Teach others how to love

killers and husbands

are all the rage

in literature this year. Try to stop,

fail, try again, finish writing

it gets better. Dizzying blackness.

unconditional power.

learn when to leave.

plant the seed.

watch it grow. Don't you know?

Bluebeard stories are only real

if your eyes are wide enough to see them.

## **Low-hanging**

By Madison Hoffman

I remember the evening  
when the wisps of an unexamined feeling  
hung like condensed air, always clinging  
to the surface of my baby blonde hair,  
to the rose-plump of my cheeks,  
and the powdered crease beneath my eyes.

That night smelt comfortably old like  
wet stone and cigarettes,  
and in dark store windows, in puddled pictorials,  
sat low-hanging jeans and fluorescent reds.

Then—it was rare to ever be with my body,  
but that night I was—  
as to live without performing, you must be invisible or divine  
like the ripest fruit hanging  
near to the ground, a wide leaf shading.

## **The Sea Makes Something Green Out of Me**

By Kaelyn Hvidsten

I'm no sailor  
I've never known the difference  
between a dock and a harbor  
and maybe that's the point—  
to notice without knowing why  
but still I look for lighthouses  
like someone who uses them  
I look to that half-built dock  
or harbor or what have you—  
that infantile, unimaginable underbelly  
of a building so vulnerable  
and unseen except by midwife  
workmen, slipping under her tarped  
cloak to soothe and sedate her  
into being  
more than what age will inevitably  
call her to be—  
and maybe she will know  
on those days sea-green sailors  
kiss her wettened concrete  
or children from a nearby college  
gather, green with freedom,  
along her length to turn words over  
like bottled ships meant to sail  
between their lips alone,  
she will know it was worth it to erode,  
or maybe she will ask if any of it  
meant anything at all as the last  
piece of her crumbles to the sea  
from which she first rose.  
I'm no sailor  
but there was an old captain's

radio next to her photograph  
in the museum  
I'm not sure if it was supposed to be  
there but it spoke of a lighthouse  
an old friend of mine used  
to operate in the summer maybe he still does—  
and I listened

## **Gathered in Pieces**

By Kati Kneifl

There's more to reality  
Than perception honeybees  
Flitter elegant wings songbird  
Sings phantoms sleep patterns  
Of constellations cross night sky  
Silent prophecies: No coincidence.

Exposed to the poles wandered  
Coordinates perched encoded  
Processes input, no: Output.  
Catch up— Stay on circuit  
Control— Be an exhibit!

Yorkshire daybreak hours  
Delightfully yearning teetering  
Delicate line of the horizon far  
Clouds break the sky falls  
Though earth soars to space

Complicated environments feature  
Deafening tunes extremely  
Constrained held to words innately  
Exposed hunt the wild-type distinguished  
Inborn mating failure sketch mark  
Why— Wait... Remarkably reborn!

## **Postcard from the City of Ice**

By Preston Meys

Superior grew desolate once you left for exotic Milwaukee. Sheets of ice cover the concrete at the end of March and there's no joy in winter anymore. The world snows and hails only to melt, unable to birth something that can stay – except for the prized Great Lake, of course, which blows its bitter breath through the deserted streets. Seagulls are swirling over my house and will be replaced by a blizzard this Saturday. Unlike the birds, I'm stuck shoveling my way out of this place and still never manage to leave; I'm not allowed reprieve from this onslaught of six-month snowy turbulence. What I'm saying is, won't you fly home already? Or will the cold lodged in my soul frost your wings unusable if you do?

## **If I Were God, I'd Detonate the Dictionary**

By Lily Pedersen

All meaning is a detour.  
Truth is just a dare with good posture.  
I made the stars drunk so they'd stagger into constellations.  
I built gravity as a joke that you all took seriously.

Miracles are typos I refused to fix.  
Language is a fuse,  
and every poem is a lit match  
tossed into your lungs.

I gave the sky its voice  
by setting fire to silence.  
Hope is a grenade with a halo.  
Love is an open casket  
you climb into on purpose.

I made your heart flammable.  
I made your mouth a battlefield.  
I made you out of leftover stardust  
and still called you perfect.  
Do you understand what kind of madness that is?

If I were God—  
and maybe I am—  
I'd rewrite the ending mid-sentence.  
I'd put a trapdoor in your shadow.  
And when you come crawling to the edge,  
covered in ash and questions,  
I'd be there: laughing,  
shaking the stars out of my coat—  
as I hand you the pen.

## **how cave man learned to language.**

By Lonnah Royale

Rock prescribed me grammar.  
i speak because i kill bird with Rock.  
glint in eyeball: light without blemish.  
throw Rock, rip feathers, grind meat in mouth.  
Survive.  
count belly-number.  
sleep on Rock.  
Rock taught me names. i make new names now.  
boulder is big Rock. clouds are soft things in the Forever Blue.  
big bird is hawk. little bird is sparrow. four-leg creature that pants and catches bird  
is dog.  
dog lifts lips and does a thing i call smile.  
dog heart reaches to my heart. that is love.

all these  
i have named.  
i will make the world bigger, but not heavier

the lights in heavens spin. sinless as blood.  
Rock hums a Forever Song. it brings my eyes to close, my arms and legs to untense,  
my chest to stop searching the Unseen in the night  
i have named this Rest.  
i live because i Repeat: eyeball, throw, rip, grind. breathe. breathe.  
breathe. breathe.  
feel Forever Song in my Soul  
sing my For Now Song back because I do not remember my Forever Song yet  
these were the first words i threw from my jaws  
it goes:  
“i know where my heart is  
and it Is in Rock.”

## **Let me tell you everything I can before you're too old**

By Lonnah Royale

This is the fridge. It keeps food cold, but the oven heats it up. This us how you tie your shoes and zip your coat. These on my face are glasses to help me see.

The blue eyes I gave you are perfect and don't need them yet.

This is my chew (don't tell Mom I told you what chew is).

This is how you cook spaghetti and brew coffee. This thing is a car. In a few years though, I'll drive you around on my Harley.

These are the words of Jesus. These are my hands that hold you now, five times bigger than your miraculous little heart.

Your legs will learn to walk soon and your throat with figure out how to talk. You found out you could smile yesterday, so I'll tell you what a joke is now.

**If I won the lottery, I wouldn't tell anybody, but there would be signs**

By Delaney Shipman

I'll calculate disease or disorder,  
or unease or mailorders.  
It's likelier I'll house a hermit crab  
in my clavicle,  
or die by cataclysmic storm,  
or play our song  
on the TouchTunes.  
Even a road crossing the sea 666 times  
would reach the pizza place sooner.

The number of teeth in a baby's mouth,  
beers in the fridge,  
pieces of sushi I can eat,  
modern day oceans,  
and lucky 7-- for luck,  
heat printed on yellow paper  
and blurred by saltwater once I get home.

I caught a blue lobster in a trance,  
and now my friends wear sheepswool,  
like living on the frigid prairie,  
but I'm without a companion.

You told me I'm one in 292 million,  
but my room is littered with scratchers and seashells.  
A quarter, your nail, my house key,  
I'd be happy with \$4,  
but fat chance.

## **head above water**

By Scott Summers

The mind flows as if it were a stream dislodging a rock holding it stagnant. Thought-like water reviving dead tributaries & branching out as roots under our boots do. They wonder about a multitude so vast that I cannot bottle enough of it to present like this. I do apologize; these waters threaten to flood me if I don't claw at a foreign shore. I know I speak like the mad; perhaps I am. The trouble with me is that I have no great Mississippi, Rhine, nor Nile thirsting & constructing a Panama, Suez, Venetian matrix seems Herculean — Sisyphean. Instead, the damhead bursts, the marshes are muddied, & Noah refuses to share his divine forewarning.

## **Sunk Costs**

By Sara Valentiuk

I lied in my mind when I claimed  
the couch would not claim me,  
because here I sit, sunken like a ship  
in the wake of two typhoons whose  
unbridled gales left trails of paint  
across the kitchen tiles. Their swells  
deposited toys, sharp shells on the  
carpeted beach at my feet and  
even though the storms now sleep,  
my mind is a whirl as I gape at the mess  
wondering what to tackle next.



## **my love is my home**

By Addilyn Green

"my love is my home" (2025) is an 18 x 24" Prismacolor pencil piece created in the spirit of joyful exploration. It reflects the idea that home is not a physical place, but rather found in the people we surround ourselves with.

For the artist, home has never been a fixed location - always shifting, lasting only a few years before starting anew. Instead, home is shaped by the connections we build, the people who support and uplift us, and those who help us grow into our best selves. It is found in moments of laughter, trust, and shared resilience - the bonds that remain with us through every transition.

This piece embodies the belief that true home is carried within us, woven into our hearts and souls, and shared with those we love in the ever-changing house we all live in together.



ТЫ ТО, ЧТО ТЫ ЕШЬ !!!



## **You Are What You Eat!**

By Adeline Leger

*You Are What You Eat!* is a 2024 oil painting created in response to the prompt of an indirect self-portrait. This work is an ode to my unusual cooking habits, typically eating individual ingredients rather than fully assembled dishes, as well as my famously stinky food. I also enjoy dabbling in horror elements, which I incorporated into this piece. Upon seeing my initial sketch, my professor noted its resemblance to World War II Russian propaganda posters and medical illustrations, urging me to get weirder. I eagerly embraced the comparisons and ran with them. The wacky, playful composition combines both 2D and 3D rendering styles, as seen in medical illustrations, complete with a stained-glass-esque background. A vibrant color palette was used to accentuate the absurdity of the piece. The text at the top of the painting mirrors my title, written in Russian as a nod to the inspiration drawn from Russian propaganda posters.

## **Honest Reflection**

By Adeline Leger

My first oil-painted self-portrait, a 2024 piece titled *Honest Reflection*, is a true-to-life representation of myself at the time—flaws and all. The piece highlights warm colors and features subtle, dynamic lighting. My goal in painting this portrait was to experiment with color and earnestly bring out the lively hues of the skin. In a world constantly bombarded by filters and AI-generated images, showing the genuine and raw human form is something society is starved for. I wanted to contribute to that unprocessed version of media by showcasing the activating hues of the skin that so often get grayed over. Being accurate in this way is also valuable for documenting a version of me in time—a moment I lived through but will never replicate again. It is bittersweet to think that your hair will never sit exactly like that again, your skin will never blush quite the same way, and the light will never hit your face precisely as it did then.



**Trespasser**  
by Julian Tollefson



## **A Sense of Expectations**

By Hannah Names

oil on canvas, 4'x5,' 2024.

As an artist who works with both visual and written language, my primary goal is to tell stories that reflect and react to the complexities of the world around us. This piece is part of a larger body of work that is about the story of adolescence pressures and the external and internal influences that shape our understanding of the world. To examine these concepts, I stitch together seemingly disparate subjects and themes, drawing from a metaphorical “scrap bag” of imagery and materials to create something more than the sum of its parts. For this painting, I digitally collaged three of my own photos and then painted them onto the canvas. I enjoy incorporating collage into my work because it allows for some abstraction within figurative painting. A collage can create a space where seemingly unrelated images live together in unusual ways. When these images are rendered in a painting it forces them to exist on an even playing field – no longer pieces cut and pasted together, but a complete scene.

## **Memories from a Viking Dealer**

By Penelope Marie Doeden

During my senior year of high school, I worked for a sewing machine company selling overpriced models to unsuspecting city slickers with too much disposable income. At the time, I had wanted the job to buy a sewing machine, but I never actually made enough to buy one. Viking machines are notoriously expensive, and while you can make your case that the price is worth it, it wasn't worth the nearly \$5,000 price tag for the machine I wanted. They sit squarely on the pricey side of the sewing machine world, feature cutting-edge technology, and are usually covered in LCD screens. While they might not be anywhere near as reliable as other brands, and not as popular as Juki and Bernina, a very small dedicated group of sewists love them nonetheless.

Technically speaking, I was working as a temp for my boss as she went on vacation. For this story, we'll call her Sue. I started the job around May, and she had me fully trained by June. I worked inside a Viking Sewing Gallery. It was Viking's internal dealer network, designed to allow the company to bypass independent dealer commissions, with the help of Jo-Ann Fabrics. Inside the store, we sold Viking sewing machines, alongside a couple of the higher-end Singer models that Jo-Ann refused to sell, machine accessories, and stabilizers. I loved working for Viking. The hours were terrible; I only worked about once a week on average, but at least I got to work. It was my greatest happiness, surrounded by sewing machines, inside one of the few places I can call 'nirvana.' I'd like to present some of my favorite memories in the style of a journal.

### **May 15th, 2023**

I still remember the smell of the store, especially during training. I think at the time, they were moving the fleece on Jo-Ann's side from the winter season into storage, as it got replaced by bolts of printed cotton and sheer polyester. It smelled like fabric, like holding a bolt of fleece directly to your face and breathing it in, along with the slightly acrid stench of the 30-year-old shopping plaza the store sat in, slowly aging as time crept along. I had drunk an iced tea from Caribou earlier, and that was stuck in my nose, too. Peaches and Fleece. That's what it smelled like. The scent lingered for the whole time that I was there, compounded by the fact that I regularly had to go back into the storage area, where the fleece was tucked away, awaiting its time to shine.

Sue was teaching me how to make demo packs. They're little packs of fabric that contain multiple different kinds of applications our machines could be used for. I hated making

\them. So much. But I didn't tell her that. I didn't want to spoil our unexpected friendship. She wore this perfume, the kind that you could only get in the glass cabinet at Walgreens. I don't remember what kind it was, but it was simply divine. Sometimes, I ask them for samples, and I'll try to find hers. It reminds me of simpler times. She acted as something of an anchor during that turbulent period. I was a functioning alcoholic, and my peers could barely stand to look at me, only months into my transition. I felt horrific, like the monster that kids think is under their beds. Sue didn't see that, or at least she didn't tell me. She loved to complain about my flats and poke me in the side for always forgetting to lock my purse in the cabinet, but sometimes it felt like she had the kind of love for me that only a mother can have.

### **May 27th, 2023**

Sue wasn't at the store that day. She might have been sick, but the exact reasoning escapes me. My other coworker, we'll call her Maria, was there instead to teach me about the quilting machines. While I'm a quilter myself, in truth, a quilting machine is just a sewing machine with a couple of extra bells and whistles that would need a detailed explanation to show the difference. We sat at that birch table for hours

as she grilled me on all of the functions the Epic 95Q had. I don't remember them. It had lasers, though, I remember that. She had me create little quilt squares, just pieces of calico with batting in between, nothing fancy.

I made hundreds of them with dozens of different messages, and sometimes, I would embroider the cotton squares beforehand on one of the embroidery machines. Maybe I still have some of the squares. I can't remember. I do remember making them after that day, obsessing over them with scrutiny yet unseen by a teenager. I still have the itch to make quilts to this day. I've included some of the messages below.

*Home is wherever your heart is*

*Peace, Love & Quilting*

*Family is found in the oddest places*

*Friends are Forever*

*I love my family, but I love my VIKING more*

*I'd rather be Sewing*

*Sew the love into the world*

*I have too much fun with my VIKING*

*Keep the world sewing*

### **June 30th, 2023**

I must have been late for work that day due to traffic. I don't remember anymore, but I know that Sue was a little miffed that I hadn't called her at 10 but at 11 to notify her that the store was open. I spent most of the day dusting. It was so boring, but I did have some fun. I made a couple of new embroidery designs on the Designer Epic 2. I still have photos of the email sent out that morning panicking over a fruit design. I think it was because nobody had realized how messed up it was until it had already destroyed a demo machine. They told us that the design would cause the needle to snap, and it had rendered an Epic 2 and a Ruby 90 dead in the water. Several customers came in for the pattern, but they all left empty-handed. It was one of those gift-with-purchase type deals to get people to buy more presser feet and stabilizers.

I had a breakfast sandwich for lunch that day. It was also from the Caribou, directly across the street. I loved stopping at that place; they were always so friendly. I think I made demo packs while I ate. Such details are often lost to time. That was the day that we heard that a lady we'll call Clara was leaving the company. She was Sue's boss, and she didn't even give them a week's notice. She just up and left. It was wild. We didn't realize then that it was evidence of the rot inside the company, and she was the first to see it.

### **July 15th, 2023**

I still remember my biggest sale. I sold someone a Brilliance 75Q and a Huskylock S21. I nearly cried when I finished that purchase; I had sold nowhere even close to that much product in ages, and it was my crowning achievement. It was a nightmare getting it to the customer's car, but the \$7,000 sale I put into the blue book more than made up for it. It was exhilarating, almost childlike in its quality. I ran to the cutting counter, telling as many people as I could. I was so proud that I even forgot to eat lunch. Sue called me later in the day, and she was so happy that I had done it. Usually, the store barely made it into the black, but with such a large sale under my belt, we were hopeful that maybe we could turn a modest profit that quarter.

That day, I think I processed \$90,000 in new inventory from the truck. It's a little odd thinking about the fact that it was only four sewing machines and a serger, but it was one spendy little store. I don't know if they've sold those Epic 95Qs to this day. That's how few we moved. We made most of our revenue off the backs of our budget models, the H-Class and Emerald series machines. I sold about 20 of each over my time with the company.

## **\August 1st, 2023**

This is the last real day on the job I can remember. We had just gotten the product information on the Onyx machines, the replacements for the H-Class models. We got a packet in the mail, all glossy and laminated pages, proudly proclaiming that this was the pinnacle of Viking design. They weren't. They had issues from day one, and I can remember that day, the display model we set up broke simply from being turned on. It was symbolic of the company as a whole. Ever-higher prices for the ever diminishing quality of our consumer products, with the "cream of the crop" staying similar to machines of the past as their prices hit the ceiling.

Sue was so excited to see the new inventory. She told me that the promise of a new machine, even if it sucked, could bring in double their normal sales and that it could help fill up the blue book. In hindsight, I know that her desperation to fill the blue book wasn't some prideful attempt to be the best, but to cling to her job as the company gutted itself from the inside out. We all knew that the company would dissolve the retail division; it was just a matter of when. That day, though, I was diligent in my work to get people to try it out, and I ran little classes to show people all of the functions of their new machines. That's what made the company what it was: the dedication of the retail division to make the product lineup something it wasn't. We tried so hard to offer warranties and make tune-ups before they even left the store in the hopes that it would give us just one more sale to list on the ledger.

## **Present**

Viking would end up dissolving the division. When Jo-Ann declared bankruptcy this year, Viking laid off the entire internal dealer network and announced it would be closed by April 15th. It's just around the corner from my perspective, but I like not to think about that. Maria would end up leaving the store when they announced the closure, since she never really needed the job. Sue, for her 35 years with the company, was offered \$750 and asked to stay until they sold the store furnishings. She stayed. When I visited the store a month ago, she told me about how she had no idea what to do, and with no retirement account in place, she may end up homeless. The hardest part of leaving was that I had no way to help her, other than a couple of words. I wish I could have given her something. Maybe one of those quilt squares. In the end, Viking is a shitty company, but the people made it what we remember it as. In a life that continued to beat me down, I had found a small group of people who saw me for who I wanted to be, unconditionally. That little sliver of happiness was so euphoric, so exuberant, and I'll hold onto it forever.

## It's Not a Love Story (or Maybe It Is)

By Ellie Hanson

My first love was a boy named Owen. I had liked the name Owen ever since my parents told me it would be my name if I were a boy. I was in kindergarten when I saw him for the first time. It was during recess, he was playing basketball near the playground. My dad plays basketball, my mom did too. I hoped I would play basketball someday. Like dad, and mom, and Owen. Maybe if I *did*, it would be fate.

Whenever I wasn't with my BFF Sophie, I would sit and watch him play. I wouldn't just sit and watch; that would be creepy. Instead I would sit on a bench that faced the playground, but you could still see the basketball court if you turned your head. I would sit there with my diary from the Scholastic Book Fair. My diary had a lock that only I held the key to. I would scribble down my first name with his last name, or our initials added together within a heart. Every so often I would glance over at his silhouette on the basketball court.

I invited him to my sixth birthday party at the local bowling alley; he got me a small *High School Musical* radio. How did he know that was my favorite movie? It must have been fate.

That night, after we got home, my mom balanced me atop her lap in her big red chair and asked me "what was your favorite part of the day?"

"The presents," I answered with a quirk of my lips, Owen's radio held carefully in my hands as I kicked my socked feet against her knee.

She smiled as my dad laughed from his spot on the couch. She then asked "And what present was your favorite?"

"Owen's radio."

"Do you like Owen?"

"I love him."

"I don't think you love him," my mom told me, a gentle smile still on her lips as she tightened her arms around me, "I think you have a crush." That was a word I had never heard before. After my mom explained the intricacies of crushes to me, I thought she was wrong. It wasn't a crush, I loved him. His name is Owen and he plays basketball, that has to mean something.

Except, maybe it didn't. Another year passed and I was in first grade; Owen never crossed my mind again. Maybe six is too early to know what love is. Fifth grade came around and my mind was changed again. There was a boy named Oliver in my grade; he was the funniest boy I had ever met. My mom said he was the class-clown. My dad was really funny too, mom said that was one of the things she loved about him.

It was one of the things I loved about Oliver too. He also had freckles, like me. It had to be fate. The only problem was a girl named Sophia (not my BFF Sophie, but Sophia, with a fancy letter 'A' at the end). Sophia was the most popular girl in the class. She had white-blond hair, like snow, and a 'contagious' laugh (that's what my mom called it). Oliver had a contagious laugh, just like Sophia's. Maybe that was fate too.

In the fall of fifth grade, everyone was finding a boy on the football team to wear the jersey of in honor of the homecoming game. Every girl wanted a boy to let them wear their jersey.

I walked into school one brisk fall morning, my heart in my hands and a question on my lips. That was until I heard the rumors: Sophia was wearing Oliver's jersey. I could hear my heart shatter against the imperial tile of the fifth grade hall.

That night, I cried slow tears along to sad songs in my mom and dad's bed, placing Oliver's name into the lyrics and wondering: '*Why not me?*' My mom came in after a while. Her hands brushed my hair behind my ear, gentle and soft in the way only a mom's hands could be. Those same kind hands wiped tears from my face, humming along to the song that was playing until I was subdued enough to tell her what was wrong. As I told her the story, my tears started again and the sound of my sniffles filled the quiet air of her bedroom. She gave a sad sigh of my name as I shoved my face back into Dad's pillow.

"Don't worry too much about it," My mom said after, "you are so much smarter, kinder, and funnier than him anyway."

"Funnier isn't a word, Mom," I groaned against the pillow, an undercurrent of snark cutting through my words. At least, that is what I wish I would have said. At the time, I didn't know that. Instead, I sobbed something along the lines of '*no I'm not*'. Either way, I didn't pay her any mind. After all, if I was really all of those things, wouldn't middle school boys notice that?

The crush (crush, not love) on Oliver faded with the seasons, and I decided to give myself a break from boys. After all, a middle school girl can only guess at what true love is so many times before she starts to lose herself. In that time, I grew taller and joined three sports (including basketball, just like I had wished to all those years ago). I drifted away from my BFF Sophie and made some new friends along the way. Mom's big red chair was replaced with a new, blue one. Yet, every high must have a low, and I underwent a lot of heartache, even if it wasn't at the hands of middle school boys.

The summer my dad passed was long and slow, even though the loss felt quick and painful. Like a hurricane, or a stab wound: the pain and fear happen suddenly, invading everything you know and feel seemingly all at once. Despite that, it's what comes after, the scar, the carnage, that leaves more of an impact. It was in the dawn of the aftermath, standing on newly leveled land, that what was left of my family collapsed together. This

time, just as my mom's gentle fingers had stroked tears from my cheeks every time before, my small, artless fingers would stroke tears from her own. Two pairs of shaky hands trying to hold their broken worlds together.

Despite all of this darkness, pain, and heartbreak, time continued to move, as it always does. Slowly, life got easier, the darkness no longer all-encompassing, but rather a bitter storm cloud in the rearview mirror as I forged forward. With this feeling of light, came my willingness to give boys a try again.

When I was in 10th grade, I thought I loved a boy. His name was Ben and he had been one of my best friends since I was thirteen years old. He told me he wanted to date me, and everyone in my life told me we were perfect, so I did. We had so much in common. He had lost his mom, just like I had lost my dad. We understood each other in a way nobody else did. Maybe it was fate. I thought I loved him, truly I did. We dated for eleven months.

The day I decided to break up with him was one of the worst in my life. But it was a pain that was necessary, at least that's what my mom said. Because each of those months was filled with a feeling of turmoil that only I could understand, yet I could hardly articulate. Because I didn't love him. Not truly. No matter how hard I forced myself, tried to convince myself that I could, I never fell. So I had to put myself out of my misery. Even if it felt incredibly selfish, knowing I was hurting my best friend. I wished I was enough of a coward to text him; to run away and never have to see him again, leaving the memory of him behind me like another cloud to populate my overcast sky. But I couldn't, not to him. My mom held my hand the whole day, as I waited for him to pick me up.

After it was over, and the damage was done, I stumbled back into my house with violent sobs stuttering their way out of my chest between gasps of air. Everything felt foggy as pain overwhelmed my senses. My mom was in front of me at that moment, gathering me into her arms with a soft tug of my shoulders. Catching me, just as she always did. She pulled my sixteen-year-old form onto her lap in the blue chair, placing her arms around my waist just like she had on my sixth birthday. She turned on low, sad music and I buried my tear-stained face in her shoulder, just like I had the pillow when I was in fifth grade.

"It's going to be okay," she shushed me as her fingers tucked my hair behind my ear, her fingers, though weathered by time, were just as soft and gentle as they always had been.

I knew she was right this time. Even if Ben and I were never friends again. Even if fate never seemed to allow me the right boys. Because she was always there to catch me when a day grew especially dark, boys felt impossible, and all seemed lost. Maybe it was fate that brought me to her, with her gentle hands and fondness for colorful arm chairs. A tenderhearted woman who was by my side, holding my hand and wiping my tears with every rocky misstep I took in the walk of life.

Maybe I do know what love is after all.

## **Killing With Kindness**

By Anja Placzek

*“And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.”*

- *Revelation 6:8 (ESV)*

The sun was setting, and War had not returned home. Death tried not to think about it. Turned the TV on and sat down. Tried not to think about it. Stood back up. Tried not to think about it. Tapped his fingers at his sides. Went to the bathroom to brush his teeth. Tried not to think about it.

He realized with a jolt that his pale hair had gained another streak of white, the foggy mirror shoving his horrified stare right back at him. His toothbrush clattered to the counter, and he dug his nails into his own clammy palms with a deep sense of foreboding.

Minutes later, he was driving to town, dial cranked up on the radio's classical station to drown out his thoughts. The stars twinkled calmly against the hazy pitch of the night, and Death allowed the surging violins to enter his brain and rend the disgusting worry from it. He felt bile clawing its way up his throat and choked it back down. *He probably just got pulled over. He's an idiot.* But somewhere in War's eyes, Death saw a piece of himself.

He jerked the car into park, so fast that a slight headache surfaced in his temples, and cut the engine, the orchestral accompaniment fizzling out and leaving him with only his own labored breathing.

A horrible sight greeted him outside the bar War and his lackeys frequented on their downtown adventures. The neon sign illuminated Death's eccentric roommate in his worst form, in the throes of that twisted sense of justice that caused him to take an eye for an eye. While Death turned the other cheek, War scratched and spat and took what he thought he deserved.

War's mouth was covered in blood like a wolf that had just slaughtered its prey, and his eyes were almost glittering in the moonlight. He smudged his hand across his face, the gore from his split lip creating an oddly beautiful color contrast against his pale cheek.

Famine and Pestilence gripped the arms of a struggling stranger as War reared back to throw a gnarly punch. At once, Death felt a stream of memory flash before his eyes in rapid succession. High school. A girl flinching back as she was shoved to the ground, the bully laughing at her pained wince. War's eyes gleaming with a sickly strange anger that Death had noticed an inkling of before but never seen in its full glory. Blood flying from the bully's face as War slammed his fist into the bully's nose. A sickening crack echoing across

the schoolyard. Death's attempt to grab War by the shoulders and wrestle him away from causing further damage ending in a sharp elbow to the face. Death staring at his only friend in shock and terror and his friend staring back and seeing only red.

In reality, the memory had only taken a few seconds to replay, but it seemed to take ages for his brain to catch up to his body- his feet were suddenly pounding the asphalt as he slammed the car door and sprinted toward the violent display. A reflection of the past was cascading into the future, yet Death could only hope the man being held in place by Famine and Pestilence had done something, *anything*, to warrant such punishment. Otherwise, War was truly too far gone.

“*HEY!*” Death's voice ripped out of him, lungs and legs burning.

War's entire body seemed to stutter for a moment, but he couldn't stop the momentum of his fist and the man's head whipped sideways with the force of the hit. His knuckles were covered in blood as he wiped them on his shirt and the man blinked harshly, struggling to remain conscious.

“What are you doing here?” War's voice came out in a murmur that so vilely contrasted his extreme display of brutality that Death felt like vomiting.

Death swallowed hard and dug his nails into his palms. “I was worried about you.” His stomach churned. “I expected you home earlier.”

“He hit someone. In the bar.” The words came out in a jumble. “He was trying to steal their cash and they caught him and he hurt them-”

“So let the police handle it!” Death spat.

Famine tried to interject, but Death silenced him with a glare. Pestilence's eyes seemed to pierce Death right back, but he stayed quiet.

“He's already bribed the security! He's getting a taste of his own medicine! Isn't that a *good thing*?” War's voice was straining now, and his ruined lip trickled weakly with blood.

Famine finally managed to get a word in. “You're lucky some other drunkard didn't punish him before we did.”

“*Punish?* He's half-dead! I think he gets it!” Death shouted incredulously.

He reached toward the man like he would a wounded animal, stretching out his palm like a peace offering, but the man began thrashing around in Pestilence's grip.

“You freak of nature!” The man spat, his mouth contorting hysterically.

Death touched a strand of his own grayish hair, confused, but he realized the man was staring at his eyes. They were so dark that they appeared pitch-black.

“Just let me help you.” Death protested weakly, and the man seemed to lose some of his manic energy. He slumped over and Famine struggled to keep him upright. Death was sure he was close to passing out.

He turned to War, who'd been opening and closing his mouth like a gasping fish for several minutes. "I'm just tryin' to be fair. You want things to be fair, right?" War mumbled, searching Death's dark eyes.

Death's voice seemed to suck the warmth from the night air. "You're ruining your own life, sure, but I'm always cleaning your messes, yeah?" He shook his head. "And it's ruining mine."

The fight visibly left War's body, leaving an exhausted husk behind.

"Can you move?" Death asked the man. The man was eerily still, so he leaned forward to tap his shoulder and narrowly missed being clawed in the face. The man had reserved a final burst of energy and nearly knocked Death to the pavement as he wrenched free of Famine and Pestilence and hobbled quickly away into the night.

"No ambulance?" War asked.

"That'd bring authorities." Death's voice had a blunt edge. "He'll live."

War picked at the skin of his knuckles, transfixed by the mess of battered flesh. It was a long moment before he spoke again, in a faint, broken voice. "Can we go home?"

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The evening news played quietly in the background as Death scrubbed grease off the dishes and War (somewhat begrudgingly) folded a pile of laundry. War had calmed significantly after the bar incident, doing a long list of chores to regain Death's favor and buying him copious amounts of frosted animal crackers which he accepted like a haughty monarch from a servant.

A peaceable silence had descended upon the apartment, broken only by occasional cursing as War knocked over a pile of folded shirts and had to redo his arduous task. Death hummed some stupid pop song that Pestilence had been obsessing over. The two roommates were working in tandem for the first time in years.

An image flashed across the screen and War let out a strangled yelp, aggressively motioning Death toward the TV.

The plate in Death's hand slipped to the floor and shattered. His stomach dropped. Pressure built up in his temples and a faint ringing sounded in his ears.

It was a photo of the man he'd saved from War's grasp three weeks ago, captioned with three sickening words: Wanted for murder.

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Death sped across the backroads, blank-faced and unfeeling. He'd left the house before War could say anything, left the broken pieces of the dish on the floor in his hurry to escape the suffocation of the apartment where the image from the news seemed to crush his lungs and churn his gut. He could still see the expression on War's face, flickering between a 'told you

so' and a sadness so intense he couldn't fathom its depth. It was burned into his mind, that wavering look.

Something skittered across his line of sight and he slammed on the brakes, heart beating rapidly in his throat. A small crunch of his wheels, and he was swerving to the side to park the car, staring at the corpse of a fawn that had met its fate beneath his roaring vehicle.

All at once, his mask of indifference disintegrated and he fell forward in his seat, banging his head on the steering wheel like he could dislodge his thoughts.

You can't escape your nature.

All those times he'd thought if he could fix the problems War caused, be kind, be mature, be quiet, be careful; if he could restore peace, if he could save just one person from cruelty, then maybe he could mend this yawning emptiness in his soul.

The body in the road was so small.

It always leads back to you.

Back at the apartment, War's precariously healed knuckle split, and a tiny drop of blood hit one of Death's shirts. A red stain bloomed across it like a grotesque flower.





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