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**APPALACHIAN YOUNG
WRITERS' WORKSHOP**

STUDENT ANTHOLOGY

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Past Tense

By Erika Skelton, 9th grade, Brentwood, TN

Past Tense

I hate you like the panels sagging from the ceiling

I hate you like the pencil sharpener constantly spinning
around its intruder

I hate you like the remnants of permanent marker on a
white board

I hate you like the swiveling chair that refuses to move,
much less spin

I hate you like the hole left behind by a nail shoved by an
unwanted force

I hate you like upside down outlets,

Like fire alarms,

Annoying and broken and always trying to complete their
jobs.

I hate you like unexpected ramps in the floor

I hate you like the step that's smaller than the rest

I hate you like the air conditioner: loud, aggressive, and
constant

I hate you like a constant

The one thing you always were

Were

I hate you like the bowels of a computer—

Were-ing.

The Gift

By Lily K. Bond, 12th Grade, Middlesboro, KY

Ada's old wrinkled hands fly,
holding onto needle and thread.
Two pieces of cloth become one
and a pattern begins to reveal itself.
Coral colors bordered with a mauve strip
make the edge of the quilt.
Pastels and floral patterns in groups of nine,
the expanse of its twin sized body.
Beautifully hued blocks held together
by skillful stitches and white thread.
The elderly woman's love not always expressed
with words but her care and detail.
Little by little,
the blocks of cloth form a blanket of soft and colorful
cotton.
Ada inspects the gift, checking the seams and trimming
stray threads.
And once she's sure it's finished, she sews a tag onto it,
proudly stating it was made with love.
Then Ada takes up a pen and writes the name of who will
receive the quilt.
Even though her arthritis riddled hands ache from holding
both needle and pen, she folds up the blanket and lays it
aside.
Smiling to herself, she hopes her great-granddaughter will
love the gift as much as Ada loves her.

Poems

By Chase Collingsworth, 12th Grade, Sneedville

Brother

Dear brother, dear brother,
I thought you'd hear my calls,
Yet they echoed for nights,
And they echoed for days,
Until they finally faded away.

Dear brother, dear brother,
Did you not see my journey?
Oh, I walked every street,
Oh, I talked to everyone I would meet,
And, oh, I stalked through every dark alley,
Just so I could find you.

Dear brother, dear brother,
You didn't take it all.
It was in the walls,
Thinking it could hide from me,
In the very place I call home.

Oh brother, oh brother,
This won't be the end.
You've gone from me,
And with you your warnings,
So now I hope you're praying,
That going down your road won't be my end.

Heretic

O shining Glory, my God so bright,
Every day we live before you,
Under the glow of your guiding light.
O Lord of Glory, I ask of you today,
Please give me your love,

If I have to stay in this broken place,
For more than today.

O shining Glory, my God so bright,
Every day we live before you,
Under the glow of your guiding light.
O Lord of Glory, I ask of you today,
I have been here so long,
That I don't know when will be my final day.
Please give me your love,
I don't want to stay.

O shining Glory, my God so bright,
Every day we live before you,
Under the glow of your guiding light.
O Lord of Glory, I ask of you today,
Was I not the worker you wanted,
The student you desired?
Why do I not deserve the love I require?

O shining Glory, my God so bright,
Every day we live before you,
Under the glow of your guiding light.
O Lord of Glory, I beg of you,
Please show mercy upon me.
There's so much to be given by you,
So please.
Even some rotten fruit would do.

O God,
Please.

Rebel

Doors are broken,
And windows are busted.
Boards are a good defense,

With shadows dancing behind them,
Forsaking light to stay hidden.
The fires may have gone out,
But I can still smell the smoke.

Crowds scatter,
People moving like bugs.
Friends watch the time,
Leaving when they need to,
Instead of when they want to.
The streets may be quiet now,
But I can still hear the echoes.

Playgrounds stay quiet,
Even when it is time to play.
Games are fun,
But they are hard to play,
When the children stay silent all day.
The wounds may have closed,
But I can still see the scars.

Smiles don't come out in color,
Faded so much they look wrong.
Voices come out,
But they sound like static,
Shaking and breaking behind apologies.
The peace may claim to be real,
But I can still see the truth.

Judging

By Joseph Dinwiddie, 12th grade, Talbott

You sit there judging me for something I can't control
you holier than thaw ass
I didn't pick this life, but I damn sure ain't gone give it up.
I live in hell every day cause of people like you
putting' me down.

But I'll be damned before I let people like you win
this war will never end as long as I live.
You may not be the only one but nether am I.
You put us on meds saying it's for the best.
I say you can go to hell you ain't no hero.

I say I've never meet a weaker man
I sat my goals to go way above what you ever expect.
You call yourself a teacher, but your nothing, but a fake
Today I look back, and laugh at how stupid you where
I've made it to college today asshole.
Fate seems to on my side, and even when it isn't I still win.

Gave up on society's views on me a lifetime a go
I don't need them any ways.
I'm tired of the way you look at me
as I where broken.

No need for any of your condescending tone with me
We both know what you really are coward,
but you seem to haven't seen that I'm
the devil in your dream's.

When you judge me you're just pointing at yourself,
and that's why I'll always win, and you will never break
me

The Key

By Kat Mahoney, 9th grade, Nashville, TN

I brushed my hair back with the palm of my hand as I yawned. I had been walking for roughly twenty minutes, and the sun was just beginning to rise. I held my shoes in my hand at my side. My toes were enjoying the dew covered grass. With each step I took, the edge of the woods was that much closer. I had my eyes fixated on a small bridge, no more than five feet long and only wide enough for one person, just visible from my current position.

As I approached the bridge, a figure stepped out from the shadows. She smiled when I stopped at the other side of the stream. "You look beautiful as always, Emma." I said. She laughed and took a step forward, outstretching her closed fist.

"You're late, as always." She glanced at my feet, bare and covered in wet grass. "Yet you still couldn't find the time to put your shoes on."

"Why am I here?" I bent down to put on my sneakers.

"See for yourself." When I straightened up I held out my hand, palm up. She took another step forward and opened her hand above mine. When she lowered her arm, I looked at the object she had placed in my hand.

"A key?" There was a small silver and green key in my palm. The metal was cold to the touch, despite being kept in her hand for so long.

"It's been so long since I've watched the sun rise, Tyler. I've missed the colors." She was staring at the sky through the leaves.

"I didn't want to see it. I would rather be asleep." Almost as if to emphasize that fact, I yawned.

"I can tell. Your hair is all over the place and your shirt is backwards. You'd hate to die on this adventure and be stuck looking like that for eternity."

“Die? Where exactly are we going?” She turned around and began walking deeper into the woods. I followed her, staying roughly three feet behind.

“We’re going to rob the Elven Prince.” I sped up to walk beside her as a dragon roared overhead. This was the beginning of a long day.

Trying

By Mackenzie Mancini, 9th Grade, Cleveland

The immaculate hospital floor laughs bitterly at me as it passes under my anxious, pacing feet. It sneers and mocks my savage perturbation, for it has witnessed it all previously. It has observed each precise heartbreak, tear, lamentation, and inconvenience this hospital has orchestrated.

Now here I am, walking back and forth, head cradled in palm, eyebrows knitted together, stomach up my throat as the cruel ground chortles along, achieving pleasure from the crumbs of my pain, a speck compared to the broken pieces that have been allocated here by others with torment much more demanding than my own.

Sadistic floor. I break contact with it, servicing the wall for its replacement, my body disintegrating into a chair.

“What time do you think they’ll bother to show?” I mumble into Louis’ chest, resting my head there.

“Maybe by 5:30 a.m.,” my husband replies.

I heave out a heavy sigh. “About right.”

“I was kidding, Eleanor; maybe about an hour or so.”

The door omits a creek, and we both rise as if we were in the midst of engaging in some immoral pursuit. Holding hands and exchanging glances, we compose ourselves as the doctor strides across the room ever-so casually and sits down. He raises his eyebrows at us, but remains wordless, a bland, unamused look plastered across his broad features.

“Mr. and Mrs. Thompson”--he clears his throat, it undoubtedly as dry as he is--“the test results came back, and it appears we have reached a conclusion. By the looks of it, it seems you cannot bear children. Now, I know--”

His voice drains out right there, all traces of words thereafter meaningless and irrelevant. Nothing he is saying accommodates message; the single message of importance has already been stated: I cannot birth children. Not now, not ever.

All at once, I am stricken with dizziness. Flooding waves of emotion overtake me inside of their brutal sea of the wreckage that is employed when one discovers or is delivered news of unpleasant circumstances. The newfound facts rush into me as any other knife would feel as it extracts the wind from my body.

You'll never be able to provide. You're never going to be good enough. You'll never make a difference. You let everyone down.

The thoughts don't cease, no matter how thoroughly I plead with them to dismiss. My breathing rushes out, turning more and more rigid at each dead end of a statement. I sense my body dropping from consciousness as if I'm about to pass out. I want to faint, to be dismissed from this world into another dimension where darkness greets me and dislodges the pain, even if only for a temporary interval.

I'm not acknowledged by the elements of alternate universes; I do not blackout.

Instead, I sob, long, hard and with vicious heaves that deprive my lungs of air. I'm vaguely aware of a gentle hand against the skin the my back and the consoling words of those around me, yet I ignore them; they bare as much

significance as my life does from hereafter, which that, I am afraid, is miniscule.

Louis' neon aqua eyes shine off a glistening sparkle in the darkness inside the four pale, white walls of our detached bedroom. They're pooling the depths of my own, tacitly whispering everything that does not play out on his lips, piercing through the firm wall of my composure in forage for emotions, feelings, secrets and everything else I venture so deeply to conceal.

I suppose it's only fair enough; I'm combing through his eyes in pursuit of the same. What thoughts, affections and discontent scenarios lie beneath the impenetrable persona of the man with glowing ocean orbs? What rests past the fireworks of unspoken dialogue betwixt us? Years of marriage permits me to decipher an answer.

A screech goes off lightly in the distance, a missile of color endeavoring on its path towards the sky. My venture is getting closer to the answer I'm sure to find. The room is suddenly warmer; I'm tense for what I do not yet know and what I am not entirely positive I have wish to find out--but it's too late to retreat now.

BOOM. A rainbow of fiery colors burst to pieces in the night sky. There it is: the answer, the completely unravelment I have been in-depthly anticipating.

I feel vulnerable, indecent and in debt, like I'm altogether detached in every way permissible. It's a moment of downright relent that neither of us can afford when I discern the disappointment and neglect he buries inside the pile of thoughts that must remain just that--but don't.

I'm about to bolt, about to discard of the entanglement of sheets and duvets so steadfast he won't even have time to

blink. My fingers graze over the colorless, flower embroidered fabric of the bed when-- Fingers. Against mine. I feel their heat over my skin, but why? I feel the edges of a folded paper. I glance downwards at it.

An image paints itself over the canvas of my mind. In a divergent dimension, a parallel reality, an alternate lifetime, a basket drifts underneath my fingertips, opening to reveal a shred of crinkled paper: a note.

I strive to obscure my smile. I accord my greatest effort to jam the blissful reaction I want to give in a box, hiring a nonchalant replacement, yet I'm too preoccupied to know if I'm triumphant in the act and too devoted to wholesomely care.

I unravel it, reading the dancing blue ink as if it's something I've devoted my entire life for. Of course, it's a quote.

"Sometimes you just have to try even if you know it won't work" (Diaz).

My eyes remain focused on the paper even after I've completed the read; I'm not prepared to look up.

This is what he wants: to try. This is the pilgrimage I endeavor on. This is the passage he wills to proceed on. I can't. Still, I must try--for Louis. This is how to compensate for the disaster I have ignited.

I inhale, move the paper below my line of eyesight, and in reply, allot a curt nod: yes.

We attempt. Nothing happens. And again. No miracle of birth occurs. Louis is swelling to be increasingly disheartened despite the solace facade he conducts. Who

is to blame him? The only thing I birth is depression, pity and despondency. Never a child; always a failure--until him.

The subtle baby bump barely peeks out from the seam of my t-shirt. I twinkle down at it. A baby. My baby. *Our* baby, Louis' and mine. Our own little miracle below the surface of my skin, waiting patiently to emerge into the radiant world, to shift his imprint into the soft, pliable earth, to forge his own unique tales of destiny, fate, and difference. *My* baby; *our* baby. I blink and regain concentration on my prior task.

Months pass in which the precious pregnancy period progresses. Copious nights occur in which sleep is replaced with eager dialogue of baby names, parenting and what sensations we'll undergo as our little kid stumbles his way through life. As my stomach swells, as does my heart with pride. It's a heavenly experience as I finally get to see my newly-born baby for the first time. Euphoria leaks from my eyes, washing all crumbs of torture and torment.

"I did it," I breathe, my words scratchy and merely a degree above inaudible.

Louis nods beside me, holding my hand, refreshing me with his presence. Water droplets are crawling down his cheeks.

"Yes." His voice is equally as tattered. "You did."

"What's his name?" our slender nurse with curly blonde hair inquires politely.

Louis and I exchange an implicit glance of assurance in which I motion for him to retain the honor of responding,

tasting the name on his tongue, rehearsing it for a change, getting accustomed to the feel.

“Matthew.”

The girl smiles. “Any particular reason?”

Another undeclared statement amidst us. He gestures to me this time.

“It means ‘gift from God’.”

Another courteous grin. “How fitting.”

We both smile softly. She has no idea.

My relationship with Louis grows stronger as Matt does each and every day. We see our baby materialize into a caring, sharp and passionate man, and our hearts swell with content. As he ages, he engages in homemade soccer matches with his father. I sit on the pouch and cheer for them. At age four, we sign him up for a little league. His team is deemed “The Tornado Attackers.” It’s his first game, and Louis and I are perched on the bleachers keenly anticipating the initiation.

Louis lightly chuckles and nudges my arm. I look at him.

“Peek over at Matt,” he hints.

I comply and straightaway join in on his laugh; Matthew is hovering in his position on the field, knelt down to extract a flower from the grass.

“Oh, dear.” I shake my head. “Have to love that guy.”

A whistle blows, and attention shifts to the center of the field. A muscular coach in an overpowering red sport's shirt stands in the middle of two children--a girl and a boy--with a soccer ball held over his head.

"We're going to drop the ball now," he loudly declares in a deep voice, carrying out the task promptly afterward.

The boys and girls stumble across the massive field like little ants, their tiny legs scurrying on in hopes of capturing the ball. I scan back over to my own midget ant, who hasn't moved an inch. I'm too deep in amusement to advise him to do otherwise. Evidently, Louis is as well. No words are spoken.

The flower eventually detaches. The broad flash of jubilation on Matthew's face when it does is priceless. He darts towards us straightaway. One glimpse at my husband informs me he is as baffled as I. We are soon to be enlightened.

"For you mommy!" he cheers, his ocean aqua eyes (no doubt inherited from his father) glistening beautifully in the sun with an inspirational vitality I cannot adequately describe.

I accept it and say the only thing I can think of:
"Thank you, sweetheart!"

"Now get out there and ace it, bud!" His dad.

A terse nod. He's off.

"I was perfect, daddy!" he gushes as we tuck him into his sleek, black bed.

"I'm glad you liked it, buddy."

“Liked it? I LOVED IT!”

I peck his cheek. “Glad you loved it.”

“Will you guys be there for the next one too?”

“Wouldn't miss it for the world.”

I clasp his compact hand in my own. Louis leans in for his kiss.

“You know it, champ. Get some rest now.”

We usher ourselves out, listening opposite the door until we discern soft snores drifting their way into the night sky.

“Eleanor.”

It's a growl, a fierce attack.

“Eleanor.”

Fury. A curse upon his dry, spiteful lips. His huge, broad hand smacks over my jaw. I want to shrill, to bold, to abandon everything right here and now. I don't, for I know what consequences await me if I were to carry out on such unruly escapades.

My eyes meet with his; he teaches me how to be entirely paralyzed while in control of every muscle. His smirking features are jagged, tense and accusing. My lungs forget to function.

“Eleanor.”

My eyes snap shut. The damage is done now: three strikes, and I'm out. I suck in, preparing for the inevitable. The mental countdown commences:

One. Two. Thr--

Gruesome strangled breaths of isolated origin heedlessly drive their way through lifeless lungs. My eyes slam open. My vision is clotted by a smoky haze. My body has switched into emergency self-destruct mode. Everything is collapsing.

What is going on?

For a few atrocious minutes, I am deserted in the unknown. At last, Louis materializes into my perimeter of detection, the ruthless fog drifting away. I can function; death mode has shut down.

“Ei?”

It's Louis; I don't cringe.

“Darling, it was a dream,” he soothes. “It's finished now. Nothing can hurt you. It wasn't real.”

He pulls me onto his chest. His plush softness transmits serene waves throughout my body, his own unique talent for being able to tranquilize me with his body heat exclusively.

“It was real. I was there. “

He kisses my cheek. A nod.

“Let's go, sweetheart. Forget about it. I have something planned for you.”

He stands from the bed, extending a hand to assist me in doing the same. My eyebrows raise in curiosity.

“What?”

I don't move.

“You’ll see.”

The line is accompanied by a sly smile I cannot contemplate opposing: I seize his hand. Squarely thereafter, I’m on a barefoot stroll in pajamas with my deranged husband on an extempore escapade toward an alchemistic destination.

It does almost pitch black. The rough crackling of mangled twigs against my feet pierces the night air, provoking me to sense as if I have just broken an unarticulated but none-the-less customary law of the forest, repelling me its trust. I ungrasp Lou’s hand to shake off my sweaty one, skittish for what I cannot pinpoint. He detects this uncomfortable change in my state.

“We’re almost there. I promise.”

And we are, for I begin to perceive little flickering specks of light radiating through slivers of openings between cozy tree leaves and rough, firm trunks and branches. I fancy they’re for us.

Louis confirms the suspicion: "That light is for us."

Upon arrival, we’re embraced with colorful strings luminous bulbs attentively hung between loops and intersections of trees with a gutted out area in the heart, layered perfectly with a homely, edge-frayed baby blue blanket and a woven strawberry basket to serve as the pinnacle.

My mouth drops upon sight; the scene’s composition is sure to have gobbled at least two hours of time.

“You like?” was the conservative inquiry.

I dismissed it. “How long did this cost you?”

“Nevermind that,” he waved off. “Are you pleased?”

“Am I *pleased*? Am I *pleased*? I am sorry, sir, but I am far beyond this “pleased” you speak of.”

“You--?”

I kiss him there--barefoot, pajama-wearing, and light-surrounded. My lips clash with his unanticipating ones. The newfound heat of moment envelopes us into a secluded hideout we unlock the key to. Everything we do is invisible.

Nobody breaks the kiss; our lips merely disjoin naturally. All the same, they are still united in mind.

“*Pleased*,” I mumble, encasing us both inside the tattered blanket. “Please.”

The night lazily rises to day. It's as if its wish to end aligns with ours for it--nonexistent. While we're counting stars, exchanging dreams, wishes, and memories, sleep is unthought of. In our private alcove, the eumorphia of youth is revived and revamped, the volume ten times higher in a deeper, enhanced and intent way. The world's tribulation is forgotten, and I have already transferred to permanent life here in my mind. Alas, darkness drains to a close and fantomas realities of absolute dream entrapment parch upon the morning sun's arrival. Before complete diffusion of camp, Louis whispers in my ear, cool breath lingering above my cheek.

“I have something to tell you.”

My reaction is hyper. “What? What is it?”

His voice hardens with detachment; his expression retains a stony edge. “This first.”

Another note; another quote. A clutch it, broad smile immensely increasing with each second of time.

"I may be thousands of miles away, but you're still the first thing on my mind."

"What's this mean?"

My words have sank with burden and unclarity. He deflects my aim for eye contact, his masquerade slanting tender and void.

"I'm leaving."

Knives. Stabbing, drawing my blood as paint slayed on a canvas of skin: sharp, deep, infinite. Letters spelling my thoughts decline to be withdrawn.

"For war. They needed me--I was called. There's nothing I can do."

It's not a wonder; he's been a soldier post-marriage and marriage alike. The turmoil is the revival. Like someone just clicked a button on a website: refresh. Like that tap just bombed the perfect island of our intimate province with the flare of fiasco and all razor-sharped paraphernalia that serves as its accomtant.

The fire of the outburst licks my insides, littering them with perennial martyrdom. There is no panacea for these kinds of scars, emotional bruises left behind, so I don't endeavor to douche the flames with the liquid of my tears. Not this time at least. This time the only moment I harvest is a meek nod for a numb essence.

"I may be thousands of miles away, but you're still the first thing on my mind."

I creek through the door of Matthew's room. Sun squints through his scarlet curtains, reflecting off pale, white walls. He looks so placid, so breezy, so natural and promising. I crawl in, half-beside him, petting his jovial little cheek with my hand.

How am I supposed to do this, telling him about his father? Like, by the way, your dad is going to war and won't be back for months? He doesn't even know what war is; Lou hasn't served since he was born. I can't enable it to shatter him like it does to me. I won't--

"Mmm..." he mumbles in his sleep.

I stop. My fingers comb over his hair, lightly transcending down to trace over the curves of his beige eyebrows. I pinpoint a lavender bruise taking over a prevalent portion of his forehead I hadn't noticed before. It concerns me, and I make a mental note to investigate it later.

"My baby," I murmur quietly enough to where we are the only ones who can hear it. "You're the only one that doesn't leave mommy. Good boy, you are, getting all muscular and handsome. Soon enough, you'll be all grown up, moving away and forgetting all about..."

The hushed sobs return.

Time passes like glaciers. Men are torn from families. People are torn apart. Emotion's murders are eternally on duty to wreak havoc. After a matter of time, it's only a matter of how big the bruise is, how distressing the scar. It's everyone's guesswork what wound will be the one to take a life, how many bruises one can suffer.

Bruises: they have never pained me so much as they do now. Matt kept getting them so much...too much...there was

a problem....a doctor... I can see them now--the walls, the floor, the doctors, the test, the day--as they rise to the surface, often as they do, haunting me forever, leaving a scar that shall last way past the end of time.

“Back again.” the floor taunts.

I step over it, ignoring the contaminated remarks of that which has seen more. Whatever is to happen, I am to be strong today. It's not an option; it's for Matthew. I must save him from whatever may come, good or bad--or lethal.

“Hemophilia,” the diagnosis imprinted into my child as I encase my toddler tight and stroke his cheek, resting his head against the nape of my neck.

“What's that, doctor?” the innocent question, ignorant of the medical term's meaning.

Placid features answer me, eyes contorted with sorrow, sympathy and pity. My lips dry. My heart beats out of time. My body waves with heated chills.

“A condition where the blood doesn't clot normally...incurable....treatments...nothing's for certain...”

I catch only phrases. Consciousness drifts in and out. I'm not somber, not shattered, not even present. I'm adrift now, forgotten in a world where bruises dot the skies, filthy laundry is an air freshener, and giving up is a regular practice.

“I'm home!”

I dump the dishes and rush toward the door, cleansing father of his coat as he plops onto the drink-stained sofa, per usual.

“How was your day, daddy?” I ask tentatively, speedily fetching a drink from the kitchen.

He ignores the statement, and I am glad for the dismissal of my mistake.

I place the drink in his hand and hover idly, praying he tell me the next task I shall do before time hollows and instances turn haywire. He takes a sip. His face freezes in an expression foreign to my knowledge.

“Now, Eleanor Louise, you know I expect my tea unsweetened.”

“Yes, daddy, I just thought--”

His voice booms, “THOUGHT WHAT?”

I cringe, knowing better than to speak.

“THOUGHT YOU COULD ESCAPE, ELEANOR?
THOUGHT YOU COULD MESS EVERYTHING UP,
ELEANOR? THOUGHT--”

Eleanor, Eleanor, Eleanor. Three strikes; I'm out.

It happens swiftly, and then I'm flung about the room as the piles of used clothes are. He's done, and I can break now. Once more, I'm thankful: it's much worse when the episodes are long-lasting.

He stumbles off into a room, and I slip outside, pulling on a cardinal cardigan I snatch on the getaway. The coat is light and shields little from the gnawing cold, but at least it matches my flaming bruise quite nicely.

I'll return to the house of course--father would be the first to find me if I didn't--but I'm just repowering now, venturing to a place where I can recharge, be still while the world around me flashes by.

I'm at the house now. We left the hospital as soon as I could reteach myself how to pronounce the word *goodbye*. The lights are dim; it's just eyes, me and Matthew's. I wasn't about to let either of us sleep alone.

In complete black, Matt reminds me of his father; his placid blue eyes gleam with the same kindness, eagerness and softness that manage to soothe me. It transports his father right into the room with us even when circumstances deny us his repossession. "I may be thousands of miles away, but you're still the first thing on my mind," reigns substantial to this day.

"Mommy?" he peeps, fearful to unlatch the silence.

I reply, "Sweetheart?"

"What's wrong with me, mommy?"

"Well, umm..." I scuffle to glue the shattered and frayed edges of my voice back in unison. "You're sick, darling."

He giggles. "I don't *feel* sick."

"It's not like that, baby. This sick, it's... It's worse."

"How?"

"Well," I echo again. "Well, it's complicated, love."

"Will I die, mommy?"

The soberness in the letters demolishes me anew. Rives flow onto pillow fabric It's my sincere wish he cannot foresee them. I administer the only acknowledgement I can withstand:

“Go to sleep, darling.”

Thank goodness he executes.

Bruises: they have never pained me so much as they do now.

Time slices like knives. Sons are torn from mothers. People tear apart. Havoc is eternally on duty to swallow emotion. After a matter of time, it's a forgotten matter of how big the bruise is, how distressing the scar. It's nobody's speculation what wound will be the one to take a life, how many bruises one can obtain, because the outcome has much less to do with the bruise than it does the concluding screeching fallout and the deafening silence of the aftermath.

Autumn's intense pigments have freshly faded into the pure white of the winter. It's a Saturday, and Matthew's fifth birthday is quickening its steps. Despite the frigid weather, Matt is ever transfixed on kicking his soccer ball all the way through the snowy season. And who am I to rob him that pleasure? So I grant it, casting my biggest regret into play.

It's so incidental, instantaneous. It's brisk, thunderous energy all exalted at one sharp point on a monitor before collapsing flat in the time it takes to blink--except nobody has time to blink. It has blinded all its victims pre-

explosion, rewarded on each slaughter or injury, and it doesn't purely butcher; it massacres.

A ball. A street. A boy walking. A car. BOOM. A body.

Pieces of information shoot at me like bullets. They are bullets, sturdy, compact pellets of inalterable composition, blowing the wind from me in one turn.

An ambulance. Sirens. Shrieks. Barring. Every muffled sound bawling for my attention suffocating me. Everywhere. Blood. Everywhere. Blazing crimson. Sickening. Catastrophic. Lethal.

“MOMMY!!!”

My name. I barrel to it, to him, to Matthew.

Limbs. Everywhere. Limp limbs. Hands. Bandages. Lethal. Blood. Matthew.

I fling him to my chest. Doors slam. Movement. Dizzy. Deadly. Matthew.

“MOMMY, MAKE IT STOP!!!”

Blood. Tears. Oceans. Wrapped in blood. Matthew.

“I can't.”

My voice is frail, thin, inaudible.

“I can't--I love you.”

He's roaring. Fighting. Kicking. Self-destructing in the core my lap. Everything stains red. So. Much. Blood. Pure chaos.

Dead silence.

This is Eleanor's story. I reappeared from war after being notified of my son's passing to locate Eleanor lying motionless on a bed of snow in the woods.

Eleanor was a fighter. She was the world's star in lieu of the darkness that surrounded her. What you don't know is just that: darkness surrounded her.

When I met El, I was making my way back from a hunt. She was sitting on a log, trembling like a leap, but stilled when I laid a hand to her back. She said a deer made them all, the dark cobalt markings on her face and back. I played the role she wanted me to, nodding my head, no elaboration performed--but I formed an intuition the moment she flinched when I took her hand. There were no bruises on her hand. When we dismissed, I forced her to meet me there. I never knew for positive why she showed. As long as she did, though, that's all that mattered.

I remember the hour she didn't come. Misery and anguish clouded the day, then the week, then she came, and it was as bad as if she hadn't.

"My dad," she muttered, voice gone, floating with the wind.

He abandoned her. She was starving. For a whole week. And she could never return. It was too much. There was no time for questions; the only thing she had time left for was to slip me a note with her secret address, warn me to never speak of it, and disappear behind the withered trees, leaves, and branches.

Baskets: I'd sneak them on her back porch. Whatever I killed that day--fish, deer, squirrel, a strawberry I glided out of the kitchen--it all accommodated to the accumulation for El. I'd distribute it and hope she got it. Furthermore, I'd started tucking notes for her: quotes to

inspire her, to give her hope when her supply drew fruitless.

Dropping off one of my signature basket assemblies, we collided once. Her eyes contorted with fear, recognition, then panic. Clamorous noises arouse from the house's paper-thin walls.

"Eleanor? Come here right this second, young lady!"

Snappy words of grumpy origin. El turned. A moment of hesitancy--I clutched her hand.

Dust filled the eyes once hazel. Chipped, brittle nails dominated where polish should have colored. Cracked sullen lips transfixed in an unwavering line. Ratted strands of Auburn hair that might have never seen a brush post-stone age. Innocent vulnerability--

"Run away with me."

The words tumbled from my lips before they retained meaning. There was no time for meaning; there was only time for yes or no.

"Yes."

She reported later to me about what happened, where she was, and what she'd been enduring. A guardian was apparently shoved upon her because of the fact she was a dependent in law. Each day consisted of strenuous labor and taxing consequences if not quip to par. Food was a non-reality apart from the undisclosed baskets. As were showers, medicine, and non-artificial care. The lady was a mask for onlookers to believe Eleanor was accounted for.

I did the only thing I knew: I let her shower, use my medicine, and eat anything in the kitchen. Eventually, circumstances sorted themselves out.

Years later, she was still handicapped by the past. The last thing she'd do was reveal it. When she was told she couldn't fall pregnant, it was a knife from her past revived to haunt her. All the internal disasters sparked by late nights wasted inside her house unbottled from the past, flinging glass everywhere, stabbing where seen fit. Next, war driving me away from her, unable to shield her from seas across, to compact my love for her on a ship and sail it, despite trying. At last, to see all her bruises advertised upon the billboard of her son, to see her pain in his, ending in his own death.

Now she's gone--an accident. On her way to woods, something happened. A deer of something? It was inaccessible. All she wanted was to go be there in peace, to release her grief--and now she's gone. Ingrained in the comfort of the trees, a carving in my loves' places:

RIP

Eleanor and Matthew Thompson

For trying.

I live every day like the present is a gift. Not because I have to, but because it is. Eleanor knew that. She was dead long before she took her last breath, but she lived like she wasn't. She was not going to let death in. Not then, not ever.

As I grow old. I keep that with me. I keep *her* with me. She may never be more than just a headstone to every passerby astray, but I know better than that; I know who she really was. She was a fighter; she tried—and endured—through the most agonizing plight. She's my inspiration; she's the reason I try, even if I know it won't work.

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The AYWW is a collaboration between Humanities Tennessee and Lincoln Memorial University. For more information visit www.HumanitiesTennessee.org

