

Across the Partition: A Creative Exploration of Black Queer Literature

by
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LITERATURE

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Critical Introduction

This Creative Senior Honors Thesis is a selection of three short stories that examine black queer literature. These three stories are literary works which feature queer protagonists. As a black queer person, I am drawn to stories that focus on the intersection of these two identities because of growing accessibility and acceptance of this tradition. Unlike in the past, authors like Bryan Washington and Brandon Taylor are finding critical success publishing novels and stories that focus on Black queer characters while films like *Moonlight*, a Black queer Film, went on to win the 2017 Academy Award for Best Picture. Previously, these stories may have gone unpublished or may have been relegated to just being Black or queer literature. This critical introduction seeks to trace a literary genealogy that questions what contemporary black queer literature is and how accessibility contributes to the growing acceptance for black queer literature. Like the title of this collection suggests, this genealogy seeks to trace a very specific lineage of black queer literature, rather than being a universal defining of what this tradition is.

Introduction

As a Mellon Research Scholar, research I've done in preparation of this project focused on the intersection of black and queer literature. This project sought to uncover just what is black queer literature. What do these stories do and what purpose do they serve are questions that I've tried to focus on in order to gain an understanding of where the work that I do as a writer sits. This thesis includes three short stories that center around queer black characters. The tradition that is identified in this introduction follows a specific selection of authors and stories, rather than following all of them. Within this

tradition, these stories have been divided into three distinct groups: the binary, restrictive texts, and mindful queer literature.

Tradition

For the purpose of this project, the tradition being traced can be divided into several categories: the binary, restrictive texts, Mindful queer literature. Binary texts are those that deal with establishing what black literature is. These texts have a focus on identifying where African American literature rests in comparison to American Literature. Restrictive texts are those that are concerned with identifying who Black Americans are while also establishing limitations on what constitutes as blackness. Essays published under this category may be concerned with limiting what actions are appropriate for black people. Finally, mindful queer literature is literature concerned with identifying ways that queer individuals may be mindful or aware of their positions in life. There is a focus on understanding the psychology of queer characters and those that they interact with. These categories concern how black queer literature has progressed from Du Bois to Washington. The first category, the binary, arises when we apply queer theory to African American literature.

Queer Theory and the idea of queering informs us of the existence of a binary within African American Literature that can be traced back to conversations between W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke. In queer Studies, intersectionality asks us to consider how the various aspects of our identity intersect and effect our individual lives and experiences while “queering” asks us to consider how to critically unravel places in literature or society where binaries appear. Queering asks us to question the things we may identify as normal or expected. Published in 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Souls of Black*

Folks introduces the idea of there being a dichotomy between African Americans and White Americans. When Du Bois writes, “Leaving... the world of the white man, I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses,—the meaning of its religion, the passion of its human sorrow, and the struggle of its greater souls”, he introduces readers to the idea that African American existence and experience is distinct and separate from those of their white counterparts (Du Bois 3). It can be inferred that Du Bois would be skeptical of the consumption of black art by white individuals. The existence of this veil assumes that the relationship between people of different races by default lends itself to othering. Alain Locke’s *The New Negro* posits a binary between the ideas of New and Old-World tradition and the difference between traditional and progressive African Americans. While these authors argue for the development of African Americans, their focus on the binary feels historically important, but it ultimately is quite restrictive. Du Bois’ veil doesn’t leave much room for intersectionality or the consideration of other aspects of Black identity, partially because of the time period in which it was written. He describes his work as a guide for the growth and development of African American men. Locke’s essay has a similar focus on the development of African Americans and their role in American society. Because of this hyper-focus on black identity and experience, there isn’t much room for queer or female voices to be heard. The binary that these authors are focused on are based exclusively on race and the experiences that arise when you are othered or separated from those in power. Black queer stories that move beyond the binary of race face a different challenge in the form of restriction.

The restriction of Black queer fiction came from both within the Black queer Community and Outside of it. James Baldwin's *Another Country* was an innovative novel which explored interracial relationships, sexuality, and the intersection of class and race. As a queer text, this novel was marred in controversy because of its inclusion of interracial queer relationships. In *Soul on Ice*, Eldridge Cleaver wrote about *Another Country*, writing, "Rufus Scott, a pathetic wretch who indulged in the white man's pastime of committing suicide, who let a white homosexual fuck him in the ass, and who took a Southern Jezebel for his woman, with all that these tortured relationships imply, was the epitome of a black eunuch who has completely submitted to the white man" (Cleaver). For Cleaver, there exists a series of specific actions that are acceptable for African American men to participate in, but interracial relationships are not one of them. This restriction differs from the binary posited by Du Bois and Locke because Cleaver is focusing on power. He specifically calls out Rufus's submission in the novel because Cleaver doesn't see it as relating to how African Americans "have managed to survive here in the hells of North America!" (Cleaver). There is an assumption here that the Black identity is the primary identity of all African Americans, which I do not fully agree with. If there is a story that follows a character who is black and queer, are there not spaces where either identity takes precedent over the other? It makes sense that Cleaver is focused on masculinity. The import of this limitation of black queer work is that it assumes black works all contribute to a singular narrative. It fails to understand the ways that queer men and women carve out niches for themselves in the canon while also suggesting that queer literature is secondary to African American literature. There's an assumption that all black artists and writers write in service of African American

experience, while also ignoring that by default this group is comprised of straight black men. Bell hooks would possibly argue that Cleaver's (and possibly Du Bois') push back against Baldwin ignores experiences that are nonstandard, like those of black women.

Bell hooks tells us that her identity as a black woman is complex and almost in opposition with Cleaver's ideas about the focus of African American Literature. bell hooks' *ain't i a woman* is a collection of essays that identifies the intersection between being black and a woman. She questions power and how those who don't have it, covet it by noting that, historically, the movement for voting equality slowly split as black men gained voting rights and white suffragists wanted them more than they wanted to be aligned with African American women. Hooks goes on to write extensively about stereotypes and how to write black women. She notes that "negative attitudes toward black women were the result of prevailing racist-sexist stereotypes that portrayed black women as morally impure. Many white women felt that their status as ladies would be undermined were they to associate with black women" (Hooks 130). The stereotype she describes, while unnamed, is that of the jezebel. It's the idea that black women are inherently sexual deviants that prey on men. This stereotype arose as a result of the rape of black women by slaveholders. Like Baldwin, hooks ask readers to consider the different aspects of identity that can alter one's experience as a black person. She ties stereotype to the binary by noting that "most white female writers who considered themselves feminist revealed in their writing that they had been socialized to accept and perpetuate racist ideology" (hooks 137). Hooks and Baldwin push back against the binary, but because this undermines the pedestal that men occupy in discussions on race and identity, other authors responses appear slightly defensive. Hooks goes on to note

that historically, African American men have coveted the power that White Americans held, but in order to “step up” and have access to privilege and exist on the other side of Du Bois’s veil, black men would also have to be discriminatory towards another group. Hooks argues that those who deviate from the expected become that group.

While bell hooks pushes back against the patriarchal focus of some African American scholars, Audre Lorde instead pushed back against the focus on rage in African American Literature. Lorde’s commentary on rage appears in an essay from *Sister Outsider*. In “Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminists Response” Lorde discusses raising her son while being lesbian. She notes that the difficulty of raising a son comes when they must move away from their mothers and become men. She believes that no matter if her son is straight or gay, she still must allow him to grow up and part of that journey is allowing him to do so by himself. She proposes that black children must learn to be loving while also resisting racism, sexism, and suicide. She notes a time where she found herself threatening her son to fight his bullies and realized that she, like many mothers, was about to force her son to become violent and gain access to a power that she sees as restricting and directly leading to the death of black men. Lorde’s essay is in response to other lesbian and feminist colleges, but it also deeply in conversation with Baldwin. Baldwin seems to find rage inevitable. To him, and by extension Cleaver, rage is an important component in Black texts. It doesn’t appear that rage is inherently involved in black queer texts that do not deal with race in some major way. In *Another Country*, Rufus likely would have been that angry regardless of his sexuality. In “Notes of a Native Son”, Baldwin writes “Rage cannot be hidden, it can only be dissembled. This dissembling deludes the thoughtless, and strengthens rage and adds, to rage, contempt”

(Baldwin). Baldwin probably wouldn't believe rage is something that can be kept from being passed down, but Lorde would. In her essay, she explains that she's chosen to do the work necessary to ensure her children are raised as emotionally and mentally free as possible. The idea that being mindful gives people power of the negative or inappropriate aspects of their (and those close to them) personality is one that I found interesting because I like the possibility mindfulness can provide when crafting characters. Being mindful about a character's state of mind gives a writer more insight into that character's personality. Prior to this project, I crafted characters by just making a quick assumption about temperament and went from there. Because of this, there are a lot of characters I've written who are melodramatic and quite unrealistic. By being mindful, I can more closely understand the wants, needs, conflicts of characters within my stories. This is also especially important because mindfulness has pushed contemporary queer stories into the mainstream. Bryan Washington's *Lot and Moonlight* are two examples of the growing acceptance for these stories to be told to the public.

Craft

Initially, these stories were crafted with a focus on two sets of ideas. Primarily, each story would feature a Black queer Protagonist, a plot driven by that character's queerness, and a focus on self-discovery. Secondly, each story took place in Austin, concerned the character's relationship with their family, and identified their socialization or interaction with those around them. The secondary ideas arose as part of the melon research scholars summer experience and once the actual thesis began were almost completely discarded or disregarded for the other factors because those seemed more important and more tangible to readers.

Utilizing the factors outlined previously, we can define the final versions of each story as follows: “Mojo Bag, Mojo Bag is a story which follows Xavier, a queer child who is haunted by a summer experience with homophobia who comes to understand he may not be able to trust his parents. Xavier’s story takes place at a summer camp, suburb, and Texas middle school where we learn he is becoming a pariah in reaction to his terrible experience. In “How’s It Feel to Be Ghosted”, Aiesha is a lesbian who reminisces on her relationship with her ex-girlfriend and comes to understand she is still attached to her. This story takes place in North and Downtown Austin where we learn that Aiesha is a well-rounded, socially outgoing person. Finally, “One Hundred Year Flood” is the story of Zeke and Darren, two queer friends who live two very different lives. Zeke has a loving supportive family and Darren is homeless. In this story that takes place in East Austin, these characters learn about how important their relationship with one another is and how important chosen families are. These descriptions of these stories are quite different than the initial drafts of each story because the initial drafts were focused more on being full stories and less on being queer stories.

“Mojo Bag, Mojo Bag”

“Mojo Bag, Mojo Bag” follows Xavier, a young boy who is transitioning from childhood to adolescence. This story is titled after the Mojo Bag, an object commonly utilized by Hoodoo practitioners. Meriam-Webster defines Hoodoo as “a body of practices of sympathetic magic traditional especially among African Americans in the southern U.S.” In Hoodoo, the Mojo Bag is associated with luck and destiny. They are small bags made of fabric that are filled with items that are designed to “provoke” a desired outcome by their users. They are also deeply intimate items. It is thought that

having someone touch your mojo bag would result in “losing your mojo” or being cursed with bad luck.

I chose this object because I’ve always been fascinated by some of the customs that are interwoven in southern African American culture that aren’t typically associated with Christianity. As a child, my mother, aunts, and grandmother would burn stray hairs that accumulated during braiding sessions in the kitchen. When asked why, they’d always explain that someone could take your hair and do something with it, like create a voodoo doll or curse you. For a group of women who read the bible nightly, these ideas seemed to come out of left field, but the smell of burning hair would fill the house anytime someone got their hair styled.

For the purpose of Xavier’s story, the mojo bag functions differently than it does “in the real world”. Xavier’s mojo bag is prepared by himself and his mother. This preparation is an example of something that binds him to his mother and his culture while also alienating him from the other children in his grade and his father (who doesn’t fully acclimate to his mother’s practice). Within the story, the bag’s magic has the power to control many aspects of their lives, to the extent that it can be used to curse the individual members and completely rewrite their personalities when misused. The mojo bag exists not to move the plot forward or to direct Xavier’s actions, but it is a tool through which he makes his desires known.

Initially, this story followed an older, jaded, and inactive version of Xavier. As an adult, Xavier had more agency, but he didn’t utilize it until the end of the story. Then I read Bryan Washington’s “Shepard.” “Shepard”, a young boy, Chris, recounts the time his cousin came to visit, and describes his interactions with this family member who was

shrouded in rumor and mystery. Chris discovers that Gloria is visiting not to recuperate or settle down, but to mourn her lost son. As a child, Chris can question what is happening around himself while also being highly observant. His point of view as a child also gives him access to a group of people who have control over his autonomy, i.e. his parents, sister, and older cousin. After reading Bryan Washington's "Shepard", I reimagined Xavier as a child, instead of an adult. By making Xavier a child, he had a built-in cast of supporting characters and environments for his story to take place. This was important for the story I wanted to tell because Xavier's usage of the mojo bag, especially in earlier drafts, was motivated by his feelings for those around him. In the first draft, he uses the bag to curse his boyfriend. In subsequent drafts, he uses the bag on his mother. It wasn't until December of 2019 that he decided to use the bag on himself. I don't think an adult character would've made the same decision or come to the same conclusion that Xavier does in his story.

Another inspiration for Xavier to become a child came from Justin Torres' "We the Animals". This story follows an unnamed protagonist and his two siblings as they transition into early adolescence. Near the story's beginning, the narrator is instructed by his mother in an intimate moment:

"Don't be simple," Ma said. She brushed my hair back from my forehead. 'Loving big boys is different from loving little boys — you've got to meet tough with tough. It makes me tired sometimes, that's all, and you, I don't want you to leave me, I'm not ready'

Then Ma leaned in and whispered more in my ear, told me more, about why she needed me six. She whispered it all to me, her need so big, no

softness anywhere, only Paps and boys turning into Paps. It wasn't just the cooing words, but the damp of her voice, the tinge of pain — it was the warm closeness of her bruises — that sparked me.” (Torres 17)

This moment illustrates where tension and conflict in this novel originate: the narrator's development as a young man appears to conflict with his mother's expectations and experience raising him. He must determine if he will be like his older siblings and how he will interact with his mother.

This tension, the resistance a child may have to their parents' rearing is one of the focuses of initial drafts of “Mojo Bag, Mojo Bag”. In the story, Xavier becomes aware that his parents have differing ideas of how to raise him. Because his parents don't agree with one another and appear to be becoming less and less civil with one another, routinely, Xavier is forced to choose with whom he interreacts and spends time; whose activities are worth pursuing in his limited amount of daylight hours. Because Xavier appears to be closer to his mother, his choice to work in the yard with his father may cause her to respond negatively and vice versa. Like in “We the Animals”, the narrator must decide to take control of his life and actively decide who he wants to be.

“How's It Feel to Be Ghosted?”

This story follows Aiesha as she navigates being ghosted by her girlfriend. Ghosting occurs when a person ends a relationship by cutting off contact and disappearing from someone's life. In relationships, ghosting may mean a husband packing up his stuff and moving out while his wife is at work, or a friend may block

another friend on all forms of social media. In these situations, the ghosted party faces delayed confrontation and a lack of closure. It's a source of tension, especially if the ghost "resurrects" and reenters the person's life. The first draft of this story started after a conversation with a friend on dating apps and modern dating culture. In this discussion, a friend and I talked about how on dating apps, people will randomly disappear and reenter someone's inbox when they feel that it may be convenient for them. This also includes disappearing and reappearing when other relationships don't work out. I chose the character of Aiesha because I think her existence as a black lesbian and her relationship with her mother will serve as important sources of both support and tension.

"After Ellen" by Justin Taylor follows Scott, a man who has decided to ghost his girlfriend. This story follows him during and after his escape from his relationship. One thing the narrator does in this story is that he meditates on every action Scott takes. Everything is examined in depth, allowing readers to try and pinpoint why he was throwing his relationship away. We are told that he was unhappy about his move to Portland, but the story is actually focused on the small moments, the little things that Scott does after leaving. One part of the story that is fascinating is when Scott goes to Facebook. He "types Ellen's full name into the search bar, and when her profile pops up he is astonished to see that she never un-friended him" (Taylor). As mentioned previously, the "ghoster" sometimes comes back, but in this instance, Scott chooses not to bother Ellen. He does move on and finds someone new. I think the process that Scott undertakes is fascinating. It highlights that grieving sometimes takes time. It also introduces the idea that there are many groups who are invested in relationships and may react negatively when they don't work out.

While *Ghosted* follows a singular person and is linear, it is also written in second person. In December 2019, I tried to write this story in first person. The narrative distance felt too close and there seemed to be no room for exploring Aiesha's relationship. The decision to rewrite this story to be in the second person came after reading and discussing "Until Gwen" by Dennis Lehane. In that story, the narrator speaks in second person in order to distance himself from a traumatic experience and pull readers closer to the action of the story. Taylor opens the story by describing the protagonist being picked up by his father:

Your father picks you up from prison in a stolen Dodge Neon, with an 8-ball of coke in the glove compartment and a hooker named Mandy in the backseat. Two minutes into the ride, prison still hanging tilted in the rearview, Mandy tells you that she only hooks part-time. (Lehane 20)

In this scene, the narrator is highly observant and is quite descriptive. As readers, we are provided with an internal dialogue that is informational but also filled with a level of personal language and personality that may not be effective in third person. By keeping the story at a distance, Lehane can keep readers interested in what the narrator and his father do together. In the end, being in second person allows the narrator to "share" their sorrow with readers:

"And you sit there until it's noon and weep for not protecting her, and for not being able to know her ever again, and weep for not knowing what your real name is, because whatever it is or could have been is buried with her, beneath your father, beneath the dirt you begin throwing back in. (Lehane 34)

The usage of “you” forces readers to consider how they would actually react within the same situation or if they were in the story. While some readers may react to the second person by trying to distance themselves or by ignoring the narrator’s invitations for emotional investment, most readers will gravitate towards identifying with the narrator.

After reading this story, I immediately began rewriting “Ghosted” in second person because the emotional closeness of Aiesha’s story would be more effective at that level. In second person, grieving is more palpable and can be more personal for readers because it elevates a story by making it take place in present tense. For readers, this means being more invested in what is happening in the story and feeling as though they are a part of the story.

Writing in Second Person as Aiesha came with a separate set of challenges from just writing in second person. It took me longer to draft “Ghosted” than any other story in my thesis because I had to evaluate everything I wrote for accuracy. Because I am not a woman, there are portions in some drafts where I would write dialogue that would sound too much like myself and I would have to do multiple rewrites and line by line revision to correct this. Later, this helped me with revising the other stories in the thesis. While the bell hooks book was useful in determining what language would be appropriate for writing, she wasn’t as helpful in helping me determine Aiesha’s voice. To get an idea of how Aiesha should speak and interact with others, I spent a good amount of time talking to my sister and a close friend. Every Sunday, my friend and I would exchange thesis drafts and she would give me feedback on Aiesha as a character. Because the story was in second

person, I had to be more aware of Aiesha's voice. Occasionally, I would slip from second person to third or first and would have to rewrite entire sections of my drafts. Initially, this meant just changing "Aiesha" to "You" but eventually I was able to get used to writing in second person.

"One Hundred Year Flood"

"One Hundred Year Rain" follows Darren and his best friend when a hurricane occurs, trapping them in his family home in Austin. The idea for Darren's story is modeled after my experience and observations on Hurricane Harvey. The hurricane in the story is not treated with the respect it deserves; Darren's father even goes so far as to wave it away as a normal storm. This serves as a motivating factor for the family to remain home. It also serves for a reason Darren's friend gets trapped at the house with him. This also serves as a source of tension, because his friend is strongly disliked by his parents.

Alexis Stratton's "Waterlines" follows a protagonist and his friend Caleb. Caleb is a trans man and the story follows the narrator on their journey alongside Caleb. Stratton utilizes dense description to fully paint a picture of every scene in his story. He describes how the narrator's family would react to heavy rain:

If Dad had been there, he would've caught the rain in jars and measured the rate of the rainfall and said things like "Twelve inches so far!" and "That's more than all the rain we got in September!" He would've known the exact level the water had to reach to break into the water treatment facility on the other side of the

river, the thing that everyone was afraid of, the thing that would turn our water green the next week and turn churches into water stations (Stratton)

This is one of the many places where the author focuses on crafting a setting that permeates the characters and their interactions. The story also focuses on how a town can restrict queer youth. The narrator notes that Caleb is mistreated by his parents while she, herself, wasn't allowed to bring a girl to prom because the school was too conservative, "The emergency alert blared on the radio, the rain coming down heavy and full. I thought about when I asked a girl to prom the year before and the school told me we couldn't get a couple's ticket" (Stratton). As a queer story, Stratton is interested in agency and location. She ties those two ideas together, which forces readers to consider how they areas where they live can impact their personal lives and identity.

In "One Hundred Year Rain", I chose to set the story in Austin because it is a location I'm familiar with. While writing, I kept a map and notebook that I would use to plot places and times where scenes in the story would take place. This included an HEB, the family home, and a recreational center. I also focused on creating a creek for the story that would be helpful for the climax because it is a place where the flooding can force Darren and Zeke into action. I also had to do a fair amount of research on water and how large bodies of water move or push and pull on the human body. Stratton came to a similar conclusion for her story, stating that "water didn't care about the things we'd built. The things we'd made to bind it. It would crest over the banks and break the dams and wash away the roads and sandbags and bridges" (Stratton). Using setting in this way crafts a more believable story and allows readers to gain more insight into the lives of your characters.

Reflection

When I started this project, I was uncertain of the direction I would take. I had planned to write five stories of varying length and had tried to over-plan each story. Because of this, it took me far longer to get started than I had hoped. Overall, I've learned some important things about my craft.

Firstly, as a writer I am more inclined to rewrite a story than revise one. This is a source of tension because if I'm constantly reimagining works, I'll never finish anything. There are over seven different drafts of "Mojo Bag" that are all completely different. There's a version where Xavier is 25, one where he's a football player, and another that more closely follows his mother. In one version from early fall, Xavier had sisters. This constant rewriting has allowed me to focus on Xavier as a character, but I feel like the first version of him and the current version are two separate characters. The same thing happened with Aiesha in "Ghosted". I rewrote and redrafted the story so much that I don't know if the Aiesha I started with is the same one I'm ending with. In the first story she was quite reflective about her breakup. The current version of her feels disinterested, possibly because the story is more reflective now. In the future, I hope I can learn to focus less on rewrites and more on revision so that the ideas that I really like can be allowed to grow and develop because in the real world authors don't have an unlimited amount of time to constantly rewrite their work. Because I rewrote so many of the stories I worked on, some got cut from the thesis and some of the stories I submitted to my advisors were never seen after our meetings.

Secondly, I found that I throw away a lot of stories. While trying to figure out what would go into the thesis, I wrote a handful of stories that I shared with my advisors.

After our meetings, I would then throw out the stories that didn't make it. A lot of these stories were written spontaneously in my free time. I can recall specific stories that didn't make it into the thesis, but I wouldn't be able to find these stories because my writing process was so disjointed. There are documents in OneDrive, iCloud, and Google Docs. These documents are almost impossible to find because I never named them, leading to my documents folder being filled with hundreds of stories titled "Document X". At one point, I came across this folder and deleted everything because organizing that mess seemed daunting. It would be better to keep the stories I worked on so I could visit them in the future, but I don't treat them as being important. This may be because I don't value digital files as much as physical ones because they can be copied and sent instantly. Later in the thesis, this led to days where I would have hundreds of documents open on the computer that I would have to manually go through to find drafts and notes for revision. In contrast, the physical copies with my committee's notes were always in a folder on my desk. Because of this, I've made a conscious effort to organize every digital file I own and consolidate them into one service. This included shutting down my Google Drive, moving everything over to OneDrive, tagging files with appropriate labels, and creating file names that are descriptive, i.e. "critical introduction_march_9_2020.docx" vs "document 62". I hope this organization will stick for all the work that I do, not just the creative.

Before the thesis, I exclusively wrote stories in third person. I liked writing this way because I didn't have to worry too much about a character's interiority. If I needed a character's thoughts, I could drop in and use their voice and then immediately return to my normal narrative distance. Something about trying to write in a voice that wasn't my

own made me deeply uncomfortable. The initial version of “Mojo Bag” had a narrative distance that was so close that readers couldn’t really follow the story. “Ghosted” isn’t in the third person. It took a lot of work to write in second person; I had to rewrite entire pages of dialogue and direction because I would forget I was writing in second person. When you consider tense and point of view, leaving third person past was a lot of work.

Going beyond the thesis, I am really interested in revising these stories a few more times and then submitting them for publication. I think this would be useful for me for two reasons: One, I’ve never published or tried to publish any academic or creative writing. I think it would be a good way to professionalize myself. Two, because I previously worked as an Associate Editor, I have experience on the publishing side. I think it would make me a stronger writer to see how writers interact with publishers as a writer instead of as someone on the publishing side. Overall, this experience may also prove helpful in the future if I decide to go into publication. In the future, I hope to continue working on the stories that appear in this thesis, those that do not, and continue to professionally grow as a writer.

Mojo Bag, Mojo Bag

Xavier's father stabbed his garden shears into the dirt, "So... Your mother said you're quitting cross country?"

Xavier nodded.

"You could go to state. You're the fastest kid in the seventh grade."

"Am I?"

"Sure. Finish up with those branches so we can mow." Xavier's father yanked his shears out of the ground and went back to trimming the hedges near the back fence. Xavier shook open a new trash bag and began going around the backyard picking up fallen branches and twigs. Near the garden, Xavier's mother kneeled and pulled up weeds. Regina, Xavier's friend, was sitting next to her with a bag of grapefruit seeds. His mother smiled and waved a handful of dirt and weeds at him.

"Xay, baby, take these," She shoved dead weeds into his trash bag and nodded at his father. "He's pretty upset that you're quitting."

Xavier nodded, "I know."

She asked him why he wanted to quit. "Was it because of camp? I know you had a bad time last summer, but it won't get better until you-"

"Momma, I'm fine." Xavier whipped the bag around and struggled to shove more sticks inside. "I just don't wanna do cross country. It's boring. Running is boring."

"Right, Gin?" Xavier stared at Regina.

She frowned at him, “Yeah, no one runs anymore! Joshua Matthews quit the team last month. Now he doesn’t play any sport.”

Regina dropped a seed into a small hole and covered it with dirt.

“Mrs. Matthews let Josh quit. Wow. What about swimming?” His mother looked between the two preteens.

They remained silent.

“Just go back to work.” She palmed her mojo bag, a small leather bag that hung from a leather strap on her neck, and then pulled up a handful of weeds.

After cutting the grass, Xavier snuck into the house while his father returned to riding mower to it’s shed. He walked back to his bedroom. He fell into his bed and stared at the ceiling. It was dotted with glow in the dark star stickers that had long lost their glow. They were more mint than alien green. Xavier leaned over and reached into his nightstand. Inside was a blue ribbon that was affixed to a picture of kids in generic camping uniforms. Xavier held it above his head and scanned the faces of the boys in the picture. He stopped on Noah and his stomach tightened. Xavier almost dropped the picture. There was a knock on his door before it gently opened. He dropped the picture onto the side of his bed and closed his eyes.

His mother sat down on the bed next to him and ran a hand through his hair. She pulled one of his curly strands out from under his head and twisted it with her finger. “I just want to make sure you’re fine.”

“I’m fine.” Xavier rolled over, pulling the strand of hair out of his mother’s finger. It caught on her nail and yanked at his scalp. Xavier considered apologizing, but he was unsure of what for. He rolled back around and opened his eyes. “I’m fine.”

“Good.” She brushed a strand of hair out of his face. Then she reached under his collar and tugged out his mojo bag. Xavier had forgotten he’d even put it on that day. She examined the leather bag at the end of his necklace and pinched it. She moved it between her fingers and when she was satisfied, she tucked it back into his shirt. After smoothing the wrinkles in her apron, she looked back at her son. “You haven’t said why you want to quit scouts. You won’t talk about the trip? I can only help you if you let me. Did something happen?”

“No.” That was weak. “I just... I’m too old to be in boy scouts.”

“Too old for boy scouts. Too bored of cross country. At this rate, you’ll be trapped in this room.” Xavier’s mom smoothed out her apron again. “Maybe you and Regina could go to a movie tomorrow?”

Xavier didn’t say anything, and she wasn’t one to press him. She had woven a large flower into one of her braids, it was a yellow and pink star that had no business being in Austin. Her braids were flawless, tightly woven into so many thin braids that Xavier had trouble counting them. Her skin was soft and brown and covered in freckles that were invisible until you got up close. She could’ve been a model, maybe she had. Xavier had never asked what she had done before he was born. “Xavier, me and your father love you so much. If you need to talk, you can come to us. Don’t hide in here all evening, Regina will be done helping me out in the garden in a few minutes.”

She poked at his side and told him to listen for the pizza. It would be delivered in twenty minutes. He agreed to get ready for dinner and then she left. Xavier looked at the picture on the ground and kicked it under the bed. Over dinner, he tried to listen to Regina talk about plans for her birthday party, but his thoughts were all lake docks, rope swings, and busted lips.

—

Last summer was the first time Xavier had been away from his parents for over a month. The camp was located far outside of Austin, in an area called the Lost Pines. It was a thick, forested area that reminded Xavier of the camp from those old Friday the 13th movies. It was supposed to be fun, but Xavier spent the first week of camp in terror. He would leave dinner early just so he wouldn't have to walk back from the showers in the dark. It was terrible. On the fourth day, Xavier sat on the dock watching the orange sky drain into purple next to a group of boys who were getting riled up over batman.

“I don't know dude, but if it was my parents, I wouldn't've just stood around while they got killed. That's so dumb.” Noah was a boy who was covered in freckles and so much acne that it was impossible to tell where one freckle ended, and a pimple began. He reminded Xavier of the boys from Lord of the Flies: loud, angry, and wild. “I mean, he didn't even try to save them. That's weak.”

“The other guy had a gun!” Christian and Noah had gone back and forth every day since camp started. Because every day blended into the next, purple dawns into purple dusks, Xavier had begun to lose count of how long they'd been at the camp.

“My dad has a gun!” One of the boys with thick glasses spoke up. “We go shooting on the-”

“Shut up, Ezra!” The group called out.

Xavier looked out at one of the boats on the lake, slowly pattering from one buoy to the next. The boat was old and sun-bleached, its paint turning a gross yellow, like the keyboard on his grandma’s computer. Xavier wondered if that would happen to him if he stayed out for too long. He’d never been sunburned, and it wasn’t possible to get a sunburn at dusk. He was certain of it.

Ezra threw up his middle finger at the group, stood up, and cannonballed off the dock, splashing the boys. When he came up, he shook his head and began swimming laps around the old wooden structure.

“You can’t outrun a gun,” Otto said, plainly. “That’s like physics?”

“What does PE have to do with Batman?” Liam chimed in from the other side of the dock. His voice was carried across the dock, minted with confusion. Xavier turned and looked at him. It was apparent that Liam was louder than he was smart.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m the fastest one here. I wouldn’t get shot!” Whispers rippled through the other boys. Christian was the fastest. He was also the tallest. He was the most popular. Xavier nodded along with the others. Christian was perfect. He was like one of those demigods Ms. Greenwood had talked about in English. “I would grab the gun like Ironman, turn it around, and shoot the robber!”

Christian stood up and turned to another group of boys sitting in the middle of the dock. Then he fell backwards into the lake and began backpedaling to nowhere in particular. The other boys stood up and followed Christian in, some taking care to strip out of their camp uniforms or to drop their glasses onto the dock. Xavier sat with his feet in the water, kicking as the other boys splashed and tried to drag one another under the surface of the water. Christian swam over and reached out for Xavier's hand. Xavier stared at him for a moment before he took his hand. Immediately was pulled down from the dock. His head smashed into the water and he was dragged down below the other boys. Xavier pulled away from Christian tried to swim to the moss-covered bottom of the lake.

—

After dinner, Xavier retreated to his room. He used his laptop to finish a math assignment and then he climbed into bed and stared at the glow of the laptop screen. Mrs. Washington's 8th Grade Math Class shined back at him. He watched the screen until it dimmed and then eventually faded to black. Afterwards, he turned onto his back and looked at the stars above him. One had slowly dimmed to a dead looking grey that was hard to distinguish from the ceiling. Xavier closed his eyes and tried to sleep, but all he could hear was the splashing of water. He could feel sand against his forehead and ice running through his spine. He had fallen asleep for an hour before his eyelids fluttered open. Xavier fell out of bed crawled across the floor, hoping to remember where his trashcan was. He didn't find it in time. Vomit clawed its way through his stomach, up his throat, and out of his mouth. It splattered onto the floor and painted his dresser pepperoni pink. Xavier covered his mouth and climbed to his feet. He lurched forward and struggled

to make it to the bathroom. Once inside, he locked the door and tried to quietly empty his stomach. Over the sounds of his dinner making an encore appearance, Xavier heard footsteps and then his mother and father were slamming their fists into the bathroom door.

“I’m fine-” More vomit. “Really, I’m just a bit-”

“Xavier.”

Xavier leaned over and opened the bathroom door.

“What’s wrong?” Xavier’s father held him, but he pushed away from him. He couldn’t talk. His tongue felt much too raw. The three of them sat in the bathroom for either minutes or hours. Xavier on his knees, his mother sitting on the sink and his father on the edge of the tub, rubbing his back. Xavier thought about the dream he’d had, being teleported back at that camp. He thought about Christian and Noah and bit down on his lip to keep himself from dry heaving. His hands shook and his eyes were raw with tears he tried to blink away. Once he was calmed down, he stood up and flushed the toilet.

Xavier nodded and then grabbed his toothbrush and covered it with a mound of toothpaste. His mother pulled his damaged muscle shirt over his head and carried it to the laundry. When she came back, she pulled his mojo bag over his head in the same motion and carried it into the kitchen. His father followed. Xavier grabbed a towel and one of his mother’s purple cleaning sprays from the cabinet and drug it across the floor. He then wiped down his dresser and carried the towel into the bathroom hamper. In the kitchen, his parents were whispering over the whistle of an old kettle. They dropped their voices even lower as he approached the kitchen.

His father turned to face him. “How are you feeling? Do you need anything?”

Xavier shook his head slowly. He reached out and pulled a hair tie from his mother’s wrist. She pulled the tie back and spun him around. She put his hair into a ponytail and then directed him to sit at the table.

“Xavier are you alright? Say something, please.” Xavier’s father was pleading.

Xavier turned to him and snapped, “I’m fine.”

His father snapped back at him. “Of course, you are. Goodnight, Xavier. Feel better in the morning.” He turned and walked out of the kitchen, into the living room, and out the back door. Xavier could see a small burst of red and orange light from the patio. He was smoking.

His mother remained silent. She finished brewing her liquid and poured it into a mug. She sat the glass down in front of Xavier and commanded him to drink. While he did so, she sang in hymn that Xavier had always heard his grandmother sing, a song about slave ships and paradise. Xavier could never fully understand the words, never enough to recreate the song. He took slow sips of the drink. It was bitter. It tasted like how licking wood would taste, earthy and dirty. Xavier gagged. His mother glanced at him and placed a finger under his glass, keeping him from lowering it. He’d either sit there, holding that mug like an idiot or he’d have to tip it up and drink.

He tipped the cup all the way up and gulped down the liquid. His throat was scorched and then it was numb. He relaxed and sank down into the suddenly comfortable plush on those old dining chairs.

Xavier's mother placed the mug in the sink and hung his mojo bag from her index finger. She sat it on the table and grabbed a wooden box from the top of the fridge. She placed the box down onto the table and pulled out a small bowl. Then she undid the leather straps around the bag on Xavier's necklace and dumped the contents onto a paper towel.

"I think you should do it this time." Xavier's mother didn't look up from the items on the table.

Xavier nodded.

"Good. I'll can talk while you fix your bag and then you can go back to bed and hopefully, you'll feel better tomorrow. That's what Grandma Taylor did for me and my sister, when we were sick."

"Did it work?" Xavier grabbed the bag and inspected it. It was big enough to slip around his thumb.

"Usually." She didn't say anything else but instead reached under the top of her shirt and pulled out a bag, like Xavier's, but with a small clip that held it under her shirt. She sat it down on the table and continued talking. "I mean, I still use mine. You've got one. Your father has one."

Xavier's father tossed a wallet sized leather bag in the air and caught it.

Xavier reached into the box and grabbed a small rock that looked like a piece of glass. It was reflective, throwing rainbows into the air in the places where the kitchen light bounced onto the object. Xavier asked the spirit of the rock to take care of him and

then he placed it into the bag. Xavier then grabbed a small vial of herbs. He opened the top and smelled rainwater and ash. He took a pinch and placed it into the bag, asking again for the herb to protect him. He reached into the box for another vial.

His mother watched him, nodding with every object he places into the bag.

Once Xavier had packed the bag, he reached for the leather strap that would turn it back into his signature neckpiece. His mother pulled the piece of leather away from him and handed him a small piece of folded paper. “This also goes inside.”

Xavier held the paper in-between his fingers. He had done this several times and he’d watched his mother do it for years, there never was a piece of paper. “Does it say anything?”

“I just want you to feel better, so I wrote words of affirmation.” She raised an eyebrow before smiling. Xavier stared at the paper. He wanted to unfold it. Instead he placed the paper in the bag handed it over to his mother so she could feed it. Using a pair of scissors, she cut a small piece of his hair, placed that into the bag, and dunked it into a bowl of clear liquor. She whispered over the bag, low enough that Xavier couldn’t hear. He leaned in and she grew quieter, like earlier. Then she handed him the bag and kissed his forehead. She rose and walked into the living room.

—

A week after sitting on the dock, Xavier’s troop had been commanded to clean the Mess Hall for a week after the boys in Troop 695 had woken up covered in red craft paint. Every evening, after dinner, the councilors would round up every member of Troop 5152 and make them watch as the other, slightly red, boys all left the large dining room,

then he would set them loose. There were buckets of soap that the boys used to sop up suds and go around the room, mopping up every ounce of wasted sloppy joe sauce and every stale hot dog bun that had been dropped by the other boys. There were towels and sprays that made the boys eyes sting and water. There were also easy jobs, like sweeping. Xavier, Christian, and Noah always ended up in the kitchen, scrubbing pots until their fingers were raw and their nails were caked with burnt food and felt like falling off.

“I hate this.” Noah threw down his sponge. “Look at my hands. This isn’t fun!”

Noah’s hands were red. In fact, his entire arm was a throbbing, bright red.

Christian glanced over at him and shook his head, “Take it up with Mikey, it was his idea.”

“But you left red paint on our door.”

“That wasn’t me-”

Xavier ignored the back and forth and kept scrubbing his pot. He was drowning in sweat and soap bubbles and his arm had begun stinging an hour ago. He wondered what his parents were doing that week. Did they miss him as much as he missed them? He especially missed them when he had free time. He pulled his hand out of the soap of his station and inspected his nails. One had cracked and another was split down the middle. Xavier considered grabbing one of the rubber gloves from the supply room, but the other boys would call him a coward. Only girls wore rubber gloves was what Noah had said on the first day of their grueling punishment. At that, the boys threw down their gloves and the councilors all shrugged.

“Xavier will agree with me.” Christian placed a hand on Xavier’s shoulder. There were small bits of steam rising from his skin. Xavier winced. “Right?”

He looked from boy to boy and tried to remember what they were talking about. Noah kicked his sponge and it flew across the room and smacked the wall with a wet slap. Xavier didn’t know what to say, so he said nothing. Christian watched him. And Xavier nodded.

“Wow, since you’re so supportive of your boyfriend,” Noah drew out every syllable, “maybe you two should clean the dishes by yourselves.”

Xavier felt heat explode onto his face and he stumbled away from Christian, knocking over a handful of plates. Christian did the same, knocking over silverware.

Noah balled up his fists, “We’re gonna be here all night because of you two.”

Xavier threw down his own sponge. “We’d be done, but you won’t shut up.”

“You can’t talk to me like I’m Ezra.”

“You’re worse than Ezra! I’d rather be stuck with him. He’s useful.”

Before Xavier had noticed what was happening, Noah had closed the space between them and tackled him. They bounced off the sink and rolled around on the kitchen floor, dirty water and bits of food becoming pasted to their clothes and finding itself onto their faces. Xavier pulled his fist back and punched Noah. Noah rolled over, grabbed Xavier’s collar, and lifted him so that he’d have better leverage to hit him in the eye. Xavier kicked and thrashed but he couldn’t get free of the other boy. Then he twisted and knocked him into the third sink. A pot clanked to the ground with its siblings. The

water in the pots had cooled, but it was still hot. Xavier wrapped an arm around Noah's and twisted and they both rolled to the other side of the kitchen.

Christian yelled and tried to split the boys apart. He clawed at Noah and tried to pry him away from Xavier, earning an elbow to his face. From the serving window, the boys in the dining room all began peeking into the kitchen. Some began chanting out each boy's names while others yelled for them to stop. It was a riot.

The grand door at the end of the dining room slammed open, shaking the room. Xavier and Noah were pulled apart and lifted to their feet. Their chests rose and fell in exhaustion. The other boys scattered, clearing the kitchen. Xavier shook off Christian's hand and stomped out of the kitchen, past the councilor's confused face, out the doors that had just interrupted the violence of the kitchen, through the laughter and playing of the unpunished campers, so that he could be alone.

—

Xavier's mother never cooked breakfast on a weekday. Monday through Friday, they lived in a cereal and milk household, but the next morning he found her standing in the kitchen. She was wearing an apron over another sundress, this time with a nametag. Adele. Xavier stared at his mother, watching for glimpses of her nametag from the dining room. He rarely heard his mother and father's real names. "Real names" bounced around in his head, as if "Mom" and "Dad" were artificial names they made up just for him. As if they were hiding something from him in the same way he was hiding something from them. Xavier pulled the mojo bag from under his shirt and placed it so that there was a

layer of cotton separating him from the leather bag. It felt hot, as if it were burning a hole into his chest. Likely a side-effect from last night.

Xavier's father pulled up a chair next to him and he was suddenly aware of how small the dining room was. He remembered last night and before he was aware of what he would say, he was apologizing for scaring his father. Words flowed out of his mouth, like the waters in the creek behind the house. Xavier's mouth snapped shut. He felt light-headed. It was as if he were watching himself, as if he were playing one of his father's old PlayStation games.

His mother placed eggs, bacon, and grits in front of him. She added a dash of salt to his bowl and then went on to do the same to her husband and her own bowl. They ate in relative silence, although Xavier's mother would occasionally ask him questions like what his plans were after school.

"You know, my parents forced me to play a sport every semester. I didn't see it at the time, but I had so much more fun than if I'd just come home every day. In fact, I met my best friend in seventh grade basketball. The rule was 'we try something at least once.' I'm not going to force you to do that. Just find something you love to do. You used to love scouting and cross country..."

Xavier pushed his plate away. He hadn't touched the eggs or the bacon. He rose and grabbed his backpack. "If I find a replacement for cross country-"

"I'll stop bugging you. Find something you can do after school and on the weekends, and I'll never mention cross country again."

"Do you need a ride, baby?" His mother started to stand up.

“I’d rather walk.” Xavier grabbed his bag and stomped out of the kitchen before his parents could say anything. He walked to school in silence, not even bothering to use his headphones. The only thing that he could think of was how bad he felt after saying that to his mother. He wanted to run back into the house and apologize to her, so he planted one foot in front of the other and forced himself to keep walking to school. He felt uneasy.

In the days after the Mess Hall fight, Xavier took care to avoid Noah. He was angry, hurt, and embarrassed. This split the entire group into two. Half of Troop 5152 was interested in following Xavier around while the other followed Noah. Xavier tried to ignore Noah and was mostly successful. Noah, on the other hand, seemed to be obsessed with the boy who’d embarrassed him in the kitchen last week. Noah’s group spread rumors about Xavier. Xavier’s mother was a voodoo queen. Xavier’s father was a poor mechanic who stole cars. Xavier couldn’t afford a new uniform for this year. Xavier couldn’t determine if it was the last rumor or the one about him liking boys that hurt more.

Xavier felt small. Noah had diminished him. They had inverted schedules and never ran into one another. If one was in an area the other entered, they would turn and go the other way. This worked in Xavier’s favor, because Noah hated the lake. He considered it gross.

On the south end of the lake, a mile hike into the woods were a bunch of old trees with a tire swing hanging from an overgrown branch that was bigger than any tree Xavier

had seen back home. He wondered if these trees were natural or if they were brought in from some other place, where real lumberjacks lived and worked with real trees that were full of sap and smelled nice.

Christian and the other boys took turns swinging from the rope and leaping into the lake. Some of them pull the tire seat as far back as they can and get a running start so that they can fly, past loose branches and past hanging leaves, to break through the water at what they thought were breakneck speeds.

Xavier was exhausted. It was the last week of camp and he wanted to relax. He had brought a towel that he could lounge on doze off while the others played.

Christian walked over and towered over Xavier, blocking out the sunlight that broke through the canopy of branches. He shook his head, throwing water everywhere and dropped down so that he was sitting next to Xavier.

“Your bruise is going away.”

Xavier placed a hand under his eye. It was still sore. “Yep.”

“Noah looks worse than you.”

“Sure.”

“Are you mad at me?”

Xavier shook his head and sat up on his hands. He smiled and stared out at the other side of the lake. There were nice houses and boats located far away from the camp. He wanted to swim to the other side and enter one of the houses where he could sleep in a

normal bed and eat food cooked by his parents and feel loved. “I think I just miss my parents.”

The other boys would’ve made fun of Xavier, but Christian just nodded. He understood. They sat like that, watching the others splash around and play like they had earlier in the summer. Xavier wondered what life would be like after he returned to Austin, farmers tan in hand and face bruised up. What would his mother think? He laid back down.

“Follow me.” Christian grabbed his hand and pulled him to his feet. Without another word, he turned and ran into the forest. Xavier contemplated laying back down, but he chose to follow him. They dodged branches and fallen trees for what felt like ages. Xavier’s legs were tightening up and he felt like he’d fall until he had broken through a large wall of leaves and flowers to come to a clearing that was filled with rocks. Xavier turned and Christian was right there. In the four weeks they’d been at camp, his hair had grown from a fade into a thin mop of curly strands of hair. Without saying anything, Christian leaned in and kissed him.

It was a quick peck, nothing special. but Xavier was startled by it. He turned around and walked across the clearing, one hand resting on his lip, as if they were prepared to fly away from him and back towards the other boy.

“Sorry Noah is being an asshole.”

Xavier could barely hear Christian and then he took a deep breath. “It’s fine.” It wasn’t. “He sucks.”

Xavier sat down on a rock and Christian sat next to him. They didn't say anything. They didn't have to.

At school, Xavier stared at his watch until lunch. Xavier laid down on a hill that overlooked the cafeteria patio. It was cold outside, but he hadn't bothered to bring a jacket. Instead, he just laid down with his eyes closed, watching the clouds in the sky go by. There was movement next to him and then Regina sat next to him.

"How does my hair look? Nice right? I got it done like that one movie star. Stacy whatever." Regina had dyed and straightened her black hair so that it was long and red.

"I don't think I like it." Wide eyed, Xavier immediately sat up and apologized.

"Thanks, jerk. What's wrong with you?" She waited for Xavier to answer. His stomach was working itself into knots and sweat dripped down his face. "You look really sick; I can go get someone--"

"I feel really bad. I just don't--" Xavier snapped his mouth shut and turned to look away from Regina. His chest felt like it was on fire again. Like it had when he'd said the principal's car was an atrocity, when he'd told one of the dance team members that they were always offbeat during pep rallies, when he'd admitted to cheating on a geography test, or when he'd blurted out that some random boy was cute.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm fi- feeling really, really sick." He grabbed his stomach for emphasis. "I think I should go to the nurse's office!"

Xavier scurried to his feet and ran down the hill before Regina could catch up and ask him more questions. He found one of the outdoor bathrooms, yanked open the door and threw himself in. He stood at the sink and looked at his reflection. He was drenched in sweat; his shirt was practically melting off his body. His fingers shook and his esophagus was practically closing itself. What was wrong with him?

Xavier felt that burning sensation on his chest and he grasped at the mojo bag sitting under his shirt. He pulled it out and ran his finger over it. The bag was throbbing with heat, as if it were a heart. Xavier lost his balance and had to sit on the toilet to catch himself. He felt bile clawing its way back up to his mouth. He swallowed it down and pulled the leather cord holding the bag over his head. He watched it swing around, spinning with no help from himself before he began wondering what was wrong with the bag. Was it him? Did he make it wrong?

Xavier hooked a finger into a small opening on top of the bag and pulled it open. Inside were the ingredients he had added the night before and the small note from his mother. He pulled it out and held it in between his fingers. The paper was ordinary, no bigger than the prophecy from a fortune cookie. Xavier took a deep breath and leaned forward, then he pulled open the note. Inside in his mother's cursive were the words: BE HONEST.

The piece of paper grew hot and Xavier dropped the paper to the ground. Was his mother that desperate for him to talk to her? Was this about dropping out of scouts or cross country or was it about summer? He would show her. Her trick had made him feel miserable. He imagined his grandmother chiding his mom, yelling at her for trying to curse him and he knew what he had to do. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a

pen. Using his other hand as a writing surface, Xavier crossed out “Honest” and wrote “Silent” right above it.

The bathroom door opened. Xavier scurried into a stall and locked the door. He heard footsteps. They stopped at his stall and there was a knock.

“Xavier are you alright? I’m kind of worried about you.” Regina knocked on the stall again.

“You’re not supposed to be in here. Reg-” Xavier chocked. “Reg... I think I’m fine.”

“Alright. I’m right outside if you need me.”

Xavier didn’t say anything, but he heard her footsteps and the bathroom door open and close. He stared at the tiles on the bathroom floor.

—

After showers had started on the last evening of camp, Xavier was the first to return to the cabin. He sat down on his bed and folded his clothes, taking care to place each item into his suitcase. When he was done, he leaned back stared at the wooden paneling of the bunk on top of his. Moments later, the door to the cabin opened and Noah walked in, flanked by two other boys. Xavier sat up and climbed to his feet.

“What do you want?” Xavier’s face had healed, and it was barely noticeable that he’d gotten into a fight. “I just want to pack.”

Noah sneered at Xavier. “Oh, look at the poor fag folding his clothes.”

“Don’t call me that.” Xavier balled up his fists and took a step towards Noah. There was a long scratch running across his arm. The other boys took a step towards Xavier.

“He’s scared look at him.” Noah slammed into Xavier. Xavier slid across the cabin floor and hit the end of his bed. He turned over in pain. “You made me look stupid in the dining hall. Now your boyfriend won’t be able to help you.”

“He’s not... Leave me alone or else.” Xavier rose up and was thrown back onto the ground. “Stop.”

Noah bent down and whispered, so quietly that Xavier barely registered that he had said anything, “I know your secret.”

He was taunting him, growing louder and louder until he was screaming, “I know your secret!”

The other boys joined in.

Xavier rolled away from Noah and tried to climb to his feet.

He was pushed down again. Xavier closed his eyes and threw a punch towards one of the unnamed boys. Noah grabbed him and shoved him into the bed frame one more time. Then he began punching him, over and over, his fist smashing into Xavier’s stomach. Xavier groaned in pain and slid down to the floor. Noah nodded and the other boys began hitting him, taking care to hit Xavier in his torso. He covered his face and they kept hitting him.

“How does it feel, Xavier.” Noah spit out the last word, like a cobra and then he was hitting him again. It went on for ages and then it was over. Abruptly, they just stopped. Xavier looked up at the other boys and crawled over to his bed. They watched him, and then Noah whispered something to one of the boys. Xavier’s stomach was full of pain. He felt as if he were being dissected. Pain radiated through his arms and he was uncertain of what would happen next. Noah and his gang left, laughing as they exited the cabin. Noah peeked back into the room and called out to Xavier, “We’re even now.”

The next morning, Xavier rode the camp bus in horrified silence. His stomach was covered in bruises that he hid under a yellow long sleeve camp tee. He felt heavy. He had tried to talk to Christian, but the boy had made sure to sit on the other side of the bus. Xavier watched him holding his stomach and wincing in pain and he tried to imagine who Noah had attacked first. He was glad they’d avoided his face, save for a newly busted lip.

—

After school, Xavier’s mother had picked him up. Xavier felt cold. He bit down on his lip and wondered if his mojo bag was free of his mother’s tampering. His skin was clammy, and he felt tired. Neither person had said anything, but Xavier could tell his mother had a question for him. She glanced at him and then asked if he was alright.

Xavier thought for a second and then he opened his mouth to speak.

“What did you do to me?”

“Xay, what do you...I don’t know what-”

Xavier tore the bag from around his neck and shook it. When he opened his mouth again no sound came out. Instead he immediately felt a sharp pain in his mouth. It was as if someone had grabbed a needle and thread and began stitching his mouth shut. The pain in his mouth was so strong that he felt as if he had kissed a branding iron. He thrashed around his seat and clawed at his throat. The pain was ripping through his esophagus and leaving his skin ice cold. Xavier tightened his grip around his neck and scratched until he broke skin. His mother had slammed on the breaks and ran over to Xavier's side of the car. She pulled at his hands and tried to hold him.

Xavier wanted to scream. He wanted to shout and yell and curse, but nothing would come out. He couldn't even remember how his voice sounded. Was he soft spoken? What did people say when they talked? He didn't know. His mother yanked the mojo bag out of his hand so strongly that it tore off its cord and spilled its contents everywhere. Xavier's body splayed out. His lips began twitching and then he was out cold. Xavier's mother took a step back from the passenger side door and covered her mouth. Then she reached for the sliver of paper sitting on Xavier's leg. She opened it and saw his handwriting. She placed a hand on his skin and noticed he was ice cold. She drove him home and waited for her husband to arrive.

While he dreamed, Xavier thought about Christian and summer camps and boys and voices.

How's It Feel to be Ghosted?

“I feel like an idiot.” you tell Kenya, a pretty girl you meet at a New Year’s Eve party. “It’s quite ridiculous.”

The party had started several hours ago. There were bottles of liquor, glasses of wine, and cans of beer strewn about the house, an oversized modern, glass, and mahogany affair packed with drinkers both on the cusp of thirty and the edge of twenty-one. There were drinks on the fireplace mantle, on the edge of the stairs, and on the coffee table. A pair of heels had been left on couch. Someone had switched the Ariana Grande vinyl for an older Erykah Badu one. The room was filled with the crackle of the vinyl spinning under its needle, drums, and the plucking of violin strings. Two of the partiers slow danced in the kitchen.

The ratio of people in the house to that outside was three to ten. Ellen, your friend who’d dragged you here, looked back at the sliding door. She nodded and clumsily left for the backyard. The main room was quiet. There was the giggling of the dancing couple, the hushed whispers of a couple that couldn’t find their keys, and the foot tapping of a girl with a face full of piercings filling her glass with bourbon.

“Aiesha.” Kenya says, “It can’t have been that bad. No awkward breakup? No annoying phone calls.”

“That’s how it seems.” You drain your glass. “But that’s now what happened.”

“Oof, sounds like you’ve been through it.”

You can imagine Kenya plotting her escape from this dreary conversation. You imagine her draining her glass and excusing herself. For the rest of the night, she’ll avoid

eye contact with me. It'll be the Halloween party, all over again. The group in the backyard erupts into laughter and shouting. You both look at the sliding door. Ellen looks between Kenya and you and returns to her conversation. There's even more laughter and more clapping.

“Tell me about it.” Kenya sits her glass on the coffee table. “You’ve been chewing at your nails since I asked about it... You obviously want to talk about it.”

After one week without Naomi, your mother invited you to brunch at her church, one of those glistening glass cages that seemed to crop up on highways and scream out at drivers: Stop here! Retribution, forgiveness, and understanding by the hundreds! For the last seven months, you’ve managed to avoid coming to “The Brunch” but your mother knew she could trick you into coming. In fact, she had been so convincing that you now stood next to her, scooping sweaty scrambled eggs onto the plates of other churchgoers while she tried to make you feel better about being dumped in the only way she could.

“Aiesha, have you stopped to think that this whole ordeal could be a gift, possibly from God himself?” Your mother whispered before using tongs to put toast on a plate.

“Naomi was quite the piece of work. I mean, look at you.”

“Ma, please. I look fine.” You’re wearing what others are wearing: a black dress, flats, and a loose ponytail. “Aren’t these church clothes?”

“Sure, Honey. If you were going to a funeral right after this-” She muttered. Then, she sat down her tongs to adjust her large lacy church hat that was both elegant and frumpy. “Why didn’t you wear the dress I bought you?”

The dress was one of the worst gifts your mom had given you since coming home. It was too long to be too short but too short to be modestly long. It was also covered in hibiscus pink blossoms. When she had first handed you the dress, you wondered how quickly you could get rid of it.

“That doesn’t matter, I was talking about you. As in, you’re twenty-four and you moved back into your old room last week. Because-”

You mutter, “I like my room.”

“Naomi changed your locks! Put all your stuff on the curb and locked you out.” She Never shied away from telling the truth. “Didn’t even have the decency to let you see her. She’s a terrible woman. You’d be better off with someone like...him!”

She was pointing now. In front of her was the pastor’s son, a decent boy who seemed more interested in his bacon than in the conversations happening around the room. He used a sleeve to wipe his face. You stifle a laugh and shake your head, “Not my type.”

“Aiesha, I am trying to help you. What about him? He’s handsome and in school to be a doctor.” There was extra emphasis on the word ‘doctor’. She placed an extra piece of toast on one of the plates in front of her. “Oops. Sorry, only two per person. God bless you.”

“I’m not interested in being set up with every man and woman you think is a little cute.” You scoop the last of the eggs onto a plate and raise a serving spoon for a replacement pot. “I think some alone time will be good for me.”

The night Naomi skipped town, you sit on mom's couch in silence and stare at her old plasma tv. The color was warped and faded in the top right corner and the left speaker was getting ready to go out. You had cried on the drive to her place, everything you owned watching from the backseat of your high school hatchback. Inside, mom brewed tea and reheated leftover baked chicken that she gently placed on the coffee table.

“Eat. Drink.”

You took a few small bites and stared at the peeling wallpaper that lined the living room. The house hadn't been renovated since your father had left, back in high school, a week after you had been given your car. He had maintained the house. Your mother had given up on realigning the photos, clearing out the garage, or anything else that could be considered upkeep. The house was clean, but it had seen much better days. After finishing the tea, you excuse yourself to your old bedroom. It's just as you had left it. Your old paintings and poems hang from the wall. The air in the room is stale, as if no one had been in since you'd left for university. The mattress was so old that you sink into it when you lay down. Instead of grabbing sheets, you turn over and stare out the window until you fall asleep.

The next morning, you find Mom making blueberry pancakes and frying bacon.

“Mornin'! How are you feeling?” She hands you a small piece of crispy bacon.

The taste of the bacon is burnt-adjacent. You cough and go to fill a glass with orange juice. You say, “I'm feeling great.”

She asks you if you have any plans for today, you say no. You plan on calling Naomi again. You had called her after seeing your clothes sitting in black bags, when your key wouldn't slide into the lock, on the entire drive to your mom's, and right before knocking on her door.

"No work?" She asks.

"I called in." You say.

"Honey, are you sick?" She places the back of her hand on your forehead. "You seem fine. Do you need medicine?"

You shake your head and reach for another piece of bacon. You tell her you don't want to go in today. She doesn't say anything, and instead drops a pancake onto a plate with a loud, almost aggressive smack.

The pancakes are perfect. In between bites, your mother says that the blueberries were from the farmers market. A Mr. Williams gave them to her as a gift when she bought a package of strawberries. She had promised the man a bag of pecans from her tree and he had asked to take her out for a drink sometime. Your mother tells her story with an excitement that you hadn't seen in years. She gestures with her fork and taps on her plate.

"Aiesha, he is such a gentleman, you would love him! He goes to church on Riverside."

You stare at your mother and stab at your pancakes.

“Oops. I’m sure you’re going through a tough time. Will you help me with the dishes?”

“Mom, I’m fine. He sounds very... sweet.” You push away from the table and pick her empty plate up from the table.

Once the dishes are clean, you retire to the backyard. The patio has a few cracked pieces of wood paneling, but every single flowerpot is filled: blossoms on top of roses on top of daisies. The pecan tree looms over the patio, shielding it from the spring sun. Your old treehouse is falling apart, its wooden boards are filling with rot and decay and the rope swing that used to be attached to one of the branches has grown weathered. It droops lowly, barely above the ground. You sit down on a bench and flick open an American Spirit box. After patting out one of the cigarettes, you place it in your mouth, light it, and take a long drag. You hold. Cigarette smoke fills your chest and makes your lungs sting. You had switched to methanol because regular ones made your chest feel bad but even now you could feel the minty smoke clawing at your throat. You exhale. You inhale. You exhale.

Your mother joins you on the bench. She reaches around you and snakes a cigarette from the box. Then she places it into her mouth and leans over, waiting for you to light it. You do. She takes an even longer drag than you and leans back.

“You shouldn’t smoke,” She takes another drag. “Lord knows it’s bad for you. These are pretty gross, too. What is this? Methanol? Aiesha, you may as well chew gum and smoke at the same time.”

“Mom, please.”

“Alright, you want it to be quiet. I can understand that.” She raises a palm in defeat. “It’s nice out.”

Several bees wondered onto the porch and lazily buzzed over the flowers and their pots.

“Have you tried to call Naomi?”

“No.” You flick your cigarette into the dirt path connecting the porch to the garden.

—

“This all sounds pretty typical for a breakup.” Kenya says.

“Well, maybe we should talk about something else,” you say.

She leans back on the arm of the couch and takes a deep breath. “So, she ditched you? You were together for a few weeks, right? I’ve had girls on dating apps disappear on me after a couple dates. Sometimes they even skip the first date and leave me standing in front of some restaurant like a vagrant.”

“No, no, no. She disappeared after over a year. I had a key to her apartment. I was on a first name basis with her boss. I let her use my car.”

“Oh no. A first name basis! How will you-”

“Do you want the rest of the story?” You sit up.

“Yeah, yeah. I was just messing with you. Laugh a little. So, you took her to meet your parents...”

“Of course. That’s what people do-”

People are coming into the house to refill their glasses and use the bathroom and check their cell phone’s batteries. Ellie side eyes you from the kitchen, her arm wrapped around a man with a dense beard, a crooked nose, and oversized flannel shirt. Someone spills something and someone else laughs. There are glasses clinking against one another, the shuffling of feet, and hushed whispers. Kenya stretches out her legs and rises from the couch. She grabs your hand and pulls you to your feet. You follow her into the now abandoned backyard.

There’s a firepit surrounded by folding chairs and beer cans. There’s a man backpedaling in the pool. Every few seconds he beckons a woman sitting on the edge of the pool to join him. She shakes her head every time. You move through a fine layer of mist that slowly drifts from the sky to the ground. It coats everything and makes goosebumps rise on your skin.

“I should’ve brought my jacket.” You say. “It’s freezing.”

“Yeah. Looks like it’ll actually rain tonight. On New Year’s Eve, of all days.” She lowered a white pool chair down and then laid on it. “So, what happens next. Was she crazy? Did she torch your car? Try and date your mother. I’ve known some crazy girls. My brother’s ex burnt the turkey last thanksgiving and tried to serve it to us as if it was a normal turkey.”

You stare at her. “Burnt?”

“That bird was like charcoal. Even on the inside.” Kenya’s eyes were wide.

“Tasted like it too. After that she cheated on him with an accountant.”

“I don’t think Naomi ever cheated on me. And she couldn’t cook. She wasn’t the kind of person who cooked.”

“What did she do well?”

I shrug and maybe it’s the wine, but I say, “I don’t know, right now.”

—

After three months of dating Naomi, she convinced you to go with her to a metal concert. You couldn’t remember the band name, only that it had something to do with blood and celestial bodies. Strange. She begged you to go with her for almost a month and you finally gave in on her birthday. The night of the concert, you stood outside of the bar where the band was performing and took long drags from a cherry vape pen. Naomi stood behind you; her arms were locked around your body while she talked with some guy about the band. She leaned forward and took a drag from your pen.

“Aren’t you excited?”

Cherry smoke blew into your face. You nodded.

Naomi returned to her conversation.

At the front of the line, Naomi thrust the tickets into the bouncer’s hands and led you into the venue. The lights were low. On the stage was the band. A crowd had formed around the stage. You and Naomi stopped in the middle of the crowd.

On the crowd, the band began tuning their instruments. The singer stepped up to the mic and greeted everyone. There was cheering. Naomi excitedly shook your shoulders. “This’ll be great!”

“Yeah.”

“We don’t have to be in the center of everything, it can get pretty wild.”

“What? No, this’ll be great. We should be right here so we can see the stage.”

You said.

Before Naomi could say anything else, the guitarist started playing the first few chords of a song you had heard Naomi singing around her apartment. The crowd joined in and began singing.

Moments later, the guitar released a high-pitched whine. The crowd began dancing and slamming into one another. There was hooting and hollering from everywhere. You turned to look at Naomi and was slammed into by a small blonde woman. Before you knew it, the crowd was swarming. Over the drums and guitar, you could barely hear. Music ran up and down your spine. You looked around for Naomi. She was nowhere to be found. Another person slammed into you. And then another. After regaining your footing, you pushed through the crowd and made your way to the bar. Naomi appeared moments later.

“Are you alright? I know it can get crazy-”

“I’m fine! Honestly, I just needed a drink.” You point at the bar.

“We can stay out here. It’s pretty calm”

“No, no, go back in. Have fun! I’m just getting a drink. I’ll come over once I order.” You wave her back over to the crowd. “Promise.”

Naomi kisses you and rushes back to the crowd.

You order a glass of water and sit down at a table. The room is heavy sweat and heat. It’s exhausting. After a few more minutes, you decide to go sit outside.

Outside, the music The band finishes after an hour. The bar empties. When Naomi doesn’t come outside, you go inside for her. She’s talking to the bass guitarist, a woman with purple and red hair.

“Aiesha! Where’d you go? Come here, come here.” She waves you forward.
“This is Amanda Pearson! Greatest player in Austin.”

You pull up a chair next to her. They two women talk for almost an hour. Naomi is lit by golden bar lights. Her eyes glisten. It reminds you of the day you met her.

—

After the day you met Naomi, it takes a week for you to see her again. Between visiting your mother’s friends and catching up with family members and going to job interviews, you were far too busy to catch up with the girl from the bar. On Saturday you called her and arranged to meet at a small diner in East Austin for lunch. Naomi had said the diner was the best in the neighborhood. While driving there you realized you were going to be several minutes late and contemplated calling her and letting her know. Wanting not to make a bad second impression, you decide to call. While reaching for

your cell phone a car cut across two lanes of highway. You leave the phone in its cupholder. A few minutes late isn't that bad.

When you finally made it to the diner, there were only two other cars parked out front. The diner was no bigger than one of those portable classrooms from an elementary school. There were large glass windows that sat in front of old booths. There was a neon pink sign: Ronda's Spot. You get out of the car and walk in through glass double doors. Sitting in the corner, right next to the booth under an old box tv was Naomi. She wore a spiked leather jacket and a purple tee shirt. Her hair had been buzzed short. You slid into the seat across from her and apologized for being late.

"I didn't even notice," she said. "You'll love it here. Artie is a great chef and we're pretty great friends."

You nod.

A woman in stained apron walks up and pulls out a notepad. "Hello, Naomi. As you can see this place is pretty dead today."

"I saw. Must be the weather. Samantha, this is Aiesha."

You smile at the woman and she nods at you.

"Cute girl. Alright, what'll it be. We have a really good burger, that's today's special." Naomi ordered the burger. You ordered a monte cristo. Samantha left with the order and came back with a coke and a glass of water.

"It'll be out in a few minutes. Naomi, it's been a while. I bought a new bike." She pointed to a motorcycle sitting in the parking lot.

Naomi whistled.

From behind the counter, a skinny man with sagging cheeks called for Samantha. She smiled at the table and walked over to him. You took a sip of your water.

“Why are you standing around? There’s so much we need to do. There are dishes to clean and orders to fulfill. I’ve been cooking all day-”

“No one is here. Look around!”

“What if someone comes in and sees you standing around? Stop lazing about and work...”

They went into the kitchen and continued arguing.

You stare at the kitchen door.

“Sorry about that. I’ve been here hundreds of times. They don’t normally argue out in public like that.”

“It’s not your fault. You like motorcycles?”

“Oh, I love them. One day, I’ll buy one just as nice as Sam’s. Then, I’ll ride up and down the coast.” Naomi stared out at the motorcycle. “You’re not into it, are it?”

“Not really, not into motorcycles. Too dangerous.”

“I think you’d appreciate it.”

“Where would you go first?” You say.

“I don’t know. I’d probably just go and figure all that stuff out later.” Naomi takes a long sip of soda. “You’ve never wanted to just run off? Just quit your job and do whatever you want?”

“I think everyone has at some point.”

Kenya crosses her arms. “That’s a lot of red flags you just ignored.”

You nod and stay silent.

The sliding door is thrust open and the partiers pour out into the backyard. One of the larger men is holding a heavy looking firework with two hands. He sits it down next the pool and pulls out a lighter. He bends over and lights the fuse. Ellen looks down at her phone and begins counting down from sixty. Everyone joins in.

You stand up and join the group, Kenya right behind you. She leans over and whispers in your ear. “Sorry you didn’t finish your story.”

“I feel like I finished. The only thing left was how we met.”

“That’s all in the past. It’s so last year.”

You agree with her and join the countdown.

The fuse burns out and the firework shakes before shooting into the air. The countdown comes down to five, and then four, and three, two, one. The firework explodes and paints the sky gold and blue and red. The crowd cheers and begins playing with noise makers and recording videos on their phones. Some one blows a horn in your ear and you turn away from there. Kenya is there and she’s staring up at the sky, her face

being drenched in the fireworks lights. For a moment, she looks just like Naomi. You want to pull away from her, but in that moment she feels familiar. There's no clear reason why you feel this way. You hadn't talked to Naomi, but you can see her face and hear her voice clear as the day you met her. You can't stop thinking about meeting Naomi. You try to shake your head clear, but in this moment you can't. The cheering and fireworks are drowned out by the memory of terrible music in a decrepit bar and Naomi asking to see you again and again.

—

You met Naomi in a run-down dive bar on South Congress two days after graduating. You can remember that week as if it were a video playing on your cell phone. There was the dinner with your grandma and grandma and uncles and aunts. You spent three days being shown off to your family like a brand-new trophy: hair strung up into a tight bun, glimmering blue dress, dainty too tight blue heels, and the one "old lady purse" Grandma gifted you were all on display. On the third evening, you walk out of an Italian joint whose name you can't pronounce because you studied Vietnamese to impress some girl. With a takeout plate of Chicken Alfredo and cup of water in tow, you sit in your car and wonder if your parents are home yet. Are they waiting for you? Is there more of that terrible cake your mother made with layer upon layer of blue fondant that seems to coat the inside of your throat and gives you a migraine. You can see her smiling as you walk through the door. Grin as wide as a Cadillac, a handful of gold teeth fighting the white ones to glisten in front of you. It's too much.

As you're getting into your car, you see the bar. The Black Cauldron. It's lowkey. There's a bouncer out front, a large man with braids and arms as wide as a tree branch,

but there's no line. You drop the takeout onto the passenger seat and say you only needed a drink for the road. It'll be quick. You check the parking meter, smooth your dress, and cross the street. The man doesn't even check your ID.

The inside of the bar is just as empty as the outside. There's this western aesthetic; There's old cracked wood, rope, a hay bale. Cow skulls line the entrance to the bar, but they've had bright pink lips painted on with someone's lipstick. At the bar, there's a group of women standing around and chatting. You pull out a stool and sit.

A bartender leans over the bar, her dreadlocks gently swaying around. She asks what you'd want.

“Recommendations?”

“The witches brew margarita is pretty great.” She said.

“Witches Brew. Black Cauldron. Western decorations. None of this makes any sense.”

“Yeah, we used to be all witch themed, but they've been trying the western thing out. Gotta get the two-step crowd in. I'm Naomi.”

“My name's Aiesha. I'll just take the margarita. It can't hurt, right.”

“Good choice.” Naomi winked and went to work. She tossed a bottle in air and caught it with one hand. She filled a shaker with liquor and juice and began mixing it, shaking the aluminum bottle around while staring at you. Then she filled a glass with the concoction. Under the bar lights it was a dark black and green. She passed it across the bar. When you reached for the glass, she placed her hand on yours.

“I know, it looks gross. But that’s just food coloring. Try it.”

The drink is perfect. It barely tastes like alcohol, but you saw how much she’d poured into the mixer. Naomi stood by and watched you, waiting for an answer. She motioned for you to hurry up.

“It’s good.” You say.

“Just good?” She asks. “Fine. So, you come into the bar, all alone, on a Saturday night. No boyfriend?”

You shake your head.

“Girlfriend?”

You don’t say anything.

The first thing you do after waking up at Naomi’s is inspect her apartment. Her studio is bigger than your old dorm. There’s a gargantuan bed in the center of the room that takes up most of the space that’s flanked by two nightstands, one of which has a large clock, the other a vintage lamp from the 90s. The kitchen area is full of fast food and takeout brown bags. The counter is littered with food containers and plastic cutlery. You also notice the art strewn about the room. There are paintings and clay statues everywhere. The lights in the apartment must be controlled by a dimmer because even with the lights on, you can barely see anything. You search through the cabinets for a cup. You find one in above the stove and fill it with water from the sink.

Naomi comes into the kitchen and sits on one of the empty counters. “Morning. Sorry, this place is so messy.”

“I didn’t even notice,” you say but you find yourself scratching at your arm. “You like art?”

“Sure.” Naomi slides off the counter and goes to the bathroom. She returns with a garbage bag that she scoops the containers and brown bags into. She ties the bag up and sits it by the front door. “I’ve been super busy, between the bar and taking some online classes, right now. Plus, I had to make that statue there and the guy who asked me to make it flaked on me.”

You walk over to the nightstand and look for your cell phone, “What are you studying?”

“Marketing.” You hear the fridge open. When it closes, Naomi is drinking from a milk carton. “Do you want to get breakfast? There’s a great diner like right down the street.”

“You study marketing and you make art?” You catch your reflection in the mirror. “I need to shower and comb my hair and I have to put on regular clothes and-”

“I can lend you something. We’re practically the same size.” You looked Naomi up and down as she crosses the room to lay on her bed. She was over a foot taller than you. “Okay, that was a dumb idea. What about lunch in a few hours? It’s Saturday. You’re not doing anything. Nobody does anything on Saturday.”

You find your phone sitting in one of your shoes. The battery is almost drained. There are several missed calls from your mother and a text message asking if you'd like to get brunch with a great aunt today. You text her back.

“Maybe tomorrow? I have lunch with my mom, today,” you say.

Naomi sighs and begins chewing on one of her nails. “Tomorrow for sure? I'll see you tomorrow?”

You nod and bend down to put on your shoes. Once they're fastened, you find your keys in the kitchen. “Tomorrow for sure.”

One Hundred Year Flood

Zeke's father swore it would never flood in Austin.

Zeke watched Darren argue with his father. They had been best friend since childhood. For fifteen years, they did almost everything together. Even now, sitting in Zeke's childhood living room, they listened to his father rant about the weather.

Darren slumped down onto the couch and said, "It could totally flood, it has before."

"Young man, a heavy rain is not a flood." Zeke's father placed a cigarette in his mouth. "You haven't seen the floods I've seen. I used to live in Florida."

With his right hand on an old bible that had been glued to a wooden coffee table for over a decade, Zeke's father stood in front of his entire family and swore that the rain was the last thing anyone needed to worry about. "Austin has always had heavy rains. When I was your age, it rained even more than it does now."

He lit his cigarette.

"Dear, really?" Zeke's mother shook her head, "That can't be true."

"It is." He pointed at the window. Zeke lifted the blinds and opened it.

"I know it'll be a light rain. I even checked the weather on the TV. We'll be fine." He flicked ashes into an ashtray. "Have I ever steered this family in the wrong direction?"

The room broke into fits of laughter.

"Yes." Zeke stared at his father's cigarette.

“Like, seven times.” Darren said.

“You almost drowned Zeke and I while teaching us how to swim.” Kyle said from the kitchen. “And we still can’t swim.”

“Please be serious! Are we not talking about the safety of this family? For people who are terrified of flooding, you all seem to be pretty okay making jokes and laughing with one another instead of having a frank and realistic conversation.”

“Isn’t drowning related to safety?” Kyle drank from a water bottle. “Drowning at twenty-one would be pretty pathetic, right Zeke?”

Zeke ignored his twin.

Their father said nothing. He looked at every face in the room before cracking his knuckles and turning to leave the room. He climbed the stairs, making sure to stomp on the last step so that everyone could hear how upset he was. Everyone in the living room waited for the door to his room to close and then immediately returned to thumbing up and down on their cell phones, reading text messages, and asking about the weather. Zeke’s mother stood up and straightened her shirt, then she followed her husband up the stairs.

“Your dad has no idea what he’s talking about, like always” Darren slid over from his side of the loveseat. “It has definitely flooded here. Hell, the power went out at my mom’s apartment last time.”

“He just likes to be right.”

“All dads love to hear their own voices.” Darren tossed his phone into the air and caught it. “That’s why no one listens to them.”

Zeke stared at Darren for a few seconds. “That doesn’t matter. Even if he’s wrong, we should at least buy more water bottles. We already drank the ones that were in the fridge...”

Zeke didn’t wait for his friend to respond and instead stood up and stretched. He grabbed an umbrella from the front door and waved for Darren to follow him. Zeke drove his car to the grocery store. It was silence until Zeke came to a small convenience store. Inside, people rushed around with carts full of canned food and batteries. The shelves of the water aisle looked as if they’d had their contents dumped onto the floor and scattered. The largest packs of water bottles had been bought, leaving behind only a handful of miniature eight packs. While Zeke loaded his cart with water, Darren snuck off to grab a bottle of whiskey. Zeke grabbed some food that wouldn’t perish and checked out. Behind him, Darren inspected his bottle and dug around in his pocket for his wallet. Zeke tried to ignore him. In the car, Zeke waited for Darren to put on his seatbelt. He pulled his bottle out of its paper bag and took a light drink. He slid the bottle back into its bag and rubbed his chest.

“Do I need to take you home?” Zeke turned to Darren and watched him tighten the lid on the bottle. “I can drop you off.”

“Do you think your dad would get mad if I stayed over?” Darren said without looking in Zeke’s direction. Zeke’s father didn’t hate Darren, but he had a strong enough dislike for Darren that he may as well had.

“You hate driving in the rain. I’d hate to make you drive all the way to Round Rock and then drive back here. Also, I spent all my cash on this,” he raised the bottle into the air.

“I can call you a taxi or an uber, if you really wanted me to.”

“But who would drink with me? My house is practically abandoned. Everyone knows a good rain needs a good drink. And no one likes to drink alone, right.”

Zeke rolled his eyes and started up his truck. There were tons of people who liked to drink alone, his father included. Darren was being clingy. “Maybe, but I don’t think my dad-”

“I can sleep on the couch. I’ll be the perfect house guest. Your father won’t even notice I’m there.”

Zeke whispered, barely high enough for Darren to hear him, “He always knows when you’re there.”

Zeke remembered the time his father caught him and Darren, then just ten, lighting grass on fire while camping in the backyard. Darren was banned from entering the house for a month. When Darren accidentally knocked over Zeke’s grandmother’s ashes, he was banned for over seven months. On prom night, Darren got drunk at the dance and vomited on the suit that Zeke had borrowed from his father.

Zeke turned the key and the engine of the truck sputtered and shook. Small droplets of rain fell onto the windshield. Zeke tried to ignore Darren sitting in the passenger seat, loudly reading the label of his bottle. At some point, he switched to

reading text messages and would chuckle to himself every few minutes. Zeke parked the truck in front of his parents' house, a two-story house adorned with peeling yellow wood paneling and an ancient but dying oak tree. The house sat at the bottom of a hill, in a cul de sac. The ground around the house's foundation was squishy, sucking Zeke and Darren's feet into the mud like quicksand. They had to make deliberate and long strides to get to the house without being swallowed by the earth.

His mother stood at the stove, boiling a pot of tomato soup. She smiled at the men as they walked into the house and focused on her cooking, stirring and adding various items into her pot. Zeke snatched Darren's whiskey and hid it in a cabinet filled with DVDs. He'd been able to drink for six months now, but he still felt weird having alcohol around his mother. Zeke could hear her talking on the phone, most likely with her older sister.

Zeke placed his cases of water bottles onto the table and pulled out a chair. He listened to his mother's conversation while Darren flopped down onto the couch in the living room.

"...Yeah, I talked to him earlier. He genuinely thinks we'll be fine. And it never gets bad in this part of town...yeah...of course...well, you stay safe. If you need to come to our place the couch is open, I know you guys get tornadoes out there when the weather gets bad...okay...love you too." She hung up and sat her phone on the table next to Zeke.

"Oh, you bought water. Thank you." She leaned over and kissed his cheek.

“No problem. I saw you were getting low. And with Kyle and I being here, I imagine y’all are running out of all kinds of stuff.” He pointed at the bag of canned food sitting on the ground.

“Your sister is staying at her apartment, so we’ll survive. It’s just the four of us.”

Jayla and her husband had two kids. They rarely ever stayed over long because their oldest kid was like a cyclone, destroying everything he touched and consuming any food he saw. Nothing was safe when he was around. And since he was only twelve, he had infinite amounts of energy for his rampages.

Zeke nodded and smiled at his mother, “Five. The five of us.”

“Who-,” she peeked into the living room and saw Darren laying on the couch, throwing his phone into the air and catching it. “Oh. I don’t know.”

“He said he’d be on his best behavior.”

“But you know how your father feels about him. He’s nothing but trouble.” She mouthed the word “trouble”.

“He’s not the only one who lives here.”

“Yes, but you don’t live here, either.” She stepped away from Zeke and walked over to the stove so she could add a pot to the bubbling liquid. “It would be one thing if he was on his best behavior, but it’s Darren. We’ll be lucky if he doesn’t burn down the house by morning.”

“Mom, he’ll stay on the couch and he’ll be quiet. Scouts honor.”

“Didn’t you hate being a scout. Anyways, you also promised you would convince your father to cut that tree down while you’re here.” His mother washed her hands and grabbed a towel to dry them. “I just don’t know. You know how your father gets. He’d rather the entire house flood than have Darren sleep over.”

“I promise, I’ll make sure he’s on his best behavior. I swear.” Zeke grabbed his mother’s hand.

She took a deep breath and nodded, “He sleeps on the couch, is quiet, and doesn’t smoke while here.”

“Even on the porch?” Darren shouted from his spot on the couch.

“Especially on the porch. You’ll poison my flowers.” She tossed her rag onto the counter and reached into the cabinet to pull down a stack of bowls. She began filling each bowl with soup and sitting them at the kitchen table. “Dinner will be ready in a few minutes.”

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By the time everyone had made it to the kitchen, the rain outside had increased once again. Zeke sat across from his father who’d refused to look up from his bowl. The only sounds filling the kitchen was the rapping of rain against the window above the sink and the slurping of tomato soup. Darren spun his spoon around his bowl and took sips of water from an old plastic cup.

Zeke’s father cleared his throat. “So, Darren. How long will you be visiting us today?”

Zeke dropped his spoon and bent down to pick it up. Once he returned to the table, he saw that his father and Darren had locked eyes and were silent.

Kyle cleared his throat, "I think he's staying the night. It's pretty dangerous on those roads, right now."

"Ah. I see." He drew in a tight breath. "I don't know if it's that bad. Don't you have work tomorrow?"

Zeke's mother quieted her husband. "Daniel, don't be rude. You need to apologize to..."

Darren pushed away from the table and excused himself. He walked out the front door and gently closed the door, cutting off his mother and father's back and forth.

Zeke shook his head and followed Darren out of the house.

The rain was falling towards the street leaving the porch mostly dry. The porch was packed with potted plants and flowers. Darren sat on a bench, his legs drawn close to his chest. Zeke scratched his head and then sat down next to his friend.

"Sorry about him. He's just being obnoxious."

The oak tree sitting in the middle of the yard shook and rattled. Its branches reached over the yard and dragged across the windows of the second story. Zeke pulled the sleeves of his sweater down over his hands and pulled his legs close to him like Darren's. They sat on the wooden bench, not saying anything to one another. Darren traced the wood grain of his seat with his finger, dragging along every groove and hole he

came across. For a moment, he looked up and made eye contact with Zeke. It was unclear if it was rain or tears on his cheeks.

“Hey, are you alright.” Zeke sat on the bench.

“I flunked my last semester. I have to redo it in the fall.”

“It’s alright. There’s nothing wrong with a December graduation.” Zeke rubbed Darren’s back. “It’s not like you dropped out or were kicked out.”

“Well... My mom kicked me out after I told her. She told me I needed to grow up and then she said I had to leave. I didn’t even get a few days to find a place to live. I was at home one day and homeless the next.”

“Where have you been living?” Zeke stood up and walked to the end of the porch. The ground had been saturated with water that beginning to collect in large pools across the yard. A small creek ran behind the house. Zeke could hear rushing water coming from the stream. He reached out and let rainwater collect in his hands that he then poured into a plant sitting next to the bench.

“There’s that one shelter downtown. And the library is open 24/7. I’ve spent some nights there. I just need to make it to the start of the semester. She didn’t change the locks, so I sneak in while she’s at work and grab whatever I need.”

Zeke sat next to Darren without saying a word. The rain increased in strength. Wind slammed into the porch making Zeke scoot closer to Darren. “That can’t be the only reason she kicked you out.”

“I guess not. I told her I liked guys.” Darren stared off, glancing around the neighborhood. Lighting flashed, making it completely clear that Darren had been crying.

“Sorry, man. I honestly didn’t think she’d mind.” The sky lit up again.

“It’s fine. I thought I could hang out here, but then I realized your parents don’t like me.

Zeke sat back down and checked the time on his phone: half past six.

“What? What makes you think they don’t like you. You’re great. They’ve known you since you were a kid.”

“I can tell they don’t want me here. Like my mom.”

“They’re just disagreeing about the weather. Then there’s the tree in the front yard. I’m pretty sure my mom wants it cut down, but Dad doesn’t want to. In fact, she’s asked me about it twice this week. Now, they’re arguing, etcetera, etcetera.”

“What about what your dad said in the-”

“He’s just being bitter. He’s always like that when people visit. My sister said she wasn’t visiting, and he acted like he’d won the lotto.”

Zeke cracked his knuckles and tossed a rock from one of the flowerpots into the yard. Zeke and Darren sat in silence for several minutes.

“I can ask my parents to let you stay at the house. They’ll understand if I talk to them.”

Darren remained silent.

“I mean it. I don’t think they really dislike you. They’re just weary of you burning the house down or breaking something. You can be a lot to handle. Remember when we tried to build a treehouse in the backyard.”

“And we fell out of the tree and each broke one of our legs. Of course. Your dad was so upset. He made us join the boy scouts that same year.” Darren laughed. “As a scout, remember when we tried to cut our hair so we could fit in with Noah McNeal. And we cut a bald patch into our hair. Your mom was so upset that she had to shave your head. Ten years of braiding and washing and massaging all down the drain.”

“See. You’re like a son to them. Anyone else would’ve just told your dad and let him deal with you.”

“Yeah.”

“Plus, I like having you around. I’d hate to know you’re out there on the streets, all alone, during this storm. And my futon is always open.”

“Yeah.” The tree violently shuddered, and a handful of branches fell to the ground with a splash. Zeke watched Darren, who had dried his eyes and was watching those branches slowly spin around in their puddles. He leaned over and planted a kiss on Darren’s cheek before standing up and walking back into the house. He passed his father who was standing at the door. His father sat down next to Darren and they began talking in hushed voices. Zeke trudged into the kitchen and cleared his and Darren’s bowls from the table. Then he cleaned the kitchen, washing the dishes and scrubbing the table in silence. After he finished, his father and friend walked into the house and said their goodnights. Zeke climbed the stairs and grabbed some blankets from the linen closet. He

laid a large quilt on the couch and handed Darren another blanket. Then he climbed the stairs and grabbed some clothes to take a shower.

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Around midnight, Zeke's eyes flew open at the sound of breaking glass. He grabbed a pair of flip flops and a tattered shirt and crept out of his room. The window at the end of the hall had been shattered by a large branch. Wind and rain pushed against Zeke, making him raise his arm to cover his face. He pushed open his room door and grabbed a leather coat hanging up on a hook and wrapped it around himself.

The house creaked and groaned as the storm pelted it with rain, wind, and hail. Zeke fought against the wind to get to his brother's old room. He pushed the door open and rushed to his side, shaking him awake. His voice was barely audible above the air rushing through the house. On the opposite end of the hallway, a mailbox that had been thrown into the air slammed into the window, cracking it. Kyle climbed out of bed and rushed to his parent's room.

Downstairs, Darren rolled off the couch. He could hear the door in the kitchen groaning and straining against its frame and then it burst open, water pouring into the house. He climbed out of bed and rushed into the kitchen to close the door. The bolts and door knob had been torn from the wall and had floated to the other end of the kitchen. Working against the torrent of water entering the house, Darren pushed on the door, but water continued to pour into the house. He slipped and was pushed backwards, slamming into the stove and knocking over a pot holder. When he opened his eyes, he could see the water filling up the first floor of the house. The window in the living room cracked and

then glass was raining down onto the couch. Darren could see glimmers of light from flickering streetlights bouncing off the shards as they fell to the ground. More and more water filled the house and he climbed to his feet and tried to get to the stairs.

The water was ice cold. Darren felt his muscles weaken and he knew he could probably go into shock and drown in the living room. He grabbed his cell phone and wallet from the coffee table and waded through the ice-cold water until he was at the stairs. He pulled himself out and sat down on the stairs for a moment, catching his breath. Water continued to pour into the house, slowly rising higher and higher. Darren crawled backwards up the stairs and was startled by Zeke, who tried to pull him to his feet by his slimy hands. Zeke slipped and fell down the stairs, and then he went into the murky water which had begun rushing into the house and then rushing out of it, like waves on a stormy beach.

The house continued to shake. The water smelled like the creek, stale water and old fish. From the front yard, the oak tree moaned as the wind grew in intensity. Zeke's parents stepped into the hallway.

Darren pulled himself to his feet and prepared to climb into the water. Zeke's parents asked where he went and instead of answering them, Darren threw himself into the water. A moment later, everyone in the house followed except Kyle, who sat at the top of the stairs and shined his flashlight around the murk.

The water stung Darren's eyes.

He could feel his lungs fighting against himself, and he was forced to go up for air. His head struggled to break the waterline and when he did, he could feel mud

caked onto his face and hair. Zeke's parents' heads bobbed up near the stairs. Their skin was illuminated in some places and covered in mud in others. Zeke's mother began sobbing hysterically and frantically moving around the water, splashing mud and water every direction before she threw herself back below the water.

The front door of the house groaned and with an eardrum rupturing crack and a thud, the tree from the front yard had fallen over and crashed into the house, splitting through the wood and roof like a sword. The porch was obliterated, pieces of wood were thrown into the now wide-open living room. Zeke's parents were pushed back against the stairs. A stronger current ripped through the house and Darren was dragged through the living room, across the kitchen, and out the backdoor, into the vast floodwaters that had blanketed the neighborhood. The last thing Zeke's mother had seen of him had been his hand being tugged under the water.

Darren's body slammed into the picket fence in the backyard. Water continued to rush through the spaces between the wooden boards of the fence and Darren felt himself being dragged further into the backyard. His body was flung through a hole that had been made in the fence and he felt sharp pieces of wood drag across his back, shredding his clothes and drawing blood. He screamed, involuntarily, and dirty water entered his mouth. He coughed it out and steadied himself so that he was floating on his back as the current moved him along. He was pushed into the thin wood behind the house, a collection of trees that adorned the stream.

As he neared the creek had been yesterday, he felt the current pick up. He was dragged through the water for what felt like an eternity and then he noticed a tree that had been knocked over. Tangled in the larger branches was a body adorned with a leather jacket. Darren waded over to the body, fighting against the current. When he was close enough, he hooked his arm around Zeke and pulled him free of the tree. They both tumbled through the current, Darren making sure to not let go of Zeke. The woods opened and the creek emptied into a small drop off that connected it to Lady Bird Lake. There was a bridge that was covered by inches of water. Darren kicked against the current once more and pushed himself and Zeke so that they would both fall onto the bridge.

He landed on his back, Zeke on his face. The rain continued pelting them. Darren caught his breath and then looked at Zeke.

There was no rise and fall of his back or chest.

Darren clumsily climbed to his feet and became aware of how sliced up he was. He crawled over to the Zeke and turned him over, then he placed his ear on the man's chest. Nothing. He began pushing his chest inwards, hard enough that he could feel one of his slightly give to Darren's compressions. He blew air into Zeke's mouth. Then he began pushing his chest again. He continued this pattern for what felt like forever while rain washed the mud off his body. Air. Chest. Air. Chest. Air-

Zeke turned over and opened his mouth. Water flowed out of his mouth and he coughed so hard that his spine felt as if it would shake loose. When Zeke was certain his lungs were empty, he laid back down on the concrete bridge and held his sides. He felt as

if he'd been stabbed. It hurt to breath and it hurt to think. His head felt like it was on fire, and his eyes felt like they were melting. Despite the water that had just left his lungs, his mouth was dry, and his teeth felt weak. He could feel mud coating his mouth and tried to spit it out.

Darren leaned down and hugged him and then he kissed him. Zeke's lungs were in pain again and he pushed away from Darren and yelped in pain.

"Did you crack my ribs?" His voice was so low that Darren almost didn't hear him.

He nodded.

"Thanks."

The rain slowed down. After an hour of sitting on the beach, a police boat came by and picked up the pair. An officer on the boat wrapped Zeke in bandages and gave him water. When they told him that the family was probably at the house, a boat was sent to pick up Zeke's family.

Darren and Zeke were dropped off at a shelter on the other side of town. The shelter was in a large recreational center. It was filled with people drenched in water and covered in mud. They all tried to scrub the mud off in the bathroom, but many were unsuccessful. Some people cried and others sat in silence. Zeke sat on a cot and drank a stale coffee. Darren laid down next to him, thinking about his mother, the storm, and homes. He wondered if everyone in this room had lost their homes. What would they do after this?

“I guess I’m not the only one without a home.” Darren wasn’t speaking to anyone, just himself.

“You can crash on my futon. It’s cheap and a little uncomfortable, but it’s warm.”

“What about your parents. They don’t have a home now.”

“They have insurance; They’ll be fine. They don’t want to live with me. I live in a studio.”

Zeke’s mother entered the shelter and rushed to her sons’ side. Her husband and other son were right behind her. “Thank god, you’re both safe.”

She squeezed Zeke, and he tried not to cry.

“Ma, my ribs.” She loosened her grip. “Darren gave me CPR and my ribs are in a rough spot.”

“If Darren hadn’t been here... You’d be...I don’t know what I would do if...” She trailed off.

Zeke’s father embraced Darren, the older man’s arms almost crushing him. He whispered into Darren’s ear, “Thank you.”

No one said anything else. They sat in silence, waiting for the storm to finally end. Rain pelted the rec center throughout the weekend. Lightning would shake the windows and the occupants of the shelter would clutch at their blankets, wondering if this temporary home would become waterlogged like their previous ones. Eventually, everyone fell into the groove of shelter life. Zeke found himself learning everyone’s names and greeting each person in the shelter, by name each morning during breakfast.

He and Darren helped distribute lunch and dinner at the front of the shelter. Sometimes, Zeke and Kyle would help tidy up and clean the areas people left messy. The rain had stopped and one of the windup radios proclaimed that the worst was over. After that, they waited until they could go home.

And then they did.

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