



in  
PLAIN  
sight

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## *Intro*

This collection of stories was created for my arts, humanities, and social science capstone at Olin College of Engineering. The goal of my project was to explore the relationship between fiction and my reality in pieces that intentionally blur the lines between the two. I hoped to use these pieces to share stark glimpses into both my life and my characters' lives, and leave it to the reader's interpretation to untangle and decipher these stories as they see fit.

I was inspired by semi autobiographical storytelling, such as the *Little House on the Prairie* series, the book *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott, the webtoon *The Kiss Bet* by Ingrid Ochoa, and Taylor Swift's recent album *folklore*. I was also inspired by how works set in realms that feel so distant from us, like *The Hunger Games* trilogy, can be so rooted and inspired by the actual current social situations and events.

The first three sources all played with retelling their experiences while blending in fictitious or exaggerated components and characters. *Little House on the Prairie* presents itself as the closest to the "truth", but still reveals bits about the author's life in addition to weaving a fictional narrative. While *The Kiss Bet* presents itself as fiction, the author has admitted that those close to her can immediately name the individuals and situations that inspired characters and plotlines. Taylor Swift's *folklore* was a massive inspiration in regards to the structure and creating a myriad of pieces, as the album contains songs completely about Swift's life, songs completely about fictional characters, and songs that combine the two seamlessly.

I grew up believing that storytelling was the most compelling and versatile tool in the world. In these pieces, you will read about the plight of an aging nymph, someone who recognizes their role in their own stagnation, and the stories that can be mapped onto one's hands. But you will also read the confessions of a twenty two year old who is still searching for connection and a sense of belonging.

## Hands

“ARE YOU READY?!?!” The rides operator cups his hands around his mouth and screams. The cheers, whoops, and other exclamations come almost instantly, just like about every other time. I flash the all clear thumbs up from my ride attendant’s stand, and he pushes the start button.

I lean against the gate as the rush of the ride sends a breeze my way, the flashing lights a dazzling display as guests spin around and around above me, against a starlit sky. It’s like watching a spinning octopus that waves each tentacle up and down. At first, the guests are tossed up and down while flying forward, but at the halfway point they are sent backwards. When the ride finishes its run and creaks and sighs its way into a resting position, my fingers make quick work of the latches to the gates.

The riders quickly push their safety levers above their heads, and scooch off the elevated seats onto the ground. They tumble through the exit. At the sight of my outstretched hand, the majority of them give an eager high five. Even with all the chatting and blasting music, the audible claps of dozens of high fives in a row ring in my ears.

The operator opens another gate, unleashing a new batch onto the scene. I watch them clamber onto the seats, their hands immediately shooting up to pull down that bar. I then cycle around, curling my hands around the levers to ensure each is locked, running a thousand apologies in my head about how close my hands must be to stomachs and more.

And thus the cycle continues. My hands high five the soft hands of children who have finally graduated from the “kiddie coasters”. I high five hands that fiercely clamp themselves around the safety lever like talons, and the ones that fly up in the air, flexed and open to whatever may happen. Sometimes, my hands are met almost hesitantly by stumbling parents who were so sure this ride wasn’t too intense for them. Cotton candy hands, long acrylic nails, hands that are convinced putting a fist on my open palm is their best move- I’ve seen it all.

Those two blonde girls who went from screaming as the ride began its circles to belting the lyrics of “Love Story” by Taylor Swift mid ride, throwing hand motions my way when they had realized I knew all the words too. They ran arm and arm when they left the ride, giggling and dashing in their pursuit of the haunted mine, various phrases bubbling over the noise of the crowd even as they stepped farther away. Once, a man with a gray shirt and square glasses, who had looked down at the ground when he entered the ride area alone, left with a spring in his step. A high school couple leaps onto the empty seats. When I walk over to test their safety lever, their joined hands quickly snap away from each other, the boy on the left blushing faintly as he looks off to the side. By the time I’ve finished my rounds, she’s grabbed his hand again. As they

begin to bounce and spin in the evening breeze, they curl closer together, his face nearly buried in her grey hoodie.

Once, during a lull, an operator named Brent tossed himself into one of the chairs, and heartily slapped on the one beside him. He was an operator I remembered for his goofy, uncoordinated dance moves during the rides, and for always sneakily hiding my height stick when I was occupied. As I sat myself next to him, I found it quite interesting to note that even with the ride's blasting music, bright lights, and the background hum of the park, it still felt so different- calmer, stiller. I could faintly hear the creaks and roaring wheels of the wooden coaster nearby as I wondered what it would feel like to bury my face in someone's hoodie. He talked vigorously about school, woodworking projects, and that one time a guest felt the need to make an announcement to others on the ride that they were single. "I like your spirit," He had said with a smile, and a high five, when we clocked out later that day.

When I arrive home in the evenings, I feel the euphoria of popcorn scented air, blasting 2000s pop music, and spinning machines drip out of me. The quietness wraps its arms around me- sometimes in a hug, sometimes to smother. I toss my Lean Cuisine into the microwave and flash on my tv just to gain some background noise. I toss myself onto the couch and look up at the swirls on my ceiling while Aaron Robinson talks about a partly cloudy Tuesday. I have a shift then. I'll throw on my red team shirt, and a smile, and hold out my hand to strangers and their stories, unsure if I'll get anything in return. And I will return to an empty house wondering where those Taylor Swift girls are now, and if Brent had also spent our entire discussion painfully aware of how close together our hands had been.

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"Tell it again! Tell it again!"

My Grandpa looks up at me with a kind smile.

"Well now, Sally, I think you ought to be heading to bed soo-"

"Pleeeeeease! One more time? To help me fall asleep?"

"Okay, I guess one more time would be okay. Luckily, Grammy's already in bed, or I'd be in big trouble!" Grandpa smiles, and begins the story.

"It was the summer of 1954. My brothers and I were admiring the Chesneys next doors' Chevrolet 3100. It had a beautiful brass coat to it that shined like the sun..." His hands stretch out, miming the shape of the car.

"Now, it was a hot day, but we still had a blast at the Chesneys. We started a game of billiards, and I was on my last ball." His finger pointed to the sky. Then he quickly waved his hands to mime the proper position for a shot. *Oh right- the game*

where you hit the balls into the holes with sticks. He had told me other rules when he told the story earlier. I only really remember the fun part.

His hands begin to wave rapidly, desperately attempting to recreate the details of what followed.

“Now, Rock Around the Clock was blasting on his radio at this point, and as I got ready for the last shot, I noticed a girl trying to bike down the sidewalk with a nearly broken chain. Her hair was as wild as they come,” he frantically shoots his hands off his shining bald head, and I quickly try to cover my nose as I snort with laughter.

“But her eyes had a sparkle I could see even from that garage. I shot the ball without looking, and it flew right off the table and smacked my partner in the jaw. Looked like he had been in some skirmish for weeks. I saw him clutch his face, and then I ran right after your grandmother on her bike.”

The hands roll forward, faster and faster.

“I finally got her to stop, and picked up her bike and carried it over to the garage. I rushed a little, and my hand got caught on the chain,” he holds out his palm, fingers flexed, and I run my finger over a thin line on the top of it. “my favorite scar. I offered to take her to Pop’s down the street for an ice cream soda. And the rest is history,” His hands go still, “Now, little one, it’s off to bed with you.”

I look up at Grandpa. Kind, loving, and silly- everything I want to be. He grabs my hand with his speckled, tan one. It feels almost like his sandpaper, but gentle and firm, and warm. I peek at the dents, marks, and freckles on it. That pebble stuck from his biking accident. A burn from making cookies with Dad. I feel my shoulders fall when I breathe. He gently squeezes my hand three times when we reach my bedroom. He makes quick work of tucking the blanket around me, scooping every corner and making sure it is put into place.

“Goodnight, little one,” he calls back, and my eyes begin to grow heavy as I curl up in the hug of his handiwork.

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Alexa has 50 hours left on her “to watch” youtube playlist and an incredible variety of single player video games. A lot of people in high school labeled her as the cute, quiet introvert. When we met, I felt like I didn’t see her talk to people all too often outside of the stereotypical hallway conversation. But she had the same best friend from kindergarten through high school, a girl named Sally who described herself as “competitive”.

Where Alexa was slow to react and relatively steadfast, with her consistent macaroni and cheese orders and Tim Burton movies, Sally was turbulent. She would

intentionally sneak behind people having their photo taken, stretching her hands to outline her own face in the background. She was often bitter when that picture was posted later. She would recreate kindergarten pictures with Alexa, pushing their cheeks together with their arms wrapped around one another, before dashing off to talk to Peter for the entire party. She wrote personal essays on how she was humble and seemed to change the rules of each card game every time she played them.

When Alexa first came over for a school project, we found that our cell model made with jello cytoplasm and a citrus nucleus took far less time than we'd expected. After a moment sitting in silence, I quickly tried to think of something.

"How about we watch a movie?" I sputtered out, to fill the space.

"That sounds fun!" Alexa replied, then paused, and said, a little quieter, "How about we watch *The Shining*?"

A few moments later, we had compromised on *Little Shop of Horrors*. While I hadn't seen it before, she danced to the songs, called out her favorite lines, and attempted both parts of the "Suddenly, Seymour" duet with gusto. Alexa may have been the cute, quiet introvert, but she also covered her room in cheetah print and dressed up like KISS for hero day during school spirit week.

It was the next day during class presentations on the Industrial Revolution that I first noticed it. Alexa's hands, shaking with her slim stack of white index cards, getting pinker and pinker- and fast, too.

"Hey, are you feeling alright?" I whispered when she sat back down.

"Oh yeah, my hands just do this sometimes when it's cold or if I get stressed. I think there was a little draft when I started presenting."

Before I could say anything else Sally had piped up, "Nice job on the presentation. I would've shared more about the steam engine though. But still, solid job."

From that point on, I tried to keep my eyes out for red hands. I saw them before theater auditions, barreling with motions to capture each character as they darkened in hue, and clutching thin pencils while scrawling history exam answers. They showed up when certain people approached Alexa in the hall, or on dodgeball days in gym class.

Following an audition for our school's next theater production, Alexa, Sally and I went out to Ross Dress for Less to find some outfits for the homecoming dance.

"How did the auditions go?" I call over to the stalls next to me in the changing room.

"I mean, they went pretty well. I really just auditioned for Summer- I love her quirky mannerisms as a character." Alexa responded quickly.

I pulled back the curtain on my dressing stall to go look in the larger, and angled mirror. It stood like a giant trifold at the end of the stalls, capturing your view from three different angles simultaneously. As I went to tell Alexa she looked cute in the blue dress she had picked, Sally answered.

“I wound up auditioning for Summer too! I feel really good about it.”

Alexa froze. “Didn’t you say you were interested in Veronica? Why’d you audition for Summer?”

“Just felt like it. Don’t worry, Alexa. Maybe someday you’ll beat me at something.”

My feet glued to the floor, I open my mouth not once, but twice, but nothing comes out in my confusion. And I am staring, fixated on the reflection of hands gaining shades of pink in the mirror.

Alexa’s hands are pretty pale in their natural state. The process usually starts with a little splotch of pink on the curve of the hand alongside the pinky, blooming outward to the tips of her fingers. Once it has crawled to the edges, it tends to darken in shade rather quickly, slightly dependent on the levels of stress. I try to shift my eyes back to my own dress, but I find myself noting the color regardless.

Sally pulls back the curtain and trots over to the mirror, ruffling her fingers through her hair as she gives a quick twirl. She glances over at Alexa. “The dress is cute. But you shouldn’t part your hair that way, it just isn’t working for you.”

“I think it’s cute.” I say, unsure why my voice is so soft. Sally looks at me, twists her lips to the side, and hustles back behind her curtain.

On the car ride home, she talks about how it seems like we’re upset and how stressful that is for her.

The next day, it is the bright red hands that catch my eyes first when they’re talking. And the not so subtle glancing quickly informs me that I am evidently the subject of the day. I see Alexa grip her hands into fists, clearly agitated.

“What was that about?” I ask when she walks over.

“Don’t worry about it. Oh, I got the maid in the play. Sally got Summer.”

Alexa starts wearing gloves. And I don’t see red hands or Sally very often anymore.



## Nymph

For too long  
I have ached for the world  
To look at me  
And see flowers in bloom  
Bewitched  
By a delicate smell  
I have held out my branches  
And ached  
As the wind tore them  
From the days in the sunlight  
I so sought  
But if I stopped  
Would they see me

There are younger nymphs  
Slender  
With bark so smooth  
To the touch  
Budding for the first time  
To see if they  
Might engross man  
To learn how it feels  
To be looked at  
With adoration  
Knowing it is their time

Dressed in the depth of years  
I weep  
For every bump  
Scratch  
Stubby branch  
Mossy outgrowth  
And hope  
As I ache  
That they will look at me  
And see flowers in bloom  
Rather than  
My aging limbs  
And cracked surfaces



## Caterpillar

It's heavy, this blanket around me  
But I am feeling heavy too  
Away from my days in the sun  
When I explored with wonder  
I decompose in this darkness  
Crumbling and dripping down  
Leaking out of every pore  
I float- formless, aimless  
Or do I drown?

A dull buzz settles in me  
A puddle kept away in silk sheets  
Out of control and immovable  
Contained- no trapped-  
By my own delicate handiwork  
Hanging to a twig by a thread  
Hoping that whoever I turn out to be  
At the end of all this  
Was worth it after all

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My alarm shrieks beside me, somehow still full of energy on its eighth try. *8:30 am*. I fumble my hand on the nightstand next to me, tapping everything in reach until I find the right button. The comforter lies on my chest, inexplicably pinning me to my bed, as though the dull feeling in my chest didn't serve to anchor my back to the striped sheets.

I open my eyes and take in the ceiling. The creases where it meets the wall, that browning water stain, a rare couple glow in the dark stars still clinging with their 15 year adhesive. The flickers of light that force their way through the edges of my blinds to dance about me as I lay motionless. My blanket cocooned around me, feeling soft on my feet as I contemplate how long I can stay here.

My eyelashes insistently attempt to drag my taut eyelids closed. I really need to call my parents today. It's been on my to do list for four days now, but I just haven't gotten to it. The worry in their voice won't be as surprising as it used to be. Maybe if I just tell them

about my sculpture project from last week we can all tell ourselves everything is just peachy.

I shift to tiptoe my feet from where they ball together at the edge of my blankets. As soon as I'm on my side, the glare from my window rudely greets me, and I pause as I squint. And after a moment, it is undeniable that this somehow feels like the most comfortable position I have ever been in. I squeeze my eyes shut tightly to ward off the light that fights for my attention as my bedding envelops me in new ways.

Today would be a good time to try that yoga class I've been eyeing. During the year I did yoga almost every day, it felt like it was much easier to focus. I curl my body further into my bed, feeling my diaphragm approach and retreat with each breath. Overly fixated given how out of focus everything else feels.

If I am going to do yoga, I always call up Caroline to go with me. I call her up- thank goodness she is available at such short notice. She was about to go out for coffee, but when I tell her I've been in a bit of a funk, she tells me she appreciates that I was willing to share my feelings with her, and that she's there for me.

I actually don't have horrible bedhead today, which is a miracle considering how much I had twisted and turned. I brush my teeth and toss on my purple floral yoga pants. Did they always look this good? It's been a while since I wore them- I would've been happy if they had just fit at all.

Maybe if I grabbed lots of new cute leggings, I could feel this good all the time! Oh my gosh, I still have time to grab a smoothie on the way over.

And it's so strange, how so many little things can make me feel so much lighter, when just this morning I found myself lost in the nooks and crannies of my bed, hiding away from my deadlines and the pressures to pretend to always be okay.

Caroline and I make faces at each other during the poses, and then laugh over the times I flopped over trying the crow position over a nice cup of tea. Of course, she mentions the same cute guy with the grey sweatpants I had noticed too. There's nothing like a good tea time chat to reconnect with something, feeling the warmth of the mug creep into my hands like a hug.

*Reconnecting...* I roll back over, sprawled out. I feel like a puddle, filling the space as much as I can in my stagnation. Spread thin, oozing into the mattress below me. I feel like I'm supposed to be upset right now- moved to action by my loneliness and loss.

I glance at my clock. *10:00 am*. I should be fine if I can get up within the next 30 minutes. I think I am upset. But I'm not moving. I crumble up, pulling my knees closer to me as I stay cocooned in my bed. *Just a little while longer.*



# Brew

My grandparents' yard was hallowed ground

It was here I played under the omniscient eyes of the oak tree

Guarded by the ivy even my grandfather did not wish to provoke

A temple attended by his hands and the footsteps of my cousins

Who taught me the medicine of the evergreen and lily

One day, we cracked open the land to brew our potions

Pouring all the seriousness I had learned in eight years of life

Into our murky elixir of friendship

Rocks for steadfastness, a root for memory, cobwebs to intertwine

Stirred round and round with the giggling incantations

And promises of youth

We barely speak to each other anymore

Perhaps because we were charmed by the

Persistent reminders of algebra, recess friends, and A pluses

Or maybe we had spent so long away from that little yard

We were no longer affected by its magic

## Dandelion

“He was entirely new

A burst of sunshine- a thing of wishes-

Amongst the downtrodden path

She was blooming

Embracing the world around her

Mesmerized with his light

He did not seem like a weed

Until he drained her

And disappeared with the wind”

We met fresh after a storm, the sun cautiously slipping out from its curtain of clouds to illuminate the gold in your hair. I swung my bag over my shoulder- my now wet SAT practice books, community service logs, and the books I escaped into leaking into one another as I shook your hand.

“It’s nice to finally put a name to a face.”

“This school’s so small, I’m surprised we haven’t run into each other before.”

It wasn’t until after you were gone that I noticed my hand still had dirt from the garden smudged all over it, embarrassment burning my face.

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“Are you ready for this game?!?! Let’s make some noise for our wonderful Eagles!”

My principal evidently forgot he didn’t need to yell into the microphone to be heard.

An indistinguishable buzz arose from my fellow students- a melting pot of chants and cheers as a wave of blue uniforms rushes through the door. Even so, that flash of golden hair crashes into my vision.

*Did he just wave to me? Wait- there’s no one really near me, so that had to be me, right?* My hand shakes as I sharply raise it up for a brief moment, just in case.

A few speeches, class cheering games, and minute to win it player challenges later, that wave of blue ripples into the crowd. Two pockets of blue peek out from across me, and I squint searching for gold.

“Okay if I sit here?”

“S-sure.”

How was our silence louder than the crowd around us? Comfortable as a thick sweater in the October breeze, my fingertips folded over the metal curve beneath me while you were next to me. I have no recollection of any other activities the pep rally committee had put together.

You only sat there for about half the game, but it was enough.

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“Ooh- okay, check out this one!”

You grabbed my hand, and I soon found myself being directed away from a pumpkin that a 7 year old had painted to look like Garfield, his rendition of the lasagna eating cartoon cat earning a 3rd place ribbon, to a very cross eyed attempt at one of my favorite characters, Winnie the Pooh. The accompanying honey pot mini pumpkin likely sealed the deal for the blue ribbon tied around the stem.

Just then, the scent of popcorn floated through the air, and we dashed our way out to many booths that lined the winding roads of the fairgrounds. We try everything of course- veggie tempura with its crunchy shell and soft cauliflower that practically melts in your mouth, caramel apples that fill your mouth with sweet and get stuck all over your teeth, and the signature item at the stand that only sells corn cobs but still runs out each night.

But of all the things we do, from watching pigs race for oreos or seeing your face light up as a baby chick begins to break through its shell, it's showing you my work in the gallery that's my favorite.

"4th place? Amazing!"

I hadn't placed any other years. I had been told that while my photo composition was well executed and my shots were cleanly framed, technical clarity was their best asset.

I could study the ideal aperture and shutter speed for certain environments, but I found it difficult to study how to make a moving piece.

These shots were blurry- full of sunspots and motion. Taken when we worked in the garden together, capturing the life and movement of our work in a place that otherwise felt so still. The trails of bees forming a delicate thread woven between still flowers. Blurred interactions as I finally got to share my favorite place with you.

"Thank you! I mean, I still need to improve framing, and I'd like to try some new techniques, but I-"

"I think it's delightful.... I think you're delightful."

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"You know, my grandfather had always called them misplaced flowers."

You twiddled the dandelion in your hand as you spoke, its curved spine flopping this way and that as a few wisps of the now silver flower lazily tiptoed their descent to the ground.

I looked up at you leaning against the garden gate, one leg crossed over the other.

*Misplaced flowers, huh?*

I had spent so many days hoping for someone to talk to. To tell someone about the way I love when it mists outside and I can feel my hair hug itself into curls, or about the fear that pools up in my stomach when I approach a crowded lunch table.

There are only so many times you can be the one who has to leave to make space before you start believing people just don't want you.

So I poured myself elsewhere- into the dragon battles of books far away, an essay on Napoleon Bonaparte, or any other opportunity that arose. I learned to prune back the primrose bush and to pour extra water on the fiery daylilies that would boast their charm for a single day before withering away, replacing their blooms over and over again.

Sometimes I felt like those daylilies, watching myself fall apart whenever the cool shade of night promised me no one was looking. But with those words, I wondered if I too was a misplaced flower.

Maybe that's why I could talk to you- at least, someday. Towards the beginning, you gave me so much time, your messages and invites pulling me away from whatever task had been occupying my day.

Then, as suddenly as your messages had first entered my life, they changed. Consistent daily check ins, walks, and complements turned into leaving me on read, not waving back. And then suddenly, a random message out of the blue- "Life is good... Or at least, no one would listen if I complained." Or you suddenly popping up at the lunch table while Jessica and I were in the middle of our debates about whether Tolkein or Lewis had better world building, to tell me about how your basketball game and hanging out with Mary Ann after, even though we had talked about seeing a movie for a while.

But today you were here, shuffling outside with your hands in your pockets as I watched the last streaks of water cautiously drip out of my watering can.

"I like that thought," I confessed aloud, realizing my hands were shaking a bit, finishing off those last few droplets. The can clang as I dropped it by the edge of the wooden gate, breaking the quiet as I felt my nervousness leak out of me, dripping to the ground below. I don't know why I was so nervous- so excited. I guess I just liked your attention.

"Make a wish." You said, smiling, holding out a bent stem, bowed silver wisps clinging to the center as they trembled in the wind.

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It's been three months since I made my wish.

*We were too close to my garden gate*, a voice in my head had protested. But you looked so earnest, so eager. So I accepted your misplaced flower.

Three months since the last time you spoke to me, before you left my two message attempts unanswered.

I like to think you're doing well now. Maybe you're working on trying to secure a basketball scholarship for college, or making plans to travel around to all sorts of new places.

I saw you at a party the other night. The LEDs dancing around your hair as I heard you say to Brenda, "Well, I think you're delightful. I'm sorry the others don't see it."

I wonder if she knows about your grandpa's view on dandelions, or that you've discovered your favorite fried dough topping is caramel drizzle, but the classic cinnamon is a close runner up. I wonder if she knows about this dull, heavy feeling in my chest when I have to see you.

I heard you've started taking college classes at night, so you can shave a year off and get your degree in three years when the time comes. I read the same page in my US History book five times, trying to figure out where I went wrong. With you, with school, with a lot of things.

The dandelions we blew, that danced so gracefully through the air, have already started a new colony inside my garden gates. I uproot so many of them each day, but there are always more. Poking their sunny yellow heads through my daylilies and bleeding hearts, an unavoidable reminder of how I had fallen behind, and how I thought I mattered to you.



## Brother

Mom always talks about how excited you were to have a younger sister. I still have the blue elephant your three year old self picked out just for me. Its fur has gotten brittle with age, and has those little fuzzy clumps that blankets and cardigans get over time. It sits in the box where I keep what I have left of you.

From what I understand, I was unreasonably serious in my youngest days. I've been told I would scream if any man besides my grandfather tried to hold me, including you, and that I would spend most of my time sitting and staring out the window. Looking through old photo albums, it seems like there are peculiarly few where I am actually smiling.

You were persistent though, and as I grew older we would run around our backyard and pretend we were running from gorillas, or play fetch with a neighborhood dog that had wandered over. We would attempt to make tunnels to crawl through in the snow. We'd read all the same books together, eagerly await every release of a new Avatar episode, or listen to Linkin Park together.

One time, you pulled me into your room and showed me the rope you had made out of your t-shirts, twisted and curled and knotted together.

"This way, I can get out of the house right out my window whenever."

"Why wouldn't you just use the door?"

"There's no secret in that- it's boring."

I don't know if your nine year old self ever really snuck out the window. But you wanted the option to.

I wrote stories about you. Next to my second grade classic short story "Go Dye your Hair Green", I wrote notes and ideas for what you could do. I remember the character that was you had a different name, but I can't recall what it was. What I do know is that you were a victorious dragon rider who won over all the villagers with his funny jokes and bear hugs. You took on mages and warlords who had cruel intent, without losing your signature sense of humor or your softness. Maybe someday I'll find these notes and make something out of them.

As we grew older, we both faced similar battles in our middle school journeys. But while I had taken comments about my awkwardness, my low "ranking" by my classmates, and lack of invites as a sign that who I was made people uncomfortable, you took your treatment as a challenge. By the end of your middle school journey, you had appeared

to go through the trope of every “geek to chic” transformation. You had an edgy haircut, skinny jeans, and somehow made your way through five years of guitar instruction books in one. You talked to everyone like they had been your best friend your whole life, and became the friendly face in the crowd for a variety of crowds and people.

At the end of middle school, I would find myself shaking every time I had to go up to someone that I wasn't comfortable with. My books were probably my best friends, and at one point someone even referred to me as “leftovers” in an activity that required selecting a team. I would have friends over, and turn around to find that they had disappeared into your room. You always tried to have my back- I remember you chased down the kid who called me a “retard” at a youth retreat and told him off. But I lived in the shadow of a bold and lively presence that was you.

Sometimes I hate myself for not crediting you with facing the struggles you had while you were here. That your transformation had come at the cost of not always eating even when you wanted to. That so many of your peers went from ignoring and mocking you to adoring you over a few pounds, a new haircut, and being more private about the things that “weren't cool”. That you were always just trying to escape the thoughts in your brain that I will never understand- through music, friendships, parties, relationships, and any other means that presented themselves to you.

They all said you lived more in your 18 years than most do in 80. I've never heard so many people share such specific stories about a person following their passing. Someone mentioned once that you were the lifeline they called when they thought about ending it all. Stories about shenanigans in New York, running around the streets of Time Square and making up a song on the spot about a man who announced to a public restroom that he was taking a dump. Riding the bike models around Walmart with friends until you were asked to leave.

And it's so weird, because you are gone and we are laughing about a video in high school of you repeating random words. And trying to figure out what we're supposed to do with six guitars none of the rest of us can play but we could never bear to lose. And with every picture, and every unbroken item we were able to scavenge from your place, I am swallowed up by so many emotions I can't even begin to distinguish where one ends and another begins.

There are other stories too. Dark with memories likely inflicted by the liquor (and more) in the witnesses' systems. But they're hazy and bleak. They don't have proper evidence. I do not want to believe them. So I won't.

When they bury you, there is a dragonfly that sits on the casket. It waits, patiently, through speeches, placing flowers, songs, and more. It only moves when they begin to raise the chestnut box into the air, to let it rest in the ground below.

My phone buzzes and hums like it never has before. An invite to dinner. A quick check in text. An update on something funny that happened. A quick meme to make me smile. A message asking me if I want any ice cream. Messages asking why my family hasn't been home. They rush at me, all at once, flooding my life. But they trickle out very quickly, and I'm even more alone than before because you're still not here.

I go to the pool, about two weeks after you made your last escape attempt from this world. There are a few groups already- I swim around them, but after small talk they barely seem to look my way.

I drift along the edge, floating aimlessly. The cool kiss of water lapping over my shoulders, gently rocking up and down, muffling any noise around my ear. I notice a dragonfly in the ripples. I pull it out and blow as gently as I can. It stays with me. I lift and move my finger, and even blow from the back of it in case it needs more encouragement to fly.

At one point, I lift my finger and gently transfer the dragonfly to my nose. It stays there- still, and gentle, despite my movements, the splash of cannonballs off the dock, and the screeching of young toddlers smashing their arm floaties into the waves. I transfer it back and forth a few times with my nose and several fingers, taking a couple pictures to remember those gorgeous wings. I'm not sure why I care so much about the remembering- I just do. I wait, feeling its gentle feet tickle my hand as it shifts around. When the time feels right, I stand and make my way to the nearest bush. I hold a leaf steady and slide it between the dragonfly and my finger. It pauses for a moment, then flies away.



## *Afterword*

I would like to thank Gillian Epstein and Cassandra Overney for their incredible feedback and help throughout this process.

I would also like to share the following sources, which I used for inspiration for specific pieces.

“Angels and Blueberries” by Tara Campbell is an engaging and compelling short story, and I was inspired to create a piece that was whimsical and invoked the idea of a “complex fairy tale”, leading to the development of “Brew”.

“Eveline” by James Joyce showcases a well paced journey in a “short short story” length. While the structure of “Dandelion” has changed since the original attempt, the story was developed as an initial attempt to portray a character’s journey through vivid descriptions and a few poignant scenes.

## Writing Prompts

### Dandelion

- Find something you made when you were a kid. It could be a piece of art, jewelry, writing, etc. Make a story inspired by that.
  - What would that object say?
- Experiment with metaphors that define a relationship from your past.

### Brew

- Think about a time from childhood where you were playing and it felt magical or imaginative. Write a small story about that world.
- Design poetry around a specific shape.

### Brother

- Write to someone you can’t talk to anymore.
- Write to someone who shaped you significantly in your childhood. It could be a child, adult, friend, relative, etc. Tell them why.

### Nymph

- Choose something in nature, and write a story about what it might say.

## Hands

- Choose a simple item and create three stories about it.
- Think about what different aspects of a person can help you learn more about them, and show the different things they can reveal

## Caterpillar

- Create a stream of consciousness journal entry and search for your favorite sentence. Create a new story from that sentence.
- Create a stream of consciousness journal entry and then block out certain sections to create blackout poetry.