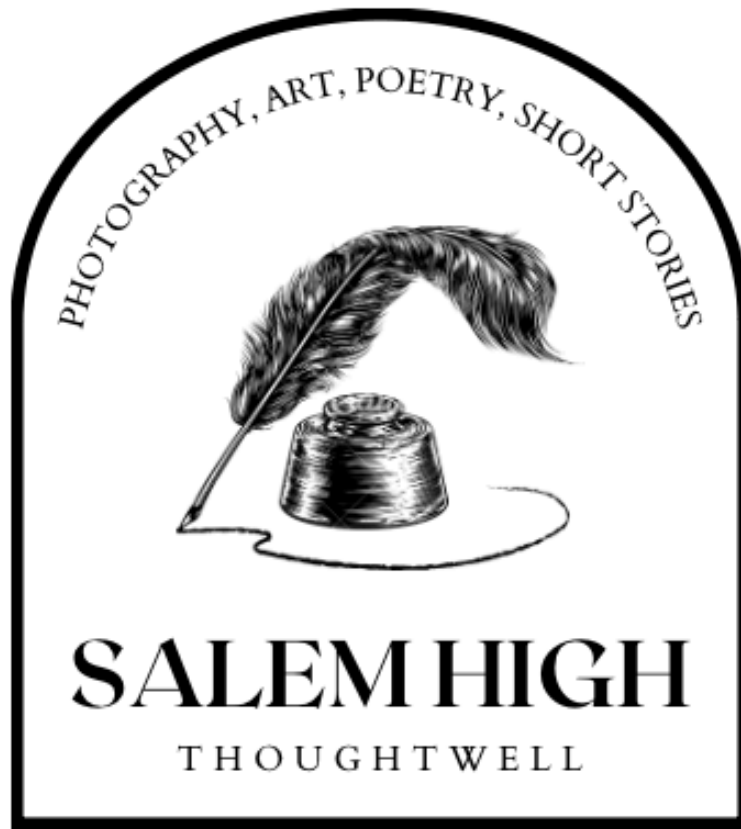




2024-2025

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Sun on skin, wind in hair

by Ryleigh Blank

Springtime sun flickering on my skin
Fresh, therapeutic, and warm
The light amidst so much rain
Posing as a beacon of hope and rejuvenation
After the long, lingering months of winter

Wind grasping my hair as it disbands from my braid
Finding its way over lips, clinging to my lip gloss
Hands scattering to put it back in place
And succumbing to the strength of the wind

I want to feel vexed
Knowing how I despise wind and its vigor
And despise messy hair even more
But my body feels nothing but peace
As I sit under the sun and within the breeze

A Mother's Love

By Kai Branch

Love is the pink flamingo moms lose to their babies.
Love sounds like her very first giggle.
Love tastes like cold coffee and lactation supplements.
Love smells like baby lotion and spit up.
Love looks like friends bringing dinner and doing dishes.
Love has made me fulfilled.

Love is as pure white as the first fall of snow.
Love sounds like her first "Mama."
Love tastes like baby food, to ensure the best ones.
Love smells like Dreft laundry detergent.
Love looks like her eyes going blue to brown.
Love puts me at peace.

Love looks like her blue "baba-booeey" she had to bring to daycare.
Love sounds like Ms. Rachel at 6:45 AM.
Love tastes like hiding veggies in the pasta sauce.
Love smells like vapor baths and cough syrup.
Love looks like the pigtails in her hair.
Love is my daughter, Adelaide.

Looking Lovingly

By Miley Chitwood

Sitting all alone in my bed
Going through my photos
Craving the happiness you once brought to me,
But all I see are distant memories
Of the person who once smiled at me,
Who's now far far away from me
I can't help but think,
Are you proud of me?
As I imagine you looking down on me

Playground

By Kenzi Coffey

Sitting on the swing looking out into the distance I started seeing my childhood
Everything started to look more bright as I was looking around
The tall long slide everyone was too scared to go down now it's all gone
The little airplane everyone used to ride looks so small now that I'm older
The long red slide that I used to get stuck in is no longer being used
The swings for the littles are barely swinging in the humid air
I look to my left and see the new playground and lost my colors
Every child over that the new playground is now making new memories
The colors that I lost are the colors the new kids and babies are just now seeing.

Going Down

By Amelia Courtright

Verse One:

Those eyes were the last thing seen before I fell
Down that dark hole
It felt like a decent to hell
I felt like I had been the mole

Chorus:

Down, down, down
She no longer held the crown
I felt like a clown
Now we are falling down, down, down

Verse Two:

She loved me
I thought I hated her
She left, and I had to heft the weight
Now everything's a blur

Chorus:

Down, down, down
She no longer held the crown
I felt like a clown
Now we are falling down, down, down

Plant

By Miranda Dailey

I am a succulent.
A plant with few needs.
One that doesn't require much help.
Just a plant who breathes.

A plant that needs sunlight,
as most plants do.
But I am an inside plant,
if only you knew.

A plant that doesn't like the outside.
It makes me feel sad.
The sun kind of hurts.
Even if it isn't that bad.

I still need the sun.
It helps me survive.
Even if I don't like it,
I absorb it and thrive.

Even if I am just a succulent.
Without the outdoors, I will befall.
I just need some care,
some love, and that's all

Life Is What It Is

By Christopher Grimes

Life, the way we live, and eventually die...

Trials and tribulations make me sigh.

Making me turn to cry, sometimes, I want to distract myself to fly.

Love for me was a euphoric type of depression.

The fallout, is far too magnified, not to just be mentioned.

Gaining experience in many aspects, and becoming wiser.

Yet losing my will to live, passive thoughts of nothingness...The boredom.

From this world ultimately from myself, an act of selfishness, is selfless to the one committing it, me.

What do I stand for? Is this who I am, can I improve, to live another day.

What can I say, I didn't ask, none of us asked to be born...

But we must do the best with what we have, I am not alone.

When people die, they ascend out, I know when I die, I will not be alone.

I am not alone, as a soul.

In my own body I lie.

Stairways

By Jaci Gammon

I see a stairway leading through the gallery of my life
Different moments— big or small— some more filled with strife

Heavenly, happily, heartily, home
Suddenly, maddening, morose, malarkey
that comes with the trifling, tiring tone
Of the midwife's subjection to a new life

Picnics in parks, and summer's swimming
Friend and family, whims and drama
Breakups that makeup undeniable sections
Of me and my frame's internal intersections

The Tree

By Waylon Moore

I see a tree,

The tree sees me.

I speak to the tree,

The tree speaks to me, its leaves rustling in the wind.

I cut the tree,

It isn't fair he can't cut me

Loving You

By Destiny Sexton

I didn't fall in love with you

I simply walked in next to you

Falling for you wasn't falling at all

It felt like freedom after being trapped for so long

The comfort I felt from that moment on

Loving you from that day on was my promise all along

Soldier

By Makyla Summers

“I wish I could remember every moment.”

Lies, this one I wish I could forget.

I struggle to find contentment

Knowing that I can't have you yet.

The world feels unfair, having taken you away.

It hurts me more than I can say.

I can not wait for the day of your return,

When we can give you the love that I hope you know you've earned.

I will get over it if it's what makes you merry,

But I can not lie, the career is scary.

I hate knowing any details of that place,

And I hate that it makes loving you feel like a race.

I long for the end of your leave,

When you come back home to me.

Sacrificial Lamb

By Jade Thornburg

Verse One:

Late at night before mass, before heading to the slaughter
A mantilla thrown on my head like a sack
I pray at my window
I plead for him for mercy

Chorus:

I promised to my mother I did not sin
But the blood on the bed sheets damned my soul
Just like it had damned my sister at the same age

Verse Two:

Bless the daughters of god
But when they are not good
They are to become lambs
They become the church's sacrifice

Verse Three:

Once girl, now woman
I feel my mother, my sister, her grandmother's rage
But I cannot shout, I must whisper instead
For I am the sacrificial lamb, I must be passive for my sins
I am his sacrificial lamb
We are to be the sweetest lambs
For when they slaughter us
We come back for them to slaughter again

Chorus:

I promised to my mother I did not sin
But the blood on the bed sheets damned my soul
Just like it had damned my sister at the same age

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The Dancing Whale

Kendall Collier

The whale stared down at me; its eyes saying take me home. I had been waiting to get that big dancing whale my entire life... that's what it felt like anyway. I could smell the scent of the familiar rubberband and see the vials waiting to be filled with my blood. No matter how many times I went, I still jumped when the needle pierced my skin— thinking of the whale to feel better. "You can have him once you're fully better," my grandma said. Now the whale is finally mine, dancing to his song in celebration of my convalescence.

Training Wheels

Layla Gallion

Learning new things can be tough. Like riding a bike or learning how to drive a car eventually. I haven't had a bad life and I still have a lot to learn. When things get hard or stressful it can make you want to quit and give up like when I first tried using a bike without training wheels I crashed into a parked car. That night I went home upset, but crying wasn't going to get me nowhere. The next couple days I kept riding the bike even if I fell and got hurt because I learned don't give up or you're never going to learn.

Coon Hunting with Bull

By Joshua Hiestand

One night me and my dad decided to go coon hunting. We had a pup named Bull who was hanging around our feet. It was his third time in the woods. We were just getting him used to being in the woods. Then out of nowhere he was gone, and my dad could not believe it. Then we heard a super loud bark, and then he located and treed. Me and my dad were super excited! We got to the tree, and he had not one, not two, but three coons up there in the tree.

Good Times Growing Up

By Albane Jusufi

My all time favorite family vacation is when I went to Florida and Macedonia. When we went to Florida we got our own airbnb with some other family members of mine. We got on a boat, and we traveled about 30 minutes to see the dolphins. We also went to this restaurant that was above the ocean. It was kind of scary, but also fun. All you could hear was the waves coming by and birds chirping. We also went to Macedonia afterwards, and it was amazing, besides the airplane ride there. Overall it was fun; I love going hiking there in the mountains and seeing nature. Both of my trips were with my parents, my brother, my two aunts and uncles, and my other cousins. When we went to Macedonia we also went on a mini vacation there which was to Albania. We went to the beach for five days. It was hot and humid, and I was out on the beach for about six hours everyday. On the last day, I could've cried all day due to how burnt I really was.

During Christmastime, I can feel all the joy families have to gather together; smelling the hot chocolate in the mornings makes it so much better. Seeing the snow and Christmas lights at night makes it better outside. In my family we love Christmas. It's the holiday where we all get the chance to get together due to all being far from each other. My favorite part of Christmas is that I get to see all my family members all at once. Usually we all go to my aunt's house in Lake in the Hills, IL which is about 30 minutes away from Chicago. Pretty long drive but totally worth it to see everyone together. The special part about it is getting together to open gifts and spending a couple days together before not being able to see our whole family together for a long time.

Some things my family does together is if we live close to some family members we will get together and celebrate any holidays that are coming up besides Christmas. When it's Christmas time my whole family gets together and celebrates. Since my parents own a restaurant we aren't able to go to church on Sundays since we work, and I do too. We get together with my aunt and uncle that live in Highland, IL, and we meet up in Fairview and go shopping together then have dinner afterwards. I don't always have pancakes every Saturday morning but sometimes I do.

Favorite Birthday

By Alesia Lawson

My favorite birthday would have to be when I was turning three. It was Hawaiian themed. It was a gathering in my backyard with a whole bunch of family and friends. We had a pool, a swing set, and a trampoline. So I was having the time of my life at three-years-old with friends and family swimming and playing on the swing set.

An Open Letter

By Nathan Lee

Dear Gabe,

You have been a great great friend all my life and we have made lots of fun memories together. I remember the times when we went ding dong ditching without the no trespassing sign so it was legal, and we had hit like four houses before that and we were on the last house of the block and it was our old bosses house and he said if we ding dong ditch him he would come out tackle us. I remember you running up and rigging the doorbell while I knocked and he almost instantly opened the door and tackled you and you instantly screamed because he opened the door so fast and tackled you. I remember the time when we had gone t-peeing and we were getting our buddies house and we completely covered his car in toilet paper then started stringing it all over the yard and house. I remember when we went up to Carlyle lake and spent the whole day driving around Carlyle then we finally found a good spot to swim. I remember the next day how bad the sunburn hurt from all the fun we had had outside. I will always remember the good times with you. You have made my life change in so many ways. I cannot imagine going through life without you in it. Thank you for being my best friend.

My Life

Sydni McHenry

When I was jealous , I thought I didn't have a boyfriend and everyone else did, and I thought I was ugly because everyone else had one, and I found the right one. His name is Bryson.

I have been with him since last year. This is about to be our one year. I am so proud of myself because I found the right guy, and plus I am about to graduate early, so me and him are getting our own place together.

We are getting an apartment in Sandoval, and we get it in October, so me and him will be getting our own home—call it our own place, and that's what we always wanted. So me and him have all the stuff for our apartment in my dad's house. Like we have all the cooking utensils and couches and chairs so we all have our stuff starting out to move into our apartment. We are so excited for this big change in our life .

But the bad part is that his job is in Nashville, Illinois, so he has to wake up early. When he was at his house with his mom he used to wake up around 4:30 to get up for work, but now he has to wake up around 3:00 to make it to work around 5:00 from Sandoval, so he is sad because he likes his sleep but now he can't sleep all the time, but he said to me that he will be ok because he will be sleeping next to me, and I can wake him up, he said!

The Great Move

Adam Michael

It was a normal day my freshman year. Me and my sister were getting home after school. We walked into the house, sat down. They gave us news that would change everything.

They told us that we lost the house. We would be leaving my childhood home, leaving everything in my childhood. We would be moving in with my grandma. We leave in December.

I didn't know what to think. My sister was crying. I needed time to think. I didn't know it at the time, but it would be the best thing that ever happened to me.

The First Kiss

Cheyenne Neff

I have been waiting for this moment for over a year. I thought I lost him forever. He kissed me. He leaned in, and I was unsure of what was happening. Everyone says romance is nothing like the books and movies, but this was different. Time stopped all around. It felt like fireworks were going off around us. My heart felt like it stopped and my stomach fluttered with happiness or nervousness. Whatever the reason, I loved the feeling. I waited for him for so long. His kiss made me realize I finally had him back, for good this time.

The Loch Ness Monster's Sister

Avelyn Sexton

“Keep on reeling, wait, tighten your drag first,” Eli yells, even though he is right next to me. “I think I caught the Loch Ness monster’s sister,” I say, trying to reel it in. My reel is clicking as more line gets pulled across the pond. This ginormous tail splashes in the water, creating ripples of tiny tsunamis going in every direction. I finally got it to shore, standing there holding my 3.14 pound bass with the biggest smile to be seen. Eli took my picture being so proud, even though 3.14 pounds was nothing compared to his.

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Manic Love

By Valerie Collier

One day late after school it was pouring down rain. You couldn't be outside more than a few minutes without your clothes getting soaked, and a slow falling fog. It was hard to see your hand in front of your own face. River and Russel were talking out of River's car, and Russel was glued to his phone, which was unusual for him. Especially when he was with his boyfriend! River was a little confused, but didn't seem to question it, for now. Once they got to River's house, River finally broke the question.

"Hey, Russel, why is your nose stuck in your phone all of a sudden?" River asked, his blue eyes filled with curiosity.

"Oh...I'm just texting a friend!" Russel said with a rose pink blush dusting his face.

"Why is he blushing if he is only texting a friend? That's not right it's not adding up" River thought **"Maybe I'm just overthinking all of this."**

River brushed it off as him just over thinking, little did he know that the next weeks would not be as peaceful as he wanted.

The night went by slowly, the night getting darker and the fog getting thicker and the smokey clouds rolling more making the rain turn from a heavy rain, to a straight downpour making it hard to even hear your own thoughts.

The weeks trudged on slowly, making only two weeks feel like an eternity, driving River insane. All he wanted to know was why his boyfriend was growing distant and being on his phone more and more. One night Russel fell asleep early leaving his phone unattended. River took this to his advantage and looked through it—if only he knew that what he was going to see was going to flip a switch in him.

River went straight to the messages and went to a contacts labeled “New Kid” because it was his most recent message. As he read through all of the messages over the weeks, his crystal blue eyes welling with tears and his caramel skin lined with goosebumps, his blood ran cold in his body, yet at the same time it made his blood boil with rage. Reading every “I love you”, “My boyfriend won’t figure out,” and “My boyfriend doesn’t matter as much as you do.” River found out the person his boyfriend was cheating on him with was Ollie Linx, the new kid. River looked up from his boyfriend's phone and was now looking through crimson red glasses.

River sent Ollie a text over Russel’s phone: “Can you meet me at the park tonight?”

Ollie responded right away: “Of course, when?”

“15 minutes,” River sent, with mania growing inside of him.

“Ok” Ollie finally texted back.

River slowly got up and dressed into his old worn black hoodie. It was ripped and had many stains and was bleached along the sleeves. He grabbed a dark mask. Then went to the kitchen and walked over to the dishes and grabbed a chef's knife. Then went back to his room and grabbed Russell’s phone still checking if he was asleep. He was, and River started his walk to the park. It was still raining, the fog settled a little bit making visibility slightly better, but not enough to tell people apart from a few feet away. River put the mask on when he saw somebody walking his way; it was of course Ollie Linx.

“Hey Russell!” Ollie said excitedly, “Why did you want to meet outside when it was so cold and rainy?” River panicked and just shrugged knowing his voice doesn't match Russel’s a single bit.

“Are you ok, why aren't you talking?” River took out Russel’s phone and texted: “My throat hurts, that's why I’m not talking.”

“Oh ok, that makes sense,” Ollie said, seeming like he knew the whole time.

“Can I have a hug though?” River texted wanting Ollie to get a small bit close.

Ollie of course came forward and hugged River thinking it was Russel. In a split second, River pulled out the chef's knife and drove it into Ollie's back. The sound of the knife entering Ollie's skin and piercing his lung gave River a rush of a feeling, almost sadistic, he liked this feeling. He yanked the knife out of Ollie's back, River's hand had thick, crimson, liquid flowing down it. He pushed Ollie against the wall, hearing Ollie trying to scream, but the blood filling up his lungs was preventing him from screaming. As River stabbed Ollie in the chest again, the blood splattered, covering what face he had revealed, laced these thick, crimson red, streaks across his face. He watched the life leave Ollie's baby blue eyes. As his eyes became a cloudy white, his pulse slowed and finally came to a stop. River let go of Ollie; he dropped to the ground his blood slowly pooling beneath him yet quickly getting washed away by the heavy rain. River sat there and couldn't help but laugh a little to himself, feeling the relief that came with finally knowing that the person you're person was cheating on you with was gone, yet River wasn't quite done yet.

River slowly turned away and headed home, the heavy rain cleaning his face from any residue of blood left. He continued wandering home letting what he did sink in. He felt no shame or guilt, not even the slightest bit of remorse for what he's done. He got home and quickly changed out of the clothes he was in since they were heavy from the rain and splattered with blood. He looked over at his supposed boyfriend still lying asleep; he couldn't help but feel his anger boil over again. River walked over and grabbed a pillow and put it to his boyfriend's face. When Russel woke up and realized what was happening he started trying to fight back, kicking, flailing his arms doing whatever he could to get a split second to get out and get a breath. Russel

kicked River hard enough to slip out and get a breath of air so he wouldn't suffocate. Russel looked frantic and terrified.

"What are you doing, you maniac!?" Russel screamed

"What am I doing? WHAT AM I DOING?! The real question is what are YOU doing Russel!!!" River screamed loudly, his blue eyes once again filling with tears of anger.

"I was sleeping and all of a sudden you tried killing me, do you have a problem?!"

"Yeah I have a gosh-darn problem with you Russel, you were cheating on me with the darn new kid Ollie Linx!!!"

Russel froze, not returning a single word, the room's air got thick as tension rose. He just looked at him and the news hit him like a bus.

"No, I'm not River!" Russel exclaimed.

"Yes you are Russel—don't even try to lie to me. I went through your phone when you were asleep!! I SAW THE TEXTS!!!" River shouted tears streaming down his face like a stream.

"Ok, so maybe I am! What are you going to do about it?!" Russel yelled back

"Oh you better believe I did something about it! I killed that inferior, impure, phony, mongrel!!!! I killed him, he's dead, bleeding out on the ground lifeless!!!" River screamed out with a sadistic smile on his face.

"YOU DID WHAT!?" Russel said his voice shaking his face showing disbelief.

"You heard me right, I killed that Mongrel!!!" River said, his voice getting this sadistic tone and his face showing an unsettling smile.

River turned around and went to his pants he had on before he changed and pulled the knife out, it still had Ollie's blood on it just now dried. River whipped back around and went straight to Russel.

“NO, NO, NO, NO, NO, NO, NO!” Russel said while backing up, shaking out of fear.

River pinned him to the wall with his hand against his throat before he could even move again.

“Don't even think about screaming for help or fighting back! Your mine, and mine forever, sadly since I did confess to you I did murder somebody I do need to leave no witnesses~”

River said in a sweet but sadistic undertone.

Russel started begging for his life but it was no use; River already decided he needed to leave. River quickly moved his arm from his throat and slowly slit Russel's, cutting his airway. River loved watching him struggle to breath and fight for his life. He also got a rush from seeing the crimson red fluid leak from his neck down to his shirt that was being stained from how much it was leaking onto it he couldn't help but laugh. He sounded manic. It was scaring Russel, knowing this was the end for him because he couldn't do anything else. River got bored of watching him struggle; it wasn't entertaining anymore. River took the chef's knife and stabbed his chest over and over again. The blood sprayed on River with each stab, and he stabbed Russel 36 times each stab with more frustration, he watched his eyes go cloudy and his body get cold—he was certainly dead at this point. River got up and changed into normal everyday clothes, packed a bag, and looked at himself in the mirror, seeing if he looked normal then left never coming back leaving the police baffled on what happened, not a sign of a fingerprint left behind and he was never caught and is lurking in the shadows.

The Ghost in the Park

By Kára Fletcher

The coarse winds sweep over the dried, dead grass. The trees sway with such a steady rhythm that you'd think they were all pulled at once by a rope. Many reports of a ghostly figure wandering the park have flooded in through recent years. Many suspect it to be an elaborate hoax orchestrated by various townspeople to scare anyone away from walking alone in the park. Given the amount of pranksters in our somewhat small town, it wouldn't surprise me at all.

Others believe it to be the wraith of Joanne Williamson, a woman murdered near the park's creek bed three years ago by a still unknown assailant. Many people have attempted to speak with, see up close or in some cases, somehow even "capture" the spirit through various means. Many who have gone after her have come back terrified out of their minds, covered in scratches and bruises, or with nothing to show at all. Many claim to have been attacked, but this is aside the fact they also admitted to tripping over various things. But I have come so very close to figuring out the true reason for these spectral reports. I plan to show the entire town my findings tomorrow evening, since they're all waiting, watching, wondering about what answers I may return with...

These were the last written words of Seamus Macmire, found on his notebook, abandoned near Area Park's creek bed. There is no evidence to his known location at this time, and the investigation continues. Anyone who has any clues as to his whereabouts, please contact the police either through an anonymous call or at the station directly.

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Radio-Active Monkey

By Jeremiah Rinehart

On a bright sunny day there is a monkey in a field of flowers. The smell of morning dew and sweet flowers brought in a honey bee in need of nectar. The monkey picks up a flower to smell it. And the bee ends up accidentally stinging the monkey and dies. Then the monkey couldn't see and then accidentally ran into a beehive. His name was The Great Loui. The bees sting him until he swings into the waterfall.

His colony finds him unconscious behind the waterfall and they bring him home. He wakes up days later, and he's grown five feet. He's now seven feet tall. Loui's fur turns purple due to the bee stings. As it turns out the bees are radioactive. And that makes the other monkeys afraid and scared of him which they also hate since they are all the same. So he sets out on a journey to find a place where he can make a new colony and live a life where he isn't scaring others around him.

On the way to finding a new place to stay Louie gets a little frightened when he hears voices. He thinks he is hallucinating again, but it's actually humans. He understands them and starts mocking them. The conmen hear leaves crunching near and grab their guns. The conmen see that Loui is purple and they say, "What the Hell is that?" Loui ends up going up to the conmen and saying, "My name is Loui and I'm searching for a new home." The conmen freak out because Loui can speak their language and end up shooting him. The conmen are, as usual, one tall and skinny man and the other is a short and tubby man. They use a tranquilizer dart which makes the monkey go to sleep and also makes the monkey learn to surf. Due to the

chemicals in the tranquilizer. The monkey wakes up from a nightmare thinking his colony has all died because he wasn't there to help.

The monkey is getting researched in a lab. The lab belongs to someone that researches radioactive animals all around the world. The conmen spent a lot of money for them to be near the ocean. They end up putting on a mind reader, and they find out the monkey understands the humans and that he knows how to surf. The conmen promise Loui freedom once he helps them get money. Loui accepts the offer because he kinda doesn't have a choice.

The conmen are excited because the money they spent on the research lab by the ocean they've got their money back only in a week of work from the monkey. They spent some of the money on themselves and the rest on the monkey's outfits, boards and private lessons. The monkey loves his instructor; he enjoys surfing and learning new things. And then the worst comes when the monkey knows that if he leaves he'd be better off because he can't deal with the pain the conmen are putting him through to stay in shape and to obey their orders.

For years he gets beaten by the conmen and he becomes very angry. Loui gets really "sick" and he becomes useless to the conmen. They end up hitting Loui with another tranq dart and he turns unstoppable. He ends up killing everyone that hurt him and just used him because he was different.

LIAR

By Ellie Smith

The thunder is rolling. The tears are flooding down. How could it have come to this? Two years ago we were celebrating our wedding anniversary in Hawaii. Now she hides his things in OUR bathroom. In the house we built together. This cannot be real. She has been lying to me longer than the rings have been on. She's silently sleeping, while I stare into the dark, gray clouds. I have been so oblivious, this entire marriage has been a lie. We're lying in bed, she's lying.

Three weeks ago I was driving home from work. Just another normal day in life. I was going home to my loving wife, whom I loved so dearly. We had been trying and failing for a pregnancy. Now that I think about it I can't help but wonder if that was on purpose too. How would she continue her infidelity with a baby bump? As I passed the stop light on the way outside of town, I saw her with him. Driving the opposite way, laughing and acting as if it was completely normal. My heart shattered; the life that we built together was crumbling down. Although my face stayed blank, my heart was left in the intersection.

Suddenly I couldn't think of anything other than revenge. Revenge for the years she spent lying to me, lying to my family. She was and is a liar. I should've opened my eyes, saw what she was doing to me. She tore me from my friends, wanted to move away from everyone I loved. I would make her pay for everything she did to me. Almost as soon as that thought came out, my eyes opened. It had been a dream, seeing her on the intersection, all of it was a dream. My mind felt fuzzy; it was four o'clock on whatever day it had been. It felt like I had been asleep for days, weeks even. With no clue what had happened, I closed my eyes yet again, without realizing that I would never open them again.

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Two weeks later, I opened my eyes (for real this time) in a hospital bed. Heavily confused, I called for a doctor. I was informed that I was in a car accident, at the intersection I thought I had seen her at. I had been in a coma for three weeks. The doctors had no idea if I would wake up, and when I did, I had no idea who I was. I only knew the things that happened in my coma. None of it was real. I have not been married, nor was I cheated on. I was a seventeen year old boy who almost died, but the dreams seemed worse than the reality.

The Hole

By Janiah Tipsword

I woke up and took off my bright green blanket. The sun beamed through my window and reflected off my tv. I remember being excited for the first day of summer break. Little 10-year-old me springed out of bed and ran outside. There was so much to do and so much to explore. We had the tractor, side-by-side, 4-wheelers, pool, woods, and anything a little boy like me could want. The weather this day was great—a nice sunny day. Once I was outside I felt so free; since school was over I had so much time on my hands. I remember being outside in the fresh air running freely through the yard.

My grandparents who raised me since I was two didn't care what I was up to. As long as my chores were done, I could do whatever I wanted and just be back in time for supper. I always came in covered in dirt. My brother was about two years younger than me. He was VERY annoying, but we got along well most of the summer. We shared rooms until just a few weeks ago; I'm so glad to have my own room. We never got along on school days. He was a typical little brother, an annoying little brat.

On this specific day we were both excited for the first day off from school. We grabbed a donut out of the kitchen for breakfast and ran outside. We rode around on 4-wheelers until lunchtime then went in for lunch. Then we asked if we could play in the pool. My grandma said yes but to be careful and not to be too rough. We put our swimming trunks on and went out to the pool. We jumped in and swam around the whole pool. We fought in the pool, pushed each other in, and played a lot of games in the water. Once we got out of the pool we dried off and went our separate ways.

I went to the woods to walk around. I looped around the pond and through the field. I went to the 4-wheeler path and knocked down some of the thorns on the side of the trail. Then I found a cicada shell that I stuck to my shirt from a small tree near the path. I kept walking until I reached a small creek. The creek was low, and you could see some broken red bricks in the bottom of it. To the left was a small bank enough for two people to stand on. To the right were two trees that had fallen over the creek. Straight ahead was the steep 4-wheeler path though the creek. I jumped across the creek and used the roots from the trees to make it up the path.

I continued down the path and found a bloody deer antler. The fresh blood on it spooked me since no one was ever in our woods. I stood there silently looking around for what could have done this or where the deer's body was. As I was standing there rapidly looking around at every sound and movement, my eyes picked up on a stump about ten feet in front of me. I quietly and carefully walked up to the small stump then looked around again to make sure nothing was around me. I crouched down around the stump and saw fur caught between the bark trying to get unstuck in the breeze. Just ahead of the stump was streaks of blood on the path. The dust from the trail had been stirred up and covered some of the blood. There were also marks on the trail from the deer being dragged somewhere.

I followed the blood down the path until the blood led into the thorns and trees. One moment I was walking, and the next moment it felt like a dream where you wake up from falling. All I saw were sticks in front of my face. Then I felt my knees hit the cold dirt and small sticks fell on my head and my lap. I looked up, and I had only fallen about ten feet even though it felt like I was falling forever. I looked around. I was in a hole that looked to have been dug out by claws. I started to stand up and brush all the sticks and dirt off of me. Once I stood up, I was eye level with a tunnel, just big enough for me to crawl through.

It was dark in the tunnel, but my eyes made out another pair of glowing eyes coming towards me. It ran out of the tunnel and was in the hole with me. We stared at each other for a minute before I jumped using the tunnel to boost me out of the hole. The creature had human features but was on all fours. It was very skinny yet muscular and hairy. It made heavy breathing sounds and sounded like a vicious animal. It had dog-like ears and long fang teeth. It was a skinwalker. After making it out of the hole I ran toward the house but not fast enough.

Now it's about nine years later, and I'm retelling how I became a skinwalker. While I'm normal and myself most of the time, sometimes it takes over. Like I'm in my body but sometimes I'm a skinwalker. I live out in the woods with other skinwalkers including my girlfriend I fell in love with out here. My girlfriend was born a skinwalker, not brought in the way I was. I do wonder where my family thinks I am, but this lifestyle is kinda fun and it's impossible to go back.

Shattered Memories

By Kairus Waggoner

*The memory of the **crunch** is still fresh, but like most things, I'd learned to question what I remember—*

“Do you know who killed you?” the voice asks with a calm tone.

The woman looks around for a moment thinking the question over. She reaches out and covers the hand on the ouija board, gently moving it over to the “No.” The group of teens looks disappointed for a moment.

“That's not what you said last time.”

—After all, most of my memories were shattered like my skull back in that parking lot.

Beware The Mysterious House

By Nikita A. Wiegmann

Two kids walked by an aged, stripped, wooden street fixture, the pole of which had a missing poster plastered upon it. Both the friends stopped for a moment, as they had been out trick-or-treating all night. Their names were Emma and Ducky; they had chosen to take a pause at the worn-down bus stop next to the light, to ask each other one basic question. Starting it up first, the feminine friend bursted out abruptly, just as Ducky was about to make a sound, “ Gee! We sure have gotten ourselves a hefty bag of loot this year!” The two of them peered into their own bags, beholding the treasures they had scrounged over the several hours they were outside. Ducky gazed inside his bag, and he discovered he collected significantly more than she did.

In a lighthearted, joking tone he responded, “Yeah, and you would’ve gotten more if you had actually decided to put much effort into your costume.”

Naturally, as this slightly touched her pride, “Aho! Don’t be a sour apple about it. Besides! Look at yourself, you’re wearing a tablecloth.” They both took a moment to examine their own attire. He wore a humble red-and-white-plaid tablecloth with crudely cut out holes fitted for his bill and eyes, meanwhile Emma donned a shabby hat with a fake mustache, tied together with a messily pressed suit. Ducky gave her a moment of silence, she was right afterall... both paused, lost in their own thoughts, though Emma was asking herself to where they should strike next.

“Hey,” Emma started whispering in his ear, “why don’t we go to that house – the one over there?” She was pointing at the gloomy, grimacing vintage house that had seemed to be staring at them from the top of the hill. Now realizing its existence, Ducky grew anxious, nervously he replied, “Are you... sure? Positive?” Emma had stopped in her tracks, but he

slowly understood Emma was serious as he was inching closer. “Fine. But after this, we’re going home!”

They staggered up the hill for what seemed like ages to them as it was very steep, not easily traversed for two children. Approaching the mysterious house, the house grew larger and larger. Ducky swore he saw the shapes of eyes from the top of the house, in the windows. It was a very colorful, however, a very vintage property; everything surrounding it, including the manor itself seemed as if it were decades old. The house was a pale, worn yellow with sage green tracing its edges, adorned with a matching green door and railing. The steps leading up to it were shaped unusually, presumably in time for the season. The trees nearby didn’t make the setting any more appealing, decaying and withering because of the weather.

Once they finally leveled themselves with this spine-chilling house, Emma quickly knocked on the door. Ducky was shaking and trembling in fear. With a decent response time, a lady popped her head out of the door with a costume of her own. She stood upright, opening the door the whole way, staring at the kids, awaiting for a response. Finally, though unwilling for one in the party, they had delivered, “Trick or treat!” The woman seemed pleased by this, she responded calmly, “Oh, cute little children! Our candy and snacks are waiting inside for kids like you.”

They both nervously stepped in, following the lady. On further inspection she was in a witch-goat costume. The woman was wearing a purple cape and bowtie, along with a purple and black velvet witch's hat. The rest of her was covered in a gray, puffy ram mascot suit, the beige horns curling upward a little before it touched the hat upon her medium-sized head. In the background inside, they heard a dying radio, it sounded like a broken record, waiting to propose

its final song. The wallpaper was much more vibrant with antique, puffed furniture aiding its prosperity. This combination provided comfort with familiarity.

Once settled in, chowing on some cookies, Emma looked around while the witch-goat woman invited some others into the room to introduce themselves. She directed her hand to a clown, informing the kids of his name—he was Billy. Then another person in a robotic suit greeted them with a friendly smile. To finish it all off, she showed them the final person, “And here’s the Wolf.”

Out of all things so far that was uncanny to Ducky, it was him. The ‘Wolf’ was in a shiny, silver-blue wolf suit, littered with small holes from age with slightly floppy ears. But that’s not what made him uncomfortable – not even thinking about the painted red apron adorned on top of the mascot suit – it was his face. It looked empty, made of porcelain. The mask had a huge smile, and two, unproportionate and mis-shapen eye holes, it seemed morbid to him. He held a knife in his hand; however with brief inspection with the scent that flowed into the room, he was currently cooking a late-night supper. However, both started to speak, “Well, it’s nice to meet you all,” Emma and Ducky both spoke in harmony, though Emma was too taken aback from her surroundings to finish, “but we really have to go home... It's almost midnight.”

“Oh? So soon? We would really hate to see you go so soon...” the witch-goat responded politely, frowning in dismay as she just got finished with the introductions.

Snap!

The Wolf was holding a camera and a brand new photograph, shaking the picture in his hand. “Sorry,” he said, “We just like to keep photos as records for our guests. Take a look around.” He pointed over to the wall on the one side of the room Ducky hadn’t looked at quite

yet; it was littered with pictures of variable ages and sizes. One caught his eye though... it was the same face as the kid on the missing poster.

Ducky was alarmed, "Sorry, but we really have to go—," he was disrupted by him, "I have a great idea. How about you two stay for the night... Besides, it's just so you can get rested because of the time."

Emma blurted out, "Are you sure?" Next to her, Ducky was cold with sweat, biting at his fingers. The Wolf responded, "Of course, it's only *one* night."

"O-okay..."

After thirty long minutes, the food was finally done. And both the wolf and goat allowed the kids to enjoy some of it too.

"Wow! This is great! What is this, anyways?" asked Ducky.

The wolf man merely swayed his index finger at him, "It's a family recipe, cannot tell." The platter for each of them had a nicely cut slab of meat covered in barbecue sauce, along its side were a dinner roll and a neat pile of green beans. Something seemed obviously wrong though, a strange aroma was trying to file into the room... the coppery smell of blood. Both shrugged it off, figuring it was just butchered off a pig as the wolf mentioned earlier with some small talk.

After eating, the witch-goat prepared temporary sleeping quarters as it was now past midnight. It was a singular bed; however, she left two separate covers on the mattress, one per kid. It was a little high, taller than both were used to, with a walnut carved bed frame displaying a beautiful array of wooden flowers in its base. Emma and Ducky settled in and fell asleep with relative ease, snuggling their blankets.

In the middle of the night, roughly around three in the morning, while the clock was ticking, Ducky was still embedding himself in his sleep with cozy warmth. Emma got up to get a cold glass of water, making sure to nearly close the door behind herself, careful as to not make it creak.

Almost half an hour passed by since she went for a glass, “Ducky,” Emma called out quietly, slightly waking up Ducky, the air was still and thin with complete and utter silence, nothing but the ticking from the clock. Then he heard it again, this time finally awake and alert. He scrambled upward, leaving the room to investigate and find out why Emma was calling his name. He was stumbling and tripping as he was still tired, and it was pitch black everywhere, having to follow the wall with his hand. As he got into the living room, he saw in the light several flies, and a rotten smell found itself in. He felt something damp under his foot, so he went to look for a lantern.

Finding a lamp, he turned it on and saw Billy sleeping on the love-seat, his face covered with a pillow. Ducky sneaked past quickly so as not to disturb him, and completely missed quiet footsteps behind him because of the clock. He threaded into the kitchen and the grotesque stench grew stronger. He looked over to see if it was because of the dishes, but only found clean plates and silverware. He did see the wolf's apron from earlier, but there were flies on it too.

In the next hallway, he noticed there were 6 doors, all listed differently, though unable to be read due to age. Ducky looked around, and checked every single door. All of the rooms were only cluttered with a few paintings and pictures hanging.

Behind him, some footsteps grew louder and louder, alongside the voice of Emma calling for him. He finally looked over his shoulder, feeling defeated, when he saw her. He walked in,

but as he crept across the room, it suddenly closed behind him and went black. The smell was the strongest here. Has something died here?

“Emma! Come on, this isn’t funny anymore!” He mustered what remnant he had of courage. Trembling, feeling across the wrinkled, old and rough wall paper he looked for the light switch by the door. He found it, flipping the lights to turn on, and Ducky pivoted in place, looking at what was in front of him. It was them. “Oh... oh my god...” He gasped audibly, now tears filling his eyes. Surrounding him in the room was everyone he recognized from the photos earlier that night, alongside his friend. They were all dead, their bodies and faces ripped apart, pieces of their carcasses missing and engulfed in piles of insects.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, so he darted a little in front of him before turning around; it was him. The wolf appeared. His costume stained red, teeth and patches of false fur missing from his attire. In the mask, where his eyes had once shown were hollow. “What are you doing here?”

“What have you done!” Ducky cried out, shaking because of the horrors he had witnessed.

“Naughty little birdy... walking around the house after dark.”

Ducky trembled harder and quivered, gulping hard as he watched him take out the knife from earlier when they ate. Ducky finally realized what happened just hours, if that, before. The wolf killed them.

“I’m afraid... that I will have to punish you... for being such a bad bird,” he breathed heavily, “Don’t worry, you won’t feel a thing.”

“Get... Get away from me!” Ducky wailed, trying to run away. The wolf lunged towards him, almost catching him by the clothes. Ducky flailed his arm at him and accidentally made the

mask fall, it shattered once it hit the ground. The wolf brought his arm up, reaching for where once his mask was, dropping the knife into the wooden floor. The man's real face was exposed. His face was rotten, teeth, skin, even pieces of bone missing, forever keeping a grin. He stared up at Ducky angrily, he then pursued what he already began.

The wolf man grabbed Ducky by the throat and ripped the jagged blade out from the floor, Ducky screamed deafeningly followed with manic, booming laughter from the man. "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE."

Police Report:

Emma [REDACTED] Ducky [REDACTED] have been added onto the missing children's list, now adding up to nine. Emma and Ducky were last seen on October 31st, 1990, they have all fallen victim to a Halloween mystery that has been recorded for over a century. Nobody knows of the whereabouts of these missing children, nor of their statuses. We are currently in the works of investigating the house at the top of the hill on [REDACTED] Lane to contact the couple who lives there as that was the last founded location of the two.

The Heat Kills

By Emma Wood

It was a blistering hot summer day, when all of hell broke loose. Kassie is my best friend of all time, but Jack, her boyfriend, went missing about 3 weeks ago. Everyone thought he just up and left, but I think the town is trying to cover up something, and I am going to document the whole thing. First, I went to the police station to see if I could get my hands on anything they had for Jack's case. I was finally able to sneak back to where they keep the files, and to my surprise they had a box labeled *Missing kids in Dellgrove*. It was file after file of kids who had gone missing over the past 15 years, but what was weird is in all of those files the same couple of words popped up: *left shoe found* and *hair found, caught on a tree branch*.

I took pictures of what I could and then got out of there, before anyone saw me. I then headed over to Kassie's house to tell her what I found, expecting her to be happy that I am trying to look for Jack and the missing kids. What I got was just the opposite; she was angry at me for sneaking into the police station. She told me to just leave it alone, and if there was a problem that we should be worried about, the police would get involved. Kassie told me to go home and get some rest and to drop the whole investigation, but that's what I was not going to do.

I told Kassie that I would drop the case and go home, but instead I went into the woods to see if the policemen had missed something when they went out to look for Jack, and by golly they missed a lot. There were clothes scattered everywhere like someone was living in these woods. In the trees were wigs of all types drying as if they had just been washed. I heard rustling in the bushes just to my left, and as fast as my feet would let me, I skedaddled right out of there.

I ran home as fast as I could and told my dad all about what I found in the woods, and in the police station. He managed to calm me down just in time for my mom to get home and before she walked through the door my dad told me not to mention any of this to her, so as not to worry her. He woke me up that night wanting me to show him where I found all of the clothes and wigs. He told me I had ten minutes to get dressed and to meet him out in the car. I put on some green cargo pants and a black long sleeve shirt and headed outside to where my dad was waiting.

I took him to where I found all of the creepy things but everything was gone when we got there. No wigs. No clothes. Just trees upon trees. He told me to split up and we would meet back in five minutes, so I went left and he went right. I looked up some trees, through some bushes, but I found nothing. I was on my way back to where my dad and I would meet, and as I was passing this big oak tree I saw something white sticking out of a piece of bark, it was a note.

Quit looking for the missing kids, if you want your dad back take out your phone and delete the pictures you took from the police station. Then and only then will

your dad be waiting in the car for you. But if you choose to run and hide and keep the pictures you will have signed your dad's death certificate.

I silently took out my phone being careful not to make a sound and deleted the pictures I took. Then in complete silence I walked back to the car hoping my dad would be waiting in the driver's seat. To my relief, he was sitting in the driver's seat, but he looked absolutely terrified. I ran up to him, hopped in the car and hugged him, asking over and over again if he was okay and if he needed anything. He simply shook his head and started driving, we drove in silence. When we got home he put the car in park, went inside, and went straight to bed.

I got no sleep wondering if I was being watched and hoping my dad would be fine in the morning. I fell asleep around two-forty-five in the morning and woke up at seven to my mom screaming my dad's name. I ran into their room and saw my mom shaking my dad begging him to stay alive. He died that night; the autopsy report said he died of a heart stroke. I haven't told anyone about what my dad and I did the night he died.

It's been a couple weeks since my dad passed, and I am still on the hunt to find out what happened to the teens that went missing and why my dad died even after I deleted those pictures. Before I deleted the pictures I downloaded them to my computer, but I didn't tell anyone that so how would they know? Did I kill my father?

I went to the only person who could possibly calm me down, Kassie. When I got there I had to let myself in. Normally her mom Sandy would let me in, but when I opened the door it was eerily quiet. I cautiously open Sandy's bedroom door only to find her sleeping. Peaceful and beautiful she laid there taking a nap. I went to stand next to her bedside to ask if Kassie was home, but as I gently shook her, I realized she was dead. I ran out of that bedroom so fast, and headed straight to Kassie's room to make sure she was okay. She was fine. Simply sitting on her bed oblivious that her mom is dead in the other bedroom.

Two deaths since I started looking for the lost kids. What is this town hiding? Kassie and her dad decided to get Sandy cremated, but before they got her cremated, they wanted to know how she died. Heat stroke again. Two people died of heat stroke in two weeks, and no one seems to bat an eye at that. I left Sandy's funeral early, when an amazing idea popped into my head. I went back to their house to see if I could find any evidence that would prove that it wasn't a heat stroke.

I quietly walked into their bedroom hoping no one would come in. I walked over to her bedside table, and what I never noticed was the lock she had on the drawer. I pried open the drawer. What was in there shook me to my core. Sandy was looking for the missing kids too. The drawer was filled to the brim with newspaper clippings on the missing kids over the past 15 years. I took all I could, stuffing it into the bag I was carrying, and then closed the drawer

making it look like I never even touched it. I left that house shaking, hoping no one saw me take it.

I was walking back to my house looking over my shoulder periodically, but then someone came up behind me, and put a mask over my eyes. I was blindfolded. I kicked and screamed but he was ungodly strong, so it was no use. I was loaded into a truck and taken to a house in the middle of the woods. I was shoved inside the old rickety house, tripping, tripping as I am guided inside. The strong man unbinds my hands and quickly leaves the room. I cautiously take the blind fold off. When I saw what was on the walls I nearly passed out. The missing kids were on the walls just like you would mount a deer. Their eyes are glued open and looking directly at me. I quickly turn my head looking for a way out but then I spot him: there's Jack looking at me with lifeless eyes.

There are about 15 kids on the walls, all of them without their hair. I looked to see if the man who brought me here was anywhere to be seen, and it looked like he went into a different room. I quietly walked over to the door and tried the door knob but it was bolted shut with no key insight, so that escape was out of the question. I looked around the house to see if there were any other escapes, I walked into a different room scanning the area for the man but he wasn't in there.

I walked into the room and it was dimmed, it had blue lights around the top and bottom of the walls. I felt along the wall for a light switch and I found one about two feet from the door. When I switched on the light there they were,

the wigs that I saw in the woods, only they looked different now. They are bloodied. Then it clicked, they were scalped! I ran out of the room only to be blocked by what felt like a brick wall.

There was the man that took me, but now I got a good look and it's the sheriff. Kassie's dad. Billy explained everything to me. How he threatened everyone in town to not say a word about his killings, and if they did their kid was next. He also explained that it is a family tradition and that Kassie is next in line to take his place in the killing rituals. The ritual takes place every year when the leaves start to fall. It symbolizes strength and is a sacrifice to the god of death Thanatos. I let him talk a little bit more before I asked the question I was dying to get an answer for. How did he get the autopsy to show a heat stroke? He explained that he has doctors on the inside giving him containers full of antidepressants and antipsychotics which caused the heat strokes.

I have been here for three years now. I asked him why he hasn't killed me yet. He says it's because he doesn't want Kassie to be mad at him for killing me. He wants it to be up to her whether I live or die. For the first year I tried to escape but to no avail, so all I have is this notebook and a pencil. Wish me luck, because next year is when Billy steps down and Kassie takes over.

Drama

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One-Act Play

By Connor Devor

Cast of Characters:

James- dad

Daine- son

Henry- grandpa

tv announcer

Scene 1

[Living room]

Enter James and Daine on stage.

James (the dad): Here take these meds son. *Hands it to him.*

Daine (the son)- I still don't understand why I need to take them. *[He says while he's swallowing them.]*

James- It's because you have tons of pain in your legs where you can't walk and the pills are to numb the pain.

Daine: Oh right, okay, ima go outside.

James: Alright, son.

Daine leaves the stage.

James (to the audience): Little does he know there's no pain in his legs; he's never going to be a better NFL athlete than me.

Grandpa Henry comes on stage.

Goes over to the pills that are on the table that he's never seen before.

Sees the label and looks it up.

Henry: Okay why does it say it's for dogs?

Looks at the labeling again and sees the side effects for humans.

Henry: Legs can go numbed if taken by human.

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Daine enters the stage.

Daine: What's that grandpa?

Henry: Well, I don't know how to tell you this, but the meds that you've been taking has been making your legs go numb.

Daine: Yeah I know it's for it to help with the pain in my legs, where I don't have to feel it.

Henry: No child, these meds are for dogs; they're not meant to help you.

Daine: Oh. So you're telling me all this time I could've done anything.

Henry: I mean, you would still have to build your body, but yeah.

Henry: We have to ask him why he's doing this.

Daine: I agree, this is absurd.

James enters the room suddenly.

Henry: Your son has to ask you something

James: Okay?

Daine: Why did you give me dog medicine that caused me not to be able to walk?

James looks at Henry, then Daine, Henry then Daine again

James: Well, I gave you those so you can never become better than me.

Daine: But how do you think that'll happen?

James: Because it's been like that for centuries and I needed to stop it.

Daine: Wow, that is so.. petty.

James: I know, I know, but it needed to be done. I'm sorry.

Daine: No, I can't do this, I'm leaving with grandpa Henry.

James doesn't say anything as Henry and Daine leave.

Scene 2

[Somewhere in California a couple years later]

Henry: Christian you ready to see the draft on tv.

Christian: Man, it feels weird having a whole new name.

Henry: You'll get used to it—don't worry.

Both of them sit down to watch the NFL draft.

TV Announcer: 1st round pick, for the panthers, Christian Mccraferly!

Christian: Let's go!!!!

Henry: Good job—I'm proud of you.

Christian: Thanks, Pops.

Night Visit

By Aleecia Shumaker

Cast of Characters

Iblis (Arakai's husband)
Arakai (Iblis's husband)
Niavee (Arakai's mother)
Atheed (Arakai's father)
Mysta (Arakai's little brother-13)
Bliss (Arakai's little sister-12)

Scene 1

[INT. Arakai was in his study, reading a book with a hand that held it, the other running a finger across his lip while in a thought of concentration his eyes scanned over the words. His other set of arms rested on the desk. The room was warm and comforting, filled with books showing his intelligence. A knock can be heard on the door.]

Enter Iblis.

Iblis: *(Softly)* Hey Ari, do you have a minute?

Arakai: *(Snaps out of thought to look over at Iblis)* I could spare you a minute, dear *(laughs softly)*.

Iblis: *(Walks over to Arakai placing his hand on his shoulder)* This is a bit out of the blue, but I've been thinking, it's been a while since you've seen your family, right Ari?

Arakai: Oh, it certainly has been, feels like years since I've seen them. *(Places a hand over his right side of his face.)*

Iblis: Your mother would be happy to see you, Ari, maybe you should. Not to mention your little brother and sister would be happy to see you.

Arakai: I suppose you are..correct.

Iblis: Perhaps I could come with you?

Arakai: *(Looks at Iblis with shock)* Oh, dear, are you sure? You know how my father and some of my siblings feel about you.

Iblis: I know, but I feel like you would like it if I did, especially since I can put you at ease. *(Iblis grabs Arakai's hand.)*

Arakai: (Sighs with a nod) Alright, we'll go together.

[The two leave Arakai's study making their way to the front door. Arakai, who felt anxious about seeing his family, turned his head to look into Iblis's eyes to seek some comfort from him. Iblis took notice and gave him a warm-hearted smile, as the two leave the house hand in hand.]

[They walk seemingly in a forest that is rather foggy and dark with small floating purple lights everywhere, scattered about. While the two trudge forward, the crunching of twigs and leaves between them as they approach the cave Arakai's family dwells within with spiders crawling on a nearby stone. Soon enough they stand there at the entrance.]

[A small laugh can be heard echoing. It is feminine, with soft taps that grow closer to the entryway. There is a faint glow of 8 yellow orbs before Arakai's mother emerges from the darkness of the cave.]

Enter Niavee.

Niavee: What a surprise! I'm pleased to see you both. *(Hugs Arakai and Iblis.)*

Arakai: It's nice to see you mom; I've missed you over the years.

Niavee: I'm glad that Iblis was able to convince you to come home, especially after all this time. Even after the wedding everyone has missed you. Your brothers and sisters have been very busy so most of them are gone doing their own...things, but Mysta and Bliss are here and they have been missing their big brother.

Arakai: (laughing softly with a nervous tone) So they have missed me.

Niavee: Indeed they have. They also have been wanting to see Iblis as well.

Iblis: We are glad that they have missed us as well. Not to mention Arakai has needed a break from his work.

Arakai: I guess you could say that, hun.

Niavee: Either way you're welcomed here whenever, even if my husband doesn't agree with your choices. Come on in.

[They enter the cave while Arakai and Iblis carefully follow Arakai's mother through the dimly lit cave with the floating purple lights, spiderwebs being strung up almost everywhere with spiders scurrying amongst the rocks. Some laughter mixed with squeals can be heard the closer they get. They soon reach a well-lit part of the cave that looks so bright with a white light. There stands Arakai's father, Atheed, with his youngest children, Mysta and Bliss.]

Niavee: Athens, dear! Look who has arrived! Our son and husband, Iblis.

Atheed: *(turns to Niavee)* So it is, the demon...and our beloved angel. *(Look at Iblis and Arakai)*
It's nice to see you two together. I'm surprised to see Iblis hasn't hurt you yet.

Iblis: *(Confused)* Excuse me?...

Arakai: *(Sternly)* Dad.

Niavee: *(sighs)* Athens, we've talked about this. *(Walks towards Atheed with a whisper)* You can't say things like that. We have to make him feel welcomed, not hated. Get your act together.

Atheed: *(Irritated whisper)* Fine, but for our son.

Niavee: *(Apologetically)* I'm sorry about that darlings. Atheed is just a little..overwhelmed.

Iblis: It's okay suegra, I understand. Ari is the same way when he is stressed out, but give him a little tea, a book, and a blanket then he will be all good. I usually like to sit and read with him in those moments cause I know it soothes him.

Niavee: Well, Athens and I are glad you are taking rather good care of our son! He is lucky to have you in his life. I knew you were a perfect match when he brought you home centuries ago.

Iblis: *(Cheerfully)* I'm honored dear suegra, I don't know what I would do without him.

[Bliss walks up to Iblis, smiling up at the tall demon while she tugged on the sleeve of the shirt with Mysta standing behind her.]

Bliss: Would you like to play a game with me and Mysta?

Iblis: *(Smiles warmly)* I would love to!

Bliss: Yay! Let's go! *(Drags Mysta with her)*

Mysta: Hey! Be careful Bliss!

Iblis: *(Laughs awkwardly)* I'll leave you guys alone to talk; I'll keep these two occupied in the meantime.

[Iblis catches up with Bliss and Mysta to play a game of hide and seek in a different part of the cave so Niavee, Atheed, and Arakai have their privacy.]

[Atheed stands with his arms crossed, his expression stern as Arakai shifts uncomfortably under his father's scrutiny. Niavee sits nearby, her expression tense but quiet as she lets Atheed speak.]

Atheed: Arakai, I raised you better than this, Arakai. You know demons aren't meant to be trusted. They only bring chaos. How could you bring one into this family? Into my home?

Arakai: *(quietly, then firming up)* Iblis isn't like that, father. He's not what you think he is. He's saved me-more times than I can count. He loves me.

Atheed:*(Snapping)* Demons don't love. They manipulate. They take. I've spent my entire life protecting you from creatures like him, and now you're asking me to welcome one as my son-in-law?

Niavee: *(gently)* Atheed, please-

Atheed:*(cutting her off, his voice rising)* No, Niavee! This isn't a conversation. It's a mistake that needs correcting.

[Arakai clenches his fist, his mismatched eyes glinting with suppressed emotions. He takes a step forward, his voice trembling but steady.]

Arakai: I'm not a child anymore, father. I know who I married. Iblis has been nothing but good to me; he's the reason I'm still alive. If you can't see that, then maybe you don't know me as well as you think you do.

[The air grows tense as father and son lock eyes, neither backing down. Before Atheed can respond, the sound of Bliss and Mysta's laughter echoes faintly from another room. Iblis's warm chuckle follows, and Atheed's scowl deepens.]

Atheed:*(Lowering his voice but still harsh)* You think I don't hear it? That laugh, those words? He's working his way into all of us. You'll regret this Arakai. Mark my words.

[Atheed storms out, leaving Arakai visibly shaken. Niavee places a comforting hand on his shoulder, but Arakai brushes it off, retreating to a quiet corner of the cave, sitting on a large flat stone. The dim purple lights cast long shadows, emphasizing his hunched posture. He cradles his face in his hands, his breath shallow as he fights back tears. His mismatched eyes glisten with frustration and sorrow. Behind him, soft footsteps echo as Niavee approaches.]

Niavee: *(Softly)* Arakai?

[Arakai doesn't respond immediately, his shoulders trembling slightly. Niavee hesitates, then sits beside him.]

Arakai: *(barely above a whisper)* Why can't he just trust me? Why can't he see I'm happy for once in my life?

Niavee: (*sighing*) You know how your father is. He's...stubborn. But he loves you, Arakai. He's just afraid. Demons have hurt our family in the past.

Arakai: (*Snapping, his voice rising*) I'm not a child anymore, mother! I know what I'm doing. Iblis isn't like those demons. He's kind. He's...he's saved me in ways I can't even begin to explain.

[Niavee reaches out, placing a gentle hand on Arakai's arm. Her touch steadies him, though he still seethes with pent-up emotion.]

Niavee: Them give your father time to see what you see. He may not not understand now, but he will. You've always had a way of surprising him, you know.

[Arakai exhales shakily, his hands dropping to his lap. Niavee leans forward, her voice low and reassuring.]

Niavee: And for what it's worth, I can see how much Iblis cares for you. He's good to you, Arakai. Don't let your father's fear take that away.

[Arakai looks at her, his mismatched eyes filled with gratitude. He nods silently. Niavee smiles softly before standing and retreating, leaving him alone again. A moment later, Iblis appears at the entrance to the alcove, his expression concerned. He hesitates before stepping closer.]

Iblis: (*Gently*) Arakai?

[Arakai stiffens at first but relaxes when he sees who it is. He wipes at his eyes quickly, trying to compose himself.]

Arakai: You heard it didn't you?

Iblis: (*nodding, his voice soft*) I did. Bliss and Mysta are still playing, but...I could tell something was wrong.

[Iblis steps closer, kneeling beside Arakai. He places a hand on Arakai's knee, his touch warm and grounding.]

Iblis: Your father's anger—it's not about you. It's about me. About what I am. I'll do whatever it takes to prove to him that I'm not a threat.

Arakai: (*Shaking his head*) It shouldn't have to be this hard. You shouldn't have to prove anything. You've already done so much for me.

Iblis: (*Smiling faintly*) If it means keeping you in my life, I'd do it a thousand times over.

[Arakai looks at him, his expression softening as tears brimming in his eyes again. Iblis reaches up, cupping Arakai's face gently.]

Iblis: You're not alone in this, Arakai. Whatever it takes, we'll get through it together I promise.

[Arakai leans into Iblis's touch, his tension melting away as he closes his eyes. For a moment, they sit in silence, the quiet reassurance between them speaking louder than words. After a while, Arakai opens his eyes, determination shining through the lingering sadness.]

Arakai: *(Quietly)* I'll talk to him again. But...thank you, Iblis. For being here.

Iblis: *(Smiling warmly)* Always.

[They share a brief but meaningful embrace before Iblis pulls away, his expression growing more serious.]

Iblis: I think I should talk to him too. He needs to hear it from me.

Arakai: *(Hesitant)* Are you sure? He might not listen.

Iblis: *(Smirking slightly)* Maybe. But I'm not one to give up easily.

[Arakai smiles faintly, nodding. The two rising together, their bond stronger despite the tension in the air. As Iblis steps away to find Atheed, Arakai watches him go, a flicker of hope lighting his features.]

[Later that evening, Atheed steps outside the cave to brood in the cool air. As he sits, Iblis approaches quietly, his usually warm expression replaced with something serious.]

Iblis: *(gently)* Atheed.

Atheed: *(gruffly)* What do you want, demon? Come to gloat?

Iblis: I came to talk. About Arakai. About us.

[Atheed glances at Iblis but says nothing, his silence a begrudging invitation to continue.]

Iblis: I know you don't trust me. I don't blame you. Demons haven't exactly given you a reason to. But I'm not here to hurt your family. I'm here because I love your son. And I'll do whatever to protect him—and everyone he cares about, including you.

Atheed: *(scoffing)* Big words. But words are cheap.

[Iblis hesitates, then unbuttons a couple buttons to his vest revealing a faint scar running down his chest, a contrast against his dark skin.]

Iblis: This? I got it saving Arakai from a demon who didn't think twice about taking his life. I put myself in harm's way because he matters to me. If you need proof of my loyalty, you only have to look at him. He's alive because I am.

[Atheed looks at the scar, his expression softening ever so slightly. He exhales sharply, running a hand through his hair.]

Atheed: *(Grumbling)* You've got guts, I'll give you that. Still doesn't mean I trust you.

Iblis: *(nodding)* I don't expect you to. But I'll earn it, if you'll let me.

[Atheed studies Iblis for a long moment, then grudgingly nods. The faintest hint of respect glimmers in his eye.]

Atheed: For Arakai's sake, I'll give you a chance. Don't make me regret it.

Iblis: *(smiling faintly)* You won't.

[They sit in silence for a moment, the tension between them easing ever so slightly. Inside the cave, Arakai watches from a distance, a small smile of relief tugging at his lips.]

[The family gathers together in the main room of the cave. Bliss and Mysta are sitting on the floor, simple game with small carved stones. Niavee is nearby, preparing tea, while Atheed and Arakai stand awkwardly on opposite sides of the room. Iblis quietly enters, his presence unspoken but felt. The tension is lighter now, though not completely gone.]

Niavee: *(cheerfully)* It's been too long since the whole family was together like this. Let's share tea before you leave.

[She places a tray on the table, motioning for everyone to sit. Reluctantly, Atheed joins, sitting stiffly across from Iblis. Arakai hesitates, but Iblis touches his shoulder gently, encouraging him to sit beside him. The tea is served in silence, the clinking of cups the only sound.]

Niavee: You know, Atheed, it's not often we get to see our son. I'd hate for him to leave on a sour note.

[Atheed grunts, avoiding her pointed look. After a long pause, he finally speaks, his voice rough but sincere.]

Atheed: Arakai...I don't approve of everything in your life. You know that. But...

[He glances at Iblis, his expression hard to read.]

Atheed: ...If he makes you happy, then maybe that's what matters most

[Arakai's eyes widened slightly, surprised by the admission. Iblis nods restfully, staying silent to give the moment to Arakai and his father.]

Arakai: (softly) He does. More than I can say

[Atheed exhales deeply, rubbing the back of his neck. He still looks uncomfortable, but there's a noticeable crack in his rigid demeanor.]

Atheed: Well...I suppose I'll have to get used to it. But don't think I won't be keeping an eye on you, demon?

Iblis: (smiling faintly) I wouldn't expect anything less

[The tension lightens, and Niavee smiles warmly. She pours more tea, encouraging conversation to shift to lighter topics. Bliss tugs on Arakai's sleeve.]

Bliss: When will you come back, Arakai? You didn't stay long enough to play.

Arakai: (chuckling softly) I'll come back soon, Bliss. I promise.

[Mysta scoffs, crossing his arms.]

Mysta: You better. Bliss hasn't stopped talking about you since the last time you visited

[The group shares a small laugh, and for the first time, the atmosphere feels warm and familial. As the sun begins to set, Arakai and Iblis prepare to leave. Niavee pulls Arakai into a tight hug.]

Niavee: Take care of yourself, my son. And remember, you'll always have a home here.

Arakai: (nodding) Thank you, mother. For everything.

[Atheed stands a few feet away, his arms crossed. As Arakai turns to him, Atheed hesitates before speaking.]

Atheed: (Gruffly) Safe travels. And...be careful out there.

Arakai: (smiling faintly) I will, father.

[Atheed glances at Iblis, nodding stiffly before turning away. Iblis responds with a respectful bow of his head, understanding the gesture for what it is.]

[As Arakai and Iblis leave the cave and walk through the forest, the mood between them is quiet but content. Arakai takes a deep breath, feeling lighter than he has in a long time.]

Arakai: *(breaking the silence)* That went better than I expected.

Iblis: *(smirking)* You mean your father didn't try to chase me out with a pitchfork? Yes, I'd say that progress.

[Arakai laughs softly, shaking his head. He leans into Iblis as they walk, their hands brushing but not quite holding.]

Arakai: Thank you. For being patient. For...everything.

Iblis: *(smiling warmly)* Always. You're worth it, Arakai. Every bit of it.

[They walk on in the comfortable silence, the forest alive with the sounds of the evening. The sun dips below the horizon, painting the sky in shades of gold and purple. As they near their home, Arakai glances at Iblis, his expression soft.]

Arakai: No matter what happens, I'm glad it's you. You're my family now.

Iblis: *(Wrapping an arm around him)* and your mine.

[They step inside their home, the warmth of their bond filling the space as they close the door behind them, ready to face whatever challenges come their way together.]

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Nikita Wiegmann	



Title: Knightless
Artist: Violet Vitek

By Nikita Wiegmann

By Nikita Wiegmann



Soulsborne Games Ranked

By Jordan Kuhns

Introduction

The *Soulsborne* series has had a massive impact on gaming as a whole; it has defined what it means to be a difficult game and has shaped many new releases in the genre. The impact it has left and the standard it has set for games is immense, and should not be forgotten. To be a Soulslike game you have to have what many people call the “Dark Souls Formula,” which is that the game must be challenging, and it must be fair. All of the games on this list revolve around this idea of facing a challenge and beating it through your willpower. A question to ask yourself when thinking about trying out the *Soulsborne* series is, how hard do you want the game to be? This is a key question in figuring out which game to play. The following list entails the background information on each game along with my opinions of them.



1. Elden Ring

Starting off with the strongest entry on the list, *Elden Ring* is the most recent release in the line up of the *Soulsborne* games, and it is by far the most popular at a peak of 952,523 concurrent players only a week into its release in February of 2022. *Elden Ring* is definitely one of the most challenging titles in this series, and has been loved by the community ever since it was announced. It offers many different ways to play the game that are completely up to the



player due to it being an open world, with many places to explore such as many diverse biomes and dungeons, the more dangerous the

adventure, the better the rewards. *Elden Ring* breathed life back into the series as *Dark Souls 3* was the true end to the *Souls* game series and left many fans wanting another game to continue on. *Elden Ring* takes place in a completely different world than the rest of the *Souls* games, it takes place in The Lands Between. This world is vast compared to the rest of the games on this list. Surprisingly, the CEO of FromSoftware, Hidetaka Miyazaki, has stated in interviews that, While being magnificent, *Elden Ring* is not his final vision on an open world Soulslike game. The game is available to be played on [Playstation](#), [Xbox](#), and [Steam](#).

2. Dark Souls 3

Dark Souls 3 was the finale to the *Souls* series and was by far their best title in the original trilogy. It had arguably the best bosses, areas, and overall player experience across all the *Souls* games. I fully recommend this game to at least try due to it telling a wonderful story, and it being my favorite game in the series. It is the game that got me into the series and hooked

me on the games. *Dark* up the climactic showing that *Souls* series fading into a



idea of these *Souls 3* wrapped trilogy with boss fights, the world of the was slowly world of darkness

and ash. The First Flame, which is what the games focus on, had been fading for centuries but through the Lords Of Cinder it was pushed forward and kept alive. In the first game, The Flame is lively and explosive in energy, but in this installment, the Flame is visibly very weak and slowly fading, symbolizing the mighty Age of Fire is slowly dying out and crumbling away, leaving only ashes. The game is a symbol in itself for life coming to an end. The bosses are not in their primes and are far weaker than they had been compared to others. The game has a very depressing atmosphere in many of the areas, you feel as though the world is sapped of its energy, fading into the Age of Dark. It is available to play on [Playstation](#), [Xbox](#), and [Steam](#).

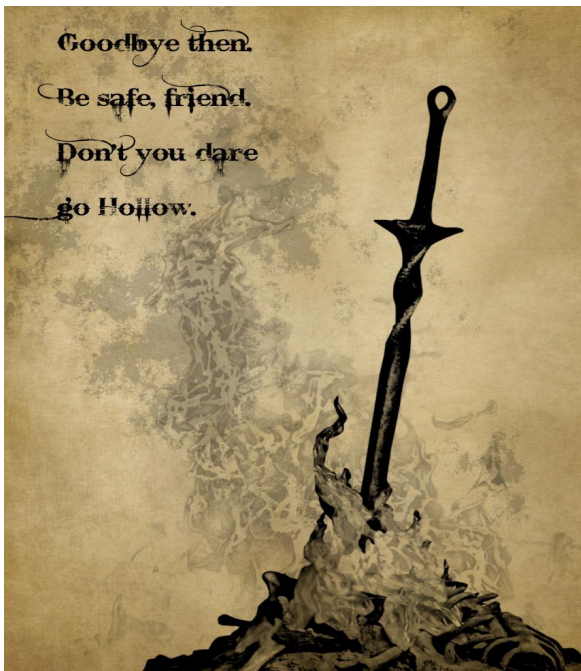
3. Bloodborne

Bloodborne, along with the previously mentioned *Elden Ring*, takes place in a completely different world than all the other games, it takes place in the Victorian city of Yharnam with an occasional eldritch horror as an enemy. *Bloodborne* also varies significantly in playstyle compared to the other games, it has numerous different changes in place to allow an aggressive and up close playstyle, rewarding the player with bonuses and health back when damaged if they play more on offense rather than defense. It is a favorite among fans, but sadly Sony, the owners of the rights to the game, will not port the game to PC or any other console. The game is a Playstation exclusive which severely limits the amount of players that the game will receive. It also has not received any updates to better software, and the game without any modding or using the new PS5 Pro, the game will not run any higher than 30 frames per second, which makes the game feel sluggish and less responsive compared to the other titles on this list. Despite these glaring issues, the game is definitely worth the time and money to play, with the different playstyle, the game rewards you for playing the game as intended, meaning that the player can play without much worry if their way of playing is incorrect. Sadly, the game is only able to be played on [Playstation](#).



4. Dark Souls 1

Dark Souls 1 is the first game in the original trilogy of *Dark Souls*. It is one of the more challenging games due to its age and content, it began its popularity in 2013, introducing the gaming world to the difficult-yet-fun space that is the *Dark Souls* universe. I fully recommend this game due to it being a great introductory piece to the series and giving background context to the following 2 games. It begins with the story of the beginning of the Age of Fire, with the



first Lord of Cinder, Gwyn the Lord of Sunlight, linking The First Flame to protect the world. The player is referred to as the Chosen Undead, which means that they are destined for greatness, undying and unwavering. The game revolves around the meaning of being Hollow. Being a Hollow means that you are without your humanity, you gave up on life itself and have become a husk of your former self. It symbolizes

defeat, and the player never will truly be Hollow if they never give up and continue their journey no matter the challenge, which makes me greatly recommend this game to a person wanting to get into the genre of games, as this core fundamental of the series kept me playing and inspired.

This game is able to be played on [Steam](#), [Xbox](#), [Playstation](#), and [Nintendo Switch](#).

5. Sekiro

Sekiro is the game in this series that changes the original formula in a way that vastly differentiates the game compared to the other entries on this list. It is one of the more difficult games due to it almost completely relying on the player's own skill level to beat, as instead of the established basics of combat that are in the other games, *Sekiro* has the player do a mix of blocking and parrying instead of rolling and dodging like the other games. This change in the

game has led to a massive amount of love from the community, as many people thought that the system of rolling and dodging attacks was slow and unfun. With the newer system however,



the player feels engaged and the fights feel climactic. I recommend this game to people that have at least played one of the other *Soulsborne* games as it does take a lot of skill to beat. You can play the game on [Steam](#), [Xbox](#), and [Playstation](#).

6. Demon's Souls

Demon's Souls was the very first Soulslike game to be made by FromSoftware. It was the first incarnation of the “Dark Souls Formula” and led a few years later to the famous release of *Dark Souls 1*. *Demon's Souls* plays very similar to the



first *Dark Souls*, however I cannot rank this game any higher than others on this list due to it being dated for its time and feeling sluggish. The remaster of the game fixed some of these issues, but the game itself does not have the same flow and feeling that the others do on this list. It also is a Playstation Exclusive, limiting it even further. The game is on [Playstation](#).

7. Dark Souls 2

Dark Souls 2 is last on this list due to it being the game that sadly was not released with enough care by the development team. The game has features that make the game have more artificial difficulty, like dodging frames being tied to a stat rather than just being a part of the



game, and the hitboxes on most of the enemies in the game being way larger than they should be and very misleading. This game should be only considered whenever a person is wanting to play all the *Souls* games, In my opinion, it is not worth playing compared to the other games in the series. It is available on [Steam](#), [Xbox](#), and [Playstation](#).