Story Studio

GUILD OF YOUNG WRITERS



SHORT STORIES

POETRY

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

VOLUME # 12

SPRING 2024

WELCOME TO SPRING!

Story Studio Writing Society is located on the traditional territories of the W̱SÁNEĆ and Lkwungen-speaking peoples. We respectfully acknowledge and thank the Lkwungen People, also known as the Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations communities, for allowing us to live, work, learn, play and create on their lands.

Through the work we do on the territory, we are accountable to the following communities: Esquimalt, Songhees, SȾÁUTW̱ (Tsawout), W̱JOŁEŁP (Tsartlip), BOḰEĆEN (Pauquachin), MÁLEXEŁ (Malahat), W̱SÍḴEM (Tseycum), T'Sou-ke Nation, Scia'new Nation and Nuu-chah-nulth: Pacheedaht Nations.

We acknowledge that the historical relationship to the land and territories of these peoples continues to this day.

As an education based organization, we recognize that we have the responsibility to work towards truth and reconciliation, and to remain open to suggestions, consultations, and partnerships, especially with local Indigenous communities and organizations, on how our organization can continue to work towards reconciliation.

We hope that Story Studio's programing and publications create a safe, welcoming and engaging environment for all people, including Indigenous peoples.

We acknowledge the support of the Victoria Foundation, the City of Victoria Strategic Plan Granting Program. and our generous donors.

VICTORIA FOUNDATION

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GUILD OF
YOUNG WRITERS

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Editor's Note

Happy Spring! This year is already flying by. It's hard to believe that we are back from Spring Break and looking ahead to the end of the school year!

The Guild of Young Writers has been working hard behind the scenes to create this Zine and I'm constantly impressed by their skill and creativity.

2024 started off well with a fantastic, inspirational, in-person talk with author Jeannette Bedard. We were lucky to have the time and space to speak with her. Author K.A. Wiggins also joined us on Zoom and shared some intel about her writing submission record-keeping system, and it was quite impressive!

The collaboration between The Guild and the Victoria Conservatory of Music has been going well and I have been loving seeing the transition from the small seed of an idea to a very entertaining script! Can't wait to hear the final product.

We also look forward to our Summer Writing Studio happening over four weeks this July. I am excited to be a part of the creation of another wonderful Anthology from these talented writers!

MSirna

Marja Sirna
PROGRAM COORDINATOR



Get to know the Authors

WOULD YOU RATHER HAVE A ONE-MINUTE CONVERSATION WITH YOUR PAST SELF OR YOUR FUTURE SELF?

I would rather talk with my future self to see if I have accomplished any of my goals and see how the world is like in the future, plus if I am unhappy with an outcome I can know what I need to do to change it. I would also comfort my future self and let them know that my mistakes are not here to burden. Although in retrospect I am not sure that I would be able to fit that all in one minute...

-Samantha

I definitely would rather talk with my past self rather than my future. My future would still be unknown, and I wouldn't want to spoil myself anything. I do think i'll just spend that one minute cradling my past self telling them

"That it'll be alright. Things can change very quickly, life will get better. Just trust in yourself"

-Rubienne

I would love my past self to have a conversation with my future self, without me knowing specifically what was said. Often we worry too much about the future and staying true to who we are, so it would be reassuring to know that my younger and older selves had an opportunity to connect. Whatever happens, it's probably better to take a chance on the future than worry about or control it, and to accept the past rather than regret it.

-Zlata

I'd rather have a conversation with my past self because I would be able to tell them that it would all be fine, even though hard things happen. I wouldn't want to talk with my future self because I think some things are meant to be surprises.

-Abby

I'd rather speak with my past self, to tell her some of the things she has to look forward to if she just keeps going. I don't want to know my future; I'd rather let it come as it will. But I think past me could use a reminder to dream about what is possible.

-Kira

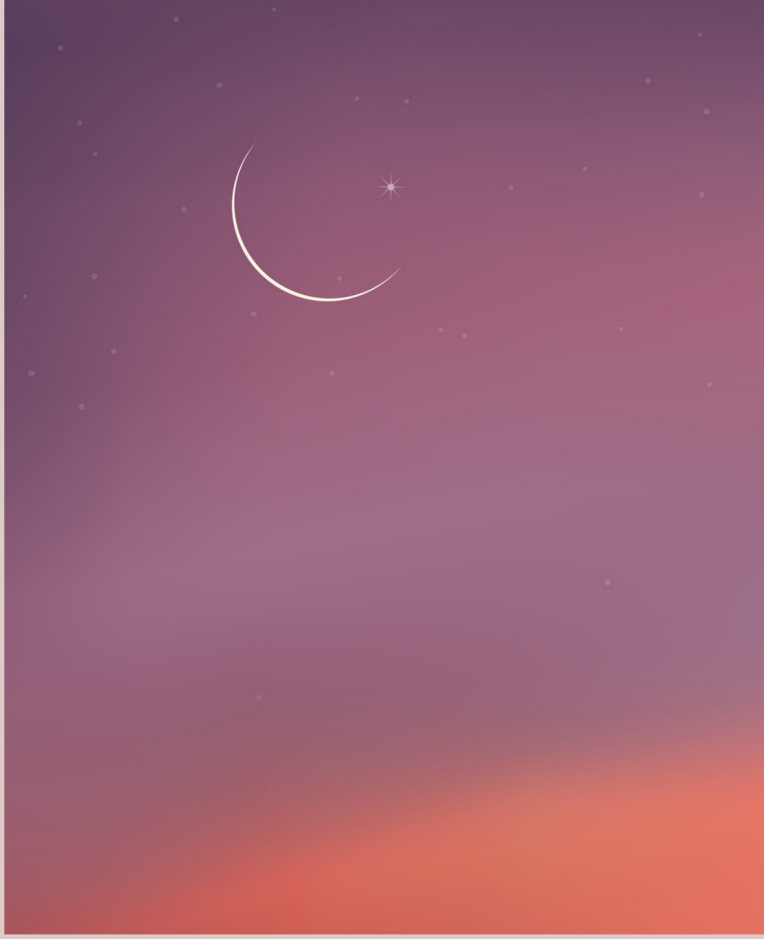
Either way, you would be able to change the course of everything in your life. If I had to choose, I would speak with my future self. The past is the past, but if I could see the future I would know whether I'm really making the right decisions.

-Raine



NEW GODS

KIRA HAWTHORNE



And that night, watched over by the serene moon and twinkling stars, we swore to be better than our forefathers, every person and god who had come before us. We swore to each other that we would not let the world fall into disrepair, we would not give up on all the beautiful things that make life worth living. Our mind's eye was filled with pictures of grisly battlefields, begging hands, empty hearts and homes filled with people who still lived, but refused to care about anything beyond themselves. We took an iron-wrought knife to our palms and clasped each other's hands, hearts full of righteous fury. We would change the world, we said. We'll show everyone a better way, a better path to take. But we knew there is only one way to bring down the gods of greed, discord and filth.

You make new gods. And you teach them what it means to be human.

We met in secret, night after night, in a cave by a lake, far enough from the town that we wouldn't be disturbed. By day, we found pieces of humanity—*the gift of flowers from a new lover, tears shed when a father dies, an old cloak made with linen and love*—and by night, we wove those pieces together into something divine. Every fragment of humanity, we wanted to capture. Everything broken and beautiful, everything lonely and loved. Each one of us gave pieces of ourselves to the six new gods: sweat, blood, tears. Our stories went into them, too, and our hearts. We wanted to show the gods what it meant to love, to laugh, to lose. Most of all, we wanted them to know the goodness the world has in it. There is what is holy in the tiniest moments; the gods of before had forgotten that.

Just before dawn each day, we left and stole back to our homes, letting our paths diverge while the sun kept watch. No one could know what we were building by the lake's waters, or else they would destroy our work. We knew instinctively that those in power were not to be trusted, but we didn't know how those lower-down would react. Would they jump at the chance of a better world? Or would they seize the opportunity to climb up in society and turn us in, destroying the new gods not yet fully formed?

Weeks passed, and our gods began taking shape. We began to whisper their names to their unfinished bodies, marking each one as unique. *Alora* for the young maiden, destined to be a bringer of light and new growth; *Safir* for the man whose domain would be understanding, platonic relationships and trust. The gods took on unique forms, varied in gender and shape and colour. But despite their outward differences, their cores were all the same. *Love*, we said, placing trinkets of our own inside their chest. *Give*, we asked, turning their palms upwards and their arms outstretched. *Take what divinity there is in humankind, and embody that for all to see. Show the world how beautiful life can be if only we try.*

But like all things, our secrecy could not last forever. It happened one day without anyone's noticing: a maid for one of the rich merchants saw us exit the cave in the early hours of morning. We had stayed later than we meant to, trying to finish the gods' forms before the new moon when we would bring them to life in full. She saw us while she was emptying a chamber pot, and grew suspicious at once. While we scattered to go about our days as usual, she crept into the cave and discovered the bodies of our gods. Even half-finished, their divinity was unmistakable. She immediately ran back into town, and told everyone who would listen about what she found.

And then they found us, not because the maid identified us, but because we were the only ones to hold back when the mob entered the cave. We could only watch as they destroyed our work, our hope for a better future. They found us, and they named us, and they put us on trial for heresy.

It took several weeks for the powerful to put together a council for our trials. During that intervening time, they kept us isolated in cells and basements across the town, so we couldn't communicate with each other. I spent those weeks praying to our dead gods in silence. The guards watching me tried to make me speak; they beat me and denied me food. I'd never been much for religion until the night our work began, but in those moments, I imagined myself a priest and held my silence.

When the time for our trial came, I was weak and hungry. I was shuffled into the courtroom in chains with the rest of us. Casting a look around, I saw my companions were as weak as I was, as exhausted. This was heartening: though we had never discussed what to do should we be found out, I saw they were as dedicated to our new gods as I was.

The judge was an old man from a city to the west. He was dressed entirely in black, against which his pale skin nearly glowed. He looked down at us from the dais, lip curled in a sneer. The guards behind us shoved us down onto cold stone benches. None of us were strong enough to put up much resistance, but still, we did not say a word.

All of the townspeople filed in behind us, jeering and cursing. Even our parents, our siblings joined in. They knew all too well that if they didn't publicly distance themselves from us, they would be punished with us.

So we all bowed our heads, letting their harsh voices pass over us. The judge banged his gavel twice, and the room quieted immediately.

"We are here today to decide the fates of these twelve heretics who attempted to create new gods," he proclaimed in a nasal tone. At this, the room erupted in shouts again. He banged the gavel again, and the noise subsided.

"We found them and their half-formed monstrosities in a cave ten minute's walk from here. A parlour maid, Miss Allie Howels, saw them leaving at the cave just after dawn three weeks and two days ago. While she did not know what they were doing, she took initiative and investigated their hideout." The judge paused, nose wrinkling in distaste. "What she found was a series of abominations—six in total—that are an affront to our values as a modern society. These heathens before you were trying to *make* gods of their own."

At this, whispers overtook the courtroom, and the guards behind us shoved our heads down, until our foreheads knocked against the wooden panels separating us from the front of the room. While none of us spoke a word, we exchanged glances with each other, each more frantic than the last. It was clear the judge would grant no mercy towards us. The punishment for heresy was death by public beheading.

"Miss Howels informed the townspeople immediately, as all righteous people would do. Almost everyone in this good town joined her in destroying the idols in that cave. Everyone, except for these thirteen in front of you today. This alone is not enough to convict someone of a crime. However, when asked to decry the false gods while detained, they said nothing. This is what they are on trial for today; this is what they must be punished for if they don't renounce their works." From his seat upon the stage, the judge gazed down on us, meeting each of our eyes in turn. His judgement-filled gaze burned into us, and there was not one of us who did not tremble.

"Who among you will renounce your "gods"?" he demanded. "Who among you will return to the path of the good and true? If you recant, you will have a handful of months in prison. If you do not, you will be beheaded in the town square immediately after we adjourn here."

The room went silent. None of us spoke. I saw a few of my fellows—my friends—bow their heads as if in prayer.

But to whom are they praying, if not the gods of old?

The judge stood, all disgust gone from his expression. "I will ask again: who among you will recant? Who among you will swear fealty to the true gods?"

At that, I raised my head and got to my feet, trembling. All eyes in the room turned to me; everyone held their breath waiting for me to speak.

"I will swear fealty to the true gods," I said softly, my voice barely making it to the judge. My companions turned to glare at me; some cursed me loudly, only for the guards to push their heads down once more. The townspeople behind us snickered quietly at the spectacle, enjoying our humiliation.

"Very good," the old justice replied, sounding satisfied. "Come to the front, then, and vow to follow the gods until the end of your days."

As I made my way up to the front, those I had worked with night after night shoved me and tripped me, hating my cowardice. But I kept my head low and did not respond, not even when one of them sent me sprawling to the floor. Again, the townspeople laughed, and again my companions cursed me, and still the judge looked down on me as if as a god from above.

I stumbled my way to the front, then fell to my knees—not out of reverence, but because I was too weak to stand. The weeks of being denied food had worn on me; I could not stay upright. A guard followed me all the while, holding the end of the chain around my neck in his hands.

"I swear..." I began, voice soft and trembling.

"Speak up," the judge ordered. "So everyone can hear."

I took a shallow breath, finding my voice.

"I swear fealty to the true gods," I said, voice loud enough to reach the back of the hall. "I swear fealty to the gods Alora, Safir and Emeric, gods of new growth, understanding and strength."

Whispers overtook the room again, the unfamiliar names confusing those who watched me. The justice seemed frozen in surprise, and even the guard behind me let my chains go slack. But my companions, who just moments ago had hated me, looked up at me with new light in their eyes.

"I pledge myself to Senet, the goddess of earth and stone, to Demos, god of the seas and skies, and to Elora, goddess of fire. To these six gods, the true gods, who we brought into the world, I swear myself to, and I vow to follow until the end of my days."

Like a spell breaking, the judge came back to himself with a start and banged his gavel, trying to regain control of the room. The townspeople were screaming for me to be killed, but my companions were quiet. I met each of their eyes as the guard behind me pushed me down to the floor. They smiled sadly at me, for they knew I had sealed all our fates.

My guard grabbed a muzzle and forced it onto my face so I could no longer speak. He pulled roughly at my chains; the judge directed him to bring me to the town square. I was dragged onto the small wooden stage in the centre of the space; there was not room for all of us at once, but I was to be first.

I could have struggled, perhaps. I could have cried out, fought back. But I knew it was futile, so I did the only thing I hoped could matter: I prayed. I prayed to our dead gods, their form taken away before we could give them true life. I prayed to the pieces of humanity we had stitched into them, to the blood and tears and sweat we shed while crafting them. Most of all, I prayed to the divinity in humankind to save us. To save us all.

It seemed we were expected to not recant, because an executioner soon stepped up to the stage. My head was forced down onto a wooden block; the man with the scythe took position behind me. I could feel the eyes of the town on me, everyone from the youngest children to the mothers and their parents. They were all quiet in the face of my death.

My companions, too, were quiet. They watched me with clear eyes, even as they were made to kneel in the mud. Looking back at them, I hoped it was worth it. That our all-too-human gods were worth their lives. They were worth mine, at least.

The judge stood beside me, opposite the executioner. He did not smile at the crowd before us, just declaring our fate in a frosty tone.

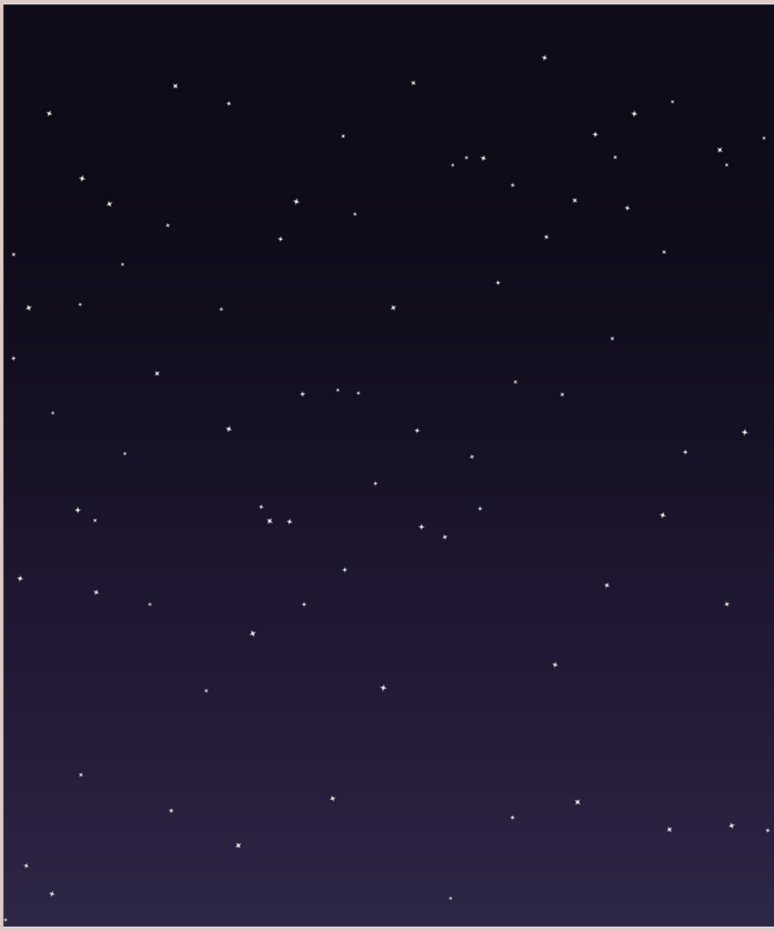
"The crime for heresy is public beheading. These thirteen heretics have not recanted, and so they will die as heretics, every last one."

I prayed fervently in my last moments, hoping that perhaps some god would see fit to rescue me. But all that came with the blow of the blade was a lilting melody on the wind.

"Six new gods made of human divine,
Brought to life by the hopes had for them.
Six new gods without form or shrine,
Sustained by belief alone."

I closed my eyes to block out the rest of the world, taking solace in that song.

"We accept your pledge, oh one who created us," a harmonious voice whispered to me "Now go forth as our vessel, and show the world that we were not destroyed with our forms. Go forth, and show that we live."





Curtain Call

BY RAINE



"Why are you here?"

The grass I stood on was as soft as carpet. The skies filled with hues of blue, orange and pink. Lush flowering trees and wildflowers surrounded me, and in front, sat the one who's been sitting backstage since the dawn of the universe. The one who asked me the question

Single-handedly, they control all the lights and sound, how much the curtains reveal, and of course, they're one who guards against those climbing onto the stage, interfering with their tapestry.

Our guardian angel, the one I've dedicated my life to.

"I've traveled thousands of years into the future, ventured across inhospitable worlds, fought back against death and destruction. I've given up everything that could've stopped me." I responded, thinking back on a life I wish I didn't have to live through.

Our universe is at the guardian's fingertips. The only thing I'm asking for is the key.

"You want to go back, don't you? Return to your once peaceful routine"

The sky is shining in hues of bright blue. I need to keep it that way.

"I want to continue forward" I answered.

Behind their throne was a shining, translucent wall. If you squinted, you could pick out the world behind it; all its planets and stars, its creatures, its technology and innovations It's people, their art, their families.

"You want, to see what comes after?"

The guardian lifted their hand and twisted it in the air. The sky turned yellow, then orange, then immediately transformed into the dark night sky. The foliage disappeared from around me and was replaced with an endless desert expanse

This can't be happening. I need to fix this.

"And how could I be certain there isn't something, or someone, you're running away from here?" the being asked.

I shrugged.

"Wouldn't you already know? You're only asking this question to see if I'll lie to you. Truth is, I chose to forge my own path, every step of the way."

The guardian squinted at me.

"Are you sure you don't have anything to fear. Nothing that eats away at you in the night. Nothing you hope never finds it's way to you."

The guardian disappeared into the darkness.

I can get through this.

"I no longer fear things in the world I come from. All I fear is you" I stated.

"If you fear me, then why do you face me"

"Because I've always been told not to. I've always been told that no one dares cross your path, unless they desire your wrath"

The guardian gestured their hand behind them, reappearing in the dim light.

"So you're the one they fear. Only a monster would fear me"

"Only a monster would instill fear in others!" I exclaimed.

The guardian stop in their tracks

I continued. "You've got this all wrong, I'm innocent, I'm framed, you're all liars"

"Those who try to escape judgement deem themselves unworthy in the eyes of others. They see everyone else as in the wrong, when in reality nothing is safe from them"

"Nothing is safe from you! You don't stop anything, you could've stopped me, stopped me before I made the mistake of falling into your traps." I screamed.

The starry night flickered and shined, as the curtain behind them split in half.

"Do you still wish to continue?"

The bad ending. The one where you betray all those who once supported you. A life where no one is by your side.

"Or do you wish to go back to the beginning?"

Behind me, the ground transformed into an endless expanse. A grid that contained the space and time of the universes

"You could go back, become someone else. Relive what you once lost."

Two opportunities to change everything. To focus on

The sky glowed orange with the rising sun.

"I don't think I could ever earn their love back" Regretfully, I walked past the guardian as they pulled behind the curtain, letting me through to the next world.

"You can't get lost anymore, you already found your path"

“This story was inspired by a writing prompt we created for the Writer’s Guild. **Green World**, A staged realm of escape. A place where the rules of society or "norms" don't exist and specifically in nature (like forest, meadow, etc.) and is typically used in Shakespeare





Soulmates

Lola Weinzettl

I first met Zach in the Cozy Corner Cafe. I was running late for work again but needed my morning dose of caffeine to function. I suppose the coffee was to blame, or maybe the fact that I was late. I had just entered the door when I saw him. He was sitting in an oversized armchair and was on a laptop typing away furiously. It wasn't exactly love at first sight like in the movies but it was something. He noticed me staring and turned his head slightly to look at me. He had the prettiest eyes. I blushed and quickly ordered my coffee, a mocha with extra whip. I turned around to head out the door not noticing the movement behind me. Zach bumped into me and coffee spilled all over his shirt.

"Oh my gosh. I am so sorry I didn't see you." My face went bright red. He smiled.

"It's ok, I shouldn't have come up so close behind you." I handed him a napkin and he attempted to wipe the quickly staining shirt. I glanced at the clock on the wall.

"Crap, I'm so late. I'm so sorry again. Is there anything I can do to make up for the ruined shirt?" He looked thoughtful for a moment then threw the napkins in the garbage.

"Well how about I walk you to work? I mean it's only fair that I do since I ruined your coffee."

I looked at him surprised then nodded.

"Sure why not, it's only a few blocks from here anyway."

We left the coffee shop together and he walked me down to my office. We talked the whole way there. He seemed like a really interesting guy. He told me he worked as a family doctor but he had the week off so he was spending his time writing. In the end we decided to exchange phone numbers. I walked over to my office door and grabbed the door handle about to go in when he put a hand on my shoulder.

"It was really nice talking to you… Oh wait, I didn't catch your name."

"It's Cordelia. What's yours?"

He smiled. "Zach."

Zach, what a nice name.

That was the first encounter we had.

Looking back, giving my number to a man I just met was probably not smart but he was such a nice guy and I wanted to talk to him more. I thought about him all through work and couldn't wait to finish my job and get home. He texted me that night a waving hand emoji, when I got it, I smiled. We texted for a while that night before he called me. We spent the night talking on the phone. He told me all about his job and some of the most interesting patients he had had. I told him about how I was always late for work and we laughed about me ruining his shirt with the coffee. We planned a date for the next weekend.

Our first date was at Butterfly Gardens. A garden that, true to its name, was filled with butterflies. It was pretty romantic for a first date. I had always imagined a first date at a fancy restaurant making awkward small talk and then deciding to break it off within the hour. This wasn't like that. It was a perfect night.

For our second date we watched a movie at my house in pajamas. I was starting to fall head over heels in love with him which sounded crazy but it was true. I thought love like this wasn't real. It turned out to be for Zach and I.

We got married three years after we first met at the coffee shop. On the exact day. We said our vows to each other under the stars, in an orchard. We danced in the grass surrounded by our loved ones. Then we went down to the beach and walked the length of it barefoot. We put our feet in the water and squealed at the cold. He carried me down the beach and into the cabin we had rented for the weekend. We were happy. It was true love.

For our honeymoon we went to Australia. It was a truly magical experience. We went sightseeing and saw koalas and kangaroos. We swam in the warm oceans and avoided poisonous bugs and animals. We spent a month there. One perfect month.

We bought a little pink house on the corner next to the cafe. It had a nice fence and a big backyard. Every weekend we would go to the cafe and sit side by side in the oversized arm chairs and hold hands while sipping our coffees.

We had our first child two years after getting married. We named her Katniss after the main character in Hunger Games, a favorite novel of ours when we were teenagers. We adopted two dogs and took them for long walks everyday.

We spent many busy years working. Our jobs occupied lots of our day but we always had time for Katniss. When Katniss started insisting she wanted a sibling, we decided to have more children. We had two children, a girl and a boy. We retired at 55. We spent everyday together. Our love story continued.

Then Zach got sick. Cancer, the doctors said. Leukemia. He claimed he felt fine but I could see he was losing his usual energy. He slept more and could no longer go for long walks with the kids. He started getting sicker. I held his hand at his doctor appointment and he let me cry into his shoulder when the doctor said he had a few months to live. I read him books when he went into hospice and brought the kids to visit.

Zach Martin Jones, the love of my life, died at 75 in the hospice. He died from his Leukemia. He was surrounded by loved ones. We buried him in a cemetery near our house and covered the grave in flowers. I didn't get out of bed for days, the kids had to bring food to my room. I cried and cried. I held the shirt covered in a coffee stain that he had refused to ever wash insisting that it was a memory of when we first met and when our love story truly began.



For a moment, everything seems as broken as it did before, like we'll always be standing in this battlefield, never knowing if the fighting will stop. But then, as the sun creeps into the sky, a white-throated sparrow takes flight, its call echoing across the plains.

-Kira




Poetry

HAPPY IS, HAPPY IS, HAPPY IS

BY ABBY H.

happy is breathing
happy is music
happy is visits with friends
walks to the movie theatre
happy is acting out scenes from kung fu panda 4
happy is dancing
happy is the sun
happy is the clouds
because it reminds me of the sun that will come
happy is the night sky
sitting on concrete
and laughing
happy is being alive
happy is missing my friends
happy is remembering
happy is knowing
that what i have now is so much better
happy is knowing it will get worse
happy is knowing the bad will get better
happy is the moon
happy is the birds flying in the sky
chirping in the trees
cawing at me
happy is human
happy is in nature
happy is orange sunsets
and pink sunrises
happy is fluffy dogs
happy is purring cats
happy is tilting upside down
happy is swing sets
and hearing the creak of the metal
happy is art
happy is hope
happy is living
happy is future
happy is now
happy is friends
happy is holding hands
happy is walking down the street
in the early morning and late at night
happy is
whatever you want it to be
happy
is happy

WANDERING

by Rubienne Munoz

Hiking through the burning trees,
braving feats of whispering snow.
Let your mind be lured away,
to a place unknown.

Leave the crowded room
filled with thoughts not your own,
Empty your crowded head,
Live a better life than what you're shown.

Drift far from the chatter and noise,
Move past the screens and smoke.
Indulge in a chapter,
spend time away from the jokes.

Let it be let far from a place where words are ushered.
Far from the ones who will not kneel,
Past the many too broken to heal,
Turned away from the blind who are too blazen to feel.

Let your mind be lured away, to a place
of burning trees,
of whispering snow,
Wander to a place only you
will ever know.

COASTWISE

BY ABBY QUIRT

No further plans for today
The wind's directions will lead the way
It's a long walk down a path of self discovery
One step too close to the sea
To cure my moving wanderlust
Walk me through this moving landscape
I have no fear of getting lost
In this timeless escapade.

Cold air and sweet cherries
Are the only things I can taste
I've befriended squirrels and woodland faeries
Both gathering sticks and moss for their own place
Office workers sit at their window and type away on their computers
The wave of all futures
All houses will be demolished
And replaced with sky-scraping buildings refurbished and polished
Oh to go back to the way things used to be
Will be nothing but a bittersweet memory
Unless...

By the time I arrived at the end of the town
Straight through a singular street
The sky turned the brightest shade of blue
Sunlight beamed down on me
Nothing felt freer than being here alone
With an internal instinct that I was safe
Stable on my own
With the longing to run away
The light will crack in when it's the right time
Let there be light.

Detox and recharge
Decompress and find out who you are
On the spiritual journey to the heart
Soul searching to find the place to start
Putting pieces back together that were once torn apart
Healing the open wounds and long-term scars
All the ways you can make your life a living work of art.

Somewhere, somehow
I found peace.

ZLATA STEEVES

NO LONGER

(rage poem)



No more giving up
Don't you dare go down any further
Stay the course and if you want to
Instead of being afraid
Scream the whole world away, make it shudder
Cause an earthquake
Shove your enemies off the cliff
of your own bone-deep hate

Scream and yell and rage, you monster,
rattle the bars of the invisible cage you grew up in
when everyone knew better, yet
nobody will ever acknowledge
the ice cold ire you burned with
was just the first stage

Now, you're in Dante's inferno
where

rage seeps out at all the injustices
at the bleeding cuts and torn skin from the shattered glass ceiling you hurled yourself in-
to only find impenetrable cement on the other side, where you
kick and slam and punch a hole right through the man-made barrier, break down, tear up for
no reason other than you want to, have to, need to

need to
rattle and unnerve them
because they bloody lied

Grab them by the shoulders
when your own are shaking
tears spilling over "for no reason"
are you crying
or laughing?
You can't tell anymore
You don't know anything
You cannot take it all over again
You cannot wait any longer
You'll bear none of it, no more, no more!
not a bit, no longer

You there! snap out of it! I said
wake up! I said
you said
Who said? I can't remember
I'm clutching my head
But one thing's for sure
We cannot take it any longer

grab them by the shoulders and shake them like it's the only thing left
break them down into their bitter brittle pieces
when they think they deserve to close their eyes to your pain
to put earmuffs on as if it will spare them, you
Make them feel
Make them flinch
Make them faint
Make them hear your silent howls of agony that shred the insides of your brain
that resonate and claw and rip their way out of you until you feel like your skull is about to split wide open
But they said their heads hurt! poor demons
As if you could take it, but not them,
not any longer

They'll leave you behind as if you were dead
when you were really asleep
tossing and turning
and trudging away from the trenches
still bleeding
mute from terror
wounds still gaping in an ugly grin
still scarred and broken, but not forever

they may have made us doubt ourselves
but no longer

no longer will they
call you unhinged, unstable, unable, disabled
just look in the mirror
you shiver, look around and realize
we're all just zombies on the autopsy table
whoops!
a killer you might have been made but
society turned us all
into murderers, even gave us serial numbers, and I can take it no longer,
that you're the only one of us left awake

With just enough emotion, enough fuel power
The right amount of kindling
like pure red hot tinder on the fire of frenzied fate
Light that gas fiercely to frantic flame
make them dance and writhe to your anger
you don't need to un-alive them
So make their bodies burn like unholy cadavers



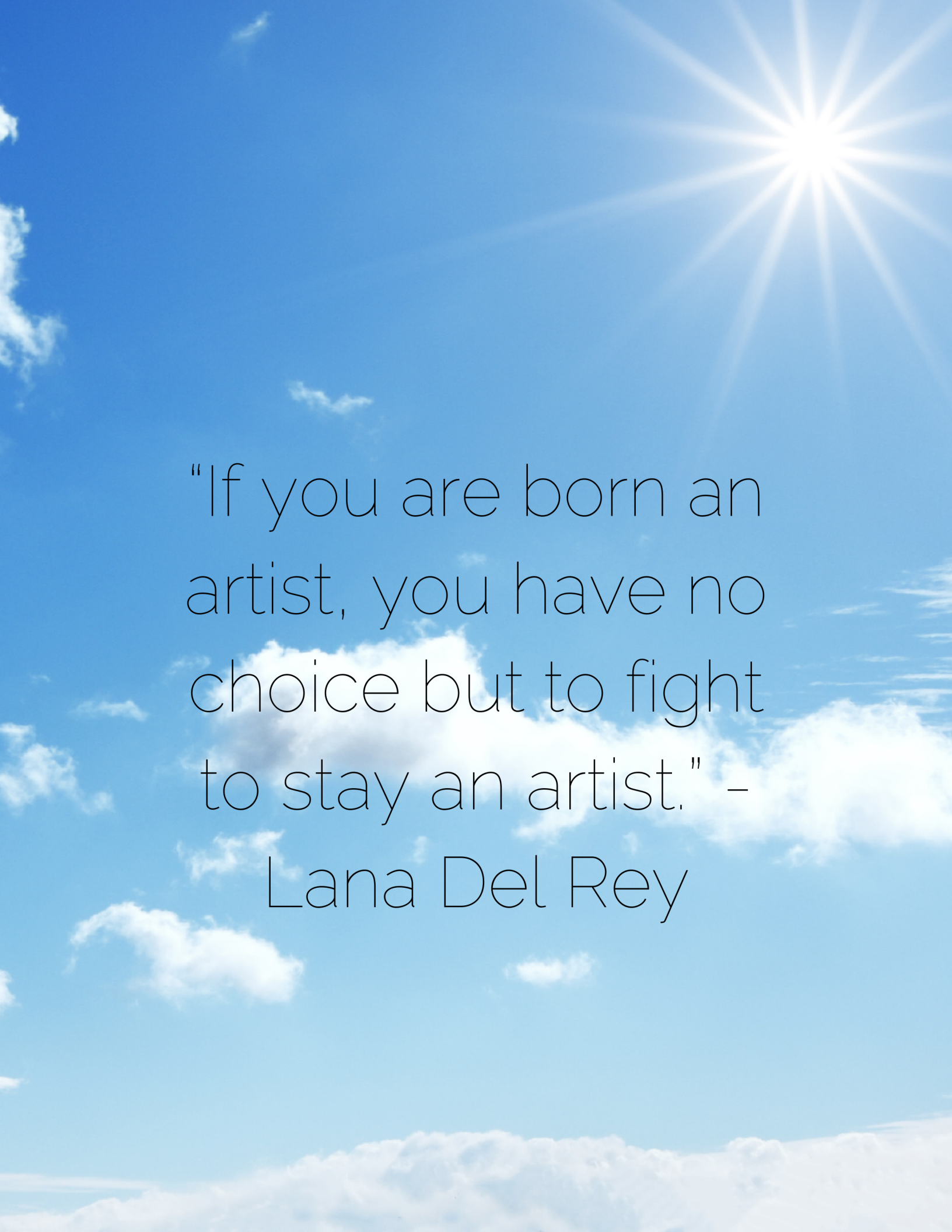
Burning up, smothering the few flickering embers remaining, stomping on their hissing ashes,
spitting on their graves
screw them, be petty not sorry, the time for regret will come later
or really, never.
as for redemption?
that was yesterday

Today, however
This isn't a race, it's a massacre
You're not King Kong falling off his building or onto his dagger
because he's been wronged
NO.
No-one can take your crazy any longer
we can all see your rotten entrails, opened up, exposed, examined and flayed
with a blade split asunder
on the autopsy table

you're the wrong one and maybe you'll realize it when you open your bloody red-rimmed
eyes and take in the suffering, the empty husks of souls you committed genocide on,
hoping you'd still be left standing
But tick tock, hurry up, else it might be too late and it's not a sight you want to miss out on, now
You can't anyways, because I won't let you
not any longer

In the end, there's only grim fate
You're not Noah and there's no noble Ark left to flounder,
no flood left to brave
No more mercy, no kindly nature
You're no Archangel in the random, wrong place
Ha! as if you were, could be, Lucifer
You forget yourself
Remember:
There's nowhere left to fall, but if there were,
I would laugh when I hear your hollow bones splinter
Because everyone's gone
You tried to save face but
I'm the Avenger
and there's no one left to save.




"If you are born an artist, you have no choice but to fight to stay an artist." - Lana Del Rey

My meeting with the Cozaks



Introduction: about the story

I wrote this story for an English assignment. We were told to write about a memorable character, and I decided to use the opportunity honor my Ukrainian grandfather, Victor, who passed away several years ago.
I can imagine him being pretty clear cut about this: "Once I'm dead, I'm dead and gone," he'd say, waving a hand, or maybe a beer bottle, in the air "then you can do whatever you like."

The following story is a mix of truth, fiction, history and imagination. Although I didn't really know him well, I've tried to infuse it with my grandfather's spirit, while creating distance between his character and who he really was, and so I'd like to say a bit about him first.

Вітя (this is the Ukrainian spelling of Vity'a, which is a nickname for Victor) is the grandparent who died. I'm lucky to say the rest of my grandparents are all currently alive, and I hope they will remain so for a very long time, because I admire and love all of them very much. Each one is a role model to me, in their own way.
But Вітя is also the guy who built bridges, who was so smart my grandma stayed with him (until they separated, lol) even though he drove her up the wall with his manners (or lack of, I should say), and gave me my first haircut. Terrible haircut, by the way. I'm pretty sure my parents still have nightmares about it.

Like any old man, the spry old fox had his faults. He was often drunk. He smoked a lot, I think. He had asthma. The word doctor was not one I could imagine existed in his dictionary, else he wouldn't have spent 30 (or at the very least 10) years avoiding one. Towards the end of his life, you'd think he was pretty much your average middle-aged Ukrainian man, living in the middle of nowhere. Wandering around like a stray dog. Picking up stray dogs.

Throughout all this, one thing never changed: my grandpa was a really smart man, and witty and funny too, to the detriment of most of my family. A genius and a math wiz, a born engineer (which was his profession) with a high IQ, had it been measured. Boredom now, that was his enemy. It's a thing we have in common. And I get the feeling we also share the trait of having a brain that is our greatest advantage, yet also our most dangerous enemy.

If you want proof that his mind was his greatest asset, towards the end of his life, he shouldn't have been standing. His ribs were frail and cracked, and I'm pretty sure his lungs weren't working, period. I won't even get started on his heart issues.

But towards the end, he was still building houses. A house, I should say. The last house. It's still there; it's also the last place I ever saw him, and the setting for this story. He'd built my family's house before that, on the dacha (property), and he was building this one for himself, with my cousin's help. It had an indoor swimming pool. He thought it'd be fun to turn it into a restaurant. I can still see it: even half-finished, it was impressive: two stories high with a basement, an indoor pool, and a vegetable garden where he was growing corn. I don't know that he had a place to sleep.

Even dying, my grandpa did more with the last six months of his life than most people do in the entire second half of theirs. He was smart, sure, but I think he was strong as well. Brilliant, yes, but resilient too. You know the saying, mind over matter? In the last six months of his life, my grandpa used his mind to make his body move.

He certainly left an impression, Вітя did.
When I die, I hope I do too, so this one's for you, gramps.

sincerely,
Zlata



My meeting with the Cozaks

There was nobody else on the property that day. At first, I thought I was alone. It wasn't a long walk from my aunt and uncle's house, so my mama sent me by myself. I looked around, taking in the scene: blue sky and sweltering sun. Gold and yellow, like the colors of Ukraine.

There was a little breeze in the shadows of the half-built house that chilled the sweat on my back. Brick and mortar to my left, garden patch to my right, with corn growing out of it. Like a painting.

But no grandpa in sight.

Before you meet him, I'd ask you not to judge him too harshly. I know the sort of impression he tends to have on people; grisly, old, rude, unhealthy... the list goes on. Quite unfortunately, none of those things are entirely false either, but they won't tell you his real story. Not the story I want you to know at least. Besides, coupled with some of his better qualities, they lend him a sort of backwater charm, I like to think.

I rounded the corner that led to the stairs of the building, and climbed to the first story. It might have been far from done, but the main structure was there. One thing you could say about my grandpa, he wasn't a slacker, that's for sure. In fact, I hadn't realized there was going to be an indoor swimming pool until I spied him swimming in it. Fancy that. Difficult to fancy the old geezer in tight swimming trunks who was paddling around in it to cool off, but our blood was definitely thicker than the muddy puddle he was bathing in.

"Vit'ya!" I called with a wave, smiling when he responded in kind and splashed closer. He squinted as if he couldn't see me and grinned a toothy smile.
"Alina, my daughter!" he called, "is that you?" He knew very well it wasn't, but still I wasn't sure, so I shifted on my feet and stayed silent. After a second he laughed and motioned me forward "no, you're Zlata my granddaughter, because you look so much like her! I always recognize my family." He went to climb out of the water and toweled off.
"At least you recognized me," I chuckled. "How are you? When do you think the house will be finished?"

He came closer "well you know, same as always, and you can tell your mother and aunt they don't need to worry about my liver." I highly doubted that, but let him continue: "I use the glass bottles as insulation for the house, see? A couple years and maybe then it'll be done." He wiped dirt off his hands. "I was thinking of turning it into a restaurant with your cousin."

"That's a great idea!" I exclaimed "I'll totally help you too, it's going to be so awesome."

My grandpa laughed, his tanned leathery skin gleaming in the sun. "Yes it would be, but that's not what I'm here to show you." I tilted my head curiously, and he beckoned me over to the edge of the pool.
"What are we doing?" I asked brightly.
"You'll see."
And then he pushed me in.



...

I resurfaced, gasping. I thought for sure I was a goner, that not even the water could have saved me. What was he doing!

“Vitʹya!” I looked around. Was the water suddenly deeper? Why was I in the middle of a lake? Where did the reeds on my left even come from?!

More importantly where the HELL was my grandpa?! Suddenly someone grabbed my shoulder and I startled, ready to shriek as panic seized me.

“Shhhhh,” he hissed from behind me, “weʹre already late.” My brain felt numb from confusion. This was a dream, there was no other way to explain it, or why I stayed silent. He dragged me out of the water, and sopping wet, we made our way up a hill towards where a group of weathered, grizzled, men laughed and discussed in Ukrainian as they sat around a fire. Daylight was falling, but I took one look at those faces and decided that no, I did not want to go up there. I glanced at my grandfather, and noticed he was rolling with the whole thing. If anything, the look in his eyes was eager and intent. I gripped his calloused hand.

We came nearer and nearer, until I wanted to pull away, when he wrapped an arm around my shoulders.
“Howdy, boys! How are we doing on this fine day?” If I hadnʹt been stunned speechless earlier, I would have been now. He was still wearing his swimsuit and a towel around his shoulders, and I was in shorts and a T-shirt with flip-flops! I wanted to die of mortification.

They all turned towards us as one. A few rascals started cracking jokes and I heard them say his name. They all seemed to know him.

A tall, heavy set man with a silver mustache stood. He raised his hand, and the others hushed. If we had been in 17th century Ukraine, I would have undoubtedly pegged him as their Otaman, their leader. Like one of the most famous Ukrainian Cozaks, Ivan Sirko.

My Grandpa stopped next to me. He raised his other hand in a military salute, and I almost fainted at his next words.
“Otaman Ivan Sirko, itʹs a pleasure to introduce to you my granddaughter.”

And the rest is history.

The End

NB about the historical inspiration: the painting below is inspired by the real historical context in the 17th century between the Zaporizhian Cossacks in Ukraine, and the Ottoman Empire. The Cossacks supposedly wrote a a very insulting letter to the Ottoman sultan in reply to his demand that they surrender to his authority, and this is the event depicted. I could easily imagine my grandfather participating in something like that, and I also thought it would make a good plot twist :) .

NB: Otaman is the Cossack word for their military leader, this is not a misspelling of Ottoman.



"Reply of the Zaporizhian Cossacks to the Ottoman Sultan", by Ilya Repin (c. 1890)


The city lights can't be seen from here, and it feels like we've discovered an entire world of its own. Stella laughs, voice ringing out in the silence. Then her smile collapses into tears.
-Kira

THE END: BORN TO BUT NOT LIVING

BY SAMANTHA MARTIN

Chapter one: Drafted

I don't want this… Please God… don't let this happen…

Thoughts swim in and out of my tired mind as I walk through the recruiting office. My eyes scan my surroundings lazily. I stopped and my heart plummets when I spot the picture of the Führer, per usual. Nazi Germany… the new Germany… I hate it. I hate all of it yet here I am being forced into the Reich. Goddamnit if I had a choice I would be on my way to England not standing in front of Hitler's photo.

"Friedrich Müller?" A well uniformed Major asks.

I look up. "Yes?"

"The Recruiting Officer is ready to see you."

Once again my heart plummets and it feels as if it was at my feet.

"Right, thank you Herr Major." I respond, averting eye contact.

He nods sharply and his hand stuck out. "Heil Hitler."

And just like that my heart sinks through the floor. My throat becomes tight and I mutter the phrase back before continuing on.

I hate it… I hate it all! Why me…? Why now…? I wish there was a way out of this…

I tremble slightly as I rap on the door and a gruff voice responds, it is harsh and I can't exactly make out what it is saying or who it belongs to. Deciding to take my chances I push the door open, just enough to see inside. The Recruiting Officer is a burly man with an air of strictness. His eyes lock with mine and it sends shivers down my spine.

"Are you Müller?" He asks harshly.

"Y- yes sir…" I nod.

"Don't just stand there. Come in."

I nod again and push the door open fully, I close it behind me before shakily sitting down in front of him. His eyes scan me and I squirmed. I can't see his name tag, all I can recognise was the rank of Colonel.



Maybe if I fail the physical I won't be drafted… I think hopefully, unfortunately another thought crosses my mind. But if I fail… will I be shot…?

The Colonel simply sits there in silence before finally opening his stern lips.

"Do you have any experience in the forces, Müller?"

I shake my head. "No sir,"

"Hm." He sighs. "No matter. The Führer will still lead the Reich to victory… even with dregs like you."

My heart plummets again, not that I thought it possible. My fists clench in my lap and I continue avoiding eye contact.

"The Medical Officer will check you over Müller, then we will decide." The Colonel says, very clearly dissatisfied with my demeanour.

I nod again silently. The Colonel stares at me before calling for The Medical Officer. He enters quickly and we make eye contact.

"Müller was it?" The Medical Officer asks.

"Yes sir, Fredrick Müller."

He looks at me with the same distaste as the Colonel.

The Medical Officer takes out a clipboard and frowns. "Right then… What is your height?"

"Five foot seven and a half." I respond.

"How specific… your weight?"

My face flushes. "One seventeen…"

The Medical Officer stops and stares at me. "One hundred and seventeen pounds."

"Yes sir…"

"A bit frail don't you think?" The Medical Officer asks the Colonel.

"Bah! He's fine, we will win the war either way." The Colonel scoffs.

I can't help but think. You say that with such confidence… Has it ever occurred to you that the Allies might win, have you ever seen how desperate you are?

The Medical Officer shrugs. "Then I suppose all there's left to do is continue with the assessment." The Recruiting Officer nods and The Medical Officer turns back to me. "Your age Müller?"

"Twenty-five."

"Right. And have you ever handled a gun?"

I look away. "Yes sir I have."

This was it, I'm going to end up in this damn Nazi army after all. The Medical Officer looks surprised.

"Seriously? When?" He asks, his right brow shooting up.

"I used to shoot tin cans with my Father." I respond, my hands wring nervously in my lap.

"Hm. You are aware shooting cans is not the same as shooting people. How can we be sure you will be valuable to the Reich?" The Medical Officer scoffs.

I don't want to be valuable! I don't want to be a part of your stupid Nazi government! My inner voice screams.

"Please, if he dies he dies. Either way the Allies use up their bullets on him." The Colonel adds.

The Medical Officer sighs and gives the other man a sympathetic look. "Fair point Herr Colonel, but I would hate to give you broken equipment. Does he even know the first thing about the military?"

"Even if he doesn't we can train him, just as we did for you Captain. You would be best to remember that, unless of course you would like the Gestapo to remind you."

The Medical Officer's face pales immediately and as does mine. The threat of bringing the Gestapo into the matter would be terrifying to anyone.

"Yes of course Herr Colonel, my apologies…" The Medical Officer clears his throat then turns back to me. "So, Freiderick Müller, was it? Congratulations, you are now a part of The Third Reich."

For the third time my heart sinks and my mouth turns dry. My hands tremble and my breathing quickens, the thought of being a Nazi made my stomach churn and the idea that I couldn't say no without being shot made it worse.

The Colonel hands me a letter. "Basic Training starts tomorrow, this has all the information. You are free to go."

I nod and put the letter in my pocket and I sit there for a few moments, The Colonel and The Medical Officer glance from each other then to me obviously expecting me to have left already. I blink then stand to leave.

Before I can however, The Colonel raises a brow. "Forgetting something? Soldier?"

I looked around, visibly confused. The two Officers exchange glances then come to attention, their arms outstretched.

Right… that…

"Heil Hitler!" They both say.

"Heil…" I mutter back, the word seeming to get caught in my throat.

Once again the Officers exchange glances, this time one of unimpress. I leave before they can say anything else.

The world seems to be crumbling under my feet. I can't believe that just happened… I am a Nazi… God even thinking it makes me feel dirty… the Major from outside sees me coming out of the office.

He smiles at me. “I see you were accepted young man!”
“I was, yes…” I respond.
“Congratulations! The Third Reich will prevail and you will be a part of it!” His grin is frankly disturbing, how could anyone be so happy about war?
I nod again. All I want was out of this conversation, out of this country, this war. I want— no I need out…
“Well, you better pack a bag son,” The Major continues. “Dunno where they might send you. Maybe the Russian front or perhaps a prison camp. Drill me son, do you even know the first thing about the Military?”
I shake my head as my hands tremble again slowly. “I don’t Herr Major… I have never been in the military before…”
“Oh my, son you are quite lucky. Your first time in the military and you get picked for the Reich! No doubt you will be a phenomenal asset for the Nazi ranks.”
I don’t want that… How am I lucky?
The Major glances at the clock. “Ah I shouldn’t keep you, good day soldier and congrats!”
I smile weakly, and continue on.
How will I tell my family? Now that I think about it I don’t even know if they support the Führer. Jesus, how did this happen? How did I go from working on a farm to being a Nazi soldier?
I have so many questions that I doubt will ever be answered. My hands continue to shake as I get into my car and they continue to shake as I drive away. As I pull up to the farm and park the car as I see my Mother rush out of the house.
“Friedrich! Oh Friedrich! How did it go?” Mother asks, her face coloured with worry.
I get out of the car and sigh. “It went… “
Mother’s face grows more worried. “Friedrich… What happened…?”
“Mother… What would you say if I was drafted to be a Nazi?” I ask, grabbing her shoulders gently.
Mother places a hand on mine. “Oh… did- did you pass the physical exam…?”
I scoff. “What physical? They took one look at me, saw I was breathing and put my name down.”
Mother’s eyes widen. “Oh Lord… Friederich, how are you taking it…”
“Mother, how do you think I am taking it… I have been shaking like a leaf since I left the recruiting office.” I pull away from her.
She looks away, tears building up. “I will have to tell your father… he is currently working in the shed with the twins, I don’t think either of them will take it well either. Oh Friedrich why you!? Of all people!”
“I don’t know…” I glance at her. “Mother, might I ask a question?”
Mother looks at me and raises a brow. “Of course,”
I swallow hard. “Do you… support the Fürher?”
Mother’s face pales, this was a dangerous question. “Oh… well… I think some of the Fürhers methods are… questionable… but overall… I… well…”
I put a hand on her shoulder. “You don’t have to finish, I know what you mean.”
So Mother doesn’t support him… that’s good, that’s really good… A small smile spreads across my lips, it is the first time I have genuinely smiled since I got drafted.
Mother smiles back softly. “Well my son, let’s go find your father… and perhaps you should prepare some snacks for the twins.”
“Right,” I smile and go inside the house.
Our house is fairly large and pleasant to look at from the outside, the architecture is very clean with the tall roof and symmetrical build. On every window we have flower boxes sprouting with cornflowers and other specimens only mother knew the name of. Inside is equally as gorgeous and homely, right by the front door hangs the metal sign father made. I take off my shoes and walk through the house to the kitchen, which was also highly decorated for our comfort, to prepare the comfort snacks for my twin sisters.
I grab two bowls, open the refrigerator, grab the kaiserschmarrn, and scoop a healthy amount for both. I add extra rhubarb sauce to each in the hope that it would make the news of my drafting easier to swallow. I just put the bowls on the table as Mother and Father try to coax the twins into the kitchen.
We all look fairly the same, with our fluffy brown hair and green eyes, Father and I’s hair is slightly lighter than Mother and the twins. My little twin sisters, Avila and Freida, are identical, other than the fact Frieda has a slightly wider jaw and Avila has wavier hair. My Father is tall and wide set with near blonde hair while Mother has a deeper shade and a very slim build.
Father had met Mother when they were younger, Mother gave birth to me at around twenty two years old and was thirty years old when Frieda and Avila were born. They certainly have their hands full with their twenty five year old son and seventeen year old daughters living at home but they do well raising us.



“Go sit down now, okay?” Father tells Avila and Freida.
Freida opens her mouth to protest but Avila spots the kaiserschmarrn and pulls her sister to the table.
Mother gently leads Father into a seat and sits next to him. I place three more bowls of kaiserschmarrn on the table, Mother takes it and smiles in thanks but Father pushes his bowl away. Figures… he doesn’t usually eat anything sweet till promptly after dinner.
“Friedrich, what is all this about?” Father asked.
My spoon freezes midway to my mouth. “Well… you know how I went to the recruiting office today right?”
Father nods and Avila and Freida stop fighting.
I put the spoon down. “So… I um- I was… I am going to be in the Nazi ranks…”
The room remains silent as my Mother suppresses tears for the second time, Father stares at me in shock and the twins whisper to each other in shaky voices.
“I see… and are you… happy about that…?” Father asks me.
“Of course not! I don’t want to fight! Hell, I don't want there to be a war in the first place!” I retort.
“Oh Friedrich! Are you going to have to shoot people!?” Avila shouts, her hand over her mouth.
“Will people have to shoot you!?” Freida adds.
I look away, to be honest I don’t know how to respond. The possibility of me being shot is certainly high and there is no doubt I will be told to shoot someone else.
“Freida! Avila! Don’t say such things!” Mother scolds.
“No Mother, it's okay…” I glance at the twins. “I want to tell you there will be no shooting involved but then I would be lying… all I really can tell you is that I will do my best to not shoot a bullet nor receive one.”
The twins nod and hold each other's hands while Father shakily grabs the bowl of kaiserschmarrn and eats it silently. The air is thick and uncomfortable and the air of sadness is suffocating.
“Oh yeah,” I reach down and take the letter out of my pocket. “Basic training starts tomorrow…”
The room goes silent once again as we all look at the letter.

Watch for another excerpt from The End: Born to but not Living in the next copy of our Zine.

My heart is a three-petaled flower:
green and gold for love, silver-grey
for magic, and pearl and pink and
blue for hope. So long as it blooms,
I will never grow old.
-Kira





READING LIST





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