



WINNING ENTRIES

**34th Annual Lonesome Pine
Short Story Contest**

and

**17th Annual Lonesome Pine
Poetry Contest**

March 3, 2021

34th Annual Lonesome Pine Short Story Contest

MIDDLE SCHOOL CATEGORY

FIRST PLACE

Preslee Strouth
Clintwood, VA

“Souls in the Sky”

SECOND PLACE

Kiarah Hamilton
Duffield, VA

“The Art of Winning”

THIRD PLACE

Anderson Robinson
Clintwood, VA

“The Spy Who Never Died”

HIGH SCHOOL CATEGORY

FIRST PLACE

Leylah Hamilton
Duffield, VA

“Finding A Life”

ADULT CATEGORY

FIRST PLACE

Faith G. Mabe
Abingdon, VA

“Max and the Moon Pie Deal”

SECOND PLACE

Willie Dalton
Pound, VA

“An Agreement”

THIRD PLACE

Matthew Stanley
Norton, VA

“Where the Tree Falleth”

17th Annual Lonesome Pine Poetry Contest

MIDDLE SCHOOL CATEGORY

FIRST PLACE

Calleigh Calhoun
Clintwood, VA

“Anxiety”

SECOND PLACE

Brody Vanover
St. Paul, VA

“The Peaceful Pond”

THIRD PLACE (TIE)

Emma Gibson
Clintwood, VA

“Stress”

Kiarah Hamilton
Duffield, VA

“Loving Now”

HIGH SCHOOL CATEGORY

FIRST PLACE

Shealin Pruitt
Norton, VA

“My Mother, My Own”

SECOND PLACE

Elora Hutchinson
Norton, VA

“Where I Am From”

THIRD PLACE

Leah Teasley
Norton, VA

“I Am From Black Culture”

ADULT CATEGORY

FIRST PLACE

Edison Jennings
Abingdon, VA

”Country Song”

SECOND PLACE

Dominique T. Locke
Castlewood, VA

“Interlopers”

THIRD PLACE

David Winship
Abingdon, VA

“Must Be Present to Win”

Souls in the Sky

On a cloudless, August night, the stars dotted the sky over rural Georgia, and the full moon that accompanied them smiled down at all those in its view. Although the night was young, many of the residents of Jasper Town were already lost in a deep slumber. 19-year-old Elliot Lynch was among the few who weren't, and the only person who roamed the streets that night...well, he would be at home if that were true.

Elliot was searching for his sister, Lyra, who had once again ran off without informing their concerned mother. It had recently become a habit of hers. She always went to the same place, however, so finding her and bringing her home was never much of a challenge. As a matter of fact, it was more of a chore to Elliot than anything. It didn't help that she refused to tell him the reason she started coming out here in the first place, but he had an idea.

"Lyra," Elliot called once he was close to the alleyway. Anyone could tell by the lackluster tone of his voice that this was nothing he hadn't done six times before.

Further down the walk, he spotted his sister's figure leaning against Dom, her large St. Bernard dog. She appeared to be lost in thought as she gazed up at the countless stars. *Elliot always found her like this. It was like the stars transported her to a world of her own where only she and, perhaps, Dom existed. There was no room for Elliot in this world of hers, and she had made that clear in the past.*

Nonetheless, Elliot approached her. "Lyra, this isn't funny anymore," he said calmly, holding onto what little patience he had left for his sister's sake.

After a moment, Lyra sighed. Her eyes never met his own, but remained pointed at the sky instead. "I'm well aware," she said dejectedly.

Elliot frowned. Despite what she'd been putting him through lately, he didn't like to see her sad. Before their father died, the two had actually been very close. Lyra never had many friends, so he became her confidant. Elliot often yearned for the days when *his little sister would race to his room, babbling about how unfair one of their parents was being or how annoying baby Esther was. Her problems were always trivial, but, nevertheless, he'd give her his undivided attention.*

Their father's sudden death had impacted every member of the Lynch family, but especially Lyra. The once happy, energetic, young girl shut herself out from the world when *she was only twelve, and has refused to come out even three years later. Their mother called it a phase, but Elliot knew better. Lyra was with their father when he collapsed in the same alleyway that they were in now. No one had known that he had been ill, and no one could have prepared that poor girl for when her father stopped breathing. At least Esther was young. She probably wouldn't even remember their father nor his death, but Lyra would never forget.*

"Why do you keep coming here, Lyra?" Elliot asked, sounding genuinely curious. He had been telling himself that this place made her feel close to their father, but the more he thought about it, the less likely it seemed.

Of course, Lyra didn't offer any response. It wasn't the first time he had asked her that question, after all. She only continued to stare at the lights in the blackened sky as Elliot stood defeated. Lowering his head, he stole a glance at the orange-spotted dog that served as her pillow. He was sleeping, as usual. In fact, the only time Dom was ever awake was when Lyra was on the move, which wasn't often.

Elliot remembered the day when the puppy had followed her home from the woods. It had only been a few weeks since their father's death, and, from what Elliot understood, Lyra was craving isolation. At some point during her walk, she encountered Dom, who couldn't have been more than a month old. It was love at first sight for the pup. No matter what Lyra did, he wouldn't leave her be. He had followed her home, and the rest was history.

"You know, Dad believed that the stars represented the souls of those that have passed on from this world," Lyra suddenly spoke.

Elliot blinked. "What?"

Lyra sat up, causing Dom to awaken. She glanced at her brother before pointing a finger at the sky. "You heard me. The stars represent souls, or, that's what Dad thought."

She folded her hands in her lap. She didn't meet her brother's eyes as she continued. "I think I might finally understand why Dom comes here every time the stars are out...to the exact place where Dad died. I think that---"

"Grrrr."

The low sound of Dom's growl interrupted her. Before they could stop him, the dog took off. In an instant, he left the alleyway and continued down the street, letting out a series of loud barks as he went. The siblings looked at each other in bewilderment. Both of them knew how unusual this behavior was for the dog.

Lyra was the first to follow after him. "Dom!" she yells, seemingly forgetting what hour it was.

"Lyra! Wait!" Elliot chased after his sister.

He had a bad feeling about a dog leading them across Jasper Town at night, even if it was Dom. Didn't Lyra say that it was he who led her here in the first place? How did that happen? And only when the stars were out? That didn't make any sense. What was Lyra going to say? Most likely, an explanation for all of these things, but what if that was the only chance he'd ever get to hear it? After all, that was the most she'd, kind of, opened up to him in years!

"Elliot!"

His sister's cry silenced his racing mind. She sounded terrified, which was something he never wanted to hear out of either of his sisters. He saw her upon the hill

that separated their house from the rest of Jasper Town. Just as he was about to reach her, she bolted down it. However, he wasn't the reason. Elliot didn't know how he had missed the clouds of smoke, but he watched in awe as a variety of oranges and yellows dared to match the height of the roof of the Lynch family home.

"Elliot!" he once again heard Lyra scream. He turned his attention to his sister, who was struggling with holding her howling dog back from the flames. "Mom and Esther are still in there!"

Although her words confirmed his worst fears, Elliot's eyes filled with determination as he dashed towards the burning house. He had told no one of the promise he had made to his father's grave. "I will protect them in your place," were his exact words that day. Elliot had never discussed such a thing with his father during his lifetime, but he felt that, as the oldest, it was his responsibility to ensure his family's safety.

When he reached the building, Elliot saw that fire had yet to reach the front door. He wasted no time throwing it open. As soon as he did this, he noticed his chest tighten, but he wasn't sure if it was because of the smoke he was surely breathing in or the rapid beating of his heart. He didn't contemplate it, but proceeded to run into the house instead.

He had already begun coughing when he reached the stairs that led to Esther's room. In the back of his mind, he wondered what caused the fire to begin with, but he'd figure that out later. He climbed the few stairs and ended up knocking down the door to the five-year-old's room. The first thing he saw was the wall of flames that blocked her only window. It didn't take him long to notice the two figures huddled in the corner farthest from it.

"Elliot!" his mother cried when she saw him.

The boy quickly went to his mother. However, before he could reach her, part of the ceiling collapsed. The flaming wood fell right between them, causing the little girl in her mother's arms to cry out in terror. She pressed her forehead against her mother's shoulder to avoid looking at the frightening flames.

"Elliot, I want you to take Esther and get out of here! No time for arguing!" the mother shouted.

Before Elliot could reply, his mother tossed Esther over the flames. He reflexively caught her, and she latched onto him when he did. Elliot looked at his mother with wide, teary eyes. He so badly wanted to argue with the woman that raised him, but the look in her eyes told him it would be pointless to do so. So, with a heavy heart, he ran back down stairs with his sister clinging to him like a lifeline.

When he returned to Lyra with only Esther, she immediately knew what had happened, and the world seemed to slow as the events that had happened next took place. Lyra's knees buckled, causing her to unintentionally release her hold on Dom.

The dog didn't hesitate to run into the then fully engulfed house. Realizing her mistake, Lyra tried to chase after him, but the roof caved in before she could even get to her feet.

They never knew what caused the fire, but Elliot found out what Lyra was about to tell him earlier. She believed that Dom was their father's reincarnate. She didn't have to explain it to him. Given the time Lyra found him, the way he looked after all three siblings and their mother, and how he kept returning to the same spot their father had died, she had a right to think that they shared a soul.

Elliot didn't know what to believe, but he couldn't deny the fact that, after the fire, there seemed to be two more stars in the sky above Jasper Town, and they were brighter than all the rest.

The Art of Winning

Two Border Collies named Blue and Honeydew lived on an arid countryside farm in the Appalachian Mountains. Blue was content and satisfied with life and curious of nature. While Honeydew was always being clever and smart and tried to make everything better. One day as Blue and Honeydew were strolling along the muddy grass before supper they noticed a group of Labrador Retrievers with their snouts close to the ground. They approached their fellow dogs.

"What are you doing so low to the ground?" asked Blue

"We've started a competition," replied the smallest of them all, "the dog that catches the most grasshoppers wins the acorn of honor."

Blue looked to see a shiny acorn sitting on a rock and decided he would win the acorn of honor, he knew the acorn would be his, though he didn't know how.

"I want to try, I want the acorn" exclaimed Blue. For it was rare to find an acorn looking so fine. Honeydew decided he would just watch so Blue entered the contest but he soon found out it was hard to catch these grasshoppers and he came in last place. While Honeydew was watching he noticed that there were so many grasshoppers in that small area. After supper Blue told Honeydew no matter how disheartened he was Blue promised Honeydew he would try again next week, and that time he would win.

Every week after that they had the grasshopper catching contest and every week Blue came in last. After the first-week Honeydew tried too. Every week more pups joined the contest and the acorn passed to what seemed like every pup but Blue and Honeydew.

Now Honeydew was just as bad at catching grasshoppers as Blue but after every loss Honeydew came to supper whistling and with a smile on his face and Blue was clueless as to why Honeydew could be so happy. After a few weeks, Blue decided to stop trying, and right before supper when the time came to go to the competition Blue told Honeydew to go without him. Honeydew felt sad his friend no longer joined him but he couldn't see why he should stop trying. So Honeydew kept trying until one day he came home with a newly shined acorn in his hand.

Blue asked Honeydew how he managed to win. Honeydew overjoyed and stunned himself, shrugged.

"Every week, when we were in that section of grass, instead of hunting for the grasshoppers I befriended them. Some of the friends I made got caught by the other dogs but I was able to make many friends with the grasshoppers. And every week I would talk to my old friends and make some new ones. This time I knew I had enough friends so when the contest started I called all my friends and they came and I set them all in my paw and kept them until the grasshoppers were counted. After I won, I let them go!"

"But all those weeks you lost, you wasted so much time," Blue said in distress.

"It wasn't a waste because every week when I lost, I knew I could win in a few more. I never lost, you only did. You gave up a long time ago, the moment you stayed behind. But as long as I kept working I knew eventually I would win."

1965, location unknown:

I woke up in a cell, hands cuffed and bloody. I look through my swollen eyes and see a guard walking toward me. My head hurts from the beating I've taken. I brace for him to drag me out of the cell or hit me with something. Instead, he tells me he is a spy and to follow him. He uncuffs my hands and we make a run for it.

We make it to the end of the hall and I hear yelling. I peek around the door and see what looks like a hundred workers gathered around. My eyes slowly follow the workers to the front of the room and that's when I see Baron Von Vizer. He is yelling at them. Baron Von Vizer is an evil monarch. He creates super weapons and bio weapons. He is working on a new bioweapon and that's why I'm here. The baron is speaking in German and I can only make out a few words. I hear the words gas and the workers start cheering.

Suddenly, the spy standing beside me is shot from behind. I turn around and see a guard reloading his gun. I charge at him and headbutt him. I think his nose is broken from the blow. I wrestle his gun away from him and hit him with it, knocking him out cold. I've got to get out of here and report back to headquarters on what I've seen and I have to find out where the baron is going.

I find a door to the outside and step into the blinding sunlight. We are in the mountains, everything in sight is covered in snow, and it's freezing cold. I hear a loud whirring noise to my right and turn my head to see a blimp.

I see a flurry of movement as a jeep pulls up and stops in front of the blimp. I see the baron get out carrying a briefcase. His tall figure and big nose are impossible to mistake. This man is pure evil in my opinion. I have to stop him before he kills millions of people. I know he has the plans with him and I bet they are in that briefcase.

I watch as the baron boards the blimp along with two men I don't recognize. The jeep pulls out and I duck behind some boxes to keep from being seen. The blimp is getting ready to take off and I know I have to go now if I have any hope of stopping the baron.

I run as fast as I can and make it to the blimp as it is getting ready to take off. I open the door and slip inside. I feel the blimp leave the ground and I have no idea where we are going or how this is going to end.

I survey the blimp and I have to choose whether to go left or right. I figure left leads to the pilots and right to the baron. I make my way toward the right. I look through the glass in the door and see the baron talking with one of the men I saw

earlier. They're sitting at a table. The briefcase is open on the table and papers cover the table. The men are looking at the papers and don't notice me. I listen to them talking and the baron is explaining that he is inventing a giant biobomb. The bomb has enough toxic gas to kill a small country.

I sling open the door and the two men look up startled. Baron asks me who I am and I respond by telling him that I'm his worst nightmare. Truth is, I am Michael Charles and I'm MI6, but he doesn't need to know that. All he needs to know is that only one of us is going to walk off this blimp and it isn't going to be him.

I grab the briefcase and hit the man with Baron in the face. There is nowhere for Baron to go. It's just me and him and his plans to kill a lot of people. One wall of the room is nothing but windows. The blimp is a pretty good distance up in the air now. I grab the baron and throw him up against the windows. This man is responsible for killing thousands of people. I decide that he has killed his last person. I open up the window and throw him out like throwing a bag of trash into the dumpster. I step over the other man laying there, gather up all the plans to the bioweapon and place them inside the briefcase. Headquarters is going to need these. Once again, I survived and beat evil.

The spy who never died.

THE END

Finding a Life

The winds of 1958 are always angrier at night. Perhaps it is because everything is still and there is nothing to block its path, thus blows an icy current. Eventually, all that is left from a serene night is tossed astray by agitated air. It was in this night air that the mountains, rivers, valleys and lakes surrounding Appalachia, through their uncultivated beauty; disguised the imprisonment of a certain man, captive to memories of his past.

Henry looked towards the sky and heaved a sigh worthy of applause. It had been eight months since he had been forced to move to Appalachia and work in a coal mine. Long days of strenuous endeavors led straight into exhausting nights. Yet, try as he might, Henry could not get to sleep. As he gazed at the stars, his mind drifted away to thoughts of home.

Home. It wasn't that long ago that everything had happened, and it still hurt to think about it. It was hard to believe that just eight months ago, Henry had been living with his family in Knoxville, Tennessee. Henry was sixteen years old and had two younger sisters, ages ten and twelve. His two dedicated and hard-working parents had worked skin and bone so their children could have comfortable lives.

His family had been one of the wealthy few in America that had the means to live a life of luxury. They traveled around cities in the newest automobiles and always wore their best clothes. They lived in a large home with many rooms; with servants and maids to take care of their every need.

The car crash changed everything. After the accident that killed Henry's parents, everything happened so fast. The family fortune had been stolen. They lost their home and all their possessions. His sisters, left with no adult relatives that, by law, could take care of them; were placed in an orphanage.

Henry had ventured out, looking for a job but had a lot of trouble finding one. He could not remember ever really having to work before. Finally, through an ad in the newspaper, Henry was able to secure a job at the coal mines. He moved to Appalachia, worked hard and saved up so that he could provide for himself. However, he still missed his old life. On the day that everything had happened, they had just returned from school. Henry could still remember eating supper as his sister, Katherine, teased him...

Eight months earlier

"Henry, I saw you talking to Elizabeth!" Katherine laughed. "What happened?"

He groaned, "Nothing. I was just asking her about George, you know, her brother. He was not at school, so I asked if he was feeling well.

"Oh, sure." She teased. "That's because George is your best friend and all, right? You haven't hung out with him in weeks."

His younger sister, Sofia, piped up, ""Yeah, and don't you have his address? Why didn't you go visit him?"

Their maid, Mary, chuckled, "Girls, I think you've had enough teasing your brother. Why don't we-

She stopped abruptly. There were insistent knocks at the front door. Mary motioned for the kids to stay silent as she peeked out the window and gasped. There were three police cars outside of the house.

Everything that happened after that was a blur- opening the door to the police, the terrible news of what had happened, his parent's wealth scrounged over until there was nothing left, the orphanage collecting his sisters, the tearful departure, and now this-emptiness.

Present time

The sad situations in the country, families separated from each other just trying to survive; could break the spirits of those confined. Nonetheless, Henry now realized that he was not imprisoned. The problems he faced only strengthened his courage and made him more determined. He looked up at the sky again, but this time he was filled with hope. He was free, free to become whoever he wanted. You could really become anything in Appalachia. Then and there, Henry resolved never to give up. He was certain that he would be able to endure this and would be able to see his family again, one day.

The long squeak of the screen door was followed by a “Yoo-hoo?” from the child who entered. Ms. Haynes slowly hefted herself to an upright position where she spotted a small face pressed against the glass case at the front counter. Besides the ancient cash register, the counter held an ample-sized display case with large glass panes in front, three wide sturdy shelves inside and two sliding doors behind the counter. It was the items inside the display that held the child’s attention. The small face was alight with anticipation and the two brown eyes were sparkling with pleasure as she gazed on the candy bars and treats on the shelves. The kind-hearted store owner wished that she could reach in and take out a candy bar to give to the little girl but knew that her generosity would not be accepted as mountain folk didn’t take charity.

Ms. Haynes peered over her bifocals and across the counter at the small girl. Her smile came easily as she greeted her little customer, “Hello Mary Jane. You traveling without your shadow today?” Mary Jane grinned at the store owner and evaded the question by asking one of her own. “Anybody got a speckle ball lately?” she queried while peering intently at the gumball machine. “It’s been a few days,” replied the white-haired, grandmotherly merchant. Mary Jane clasped her hands almost prayerfully and fairly bounced up and down on her toes. If she got a speckle ball, she would get the Reese’s Cup. The Reese’s package had two candy bars, one for her and one for Max. Besides, she loved chocolate and Max loved peanut butter so that candy bar was perfect for both of them.

“What can I do for you today Janie?” Ms. Haynes asked as she came from behind the counter with her feather duster. “Your mama send you for groceries?” Ms. Haynes often worried about Virgie and her large family. She knew despite the hard work in several gardens they grew, there were no leftovers or probably even scraps for the dogs after mealtime in the family’s household. Mary Jane and Max, her brother, were often sent to Haynes’ Grocery for a few

items. Max, the one she'd referred to as Mary Jane's shadow, had not yet appeared. It was odd to see one of the Irish twins without the other. With thirteen children, it seemed that Virgie was more often pregnant than not. Ms. Haynes knew the tab she kept for the family was always in the red, but she also knew Virgie paid what she could when she could.

Ms. Haynes began to dust and straighten the store shelves while Mary Jane followed her, chattering nonstop. She knew that sometimes the children wandered in out of the heat just for shade on scorchers like today. She also knew they often wandered off from the menial jobs they were given by their daddy, when given half a chance. While Mary Jane was always the talker of the two, Ms. Haynes was surprised to find that the girl seemed intent on entertaining today. The child's chatter had risen in volume so that it nearly covered the clucking of the hens under the floor of the store. At the moment, something seemed to be disturbing the Silkies and that almost seemed to be disturbing Mary Jane. The little entertainer was talking and fairly stomping her feet as she followed the matronly woman's route through the store aisles. "Whatever the ruckus, it served them right," thought Ms. Haynes. She was still upset that the chickens had made nests so far back under the low part of the store that there was no way anyone could get to the eggs.

Right as the hens seemed to settle, the screen door squeaked its announcement of Max's arrival. He came in holding his shirt tail up to cradle at least a dozen eggs. "Hey," he said to Mary Jane. "Hey, Mama sent me to trade," he said to Ms. Haynes. "Are those eggs for me?" asked Ms. Haynes wondering how it was Virgie had extra anything with all the mouths she had to feed. Again, the direct question went unanswered as Mary Jane, being ten months older stepped in to explain. "She wants for us to get two RC Colas and two Moon Pies. Will you trade with us?" Ms. Haynes studied the faces of the two towheaded children. They gazed back at her with serious, unwavering eyes. "Why certainly," she said. I think you are getting the short

end of the stick on that deal though. I believe you should at least get a penny apiece to boot.”

The children’s gaze faltered, and they looked at each other with smiles.

With a twinkle in her bright blue eyes, Ms. Haynes put two Moon Pies in a small brown paper bag. “You two go on over to the pop cooler and get your RCs.” The children scampered across the store and opened the deep-chested cooler. They leaned over on tippy toes and reached inside for their booty. The frosty air from the cooler escaped into the hot store. The lid to the cooler smacked closed and the “pshhh” of the bottles uncapping was followed by two “ahhs” from the satisfied children. Mary Jane took the bag from Ms. Haynes with a “Thank you, Mam.” Max’s brown eyes looked down as he echoed his sister.

The children turned to leave. Ms. Haynes called out to them, “Hold on a minute!” They halted but were slow to turn around. When they faced the store owner both nervously returned her stare. Ms. Haynes said with a grin, “You forgot your pennies.” She handed the change to Mary Jane and then reminded her, “It’s been a few days since anybody got a speckle ball.” Mary Jane’s features quickly shifted from fear to joy. She took the pennies in her hand and looked toward the gumball machine. She handed one penny to Max and urged him to drop it into the machine’s coin slot. He dropped in the penny and cranked the shiny, silver knob one, two, three times. He opened the little square door and collected his green gumball as it rolled out. He instantly popped it into his mouth and stepped aside so that his sister could have a turn. Max took the grocery bag from Mary Jane and solemnly watched as she took her place in front of the gumball machine. He knew how badly Mary Jane wanted a speckle ball. A speckle ball meant that the lucky customer would be awarded a treat of his/her choice from the display case.

Mary Jane clasped her penny in the same prayerful pose she struck earlier in front of the display case. She put the penny into the slot, wiped her palms on her denim pedal pushers and

turned the noisy gumball crank. She placed her other hand onto the door of the machine and slowly raised it. Audible breaths expelled from all three as they witnessed the speckle ball laying in Mary Jane's sweaty palm. Ms. Haynes reached into the display case and wrapped her hand around a Hersey bar. Both children shouted, "Reese's Cup!" With a grin Ms. Haynes picked up the Reese's Cup and handed it over. "This must surely be your lucky day," she said. The children seemed to shiver despite the heat as they took the candy. "Tell your mama congratulations for having good laying hens and lucky children," she called as the children hurried out the door. They already had the orange wrapper off the candy before the screen door smacked closed. Ms. Haynes watched as the two children sat down, side-by-side on the wooden store steps and enjoyed their sweet treats and colas. They made short work of both and quickly disappeared down the road.

The slamming of the back door heralded another person's arrival and Ms. Haynes turned to see Denzel, her son. He was muttering under his breath as he came through the storeroom and into the store. "What has you so riled?" she asked him. "Those hens of yours!" he grumbled. "They've made their nests all the way back under the low part of the store. Any eggs they lay will have to stay there or hatch!" he said with disgust. "Oh, don't let that worry you. Little Max crawled under there earlier today and brought out a full dozen," she informed him. "How did you get him to do that?" Denzel asked. "It cost me two cents, two RCS and two Moon Pies," she reported. "Think he will do it again for you, cause ain't no way I can fit up under those low boards?" Denzel explained. "I think so," his mom said with a shake of her head and a laugh.

End

An Agreement

I rocked myself back and forth in the rocking chair on the porch, the slight thud it made against the uneven boards was familiar and relaxing. The air still held the last chill of winter in the early spring morning, I was glad I had wrapped myself in an old quilt before coming outside. The patchwork colors were faded from their original bright mosaic, but it was warm and soft as butter.

The screen door screeched as it opened and a wrinkled but manicured hand extended a cup of coffee to me.

I took the mug, automatically blowing the hot liquid before I took a sip. "Thank you," I said.

She walked across the porch and took a seat in the rocking chair next to mine.

"What's wrong, Francie?" she asked, her voice both gentle and stern.

I smiled at her, "What makes you think something is wrong, Mamaw?"

"You come visit me plenty but when you spend the night, I always know something is weighing on your mind."

"Not really, I've just been missing Papaw and wanted to come stay a night," I explained.

"I miss him too. Even though I swear that man drove me crazy most of the time," she said with a laugh.

"I hope I find love like you had with him someday." I took another sip of coffee and wrapped my hands tightly around the mug, enjoying the warmth.

Mamaw chuckled, "Things weren't always so good between us. You have to work hard for love sometimes."

She rocked back and forth in her chair, watching the occasional car drive up the hollow road. Her face stayed relaxed as she watched them and I knew she recognized every single car. Someone who didn't belong would have warranted a concerned expression and phone call to the neighbors.

After a time, she went on, "We married so young, which was normal then, but it didn't mean we knew what we were doing. Going from my momma's house to running my own and learning to be married was hard. I didn't have a car, and for the first year, we didn't even have a phone. I was more than an hour away from my parents and I hated to bother our neighbors over every little thing. There were many nights your papaw wouldn't get home til after dark and

it would sometimes be two weeks at a time before I saw another soul besides him. It definitely wasn't easy." Her face was solemn as she reminisced.

"I honestly, cannot imagine anything like that," I said. I'd heard a lot of their stories over the years and never failed to be amazed by the hardships they endured and overcame.

Their home had always been my happy place growing up. The smell of delicious food cooking at nearly any time of day, creeks to play in, a big yard to run in, and so much love.

"I've never told anyone this, but I poisoned your papaw one time."

My head whipped to the side to see if she was joking. Mamaw's gaze was straight ahead and only a tiny smile was on her lips.

"On purpose?" I asked, equally horrified and intrigued.

She nodded, "Your daddy wasn't but three months old, cried all day every day with the colic, and I was worn out. Your papaw thought I was letting the chores go and I wasn't cooking as much as I did before the baby came. He was pretty ugly to me and I could tell he'd had a few drinks, but I got up and started fixing his dinner. We kept ipecac on hand in case the baby got croup and I just poured a good amount of it in the gravy that night and made sure not to eat any myself. Lord, did he get sick! He was sure he was dying. I told him I'd put rat poison in the gravy to scare him a little more and said that he wasn't going to treat me that way while I was at home taking care of this house and our baby. He looked scared to death."

My eyes were wide as I imagined her story playing out.

"Oh, don't look at me like that. I wouldn't have actually killed him. I had just seen it happen too often, wives getting beaten and made to feel worthless. And back then, we didn't have anywhere to go and a divorce wasn't an easy thing to get, especially without money. I wasn't going to let that happen to me."

"Weren't you afraid he'd kill you when got over being sick?" I asked.

"Nah, I probably should have been, but I knew he couldn't go to work, maintain the house, cook, and raise the baby. He needed me as much I needed him. We didn't have anybody but each other. I'm not saying what I did was right, but I just didn't know what else to do."

"So, what happened afterwards?"

"Honey, when I got up the next morning there was bacon fried, apples cooked, biscuits made, coffee brewing and when I walked into the kitchen, he kissed me on the cheek and told me he was sorry," she grinned and patted my knee.

"And you trusted him enough to eat it?!"

"He was still pale as a ghost and I could tell he was sorry. Also, I made him take a bite of everything first," she chuckled. "We talked a lot about the expectations we had and reached an agreement to be good to each other. It still wasn't always easy but we kept our promise."

"I don't think that trick would work out well these days, Mamaw," I said with a laugh.

She nodded in agreement, her eyes were distant, still remembering. "Eventually, I did tell him it wasn't rat poison I'd fed him but it still took about twenty years before he would eat my gravy again."

WHERE THE TREE FALLETH

Kurt saw the tree in the road in the nick of time. He still stomped on the brake pedal with both feet; fighting the steering wheel to keep his truck from fishtailing on the gravel road. His wife Kayla let out a banshee's scream as she braced herself against the dashboard. She never saw the tree; she'd been dozing peacefully in the passenger seat after pulling an all-nighter to study.

Kayla was one exam away from her nursing degree, and she'd spent the last two weeks cramming for this final exam. Kurt had seen that she needed a break, and suggested they go for a drive in the mountains.

"Absolutely!" Kayla had said enthusiastically. "I'm going blind on *Gray's Anatomy*."

So, Kurt had fired up his company truck- an extended cab behemoth- and they lit out for the territories. The ride had been peaceful and relaxing, despite the bumpy road. Kayla spotted several deer grazing in a clear cut, and Kurt had stopped several times to allow chubby fox squirrels to lumber across the road.

They'd talked about one thing and then another; idle conversation for an idle day. Kurt noticed that Kayla had gone quiet, and when he glanced over, he saw that she had nodded off. She looks adorable when she's asleep, Kurt thought.

He kept stealing glances at Kayla; eyes drifting from the road, and mind drifting to other possibilities. Maybe if she takes a nap, she'll be in the mood tonight, Kurt thought hopefully. With her studies, and his being worn out most days after work, they hadn't had much time or energy for each other lately.

This thought was occupying Kurt's mind when he saw the tree out of the corner of his eye.

"OH MY GOD!" he shouted, as the truck ground to a halt inches away from the tree. A haze of gravel dust had enveloped the truck after the sliding stop, and Kayla tried to get her bearings.

"What happened?" Kayla asked breathlessly. "Did we hit something? Is it a deer? I can't see anything!"

"There's a tree down across the road. I saw it at the last second. We barely stopped in time."

"I'm going to need a change of underwear," Kayla joked as she leaned back in the truck seat.

"Same here," Kurt replied. "Are you okay, babe?"

"I'm fine. Not the best alarm clock, though. Are you okay, Kurt?"

"I'm okay, I think. Close call, though."

Kayla reached over and took her husband's hand, and they both sat there in silence while they gathered their wits.

After a few minutes, the dust began to settle, and Kurt gave Kayla's hand a reassuring squeeze as he opened his door.

"I'll have this tree out of our way in nothin' flat. Why don't you look and see if it hurt the truck."

"Can do," Kayla nodded while climbing out of the passenger door. Kurt walked to the rear wheel and climbed into the truck's bed, where his massive toolbox stretched the width of the truck. He smiled as he unlocked the toolbox and reached in for the tool of his trade.

Kurt was a logger. Actually, he was co-owner of Lonesome Pine Logging. Kurt and his brother had started the company a few years ago, and it had grown into a healthy little operation. To think that a downed tree in the road had almost done Kurt and Kayla in was almost an insult.

With that in mind, Kurt pulled his chainsaw out of the toolbox and removed the chainguard.

It was Powercut's very best saw. The 455 turbo charged chainsaw, ladies and gents; made right here in the good old U.S.A. Kurt always bought the best equipment for the business, and that had played a large part in its success.

Saw in hand, Kurt climbed out of the bed on the passenger's side and approached Kayla. She was standing in front of the truck, gazing down at the tree when Kurt put his free hand on her shoulder. She nearly jumped out of her skin.

"Whoa! I didn't mean to scare you," Kurt said apologetically. "Did the tree do any damage?"

"Kurt," Kayla said in a shaky tone barely above a whisper, "that is not a tree."

"What do you mean it's not a tree?" Kurt asked in bewilderment. "Did you hit your head on the dash?"

"Look at it!" Kayla shrieked. "Take a close look!"

Kurt took his first real look at the downed tree, and his jaw nearly hit the gravel road.

"Kayla, is that.....?"

"It's an arm, Kurt. It's not a tree, it's an arm."

Kurt's entire body was trembling. Kayla was right; stretched across the width of this remote mountain road was a massive human arm.

It can't be human, Kurt thought to himself. It just looks human. It is some kind of a fake.

It must be about five or six feet in diameter, Kurt estimated. Years of sizing up timber had schooled him in this art, and he was rarely inaccurate. The thing was a deep brown, lending it a bark-like appearance. If it was an arm, it had a great tan. Enormous wiry hairs covered it; each one as thick as a power line. The muscles and tendons stood out under the skin as if the hand was clenching something.

"Where's the hand?" Kurt suddenly wondered.

"What?" Kayla asked as she started to back away.

"If this is an arm, it stands to reason there's a hand, right? And what about the elbow and the biceps? Where is the rest of it?" Kurt was in motion now, circling behind the truck and running to the edge of the road.

"Kurt! Please! Let's just get out of here," Kayla pleaded.

"I just want to get a closer look," Kurt answered. He made it to the side of the road and crouched down, his chainsaw still in his grasp. The road fell away on this side down a steep slope. Kudzu vines had completely taken over the ground here; the vines were piled on top of each other at least six feet deep. The arm disappeared into the kudzu, but Kurt noticed that it tapered down in just the right way to form a wrist.

"Kurt! I want to get out of here!" Kayla said frantically.

"See if you can spot the elbow," Kurt said as he hustled back around the truck. No way was he going to climb across this thing.

"All I see is kudzu," Kayla said. She was right. A treacherously steep hill bordered this side of the road, and the kudzu was waist deep. Even all the trees that dotted the hillside were draped and swallowed by the invasive vine. The arm vanished into this green mess.

"Get in the truck and get me out of here, Kurt. It's some kind of monster, and we're standing here gawking at it! Let's get out of here before something happens!"

"Okay," Kurt answered. "We'll go, but I'm gonna find out what this thing is made of. It can't be a monster, Kayla. It's some kind of movie prop or something that some redneck copied from a Youtube video. You jump in the truck. This will only take a minute."

Kayla climbed in the truck, and Kurt walked around in front. In one swift, practiced motion he yanked the starter rope and the chainsaw roared to life. He revved the motor several times and approached the arm. He heard a faint banging noise, and looked around to see Kayla hammering on the windshield with both fists. She was in tears; shaking her head back and forth, imploring her husband not to go through with this.

Kurt was determined, however, and giving Kayla a quick nod and thumbs up, he sunk the chainsaw into the arm.

The saw dug in deep, and Kurt leaned into it with all his weight. Blood erupted from the cut like a geyser. Bits of flesh, muscle, and all manner of gore flew from the chain in all directions.

Kurt had lost any doubts by now. The first time he'd used a chainsaw, it had slipped off the limb he was trimming, and sunk into his thigh. That wound was practically identical to the cut he was making in this arm. The size of this monstrosity being the only difference.

The saw started to bog down as it sank deeper into the tissue. Kurt was straining with all his might. Suddenly, the saw hit something solid and stalled completely. He'd hit the bone. If Kayla were out here, she could tell me if it was the radius or ulna, Kurt thought.

Kurt propped one foot against the arm and tried to jerk his saw out of the wound, but it was stuck fast. As he continued to heave, the ground began to tremble under his feet. The arm gave a sudden lurch and began to pull back into the kudzu.

The lurch knocked Kurt down, and he scrambled on hands and knees back to the passenger door. Kayla opened the door and pulled him inside. He crawled across her and slid behind the wheel.

"Go, go, go!" Kayla screamed as they both kept an eye on the arm.

Foot by foot, the arm withdrew into the kudzu. Kurt gasped as the hand came into view. Huge fingers the size of railroad crossties made a fist the size of a boulder. The final straw was what they saw sticking out between the fingers.

Antlers protruded between the thumb and index finger. Kurt counted at least eight points; a nice size buck for any hunter. Kurt cranked the truck and slammed the gearshift into reverse. He drove backwards until he was able to turn. In the rearview mirror, they watched the arm slowly disappear into the kudzu.

Kurt dropped the truck into the gear and sped away. Kayla leaned into his shoulder and sobbed. He didn't take his eyes off the road the rest of the way home.

Anxiety

People, too many people
Anxious, scared, feeling alone
The thoughts become too many.
My mind runs too fast
How can I stop this,
How long will it last?
I just want the freedom
Not the dread that comes along
I want to be normal
Not some person in a song
I don't want these feelings
I don't want this hurt
I need someone to help me
To make this all go away
But if they do, then how could they stay?
Let me be free from this misery.
I will soar in the sky. Free from my mind.

The Peaceful Pond

The long green grass mixed with white flowered clover.
A green darting dragonfly hovers over.
The water is cool, dark, and deep.
Down in the muck catfish and turtles sleep.
Suddenly my prize leaps out of the water with a thundering splash.
A monster sized Big Mouth Bass.
My fishing pole has awaited in anticipation this whole time.
I kick back and wait for the slightest tug on my line.
On this warm summer day the sweet taste of success will be mine.

Stress

If stress was a color

It would be dark blue

As dark blue as the ocean during a terrible storm

If stress was a taste

It would be like taking a bite into an unripe strawberry

If stress was a feeling

It would feel like butterflies with razor sharp wings in your stomach

If stress was a smell

It would be as putrid as soured milk

If stress was a sound

It would be like a constant defining ringing in your ears

Loving Now

You never miss the sun until it sets in the sky
Clouds low, light dark
Waiting for the dark to part

You never miss the warmth until it disappears
Cold sharp, wind quick
The fog surrounding you so thick

You never miss the birds, until the chirping goes away
The noise you never anticipated
Suddenly just faded

But when the sun sets we get to see stars
The beauty in the dark
A calming of your heart

And when the warmth is gone you get the snow
Snowflakes crystalize
Each a treasured prize

Like everything else, the birds can enjoy their rest
And you have one too
You enjoy what the beauty of silence can do

The warmth always comes again
Never fully passing away
Making us remember every moment has its day

Pay attention to the present
It's a memory far to soon
Next thing you know, you've just missed full moon

My Mother, My Own

I am from the gardens of green beans and tomatoes,
The ones where mud pies formed at my fingertips when cool rain struck the earth.
I am from the rose bushes that prick your fingers,
Even though Mom always warned me,
“Stay away, you’re gonna get hurt.”

I am from the travel to his house on the weekends,
The knowledge that the bruises on my legs weren’t going to be from falling down.
From the bare necessities of living,
From the curiosity of what tomorrow would bring,
From the knowledge that I would make things better someday, somehow.
I wonder what he thinks when he hears my name now.

I am from the popcorn parties with my siblings,
The distraction from the fact mom was working late again tonight.
We never minded, as we knew things were going to look up for us one day.
All we could do is pray and love,
Love and pray.

I am from the focus on my academics,
The perplexity and fulfillment of it warming my conscience,
Leaving me always wanting to achieve and learn and experience more.
I am from the need to make something great of myself,
The need to make my family proud.
I am from the late nights of studying so I can get to college one day,
For the first time in my family’s history.

I am from the love that is chosen,
Not fabricated from blood.
From the family that cheers me on,
That supports me and doesn’t hold my head beneath the pond.
I am from a new line of ambition, strength, and valiance beyond measure.
Only now, I will feed that bonfire,
Giving in until there is no fuel left to be found.
I am the daughter of my mother,
The being of my own.

Where I Am From

I am from craft supplies nobody uses anymore.
From being a daddy's girl
And going on fishing trips in the summer.

I am from ugly wallpaper and overgrown flowers and shrubs
That I tried, and failed, to tame.

From the TV constantly running
In a room that's way too hot all year round.

I am from dancing to old vinyl records
And stories about working on the railroad.

From Christmas and Easter at Grandma's
And deer meat from my uncle's hunting trips.

I am from twin black cats and countless strays as friends.
From "because I say so" and a family that ignores problems
Until they can't anymore.

From being the person everyone goes to when they need someone to talk to
The therapy friend.

I am from countless notes left laying to remember to do things,
Yet still being forgotten.

From an apple pie recipe passed down
And from secrets my grandpa kept from all of us.

From peace on a cardinal's wing
And wondering which of my family members came to visit from heaven.

I am from pictures on the walls reminding everyone of what once was.
When Grandpa was still alive and when Grandma remembered things.

I am from hating that old house now because there are too many memories attached.
From avoiding the dog that was once my best friend
Because she reminds me too much of Grandpa and it's too painful to remember.

From having to repeat myself countless times
and Grandma still not fully understanding.
From not knowing why the place I used to view as my home
is unraveling.

I Am From Black Culture

I am from the motherland. Things considered ghetto and ratchet
until they end up in fashion.

I am from cornbread, collard greens, and baked beans. From brothers and sisters
in bondage, yet "free". Hushed over voices, yet told we're too loud.

I am from celebrating my culture
then being told it's a form of voodoo, hoodoo, and witchcraft.

I am from my hair, for it is art and knows no restraints such as gravity.
My hair redefines reality.

I am from looks of hatred and suspicion from just walking into a store

I am from the sound of gunshots. From being shot even with locked doors
In my own home.

I am from being told to put my head down, hands up, and somehow
Still getting locked up.

I am from negro spiritual, gospel, rumba, blues, bomba, jazz,
R&B, rock and roll, reggae, hip-hip, afrobeat, funk, and
Even country.

I am from the cries of my brothers and sisters dying right before
My eyes. Being treated like weeds, uprooted, put in a
Foreign land, growing again, only to be cut down.

I am from big family reunions with drunk aunts and uncles and the
Music bumping while the kids run around.

I am from summer days where it's "too hot for lotion" and
Precede to be called ashy. My skin glows in the sun
Yet it is still shunned for being too "ugly".

I am from the Eve gene, AAVE, emancipation, Jim Crow laws,
Segregation. Every year we find new definitions of the word
Freedom.

I am from perm relaxers and bleached skin
Just to "fit in".

I am from strain and frustration from mothers' cries.
I am from Breonna Taylor and Elijah McClain and yes,
Say their names.

I am from my ancestors and all of their achievements
That allows me to be who I am today.

I am from Black Culture.

Country Song

She styles hair, does manicures too,
at Sassy Girl's Bonbon Salon
(The Place To Go For A Killer Do),

and he drives a long-haul truck,
popping Addies to stay awake,
selling weed for an extra buck

to pay off their subprime loan
and not have their house repo'd.
"We're screwed," he says, "screwed to the bone."

Then she tells him he's her hot mess,
brushing back a wisp of his hair,
adding, "honey, I got no regrets."

And though they get high, they somehow survive
and managed to raise three kids
(who say they'll visit, but never arrive).

Last night she held him while he was asleep
and heard him mutter, "Aint nothing will keep."
Whoever dies first, the other will weep.

Interlopers

We have fished this creek for years,
catching black nosed dace and
red nosed dace, the occasional hornyhead
fat with her July eggs, but my brother
reminds me of the trout
he caught here in the 80's.

*One right after another,
as soon as the line hit the water,*

he says. I remember him
standing on the big slanted rock
where the deepest and coldest water
pooled, reel in hand, and a stringer full
of still flipping rainbows. I remember the sound
of steel against the scales, the scuff and scrape
of friction and blade. I remember the red bleed
of bellies opened and their blue-purple guts spilling free,
the slicing just behind the gills as he cut off the head.
And I remember how he tossed those entrails
to feral cats nearby. Their tails twitching but eyes fixed,
feasting on fresh iron and innards.

His hands move slower now as he shows my son
how to prepare his catch, separating the skin and bones
from fin and flesh, teaching his nephew the way he taught me.
They coax a tabby from the rhododendron to offer the insides.
On this bank, with the blood and mud washing away
in the soft pull of a current, we all have learned
what it means to give and to take.

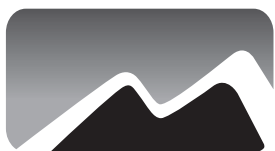
Must Be Present To Win

I'm not sure how much
winning
is involved in life
but I'm certain
being present
is.

Traveling highways
or dirt roads
I'll keep an eye
on the rear view.
My history is one thing
of which I can be certain
other histories are less clear.
The doctor can check my vision
only I can check my view.

Looking ahead
over ornaments and through sights
deciding to turn left or right
at the forks
sometimes there are directions
other times indications
but whatever my destination
I'm on my way there.

My key to connecting
past and future
is keeping a hand on the wheel
a foot on a pedal
sight on the road with
eyes on the prize
whether I'm going to place or finish
I've got to be presentish to winnish.



Mountain Empire
Community College Foundation

