

RUCKUS *Summer 2025*

Student Literary Magazine
The Lehigh Valley Charter High School for the Arts

SENIOR STAFF

Cadence Ryan
Gianna Carbone
Everet Smith
Haven Simmons
Bee Kanofsky
Eclipse McKissick
Rayna LeBlanc
Maddie Hess
Alyse Gammons
Lila Pieson
Helena Velez
Liani Vargas
Simran Kaur

ADVISOR

Heath Mensher

Email RUCKUS: chartsmag@student.charterarts.org

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RUCKUS

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Cover art by Lila Pieson

The works contained within *Ruckus* are the artistic expressions of the individual members of the Literary Arts Program. This collection is not intended to be viewed as a statement about the views of Charts as a whole. Some readings and other content in this magazine may include topics that some readers may find triggering and/or traumatizing. We apologize for any content which may be viewed as offensive.

A Glitch in the System

By Cadence Ryan

A glitch. That's all it took to end an entire world. Not fire, not war, not some dramatic apocalypse—just an error in the code. I can't stop thinking about the people who lived in that simulation we built. How real everything felt to them. How hard they worked. How fiercely they loved, fought, struggled—all for a life that wasn't even real.

And in the end, it was our mistake that erased them. They did nothing to deserve it.

I wonder what they thought when it happened. Did they even have time to think? Or did it all unravel too fast for their minds to process? Part of me wishes we'd given them some warning—some kind of closure. But the glitch was too big. Too obvious.

Usually, when a simulation starts to crack, we phase it out slowly. Push out a pandemic, nudge an asteroid off course. Sometimes we get creative—zombies, aliens, you name it. Let the world end with some flair. But this time, everyone glitched back seventy-five seconds. Simultaneously.

A single person, we could brush off. Call it déjà vu, or a dream. But when the whole world

jumps back in time together? That's too much to explain away. That's a tear in the fabric. A crack in the illusion.

So we pulled the plug.

No warning. No countdown. Just—end.

It felt wrong. Usually, people get time to react. To spiral. To panic-buy eggs, milk, and toilet paper like that would somehow shield them from annihilation. Others cry, fight, pray, or just sit there—quiet and still—staring at the sky.

This time, they got nothing.

When I first started here, I thought it sounded exciting. My real life was painfully ordinary, and now I was being handed the chance to design entire worlds. Billions of lives at my fingertips. A digital god. It was intoxicating.

But no one warned me about the guilt.

No one said how much it would hurt to be the one who ends lives—fake or not. Most people at the Institute don't think about it. They convince themselves these beings aren't real. That it's all just data. A training ground for our world. A tool.

But I can't make that separation. I've seen the way they live. The way they hope. To them, it is real. As real as this feels to me.

After my first month, I wanted out. I brought up my concerns, tried to quit, even offered a two weeks' notice. They laughed. Said I should've read the fine print. Once you join the Institute, there's no leaving. You become government property.

I signed my life away and now I'm stuck.

I can't stop thinking about those people. Not just as lines of code, but as people. What if I'm no different? What if this reality I cling to is just another simulation? What if someone's watching me, waiting for my world to glitch?

Today, after the shutdown, they let me leave early. Said it's best to start a new server on a fresh day. But I know the truth—they saw it on my face. I wasn't okay. I needed to go home, get some rest. Try to forget.

But I can't.

I can't forget that I ended a world. I can't forget the silence that came after. I can't forget that they trusted their reality—and we took it from them.

Mid Day, Late June

By Hannah Kraybill-Greggo

I am born on a Monday,
a tiny blossom unfurling into a new week
fresh tiny eyes the color of dirt,
barely able to open to the sun
on the last afternoon in June

the tender palms that hold me,
first call my grandparents

covered in dew drops and sweat,
my Mother said "come meet
your youngest granddaughter, she's here"

"We're outside" a kind voice answered
"I knew she would be when I arrived"

(My little bloom was worth ignoring
the bramble)

I am born eight years after the promise
of a world's end
a millennium of fated misfortune
to the believers in destiny

my parents had looked fate in the eye-
yet they blinked and here I was.

two weeks and many years late,
but here nonetheless

I am born to the angry whispers
of odds that my existence defied-

and the murmurs of gratitude
that remind me, reinvention is always possible.

I am born somewhere between
Long Island and Lancaster,
between the moment where a head bent
in prayer raises for a fight

I am born halfway through a story that is not
my own
the first half is only warped time-
words pushed to the outskirts of our garden-
so far that they formed a wall.

I am born the youngest and only,
my petals shiny new,
but my roots deep into the
rivers and valleys of time.

Vodka Flavoured Tears

By Alyse Gammons

You stare down at the bottle in front of you.

It is leaking dribbles of Smirnoff onto the countertop, having been tipped over three hours ago in an accidental drunken shove. It looks almost like it is crying, tears escaping the neck and rolling down the countertop to the floor.

In your still intoxicated state, you can't help but see your mother's face in the puddle it has left behind. Her mahogany skin gleams in the light, and her tightly kinked curls bunch together in a neatly fashioned bun.

She is beaming up at you through the puddle, her eyes shining with a pride for you that you have not seen since she passed in your eighth grade year.

You remember how in your younger days, right after dad died, she would treat you extra carefully. Like you were always on the edge of tears. So delicate as though you were to leak, and

shatter all over the carpet in the common room. Perhaps worried that if her son broke too, she would have nothing left to cherish.

Your eyes meet hers, as she beams at you, and you can't help but feel mocked. That the pride she adorns you with is nothing more than obligatory, for you are her son. You are her son and she has nothing to do but provide you with unwarranted praise.

Praise that does not linger out of the lips of alcoholics who pass around a bottle half past midnight, hoping that their sponsors do not catch them this time around. Hoping that AA is easier next week. Praise that does not get spoken when they are called out for their relapse, and hard pressed into cleanliness. You think of your roommate, and his distraught face as he discovered where you had been getting your stock. Tears leaked from his eyes, dribbling down his cheeks. Expression desperate and flustered and worried. Lips curled into a disappointed frown, shaking. Only unable to stop when he is sure that you are no longer a fumbling drunk.

So you shove him, and defend yourself, and
the bottle leaks, and he is crying all over again.

You look down at your mother, and she is still
beaming.

You look down at your mother, and she is
washed away as a tear rolls down your own
cheek,
shattering your drunken hallucination.

You remember your mother, and think about
whether or not she would be beaming still, as
you
crash in and out of your friends' lives. Spilling
bitter vodka flavored tears all over the
common
room carpet, as they try to keep you upright
and carry you to your room.

Faintly, you hear the bottle roll from the
counter and shatter all over the kitchen tile.
You are
certain she would no longer be beaming.

Dust between my sheets

By Rayna LeBlanc

The shadows on the wall have grown
stretched masses of black and blue
Semi-human shapes
fraying at the ends
How you've changed, no longer whole
Speckled in dry color, paint chips
Eyes hollow tunnels where trains clatter
through
Tracks rusted and narrow, winding around
your cluttered cross-hatched mind
At night I turn in my sheets to a cerulean world
Charcoal vignettes in the dim corners of my
room
I imagine your shape there, shivering and
knotted
Oh executioner
how small you have become
A mere seed, a torn paper bag of what you
once were
Comforters shift beneath my head as I turn my
back
on your quivering shadow
I'd like to shut my ears and eyes to your
presence
Your breath
So I do
How sweet,
how sweet
Finally you are gone

Excerpt of *Liars*

By Everet Smith

Breaking into this party was easier than I thought it would be. A forged invitation, some quickly-stitched dress attire, and a few grins was all it took to convince everyone that I fit right in. Now I'm making my way across a glittering ballroom, weaving through crowds of aristocrats under the light of a crystal chandelier. A grand sight. And the wine isn't half-bad, either.

A gown-wearing woman tugs on my arm. I almost spill my wine on the velvety material of her dress. I steady myself before I make a mess, giving her a smile.

"Ms. Worthington! Mind if I have a word with you?" she asks, bright-eyed and buzzing.

"Of course. And, please, it's Valencia," I say with a wink.

"Very well, *Valencia*." She giggles as she says it, as if what she just said was funny. I spare her a chuckle. "I just wanted to tell you that I absolutely adored your treasure-hunting adventures! My husband and I especially enjoyed the gold-hunting dog... What was his name?"

"Treasure." Was that what I named the dog? I don't remember.

"Oh, yes, Treasure! We absolutely loved him!"

“I’m so pleased to hear it. He was a special dog. It was truly a stroke of luck that our paths crossed,” I put a hand on my heart, reminiscing over my beloved, non-existent companion.

I slip away from my mourning act when she doesn’t say anything to break the silence. I eye her near-empty champagne flute.

“Why, a lady as fine as yourself shouldn’t be burdened by an empty glass! Allow me to take it off your hands,” I offer a gloved hand, hoping that she doesn’t notice the yellowish stained on my thumb. If I’d had more time, I would’ve found more pristine fabric to use for my gloves, but time isn’t something I’ve had in abundant supply. So, a garbage-bound window curtain had to suffice.

“There’s no need for you to go through the trouble! I’ll just call one of the help over,” she replies. She raises a hand to alert a nearby server. I swerve to block it from the server’s view.

“Please, I insist, my lady.” How many times have I said “lady”? Or “please”? Too many times, that’s for sure. But based on the way she playfully touches my shoulder, it seems to work.

“How very kind you are!” She finally hands over her glass. I smile a last time before leaving her to talk to someone less interesting. I make my way towards a narrow hallway from which servants have been streaming from all

night. The guests have refused to touch it. I'm positive it's where I need to go. I head towards it, picking up the pace as I come closer to leaving the sound of haughty laughter behind. I pretend that I can't hear the people calling the name I selected for the night. I have to complete my job before the party ends, and I've run through all of my typical lies.

A server appears in front of me as I approach the hallway.

"Can I take your drink, madame?" he asks as I rack my brains for excuses.

"That won't be necessary. I'm on my way to the kitchen anyway," I say.

"Why? If you don't mind me asking." He adds the last part quickly in order to remedy not minding his own business.

"One of the chefs is an old friend of mine. I wanted to say hello."

The server pales.

"The chefs are quite busy at the moment. I wouldn't advise speaking to your friend at this time. My sincerest apologies, madame."

I study him. His crumbling composure, his wide eyes. These aristocrats have done a number on him.

"That's a shame. But it's fine, I suppose." He cringes. "Would you mind if I waited for her in the hall?"

"Of course," His shoulders relax slightly, happy he can appease me. He bows, and

leaves me alone in the hallway. Just as I had hoped.

I set down the glasses on the floor. I shed my red coat, revealing a simple, all-black outfit, similar enough to the uniforms of the waitstaff who haven't been dressed up to pass off as one of them. I hide my coat in a nearby janitorial closet. My heart sags when I shut the door on the coat. Despite its humble beginnings, it's some of my best work.

The sound of heels in a hurry snaps me out of my grief. I grab the two glasses and make myself smaller. I scrunch my facial features into an anxious expression just in time for a better dressed server to enter the hallway.

Her nostrils flare when she sees me.

"What do you think you're doing? They aren't supposed to see you out there!" she huffs.

I melt into the floor, my lip quivering just enough to look realistic.

"I'm so sorry! I just... I'm new, and..." I stammer.

"Spit it out!"

"A guest requested that I take her glasses and fetch her more wine. And, I, well, don't know where the cellar is..."

She rolls her eyes. In a harsh movement, she grabs the glasses with one hand and my arm with another.

“Must I do everything myself?” she mutters, dragging me down the hall. I contain a smile. All is going to plan.

To be continued...

To Ignore the Visible World

By Lila Pieson

In a fit of personal disdain, I ask myself
Have I
ever lived

As if, at that moment, the question may be
answered

By a voice unknown to me

Or unaware

“You have lived for as long as
you have felt”

(I have based my life upon the necessity to
live)

But even more intense than
hatred/
/Unease/
/Diffidence

Are those nights where I feel
(And the world
Hums, hums)

Sharp edges
Become nothing more than walls

We speak softly
In no rush for
conclusion

I remove the batteries
From all of the clocks

(You hold my heart in your
hands)/

I have lived for as long as I have trusted
you

/(and a steady rhythm in
my palm—)

I don't know when it started

By Ellen Connolly

I don't know when it started—
with that look I'd seen before
a face full of two red roses
twin dark elderberries set deep within their
petals
a handful of spider's legs arranged around
carefully
so they waved in the sticky summer breeze.
a star-cut apple of a mouth
which spoke to me (closed, softly) before it
opened
and the bees came pouring out
like the bats of days before.
My sighs offer them enough opportunity for
echolocation
and they swarm in and out of the sound waves
in the empty of my bedroom.
And she sits on the edge of my bed, back bent
as they play in her hair
with little concern for the bright color
which is soon drained like the pink from her
face
and I know she's not there anymore.
Her cracked glasses
which she snapped (easily, quickly)
with her long garrote of red-knuckeled fingers
are two broken plastic bags of goldfish
which drip into my comforter
soak through my sheets and then my mattress

the bees buzzing loudly at the sweet drops.
She isn't back yet
and her head is a tulip (red)
and her spine is the stem
and something is a few thin, tall leaves
maybe wings.
Her legs are twisted roots digging into my
hardwood floor
and the weeds growing between them
have yet to flower.
It's dark out now.
Finally I rise from the bed
and open the window
so the orange streetlight can filter in
sweet-smelling like antiseptic.
I don't know when it started—
but the bees wander out the window
on the stifling warm wind
and soon I can recognize her face again
which is (flushed, raw) pink again
like she's been out in the cold
for a very long time.

To Zaun

By Maddie Hess

I am a cousin to the muscled man that is war -

I watched him age.

Watched his frail body

Across the horizon,

Dusty tumors of grief

Emerging in the skin of our humanity,

I

Fall

Down for you. And I sing a song
for hours and hours

And it is all for you -

For a giving tree's infected leaves

Falling down as the air

Meets the pipes of a flute,

For a missile flying angrily as a

Finger meets a guitar string

And together, we sing

Yet, vanish lurks behind us,

Trails at our shoulders,

A spiky underbelly of society we

Dared to ignore.

If we drank the last drop of the stories we told,

Would we die of thirst as the

Laughter, agony, and sacrifice

Ages our already weary lungs?

A sky tinged with violet

Melting down the surface of our

Stone-walled brains.

We initiated turmoil and we

Imitated passion -

We predicted populations before

Love was created
And slammed it into the door
Before it could choke its last words.
Could we speak of a wordless massacre?
Have we become a massacre?
Watching ourselves glow in the candlelight of
Our homemade funeral,
No deed could ever be undone.

We have learned in our time that
Nothing will ever suffice.

Covetous

By Cosmo Danis

Carve me in your own image.
Pour my bones into your mold.
Shape my mind to think like yours.
Taste like yours.
love like yours.
Chisel and cut at my temple until it is your
own.
Accentuate my faults, till they destroy
themselves for you.
Pluck each fiber of my being until you are all
that is left.
Pull and prod at my scalp till my hair bounces
the same as yours.
Tastes the same as yours.
Loves the same as yours.
You can drag me through hell and back as
long as I can rub off whatever was left of me
on the way.
Let me creep into your skin.
Tell me how to have your skin.
Teach me how you take each step.
Explain to me how you word each rhyme.
Let me grab a magnifying glass and take a
look inside your brain just to see how it
functions.
Let me take apart each limb from your body so
I can attach it to my own.
Why is the god up there so unforgiving as to
deny me the right of being you?

You are all I want.
Each little imperfection.
You are all I need.

2008

By Felix Murch

When I was born
Gay marriage was not yet legalized
My small body in a Obama onesie
Face full of hope

When I was born
My parents struggled for rent
Strapped to my mother's body as she took the
bus
My dad walking to his school

After I was born
We moved over 3 times
Rent increasing far too much for us to stay
Jobs paying far too less to keep us inside

I cried when we left San Francisco
Biting, screaming, and crying
As we left the only safe place I knew

Pennsylvania is now my home
But it doesn't feel safe

I miss when church didn't feel oppressive
We stopped going after we moved
Places meant to be bastions
Now filled with guns and harsh words

9 years after I was born
Women filled the streets of DC
My pink hat hot with rage for someone I did
not understand

8 years later and now that man is back in
office
And my hat is burning with anger
My state turned red
And my face drained of hope

The Apartment. The Home. The Fire Escape.

By Samantha Suarez

My earliest memories stem from apartment
3C.

end of the hall to your left.

it was not my house rather it was my great
grandmothers
though it might as well have been mine as
well.

mi casa es su casa

a phrase not spoken but understood
we were just a floor above

but preferred to be closer to the ground
grounded in apartment 3C.

the rooms were yet to be bustling with great
grandkids

I was the only one

so instead the space was filled with laughter
from adults

and conversations among teens.

yet the memories did not hold any less value
all that mattered were the smiling faces of my
dear family

pure joy

I remember much from the third person

perhaps it is because my mom took so many
videos and photos.

my pov that of a camcorder.

but I remember nonetheless.

I remember the simplicity

the chocolate oreos.
the hungry hungry hippo games.
and the fire escape just outside the main
bedroom.
from what I remember
the metal had yet to rust and it was thicker.
I always wondered what it would be like to just
sit
and admire the skyline on those rickety stairs.
but of course I was far too young to ever dare
to escape through the window and just sit in
admiration.
now I am too old and the stairs too weary
if they could barely hold the weight of a child
then it cannot hold the burdens of grief
I am older.
no longer the only child running through the
halls.
no longer running at all.
the rooms aren't filled with laughter.
just a dense air, a certain sadness.
it's been years since I was able to call this
place home
or call it anything
it faded from my memory as most things do
but when I came back there was nothing but a
casket of what once was.
there are no more chocolate oreos.
no more hungry hungry hippo games.
no more apartment.
no more home.
no more the person who made it home.

and I can no longer return
to find out if the rickety stairs can hold my
weight
and that of the tolls of life.

Colic

By Kelsey McIntyre

You think you know love.

You cradle it, convinced it's a sleeping baby,
soft and pink and smelling of sunshine.

You whisper promises into its downy hair,
vows of forever, of unwavering devotion.

You build altars for it, draped in silk and strung
with fairy lights.

You curate playlists dedicated to its supposed
perfection.

Then it wakes.

And it screams.

Not a gentle cry, not a whimper for milk.

This is a banshee wail, tearing through the
carefully constructed serenity you've built.

It claws at your face with needle-sharp nails,
leaving trails of blood you try to convince
yourself are just vibrant rouge.

You try to soothe it, humming familiar melodies, reaching for the soft blanket you thought would always comfort it.

But it thrashes, spitting out the lullabies like poisoned wine.

The blanket burns your skin.

You realize it's not silk, but barbed wire, woven with the broken promises you thought you'd buried.

You see the love you thought you knew, morph into something grotesque.

Its eyes, once shining with adoration, now glint with a possessive, hungry light.

Its lips, once whispering sweet nothings, now curl into a snarl, spitting accusations, demanding more, always more.

You're trapped in its orbit.

Every attempt to escape is met with a tightening grip, a vise around your heart.

The altars you built crumble to dust, the playlists become a discordance of torment.

The fairy lights flicker and die, leaving you in a darkness as thick and suffocating as shame.

You start to question everything.

Was it ever love at all? Or was it just a
beautifully packaged delusion, a shimmering
mirage in a desert of your own making?

The answer doesn't matter.

Love, in its wrath, is a storm that strips you
bare, leaving you shivering and exposed.

It's a fire that consumes everything you are,
leaving only ash and the bitter taste of regret.
It's a tidal wave that drowns you in its
undertow, leaving you gasping for air you can
never quite reach.

And you, foolish you, thought you could tame
it.

You thought you could contain it.

You thought you knew love.

Maybe In Another Life

By Lila Dobrowolski

Maybe in another life,
my bones and my skin are intangible,
and you held no power over their creation.
My soul floats through the waters of time,
the fragments of a siren and a sailor.

Maybe in another life, I will know your touch,
know it as the strokes of a tired hand
against my arm, real and packed with purpose.
I will know your nose as confirmation.
And your eyes as my eyes,
and the patterns of your age spots
as the stories that shelter me.

Maybe in another life, my mother
wrapped her tiny hands around your neck,
spun around in the chairs in your barber shop,
learned Italian in the double house on Pine
Street,
stomach full of baccala and petrali on
Christmas Eve.

Maybe in another life, your home was the only
one
that taught her important lessons,
Your hands the only hands that rocked her
cradle,
and your voice a wall against
the atrocities raging on outside.

Maybe in another life, we know nothing
of incompleteness. Of stuttering, of shame.
Of gnawing holes. Of dying
on the battlefield of mutilated trust.
Nothing of relief, or rust, or fragments of
cosmos.
Nothing. Of who we are
or what we could be
had we been born under different moons.

People Watching

By Grace Stapp

My little brother is 8 years old and likes to watch people as they walk past the windows. We call it “people watching,” the activity he does so intently. He could watch them for hours. I used to wonder why. What was the appeal? They were just people, people who we would never see again. People who were just a blip on my radar. But he knew better than me, that that wasn’t the case. Those people were all living and breathing, and they all had their own stories to tell.

I struggled throughout elementary, and then even more throughout middle and high school. I always tried to pin blame on other people rather than myself. How could I have chosen to put myself in this position? It must have been someone else’s fault. The world was out to get me. I never really thought about what other people were going through, even when I was the one inflicting pain onto them. I just didn’t care. I couldn’t wrap my head around the fact that these people cry too, these people laugh, they live and they die. I was always so focused on myself, I never got a chance to look around. I never got to understand why we are the way we are. Why do we all feel things the way we do? Why do we love, why do we hate? I’m in awe of the

world now. The billions of people with each their own stories to tell.

We all have different minds, different thoughts, and completely different worlds. We will never know the silent battles people are facing, and we will never walk in each other's shoes. Do we really need to do that in order to empathize with each other? To understand? I wonder every day why we all have such distance from each other. Yes, there are families, there are couples, there are friends, but everyone else is a stranger. Just think about that for a second. You only know so much of the world, or in reality, so little. How much of the world do you not know about, how many people have you never met? How many relationships do you not have?

I want to understand the world and the people that make it, but I'm afraid I don't have the capability, that I don't have the strength. Yet I keep pushing for something, anything at all. I pray to get a glimpse through every person's mind, to try and fix things. To make it better than it is now. We made this country because we all came together to fight for it, so why aren't we fighting for each other anymore? What happened to loving thy neighbor? Loving thy neighbor regardless of their pains and trauma. Regardless of their sexuality or gender. Regardless of the situations they were born into.

In the meantime I'll sit with my brother,
looking out the window. I'll watch the people
with him as they stroll by, and I'll try to wrap
my head around this strange and cruel world.
I'll try to remember why I was put here. I'll try
to remember the struggles and triumphs I
overcame to get here. I will look in the mirror
and see the world looking back at me.
Because I am a part of it, and shouldn't I be
proud?

A Last Name

By Danica Dollenger

My birth certificate says: Female Caucasian
Mother: Laura Yundt Dollenger, 29, Caucasian
Father: Andrew Charles Dollenger, 35,
Caucasian

*An hour away,
In a house of white
Our first black
president
Is settling in.*

My tiny fingers curl around my mother's hand
The gentle softness of a new life
"You're gonna do great things
With this president above us"

At age eight, the peace ends

<i>my own</i>	<i>The world outside</i>
<i>opposed</i>	<i>Couldn't be more</i>
<i>man</i>	<i>A woman and a</i>
<i>woman gone</i>	<i>Arguing with anger Ending with the</i>
	<i>And the man on top As always.</i>

Eight years later
My rights are ripped away

*I was born a girl
Pale skin, blue eyes,
brown hair
Just short of the
american dream*

My anatomy my downfall
Falopian tubes strangling me
Is it me or that man
The man who leaves hand-shaped bruises
On women's throats
And duct tape residue on their mouths

*A woman steps in
Her dark skin a
pretty hue
Her voice loud
enough to speak for me too*

I smile, watching her laugh at the man
His ignorance evident
Beside her intellect

Yet it's in this moment I realize
Her last name never spoken
Kamala whispered unfinished
Unended

And I notice for the first time
I will never be
Worthy of a last name
An apellido
At least in the eyes
Of power
Of people
Of history.

Safe Haven

By Pine Silver

Terror frequently bonded my siblings and I; nighttime walks in the woods, scary stories told under blankets, rushes of adrenaline as we snuck candy we weren't allowed to have. This was the way having siblings was— you spat at them, stole their things, insulted them, all with the mutual understanding that when everything hits the fan and nobody cares enough to be by your side, they will be standing right behind you (maybe using you as a shield, maybe protecting your back from things you can't see, it's hard to tell).

If terror bonded us, then pain made sure we stuck together.

I lost track of the times where it screamed, shouted, scolded and scorned, despised and neglected, but it was harder to track the times where, there he was, there I was, lurking in a hallway of our house with words sharp enough to cut its rope of attention away from me, from him. Our bedrooms became safe havens for only us, locked doors and whispers of comfort over shaking shoulders and puffy eyes.

Despite the insults thrown between us (idiot, selfish, cruel, and a myriad of other things), we found a strange mutual comfort in how quickly our sharp tongues could turn to it instead. Crueler words spoken, but truer than the ones thrown at each other. (Narcissist, distant, self-absorbed, self-righteous coward.)

It was second nature, perhaps, to protect my siblings– the only people in our family I shared blood with, the only people who were as scared of it as I was (maybe still am). My use of distraction to save him at five turned to scathing anger at thirteen; finally old enough to stare it in the eye and demand answers and apologies I knew it would never give.

Our bedrooms remained safe, even if we sat alone in them now; the anger at ourselves was palpable, seeping venom into whatever we touched. We were too furious at it to accept apologies, too terrified of our own rage to accept words, however hushed they might have been. Instead, our backs pressed against the wall, seeking refuge in the barrier that separated us by inches. Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen years of this forced his patience to a boiling point, and my red-hot rage to the edge.

I longed for the day that he would break free, and yet, I feared the mere thought of it. Who would protect me in his absence? Who would I protect with him gone? Our bond was forged of terror and tears; with his vacancy, the terror would wane, his tears would be wiped by others, and I would remain politely stuck, waiting in that house until I could break free, too.

I think I will go to him, when that house I called home is finally neither, look into his eyes and tell him, "See how far we've come, see what we survived?"

I will wait for him to smile, quick insults on his tongue, and my sweater on his shoulders. I will see the bedroom door behind him, agape, the spinning fan damaged from the hits it's taken. Here, the pain is not so painful. Here I will clean my wounds, take a breath, and rise for another go.

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