# RAMOIRS

2019-2020





SF LITERARY MAGAZINE

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Thank you for reading the 2019/2020 edition of the Ramoirs Literary Magazine!

The Ramoirs team here at Spring-Ford is excited to share this year's collection of poems, short stories, and photography created by our fellow high school students.

To everyone who submitted their creations, thank you for sharing your creativity with the Spring-Ford community.

We hope you enjoy the original works provided by the artistic individuals who put so much love and care into their pieces. And, who knows? Maybe you will be inspired to create your own short story, photograph, poem, or work of art for next year's magazine.

Belinda Byrne, Editor-in-Chief

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#### THE NOMAD

#### BY: OLIVIA WAGNER

When you are lost, it is impossible to appreciate and see the beauty and wonder of a foreign city.

It is impossible,

because you are overwhelmed.

You are overwhelmed with the fear of the unknown.

You are overwhelmed

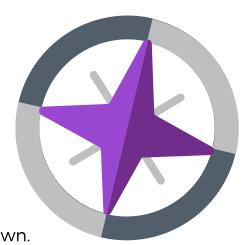
by the knowledge you do not belong.

You are overwhelmed

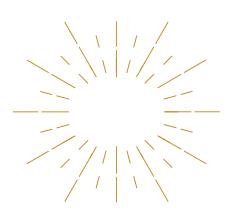
by the feeling of being utterly alone.

You are overwhelmed

with the longing to be home.







## UNTITLED

BY: BRANDEN SHANK

Death breeds life on new horizons;
Pain will always turn vengeance to violence;
Maturity shows the true power of silence;
A fork put in the right hands turns trident;
Value is found in the rough, not the diamond;
A story will forever be left numb to blindness;
The tale of galants are left drowned by pain;
The greatest thing to be learned, is the lesson of restrain;
The ash of one fire sparks the tinder of new flames;
But that tinder burns slimmer as time slips away;

## PAW PRINT

BY: LAUREN RUFFO



Only the best have to go so soon,

Up until the end you were still such a goon.

But that is what I loved about you most,

When I needed a smile you were always so close.

You radiated an energy like no other,

Awaiting the next victim your kisses would smother.

A dog so crazy yet laid back,

Regularly at my feet in case I drop my snack.

Fur as golden as the sun's rays,

Thankful for our 5,475 days.

I wish I appreciated the times much more,

Because I miss seeing your face when I walk through the door.

Happy, sad, or tense you always had a clue,

The chances of this perfect dog is too good to be true.

They say things will get better as time goes on,

But it's just gotten worse knowing that you're actually gone.

Although now we may be apart.

You forever left your paw print on my heart.

#### SOFT

#### BY: TAYLOR O"SHAUGHNESSY

My skin is silk and my insides soft I am accompanied by my twin oft Staring up at white for most of the day Till she comes back through the adjacent hallway It varies from time to time, what I hear and see Sometimes it's anger, sometimes it's glee She's brought in friends, boys and girls To see her laughing brightens my world Often times I am her only source of comfort And I aid her frequently when she needs slumber I see it all, her dreams and fears Some nights I end up covered in tears I often fear I will get replaced Like furniture that takes up too much space But for now I will relax, and help her do the same Until she is no longer my dame



BY: REYGAN WEISS

The world can be cold and unforgiving
Like the wind swirling around us now
And life can be unfair, a cause for grieving
People lie to us, betray us, leave us behind
With nothing but a glance, a sigh

But tonight I am not alone anymore
Under this sky full of stars
Surrounding me are hands to hold, arms to hug
Laughter fills the space around us, a sweet sound in tune with the music
A symphony of happiness
A harmony of love

The world may be cold and unforgiving
But tonight I am warmed by these blankets and the love of my friends
The wind now welcomed
Life may be unfair and grief-bringing
But tonight I no longer mourn

Instead I stare at my sky full of stars,
And realize that no one is ever truly alone
That people will hurt you, try to break you
But you will heal: surrounded by love, by joy, and by friendship
And that one day, one day soon, everything will be okay

## ONLY TEMPORARY

#### BY: ALISHA DOZIER

With air as bitter as the attitude I hold
And drooping eyes with a frown upon my face
I limp around the somber hallways
Wondering if my peers approve of me in this space

Everyone is sectioned off into groups But I'm the one who stands alone How do I so desperately fill this void? I long for a circle to call my home.

I've made friends and created relationships But there is still an emptiness inside me Blinking back tears I need to remind myself That this is only temporary.

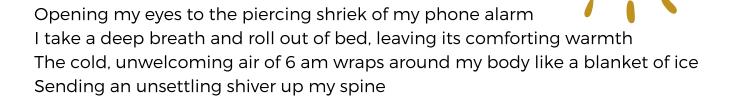
I don't need to fit the mold of a group
I don't need to change myself to fit in
Stop focusing on people you won't remember
And don't let that patience run thin.

The void inside me began to fill with comfort But the bigger picture is what I had to see High school doesn't last forever Appreciate those who love me for me.



## INTO THE NEW DAY

BY: S.C.



I stand there for a minute, just as I had stood outside the entrance of the emergency room

Remembering the feeling of same cold air pushing my body forward, Remembering how I pushed just as hard back, resisting, refusing to go inside Terrified of accepting what had happened and what I was about to see.

I head downstairs to heat up my breakfast, hugging myself in hope to find that warmth again,

Half in touch with reality,

I think I hear the insistent beeping of the microwave somewhere far and distant in my mind

But all I hear is the beeping of the heart moniter above my mother's head It's rhythmic song had caught my attention, somewhat easing the anxious pit in my stomach

My eyes wandered from the jumping line on the screen

Down to the swollen viens of her cold hand that I was holding onto so tightly

As if that was the only way I could keep her with me

My entire body shudders as reality hits again,

I realize I'm getting late

Forever wishing that I could go back in time and take that terrified 5 year old girl into my arms

And reassure her that she was not going to feel loss, that this day would get easier

I hurry to the door, glancing back at my mother standing behind me to wave goodbye, before stepping out into the new day.

#### **BACKGROUNDS**

#### BY:NATALIE MASON

I'm too often disappointed
My peers just don't live up to my expectations
Their actions are careless, inconsiderate,
I feel outpointed

Can't keep conversations,
Have no concentrations,
Need far too many confirmations
But maybe the reason for these actions can be pinpointed

Their parents, guardians, home-life could be the true explanations
My family loves me, shows me affection
But other kids may only receive neglection
Sit at home and feel no protection
Forced to act as an adult, with no objection
I can't hate solely on my surface inspection
When I look deeper
I can make the connection

I'm too often disappointed
Parents just don't live up to my expectation
Their actions are too influential to be disjointed
Set binding limitation, express fiery condemnation,
Give zero liberation
Maybe Mom's never home
Or Dad never hugs
Or a sibling is the guardian appointed



Not everyone was raised as I was, and that's my true my frustration

#### THE TALKING WALLS

BY: G.B.

It was a normal Wednesday, Just like clock work. My dad drives my brother and I To our mother's house in Royersford.

Looking out the window
Watching life go by,
I close my eyes for a second
And see a bright blue sky.

When I open them,
I see my old preschool.
With little kids running around
And their faces covered in their drool.

The playground shaped like monsters Seemed bigger than it does now. Not one adult there is one I know, I lift my lips to a scowl.

I see the black top
Where the water games took place,
I hula hooped,
And played basketball.
It's smaller than I recall.

I wonder if the building Looks the same on the inside? If the walls could talk, Would they remember my walk? Will they remember the Polly Pockets I took? Or my birthday balloon That hung on a hook?

Is the snack room Still there for me? Or do I have to wait Til lunch to eat?

Does the bins filled with trucks
Remember my face?
Will I be recognized easily
Like the coloring of the carpets?
Or will I be remembered
As a disgrace?

If these walls could talk,
Will they mention the wet naked bodies?
Will they mention the friends I made?
Or the other kids who were small scrawny?

If these walls could talk,
They'd have a lot of things to say.
Starting from when
I was a bratty child.

Ramoirs
Poetry
Contest
Finalist

My naive mind,
Dumb blonde moments,
And lessons of figuring things out.
All things that'll embarrass me now.

Then they'd talk again,
But this time about me today.
They'd mention how tall
I've become like a waterfall.

The way my style has changed Throughout the years. And the knowledge I've gained With my peers.

They'd judge my interests,
They'd judge my sayings,
They'd judge my appearance,
They'd judge the friends who are staying.

If these walls could talk,
They'd be proud of how far I've come.
From stepping into a school
For the first time,
To my graduation walk.



#### SUNSHINE BOY

#### BY: JARRELL BROWN

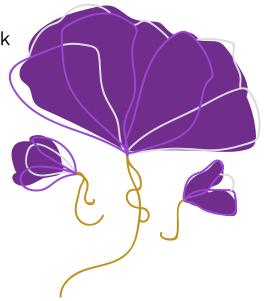
"Just wait a few more hours and then you can swim"
Apple trees and pigeon coops
Cicada skeletons look grim
I skimmed the pool for spiders
Surprised they could even swim
When the time came around we dipped right in

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Contest
Finalist

Running through the greenery
Felt like fairies in the forest
Floating and gliding and holding onto the beautiful sounds
When we touched the ground it was cool

We swung back and forth then sat in the patio for shade Reminiscent of my peanut butter and jelly days Running in the garden and picking the fruits The end of the day looming but tomorrow becomes anew

I go home today but tomorrow will be back When the suns still shining Putting freckles on my back



#### STAINED GLASS

#### BY: AMY SMITH

Look through me, and tell me who I am.

If you believe you know me, then tell me For I do not yet know myself I am still searching for my meaning And what I meant to do

Look through me, and see my struggle

The constant to and fro of turmoil bubbling inside me Melting and twisting, like a great molten sea Emotions are a whirl of paint, constantly mixing and changing hue From red to yellow, from green to blue

Look through me, and decide who I am.

Make your judgments whether I am of any consequence Is my tongue twisted by malevolence?
Or perhaps the ignorance of youth?
For could only you know the truth?

Take your thoughts of me, and swallow them.

For if you choke on your words, that shall be no fault of mine I will not wince at your pain or take on your discomfort If they fly free from your mouth, I will smile
But I will not take them as gospel or law

Look through me, you cannot.

For I am a kaleidoscope of color Cascading a light all my own I cannot be repeated by any mold Nor can I be altered by your eyes

For I am like a stained glass window You cannot change me, for I am my own image.



RAMOIRS
POETRY
CONTEST
WINNER!





The forest was humming with the sounds of autumn. Chipmunks scampered through the underbrush, noisily bickering over fallen acorns. Birds chirped over head from the tree branches which were just beginning to drop their leaves. A gust of dry wind caused a shower of colorful leaves to descend upon the forest floor. One leaf, a bright red one, glided down with all the rest, but did not quite make it to the ground. It landed on the nose of a large dog, that had been sleeping, tucked among the tangled roots of an old chestnut tree.

The dog's eyes snapped open. He yawned, and the leaf completed its journey to the earth. The dog got up from his spot and lazily made his way to a small clearing. The birds continued to chirp, but the chipmunks had vanished. It was not a clearing really, more of a wide spot in a well-used deer path. The dog walked along the narrow trail, which wound its way through the forest, gently down hill. The dog's light brown coat blended into the dry undergrowth and made him difficult to see as he wove his way between trees. The worn red collar around his neck had a single tarnished tag on which the name Buddy could only just be read.

Buddy was not any definitive breed; he looked to be part Labrador maybe, or Shepard. After a few minutes of travel, the forest ended abruptly, only to be replaced by tall grass and a variety of wild flowers. The path continued and was now only a narrow strip of flattened grass. The gurgling of a stream could be heard, and once Buddy reached it, he drank. Once done, he crossed the stream, paws sloshing in the cool water. On the other side of the brook a small herd of deer were grazing in the meadow. One young deer looked up, but the rest ignored the dog's approach. The deer were far too big for him to be any threat, and there were too many of them. Over the years, the herd had become accustomed to his presence. The lone canine wandered on, past the deer and into another swath of forest beyond the grassy field. The sound of birds chirping grew louder again as Buddy entered the woods, still following the meandering path. Fallen leaves crunched under his paws as he steadily advanced deeper into the forest. He was heading for a small clearing where he sometimes could catch a rabbit to eat.

Besides the faint smell of rabbits, there was also a strange smell that the dog didn't recognize. He paused, then turned right, off the trail and into the woods. He heard the crunch of twigs and leaves ahead and crept cautiously forward. A hiker was clumsily making his way through the undergrowth. He was weighed down by a bulging green backpack and looked tired and unshaven, as if he had been hiking for days. This was the first time Buddy had encountered a human in over three years. He kept perfectly still, and the man did not notice him until they were only twenty feet apart.

"Hey!" the hiker called. "What are you doing out here boy?"

Buddy cocked his head, but did not move from his spot. The hiker reached into one of the many side pouches of his pack and pulled out a half empty bag of jerky. Buddy's nose overcame his mistrust, and he came closer. Suddenly he leapt forward, snatched the bag, and ran deeper into the forest. A few minutes later, the man found Buddy, who was still licking the plastic.

The hiker, who's name was John, was lost. He had been lost for four days and was beginning to run out of water. Having forcibly removed every molecule of jerky from the bag, Buddy started walking away. After going a few steps, he turned around and looked back at John, then continued onward. John, partly because he was curious as to the origins of this dog and partly because he was hopelessly lost, followed. He had been wandering the wilderness for days, and had not seen any sign of civilization, so he gladly accepted Buddy as his guide.

They walked for hours, Buddy silently weaving through the underbrush, and John trampling behind him. Buddy never stopped and John, afraid to lose sight of him, never did either. Eventually the forest started to thin out, and John could hear the hum of an engine. John followed the noise and came upon the backyard of a log cabin. Two young kids were chasing each other through the yard as their father mowed the grass. John had escaped the wilderness, he was saved! He looked back for the strange dog that had led him here, but Buddy was nowhere to be found.



WAIT SOMEONE HELP I CAN'T BREATHE I CAN'T BREATHE DO I THROW MYSELF ON THIS TABLE WHAT DO I DO I'M NOT BRE- and it all goes black.

I was having a very hard day at the Philadelphia Renfrew Center.. I was two weeks into my five-week stay for an eating disorder and the expected bloat of the re-feeding process was really getting to me and I feared, as I always do, that there was something more serious going on. It was dinnertime. My anxiety rang in my ear that this kind of intense pain wasn't normal and I could fall over dead in therapy from leaking intestines. I begged for Simethicone and Mintox before and after every meal, but the crumbly white tablets that tasted of toothpaste and chalk did almost nothing to ease my discomfort.

I cried during most meals, screamed during some. The bloating had been going on for days or weeks, starting on Christmas morning. I felt like my stomach was stuffed, painfully stretching for more food every day than it ever had in all my life. Eating caused frustrating sharp pains at the top of my abdomen and agonizing throbs at the bottom. After every meal, I could feel the tearfully swallowed mixture of nutrients I was forced to choke down creeping up my throat as I complained about how difficult my recovery was. I hated it. Despised it. But I knew it was necessary to begin a life where I was living and not merely surviving, or so my peers assured me.

It was dinner, not the hardest meal of the day, that was reserved for lunch, but a difficult one to eat nonetheless. Monica, my eating disorder, was screaming loudly in my ear, but my treatment was helping me to tune her out. I was sitting at a table in a sparsely decorated dining room, eating my food. The menu: turkey burger with lettuce, tomato, and onion. Time was running down, I was sweating bullets, partly from refeeding and partly from nerves. It had been a few days since I hadn't finished a meal, and I didn't want to break my streak of meal completion. If I didn't finish, I would be lectured by my caring nutritionist, and some of the small privileges I had been awarded would be revoked, like choosing my flavor of fruit juice or being allowed an extra cup of tea with breakfast. But these bites were hard to take. I was so conflicted.

The lump of calories sitting on my plate, Monica taking on a new form in the food. "This will make you fat. This isn't safe. They don't know what they're doing. You can't let them have control. This isn't safe!" More so, though, the pain of my stomach was the thing that seemingly would not let my arm move from its comfortable place on my lap and pick up that goddamn food and shove it in my mouth. My body told me, "Stop eating! There's no more room! I'm full!" but my counselors assured me, "Your hunger and fullness cues are messed up. You can't rely on them right now." Sitting with my head in my hands, my feet perched on an uncomfortable wooden chair so my position was bird-like, I wanted to eat. I hated Monica with every cell in my body, but I simultaneously was grateful for everything she had given me. Comfort, something stable that I could rely on when everything else in my life was going haywire. And, I was in pain.

Between Monica, the torment in my gut, and my frustration with my taste buds that found this meal (and every meal) absolutely vile, I considered just putting my feet on the ground, pressing my retainer back into my gums, crossing my arms and refusing to let a single molecule slip into my mouth. There were five minutes left in the designated dinner period, at the end of which I would be asked "chocolate or vanilla?" for the dreaded Ensure Plus nutrition drink, and I began to panic. With half of a turkey burger on my plate and a flimsy plastic cup of cranberry juice, I turned to my friend Sarah, sitting on my right side of me, who was trying to help me through this meal. "Say something to make me laugh," I begged. I was out of options, I was not going to complete otherwise, and I thought maybe if my bio-chem studying, curly-haired, gay, forever joke-cracking friend said something funny to me, then maybe I would be distracted enough to choke down the slab of dry ground dead bird on the crumbly, stale pump of dough that was going soggy with the tomatoes layered on.

Sarah being the friend that she was, she threw caution to the wind, with the purpose of getting me to swallow the untouched remains of my dinner-time effort. As I took a bite of my burger, my arch-nemesis of the day. I began to laugh. A hard, deep laugh as I found her six words absolutely hysterical. Or so I thought. I tried to take a breath, but I realized something was in the way. I can't breathe. OH MY GOD, I CAN'T BREATHE!

It felt like my throat was being grabbed, tightened by Monica herself. "You thought you could do this. You're wrong. See, I told you it wasn't safe." I panicked. I raised my hand like the conditioned student I am, and when I realized that I wasn't getting the attention of Olivia, the counselor on the other side of the dining room, I stood up. After standing, my mind went back to a fuzzy memory of my friend's mom telling me to throw myself on a table if I was ever choking alone. "Are you okay? Abby are you okay? It's okay, you can stand," Sarah said, surprisingly calmly. Emily, the sweatpant-sed girl across from me looked deeply shaken. I took the most desperate, most scared breath of my life. It had an element of high pitched scream. \*Gasp\*

It was audible to the whole room. My hoarse voice tried to breathe in, but something was stuck. I couldn't. For the first time in my fifteen years of life, my lungs could not pump in any air at all. They had worked over and over, day and night, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, conscious or not and all of a sudden, they stopped.

It's important to note that choking and not being able to breathe was my biggest fear, always has been. I remember bits and pieces of what happened while I wasn't breathing, but my friends filled me in on the rest. Olivia shuffled to the phone but when she took a look at me, she dropped it and ran. It fell straight down onto the ground with a crack, as did my hope that I would survive this day.

My friend Sarah said later she began to try to perform the Heimlich on me but wasn't doing it correctly. That's when tiny, blonde-haired, always smiling but rarely eating Katherine, stepped in to save my life. No counselors were present. No help. No staff member stepped in to save me. It was up to the patients.

There's something wrong about that, and that fact still annoys me to that day. If there was no patient there to save me, I would have died right there on the cold, hard tile floor of a mental hospital. At one point, a girl ran out into the hallway when she realized nobody was doing anything about the fact that I was seemingly dying there in the dining room. She ran towards the nurse's station screaming "SOMEBODY DO SOMETHING A GIRL IS CHOKING SOMEBODY HELP."

#### Then I blacked out.

I remember regaining consciousness, panting, grateful for the miracle of air in my lungs. A counselor I wasn't particularly fond of told me "cough" and I did, but not without covering my mouth with the crook of my arm. My mom's lessons on manners and germs ringing in my ears as thirty women stared at me dumbfounded.

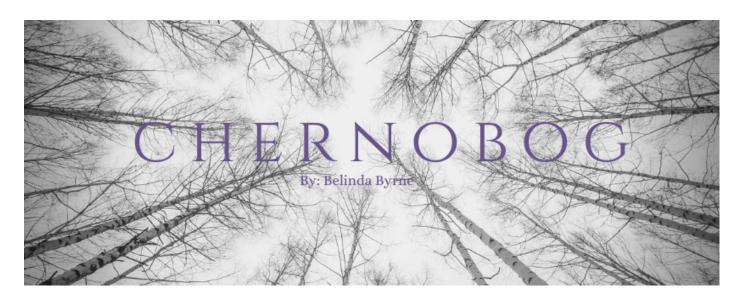
"No. Cough again and put your hands on your head. It opens up airflow," and again, I coughed into the crook of my arm, slightly confused as to what just happened. Then, I began to laugh. I laughed because I was in shock. I laughed because everybody else was so scared. I laughed in the moment. I laughed and laughed and laughed. Like a madwoman, I laughed.

And then, I ate. I picked up the patty and chewed and swallowed like it was second nature, not even tasting the food. I felt none of the regular emotions that I normally felt when I ate-the usual disgust, self-hatred, anger, pain, doubt, none of it was there. I giggled my way through eating it. My abdomen was sore from the Heimlich, but I finished. No relief, no

gratitude, no anger, no bloating, I was numb. I was happy to be numb and do something that used to be mundane in my life, something as simple as eating. Compared to choking, I could eat no problem. Cranberry juice? Not even a second thought. I poured it down my throat. Easy. I was grateful to even be alive. My meal was completed. I choked, I coughed, I cried but I had completed my meal.

That day, I had faced my biggest fear dead in the face. And I lived. This day was a nightmare, but also put things in to perspective. I learned to trust my body and to trust those around me. I learned not to dwell on fears.

I also learned-- don't laugh while you're eating or you might end up with a \*gasp\*.



"Among Slavic people, there is one weird belief that is kept in their drinking fests and feasts. They at the same time bless and curse under the names of their Gods, respectively in the name of good One and evil One, saying that good things come from good God and evil comes from evil God. In their language, they call evil God 'Chernobog' or 'black god'."

- Helmold, Chronica Slavorum

Deep in the forest, where the birch trees grow upside-down, their branches slithering across the ground. Where there is no sky, but perpetual snow falls upon the hunched shoulders of a lone traveler, his face concealed by the hood of his navy blue parka. Where the only sounds are the shakiness of his breath and the whistling wind that parts the snowflakes just enough to reveal a mausoleum engraved with the words,

#### "Chernobog,

where one decides whether to live or die."

Endride stops between two pairs of fractured pillars. One so much so that the middle has crumbled entirely, causing its upper half to lean against the other. When he looks closer, he sees the roof tilting slightly to the left, either due to the vines engulfing the structure or the loss of support. Evidently, no one has tended to the place in so long that when he attempts to calculate the passing years his headache returns tenfold.

"Why would he send me here?" he thinks instead. He clicks his tongue. "My old man finally losing it?" The possibility is very likely, he notes, after losing his eldest son and grandchildren.

The question dissipates when disembodied voices whisper from within the chamber, but no one appears to be inside. Not that Endride can see too far in. Though he should at the very least be able to detect some sort of movement.

He chances a glance to his left and then to his right. Hastily. Furtively.

As much as Endride can tell, the trees surrounding him are his only company in these mountains, and they surely cannot whisper.

What he does not know is that the trees infesting Chernobog do indeed whisper. Today, however, they remain silent, as they have not been in the presence of a human like him in a very long time.

Endride begins to turn around but freezes when his heart strikes once against his ribcage. He suddenly remembers being advised *not* to look back at any point during his journey, even once he arrives, because he is still not safe.

"One never wants to know what follows them in these woods," he recalls his father telling him, and he knows with absolute certainty that a smile did not accompany those words. Endride had not smiled either, not after what he had done and what lied ahead.

A child giggles at his near mistake, and after a moment it fades away with the wind. Endride shivers even though, oddly enough, there is no chill in the air at all. He recognizes that laugh and never wants to hear it again.

He braves his next step when he hears the crunching of multiple footsteps in the snow closing in on him. The darkness before him is preferable to whoever, no, not whoever anymore, but *whatever* is pursuing him.

Muttering a prayer that falls upon unforgiving ears, Endride advances into the mouth of Chernobog.

\*

Endride is standing on a frozen lake as his brother reels in the line from the hole they cut earlier in the morning. He stares over his sibling's head to the mountains beyond and ignores the sigh following the lack of fish at the other end.

"Can't believe I haven't caught a single thing," his brother grumbles as he tosses the rod aside. He places his hands on his knees before hoisting himself up with a groan and then stretching his back. "Did you bring me all the way out here just so I'd embarrass myself?"

"Why haven't I done it yet?" is the question lingering in Endride's mind that he first wants to answer.

"Farth to Endride."

"All you have to do is shove him in!" The voice in his head sounds exasperated and impatient.

Endride's brother sighs. "Don't tell me you're still mad about that." He slaps his dry, calloused hand on the younger's shoulder. "She messed with you, man. Cheated on you for god's sake. I just gave her what she deserved."

Endride breaks his stare and glares at his sibling, shoulders tense, hands starting to tremble. "Who are you to decide," he hisses through clenched teeth, "what someone deserves?"

His brother takes a step back at the sight of the harsh lines creasing the other's face, just now realizing how much he has aged these past few months. He holds his hands up defensively. "If you're all worked up about getting wrapped up in all this, then relax. I took care of everything. It's over."

Breath visibly appears from Endride's nostrils. The lake is brutally cold today.

"It's over, Endride," his brother repeats, more firmly now.

"No," Endride mutters, resolute, "it's not."

His brother is plunging backwards into the lake with a scream that falls upon unforgiving ears.

Now that everything is truly over, Endride lowers his arms and turns his back on the hole. When he squints, he makes out two little boys, his nephews, standing on the shore, clutching each others' hands and eyes fixed upon him with dread.

Endride's stomach sinks.

蛛

Endride is faced with nothing but pitch black. When he twists his head in the direction from whence he entered, the decaying pillars and squirming birch trees are gone, but he never heard door closing behind him. The scent of a previous downpour clogs his nose, along with the smell of fish. He covers his mouth with a gloved hand.

"Are you prepared to see life after death?" a woman's voice asks.

The question ripples around the chamber, suggesting the size of the room is much larger than it should be. From the outside, two people standing shoulder-to-shoulder would be uncomfortable. But in this massive, shadowy place, Endride only wishes there was another physical being there alongside him.

He swallows thickly, and all that escapes his mouth is a feeble, "Uh-huh..."

"Marvelous," the woman's voice chirps. "Remember that this is only a simulation. So we ask that you do remain calm until the very end. Thank you." The voice does not echo this time around.

After a moment, the room is brightening. Strips of LED lights shine above Endride, and even when he closes his eyes they burn. When he opens them again, confident they have adjusted enough, he sees all four walls are constructed of eroded stone.

"What the hell?" he mumbles under his breath.

"The simulation will now commence," the voice chimes in again. "A word of advice..."

Endride scoffs, uneasy. "Yeah?"

He rocks back and forth on his heels, waiting. "Is it just me or is she pausing on purpose?"

"Hold your breath."

"Wait! What do you-?"

Endride's throat tightens.

Water begins pouring down from above on all sides. And at this rate, the room will fill up fast.

"Wait, stop it!" he yells as he nearly trips over his own feet trying to scramble to the center. Water is already lapping at his ankles. He can barely hear his voice over the roar of rushing water. "This looks very real to me!"

"This is only a simulation. Please remain calm."

"Like hell this is a simulation! I said stop it!" Endride goes to launch himself at a nearby wall to find some sort of exit, a doorway of some kind, but there is too much water to safely pass through. Plus, the water is up to his knees now, and it is becoming more difficult to move by the second.

"This is only a simulation," the voice repeats. Is he imagining an edge to her tone now? "Please remain calm."

Water sprays onto Endride's face, and he cannot tell it apart from the tears running down

his cheeks. He will not accept death by his hand, not if it will be like this. His decision has been made in only a couple of minutes.

"I DON'T ACCEPT MY DEATH!" Endride screams, slapping his palms against the water at his waist. His soaked jeans make his legs ache, and he is struggling to remain upright. "I DON'T ACCEPT IT! I'VE HAD ENOUGH!"

And like a faucet being turned off, the flow of water miraculously stops. The voice does not speak right away, so he is left with the ringing in his ears and the trickle of the last water droplets.

Endride's hair is sticking to his face, but he does not lift his hand to peel it away. He does not move at all.

"You do not know what Chernobog is, do you?" the voice taunts.

He swallows thickly, catching his breath before he replies confidently, "It's where people who want to die can see what death will be like if they choose to end their life."

"Correct...But not for people like you."

His snarky response dies on his tongue in the second half of her sentence. "People like me?"

The voice snickers. "I see your father did not tell you."

Endride balls his hands into fists, and his teeth are chattering both from the cold and his rising exasperation. "Tell. Me. What?"

"Monsters like you don't get to choose."

\*

Endride's father watches his only remaining son with indifference as he explains what he has done. Whom he has murdered.

"I can't live with what I've done." Endride is on his knees before the armchair, face buried in his hands, body convulsing with sobs. "I don't know what to do, father."

"Look at me," his father demands. Even sitting in his chair he looms over his son, crushes him with the weight of his detached tone. "Deep in the forest, where the birch trees grown upside-down..."

Endride listens attentively to his father's directions and sets off the next day at dawn. When he looks back at the cabin that suddenly no longer feels like home, his father has already disappeared back inside.

\*

"Your father sent you to Chernobog, knowing you would never return," the voice declares, "for drowning his favored son and only grandchildren."

The water stills around Endride. Blood drains from his face and heart which feels as if it has not been beating since the memory resurfaced.

The wall before him starts to lower.

"Tell me, Endride..."

He lifts his head to the ceiling despite the lights. Short gasps escape him.

"Do you know what it feels like to drown?"

Before Endride has time for her words to sink in, a wave crashes towards him, sending him spiraling until his back slams against the opposite wall.

His eyes bulge out of his head, and the veins in his head pop. Quickly he clamps his mouth shut and focuses on pushing himself to the surface once the throbbing in his head subsides just enough.

Endride's hands touch the ceiling, but terrors claws up his throat when he realizes that he is still underwater. And he cannot breathe.

"You'll drown here." The voice sounds muffled to him, but he is able to make out what she is saying. "And when you die, you'll continue to drown wherever you end up. Forever."

His vision goes in and out of focus. A figure is floating towards him.

"But don't worry. You won't be alone."

The figure possesses features that have been burned into Endride's skull. The same large hands and body, unshaven face, shaggy blond hair. But his eyes are foggy, lips ringed with blue. His skin has yellowed, and fish swim between his legs, brush against his cheeks.

Endride opens his mouth to choke out his brother's name.

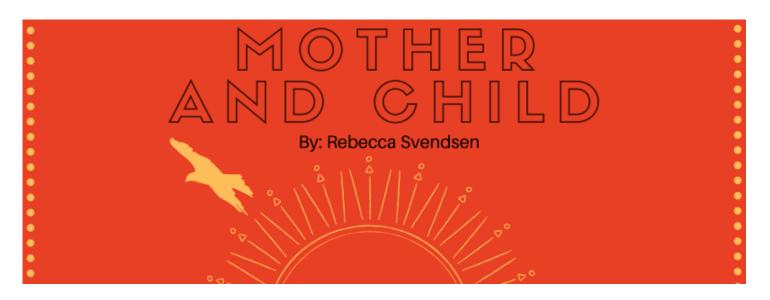
"You see, your brother will be alongside you. He did kill your unfaithful fiancee after all."

"HE DESERVED IT!" Endride's mind obsessively repeats. "HE DESERVED TO DIE! HE DESERVED IT!"

And like the woman's voice could read his thoughts, she muses, "Who are you to decide what someone else deserves?"

Outside, the trees flail their branches, whispering excitedly to one another. The voices of two children hum.

Under the water, Endride's brother slaps his hand on his shoulder.



"Mother and Child" is an original short story inspired by characters from Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* and the Ibo proverb, "A bird is not beaten by the rain on its nest."

It was probably the death of her father, Okonkwo, which sparked up a will in Ezinma to go out and find a husband. Previously, many men had wanted to marry her but none could ever win her heart, as Ezinma refused all of them. Then, she met Kambili. Kambili was not just a husband but like a best friend who was selfless and showed compassion for his wife. Together, they developed a close bond and a successful relationship. Once they were married, they had a child and named her Ifechukwu. Ifechukwu showed a beautiful, kind heart and loved her parents. Together, they were a happy family. As for Ezinma's mother, Ekwefi, she remained a special part of Ezinma's life and continued to play her role of Ezinma's mentor. Besides the missionaries, all was well for Ezinma and her family. That was, until a disease spread that would throw Ezinma's entire life upside down.

Anyone who lost a loved mentor in their life would be devastated. Ezinma loved Ekwefi dearly and it was Ekwefi that guided her through her everyday life and kept her life stable. One night, Ezinma and her husband, Kambili, were talking as they watched Ifechukwu play out in the yard. By then, Ekwefi's illness was worsening and Ezinma was beginning to worry for the life of her mother. "You've seemed upset lately," Kambili commented. "Is it about your mother?"

"Yes, it is about her," Ezinma sighed. "I fear that she may not recover from her illness. I mean, she has grown worse every day. I think she is going to die, and I don't want that."

"Death is a natural part of life," Kambili replied in hopes to comfort her. "Everyone's going to experience it sooner or later, and sometimes it can happen even to people who are not so elderly and fragile. But there's still hope at least for now so we'll just have to

wait and see what happens. But Ezinma..." Kambili looked her in the eyes, with a warm look in his eyes that almost seemed to signify a dark omen, yet one that could be controlled and expressed with warmth.

"If your mother does die of this disease, please don't let it sink too deeply into your life. Don't let it bother you too much. It is okay to weep for the dead, but sooner or later, one will have to move on and not let it get them down forever. You know, a bird is not beaten by the rain on its nest."

In that moment, Ezinma felt the evil of the earth really sink into her, and she felt a dark fear as if there was no hope left. That night, Ekwefi died. As expected, Ezinma was devastated. She felt a huge, significant loss to her life. Then, the matter got worse when Ifechukwu developed the same illness Ekwefi had when she died.

Ezinma felt emotional despair and spent a lot of her days in tears. Her emotional strength seemed to have rapidly diminished from the night her mother died. Ifechukwu began the same path Ekwefi had gone down as she traveled towards her death. Ezinma felt a dark evil take over her and didn't interact much with her child. To help things, Kambili took care of Ifechukwu and gave her lots of medicine, but none of it seemed to help much.

"You're going to be fine," Kambili assured her.

"What about my mother?" Ifechukwu worried. "I am worried because she is not fine. I think she's in more danger than me."

"Your mother will be fine," Kambili said. "Your grandmother's death took a huge part out of her life and she's going to need a lot of time to recover, but don't worry. I'm sure she'll eventually return back to her normal self. It's going to take quite a bit, and I have to work with her, but she's going to be alright."

Ifechukwu was not so focused on her illness as on Ezinma. Kambili also spent a lot of time with Ezinma. He was a very wise man and knew the natural ways of life. "You shouldn't worry too much about your mother," he told Ezinma.

"But why just forget about her? Why banish her from my life when she was such a huge, important part of it?" Ezinma responded.

"Because," Kambili told her. "Sooner or later, we all lose something that means a lot in our life. And the clock can't be rewound, so it's important to move forward. Ifechukwu is your child and she worries for you, even more than her illness. I'm sure Ekwefi would want you to become like her."

"What?" Ezinma asked in confusion.

"Sometimes," Kambili said. "The best way to learn from a mentor is to become the person your mentor was for someone who really needs it, and give them the best life possible, the one you would want for yourself. What I mean to say is, take care of Ifechukwu. She loves you and looks up to you as if you're Ekwefi. So become that person for you, and that's what will help you to progress and move on in life, from this."

In the morning, Ifechukwu lay weakly on her bed, barely conscious and even Kambili who had been stable was worried. Ezinma knew she could not let her daughter go. Kambili's words hit her very deeply and so she too looked over Ifechukwu.

Something had changed inside Ezinma, like this voice that told her that Ekwefi was dead... but Ifechukwu was still alive, but barely.

Ezinma spent all day by her daughter's bedside while Ifechukwu lay still. At sunset, Ifechukwu became unconscious. That was when Ezinma decided to consult the gods for help. She prayed a prayer saying that Ifechukwu meant a life to her, that she'd already gone through losing her mother, and that her daughter was like her mother in another body. "Please save her life," Ezinma begged. "I regret all the days I spent away from her, this daughter of mine is the only way I can overcome the sorrow of losing my mother." When she concluded her prayer, Ifechukwu was still unconscious.

Kambili had left the house at sunset to run an errand of some kind but now returned. "Here," he said, "I found some medicine. This should help."

Kambili gave the medicine to Ezinma, and she fed it to her daughter, then she stayed by her daughter's bedside all night to watch over her. Although her mother was dead, she would never be fully gone. Along with that, Ezinma had a family in her life that would always be there for her.

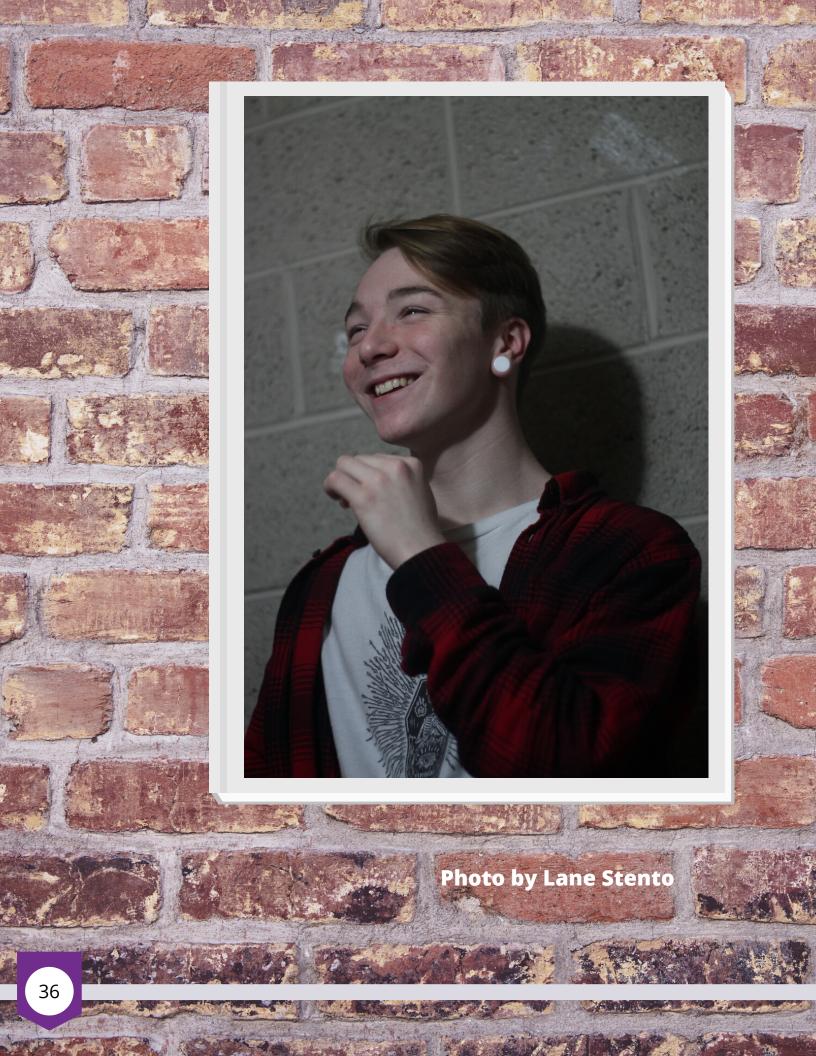
The next morning, Ifechukwu woke up. "How do you feel?" Ezinma asked.

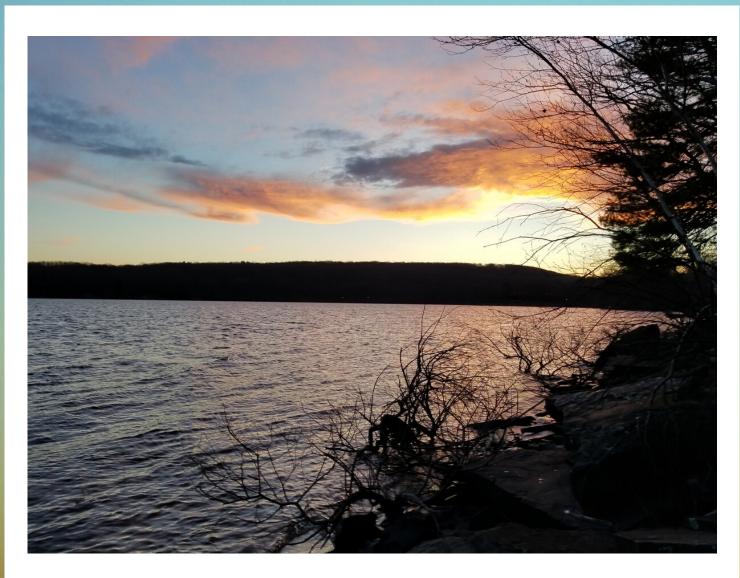
"I feel... normal..." She replied. It wasn't long after that when Ezinma and Kambili discovered that their daughter had fully recovered from her disease. "Thank you for caring for me."

"You're welcome," Ezinma responded. "You should always know that you are my entire world and there is not a single thing I wouldn't do to make sure you live the life you deserve."

In the years to come, their village was controlled by the colonists even more but aside from whatever conflict there was, Ezinma and her family managed to pull through. Through all that had occurred, the three became a happy, close family and Ifechukwu went on to live a good, rich life of special memories. When Ezinma gave birth to a younger brother for Ifechukwu, Ifechukwu felt a special connection and love for her brother, and became a special older sister in his life, just like the mother Ezinma had been for her.







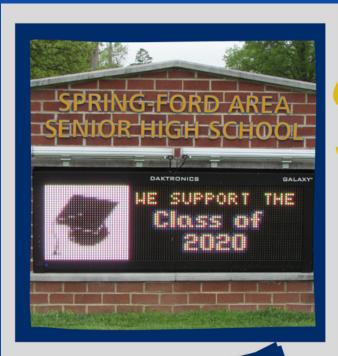
"Lake Sunset" by Austin Elliott



Photo by Monet Spann



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### **THANKS**

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