

**Westland
Writes**

2018

Alexis Tharp
editor and contest judge

Cheryl Vatcher-Martin
contest judge

Westland Writes 2018

A Collection of Local Writing

Alexis Tharp
Editor and Contest Judge

Cheryl Vatcher-Martin
Contest Judge



William P. Faust Public Library of Westland
6123 Central City Parkway
Westland, MI 48185
www.westlandlibrary.org

Compilation copyright © 2018 William P. Faust Public Library
of Westland.

All individual poems and stories are copyrighted by their respective
authors, and are reproduced here with permission.

Contents

Poems

Helaine Binstock	3
<i>Seasons</i>	3
<i>Life</i>	4
Emma Carlton	5
<i>Ending</i>	5
<i>A Piece Of Me</i>	5
Bettie Cunningham	7
<i>In Love with Right Now</i>	7
<i>The Valleys</i>	9
Erie Belle Ferns	10
<i>Be the End</i>	10
Angela Johnson	11
<i>God's Whisper</i>	11
<i>Mi Amor</i>	12
Cheryl A. Martin, MA	13
<i>Poetry in Motion</i>	13
<i>Ocean Dreams</i>	15
Catherine M. McKenzie	17
<i>Disney's Hilton Head</i>	17
<i>Farewell's Sigh</i>	17
Denise Sedman	18
<i>The Dutch Were Most Bewitched</i>	18
<i>Sweet Violets</i>	19

Angela Shinozaki	20
<i>We Become Stars</i>	20
<i>When I Realized You Were Magic</i>	21
Nkosi Shorter	22
<i>Nature's Characteristics</i>	22
<i>Children's Characteristics</i>	22
Nancy Louise Spinelle	23
<i>Serendipitous Youth</i>	23
<i>Habitat House</i>	26
Brian J. Tripp	27
<i>On Dragonfly Wings</i>	27
<i>Storms Past</i>	28
Shari Welch	29
<i>Give God Praise</i>	29

Haiku

Annette Rochelle Aben	33
<i>Nature's Diner</i>	33
<i>Eventide</i>	33
Bettie Cunningham	33
<i>Shelf Dreams</i>	33
<i>Beautiful You</i>	33
Stephanie Goodman	34
<i>Her Name</i>	34
<i>New Beginnings</i>	34
Brenda Kulak	34
Cheryl A. Martin, MA	35
Sherry Wells	35

Stories

Larry Binstock	39
<i>Skewed Rhetoric</i>	39
Asem Juhani	41
<i>Appley</i>	41
Cortney J. Rowe	51
<i>Names</i>	51
Katelin Smith	54
<i>A Procession of Petals and Pulses</i>	54
Imelda Zamora	58
<i>Friends</i>	58

Poems

Helaine Binstock

Seasons

OF SUMMER, WINTER, SPRING AND FALL – which is your
favorite one of all?

It could be spring when flowers bud – when grass returns anew;

It could be fall when colors change with early morning dew;

It could be winter crisp and clear – with freshly fallen snow;

It could be summer, bright and warm with sunshine all aglow;

Consider June – when flowers grow and love is in the air;

Perhaps October's harvest moon – a spectacle so rare;

July and August in their prime – each beach of silver sand;

December with its evergreens – so proud, so tall, so grand.

OF SUMMER, WINTER, SPRING AND FALL – which is your
favorite one of all?

Choose winter with its sparkling snow – choose summer, warm and
bright;

Choose spring when things begin to grow – choose autumn for its
gold moonlight.

Of all beloved seasons – whatever be your reasons

OF SUMMER, WINTER, SPRING AND FALL – which to you is best
of all?

Life

Life is richly brimming waiting there for you;
Gaze around, explore it all if ever you feel blue;
Things you never noticed are out there to amuse you;
See the sights, enjoy yourself, something might enthuse you;
A day you might feel all alone, no one there for you to phone;
A day you cannot sit and read – a day of fun is what you need;
Here's a list of things to do – pick a favorite one or two.

Notice monkeys at the zoo – they make you smile, perform for you;
Observe a swimming polar bear – sniffing freshness from the air;
Amble through some works of art – DaVinci and Monet;
See a movie, see a play – learn the beauty of ballet;
An aria from an opera might lift that dismal gloom;
Greenhouse flowers in winter are always in full bloom;
A musical performance – soak up its mellow sound;
Stroll a path on nature's trail – smiling people all around.

Life is richly brimming waiting there for you;
Gaze around, explore it all if ever you feel blue;
Take pleasure in whatever uplifts your dreary state

Indulge yourself, luxuriate – YOU MAY REGENERATE!

Emma Carlton

Ending

Wrapped up in books
 I write the ending
 It could be disastrous but I know it will be fine
 I've traveled abroad
 Seen the future
 I'm in an unknown city
 I struggle to see straight
 Hearing the cries from a distance
 My eyes glazed over
 Leave me to dream
 For this is not the ending I wrote
 Nor is it my book

A Piece Of Me

Stop with all the questions
 Stop with all the whispers
 Stop with all the rumors
 All of the pointing and stares
 It's a consistent war in my head always wondering why
 Every day is a battle
 To forget, forgive, survive, be happy and normal
 All of the restless nights of nightmares, sweating, and worrying
 keeping me alert
 Jumping at every little sound
 Terrified of the hallways at school, always looking over my shoulder
 Never alone, but never with someone
 The ghost of the night haunts me, always reminded
 I'm told to stop worrying and being alert all the time
 I'm told he can't reach me and it won't happen again

It's not a promise or guarantee
The fear never leaves and the memories always there
Everywhere I look he's there
I'm being reminded, forced to relive it
My pieces are scattered, not a whole
See the broken fragments around me
I had no say, my body taken from me
A simple touch and a wave of panic sinks in
I hesitate to make contact, even with the ones I love
A ruined soul is now where I once existed
Shriveled up and wilted like a flower
Humans were not made to be titanium and I am certainly not
I feel as if I am a human barricade, consistently taking blows
Seeing the artillery, but never prepared for it
I've been walking around with a wound that has not yet bled
I had to grow up too fast
The feelings I have because of my past
Each day I'm a brave survivor as they say
Really I'm not brave or surviving
Knowing this does not define me, but it's a part of me
My pieces cannot be reconfigured to change my image
I have got to move fast, in order to escape my past
But I am holding my head high
For I am taking my power back

Bettie Cunningham

In Love with Right Now

This is not a love poem about a woman or a man. This is not a love poem of making love or holding hands.

This is just a serenade to this moment in time that makes my life what it is and what it is, is mine. Ex-clu-sive-ly mine.

Yes. I'm in love with right now.

I'm in love with everything that makes me, me; from the obvious, to the things you'll never know nor see:

Like my wants and my dreams and my most intimate prayers; like my thoughts and my goals and even my fearsthat are all mine. Ex-clu-sive-ly mine.

Yes, I'm in love with right now.

Although everything is not what I'd like it to be, and there may be quite a few people hatin' on me.

And though the sun doesn't always shine on my lil' piece of earth... but for all that it is and all that it's worthit's mine. Ex-clu-sive-ly, exclusively mine.

Yes, I'm in love with right now.

I'm in love with my skills because they pay the bills—And I'm in love with aging, it adds to my sex appeal.

The things that I used to complain about no longer get me down because I've learned to love these gray hairs and a few extra pounds ...because they're mine. Ex-clu-sive-ly mine.

Yes, I'm in love with right now.

Yes, I'm in a good place, a good way, a good mindliving life contently and having a good time.

Appreciating every moment, every minute, every hourrealizing that right now is all I have and I've got the powerand it's mine. Ex-clu-sive-ly, exclusively mine.

Yes, I'm in love with right now.

The Valleys

All of us have valleys in our lives
Places that we fall, stumble or walk into
Dark, lonely places
That may consume us and confuse us
That may depress us and suppress us
Just as there are sticks and stones and rough spaces in the valleys
There are also lessons in the valleys
And I know for certain that
The valleys are God's gifts to us
They are there to
Grab our attention
Teach us
Shape us
Mold us
Help us
To become
Stronger.....wiser.....better
Only when we have been through some valleys
Can we truly appreciate
Being
On the mountain top

Erie Belle Ferns

Be the End

His razor sharp talons shred the tender flesh of my chest

Sending electric shocks of pain to every inch of my body

He buries me under layer after layer of heavy filthy dirt

It gets hard to breathe

Is this the end?

How much more can I take?

Muddled and muffled, no one hears my cries

So much to say that has never been said

I never meant to hurt you, please forgive me

Is my voice silent?

Does no one hear me?

How much more can I take?

The pills, the pills will ease the pain

Again they say, try this one, try that one

It never works the way they want it to

I think I'm broken

Can this please be the end?

How much more can I take?

Angela Johnson

God's Whisper

Rejoice! A new day is here as the fresh sun rises
I turn my gaze up to you God, ears opened wide
I intently tune out distractions and tune into your voice
Resting in comfort, knowing you are always by my side.

I look forward to my morning commute; dark, quiet and alone
My daily devotional sets the tone, pouring out Your wisdom and grace
I am purposefully being quieter in the presence of others
To create a bubble of positivity as I seek Your Holy Face.

As the rush of the day begins and the stress starts to arise
I sometimes go back to the familiar place of anxiety
But my new focus is to Pause in place
And imagine a life of your stillness and the secrets of what could be.

When the noises are loud, interruptions distract and inadequacies set in
When I'm moody, irritable or angry, I hear You a little crisper
Your voice isn't in the wind, or in an earthquake or fire
But I now recognize Your voice as a gentle loving Whisper.

Mi Amor

You are the yin to my yang,
You are the night to my day
 The loud to my quiet

I am Springtime; You are the Fall
I am a giver; You are a helper.

You are my sharp truth, my tough love
I am your soft heart, you are my hard facts.

You are my wings when I cannot fly
You are my faith in my disbelief
You are my warm in my cold.

My provider when I need care
My support when I need comfort

I am your queen, and you are my king.
You are the father of my children,
 Raising them to be godly men like you.

Together we can conquer the world,
 Alone my glass is half full.

My crush, my soulmate, my everlasting love
Ever thine, ever mine, ever ours.

Cheryl A. Martin, MA

Poetry in Motion

A Shakespearian sonnet,
As the Quill pen etches poetic magic,
April flies by,
Scribing a winter's day filled with snow crusted Daffodils bent towards
wilted rhubarb leaves,
Twirling winds dusting up autumn's leftovers,
With brown patches of earth, discolored foliage,
Lay crumbled, where Evergreen growth should be bursting through
the Tundra,
Lake shore breeze carries an angelic red winged black bird, military
stripes skyward;
Announcing to the Bard that an impending ice storm is in the wrong
season,
Writing a quick musing with heartfelt gratitude, will whisk Madame
Nature's shortfalls quickly away,
While serenading the march of spring, releasing the sweet tune;
One feather touch of a flavorful verse,
In the next breath, greetings with the grace of cream and dandelion
As the golden Daffodil pistils regroup from the icy touch,
Leaping forward leaving winter's rawness behind,
Alas, the reflection of harmony,
Words flow effortlessly, warmth emits as multiple Red Wings, Robins,
Geese,

Flock in unison, each with distinction

Solemn, purposeful flights,

A view reminiscent of the Snowy Egret prancing carefully, splashing,
fishing, and

Whoosh, overhead, his solo flight, magnificent, elegant and powerful

Nearby, Ivory floats peacefully in its man- made lake, awaiting her
mate,

Searching through the Mallards along the shore, hoping he is gliding
to meet,

With a thrust of water fowl, that white slender neck, protrudes, giving
her hope,

As he glides softly, riding the waves,

Blackbirds, feathers in flight, angels nearby, a sentry on the fence,
awaiting us, bright red wing stripes,

Up close and personal, a sight for us to see;

Knowing that a whisper in the wind, would carry him there, for that
special moment in time.

Like dances with wolves, the lull of the spirit, and willing a memory,
a call of the wild,

As when the herd of deer, grazing, by the side, as the window rolled
down, and a gasp,

A secondary glance, one creature to the next,

Is my complete field of dreams.

Ocean Dreams

No matter where I place my feet, the sea is near,
Its salty hues, memories of yesteryear,
Always at the forefront,
As I hold them dear,
Seaweed of varying stringing lengths,
Cling to the toes; and wrap around an ankle or two,
Becoming a green anklet with fresh ocean algae,
Glee of the sea,
That conch echoes near ones ear, whether it is close or far,
It is there to hear, but not spear,
Orange flesh, and webbed gear, suction of the starfish,
Glued to its reef designed boat dock;
Shrill gulls scream, shrieking, feed me, there's food here,
As the wooden creaking, fishing ship drops anchor,
Sensory aroma of quahogs, thickest clams pulled from the sea,
A raw treat tossed to some hungry teenagers,
Whose appetites
Certainly desiring a new beach palette
Shuck the shell, as the large clam disappears,
Tasting salt from the seaway, pureness, and fresh
Delectable, as the strong cries from the birds grew louder,
Random Flounder, lobster claws, to be picked apart,
Perhaps another quahog, loose from its shell,

Tossed, as not good enough for the Manhattan,
Scraps, the fisherman dumped,
Haven to the sea birds, as a welcome snack,
One last moment on the dock,
A smile from the fisherman,
Hands a bag of fresh quahogs,
My afternoon delight.

Catherine M. McKenzie

Disney's Hilton Head

If every day could start like this
with clean fresh air and dew filled mist
and harbor lights across the bay
that peer through trees as if to say

The night is gone, The Night is gone—
Wake up, Wake up, The night is gone

While birds that chatter in the trees
and Spanish moss awaits a breeze
to start the day and celebrate

The night is gone, the night is gone!

Farewell's Sigh

Life begins and ends with hello and goodbye
It's only farewells that leave a sigh

Within the heart of mind's wandering thirst
We're left in search of what was first.

Hello!

Denise Sedman

The Dutch Were Most Bewitched

Tulip Mania, December 1634 – February 1637

It's said a Dutch sailor was thrown in jail for eating what he thought was an onion, when actually it was a tulip bulb whose cost could feed and clothe an entire Dutch family for half their lifetime.

Semper Augustus,
was an ill-mannered tulip
flamed and feathered red

... it had a mosaic virus which broke its lock on a single color. Now infected, without enough strength to propagate, this variety was done in. Although once, you could have received forty-thousand dollars for a bunch of bulbs, plus a coach, harness and two dapple-gray horses.

No matter the price, the Dutch did still love their tulips. So, more and more precious bulbs were cultivated. People were investing, trading, speculating. It was tulip madness. An economically absurd group craze.

When will tulips bloom,
The colors are so striking,
When will tulips bloom?

Bulbs changed from hand to hand several times a day. Prices soared sky high from week to week. Contracts were signed. Futures were up. A tulip's life became topsy-turvy, headed toward disaster. One buyer broke his promise. Panic spread. The price of bulbs tanked. It went from fashionable to rage. The bubble burst. No longer a passion for beauty. The Golden Age was gone.

The Dutch were ashamed,
greedy, lack of foresight, too.
Good-bye dear tulips.

Once feathered now flamed.

Sweet Violets

“Hold me,” cries the baby to his mother,
 from his room with bright blue wallpaper
 that stimulates his senses
 when the lights pop on,
 and makes his mother appear
 fuzzy blue, smelling like warm milk.

He screams for his favorite toy,
 points his finger to say, “bring it to me,”
 sits secure in his high chair,
 waits for mashed potato mush.

“Da, da, da, da.”
I can talk. Hear me now.

His mother smiles,
 strokes his cheek,
 mouths “Mumma, Mumma.”
 With her lips pinched round,
 she kisses in rapid pulses.

“Hold me,” cries the mother to her son
 from the room in a nursing home,
 with its crazy plaid wallpaper
 that gives her dizzy spells
 when the lights pop on.

Son, my dear son.
I can still talk. Hear me now.

He strokes her cheek,
 mouths, “I love you, Mumma.”
 His lips pinched round,
 he kisses her cheek,
 feels her diminishing pulse,
 and smells sweet violets.

Angela Shinozaki

We Become Stars

Our parents made a little spark
Pushed us up into the night sky
With their bare hands
Our grubby faces shining with
Starlight
Our hearts pounding out
Ancient rhythms
We look down and our tears
Fall on their upturned faces
But they will not embrace us
They let go and watch as
We become the stars in their eyes

When I Realized You Were Magic

When I realized you were magic
That you wanted to come into this world
You were determined to do so
Even with all the knives and sharp edges
All the loose mouths telling lies
All the dreams falling down wells
And turning into forgotten pennies
You had a reason to be
And that was enough, I decided
For my love to swell
And my breasts to grow firm
I wouldn't stop you
Couldn't; didn't want to
Even as I worried about
Bare toes on broken glass
And cradles falling out of trees
Cruel laughter and ignorant
Jokes born of fear
And what it means to be a hafu
In a broken world
Everything has a meaning
And purpose all its own
The best I can do
And the most I can hope for
Is to help you find yours
You are not half or double
You are whole
And because of you, so am I

Nkosi Shorter

Nature's Characteristics

The wind started to blow,
As the people in the boat started to row,
The animals started to shiver,
As the bright moon drew nearer.

Children's Characteristics

Children read and children write,
Children laugh and can fly a kite,
Children talk and children dream,
Children can radiate like a sunbeam.

Nancy Louise Spinnelle

Serendipitous Youth

I lost my youth.
You'd recognize it,
if you caught but
a glimpse

It's content as a
Spontaneous smile,
made from the
sound of steps
in puddles on
rainy days.

You'll feel it nudge
you up a hill and
double dare you to
roll, until you're
covered in stains
of green grass.

It makes you stop
and point to the blue-
gray skies, while
you try and count
the geese go by.

You'll climb a tree
to ride the tallest limb
like a wild horse;
ordering the clouds away
so the sun may shine.

Then it waits till
dark for you to hold
the glow, of
shooting stars
caught within a jar.

Enticed, you blow
the paper off a
straw, blowing
bubbles to get your
shake to erupt
into a quake.

Then quite unexpectedly,
it slips away.
Unnoticed. Never
really missed,
your youth now left
for another.

Someone thrilled to
bound through
heaping mounds of
crisp fall leaves.

Someone excited
to slide across
winter's slippery
ice.

Someone glad to
sing off-key, to
beckon spring
buds into
blooming.

Someone eager on
a summer's day to
coax a rock to roll,
to ponder what
crawls beneath.

My youth is gone,
for good I fear,
except when
children gather
near.

It's then, with
bursts of laughter
and giggles galore,
I catch a glimpse
of my youth
once more.

Habitat House

This house is mine.
A house of pride,
built of strength born
in others who care.

Windows alive with hope,
whispering tidings of joy.
Walls in hues of humanity,
wrap us safe within.

This house is mine.
Here memories are kept,
of voices in victory and
children excited with joy.

Silently I give thanks.
My strength replenished.
My faith renewed.
This house is now a home.

Brian J. Tripp

On Dragonfly Wings

The sweet summers of younger days:
There were trees to climb
Fireworks to watch
and fireflies in jars to catch
Oh, how those days flew quickly by
As though on wings of a dragonfly

The brief summers of college days:
There were papers to write
And subjects to learn
Meager wages and tips to earn
Oh, how those days flew quickly by
As though on wings of a dragonfly

The bittersweet summers of mid-life days:
There was so much work to do
And too many bills to pay
Precious few vacation days
Oh, how that time flew quickly by
As though on wings of a dragonfly

Now I'm at a later stage
Fast approaching retirement age
I watch as grandchildren climb in trees
They grow so fast, just like weeds
Oh, how quickly these days fly by
As though on wings of a dragonfly

Storms Past

Youth is a storm
that passes through life
Like a thundering tempest
it rages and pitches and rolls
with a fury unrestrained
as the years unfold

With reckless hearts,
we played, we sung, we danced
Clumsy attempts were made
at something like romance
We held hands, we kissed,
Innocent, without pretense
Mostly Cupid's arrows missed
We studied, we worked, we slept
Sometimes we laughed aloud
On darker days we wept
Secrets shared, promises made
Some of these we kept

Looking back now, from afar
at all those distant places
Reminiscing with thinning hair
Time etched upon our faces
Now circumspect we view
our youthful steps retraced
A lifetime of wisdom gathered
with years that we've been graced
Ultimately, we followed our hearts
To find fortune and be fulfilled
After all, it led me to you
And to a life well-lived

Shari Welch

Give God Praise

Thank you lord for allowing me to write in

rhyme

Experiencing this glorious creative gift each and

every time

It is so exciting to enjoy this mysterious

flow

Thoughts begin to come and weaving words just

start to grow

Into themes, thoughts, and concepts that

explain

Numerous engaging aspects of life over and over

again

Wow this is fun to explore the many trails — gliding

through

Feelings of pain, sorrow, joy, and laughs from me

to you

Haiku

Annette Rochelle Aben

Nature's Diner

Cherry tree blossoms
Warm, Spring sun calls forth fresh fruit
Birds anticipate

Eventide

Sleepy sun, sinking
Moon awaits her cue to rise
Trees become shadows

Bettie Cunningham

Shelf Dreams

Dreams left on a shelf~
waiting to be picked up like~

dusty unread books.

Beautiful You

There is just one you~
You are One-der-ful-ly made.

Be-you-ti-ful you!

Stephanie Goodman

Her Name

A Profound Picture
Personally Received Gift
Nice-Looking Meanings

New Beginnings

INDIVIDUAL
FEELINGS OF FRESH AIR & LIFE
SUCH A PLACE IN TIME

Brenda Kulak

Your Words They Hurt Me
But Your Leaving Hurt Me More
Forever . . . You Lied

Her Smile Filled My Heart
My Heart Weeping From Her Pain
God's Lil Butterfly

Cheryl A. Martin, MA

Write a poem each day
Listen to the breeze outside
Reflect on each sound

Echoes of the lake
Rocking waves– swaying boat dock
Swooping sea gull dives

Sherry Wells

Early morning sun
Brilliant illumination
Bringing earth to life

Feathered friends flying
Squawking, Singing, Soaring soon
Paddling perfectly

Stories

Larry Binstock

Skewed Rhetoric

I came back to work from lunch sooner than usual that day. I had been in the midst of writing a story, and my preoccupation with that task forced me to cancel my planned post-meal walk on Chicago's Michigan Avenue, and return to my typewriter. I emerged from the elevator on the 16th floor of the Equitable Building and began the familiar walk to my office.

Since there were several minutes left of the lunch period, the employees who had remained at their desks were still engaged in various personal pursuits—reading books or newspapers, making personal phone calls, or chatting with colleagues. A group of four youngish employees—in their early twenties—was holding a confab just outside my office. I knew them slightly and nodded a greeting as I threaded my way past them. From my desk I could overhear their conversation and perceived it centered on astrology. I also perceived that none of the four was familiar with the subject. However, since it was of mutual interest, they were determined to muddle through it. Besides, this meeting was palpably more about flirtations than facts.

That evening as I awaited the elevator that would take me on the first step of my journey home, I noted that two of the female participants of that astrological conversation—whose names I knew to be Anita and Doris—were among those also waiting for the elevator. Once the conveyance arrived, we all piled aboard and just as the doors were closing, a late-arriving figure slithered between them. It proved to be one of the male participants of that earlier conversation. Wishing to be cute, Anita said aloud, "Look who's here. It's Joe!" Also striving for cuteness, Doris announced for all to hear, "Oh yeah, Joe. Isn't he the one that's a feces?" Immediately, the elevator passengers broke into raucous laughter. Since I was standing right beside her, Doris turned to me in desperation. She said nothing, but her expression clearly asked, "What did I just do to make myself a laughing stock?" I whispered an answer to her unspoken question.

"I think you mean Pisces," I explained, "And I think you might want to look up the word "feces" so you don't misuse it again, and get embarrassed. Again." Still wordless, she simply nodded in agreement.

Two days later I found myself once again sharing the evening elevator with Doris. As I looked at her I wondered if she had taken any steps to correct herself in the usage of that misused word. My conscience raged at my impolite inclination to remind the poor girl of that awkward moment. My conscience, however, was easily vanquished by curiosity. Thus, when the elevator reached its destination and we were disgorged into the lobby, I made my move.

Since I exited the elevator directly behind Doris I easily and unobtrusively gained her attention. "Doris," I said softly, trying to sound as friendly as possible.

She turned to face me, somewhat surprised at my initiating this contact since we seldom communicated. "Hey Larry," she said cheerfully.

She started to turn away, figuring this would be all to the contact. I quickly continued. "I was wondering something," I said. "Remember when you misused the word feces in the elevator a couple days ago?"

"Oh yeah," she answered with a tinge of residual embarrassment crossing her face. The expression almost made me regret bringing up the subject. But I forged ahead.

"I was wondering if you took my suggestion about looking up that word so you wouldn't misuse it again."

"Well," she said sheepishly, "I didn't exactly look it up." She became more prideful. "But I did ask my best friend what feces meant."

I was happily surprised that this girl had taken such a step to implement my advice. Further, I experienced a wave of gratification. I was instrumental in having this girl acquire a bit of new knowledge in her life. Maybe I even helped save her from enduring future derisive laughter. I decided to prolong my gratification and push the matter further.

"Tell me," I said, "what did your friend say that feces meant?"

Still beaming with pride, Doris answered, "She said feces meant an unborn baby."

I merely said, "Have a good evening," and walked through the revolving door that took me out of the building.

Asem Juhani

Appley

"And the kitchen door right here opens onto this lovely porch with an amazing view of what I like to call a very big backyard!" She followed that with a chuckle that went along perfectly with her practiced cheerfulness. "It's run a bit wild for a while but with some love . . . oh, so beautiful!" She was silent for a moment before a ping sounded from inside. "How about I give you two a few minutes to enjoy the view while I grab that?" and without waiting for an answer, she spun on her heel and was gone.

"Is it just me or do you also feel the urge to hit her with one of those fancy fireplace pokers inside just to see if she's capable of more than one emotion?" said Mrs. Kim while turning to face her husband.

"I'd laugh if I knew for sure that you're kidding!" he said, before adding in mock-cheeriness, "So, Mrs. Kim, what are we thinking?"

"Oh no! It's contagious!" said Mrs. Kim while taking a couple of steps back with her arms raised in fake horror. "I might have to send you to a farm somewhere! Oh, wait a minute, this IS a farm somewhere."

Her husband laughed while he rushed her with a hug that was followed by a spin. "It's too late for that, soon you'll be one of us!" He put her down gently but maintained a light grip on her waist. "Seriously though, what do you think?"

"I really like the house, but this *very big backyard* is way too big. And I grew up on an actual farm!"

"But it's beautiful! Maybe I can take up farming as a hobby!"

"Look at you city boy wanting to run a farm as a hobby! We don't have the time to take good care of it, honey. Between your crazy shifts and my job and school, it's lucky that we spend time together at all!"

"C'mon babe, I can already see our kids playing around that orange tree . . ." He pointed.

"That's an apple tree!" she quickly corrected.

". . . climbing that big oak . . ." he continued.

"That's a beech tree! It's like you've never seen a tree before! And my kids won't be climbing that tree, or any tree for that matter!" she interjected.

"See? So much to learn!"

"It's two acres of land! Taking care of it would be so much work!"

"It'll give us enough room to practice!" he exclaimed. "You like apples! Don't you like apples? Maybe we can start a small orchard over there instead of those ugly-ass bushes, make our own cider!" His eyes were wide with excitement!

"Ok, you're doing this on purpose because *I know* that *you know* that those are grape vines!" she said with a smile.

"You already said that you really liked it!" he argued.

"Because I do!" she replied. "The house itself is amazing, the location, the heavenly view, and I can't believe their asking price!"

"But?"

"I don't want us to bite more than we can chew! I don't want this beautiful view to turn into some sort of wasteland because we aren't taking good care of it," she answered, peeling her eyes off of his to look around.

"It won't. And if what Ms. Always Happy said about it being practically abandoned for the past ten years is true, then we have nothing to worry about! We can't be worse than . . ." he was cut off by the kitchen door swinging open bringing the delicious smell of fresh pie with it.

"So, Mr. and Mrs. Kim, did I tell you about the renovated walk-in closets?"

"Grab me that poker!" whispered Mrs. Kim. She took one more look around the place before turning to face their interrupter with a smile and adding, "We'll take it."

"Guys! Guys! Guys! Wake up! Come on, wake up!"

"Mmmmmmm"

"Come on guys! It's spring! Wake up!"

"Why did you have to be near us?"

"Because I didn't have a say in . . . HOLY COW!"

"What is it? What happened? Please tell me I still have my . . ."

"Guys, look behind you! Are those new guys?"

"Not falling for that one again!"

"Yeah, we're not falling for that trick again, Appley! There haven't been any new ones for years."

"It's not a trick, you silly vines!" said Appley. "This is real! Wait a second, why do they look so much like me when I first came here? And *WHERE is the rest of me? What's going on with this place?*"

"Because, technically, they *are* you, Appley!" a deep voice said. "And it looks like you had your first pruning this year!"

"BEECH! You're awake! What do you mean, *they are me?* I'm right here, aren't I?" asked Appley, barely containing the panic in his voice. "And what on earth is pruning? Why do *you* still look the same? Am I dying? Am I already *dead?*"

"Easy now my little friend, there is no need to panic! How about one question at a time?"

"Am not little! Am ten years old!" replied Appley indignantly.

"Oohaha, I remember being that young! But fair enough. Where do you want to start?" asked Beech patiently.

"Why am I missing so many branches? Was this a bad winter like the ones you told us about from your childhood?"

"Oh, my friend, I am way too old to stay awake in the winter or keep leaves, but pruning is not an act of winter, it's a thing humans do." started Beech.

"Humans? You mean the movers who brought me here?" interrupted Appley.

"Maybe they are, or maybe not. But from what I see around here, it's one of their kind for sure," replied Beech.

"But why would they come back? Why chop up my branches? I like my branches!" complained Appley.

"So you can have better fruit, silly! We used to get chopped all the time before them humans got you here." replied one of the vines.

"Nobody asked your opinion!" shouted Appley back before turning to Beech. "Is it true?"

"Am afraid so, dear!" replied Beech calmly. "With less branches, you get better at making fruit that is easier to pick."

"But I make my fruit for the seeds!"

"Not to humans, you don't," one of vines yelled. "And we used to be real good at it before you showed up, and then, they were gone!"

"And now they're back!" yelled Appley back.

"Yet none of us vines seems to have lost a single twig, while you got a nice grooming and some 20 new clones!" another vine added.

"What do you mean clones, you dirty, trunk-less vine?" shouted Appley, his branches shaking with anger.

"Vinny, Appley, stop!" Beech interjected.

"He started it!" complained Appley. "Besides, how can you even tell them apart, they all look the same!"

"We are *not* the same!" objected three different vines in unison, before everyone fell silent.

"Now, Appley," Beech started, as calm as ever, "look closely at those new ones, do you notice anything familiar about them?"

"They all look like me, I get it!" replied Appley.

"Take a better look, buddy" repeated Beech "Maybe focus on the top parts?"

There was a moment before Appley gasped. "Oh my! I recognize those! I *made* those!"

"Exactly!" Beech was smiling. "The humans must have liked your fruit, so they took some of your new branches, put them on top of a root, and planted them."

"And that works?" Appley was amazed. "But . . . HOW?"

"I don't really know! Humans are good at making things that we don't really understand. I doubt even other movers know how." Beech answered.

"So now, there is more than one of me?" asked Appley, his tone uncharacteristically shaky. "Are there now 20 more new Appleys? Am not sure how I feel about this!"

"How about we ask them? They seem to be waking up!" Beech's excitement was apparent. "Oohaha, new trees are always fun!"

"Hey babe, close your eyes, I have a surprise for you!" he yelled out, slamming the back door behind him.

"I'm in here," she yelled back from the living room. "And I could

really use a distraction!" He walked in with his arms behind his back. "Grading papers?"

She waved a sheet of paper frantically in the air. "It's like I've been talking to their seats all semester!" She put her feet down from the coffee table and laid down the paper on top of a pile next to her. "So, what's my surprise?"

"Well," he said, slowly moving his arm in front of him, "am glad to announce that *my students* have been listening very well," and there in his open palm was a small apple.

"An apple!" it was hard to keep the disappointment from seeping into her voice. "That's . . . wonderful!" she continued with a smile.

"It's not *an apple*, it's one of *our apples*!" he was shifting his weight from one foot to the other like he always did when he was excited.

"Woo, I love our apples. It's a bit smaller than usual, is it not ripe?"

"You still don't get it, do you? This isn't from the apple tree, this is from OUR APPLE TREES!" he continued, "The trees we planted when we first moved here! They've finally fruited!"

"You're kidding! That's amazing!" she exclaimed. "Let me see! Let me see!"

"Careful now, it may be a bit sour!" he warned.

She took a small bite. "Oh, it is delicious! Seven years in the making, huh?" and followed with another bite. "I could get used to eating these!"

"Yeah! I almost gave up on them, but they finally came through. Here, let me try!" He reached out with his hand but she slapped it away playfully.

"You must've had a dozen already! Besides," She patted her swollen tummy. "I think little Leia likes 'em! She's kicking!"

"We still have not agreed on names!" he protested before bending and planting a kiss on his wife's tummy and whispering, "You can have as many apples as you want, baby Galadriel!"

"GALADRIEL?! This one is definitely off the table!" She put both hands on the sides of her swollen abdomen as if to shield its occupant's ears before adding in a mock-baby voice, "Don't listen to daddy, baby girl, he doesn't know what he's talking about!"

"Hey, you use a name we didn't agree on and I'll use whatever

names pop into my head! Besides," he swatted a small bug off his shoulder and added, "weren't you so sure you wanted to name her Merida last week?"

"I was, but then Cheryl, from my book club, pointed out that Merida's mom turns into a bear in the movie!" she answered shyly and started nibbling at the apple in her hand. "And Leia's mom was also a queen!"

He laughed heartily before sinking into the seat next to her. "True! And her dad is the worst guy in the galaxy!"

"Oh," she said, "I hadn't thought of that!" she was silent for a second before adding with a laugh "well, it's a low bar for you to clear!"

"Wow, you think so high of me, mama bear!" he replied with a chuckle.

"So how many of the original 22 trees are still around?" she asked, dangling the apple core by the stem. "17 I think," he said, scratching his chin. "One never took on the root, we lost another one when I overworked my shears and three to the frost last year, so yes, 17 total, though six of them don't have any apples on them yet! Oh, and don't forget the original."

"And to think you almost gave up on them that year to expand the vines even more!"

"Would you've blamed me? Those grapes are amazing!" he exclaimed. "But yeah, am really glad I waited. Maybe next year I'll expand the orchard even more! Which reminds me," He started to get up. "I gotta go out and finish up."

"And I have to finish torturing myself grading these." she said with a sigh. "I was thinking we'd order Chinese for dinner, sound good?"

He bent down and planted a soft kiss on her lips. "Sounds delicious!" He was at the doorway before he turned and asked, "How do you feel about naming her Hermione?"

"This is just absurd! They're taking over the whole place!" whispered Chuck, the youngest of the vines. "It's only lucky the movers like grapes or we would've been uprooted years ago!"

The summer sun was blazing, but the vines were having a hushed

conversation, while Appley sang loudly to the little new apple trees.

“And they are adding more and more new ones every year, how many apples can a damn mover eat!” added Vinny to gasps from the surrounding Vines.

“Hey, show some respect!”

“The movers are the reason we’re here!”

“They take care of us, we give them fruit, that is how it’s always been!”

But the few hushed whispers of “kinda has a point!” were all Vinny needed to go on.

“How long are we gonna just sit here while the movers favor those apple trees year after year?” replied Vinny angrily. “Over a hundred new clones since the movers came back! How many of you were allowed to spread? When was the last time any of you got a new trellis? All we get is more Appley clones! Applones! I am not taking it anymore. We were here first, we will take back what is ours!”

“And what do you propose we do? We’re trees, they’re movers!”

“We show them who the better trees are!” whispered Vinny. “We take down their top guy!” There were more murmurs this time around.

“You mean Appley?”

“Are you crazy? That’s hurtful, let alone impossible!”

“Appley is the nicest tree around here!”

“What are you thinking?”

“I think Vinny’s lost it!”

“Hear me out you silly creepers!” Vinny continued. “None of you likes Appley as much as I do, we’re so close our roots are basically touching! We are best buddies! You have no idea how much it hurts me, more than any other tree, that it is *my friend* that is doing this to us! We have to do something or soon we’ll all be chopped wood! If we can prove that we are a stronger and better breed, we can convince the movers to expand us next year instead of them! Besides, all of those trees you see behind you, they’re all Appleys, each and every one of them is a clone that was made from one of Appley’s branches. We take the big guy down, no more new clones, yet Appley’s legacy lives on.”

The vines were silent for a moment. They liked Appley very much, but they’d grown weary of waking up every spring to more and more

new apple trees, all clones of Appley. And come to think of it, Appley had become annoying recently, with his annual chant to the new clones and the bragging over the mountains of apple crates every fall. And come to think of it, none of the Applones had grown as tall or as strong as Appley. If they took the big guy down, it'd be vine land again.

"And need I remind you of what happened when Appley first came here? How the movers abandoned us for years? Who knows how long before all of these Applones drive them away again? Maybe for good?" Vinny went on in his hushed rant. "Remember Beech? Because I do! The oldest tree in the whole yard! All the new Applones had to do was fruit, and the next spring we wake up to his stump over there! Are you willing to take your chances with that? Because I am not!" Vinny went on. "I won't set here freaking out every fall that I may never see spring! I won't be the fool enjoying myself while those canker-full trees take our place, because unlike Beech, when we're gone, there won't be a stump left! We are the originals here, we came here before all of these Applones, and we deserve to be here long after they perish! So am going to fight for my spot here, our spot here, or I'll wither trying!"

The vines were all silent. A few of them were stealing glances at Appley's branches dancing in the breeze. Others were more fixated on Beech's old stump, now a table surrounded with chairs made from the wood of the same old tree. It was a while before Chuck broke the silence.

"And how are you planning on taking Appley down?"

"Oh, I have a plan!"

"Careful now, Emmet, I don't think that old trellis can hold your weight!" shouted out the old lady from her chair under the big apple tree.

The kid jumped to the ground and sprinted in her direction. "What's a trellis, nana?" he asked after jumping into her lap.

She hugged the little boy and kissed his hair. "It's a support for trees that can't hold themselves up."

"But there are no trees around it!" noted the little boy.

"There was! When we first came here, this trellis was supporting

some of the best vines ever.”

“And what happened to vines? And why was he a tree?”

His grandma laughed. “A vine is a grape tree, darling!” she corrected him before adding, “And ours used to bear the best grapes you’d ever tasted.”

“And then came a dinosaur that ate it! ROAAAAR!”

“Oh, no! Not a dinosaur!” chuckled the old lady. “One year they just stopped producing grapes! I guess the soil was no longer good for them or something! We had to remove them less they become full of pests and insects! One of them had reached out with its roots so far looking for good soil, they almost blocked the tap root for this very tree we’re sitting under! Your grandpa said if we hadn’t removed them, we could’ve lost it as well!”

“So you and grandpa are the tree dinosaurs! ROAAAAAR! ROAAR!” The kid was roaring with his hands clawed.

The old lady laughed before adding, “Oh, your grandpa was no tree dinosaur! He is the one who planted all of these Apple trees! And they all came from this one, that’s why we were happy that we saved it!”

Emmet’s eyes widened with wonder! “This tree had a lot of children!” He jumped down and ran to the tree’s trunk and patted it. “Good for you old tree!”

A man with short hair and scruffy beard showed up on the kitchen porch. “Mom! Emmet! Come inside! Dinner’s ready.”

“We’re coming!” yelled Emmet back. He ran back to his grandmother’s side and waited for her to get up. “Are mom and dad going to have as many kids as this apple tree, nana?”

“Oh, good question!” said his grandma, getting up from her seat slowly “But I don’t think so, trees and humans have kids in very different ways,” she added while she took her grandson’s hand and walked past the Beech stump table.

“Do trees have names, nana?” asked the little kid. “Does the big tree know all of its kids’ names?”

“Another good question, Emmet! But I don’t know! Your grandpa gave each one of those trees a name with a label on it, but I don’t know if the big one even cared about their names, it just kept on,” replied his grandmother “What I *do* know though, is that before you dad was

born, his name was Leia!"

"WHAT? Why?" the little kid asked between his giggles "Leia is a funny name!"

"Not this again, mom!" said the man with a weary smile. "Go on now, kiddo, wash your hands and get ready for dinner!"

The little boy ran inside, still giggling. "MOM! MOM! Did you know that dad's name was Leia!"

"I'll never hear the last of this, you know!" the man said before looking over his mother's shoulder and adding, "I still don't know how dad did all of this on his own, 713 trees, counted them myself! It's unbelievable

"I do," she said, looking back at the orchard behind her "I loved apples, and he took on farming as a hobby!"

THE END

Cortney J. Rowe

Names

Zillah leans on the bridge's metal bars as she and Hibiki look at the river below. Reflecting the setting sun, the river is a glassy mix of pink and yellow. A gentle breeze runs through their black curls as they silently take in the sight. Zillah is the one who speaks first.

"Do you know what 'Zillah' means?"

Hibiki blinks as she processes the information. "'Zillah' comes from the Hebrew language. It means—"

"Shadow."

Hibiki looks at Zillah. Humans had the interesting habit of asking questions for which the answers they already know. Generally, however, this habit leads into a discussion; with this in mind, Hibiki waits patiently until Zillah continues.

"At first, I thought it was cool," says Zillah after she takes a breath, "'As quiet as a shadow,' 'like a ninja emerging from the shadows,' I thought. Then I realized that it wasn't something cool like that. From the day I was born, I was always in Helene's shadow. Mom knew it; that's why she gave me this name."

Zillah kicks one of the bars. Hibiki's voice breaks through her thoughts. "The word 'Hibiki' has multiple meanings in Japanese. The meaning that seems most relevant here is 'echo.' My deduction is that Dr. Yagami named me as such for similar reasons as Dr. Fontaine. My purpose in being built was to be a near-exact replica of Helene Yagami: her echo."

"So that's what our purpose is?" Zillah says as she whirls on Hibiki, "To be Helene's copies? Her reflections? Are all of our actions going to be measured against hers? Is our worth as 'creations' based on how successful or unsuccessful we are at being as great, as wonderful as Helene?"

Zillah kicks the bars again. It wasn't fair. Helene was beautiful, intelligent, beloved; Zillah is a short and dumpy teenager who has failed ninth grade once, and is on the fast track to fail it again. There's no way

she could be Helene; if that was the reason why she was created, then she failed at her purpose. In the eyes of her mother, she's worthless. Zillah rubs her eyes, but the tears fall in spite of her actions.

"Humans are unique."

Zillah looks at Hibiki. In her opinion, Hibiki is better built than she is. Hibiki is taller and much thinner than she is, and her curls are more stylish than the bunches around Zillah's own head. Maybe her mother would have had more success if Zillah was an android instead.

"Well, they are many androids that are . . ." starts Zillah, but Hibiki shakes her head.

"Machines, even human-shaped ones, behave the way they are programmed to behave. The behavior of humans is based on many factors: nurture, environment, education, mentality, experiences, and a plethora of other things. Even humans who are biologically the same, like monozygotic multiples and clones, experience different reactions, thoughts, emotions, and beliefs. It would be impossible for you to be exactly like Helene, even if you both came from the same womb."

"Yeah, try telling my mom that" responds Zillah. "I've told her that I'm not Helene, and she just got angry."

Hibiki blinks before saying "I think that is a good idea, Zillah."

Zillah stares at her. "What's a good idea?"

"My talking to your mother. If you did so, you would more than likely become emotional, and therefore irrational. I will be able to talk to your mother logically, and it will have more impact from me because I am a third-party observer of your relationship."

"My mother's stubborn. You shouldn't even bother . . ."

"Zillah, when I did not live up to Dr. Yagami's expectations, he shut me down. I would not want something similar to happen to you. I would be unhappy if it did."

Zillah smiles as she folds her arms. "Androids can be unhappy?"

Hibiki blinks again. "Technically no. As I stated earlier, machines only behave how they are programmed to behave. If you were to expire, logically, I would expect it given that humans are mortal. Illogically, however, your absence would leave me alone. As irrational as it is, unhappiness seems to be the appropriate word."

Zillah looks at the river again. Hibiki is the first person to tell her

that her absence would cause unhappiness. Yeah, her best friend probably feels the same way, but she's so smart, pretty, and popular that she'll probably forget about Zillah in a month, tops.

"What if my mom kicks me out?"

Hibiki smiles, hoping that it is appropriate for the moment. "I am homeless as well. If you like, we can find a home together."

Zillah smiles back; the thought of living with Hibiki outweighs her fears of being kicked out. "Okay. Let's talk to Mom."

Katelin Smith

A Procession of Petals and Pulses

It's rare to see death on a wedding day.

It was not something that a new bride would normally have on her mind, but Pauline supposed it fit the dour mood. She was bound to a man she did not love and was given by the wedding party only a few moments before the ceremony, where she sat alone in a side room of the church at her own request. Pauline stared herself down in the oval mirror of the armoire, trying very hard to will the tears away, wishing that God would strike her dead before she had to walk to the altar.

Thump, thump.

Pauline assumed it was a knock at the door, a bridesmaid she didn't know arriving to take her to the sanctuary (what a lie, it was hardly safe) to meet her fiendishly grinning groom. She softly called to the knocker that she would be out in a moment, that she just needed a few more minutes, but there was no response.

Thump, thump.

Pauline stood, tulle and lace twisting around her as she shuffled about the room for the source. The church was old and worn, the cheapest place they could find on such short notice. It was old, water stained, and settled next to a condemned part of the city that was blocked off by giant sheets of wood and metal. A window, just large enough for her to fit through, overlooked one of the waterlogged alleyways that hugged the building. They were all overgrown by weeds, algae, and stray plants left on the other side in abandoned flower boxes. Pauline wondered if it was possible that some animal had gotten into the walls and was rattling the piping.

Thump, thump.

Pauline came to the window that overlooked one of the alleyways. Its panes were dusty and scarred by the weather, impossible to see through. Pauline carefully undid the latch. She slid open the window, her recently painted nails chipping against the faded white paint, and then she looked out, veil catching on the splintering frame.

At first glance, Pauline saw nothing. Then she saw a figure sitting in the corner of the alley, on the only dry patch of brick path left. Pauline leaned forward and called out to the figure, but there was no response.

A sense of curiosity overcame Pauline. Glancing at the door she hiked up her dress. In her spotless wedding gown, Pauline started to crawl through the window. She went feet first, skirt tearing on the sill as she precariously stepped into the ankle-deep water. The muddy liquid seeped into her stockings and shoes. It felt disgusting, horrifying, but only slightly less so than thinking of walking down the aisle.

Pauline approached the figure in the corner, gently calling out to them. She sloshed through the water until she was only a few feet away and saw who or what it was.

She didn't dare scream. Instead, she let go of her torn skirt and covered her mouth with both hands, gazing upon her companion with only a look of sorrow and pity.

In the corner sat a skeleton, like it had just settled down for a rest after an afternoon walk. Flowers burst through the skeleton's chest, sprouting a rainbow bouquet of perfumed tokens from the gut and rib cage. Purple and blue pansies clustered in the pelvis and peeked out through the breastbone. Scarlet anemones scaled the spine and bloomed over the collarbone, staining the empty space red. A spattering of other lost flowers poked through the rags that were, at one time, a beautiful white gown made of silk and lace.

In the skeleton's outstretched hand there was a heart.

Still bloody.

Still beating.

A moment passed. All that could be heard was the quiet yet persistent *thump* of the heart. The skeleton's eyes, filled with light blue forget-me-nots, stared at her. Then the wind rustled the petals and shifted the hollow gaze away mournfully.

Thump, thump.

The heart still beat. As Pauline stepped forward and crouched down, she thought she heard someone calling for her. Someone in the chapel, wondering where she was. The boney white hand clutched the frantically beating organ just a little bit tighter at her approach. Before she could stop herself, Pauline reached down and dug her fingers into

its flesh. The heart was still warm, freshly cut, but the brittle bones sat bleached.

Someone called for Pauline again. She looked over her shoulder, the shout closer. She knew she didn't have much time left. The heart thumped until it was frantic, burning in her hand, staining her fingers and palms with sticky red blood. Then she heard a voice, the gentlest of whispers.

I will take your place, the skeleton said in its tattered gown. Its fingers slowly lost their grip on the heart, presenting it to Pauline like a proposal. *If you wish it.*

Pauline didn't hesitate like she knew she would at the altar.

"I do."

She took the heart and felt it fall still in her hand.

It was rare to see death on a wedding day, but Pauline believed the groom deserved it. She stood very still at a window looking inside the chapel, clutching the skirt of her gown like a lifeline. She could see her would-be-husband at the altar already, laughing and jeering with his best man. The groom was bound to a woman he loved to torment, who had wealth, beauty, and a greedy set of parents who longed to climb the social ladder. He had spent the night before fucking whores and drinking until dawn, but recovered miraculously for his special day, hair slicked back and suit perfect.

Perhaps that was why when the organ started playing and the doors opened, he did not notice someone different walking up the aisle. No one did; they were too distracted by the joyous occasion that was about to take place, by the bridesmaids' gowns, the decorations in the chapel, or the thought of the coming reception.

The bride was absolutely gorgeous as she walked down the aisle, dress of silken make and lace trimmings. No one really noticed how slight she was in comparison to Pauline, how the dress didn't match the one that was picked for her. The train was long and heavy and the veil masked her face. A bouquet of pansies, anemones, and forget-me-nots clasped in her lily white hands drew the crowd's eye, not the inconsistencies or how her fingers looked just too thin.

She slowed and carefully stepped up to the altar, hands still clasped around the flowers. The groom smiled at her, and nudged his best man, making a discreet but rude gesture towards her figure. The bride tilted her head just so, acting coyly to entice him on their special day. The groom's smile widened as he took his place across from her and lifted the veil.

His smile disappeared, as did the color in his cheeks. He went to scream, but he was too slow. The bride dropped her bouquet and the groom pitched back as hands of bone tore into his chest. The splashing blood stained her lovely white gown an even lovelier crimson as his scream cut dreadfully short.

The bridesmaids scattered, the groomsmen fainted, and the crowd lost all taste for the reception afterwards. The skeletal bride triumphantly lifted the still beating heart from her groom. She held it high for Pauline to see from her spot outside the church. For a moment, the forced smile of the skull actually looked genuine.

Thank you, mouthed Pauline as people began to stagger towards the exit, tripping over one another to escape. The bride nodded solemnly and let the heart drop. It bounced down the steps and rolled down the aisle as Pauline turned and ran. She hoisted her ruined wedding gown up just as people began to scramble from the church. The screams grew louder but all Pauline focused on was her own solid, steady heartbeat.

Thump, thump.

Imelda Zamora

Friends

The cat sat herself down on the floor and put her right paw out in front of her.

"Let's be friends," she purred.

The little mouse looked up and promptly extended her own tiny right paw out to rest on top of the cat's paw.

"Let's be friends," the cat repeated, then added, "Forever."

"Forever?" the little mouse squeaked, her eyes round and bright. "Forever? How long is that? How long is forever?"

"Hmm, let me see," the cat purred. She scratched her chin with her left paw and thought for a while. "Hmm, one hundred days? One thousand days? One million days? I don't know."

"That seems like an awful long time", the little mouse squeaked. "Do you think we can live forever?"

"Probably not." The cat scratched her chin again. This time it was really itchy. So she scratched and scratched and scratched. Finally, she purred, "There must be something we can do."

"Like what?" the little mouse squeaked. "Like stop time?" And then she laughed, amused at what she just said.

But the cat did not laugh. "Stop time?" she purred, getting excited. "What a brilliant idea! You are one smart mouse, you know that?"

"Huh?" The little mouse raised her eyebrows then smiled. "Gee, thanks, cat."

"You are welcome, mouse," the cat said, nodding her head. "Now, that's exactly what we will do. We will stop time."

And how on earth, dear friend, do we do that?" The little mouse was puzzled.

"Simple." purred the cat. "Since we cannot live forever, we will stop the time and make this moment forever. We will make this moment forever for us by making the most of our time now. Now, while we still enjoy playing. Now while we are still together. Let's do that."

“Yes, let’s,” the little mouse purred. She finally learned the cat’s language.

“Let’s,” squeaked the cat.

Then they high-fived each other.

THE END