

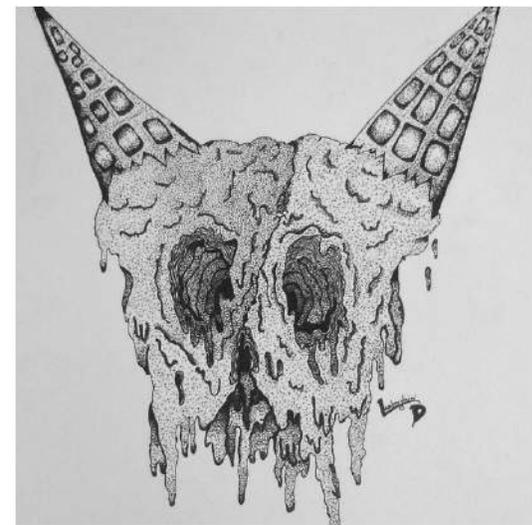
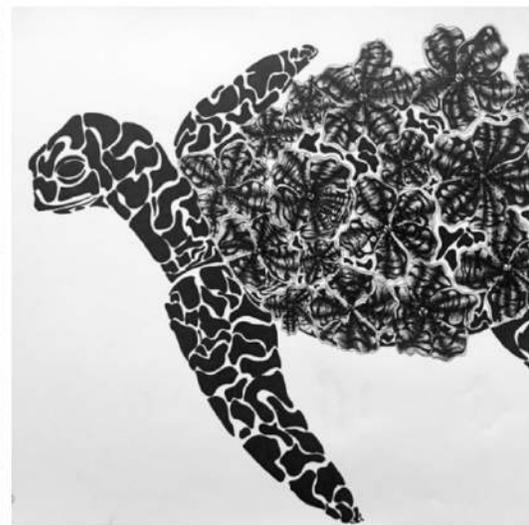
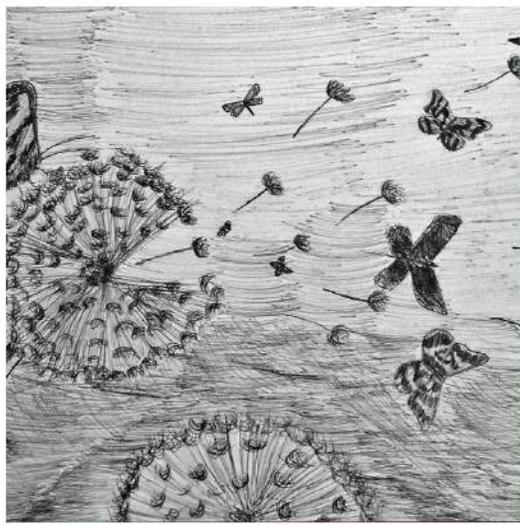
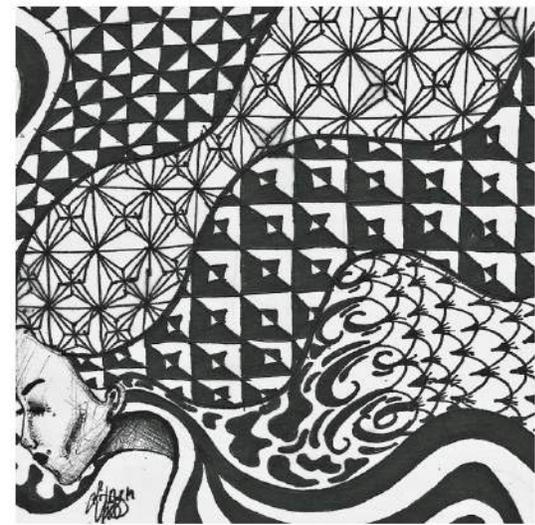
Literary.

2014-2015 Edition

Magazine

Varina HS





Essays



Identity

by Tameasha Blair

I look down at my shoes because I don't know how I should respond. My mind explores different phrases I could say, different ways to approach my response, as my mother stressfully but caringly says, "I don't want you to go far off to college."

I'm the oldest of five, my mother's first child. She had me when she was seventeen years old. I'm the one who makes sure my brothers and sisters clean up their rooms and do their homework. I'm the one who washes their dishes, tucks them in, and makes sure that they wake up on time for school. In some ways, I feel more like a mom than a big sister.

My mom got into some trouble when I was younger and had to leave us for a couple of years. We were shuffled between our father, our father's mother, and mother's mother. Since then, I've always felt especially protective of my sisters and brother. The problem is, now that we're in a stable home again with our mother, I don't know how to stop this overwhelming urge to protect them; It's no longer something that I want to feel, but apparently it's something that I still need to feel. So when Montasia says, "I don't know what I'm going to do without you" or "don't go," or Alexandria says, "Just stay here and go to college; I'm going to miss you," I look down at my shoes because I don't know how I should respond.

I want to tell them that it's time for me to start living for me, but then I sound selfish. I want to tell them that I'll be just a phone call away; but then again, my sisters are pretty smart, and they'll know that it will take more than just a phone call to reach me. I want to tell them I'll come visit, but that isn't the same as sharing a room with your sister, as I've done for my entire life. I want to tell them that I'm leaving for us, so that we'll end up better than our mom's situation, but then I remember: my mom is taking care of all five of us on her own, and things didn't turn out so badly. But instead of saying any of this, I continue to look down at my shoes.

So I reach a conclusion: I'm scared. I'm not going to lie to myself and say that I'm completely ready to leave everything I've ever known. Because in all actuality, just like half of the other college students, when we leave the home and the family that we've always known, it feels as if piece of our identity is parting with us, too.

When I decide to speak, I'll tell Montasia and Alexandria that I'm going to miss them too. I'll tell my little brother Terrance and my little sister Julia that I want all of us to learn from our parents' and grandparents' mistakes. I'm leaving and furthering my education to show them that they can do it too; all of us have the potential to succeed. I'm not forgetting about Montasia, Alexandria, Terrance, or Julia. I'm creating a bright path for them to follow after me.

How Words Cut the String

by Natani Collier

One string, one string attaches our hearts to our soul. Some can understand, others can only listen. Those who've felt this know that even days after they are gone, their image still plays through. How is it fair? He never got the sympathy I got. He never felt true love or compassion. Yet, I live on. I go to lunch every day and see that he's not there. I see the spot where he sat only the week before. All it takes is one word: "fag." One word: "gay." One word: "worthless." All words most of us know, but never truly think about. But imagine someone who goes home every day, hoping to escape school only to find that his home life is a trap, a hole of fighting and hurtful words. Imagine having a family who won't acknowledge his existence simply because he was partially confused about his sexual orientation. He was someone who had more future than the next guy, but was blind to this. To him, the acknowledgement of his existence was all that mattered. Only, whenever he was acknowledged, it was in a nonchalant or rude manner. And this became his base. Whenever he had time to think about his life, he went back to this base, a base filled with the repetition of those words. And how could he move on from that base, when every time he tried he was shot down?

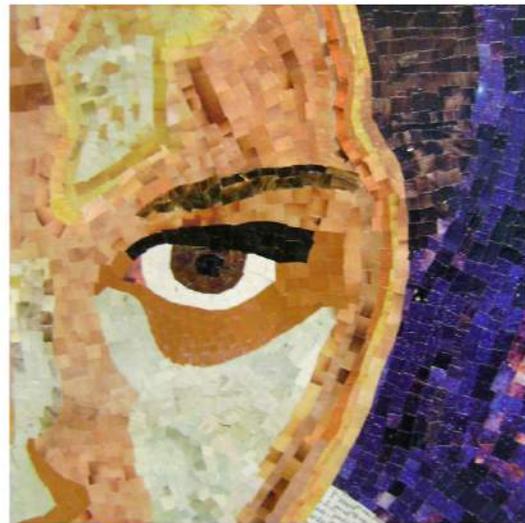
Well those words – fag, gay – as worthless and as simple as they are, he believed. The string that had connected his heart to his soul started to lose thread each day. The words, the fake smile, the engraved depression, the shallow hope – by all these it was cut. By a life that seemed pointless, barren and invisible, that line was cut, and that cut line frayed into a shadow. He became a person who was physically cut from society, empty, cropped out forever. Future generations will never know that he was a gift of a person who never had the chance to be opened.

Little did he know what happened after he was gone. By the Monday after, we had all been told the news. A weekend of fun followed by the realization that there was someone who would never walk the halls again. Someone who would never find true love, or true acceptance. The news that morning broke a piece of all of us, leaving regrets and confusion in a quiet and empty day. His name and story spread through the school, flowed through the bodies of every person. The next day, the colors of blue and green were shown in the form of t-shirts, socks, hairbands, jewelry, along with his name written across arms. Only his name, his favorite colors and our memories of who he was reminded us how he had been loved all along, how he had been blind to this because he put the words of strangers above those of his friends. Although to a person who was told he was worthless more than he was told he was loved, it might not have mattered.

Until you know and lose someone from bullying and depression you can never truly know what it's like. If you're someone going through this, know that if you leave, you'll be missed. Not one day, not two days, but every day that you are no longer here. High school is a trial that life gives us so that we're stronger when we leave. It's so we can understand that life experience makes us stronger, so that we can fight through and see the day when we won't have to. To everyone else, the next time you make a comment about someone you think could be gay, someone who is different from you, remember this: those words stick! From the time the person wakes up until the moment they go to bed, those words stick. Don't say the words that cut the string; don't be the reason they break and end it all. If you think they won't... think again.



Poetry



GRINDING

by Deja Taylor

Stay on my grind,
Giving up is the last thing on my mind.
Haters gonna hate,
But what can I say?
If they ain't hating
While I'm grinding
Then I'm not doing it right.
Turning this negative energy into positivity got me high as a kite,
Floating on the clouds cuz I'm out of sight.
Y'all better watch my dreams take flight.
In the words of Drake, "I just wanna be successful."
'Cuz you know this life can be so stressful.
I lead by example,
I'm destined for greatness and imma give these haters a little sample.
I'm putting in overtime,
'Cuz I wanna let my light shine.
Because this life is all mine,
And imma make the best of it in due time.
Countless times I've been told "no"—
That just gives me more drive to let my talents show.
Everywhere I go people always say, "oh I heard about you."
See even the haters gotta give up the props too.
People always asking, "why she do this" or "why she got that?"
I just say "don't worry about all of that."
You do you, and I do me,
If you can't be happy for me or respect me just flee.
I'm thankful for all my supporters,
Because if I had no one down for me it would just be torture.
I'm putting my life in order
So I can move forward.
I can't be defined—
Being put in a box means I'm confined,
And trust and believe that's out of mind.
Imma keep grinding.
I have God on my side, and that's a contract that's forever binding.
I'm not just rhyming—
I'm inspiring, encouraging, and motivating...
You'll know my name one day.
I won't have it any other way.

History Shouldn't Repeat Itself

by LeNae McEachin

People are screaming, injustice surrounds us.
The ones who should protect us are killing us.
Our children are bleeding in the streets;
The ones that still breathe look up and
Ask their parents if they'll be next.
Because that was their brother who was killed,
Perhaps the only male figure they've known.

So the people take action into
Their own hands.

The city goes up in flames,
And a second civil war begins.

In two thousand and fifteen

The color of your skin still determines your lifestyle,
And how you're viewed by some paler people with
more power.

We can't change the world if the people saving us
Hold both our lives and our deaths in their hands.

Imperfection

by Deja Taylor

Society labels certain things as "perfect,"

But tell me, is it really worth it?

At one point in time everyone feels uncomfortable in their own skin,

It's just society's misconception that has our minds in a spin.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder—

At least that's what they tell the owner.

And hey, there's no such thing as the "right" or "perfect" religion.

Believing in a higher being or power is your decision.

And I'm tired of everyone questioning my sexuality!

Why can't they just let me be me, and face reality.

It's like being with a member of the same gender questions tradition,

And that's what causes division.

A person becomes an outcast just because they're different,

Which causes them to become distant,

And give up on life in an instant.

All of us have flaws,

And those flaws cause our confidence to withdraw.

So at the end of the day, what really is perfection?

It's nothing but a confession of deception.

And hey, maybe imperfection is not so much of a bad thing—

It's everyone's uniqueness that gives life that "zing."

We all have characteristics that make us who we are,

And that's what keeps us wishin' upon a star.

Or in other words, keeping hope alive,

Because that's what really helps us survive.

I'm perfectly fine with being imperfect

Because in the end, it's my opinion that's really worth it.

Our Children Fall Behind

by Maria Diaz

Our new generation falls behind,
While everyone waits and watches.
The politicians don't mind,
Making speeches
About the future
And our young minds,
And how change is coming.
"No child left behind"—
It's a slogan for the slick
Who co-opt the White House,
Then print them on T-Shirts, in all colors and sizes,
Then sell them to everyone for \$14.99.
This is all so unkind.
Cut out more programs,
Take away the art, the music, the creativity,
Until we are all so blind.
The left brain is dominant,
It rules the future,
This new state of mind.
Some prosper,
More fail.
"No child left behind"
Is a bumper sticker,
A caption on a mug that your grandmother drinks from.
It's an empty slogan that leaves no room for imagination
In a young one's mind.
When will we take notice?
When will we even care?
We need to stand united
Or our nation will fail.
A fire needs to be ignited
In the hearts of all.
Stand up, and make a change,
And maybe then,
No child will be left behind!

The Color of My Skin

by Mansoor Yagoub

Our history is filled with troubles and tears,
The cries of our ancestors ring through the years.
Beaten, killed, and ripped from our kin,
A price we'd pay for the color of our skin.

Brought on ships from the motherland
To the shores of this country to work its land,
Slaves we were, way back then,
All because the color of our skin.

Sugar cane and cotton, that's what we picked,
All our lives oppressed,
Beaten, hurt, and kicked.
We were treated like animals—no, not like men.
“Why would we?” they'd say. “Just look at your skin.”

But soon the day would come
When we learned to fight back.
No longer would we be hurt simply because we were black.
Soon slavery would come to an end.
Freedom would come to all men with my skin.

Some years later citizens we became,
Only to experience even more pain.
Jim Crow came around limiting our rights—
But oh my people had learned how to fight.

We marched and stomped all over the South.
“Justice we want!” would come from our mouths.
And we marched and marched, again and again,
Oppressed no longer because of our skin.

The fight we fought was a battle we won.
But the war is not over, the fight is not done.
Equality for all; justice will prevail.
We will fight forever and never fail.

Together we will stand,
Holding each other's hands,
And racism and injustice will come to an end.
No longer will I be defined by the color of my skin.

Wounds in the Way

by Deja Taylor

The beating of her heart
The thumping sounds in her ear
The burning tears that run down her face.
The building of walls around her trust
The humming of never ending thoughts in her head.
Those are the signs of her hurt and pain.
She's a sweetheart, but not to the point where someone can walk over her.
She's strong-willed and resilient
Not because she wants to be but because she has to be.
You see, she's been hurt.
She let people into her personal world who had no business being there.
She opened up her heart and let down her guard
But they stole her trust and sense of serenity like thieves in the night.
They took her to a new low
One that was hard to come back from.
Now she's closed off and distant, separated from anyone who wants to get to know her.
But you'd never know any of this by just looking at her
She hides it so well.
She's slowly finding her path back to happiness
She wants to open up her heart again
But you see, there are wounds in the way.

You Can't Be More Human

by Mansoor Yagoub

I can laugh as loud as the next fellow,
Or be as proud as the next old boy,
But I can't be more human.

I can sing a song with a voice so great,
Or make a face that's mean with hate.
I can cry tears of pain and sorrow,
Or dream of happiness and joy for tomorrow,
But I can't be more human.

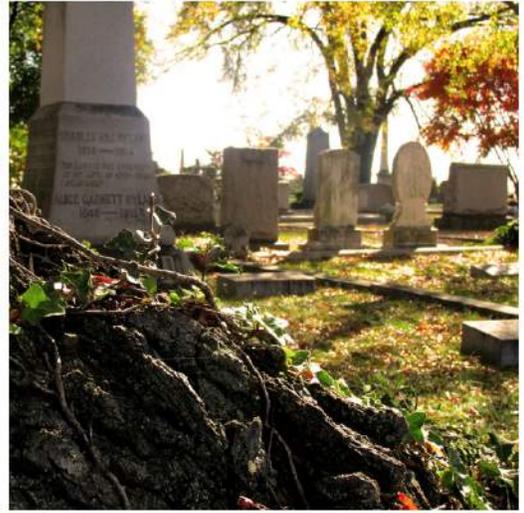
I can have a heart that's broken in two—
But any more than any of you?
Can I cry more tears than any other,
Or miss my mom more than you miss your mother?
Can I be more human?

No, I can't, this is true,
Knowledge known to only a few.
We think it's okay when we make mistakes,
But when others slip, we make a face.

Why do we do this?
Do we think we're better?
No, we're only human.



Short Stories



CAYMAN

by Jermaine Naylor

Slavery in Africa began long ago, before recorded history. Conflict between warring African kingdoms resulted in the capture of prisoners, who were often sold as slaves. In some ways, this pattern has continued even into modern times.

Each day I wake up thinking about my parents, remembering all the things I did wrong to them. Maybe that is the reason why I'm going through this situation. I just wish I was with my family instead of being in this living hell. Sneaking out of the house was the turning point in my life; I was snatched, knocked unconscious, and woke up with heavy chains wrapped around my legs.

As I'm laying down on this thin mattress, I can hear hard footsteps coming towards me. I know it is my master. As soon as he sees me, he yanks me out of my so-called "bed" and drags me outside. He tells me to pick every mango in the garden that is ripe and ready to be picked, or suffer the consequences. This is the activity that will occupy my entire waking day, unless on a whim he tells me to work at something else. As bad as it is I'd rather pick than do anything else, because when they're not looking I can sneak some fruit into my famished mouth. I'm starving – they only give us one meal a day, call it dinner, and that's all. I was a big man before all this happened.

I have one friend here, a young man named Cayman. Cayman was the same age as me and we have a lot of things in common. He got himself into this situation the same way I did, by being hard-headed and running away from home. He's always had my back since day one, when he took the blame when I forgot to hang the master's clothing out to dry. I should have been in trouble that day, but he's the one who ended up with extra bruises on his back. He claims that it has gotten to a point where it doesn't hurt anymore. He's been here so long that he's probably right.

As I was picking crops one day Cayman approached me, quickly and silently, hiding from master's guards. He whispered sharply in my ear, "Ayo, I find an escape route." When he said that, I just looked at him like he was crazy. "No man I'm dead serious. We can do this," said Cayman. I think of the blue-and-black welts on Cayman's back, and I'm scared. What if we get caught?

Later on, Cayman comes into my pod, and we talk about the escape route. Cayman had stolen the key to the gate in the back fence. It shouldn't be that hard to sneak out that way since it's only watched by one guard, but we need someone to distract the guard, so we got another slave to do it. We tell him that if he does this we will come back to free him. I feel guilty because I think that we are probably lying to him. He's going to be waiting for us to come back, but once I'm back home I can't see myself coming back for him. I might feel like I should, but I love my family and I need to stay there with them.

So the day finally comes and we wait for lights out, and then we start heading to the back. Our accomplice distracts the guard by trying to climb the fence, and while the guard escorts the man back to the pod, Cayman and I quickly unlock the fence and run. What we don't know is that there is another guard patrolling the ground outside the fence, and this guard turns and spots us. "There isn't a turn back now," Cayman spits out the words, and we continue running through the woods. There's a rattling spray of shots fired and we dive to the ground, but the bullets only cut through the branches above us and clatter off into the forest. We roll off the path, behind a huge rock, and Cayman wraps his hands around a large stick. We wait for the guard to get closer, crouched like springs behind the rock. "When he comes you run, as fast as you can and don't look back for thirty minutes, you understand?" Cayman asks. I nod. We see the man, and Cayman charges.

I run and I run, the forest around me a black and green blur, and when I finally look back I see nothing but trees. I stop only for a moment, then keep running. The forest is endless. Finally, in front of me, the path ends, and I see a bright village. It seems like... like... home! I run down the center path, through the deserted central square, down to the far end of the village. Down to my house. I knock on my door... knock... knock... no answer. I knock again. Then, slowly, the door opens just a little.

Then it swings wide. I see my mom and dad in tears, crying as they snag me into their arms. I've been gone, but I will never make that mistake again.

Be a Man

by Matt Felts

After getting home from a six-hour shift at the Sandston Bistro, I was on my way to wash off the unpleasant-smelling burger grease attached to my forehead, work clothes, and, quite frankly, all of the rest of my body, when I received my nightly greeting from my mother. After every single drop of hot water was gone and I was left playing dodge ball with the snowflakes falling from my shower head, I dried off and began my journey towards an intense pile of homework that approximately one hundred percent of my teachers had assigned me for that night. It was during this time, in which I've already prepped my mind to prepare for the homework battle ahead, that my mother broke my concentration in order to say goodnight to her child.

"Goodnight son, I love you," she said.

"Night, I love you too ma," I replied.

"Can I have a kiss on the cheek?" she politely asked.

"No momma, I'm a man." I said.

We parted ways after a hug, and I went back upstairs to finish my homework. While reading *Catching Fire* for my independent reading assignment in English class, I began dozing in and out of consciousness. Finally, I was overcome by the most peaceful entity in the world: sleep.

In the morning, around 7:45 a.m., I jumped from my bed after my third alarm, titled "WAKE UP NOW MATT," began humming annoyingly in my ear. Once I came to reality, I ran a 4.2 second forty-yard dash to my bathroom and began brushing my teeth faster than a fiber optic cable transfers digital data. Strangely, I heard three hard knocks on the front door. I hurriedly threw on a shirt to see who was abusing our beautiful green door. With my white t-shirt on backwards, I opened the door to find a concerned-looking police officer. The officer proceeded to inform me that my mother had been in a car accident on the way home from dropping my sister off at kindergarten, and was now being rushed to MCV hospital.

I began to bawl. I couldn't even breathe right. I kept thinking that the last thing I said to my mother was a refusal to give her a peck on the cheek.

Suddenly, I faintly heard "Matt, Matt, Matt..." and woke up to my mom calling my name, telling me that it was time for me to get ready for school. Never in my life had I been so joyful to wake at 7:30 in the morning. With bloodshot, puffy eyes – the after-effects of my horrible dream – I calmly responded to my mom with a raspy, "Okay, I'm up."

I slowly got out of bed, moaning and groaning. Thank God I'm closer and closer to retirement every day! I took my time walking to my bathroom, then brushed my hair and teeth to perfection. I put on a shirt for school, and even had time to find a matching belt to wear with my shorts. Just before I was about to walk out the door, I turned to my caring and wonderful mother, and with a huge smile on my face, I proudly gave her a kiss on the cheek and said "I love you mom, and one day I'm going to be successful for you. Thank you for all you've done for me."

It may be a simple event in my life, but this simple gesture and this simple statement have had an extraordinary effect on my relationship with my mother and my outlook on similar situations. I realized that sometimes the most adult action or statement an individual can make is something you don't see as "manly." I've learned a lot from this action; it has helped me grow into the individual I am today. Now my mother doesn't say goodnight to her child, she says goodnight to her man.

Toshimas Dog

by Hannah Redington

Part I: Friend

Toshiro; it used to be bright and vibrant.

He had a feeling it did, anyway. There were clues of its grandeur, things he perceived as clues. He had a feeling that the signs used to glow with vibrant neons, that the streets used to bustle with people. These subtle “clues” were the only reason he didn’t mind Toshiro and its violence. The only color that seemed to light up the streets now was scarlet. He used to love that particular hue; now, he felt he would vomit.

Inu sat cross-legged on one of the many empty roofs in Toshiro. The skyline matched the scenery, bloody and fiery. He appreciated the sunset, a luminescent sight. He took in the warmth, the only warmth in Toshiro. Inu made sure to be on a roof and gazing at the dawn every morning and afternoon. Part of him wished he was seeing the sun in this way somewhere else, on a different roof thousands of miles away.

If he stopped breathing for second or two, he could hear a fight splattering on not too far from where he sat. He could hear the contact of a fist on stomach, an arm, or even a face. Inu didn’t want to hear those things, so he took a deep breath and sighed loudly.

Milky hair fell into his eyes. He brushed it back.

Inu took another long, deep breath and heard a rock scuttle against the ground. He snapped to attention and turned, sat crouched now in a fighting stance. He had snatched his knife from his boot and held it horizontally in front of him. He glared in the direction the sound had come from.

“I know you’re there. Out!” Inu growled. At first he thought he’d have to go after the stalker, but the figure stepped out from behind an air conditioning unit that more than likely no longer worked. Inu directed his glower at the man.

The man stood about six feet tall. His long brown hair was tied back into a ponytail, and he wore only a black, tattered vest and jeans. His shoes looked out of shape too, but Inu wouldn’t expect anything else from someone in Toshiro. His own green t-shirt had holes and blood stains all over it.

“I didn’t mean to scare you, gin-chan,” the man lilted. Inu was confused by this man’s jovial persona, he would have killed the guy. And what the hell was *gin-chan*?

“You just wanted to watch someone, maybe kill them without being delayed or interrupted?” Inu shot at the man. Quickly, he glanced to the base of the man’s neck. Sure enough, the identification tag hung there, number glowing in the dusk. “Sorry for the disappointment.”

The man smirked.

"I didn't plan on killing you," he assured, and his hands raised in surrender.

"Yeah," Inu scuffed. The man's smirk turned into a suggestive smile. It sent chills down Inu's back.

"You've got a cute glare, gin-chan." He purred. Inu's eyes widened, then narrowed quickly into another scowl.

"Who the hell are you?" Inu snarled.

The man paused before lowering his arms and pursing his lips in thought.

"Arata." He smiled again. Inu nodded. "Will you extend me the same courtesy?" Inu paused, mulled this over. If it had been anyone else, they wouldn't acquiesce. Inu, however, hated being rude.

"Inu," he relented.

"Dog?" Arata's lips quirked into another smirk. "That's your name, right?"

"Yes, what else would it be?" Inu rolled his eyes and lowered his knife. Arata laughed, and nodded in agreement.

"Well, my name is my own. Given to me by my mother and father." He mused and stuffed his hands in his pockets. It was Inu's turn to laugh. Arata's features shifted to warm, at peace. "Your laugh is soothing."

"Why are saying this stuff?" Inu mumbled, unable to hide the warming of his cheeks. Arata noticed the reddening.

"Why not?" Arata countered seriously. Something in his blue-green gaze had Inu glued to his spot. You can't trust people in Toshiro, yet this man exuded it. "You should appreciate beauty when you see it."

"I'm 18 years old and a man, how am I beautiful?" Inu spat.

"You are," Arata shrugged and approached Inu slowly. His gaze was intense, fiery almost. Inu gulped, but stood from his crouch. "Let's get to that bar in the neutral zone." Arata added.

"Go to the neutral zone, with you – to do what?" Inu narrowed his eyes at the mysterious man.

"Talk, hang out, something," Arata shrugged again. Again Inu paused. why would he even want to go anywhere with this man who kept calling him gin-chan and saying weird things? Again, this man's gaze beckoned to him. It called to him, like a siren. Or a damn chihuahua to a dog whistle, Inu snarled to himself.

"Sure," He sighed. Arata grinned, a goofy, happy grin that made Inu return it.

...

"Why are you here?" Arata asked.

The two were seated at a table. It wasn't crowded, and Inu was grateful for that. The two were quiet for only a few moments before Arata asked his question. Inu frowned.

"Isn't that personal?" Inu asked.

"I'm here because my family needed the money. Sadly, I got word that they were killed," Arata said. He spoke in his matter-of-fact manner, but Inu saw it in the sea-like eyes. It hurt.

"My brother is sick, and we can't afford the medicine. I had been training for years, and I was a competitor in a few fighting games. I didn't earn enough though." Inu felt he owed it to the man. Telling him what he did.

Arata smiled.

“Thank you,” he said. Inu frowned, suspicious.

“Why?”

“For telling me that, it was personal and you seemed unwilling to answer my question.” He explained, his amused smile returning, “I wish I had attacked you, just to see what you could do, gin-chan.”

Inu laughed, really laughed. He felt light from the humorous statement. Floating like a feather, and happy. Inu wasn't an unhappy person, but Toshiro changes people, and Inu was always impressionable.

“Such a calming laugh,” Arata whispered, seemingly to himself. Inu no longer felt uncomfortable. In fact, his cheeks colored and he smiled. “A nice smile too.”

That's when Inu was sure of it. Arata was the person he could trust. He didn't know why, but if everyone else failed, Arata wouldn't. His warm eyes and smile, his calm voice, and even his spontaneous compliments made Inu open up. Relentless butterflies flew around in his stomach as Arata looked at him as one looks at a piece of artwork.

With only a second's thought, Inu got up and left the building. He heard Arata follow, the tattered boots making sloshing sounds in the rain that had started pouring while they sat inside. Inu stepped into one of the thousands of alleys in Toshiro. He turned to look at Arata.

Inu lived a simple life in the real world. His mother was a plump, grey-haired woman with a wrinkly smile. His father a mustached, stern man. Inu's brother had always been sickly, but what he had now was cancer. He wouldn't live even if he had medicine, but with medicine he wouldn't be in pain anymore. He'd feel okay. That's why Inu, when he heard of Toshiro, decided to participate in its grim game. That was a year ago. He'd delude himself into thinking his brother was okay, and still alive. For all Inu knew, he wouldn't be alive in a few weeks or months either.

Yet something in Arata's eyes made Inu believe he would live. Something in those eyes made him feel hope, even more so than the dawn.

Arata stood there, patiently waiting for Inu to say something. Inu didn't know what to say, but he felt crowded in the bar.

“I need someone to trust,” Arata said when Inu could find no words. “I can trust you, Inu.” That had to have been the first time Arata used Inu's actual name.

“Yeah,” Inu nodded and scratched the back of his head. “So, we could team up, have each other's backs. This isn't a partner game, but the more allies-“

“I'd very much like that.” Arata grinned.

Part II: Slave

One year later...

Inu watched the sunrise; it had been a year since he found Arata at the sunset. Inu laughed at the memory of their first meeting. He hadn't trusted the brunette at all, and now that brunette was his best friend, his only ally. He was happy now; his gut before had told him this correctly. Arata had made it possible for him to see 378 more sunrises, and 377 sunsets. Inu didn't know how could ever thank Arata, except by supporting him in return.

“Gin-chan! Come on, we need to get to cover. I'm beat.” Arata called from a few buildings away, on another roof. Inu laughed and jumped up from his position and leapt between the gap of his

building and the one in front of him. He ran, then flipped to the next roof. He did it again, his right hand brushing the edge of the last roof between him and Arata.

The rush was what made him good at this, this parkour. He relied not on numbers or probabilities like a gymnast but on faith and adrenaline like a warrior. He loved it.

Arata laughed.

“You cannot resist it,” he chuckled heartily, “I do enjoy watching you though. You’re like a damn bird. All you need is wings,” Inu punched him in the arm playfully.

“Shut it, we need to get some sleep. We could go to Fujimoto’s,” he offered, walking towards the fire-escape.

Arata followed behind, hands in his pockets.

Inu couldn’t help himself – he immediately trotted to the fire escape and leapt over the railing. He kept a hold on the railing and leapt onto the next level of the fire escape. Arata laughed again at the strong movements his friend performed. He kept his smile as the friends went their own ways down the escape. At the bottom, Arata slid down the last ladder, while Inu gave his final jump.

“I beat you,” Inu teased.

“You were preforming while I was making my way down a reasonable way. Isn’t it I who’s supposed to be wild and impulsive?” Arata joked back. Inu stuck out his tongue then started down the alley.

He was right. Arata was the one to make comments that were inappropriate or funny. You didn’t hear Inu saying weird things, or making random statements that may or may not pertain to the conversation. That’s one thing he liked about Arata: he brought out Inu’s lighter side. Something only the sun could do or his family, whom he’d never see again. Nevertheless, after a year, Inu had seen some of the flaws in Arata. Like his limp – when he walked, a barely noticeable limp in his right leg impeded him. Inu asked how this came to be, and Arata said that in one of his first fights he dislocated his knee without realizing it for a week. Without proper medical help, and having to pop it back into place himself, the leg became gimpy.

Also, Arata could not see certain colors. Reds and greens turned to grey through his eyes. He begrudgingly told Inu this when he noticed that Arata said he didn’t know the color of Inu’s eyes, which are an unusually bright green.

Inu would never consider Arata weak for his flaws. How very cruel that’d be to call his closest friend weak, especially when Arata seemed to be so strong after years in the game. In fact, despite his limitations, Arata was probably stronger than Inu.

“Birdy!” Someone sang from behind them, scratchy and deranged. Inu knew exactly who it was. When he turned, he would find Saw and Nub.

Saw was a six-foot-tall brute of a man. His hair was black, shaggy and long, and his eyes were black, two pupil-less orbs full of insanity. He carried around, as his melee weapon, a katana that seemed to glow with murder. His partner, Nub, was just as tall but even bulkier than his partner. He had olive skin and dark hair. His gaze was a bit more sane than Saw’s, but two jagged scars stretching from his forehead to his jaw added to the ferocity of his visage. His weapon was a small hand scythe, one that a farmer would use to gather wheat. His name, unlike Saw’s, had an actually meaning. Nub’s left hand only had three fingers.

These two made up the guard dogs of Toshiro, or perhaps the gamekeepers. They made sure to catch anyone who thought they could just steal rings from people without a fight or death. That was all they were good for – that, and generally terrorizing the players.

“Saw, we aren’t here to torment... sadly.” Nub rolled his eyes and gazed down at his bloodstained weapon. “Arata, I hear you’ve been stealing rings from people. Ai has been complaining about how you’ve been stealing his things – namely, his rings. You know the rules, gimpy.”

"I haven't been stealing, Nub. Yet, since we are not in a situation where I have the authorities on my side, I don't believe I can prove it." Arata sighed. Inu frowned and looked from his friend to the savages before them. Of course he believed Arata. The brunette didn't even care about the game anymore. Those were his words; after word came to him that his village was destroyed, no survivors, he just didn't care about the game any longer.

The scythe-wielding man sauntered a bit closer to Arata and Inu. His grin wavering.

"I'm a fair guy, Arata. Tell me the truth and we won't kill you, and we'll even leave your pretty bird alone." Nub smirked and flicked his sharp eyes over to Inu. Saw's lower lip poked out sadly at the news. Quickly he gave Inu a predatory grin.

"That's not very fair of you Nub, because I never stole anyone's rings." Arata moved a bit, moving into a firmer stance, preparing for an inevitable brawl. The fight was unlikely to be in his or Inu's favor. Nub and Saw shared a grin at Arata's move.

"Fine." Saw snarled, spun his sword around and licked his lips in anticipation, but Nub was the one who made the first move.

He leapt into the air, an owl soaring down to catch his meal. He swooped – but was unsuccessful in catching the mouse. Arata ducked quickly, flowing away from the guard dog. Nub growled. He landed on his feet and with great force slashed his scythe into air, making a whoosh.

Inu made the fatal mistake of being distracted by these sudden movements and was ambushed by Saw. The crazed man cracked the butt of his katana against Inu's jaw. He fell to the ground and Saw's insane laughter blared in his ears. His jaw throbbed and he spat out the blood that was filling his mouth. Along with the blood came what might've been his tooth, he didn't have much time to check as Saw barreled towards him.

Inu thought fast, and managed to kick his foot into Saw's stomach. The black-eyed fighter hissed and stumbled back. Inu had made it to his feet by this time and swayed into a capoeira ginga stance. Saw gripped his sword and skillfully swung it across Inu's raised fists. Inu dodged and landed a Martello kick that missed the jawline, knocking Saw in the neck. Inu cursed himself for being off-target.

He dodged Saw's retaliating fist and landed a punch on the taller man's cheek. He wished that he could see what Arata and Nub were doing. Was Arata alright? I have to see, he thought desperately.

This momentary mental distraction allowed Saw to grab him by the throat and slam him into the alley's wall. His head ricocheted painfully against the brick. On impact Inu blacked out for a quick second, stars mottling his vision as consciousness returned. His eyes searched for an escape as Saw prepared to slam him into the wall again, and he saw Arata and Nub's fight only a few feet away. Arata had Nub in a choke hold.

Inu was thankful that before his head hit the wall again he blacked out, this time falling completely unconscious.

...

He woke up numb, his sight nonexistent. He tried taking a few breaths and the pain crept back slowly. He winced and made no attempt to move, but managed to at least keep breathing. If he could breathe, it meant that he was in fact alive. He didn't know what he'd do... or maybe he did know what he'd do if he died. He'd go to his brother and see him again, the bright boy who had so much energy before the cancerous tumors. Why was Inu still trying to get money for his brother, when he'd been told before he joined the game that the young man had only a few months to live? Those few months had passed. His brother was gone.

He didn't go to play this game for money or for his brother. It was for himself.

He knew now, he realized it. Under the dark sky, among dried and fresh blood, he knew. He left his brother and his family because he didn't want to face it anymore. So living wasn't a necessity.

Not when he'd done something so selfish. Was ouka-san dead, or outa-san? Were they gone too?

“Inu!” He heard a very real shout, something he couldn’t simply ignore or pass off as a part of his turbulent thoughts. Inu struggled to get his eyes open, only managing to reveal one, the other still squished against the pavement. A blurry image of Arata came into view.

The brunette was being held from behind – Inu could tell that much. One of the other guard dogs was standing only a few feet away from him, swinging a scythe around. What was his name? His muggy mind could not remember.

Then he heard breaking glass, or maybe the crunching of bones... but then his eye told him it was another of the men laughing. He tried to move but failed miserably. He tried talking but that was even harder. How could he be so helpless? It wasn’t like he was hit multiple times. Or maybe he had been?

Then the worst thing that could ever happen was unfolding before him: the scythe baring man gently tapped Arata’s stomach. Inu saw a wince flash across Arata’s face, despite how light the tap had seemed.

Now Inu forced himself onto his hands and knees. He wobbled a bit, but was steady. He huffed in a few breaths, then struggled to sit upright.

“Ara... Ara...” he tried to call, but not only did the name stumble on his tongue, it wasn’t even above a whisper. He took a deep breath and hissed at a pain he could not pinpoint. “Arat... a... Arata...” He panted.

He kept mumbling the name over and over again. He tried to be louder with each attempt, but it seemed he still wasn’t loud enough.

Inu was now in a sitting position. Arata was still being held back, the scythe-wielding man still sauntering around him casually. Then Inu was introduced to a color he was already too familiar with.

The scythe shot up and into Arata’s stomach through his navel. The curve sank in and up inside Inu’s friend, his only ally. The blade must have been long enough to reach Arata’s heart. Blood poured from the corners of his mouth and onto his shirt and onto the ground. Then everything froze for Inu.

He didn’t know if he was screaming. He wasn’t even aware of his surroundings; he just knew that Arata had a scythe hilt-deep in his abdomen. He knew that his only friend was dead.

The man pulled the scythe out in the most grotesque way possible, yanking it out and taking with it many of Arata’s internal organs. Inu vomited at the disturbing sight, wrenching all over himself and the ground in front of him.

The two murderers looked over at the retching sound. Inu remembered now that they were Saw and Nub, Nub being the one who had just killed Inu’s best friend. At this realization he got up and rushed the man, knocking into him. Yet he was still weak, and Nub pushed him off onto the ground again. Saw erupted into psychotic laughter, the kind Inu had earlier associated with breaking glass. Inu huffed and snarled at the men towering above him.

“A curse on you!” He snapped.

Saw pursed his lips, hiding a creeping grin. Inu felt was a sharp and sudden burning across his chest, then saw that infernal color again. “What should we do to him, Nub?”

“No idea... kill him?” The dark-haired killer shrugged, gazing at his red-stained weapon.

“I know, let’s keep him, like a pet or slave.” Saw grinned, excited at the prospect, the idea of Inu in chains, maybe calling them “master” or “lord.” Over my dead body, Inu thought. Nub seemed to be considering the suggestion. He shrugged again.

“Alright, whatever, he’s your responsibility though.” Oh, how Inu hated being treated like a dog. As if Saw should remember to take him out, feed him from a bowl embroidered with the name “Fido,” or give him a bath. Inu spat at the crazy guard dog.

Saw didn’t snarl or glare; he simply laughed at the smaller male’s action, and Inu felt a pain like a hot iron in his chest.

For the second time that day, Inu was forced back into unconsciousness.

Inu sat cross-legged on one of the many empty roofs in Toshiro. The skyline matched the scenery, bloody and fiery. He appreciated the sunset, a luminescent sight. He took in the warmth, the only warmth in Toshiro. Inu made sure to be on a roof and gazing at the dawn every morning and afternoon. Part of him wished he was seeing the sun in this way somewhere else, on a different roof, thousands of miles away.