

# Touchstone

*Victoria Horn*

Three knocks echo  
the pounding in my ribcage;  
three words beat  
against my hungry eardrums.  
“Come join me,” she yells through the woods,  
our question and answer reverberating—  
breath abandoning my body,  
my voice cracking like dead bark  
as I clutch my touchstone,  
stuttering,  
*Keep me safe*

Rain smudges the ground  
in autumn colors beneath our soles.  
My gaze slides over her reflection—  
muddy eyes shining,  
repeating the dark vitality of earth  
pearls gleaming inside rose-red lips,  
petals unfurling messages  
of friendship.

The trees undress as we tear  
the layers of doubt separating us,  
her eyes promising to plant me  
in her heart’s soil—  
so I dig through the past,  
but slowly, to bare  
the touchstone in my chest.

Time running through our fingertips,  
relentless as the dark hunting the sun.  
The trees lurk in their grim nudity  
and I follow the glint of her teeth, bounding  
through their grabbing limbs  
*I want you to meet my friends,*  
she grins  
darkly—  
and disappears.

I am surrounded  
by wolves  
in human skin.

Crouched in tight-knit circle,  
their bristling shadows froth  
with longing, snarling  
toward the heat  
of my hammering pulse.  
Their leader uncurls,  
her wilted lips baring  
ominous yellow teeth,  
her black eyes mirroring  
the hole in her chest  
where seeds whither  
away from sunlight.  
She watches me shrink  
from her looming pack—  
I stumble for safe words  
but they bark and laugh

and lunge

for the pounding touchstone  
caged within my bones.

Their jaws smear  
my blood in the snow  
and she covers their tracks,  
leaving me as a warning  
for others.

I clutch at my open chest,  
blood-slick with rejected love,  
eyes shut tight, grasping  
my mangled touchstone,  
screaming to the trees.

Why do her dark eyes burn  
while mine flood the banks  
of my cheeks?

Why do her teeth cut the ties  
while mine sew strings  
of vulnerability?

Why do her lips bleed hatred  
while mine bloom  
with offerings of love?

Why does she fear my embrace,  
like ribs around a heart?

What beasts ravaged  
the meat inside her ribcage?

The trees linger, looking  
as I lie shivering in snow.  
Warm breath whispering on my cheek—  
I open my eyes to find  
an angel, palm outstretched,  
porcelain fingers reaching  
for the hand that covers  
the gaping hole in my chest.  
My blood stains her life line—  
she reaches into her pocket  
and presses something missing  
into me, so I beat stronger,  
  
my scarred chest pounding  
when she touches me,  
a proud throb  
as something  
swells beneath  
the shiny, pink skin—  
love.

Let the wolves come.

Victoria Horn is a sophomore Writing & Rhetoric and Literature double major at Northwestern College in Orange City, IA. She has been obsessed with the written word from the moment her mother and father began reading to her as a child. She has avidly been writing poetry and short fiction since junior high. Throughout her love affair with writing, she has cultivated a heart for writing poems about the people and experiences that have shaped who she is today, as well as writing romance fiction that isn't cheesy. After graduating from Northwestern, she plans to get a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and pursue a career as a YA fiction author. This is her first publication.