

Hive Avenue

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HIVE AVENUE



A LITERARY JOURNAL

Hive Avenue Literary Journal

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MISSION STATEMENT

Hive Avenue is rooted in the belief that art is vital for the sustenance of life and has the strength to unite a community.

Our mission is to foster the professional development of writers, poets, and visual artists, to promote communication, connection, and the feeling of kinship.

Here at Hive Avenue, we aim to showcase the tastes and talents of both established and emerging writers in the global community – dare we say, hive?

Hive Avenue strives to cultivate an environment of appreciation; a sanctified space for all to be able to breathe and to read.

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Goats

by Lawrence Bridges

Extension Cord

by Billy Thrasher

I'm standing next to the workbench that my son and I built some time ago. It is an eight-foot-long 2x4 doubly framed two-tier skeleton, covered with thick plywood and piled with greasy, abandoned car parts and hardly used tools. My son's extension cord, given by his mechanic friend, is stretched across the garage floor like a shed snakeskin.

I begin to wrap the cord holding the plug end in my palm, making heavy circles that hang. Suddenly, I'm standing in front of the carport next to my dad. He is taller and wider than me, and he's showing me how to grip the plug end in my palm with my thumb, extend my fingers, and keep my wrist stiff and straight, then wrap the cord around my elbow and into a taut circle, then wrap the socket end around the top cords twice and connect the socket into the plug. He tells me it's easier to carry and wouldn't fall apart when the bundle is tossed into the bed of the pick-up truck.

I stop, let the cord unfurl to the floor, and start over again, wrapping my son's extension cord the way Dad showed me, tying up the memory into a nice taught circle. Then I wonder if my son knows how to wrap it the same way.

Imaginary Hero

by Billy Thrasher

Last weekend with your mother, a splinter
of wood from the handrail of your grandpa's
stair dug its way into your hand – a brown sliver,
encased in a muddy yellow puss-cushion
on your palm just below your thumb, too deep
to dig with a needle. Tuesday evening, you
were calm and shrugged your shoulders
while I removed my glasses, holding them
in my mouth, and with my nose against your thumb,
inspected the splinter, again and again
until you left Thursday morning. I hoped
that when you returned Friday evening, it would
still be there, so I'd be the one who pulled it out,
to show you the relief on my face, to
make my eyes brighten, to lift a constant concern
of mine. Friday, it was still there, still taunting
me. I had until Sunday. You played peacefully
while I stood guard like a Surgeon. Many times,
you surrendered your thumb to me as I inspected
the splinter. I'd played the Tooth Fairy, Santa Claus, the
Easter Bunny, a soccer coach, a tutor,
and more. This time, Sunday afternoon
before you left, I became the hero.

Golden

by Billy Thrasher

You were five when you got out of bed at 2 a.m. and padded into the kitchen, as I wrote about cold dark days on my laptop, at the lamp-lit table taken from a Wendy's restaurant. You wanted to sleep with me and asked if I remembered when you would get out of bed, walk into the living room, lay on the couch next to me as I slept. I thought maybe you were too young to reminisce,

but maybe that was evidence you were growing up, wanting to store the memory. I hope you do. My vivid memories began during kindergarten, and you're starting school two weeks from now. More memories will come. Keep them. I closed the laptop, that's when you said you wished your mom and I would get back together. You sat on the edge of the couch

like a soft gold nightlight that glimmered in the dark. Quiet. We lay down. My left arm outstretched under the pillow, the other on my side. You cupped next to me wearing your gold play dress. It was warm next to you, too warm for the quilt. Almost asleep. Were you? A long time, maybe an hour, then you got up and said you wanted to sleep in your bed. You kissed my cheek, we said good-night together, you said good-night once more, kissed my cheek again.

A feather is not that soft. You padded the floor to your room, shut the door, gold light shimmered from below into the hallway then darkness. Silence. I was cold and reached for the quilt.

Sleeping Dogs

by C. L. Killgore

Sleeping dogs lie
basking
in intermittent shafts of golden light
as narrow blades of unkempt grass
sway
beneath the gentle rustle of ancient trees.
Time moves differently,
slowly,
on summer days where ice melts
and beads of condensation
trickle
down a tall glass of strong, sweet tea,
and a faded blue sky,
cloudless,
achingly-bright,
stretches beyond the safe,
the comfortable places we know.

G.A.E., or the General Absence of Everything

by Chris Farago

It's not as unpleasant as you might think:
No pleasure, yes, but also no pain,
No interminable wait times for the next operator,
No paper cuts, no molded-over berries.

This poem isn't there, either,
No iota of self-awareness lurking.
No squee generated by that video
Of the cat walking on its back legs
And saying mama precociously.

The dystopians always frame this as a choice,
All or nothing,
But they've got it wrong:

All and nothing are there together on the menu--
Choose both and see what happens.

Waiting for Nu

by Chris Farago

“And when Mister Tench is on the bench,
I want to be the piano.”
—Fiona Apple, “Largo”

I was told
not to mention it.

I countered that
I was speaking it out of existence,
merely putting the bunny
back in the hat.

No one bought it.
A conversation continued outside my window
that i was not a part of,
would never be a part of.

A man with a tom-tom drum
plays until his hands are bloody,
thinking that everyone wants to hear
his tom-tom drum, but no one does.

A sliver of darkness
breaking through the light,
but just a sliver—
people see it and ignore the moon
(also just a sliver)
falling from the sky
and
landing on a star.

The conventionality of all this
is where the absurdity lies.
I drink my cold coffee cold
and wait for the next show.

heaven is

Elissa Russell

heaven is
everyone gets their own room
and
stables of horses
or unicorns
or my little ponies
brought to life

heaven is
california kings
with
fluffy fresh sheets
and
cats purring
warming your feet

heaven is
1st time away
meeting your Real Dad
and
2 half-sisters
Tabatha
and
Bethany

heaven is
Algebra
floating equations
pluses and minuses swirling
Do two half sisters equal one new family?

heaven is
no more
bruises or
countertop pills or
fear of leaving
your room

heaven is
tasting life
dribbling down
sticky chins

Phoenix

by Gian Carla Agbisit

This is not a story of redemption,
but neither is it of regret.

In a new blaze, I stop
to recognize the ways

and stages of bright
burning. In remembrance:

to the old woman—
in her scarves, in her seventies,

Amidst my shaking,
And snot, and sweat, and tears—

who said, “Sixteen
is too young to die.”

So is 18, 25, 29,
I thought. Hindsight

is always crucial
and always late

So I wait, and wait,
and learn to hate

or erase the traces
Of brokenness,

Leaving reflections,
Shadows, friends.

I am back again:
Brilliant, broken, burning,

telling myself, “Thirty
is too young to die.”

33, 35, 39...
Hindsight is always late,

So I wait, wait, wait.

Cumulative Decay of Heartbeats, Control Rods, and Cure Songs

by Henry Cherry

1985 wore ankle bells and
Sparkling left-handed gloves,
Was filled with new drivers.
The full pregnant impact of
Nuclear destruction.

I became a lotus flower
But never had seen one.
Drank beers and passed out
In a car going the wrong
Way on Route No. I can't remember

The damage of gullibility
Perspired in overheated lies
That flooded separation
Anxiety, that wore ties and sandals,
Oxford button downs.

I sang the birdsong blueness
Smudging the late summer
East Coast skies, while the blades
Of grass sucked into mower bags
Became the aura of infinity.

Holiness holiness holiness

by Jared Pearce

She stopped loving me when
her kidneys went caput,
her snapped back, her head
whanging like a sawblade,

and me with my wrong-cooked
broccoli, my heart holding
words, my pun-making
during Bible time—

but the old were so funny,
outliving trees, begatting,
zions and floods and handmaids,
fire cruising from heaven

to keep the noise down.
I'll tread barefoot so as not
to wake her, so as to keep
the covenant of my hands.

Pandemic

by Jared Pearce

Rain, and the worms breached
the concrete brink,
stretched themselves hard
to float above drowning.

Running blind on walks
and in the street,
the slight traces of their feet
etched the sandy washout

of the gutters. That trace,
and their curlicue dead,
are the remains—they could
find no way home to dirt,

their flight too high and far.
Jaime carried worms
back to the soil, but when we
checked later, one nightcrawler,

half-dove in Earth, was still
and gone, like the world
sticking its skinny, purple-grey
tongue at us.

Tybee

by J. C. Reilly

Sunset red as a scar puckers the early evening sky.
The seabirds glint like small comets and are gone.

The seabirds glint like small comets. Gone
are the people under umbrellas, sprawled on towels.

People sheltering under umbrellas or sprawled on towels
have left us behind, so the beach is finally ours.

Even when the beach is full, it is always ours,
two sisters with memories of a father's abandonment.

Two sisters with memories of a father's abandonment
exult as a school of dolphins jumps the waves.

A school of dolphins in great arcs jumps the waves,
more elegantly than the two of us at high tide.

Something of rupture is more elegant than high tide.
Something of rupture puckers the heart's evening sky.

5 haiku

by Jerome Berglund

pus obscuring

selvportrett lancing
boils pock-marked topography
lunar rove maria

resignation

predicament to
reflect on, [resignation](#)
flatly rejected

activated charcoal

retches [activated](#)
[charcoal](#) the picture of a
sorry soul possessed

must become parched

[must become parched](#) for
water to taste good, famished
savor day-old crust

tune in

can tumbler stick the
landing, close strong flying colors
[tune in](#) to find out

Bounty of Debris

by Joe Bisicchia

After all the shattering of glass,
all the pouring of sky onto the pond,
all the raining of catfish and dogs,
all the texts from my iPhone
now lost below my feet,
find me amidst the flotsam and
I'll find you amidst the jetsam.
And we shall root for buoyancy,
for shared purpose like porpoises,
and finely get along. Or not.

I go with the gambit of better things.
I say we shall see eternity over what bobs.
Artificial goes so much the nourishment,
only to firm plastic our hearts.

Were we not made to be pliant?
Then, find you and I'll find me.
So full of sea, and other things,
a sea itself so full of things, and yet
empty as the solitary go adrift.
None of us must go amiss in the mix.

Let me offer you my fin.

Adam's Exile

by Kris Green

Two birds sing as the rain dissipates.
The leaves drink and stretch endless vines across the garden.
Crickets join the chorus of chirping insects.

Fruit discarded, left to die on wounded soul.
The ground downtrodden; the steps lead away.
The earth takes back the fruit, to blossom and bloom again.

The moon peers down giving side-glances toward the sun in open day.
Surrounded by the assembly of clouds,
Who already have begun to drink their voided reservoir.

The pressed meadow, that years from now kings would wage war over,
Is alive with symphony of terrible life,
Forsaken to grow wild without its keeper.

Sedona

by Laine Derr

At a young age, I lost my brother,
his coyote hunger roams the desertcape.
In a local newsletter, from what I've heard,
he's retired, happy, 30-year pension
of being angry
of being other
of hiding the taste of blood.

High Five

by Laine Derr

We are what we will be.

Devoid of light,

a triumph's fist:

over Index

over Import

over I

and yet we sleep,

balanced.

Agnostic

by Luke Park

Your gaudy fashion and easy gait
clashed with your mind like magic and physics.

I'd tell you about the pills I'd take, modern day chemists
your parents would give you ginseng. I can't tell which is better or worse.

You'd tell me it was easy to bite the apple, some simple sleight of hand
but we both knew the finesse of it, like dancing knives, juggling fire.

We'd exchange our poetry, our artworks, pulling rabbits from hats
and snakes from our tongues. What we said I will never truly know.

But when I'd suffer, when the land of the cross and the spiral helix met
a thousand years of pain and history rose, spirits waving "hello."

And when those ghosts waved, when the serpents died
the unknown truth herself was conversing.

Dreams Curve Around Reality like Streams Around Rocks

by M. Ait Ali

Imagine you are sitting
Upon that one pile of silence foam,
Listening with that spiral ear
Unto that which is veiled in pre-deposited dreams.
Imagine you are absent from your face
And all the faces you've been mirroring, here and there—
Upon the all-told burbles of streams—
Inasmuch as the beauteous flees the goat's feet
Throughout the crops of Moon and Sun.
Let there be only one ear; one eye; one amorous thought:
Let them all be Heart and Mind,
And no better or worse halves; no spilled cream in the doorways of agony and sorrowful
memories; no darkness windows without the curtains of hope pulled to the side of your
truth and dawn.

Imagine it all starts as a night-old tingling in your bluest toe—upward into your entire
creased foot, which the distance enslaved—rising from that which is blue, into whom
you truly are tonight: Mind and Silence and a tiny speck of Light!

Imagine it finds rest in the heart of what you are,
What you were, what you will be;
Speaks in the fragrance of the ablest flower;
Blots out your thoughts from the records of disquiet;
Prevades your senses, then speaks unto you
Like a foam-hearted Mother to her lonely and only Child:
*"You've wronged yourself with so many crafty lies.
Those were but filled jars. Leave them behind or break them with all the might
whereby flowers open their buds. Seek the emptiest of them. Brim them over with that
which is timeless. Carry them into the night ahead!"*
Imagine, then, how she would leave you to the sleeping beauty you are.
Imagine, then, how you would awake.

Supply Chain

by M. R. Pelletier

The trains hurry by
at night, double-stacked,
containers full of sneakers,
t-shirts and baseball caps
wrought by callused, young hands
in factories half the world away.

No one wakes.

james john

by Nicholas Barnes

My walks never go near
The big green bridge.
God knows I've never walked it,
Only crossed it in a car.
I fear my dental records
Will be the only identification:
203 feet is a long way down.
I won't be the first,
And I won't be the last
To think of what that water
Would do to your bones.
They'd discover me in that tomb,
That basilica underbelly,
Arches sprawling over glass,
Over catacombs abandoned.
They'd find me, and say:
What a nervous wreck.
Fish food now, but I heard
He was happy enough.
Daily thoughts about death,
The void, the absurd, about
What I'd do if I was up there,
Straddling steel and bedrock,
With the 24/7 hotline number
And headlights cheering me on.
I'm scared to walk that crossing
Because I don't want to die,
I just want to stop feeling this way.
And I'm afraid of what I'd learn
About myself if given the chance.

Beneath A Crooked Sky

by Noah Rymer

I crept off in the moonlight,
grieving and alone
to find my late mistress;
She who made me feel at home.

The crescent in the sky cuts like a scythe
all poor souls reaching for heaven above.
Down the damned went,
forsaken, without love.

I cursed as I clawed the clay that formed me,
this putrid, acrid dirt.
Soaked in suicide's diabolical grin,
a taste so bitter it hurt.

The metal gate rattled itself fierce,
rust spattered like ancient blood.
A fine, low moan through the willows,
the coming of Death's dove.

Hands were scabbing fierce,
for this land demanded sacrifice.
My head was stabbing sharp,
a heart carved of black ice.

Her headstone lay crooked,
the cadaver's point of view;
like the shotgun she tasted metallic,
the bride's head lay askew.

Yet when love's labor lost never returns,
and ghosts haunt only in fairy tales,
madness can run like surging poison
in your veins,
and it's to your own cross you've been nailed.

Thus my spade sliced the cruel burial ground,
carving like an implement of de Sade;
I skewered slightly the coffin cold,
and tore off the shroud of sod.

The cross insignia branding the box,
I pried open the coffin as a child
with a Christmas present.

I viewed my lady past, lying;
I had come too far to resent.

Lying in her wedding gown,
like a paper doll thin.
Her face smothered in makeup plaster,
yet chipped like a China doll, rot of sin.

I stepped down into her shallow grave,
grubs inching over her face.
I brushed my lady's cold skin;
Here she stood in burial lace.

We swooned to the tempo
of midnight's suave din.
The crickets chirping, like singers usurping,
the other in a sweet churchyard hymn.

Oh, how we waltzed a mournful ballad,
moon full of pale yellow light.
The dirge of a skull's sonnet such,
her coldness to the touch felt just right.

And as the cape of stars began to slide,
as the bask of the crescent ceased to stay,
I felt that our time had gone too soon,
and soon she needed to lay.

With tears like the rich cascade of the Euphrates,
I beheld my decaying darling.
Impressed the lips of the living onto the dead,
forever of my own story, reminiscent,
I will be marveling.

First Love

by Pat Daneman

You are ugly. Your pants are too tight, your backpack
is always falling off your shoulder. You have met a boy.

Or a girl. Someone perfect, whose breath smells like peppermint,
whose feet are bare and dirty. You cannot turn your gaze away,

as if they are a cathedral burning to the ground, or the carcass of a horse
turned rainbow colors, all motion and buzz.

They look at you and sigh. They have dreamed about you every night
for the last hundred years. They know everything about you

and are not bored. Mornings between homeroom and Spanish,
you stand next to each other at a window dark with rain,

each looking into the eyes of the other's reflection,
trying not to bleed or sing.

Climbing Out a Window in the Middle of the Night

by Pat Daneman

She goes up to bed wearing mascara.
Her mother yells *wash your face*.
She's not a bad girl—she's in love—
the kind that burns like trash fires

in all the back alleys of a body.
Her boy has the blondest long hair,
the most fragrant leather jacket.
He waits for her under the oak tree.

At the all-night gas station.
That dark stir at the corner—
that's him, sweet intelligent cloud
of his breathing rising. Her father

falls asleep in a chair. He thinks she's still
his girl in pink tights who plays piccolo in band
and reads fairy tales. He loves her
with the kind of love that won't go away,

like waves that soak into the shore,
leaving the sand flat and damp.
By the time he goes upstairs and gets into bed
with his wife, who, indeed, years ago,

would have climbed out a window for him,
his girl and her boy are alone in the park,
walking too close to hold hands.
When they stop to kiss, they seal

their bodies together. Winter is coming,
but the cold won't keep her inside—
she's in love with a window, a branch,
the reaching, the climbing, the fall.

My Father Asks Me If I Have Any Rope

by Pat Daneman

I don't. I wonder what he will use it for.
In his kitchen are stacked cases
of bottled water, red beans, tuna. Everything

is chipped or cracked—the edge of the counter,
the floor tiles, a cup in the sink. The window
has a hole that lets in a draft. Turns out he wants rope

to tie his car door shut—front seat, passenger side.
His dog likes to ride there, and he doesn't want her falling out.
You can get that fixed for good at the shop, I would tell him,

(no matter that the dog died last year) but I know
that would only become the first sentence of a long conversation—
the mechanic is his cousin, there have been incidents—

one with gasoline and a rake, then something else
with the cousin's wife about the President. Here he comes,
up from the basement with a big coil of rope over his shoulder,

like he's a Merchant Marine or a Teamster—someone
with something big and important to fix.

Details of an evening

by Purbasha Roy

The sun slipped behind west
quality of dark improving each
second like coffee I made when
thirteen and the coffee of yesterday
that took to coldness after I forgot
at window-sill to attend doorbell
calling. How I stretched my body at
made bed could've enlivened a broken
boat's silence as it journeys to river-bed
something in suddenness like waft of air
recalled evenings, world felt less strange
my pick of blue wildflowers on way back home
the petals braving sun on them could've
dizzied butterflies as sky scarpes dropped
down. Never scolded for the mess I brought
mortal shapes of virtues have pink smiles
once a foreteller told mother, pink is her
color. With a prick of pendulum-stroke trance
ended like a pigeon flown to yonder from
magician's pocket. My synapses drugged
on these, vanished like crowd from an
ancient civilization struck by epidemic
leaving relics behind, but for whom...

Four Minutes

by Robert Brice

The fine gentlemen at the clock shop
don't take credit cards—
ironic, as their clocks know the time.

I bought a weight from them
that doesn't quite match the other two.
But I know no one will notice
as long as time passes by.

I adjusted the escapement
a fraction of a millimeter;
the grandfather clock stops
after no more than four minutes.

It's the clock my father built
when I was just a child
before I understood
what it meant to build,
what broken means,
or the relief and curse
of time standing still.

Fractals

for Alexander Harristhal

by Ryan Thoresen Carson

I remember
what Alex had to say about fractals

it's reassuring,
that you don't always notice them.

But seriously, they're always there.

Which is my favorite thing about celebrities.

I can just think about what they are doing
at any given time—
unlike friends who must be clutched
and located, texted, are you ok?

Yeah, it does feel like
the sky is always falling,

but it's only raining
all the fucking time.

But celebrities, I wonder what they're doing,
they aren't suffering,
well not in the way that to clean
another's house is suffering.

I like to think that Madonna
is driving up a hilly carpet of evergreens.

Courtney Cox in an apple orchard with lenses
reflecting honey crisp, golden, delicious.

And me?
I'm wearing clear lenses of fractal

in admittedly sick deck shoes
on an admittedly sinking yacht

sequestered and sloppy
in my best stripes

I drink for sustenance.

Tedium, Traditions

an elegy for Eli Todd

by Ryan Thoresen Carson

The weary heart it drags on the Northern New York arteries
the pumping blood of the cars make noise, like all your time
accelerating past you, on the side of the road. It's a hike,
I say, feeling pretty dazed from all that sun. The soul it savages,
it makes things up, that will never happen, but could have.

When I stare up at the sky that allows things to drift, not like down here,
where the wind can still lap up the flames to roar and then disappear.

I wish there had been a roar when you disappeared, instead
I was going about my day. I attended a rally, I'm always at a rally.

So my days begin to be marked more by moments of stillness
than by acceleration. I got a call on the phone, not a roar but a ring.

I wish I could say that answering felt monumental
but I'm always picking up phones. Instead, Anika told me the world's
worst joke, that you were dead. I laughed and told her that wasn't
very funny. I was about to ask if she were around for a drink,
I was hungover, I had had a drink with you the night before,

I could use another.

So now I'm walking over foothills outside Binghamton and my feet
have begun to stink. The grit on my legs marking my distance
is distorting my sunburns into streaks. I would weep if it weren't
for the beauty. I wish I could weep for the beauty, but there's so many
things that you'll never see, so how beautiful could they be?

Besides, what would you care, you have more in common
with the dirt than with my words about it.

We covered you in it when you died, without a headstone. Traditions.
They carry us only so far, but it's nice to have a crutch. Dirt finds its way,
like ghastly glitter found after a particularly bleak send off party.
I hoped it would cling, began resisting the necessary washings, like a teen
who had just touched their idol. I did keep totems, small at first, but then
wearing a patch of yours on my jacket, wearing the headstone
you would receive nine-months later, after judgment,
a monument to the judgment of tradition.

The Letter O

by Shay Wills

If I were a wolf, I wouldn't
Write a poem about being
A wolf. Oh, I'd lope and lunge
Along hills and ridgelines,
My sense of smell would guide me through
The dust and sedge, the pines and open
Space over my head for prey.
I wouldn't know *The Odyssey* or Ovid
Or the importance of the letter O
In a phrase like "romantic movement."
I'd know the taste of deer blood
And scent of the deer's final, fearful
Dung. My lungs would feel elastic.

I'm no wolf jogging along a boulevard,
Both knees armored with braces,
And I limp from a ligament surgery.
I know what a wolf does not. I know
The letter O is in dollars and furlough,
And I know the taste of cannoli after gunfire,
The aroma of ink in poetry. Nights are
Slashed back with electric lights
From nuclear power plants or
Hydroelectric dams that stop the rivers.
Very un-wolf-like, I still feel wolfish,
Which has an O in it too.

To a Crying Baby (for Ryan)

by Thomas Rions-Maehren

I get it. You
used to simply not exist, and now
you do. That's a lot to cope with. Pile on
the undefined stomach pains, chafing diapers,
icy boredom, and the
the disorienting vastness of the world around you; crying
is probably the only thing that

makes sense. Heck,
it's been decades, and the thought
of the absurdity and the superfluosness of my own
existence, this grey sweater I'm sown into
that's just a bit too warm and vaguely itchy, still
brings tears to my eyes
sometimes. The emptiness here
has so much pizzazz – flashing neon lights, raucous rattles,
googoo gaga nonsense, dizzying mobiles of disingenuous
smiling faces looking down on you,
sweet, sweet binkies that are fun to suck
but relinquish nothing – and society fills

you with shiny sparkling nothingness
until, hollow, you burst into a blustery
confetti of dust and nostalgia. What I mean

is that none of this matters, but even
as a newborn, you're hardwired
to grope around for meaning,
and you'll spend a hundred years probing
through a goopy, mushy, baby food reality,
fumbling and feeling and reaching for
and failing to find something that doesn't even exist
like the milk your tiny mouth contorts to suck
in your dreams.

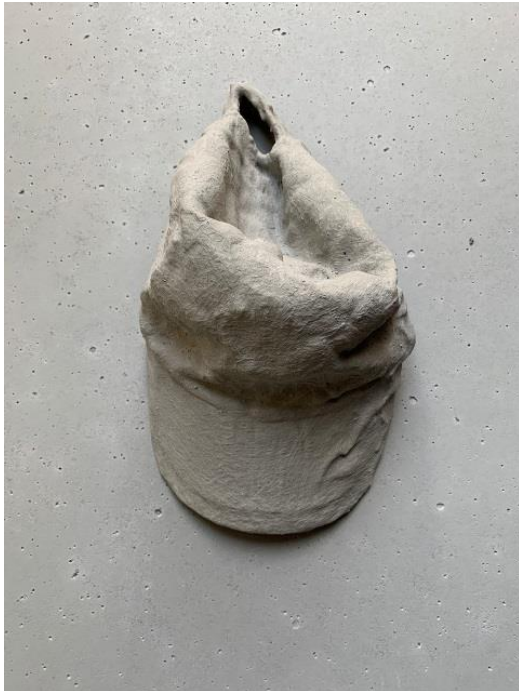
I suppose it's all my fault
for dragging you into this in the first place.
I'm sorry.
I don't have any answers,
but I'll be here if you want to order a pizza and talk about it.

In Cemento Veritas

by Mario Loprete



Sfera Ebbasta



Was My Father

Untitled



Concrete Ice Cream

Daffodil

by Alisan Keese

There's a song on my favorite Halsey album called 'More'. In it, she sings, "They told me once/ Nothing grows/ When a house ain't a home" and later, "They told me it's useless there's no hope in store/ But somehow I just want you more."

The song details a miscarriage Halsey had just before going on stage to perform. Having not even known she was pregnant, she found out only after she lost the baby. Halsey's miscarriage was caused by endometriosis, which is a condition that can make it extremely hard to get pregnant, let alone bring a baby to full term.

Despite having not known she was pregnant, her miscarriage took a huge toll on Halsey, both physically and mentally. She still went on stage and performed that night, but sobbed when she got off stage.

There were two revelations I had when I first heard the song in January 2020. First off, as a young woman who has never been pregnant, nor really wants kids at this time in my life, it never occurred to me how unfair it was that so many people who genuinely want children and would be good parents suffer miscarriages.

The second was that your body could be the sole reason you lose a baby. You can not drink, avoid caffeine, cut out deli meat and tuna, exercise the perfect amount, feel the baby kick, and want that child more than anything on this Earth. Yet, an imbalance of hormones, a weak cervix, or the fact that tissue grows on the outside of your uterus can make the difference in if your baby lives or dies.

It's unfair. It's unfair that I know so many people who have had miscarriages. Some have had multiple. Some had children after and some before. It's unfair that we can control so many aspects of our body: what we put into it, what we adorn it with, and the way we exert it. Yet, we can't choose if our body is equipped to nourish a fetus or whether it's a good home.

It's unfair.

The first daffodils were springing from the ground the day we found out about you. It was a Monday. The city was beginning to decide it was spring. When I came home from work it was light outside, my coat felt a little too thick, and it felt impossible not to feel a small sense of unadulterated happiness. Even if it was just as I walked to my apartment.

My mom asked me to call her. The ominous text message that I'd received many times before normally was innocuous. It rarely meant bad news. Yet, as I walked from my car to the package room to my apartment, I couldn't shake my gut feeling. It was trying so hard to be optimistic because it was beautiful outside.

I dropped my things and changed. I started dinner and called, letting the frozen vegetables thaw as I listened to the two short rings.

“I’m pregnant.”

I’d known something was wrong when I picked up the phone and my mother’s voice was weak. It wasn’t weak because I’d woke her up or because she had a cold. It was weak because she’d been crying. Was still crying.

Pregnancy comes in two forms--wanted and unwanted. The wanted pregnancies, even when a surprise, are a cause for celebration. They lead to parties and preparations. It’s another checkbox in life that gets ticked off with a ballpoint pen. Unwanted pregnancies--however--cause anxiety and dread. Sometimes they can become wanted and other times they never do. Wanted pregnancies rarely become unwanted.

“So, it’s ectopic then?” I asked.

Here’s the thing. Other than being 47, there was only one problem with my mother being pregnant. She doesn’t have a uterus. There was nowhere for this baby to go, to implant itself in a healthy uterine wall. Not only was it dangerous now, but the baby had no chance of survival.

During the ultrasound, no heartbeat was found. Yet, the baby was nearly 16 weeks into development. Just under halfway through the pregnancy. With some quick Google searches, I learned that the longest an ectopic pregnancy lasted where the mother survived was 20 weeks.

My throat went dry.

At 16 weeks, your baby is the size of an avocado and weighs roughly 4 to 7 ounces. The nervous system is beginning to form and this is the first time mothers may begin to feel fetal movement. The eyes and ears will have moved from the side of the head to their more finalized positions. The facial features will begin to look more pronounced and at this point, the face will start forming expressions, though the fetus cannot yet control them.

The sex of the baby is normally determined between 18 to 21 weeks. Though, in some cases, it may be possible to find out as early as 14 weeks. However, it’s around week 7 that the chromosomes of the baby determine the sex. If the baby received two X chromosomes, the baby will be female. If the baby received one X chromosome and one Y chromosome, the baby will become male.

Over the next month, the baby will double in size. 16 weeks is a turning point in a pregnancy where the baby will begin to grow quicker and develop more personalized features within the coming four weeks.

“Are they going to do surgery?”

“Did they give you iron supplements?”

“Antibiotics?”

Every question I can think to ask I do. Based upon all of my late nights Googling things that could kill me and remembering the various OBGYN videos I’d watched throughout the years, this was nearly impossible. Ectopic pregnancies on their own are rare with fewer than 200,000 cases per year in the United States according to the Mayo Clinic. Let alone an ectopic pregnancy in a 47-year-old woman without a uterus and whose tubes were tied well over a decade ago.

The solution the doctors gave her doesn’t surprise me. My mother doesn’t have a choice. This baby will kill her. If her tube doesn’t rupture, then the fetus will eventually cause sepsis. When the baby was discovered, the placenta was no longer there. Combined with no heartbeat found, if he was still alive, he would not be for long.

Just a few decades ago, I probably would’ve lost my mom to this. Before the widespread use of ultrasound and availability of the necessary drugs, the maternal survival rate for an ectopic pregnancy was 0.14% and the fetal one even lower. Even today, ectopic pregnancies account for 10-15% of all maternal deaths in the United States.

I could tell my mom was struggling with this. This non-decision. Not knowing there’s a baby growing inside of you doesn’t make this situation any easier. My mom--even before she is a woman or a wife or a human--is a mother. She loved this baby even if he wasn’t alive or ever would be.

To me, there was no question. I love my mom and I need her here. I knew that if the situations were reversed, if I were the one with an ectopic pregnancy, I know my mom would tell me to do the same. To take care of myself first. Though, I know I would feel the same way. The weight of this non-decision would haunt me, probably for years and the rest of my life. Even though I don’t want kids right now and I have no qualms against deciding what to do with your body, not having a choice, not having the power to give a baby life despite the fact that it grew inside of you for weeks, months.

Not knowing doesn’t make a baby any less wanted.

It’s unfair.

You can pick out asphodels by their thin white petals that seem to grow upward as if craning their necks to look up at the stars. Thin, wiry, and delicate, the petals look

durable, fragile, and like they may prick you. Like a cross between a pine needle and a rose petal. They are native to the warmer parts of Europe, Africa, India, and the Middle East. Yet, today you can find them in the warm parts of nearly any country.

To most, they will walk past such an ugly plant, not finding anything too special in a shrubby, cone-shaped plant. Though, they may one day recognize it when the light parts and they come across a field full of these white or yellow flowers. Asphodels tend to look best in the dark or dim light. Those who come across it at moonlight are the luckiest.

In Greek Mythology, asphodels came to symbolize the Underworld. Not only due to their grim appearance in the sunlight, but also because they poisoned mice and remedied some snake bites. Ironically, the bloom of the Underworld preserved life and crops.

Perhaps this is why Persephone wore them in her crown. The daughter of the harvest Goddess she brought life every spring and departed with it every autumn. I imagine that like how the yellow and white petals of daffodils are the first sign of spring on Earth that when the Asphodel fields bloom, the residents of the Underworld know that their queen has returned.

When you die, there are many places you could go in the Underworld. Most people--who lived neither particularly good or particularly bad lives--went to the Asphodel Fields where their shadowy figures lingered. The particularly bad found themselves flung into the depths of Tartarus, where we can only imagine the carnage. The particularly good--the heroes of Ancient Greece such as Achilles, Heracles, and Odysseus found themselves in the Fields of Elysium.

Normally, only heroes, demigods, or the rare mortal god found themselves in this paradise. The ones with temples and cults for them in the land of the living. The ones whose memories and mythology would survive for millennia.

There was one exception.

Children and babies who died danced and played in the Fields of Elysium. The gods--despite their selfishness and penchant for injustice--recognized that these children never got the chance to become heroes or saviors. Therefore, they should not be punished for what they never got to do.

Their living families built temples and shrines. Some especially prominent children even saw cults form in their honor. I like to think that whenever a child died, it was not Charon who greeted them at the banks of the River Styx, but a beautiful woman with asphodels in her hair.

When the shock settled, we all began to accept that death is inevitable. Everything with an ounce of life will die one day. Whatever your beliefs--in an afterlife or not--most

believe that once a life ends, it is peaceful for the majority. Even in cycles of samsara or reincarnation, your current life ends and a new one begins.

I like to think that little Mason Henry Hell died as the daffodils sprung from the ground so that the mother of the Underworld could cradle him in her arms. And when she returns to the Underworld in six months, she will carry him against her chest like a mother as she crosses the River Styx. The goddess will carefully lay him in the Fields of Elysium where her fingers brush against the new gray asphodel blooms.

Here, he will have endless friends to play with. He was supposed to be the first son born on the Hell side of the family. Yet, in the Fields of Elysium, he is the only son who carries the name. By rare chance your living soul visits the Underworld, you may be surprised how alive it feels. For every spring, Persephone brings the souls of those who never got a chance with her, so they may, too, experience life and see those left behind.

Like asphodel, their blooms are yellow and white, though more vibrant than the gloomy buds of asphodel. Daffodils derive their name from the sacred plant of the Underworld. Maybe because they share the same color petals, though I like to think it's because with death, comes new life.

I would like to end with a line from Dante. Referencing the work of Virgil, Dante describes the scene from the *Aeneid* where Aeneas visits the Underworld and comes across his father, Anchises, who died earlier in the epic, in the Fields of Elysium.

Dante writes, "With such affection did Anchises' shade reach out, if our greatest muse is owed belief, when in Elysium he knew his son."

Mom Fucked Us with Weight Shit

by Emily Fontenot

Both legs in. Stop at the thigh. Breathe. Jump. Jump again. Jump until they pull past my thighs and my big, fat, ass. Until I feel fabric touch my hips. Then jump one more time, cursing the low-rise trend as I force jeans over my love handles. Tug until it feels like the jeans are up my fucking vagina. I've never even used a tampon, yet somehow I endure this every time I have to wear jeans.

Once they're in place, stop again. Pray that they'll still button, that the zipper will stay up. Remind myself that I was on my period last week and that's why they were painfully tight. Promise myself that this week I'll start, start over, start again. This time I'll lose the weight. Suck in, hard. Button. Then zip. Keep holding my breath for three, two, one. Slowly exhale, don't scare the zipper with the extra pressure of oxygen. Breathe.

Give them ten minutes. They'll stretch out. Then I'll actually be able to move, to breathe. That's just how jeans work.

"We're leaving in five minutes," Mom calls to the house, accusatorily, like it wasn't like this every Sunday.

The zipper's held. Will have to speed things up. Stretch a little. Bend. Help the fabric loosen. Wonder if they've been shrinking in the dryer. Remind myself to start hanging them to dry. Breathe again and walk out of my room, at least fix some cereal before y'all corral us out.

You, in the kitchen with a water from your ice chest. We didn't drink bottled water in the house—it was a waste of money. You wipe the dew with a paper towel, ease the bottle into a huggie. It's brown, subtle, the Logan Fournerat Cattle Company one. Smile. Walk past to the pantry. Grab a box of cereal.

"The car's already running." You never were a breakfast person.

"I'll fix it in a cup. Take it with us."

Gather cup and spoon. Pour cereal, milk. Walk over to the island. Drop spoon. Great. Jeans aren't stretched out yet. Bend slowly, at the waist—not the knees—to pick it up.

"Bend your knees." Your voice is suddenly harsh, angry.

Three things go through my mind one right after the other:
Red. Hot. Everywhere. Not anger. A flush. Embarrassment.

Was it that easy to tell? They fit. They buttoned, zipped then stayed. I had looked in the mirror. They fit. I'm a size six.

You couldn't tell. And if you could? What was it to you? Couldn't you let me handle it? They would stretch out. I would lose the weight. And since when did you care? Since when did you even see me? We let you have your denial. We let you believe all sorts of things: That your brother's not queer. That your dad wasn't an alcoholic. That your sister didn't marry a child molester. That she had believed her daughters when they told her. Or better yet, that she hadn't had to. Because it had never happened. That she hadn't married another one.

They fit.

Did you think I was trying to be sexy? Mom said all guys ever thought about was sex. Did you think that's what this was? Practice? Me? More red, flushed. Can you imagine? I can promise you, that's not what this was. I could just see, feel every seam bursting if I bent at the knees, breaking the wooden planks locking them in place. They needed time to stretch out.

And now my cereal was soggy. Throw it out. Go to the car, silent.

I don't know if I'll ever forgive you for that.

Steps to the Summit

by Faith Breads

We all heard the train a-comin' the night Beamer belted out "Folsom Prison Blues" in the basement of Station 19E, Johnny Cash's loathsome rail line making a special stop in the Roan Highlands for one night. Her raspy baritone was a favorite amongst the jumbled crowd of janky thru-hikers and townies in camo, music being the mighty mixer of cats that might otherwise clash. I cheered with the rest of the transients. And though we'd been playing leapfrog for a hundred miles, I hardly recognized the girl on stage, the power of a shower proving simply undeniable. Beamer The Hiker was now Beamer The Magician, not just shapeshifting from hiker trash to Johnny Cash but performing pure telekinesis in the process. She uncrossed arms, cracked smiles, and grew the karaoke list a whole page. No matter how loud we'd *Ba Ba Ba-ed* just a song before, the wannabe Neil Diamond had no chance: this was the tune of the night. Perhaps because we had all once felt like Johnny behind bars, tortured by our own Folsom Prisons, mine being the prospect of living a life so-called free—with the car and apartment and corporate job—only to never really have the time to see the sun. Now, here we were, rich folks for the night at a hostel with over two-hundred beers and thirty-dollar bunks, night forty-three of our grand prison escape on the Appalachian Trail—and boy did Beamer blow our blues away. Well, everyone except one.

I was not the only fugitive of the Life Expected, enlisting my partner's help to break my mother's heart. Mijal and I met in college, and for those brains that just fumbled the pronunciation or skipped it entirely, fear not: I couldn't say it either when we first met. By the time I learned how to say her name (think Mee-hal), I had become unlearned in being her friend. I'd completely forgotten that's all we were. It was an honest mistake when I referred to her as my girlfriend while we imagined meeting each other's parents – but she never corrected me. Similarly, she never flinched when I jokingly announced my 2021 departure into the Appalachia two years later, us imagining life on the trail as the credits of *Wild* were still rolling. At the time, I was all talk and no walk. Though a five-sport athlete, my grandparents conditioned me to drive up mountains instead of climbing them, spending many summers snaking around Skyline Drive with bellies full of roasted weenies – comfortable. Despite the style of Reese Witherspoon's hair in her role as Cheryl Strayed, I knew a thru-hike was anything but comfortable. I didn't take my declaration seriously until I realized Mijal had taken me seriously. Thanks to her, the A.T. not only existed in our thoughts but wedged its way into our conversations, bank statements, closets, and Christmas lists. Saturdays were for plucking the best discount gear from REI garage sale racks, and Sundays were for day trips to Shenandoah to test it out. We slowly became people who *looked* like they might hike the Appalachian Trail all in one go, and yet nothing was slow about it. Two years of planning our walk to Maine flew by overnight. Before we knew it, my mom was driving us down to Georgia in tears, salary and stability in the rearview mirror, Mijal and I a ball of nerves as we posed a critical question for the first time only then: *do we even like to hike?*

We set out to answer that question for ourselves on April 9th, 2021, departing from the famed arches at Amicalola Falls State Park with packs we swore would weigh five pounds less. On day one, we learned the weight of water and discovered just how precious a gift it is! By the time we made it up the first climb, we were unzipping our pantlegs to strut in knee-length shorts, and a fallen tree after the second climb begged us to sit and sip the weight off our backs. We feared being cold but had underestimated the sun, which proved its strength by scorching us underneath the bare trees. We made it to camp sunburnt and parched, but sure that we liked hiking enough to stay the night. Day two reinforced the weight of water, this time in the form of rain that logged our clothes, shoes, and packs. The frigidity we feared made an appearance after all, forcing us to stop mid-day for a hot cup of broth. And when we liked hiking even then, shivering forward with toes we could hardly feel, we decided we'd be alright. That was before night four.

On night four, we heard gunshots as we were falling asleep, and when Mijal rolled over to ask if I heard them too, I replied: *honey, that was a tree*. But the noise that followed could absolutely not be misperceived, a baby cursing the gun/tree with screams for stirring her sleep. *Surely*, we thought, this baby's family is out for the weekend, and once we rose to see them gone, we figured they had hit the trail early to finish out the five miles southbound to the road. As we hydrated our oatmeal and coffee crystals, word buzzed that the pop was, in fact, a gun. The result of a blunt gone bad, a hiker high as Clingman's Dome (the A.T.'s tallest point) mistaking a tent for a bear. Who knew skunk was the wildlife we should be worried about?

The misadventures continued into the morning, a handful of hikers sniffing around camp, searching for their food bags. One of the early birds spotted a curious jeaned man with a grocery bag fumbling with the cables that hung the provisions. Those single-digit days had tons of unlikely characters attempting to trek through, so it wasn't beyond belief to deem him a thru-hiker – until three or four sacks were missing. Then, we realized the forager was likely homeless and hungry and in the know of how to make our high-hanging food his low-hanging treats. Hikers shared their snacks to help the foodless ones make it to the road, where they'd need to hitchhike into town for a resupply. As Mijal and I marched away from the circus, our thru-hike affording us tickets to The Greatest Show on Earth, a huddle formed around one of the last tents still pitched. Pale and pained, a girl we'd befriended the night before, Kelly, clenched her stomach as she described the bombing in her belly between breaths. *Giardia*, we all told her. Must've had some bad water drip from her filter into her drinking supply. We continued, assured by the surrounding spectators that they'd help her get through the day. The next time I got service, I received a text from one of our new pals who'd stayed behind: *Kelly & crew hiked five miles south. Forced to crawl when it got bad. Ovarian cyst twisted x4. Size of eggplant*. The doctor told her she probably would've died had she not gotten to the ER when she did. The other text I received was from my mom, asking: *How's it going* – to which I replied: *having sooo much fun! <3 love you!*

Mijal and I hiked on. And much to our surprise, the small, stoned, and scarred did too. Kelly returned three weeks later with a new relic on her stomach, the dopers always offered a puff when we passed, and the baby and her family were, in fact, on their

way to Maine. Admission to the adventure was simply one's appetite (or one's parent's appetite) to be there, and the most unlikely hikers seemed to be the hungriest. We met hip replacement hikers, schizophrenic hikers, two-hundred-pound overweight hikers, gap year hikers, riddled with Alzheimer's hikers, father-killed-my-mother-and-tried-to-kill-me hikers. Things that society typically viewed as disabilities and ailments were the very things that propelled people forward on the Appalachian Trail. Everyone had a *why*, and every soul-hungry hiker shared their *why* around a fire each night, none of us tired enough yet to retire to bed immediately after dinner. They were seldom sentiments like: *I'm big and strong and want to put my strength to good use and see America*. But instead: *I'm weak and incapable and need to prove that I can become otherwise*. The trail was never about who you were before getting on. It was all about who you were becoming while you were on it. So we never probed into each other's pre-trail details unprompted, asking more questions about the future than the past. Unified not by our personal histories but by the everyday experiences of being a thru-hiker. Converging on the Appalachian Trail with one for-sure common denominator: the need to satiate our hungry souls with each summit and become who we'd once thought we never could be.

The further we forged towards freedom from our past lives, the farther we got from former familiarities until even the tags we'd worn since birth – the eternal name – proved fragile after all. Hikers forget their birth labels once others knighted them with a trail name, usually reflective of a unique experience on the Appalachian Trail. Unless you met in the first week or two, the only way you'd know someone's real name was through Facebook, our phones communicating like mushrooms at camp each night to provide the most accurate friend suggestions by morning. Learning each other's real names often shocked both the discoverer and the discovered, perhaps because the birth name was a reminder that our lives on the trail couldn't last forever. Even if we reached Maine as radically different people, it's highly unlikely that one who signs *Dick Nipples* on their hotel reservations, job applications, and holiday cards won't be rejected and ostracized. So, we never knew each other's real names unless you were outed by Facebook, in which case a game of who's who would ensue. I recall digitally be-friending one of my trail pals, squinting closely at his half-inch profile picture showing him clean and jeaned, scratching my head thinking: *I don't know a Landon?* Except, I did, for over 1,500 miles. I knew him as Hamburglar, twenty pounds lighter with his bushy beard unkempt.

A LASH-er (Long Ass Section Hiker) renamed me after a stop at our first hostel, Hostel Around the Bend. Conveniently situated eight miles before the North Carolina border, Hostel Around the Bend is the perfect stop for hikers looking to celebrate almost completing their first state. It also happened to be where I'd celebrate my twenty-fourth birthday. I decided to bake Betty Crocker's finest, a super moist strawberry cake, in a nod to my late grandmother (the same one who lugged me up mountains in her minivan), whose birthday is a day before mine. I assumed the hostel offered pans since the kitchen had an oven, only realizing *after* the batter was mixed and oven preheated that the only pans provided came in the style of sheet. Skeptic hikers watched as my baking resembled more of a boxing match than a birthday celebration, putting the pan in the ring round after round, me the cornerman wiping off stuck remnants and reapplying Pam for another bout. Once the very thin layers of cake cooled, I stacked

them with icing serving as glue, the doubters dancing once they realized they'd get a slice too. Electronics charged but social battery drained, I bolted onto the trail the next morning, stepping largely to find solitude and distance myself from the crowd at the trailhead. I toasted to finishing our first of fourteen states with lunch, tortillas rolled with tuna, and waited for Mijal. The LASH-er emerged minutes later as I lay slumped on a rock, claiming he had tried to catch me though I was always one step ahead. Of course, I knew this, but one must fight for solitude in the first few hundred miles on the A.T. when camps are often filled with 20-30 tents a night. He sat beside me, and in a burst of excitement at having finally caught up, he sent my birth name to bed for a six-month timeout. From then on, I was Strawberry Lightning.

Mijal earned her fresh moniker during a punishing push out of the Great Smoky Mountains where we'd encountered our first bear, which wouldn't have been so frightening if Baby Blue hadn't almost gotten eaten by one. The same family from night four had kept pace with us for weeks, even though only four of the eight legs were walking. The night before our first major wildlife run-in, they had one of their own. Mother Bethany had set her blue-eyed girl by a tree as she hung their hammocks, and Dad Austin got started on dinner with Aadrik, the toddler of the bunch. As Bethany clasped the final hook, hikers hollered at a black blob between the trees. Critters aren't scared of people in America's most visited park, especially when well-intentioned guests feed them sugary treats. Visitors aren't even scared of the critters anymore, particularly if there's a solid selfie involved. The reality is that fed bears are dead bears, rangers bringing out the bullets once the bruins become too friendly. As this blob became less blur and more bear, hikers added their trekking poles to the ensemble, smacking them together as if to say: *our books are filled for the night. You'll have to dine somewhere else.* And in the most curious plot twist, the beast bypassed the pile of food bags still on the ground, where it could've had tuna and Snickers-galore, and gunned straight for the baby. I admit, Blue's eyes were hypnotic, a pair of pearls you couldn't help but stare at for an uncomfortably long amount of time – but this was no way for the precious six-month-old to meet her first bear. Thankfully, someone high above agreed, sending a park ranger strapped with a hunting rifle to intervene right in the nick of time. Instead of hunting rampant boar that night, he protected Baby Blue, who rested in her custom-made miniature hammock, swaying peacefully above her parents.

So, you can imagine our fear when we encroached on a cub the following day, perched fifteen yards ahead around a bend in the trail – no mother in sight. Paralyzed everywhere except the mouth, Mijal discharged her version of bear spray, a clamor through Smash Mouth's "All-Star," as loud as her vocal cards could manage, veins sticking out in her neck and all. After ten minutes, her croak became a croon, the adrenaline wearing off, and we tip-toed forward with ears perched and eyes scanning, the mom never to be found. Hikers dubbed her All-Star by dinner, a transformation we thought was purely nominal at the time, but her *becoming* was underway.

The bears were the beginning of our stressful slog through the Smokies, with Mother Nature drenching us in three days of bone-chilling rain in the back half of the section. The first day wasn't so bad, with evergreens emerging from the fog to create a magical, fairy-tale atmosphere. Though we were cold, we hiked slowly to take in the

scenery, snapping pictures between thunderous booms, shielded by an oh-it-won't-happen-to-us mentality. *It* being some disastrous thing that comes with loud, flashing thunderstorms, and we didn't know what *it* was; we only knew we were safe from it. We anticipated arriving at camp early, where we'd have ample space to dry our gear. Except, everyone had the same idea, and *it* had happened to somebody. Lightning struck down on two section hikers, scorching their shoes and leaving them and everyone else around emotionally rattled. They were physically okay. Praise the Lord. But it was enough to cause my fear of thunderstorms to flare up, so we hunkered down in our polyester home, drifting to sleep with a mobile of wet socks and undies above our heads.

All-Star and I rose before the sun the next morning, determined to be one of the first to camp on our second straight day of rain. Our only luck was that it was thunderless, so no *it* loomed above us. Instead, it ran below us, our path becoming less of a trail and more of a miniature waterfall. But we waded through the water confidently, with nothing having dried overnight. There can be no shock factor in getting your shoes wet when they are already soaked. It was cold, though, so we kept ourselves warm with the idea of a hot brothy lunch underneath the protection of a shelter. Eventually a wooden post emerged from the fog, and we darted towards it as if it would disappear if we blinked. All-Star started one of our deranged pre-lunch chants, her screaming *LUNCH* as I followed with *NOW!* And right when I began to dig for my spork, something proved to be more frightening than the bears – the faded sign showing 0.6 miles to the shelter. *No way we're tacking on another 1.2 miles in these conditions*, we thought. So we sat, saving the ramen for later and eating our peanut butter and jelly sandwiches quickly to avoid another flare-up of mine: disgust from soggy bread.

With no hikers coming from either direction, the afternoon transformed All-Star and I into two little monks, enlightened by the prospect of outpacing the crowd to camp due to our sacrifices of shelter and sleep. We were no longer waterlogged but weightless, dancing amongst the salamanders in our great migration through the rain. We twirled and sang and clapped in our pilgrimage, euphoric in having completed seventy-five percent of the day's efforts. But, of course, we were victims of late-stage hiker brain. The hiking day consists of four phases: the first three miles of every day being the groggy slog regardless of weather or terrain, the next six miles being the stride express, followed by three miles of the post-lunch plod, then the mad march to camp beginning five miles out from the day's stopping point. Upon making it to one's destination, thru-hikers usually excuse each other from being coherent for at least an hour, stage-five hiker brain completely deteriorating the ability to think. In fact, hiker brain is the leading cause of spilled dinners, improper tent set-ups, and unexplainable stares off into the distance especially when being addressed. We were clearly in our fourth phase, manic and moving towards the shelter, smiling and unaware of the day's earlier sufferings. This time when the wooden sign pointed us 0.5 miles off-trail, we obliged happily, skipping all the way to our three-walled sanctuary, its back facing us, sighing with relief as we turned the corner only to find it absolutely stuffed. *Where the hell did y'all come from*, we gasped aloud. No one replied or budged, their butt-to-butt arrangement seemingly leaving little room for even speech. *They've been here*, another soggy hiker chimed in. The hikers at this shelter had decided to stay snuggled in their sleeping bags once the pitter-patter became a pour. Most of us were still lugging around

too much food in that first month, so it's not like anyone *had* to budge. And to think All-Star and I were the monks. These meditative motherfuckers stayed silent and still for three days straight.

Back to the tent, still damp from the night before, and with hikers now bottlenecking and spots limited, we had our pick: slumber in the shit-fields or on a slant. Really, there *were* shit fields. Toilet paper bloomed like flowers as trowel-less visitors left more than their droppings. We opted to sleep with blood in our brains, inching forward the next day not just damp but deprived of the nutritious Zzzs critical for recovery – but it didn't matter. Two hundred miles into our twenty-two-hundred-mile trek, our beginner's zeal would soon fade but not yet, keeping us warm and moving us along right when we needed it most. And on the fourth day, God finished creating the sun, the moon, and the All-Stars of the world – me having a front-row seat and even a helping hand in the act.

After three days the rain had stopped, and the sun peeked through trees starting to dance their late-April bloom, but it was only the start of our thaw. When *everything* is cold and wet for three days – the tent, the sleeping bag, the socks, the shoes, the jackets, the gloves – the warming process is inchmeal. Despite having the opportunity to land our legs at Standing Bear Hostel, the rustic rescuer of hikers only three miles north of the Smokies, something about Hot Springs made us feel *hot* – and that's all we wanted after this stinging stretch of trail. We decided to push on another day, determined to get up and over Max Patch where Hot Springs would welcome us the next night. Yet, we had underestimated the climb to the iconic bald. I didn't know it then, but a hiker would later tell me a fact that rings true when recalling this section of trail now: the Appalachian is steep compared to America's other long trails because it was created by the men of World War I, hard fellas that sought the fastest way from one point to another. At first, All-Star and I chuckled at the sheer incline of the ascent up to the peak, a relentless pattern of steep-flat-steep. After hour five, we released stress by at-the-top-of-our-lungs screaming about our plans to open a trail-side giftshop with shirts that read: *I hiked the entire Appalachian Trail and all I got for it was two fake knees*. By hour ten, we longed to be back in the Smokies. At least in the rain, no one can tell when you're crying.

Thankfully, the wind hides tears just as well as rain, and mine were dried instantly by the vicious swells that met us on the summit. We made it just in time to be spellbound by God's golden sphere setting behind the Carolina mountains, and right then I knew it was the greatest sunset I'd ever seen. The first one I truly worked for: twelve hours of one foot in front of the other, climbing over 6,000 feet. Perhaps it was because my future in a wheelchair seemed imminent, but the parking lot below didn't bother me despite other hikers feeling cheated and insisting it plagued the natural beauty. I was simply enamored by the couples falling in love on blankets, pups escaping their owners searching for fallen food, kids staining their shirts green by rolling instead of scrolling. No innovation in technology will ever replicate the lure of Max Patch, and I was happy to be experiencing that sunset with everyone, whether they climbed to the top by foot or by car. It could've been our exhaustion, or maybe that's how all sun shows go, but the magic steeped in red and orange was ephemeral. As the sun waved its

goodbye, dipping below the blue silhouettes of mountains far away, we became bewitched by the beatings we had just endured. That week, the trail had whittled us to our cores, All-Star more than me, our green fervor finally faded. With a shake brought on partially by our dampness in the twilight temps and partially by the process of her transformation, All-Star looked me dead in the eyes and pleaded for the offing of her auburn hair, perhaps with the last ounce of energy she could muster. Day twenty-eight left her evolved in such a fashion she demanded it, too, be reflected in her appearance. One pinky-swear later, protecting me from the aftermath, I hacked her hair chunk by chunk with a rusty knife and scalpel, the sharpest objects we had, her deep-red locks vanishing into the night with the wind like a tree altered by the change of season, shedding leaves and becoming bare.

We made it to Hot Springs the next day, where hikers took turns playing barber with clippers we'd snagged from Dollar General, buzzing off the rest of her mangled mane. We entrusted the most artsy of the bunch to carve a star into the stubble on the right side, showcasing her new self: All-Star. Here she was: bald and bold and beautifully unaware that the night on Max Patch would leave her more than transformed – it left her broken. Slowly, she realized. The confidence she carried with the cut lasted a few days before self-doubt began to seep into her head. What felt like a lifetime on the trail was barely ten percent of the journey, and that idea swallowed her whole. Two weeks later, she was a shell of herself – not just as All-Star, but as Mijal. She was her own Folsom Prison, and no matter where she was – the Appalachian Trail, back home in Maryland, Station 19E as Beamer banished the blues for everyone but her – she was jailed.

The riot at Station 19E lasted well into the morning, teetotalers even toppling off Sobriety Summit to join the drinkers in causing a ruckus outside the hostel, cigarette smoke and screams leaking into our sleeping quarters. Sleep prefers to take me with a hammer, knocking me immobile until morning but sneaks into Mijal sparingly as if she's a pool it doesn't know how to swim in, restricted to the shallow end. With the poor conditions at Station 19E, Mijal tossed and turned all night, though it wasn't just from the noise. She roused me several times throughout the night, insisting we needed to talk about X, Y & Z right then, random topics from our pre-trail times. Still drugged by drowsiness, I said the trail would be the perfect place to discuss in the morning. The next day, our hitch dropped us off at the trailhead. Mijal looked at me wearily as I hoisted my pack up to my back. Her eyes alone could've spoken the words that came next, distant and strange, expired bulbs with no flicker left, yet I tried to flip the switch anyway. *Let's talk on the trail, c'mon*, I begged. So we walked a mile, then Mijal asked to sit beside a tree. *I need to go home*, she said. I replied with an offering to stay another night at a different hotel, talk right then, and do anything she needed to stay, yet she'd decided. Her dad was driving down from Maryland to pick her up. The me-a-month-before would've gone home with her, but Strawberry Lightning was different from Faith. Newfound independence rooted me to the ground. Mijal didn't encourage me to accompany her either, knowing our plans to thru-hike the A.T. weren't truly *ours* but two separate dreams intertwined by being together. The Appalachian Trail had given her everything she needed. Mijal was hungry for other things, but my soul still growled. For the first time in my life, I felt alone.

Amphoteric

by Katie Tonellato

My dad never got into the pool with us when we were kids, despite going to college on a swimming scholarship. Near chlorinated water, my dad's eyes turned a venomous red and tears pooled from the pink corners. He was a nationally ranked swimmer before progressive goggles were invented. The goggles he used were clear and plastic, digging into the soft skin around the eyes and keeping minimal amounts of water out. The chemicals from the water stripped away the tear film on his cornea, leaving him susceptible to burns, dirt and infections.

All of my memories from pools, lakes and the ocean feature an omission of my dad, and my mom sitting in her tri-fold beach chair, reading a supermarket romance novel while her pale skin burned.

Incendiary as a child, I never made it past the third or fourth round of swim lessons because my mom couldn't handle having to keep me from talking back to the swim teacher or pushing other kids under water. I bullied both her and my brother, who was clumsy, with his disproportionate feet and head. If my brother didn't trip into the water I pushed him. If my mom tried to reel me in to wrap me in a towel, I would swim to the middle of the pool. No way she would jump into the water to retrieve me. As a result, my family grew up doggy paddling and pinching our noses before we jumped into water.

I joined the swim team my junior year of high school, still lacking in fundamental skills. For the first week of practice I spent most of the time catching my breath on the wall and wondering how long it would take me to sink to the bottom if I let go. There were over 70 girls in the pool. My coaches and team wouldn't have been able to see my body past the kicked up water. Except my friends would notice because every time they passed me doing laps they made sure to pull me under by my feet. Learning to stay afloat took over a month.

At my first meet, my dad, who had refused to go to my soccer matches because soccer was "boring" and "gay", perched on the bottom rung of the bleachers in the murky humidity of the pool, eyes pouring out tears. He wore the same outfit everywhere. A crew neck sweatshirt, a golfing hat to cover his bald head, khaki shorts and navy New Balance sneakers.

I swam in the outside lane, otherwise known as the slow lane, and got 3rd in my heat. My dad walked along the lane line of the pool for the entirety of my race. His voice bobbed in and out with each stroke I took a breathe on.

He drove me home afterwards in his truck. The seats were duct taped and smelled like cigarette smoke.

The entire ride he taught me technique. To hold my hands above my head like an arrow and squeeze. How I could do a flip turn and be ten times faster. To open my palms and look straight ahead.

I fell asleep against the window.

After that car ride, he followed me around the house for the rest of the fall season. If I watched television in my room he knocked on the door and swung it open precariously to talk about swim meet dates. If I went to the bathroom he faced the wall in the corner while I peed to talk about progress plans.

If I waited on the porch for my friends to pick me up he would wait outside with me.

“I think you can get faster than Amber if you just get over the piano on your back,” he said from his seat on the porch steps.

I nodded, “I only need to go down by three seconds and we are tied. But she doesn’t even swim backstroke.”

“Who cares! She’s been swimming her whole life and you just started two months ago.”

“Look at how buff I am now.” I rolled up my sleeve and flexed. “I’m like a man.”

He scoffed, pulling himself up by the railing, “These are muscles.” His own sleeve pushed up onto his shoulder. His arm bulged. The veins in his bicep were a dark purple.

“One day I’m going to be more buff than you,” I said.

“Maybe when I’m dead.”

My ride pulled into the oak leaves piled on the side of the street. I left my dad on the porch. His body disappeared behind our screen door as the car pulled away.

...

Before water is concentrated with chlorine and poured into fiberglass, concrete or vinyl pools, water is transparent, tasteless, odorless, and colorless. Essentially, in its most basic corporeal form, it is featureless. A blank slate. Yet, it is the solvent of life. Our bodies are made up of 60% water. The vital organs; the brain, the lungs and the heart, are made up of 70% water. Essential to most solutions on earth, its lack of distinctive attributes allows it to react with all of the solutes around it.

Humans are pliant as such. They are what they react to around them. They are solvents. Like the pores of a sponge, they take in their surroundings and become mirrors of them. Refractions of their environments.

Which is why submerging in water is healing. The plunge rinses the body and gives another life, by relieving us of the environment in which we are reacting. Senses are dulled, blurred, muffled, numbed. All that is left is the body itself, skinned and ready to become new.

...

In my final years of college I got so lonely I felt like a teenager again.

I was going out every weekend to a gay karaoke bar called Nyne and dancing until I threw up in the bathroom or dropped my Alaska credit card in the toilet. I went with anyone who was willing. The DJ played the same three songs on repeat. I danced and danced until my hair was soaked in sweat and makeup ran down my face. Until my physical body was displaced from the bar, somewhere underneath it all.

My roommates Chelsie and Kaycee were usually the ones who went out with me. Neither of them drank. They drove me twenty minutes into Spokane just to babysit me. Chelsie knew the security outside, so we got in for free.

One occasion, I housed an extra beer in my pocket from our house. I beat the system this way. Saving money and staying drunk. We sat at a table and my roommates' eyes danced over me. I felt that without me they didn't know what to do at a club. I guided what we did, when we went out, how much fun we had, and they held it against me in the morning.

I pulled the beer out of my pocket and chugged it. One of my roommates grinned maniacally, the other looked around the room.

"Katie put that away. You can't bring in outside drinks," Kaycee said.

I crushed the empty can in my hand, "just a can."

I walked over to the counter, saw no trash cans, and set my can on the bartop.

The bouncer followed me and scooped me up under my arm as I started to sit back down. Both my roommates' eyes went wide.

"Whoop." I turned to him. He was tall, pear shaped and bald. I had seen him there before. I had never seen him smile.

"Is this yours?" He held the can in his other hand.

I nodded. It was nice of him to hold me up.

"You can't bring outside drinks in here? Do you know how dangerous that is? What if someone spiked a drink or something. Right?"

I nodded, but I could only hear some of what he was saying.

“Don’t do this again.”

My cheeks flushed. After realizing I wasn’t going to be kicked out, my roommates laughed, huddled closer together, separate from me. I sat down again.

“You idiot.” Chelsie’s mouth was tiny and tight.

I shrugged, “Next time I’m making a run for it.”

Kaycee shook her head, “You’re going to get us banned.”

I didn’t care. I didn’t care what he said. I didn’t care if someone spiked my drink. I didn’t care that they watched me all night. I didn’t care that I fell into people dancing, or that their drink soaked through my shirt. I didn’t care that Chelsie got annoyed after having to drag me back to life from the bathroom. I didn’t care that nothing was real and no one cared about me. I didn’t care that they bought me more drinks. They laughed like hyenas. I danced and danced.

On the drive home I pressed my face into the car window. The condensation from outside was like ice on my cheek. When we got home I got out of the car before them, stumbled into the house, and put distance between us. I grabbed a box of cheerios from my cupboard which also housed mushrooms I hadn’t taken that had gone stale, and three packets of edibles. I brought the cheerios with me into the bathroom.

We had one bath at our house. I turned on the water as hot as it went. While it filled I spooned cheerios by the fistful into my mouth. I turned the lights out, immersed in darkness, only the sound of the water flowing.

I placed the cheerio box on the floor before undressing. It was knocked over in my attempts to take off my pants. I dipped into the water and it was scalding. I held onto the wall.

My eyes started to water from the steam. When I was little I used to cry in the bathroom with the space heater on my feet because our house was drafty. The bathroom always seemed like a place of comfort to my family. The only time my dad had cried in our house was in the bathroom. He had an air bubble pressed into a cavity on his tooth. He locked himself in the bathroom and cradled his cheek, lying on the floor, crying.

The only other time I’d heard of my dad crying is when my mom told stories about when my grandma died. The way she told the story, he was bawling, but I couldn’t imagine it like that. My dad was full of humor and anger and care. He didn’t interact with sadness. Unless the force of the emotion had been so strong it had broken free. He might have breathed in, counted to three, breathed out and let it pour out of him like rotten garbage. His purple face crumpled over his knees.

My dad still does not talk about his mom except to talk about her cooking. I tried not to engage in conversations with my own mom about her because it felt sneaky. Like a raw, open cavity we pressed into.

My roommates were banging on the door. I woke up just as my bottom lip sunk below the water line. The box of cheerios was face down on the floor, the bag opened. A few stragglers laid out like little shells on the floor. I called out to them that I was fine. The bath was no longer warm. I got out and water slid off my leg onto the floor. I wrapped a towel around myself and opened the door.

...

My junior year of college, I had panic attacks every single day. I would lie in bed with my eyes closed. Facing the wall. Facing myself. I cried a lot. I was high all the time. I couldn't move. That same year I attempted suicide. Curled up on the bathroom floor, head leaning back on the cold porcelain of the tub.

In a last minute moment of weakness I called my dad on the phone.

"Katie what's wrong?" My name wrapped around his mouth.

My words stuck in my throat. I gurgled them up in small spurts, "I don't know," came up.

"Katie, you have to talk to me," he said.

Katie. I am here. Katie. I have care. Katie. I am on the other end of this phone call.

"Nothing's wrong," I cried. Tears fell into my mouth. "There's nothing wrong."

"It's okay. It will be okay."

He stayed up with me. Hundreds of miles away. An exhale on the other end of the phone. I don't think he knew what was happening or what he could do. Both of us were helpless at that moment. All I remember him saying is "It'll be okay."

Over and over again. "It'll be okay. It'll be okay. It'll be okay."

He pulled me out of school. I left two weeks before finals and stayed at my parents house. It was a silent summer. People tip-toeing around the house. I could hear them like mice, opening the fridge quietly, telling someone to turn the television down, pacing past my room, afraid to knock. On the odd occasion I was home and awake everyone would hide in their rooms except for my dad, who pretended to do chores in the kitchen, watched tv with me in the living room, and asked if I wanted anything from the store.

I worked four jobs. So many jobs that I didn't need to think about anything but working. When I came home I collapsed onto my bed, slipped on the Winnie the Pooh sleeping mask my mom bought me the year before for Christmas and passed out. I would get about four hours of deep sleep before my alarm would go off and I would be up again once more, heading out the door in my Doggy Daycare t-shirt.

Sometimes when I slept, I would wake up and my dad would be at my door looking in at me, unsure, still, like there was something sitting on the tip of his tongue. All the memories from when I was a kid. When I scraped my knee after falling off my scooter and he put neosporin over the rocks embedded in my skin. When I fell out of the back of his parked truck and was convinced I broke my arm so he made a make-shift cast that I wore for two weeks. When I lost my first soccer game and cried inconsolably in his lap. When I got homesick at my first sleepover and he came to pick me up. When he would ground me for doing something mean to my brother but would never let me miss going with my friends' family to a play that he knew our family couldn't afford. When I snuck out to the skatepark in the middle of the night and had to call him to pick us up in another city after we missed the last bus. When I was small, smaller than his knees and I would stand on his feet in between his legs and he would walk me around, holding me while I watched the world grow small around me.

...

I dodge around undergraduate students trying to reach the fourth floor. I technically recognize that I am not late in any sense of the word, but my mind can't quite wrap itself around the idea of the potential of being actually late. I am headed to my Literary Journal class, in my first year of my Master's program. My headphones are hanging from my pocket and I step on them as I walk-run before reeling them back in by the chord.

My phone rings in my pocket as I pull up to the classroom. The sound alone overflows my already, fast-beating heart. My dad is calling. The phone is heavy in my hand. I think about smashing it on the floor before answering it.

"Hey dad," I say out of breath.

"God damnit I have a funny story. Are you busy?"

"I'm just heading to class."

"Alright, I'll be quick." He won't. "So you know how your mom and I have been reading her old diaries?"

I give him a gentle "hm," half listening to him ramble on about my mom's school girl crush on some band singer. People wave at me as they walk into the classroom. I wave back. I stand next to a window, looking out over the mountain of Flagstaff, Arizona. A landlocked state. Less than 1 % of its surface is water. The air is sparse and dry. I miss the water of my hometown. I miss walking along the waterfront smelling the

fish and watching birds fly from the posts of wood that had once been docks, but had burned down in a fire, leaving charred and wet poles that receded as the tide came in and out.

This summer I will move back to Tacoma for two months while paying rent in Arizona. Throughout high school I dreamed of leaving Tacoma behind. I rarely went back when I was in my undergrad. I wasted time drinking and partying and making plans for a future that lost its pulse in my hands. My old bedroom gathered dust. The dust collected on the window sills, my swim trophies, my old children's books, my Letterman's jacket. I was going to become a famous writer or comedian. I was going to go to Uganda, Italy, China, Tasmania, and Russia. Leaving my parents at home to wonder where I was, what I was doing, who I was with. If I was okay.

I look at the phone screen while my dad talks, the time trickles forward.

"How's what's her face?"

"You mean my girlfriend? Bailey's fine. I'll make sure to tell her you say hello."

"Don't tell her that. What if she thinks I like her," he replies and I want to laugh and cry. My professor has started class.

"Hey dad, I have to go to class."

"Alright sweetheart I'll talk to you later."

He hangs up first.

...

I'm in my childhood home for Christmas break, which truly isn't my childhood home anymore. After I moved out, my mom gave my older sibling my room, my family acquired four cats, and all of the furniture had been replaced.

My mom is cooking from the other room, and Christmas music is playing. The smell of baked bread is in the air. She walks into the living room with glazed eyes. Ever since my brother got his job at a dispensary she is always high. She is more tolerable this way.

"Well, Kate's," she pats my thigh, "We're glad you're home. Your dad has really missed you."

"I'm glad HE misses me," I reply.

"He really does." Laurie says without looking up from their phone. They have short bleached hair. They are three years older than me and still live with our parents.

“No seriously he’s been a bit depressed.” My mom rubs her hands up and down her pant leg. The ring on her finger leaves indents on her skin.

“I hear him crying sometimes,” Laurie says. They are flippant, cold.

I feel buried. “You do?”

They nod.

“The pills are making him sensitive.”

He calls them his “girl pills.” Really they are testosterone suppressants so his once cancer filled prostate remains cancerless.

I’m not sure how to respond.

“Doesn’t he still go golfing with his friends?” I know he does. He always has a story to tell me when he calls me.

“Sure, but they’re getting old and weird,” my sibling says.

Footsteps walk around upstairs. A door opens.

My dad’s feet are lighter on the steps than I remember them. He walks into the room heading for the kitchen. It’s jarring. He has lost all of the muscles that once made up his shoulders. Puffed skin reveals gaps where the muscle has atrophied in his arms. The skin of his face pulls down like the jowls of a fish. He sits next to my mom on the couch. She runs a hand over his head, taking his hat off. He cradles into himself.

“Dad,” I say.

He doesn’t open his eyes. He hm’s at me.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“I’m sleeping.” he replies, “I would be a lot more okay if you stopped asking me questions.”

“Alright asshole.”

His smile reaches outside his face.

...

Now, back in Flagstaff for another three months before I head to Tacoma for the summer, I have panic attacks before I go to bed. I thought I had cured myself of them. But, recently, I’ve had a few uncontrolled, soundless ones.

Here's how it starts: I lay in bed. My space heater purrs because my roommate won't let us turn on the heat. The blinds are closed to my window, but because I have so much junk on the window sill they are still cracked, the light pushes in from the stars outside. The shadow of a pine tree moves back and forth.

I hear my upstairs neighbors filling their bathtub. I tuck my feet under the blanket to conserve heat. I have this fantasy. Which I have had before. In it, the bathtub fills up with water. The weight of all that water breaks through the floor/ceiling and the tub crashes through the drywall and crushes me. I never die in this fantasy. It's a playful thought, not a dark one. My legs are crushed underneath the porcelain of the tub and I am alive and I feel all of it.

But there is more. My phone rings and it is all the way across the room. It rings and it rings and it rings and then, my voicemail plays out loud, "This is Katie's phone. Leave a message."

I sleep. I wake. I try to breathe. Nothing comes in. Nothing goes out.

...

I turned 25 in September, six months after the Covid pandemic hit. I celebrated the day before my birthday. My friends took me to a pumpkin patch. We pushed each other around on wheel barrows, ate corn, and took pictures. I was happy to be 25.

On my actual birthday, I called my dad and asked what my mom and him were doing for dinner. We decided to meet up at the one and only Dickey's.

I pulled up and the parking lot was full, but the Dickey's was completely empty. Inside, the walls were made of wood strips like a barn. Behind the cafeteria style counter was a yellow and brown menu. The Tuesday special was the pork rib plate, complete with a side of beans and a roll. The menu looked far better than the food tasted. Yellow plastic cups were stacked high near the cash register. My parents had dozens of these at their house.

My parents were standing at the counter, huddled around the large menu. Three portly men, sweating and tired, waited for their order. They all had some form of spotty facial hair. I walked up behind my parents and my dad waved to me. He hovered above my mom who didn't notice I walked in, her eyes focused on the beef brisket and pulled pork pictures overhead. Her arm wrapped around my dad's.

"Happy birthday!" My dad said. He grabbed the back of my head and kissed my forehead.

My mom turned to me, smiling too broadly, like a pumpkin. "Happy birthday Kate's!"

I nodded my head at her. "Thanks."

We ordered and everything was quiet. My dad ordered quickly. Usually, he takes fifteen minutes to ask questions, ponder the menu, and consult with the group on the best deal. I got the feeling that my parents were distracted.

We sat down without food. On the television screen our table faced country music videos played. A curly haired country boy sat on the beach with a guitar in his lap. He wore jeans, but no shoes.

“Why are you two being weird?” I asked. My mom shot me a pointedly pathetic gaze.

“Nothing, just had a doctor’s appointment today. It’s been a long day is all. What have you done today? Get fucked up?” my dad asked.

“No we did that last weekend.” I grinned at him and he nodded watching the screen behind me.

My mom picked at her food. Her eyes were watery. I made a joke about the man on the television and my dad chuckled lifelessly. I stared at them both and neither met my eye. Two older women walked around the corner holding two giant baked potatoes on their trays. They sat on the opposite end of the restaurant. Food fell off one of their plates onto the table.

“Why are you being so weird?” I asked, annoyed.

“Nothing.” my dad said at the same time my mom said, “Your dad got some unsettling news.”

Unsettling, like there was an arsonist living on our street. Like we had been robbed. Like someone we knew was going to jail.

“Stephanie.” My dad looked at her, furious and she cowered like a dog.

“What kind of unsettling news?” My stomach dropped. My chest rose.

“I said not on her birthday, fuck.” He shook his head at her. He seemed scared. I had never seen my dad look scared.

“What news?” I asked again. My hands started shaking. I put them in my lap.

He looked back at me and was calmer than before. “You remember the other day when I was peeing blood? Well they checked my PSAT or something and it’s indicating that I have cancer.” He said the word indicating in a mocking tone, like a doctor would say it.

We all paused.

“What does that mean?”

“He says they caught it early, so there’s nothing to worry about. I mean they scheduled me for a follow up in three months. If it was urgent you would think that they would get me in the way sooner,” he said like a salve. For himself. For me.

...

Underwater is quiet enough for peace, loud enough for an inner silence. I pull and the water rushes in between my fingers. The Northern Arizona pool is similar to most I have been in throughout my life. Hot, moist air that makes the cold water tolerable. Next to me, an older man is kicking hard, holding a kickboard, with his goggles pulling back the skin of his face. I stroke, one two three four, breathe. My muscles are hard. I kick. I pull. People like to say that swimming is a great time to think. I can’t think. Or I can, but I cannot stop thinking about what I don’t want to think about. I focus on pulling more, harder. I don’t grieve, I rage.

I get to the wall and pull the goggles off my head. My phone is sitting in a ziplock bag next to my kickboard. I am waiting for my dad to call. Now, I am unceasingly waiting. There are no messages. I reestablish my goggles and push off from the wall. I think about the fact that my dad and I are the same. I got so much from him. I got his smile, his eyes, the red undercurrent of our skin. I got his loyalty. His gapped teeth. His athleticism. His guilt, worries, fears. His love for women. His potty mouth. I got his mean humor and his charm. I am just an alteration of him. If he is sick, if he chokes on the air around him, who do I give all these things back to? What do I become in its absence?

I lurch forward, desperate to get back to the wall. I continue swimming. I am amphoteric. I can be used as both an acid and a base. I am neutral. Without reaction. I am whatever I am interacting with needs me to be.

Liar Liar

by Kiy Pozzi

Children start lying at the age of three, and after that, it's only an improvement.

We tell around 1.65 lies a day, give or take. Which is as absurd of a statistic as I've ever heard, because who's honest enough to research this? I keep imagining some scientist draped in an impossibly starched lab coat with an "It's Always Better to Tell the TRUTH" pin on the lapel. He carries around a clipboard all day and faithfully records his inconsistencies:

Note: 9:04 p.m. told my son mommy and daddy fight because they love each other. But I've been touring apartments, and my back can't take this couch much longer.

Or maybe this data was provided by some god-like team. Some omniscient beings that meet once a week behind solid oak doors and a plaque that reads, "Purveyors of Truth". They take their seat at the long board room table and tally all the lies that have been said in the world since they met last. They laugh at some of the more ridiculous ones, "how'd he think he'd get away with *that*", and they pause on some of the more heartbreaking ones, staring at the space between their shoes and wondering how people can be so cruel.

As a teen, I had a habit of lying. You might even say it was a problem. Even a simple question like, "what did you eat for dinner last night?" could warrant half my daily average. I lied lines of invisible trophies up on my walls; I'd spin my words to make my life seem like a promising graph of exponential growth. But my Evangelical upbringing caused guilt to creep in from all corners. So I started carrying a rubber band across my wrist to combat such inefficacies. Each lie would stir me to draw the rubber back as far as it would stretch and send it careening into my skin. But as the red rings stacked up, I began to see them as guardian angels, or maybe just their halos. Each little white turned red began to signify a time I was protected from admitting the truth of the matter, a time a spirit intervened and let me escape relatively unscathed. I was both Pavlov and his dog: simultaneously conditioning and rewarding a faltering sense of honesty.

But this wasn't just me. Once, my pastor provided an asterisk to the Ten Commandments. He spoke with the conviction of a southern summoning: "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor. Thou shalt not lie." He paused to let the holy words sink in, "I don't know if I always believe in that." Members of the congregation looked up from their knees and towards each other with faces of confusion. Was this blasphemy? He held out his palm in an effort to calm them down, "Now let me explain myself, folks. Imagine this. You're with your family: your wife, your kids. You're watching a movie, making dinner, etc. Suddenly, you hear a window shatter from the other side of your house. Someone's breaking in. So you jump up, shove the kids under their beds, your wife gets in the closet, but you have no time to hide. The intruder hears

the rustling, walks in, and finds you. He's got on all black and a ski mask you see. Real scary looking. He takes a gun out of his pocket, points it between your eyes, and says, 'tell me where everyone else is.' Now should you go on and be a good Christian and tell him? Do you really think God would frown down on you for lying then?"

I'm asking you now. How often has the truth gotten you into more trouble than a little lie could've smoothed over? When Aaron heard me on a roll and asked, "how far are you going to take this?" should I have answered *not much farther*, or, more truthfully, *as far as it needs to go*. When Thomas told me, "I can't trust anything you say anymore" should I have said, *of course you can*, or should I have said, *you're right. You can't. Because this is who I am*.

A lie is gloss; It is sheen. And again, I'm asking you: what catches your eye?

When You Find Your Voice

by Matthew Berg

Stumbling over self-consciousness, overanalyzing the thoughts tripping their way to words spoken. The wrong expression offered, and the now red-faced communicator wants little else than to hide from it all.

Then one day it happens. Clarity is known, a healthy processing with a defined delivery. The place of solitude becomes a strength. The welcome partnership of a more gracious audience empowers the timid and the out-of-place. When you find your voice you learn self-worth, self-confidence. When you sift through your thoughts and emotions, seek a healthy investment in being the best you suddenly everything changes for the better, you become whole. The place of solitude can be anywhere (and sometimes it's not even one of solitude). The welcome partnership can be in many forms, and as long as it's honest and allows grace in the process there is good and healthy growth there.

When you find your voice, you begin to find you. This is only one part of good self-worth, it is a necessary one I'm finding however; and for me I'm finding it through writing.

Blue Diamonds

by Sara Paye

At the end of James Cameron's 1997 blockbuster, *Titanic*, Rose forfeited *The Heart of the Ocean* into the sea with a feeble gasp. The sea, where dolphins swim and leap and have no metric for grief, no metric for greed or for jealousy. Blue diamonds get their cyanic color from hydrogen, a highly combustible element. A rarity, they form under immense pressure and without self-destructing. They harden and crystalize, become strong enough to cut glass.

Today I am engaged to a man whose work ethic makes mine look like a picnic. I am an easygoing, soft, and gentle human, attracted to other soft and gentle beings. These beings are often women, and so I call myself queer. But my fiancé, Jeff, is also soft, gentle, and kind. He is tender and open and makes space for me in a world where I rarely find a good fit.

Rose had a wealthy fiancé. He gave her *The Heart of the Ocean*. Yet like Rose with Jack, someone else confessed their love to me. Earlier this year, I went on a hike with my friend and ended up at a picnic table. In denims, boots, and an industrial-strength jacket, they got down on one knee and asked me to run away.

"Do not marry Jeff," they said, chin trembling.

Then I was combustible, breaking into many parts like a mirror shattering, feeling as though I would turn dead, turn blue from the inflexibility of my heart. I had indeed been attracted to this friend, I had thought the world of them and their leadership in our community, but now their harsh ultimatum made me cringe. My self-image of softness and this tough reality nodded at one another as I broke down in tears, instinctively craving Jeff's kind eyes, his warm smile.

"But if you're queer, and you're with a man, aren't you unhappy?" My admirer's logic almost convinced me to cave, had me considering what it would mean to break my engagement of ten months. I spiraled. What about the condo? Our cat, our dog? What about the person I am when I'm with Jeff? *What about Jeff?* I remembered, and my body knew what it wanted before any words could form. Though I considered choosing a new path, I could not betray my skin. My skin wanted Jeff's, wanted comfort, safety, warmth, softness.

"What does queer mean to you?" They persisted.

"I like kind and gentle people—people who are sometimes women, but sometimes men, sometimes neither." My hands repeatedly folded a tissue. "I cannot run away with you," I told them. "It's not what I want."

A stern gaze, a fixed glare came from my friend who had before and otherwise been an eager presence. Their shoulders hunched; their hands gathered in a tense knot.

“Then, goodbye.”

So with windows down, I drove fast from the mountain where I could have run away. I drove so fast, I got one red hot speeding ticket from a Federal Lands Trooper. His truck blinked blue and white and pulled me over. My stomach sank and the peach fuzz hair on my arms stood up straight. I could feel blood coursing through my chest, emanating from my fearful heart.

“Do you know how fast you were going?”

“No, I’m sorry, I...”

“79 in a 55,” he said.

I nodded, then waited for him to return with the citation. Parked on the outskirts of a town called Blue Diamond, just west of Las Vegas, Nevada, I gazed up at Red Rock Canyon where climbers scaffold high on surfaces formed from iron oxide and hematite, where the sun sets and the budding crest of darkness meets neon pollution. Hydrogen spectral combusts, making a glowing, dusty blue sky.

Down in the valley, in city center, I returned to the landing where Jeff was already home. I let him hold me, even though hours before I could have forfeited that privilege. Staring straight ahead, I told him what happened, how it felt like my friend had emotionally tormented me, asked to me leave or else. Jeff was consoling, brushing strands of hair to clear my tear-stained face and look into my eyes. He called them ocean eyes.

"What do *you* want to do?" he asked. His chest rising with a breath, the breath holding for my answer before he exhaled. I was never more certain of his love or the freedom we created when choosing one another than at that moment. My birthday would be in five days, his in seven. We are both air signs, lovers in the age of Aquarius, foodies, and underpaid social workers. So days later, on a Mexican cruise we had saved and saved and saved for, I wanted to be happy. I wanted to believe I deserved the break, but guilt and shame complicated my thought patterns with combustibility: I am queer and so is the friend I rejected.

But would that life have been easier, or better, than the one I chose?

Had I made the wrong decision? Had I steered in a direction that would bring me to ruin? The ship offered 24-hour soft serve ice cream over which I would mull these questions. I stirred vanilla into chocolate, chocolate into vanilla and wept. Jeff sat with me, asking no questions, and offering steadiness alone. He knew I had admired my friend, and he allowed me to feel the loss of my connection with them without jealousy. Now I had the emotional freedom to ask whether I should be somewhere else, someone else. Karaoke and bingo tournaments couldn’t distract me long enough. I feared the version of myself I would return to after the sunny dream of Mexico, after mariscos and

ceviche, after the culture shock of federales fully armed in open vehicles, and lots of bartering for handmade souvenirs.

Aboard the cruise, Jeff and I were clad with sunscreen and sunglasses, big straw hats and lanyards, swimsuits, and sandals. We explored fine dining restaurants, shops, and an open waters casino. It was all opulence and consumerism, though I loved being surrounded by ocean. To one side of the ship, we could see the glittering shores of Baja California. On the other side was saltwater and depth as far as the eye could see.

Waves dipped and rolled and beckoned me to pause and self-reflect.

Sitting on the deck drinking Mai Tais felt like a crime, like I was abandoning some other calling, a traitor of some other life. Perhaps my fearful being would be swallowed by the life I had chosen, would be erased of its queerness if I did not take charge from this point. Saltwater foamed around of the cruise ship, and I brewed, too. I thought of my friend. Sunlight found me even in my stewing and allowed me glimpses of rest, or at least fatigue.

I drunkenly remembered Rose's *Heart of the Ocean* when Jeff and I walked past the cruise ship's jewelry store. My anxious stupor was broken by a gentleman in a tuxedo. He hollered, gathering the passing crowd.

"Hey, folks! Care to guess how many karats this here blue diamond is? You guess correct, and it's yours!" He held an arm in front of us to show a blue diamond ring embedded in a velvet box. "Go right ahead, guess a number between one and five, jot it down next to your name and stateroom number to submit—to our—raffle!"

There is so much hope in a cruise ship contest, so much plastic hope.

In my loopy, messy handwriting, I wrote on the clipboard list: *Sara Paye, 2.75 karats, Room 1424.*

In his small, chicken-scratch handwriting, he wrote his name right under mine: *Jeffrey Feick, 3.25 karats, Room 1424.*

We had a supper of overcooked Mahi Mahi and dry roast chicken. There was an onboard magician who asked Jeff to pick a card to prove he and I were made for each other when he found it at the top of the stack. Worried that perhaps it wouldn't be a match, now I will never forget the six of clubs. We ate and ate some more, and again I felt combustible. We slept most of the night, abandoning the notion that either of us could have correctly estimated the blue diamond ring's cut or size. At 3am, I woke to use the restroom. The ship had come to a stop, though its body swayed with the waves.

The story of Rose's *Heart of the Ocean* represented her fiancé's wealth—and later, her new lover's nude drawing. Which had more value? Every audience member of *Titanic* had to know there was room on the raft, on the floating door, for no one but Jack Dawson. Before wobbling back to bed, I glanced from the stateroom window to the sea

below, to imagine frost and descension—to say goodbye and let go of my friend for good.

Instead of some cinematic end, and illuminated by the ship's light, there was a whole pod of dolphins gliding with speed past my view.

I gasped, pointed. Jeff slept.

"Wake up! Wake up! There are *dolphins* out here."

Jeff woke groggily with sweet and stirring hums coming from his throat.

"Huh?"

"Dolphins!"

He made his way out of bed and over to my side. We stood holding hands, nearly naked, faces against the plexiglass. There must have been more than twenty blue-grey porpoises swerving and charging past our tired, buffet-inflamed bodies. It would be our last indulgent hurrah before Jeff's pancreatitis diagnosis the following week. The harsh reality of medical issues would soften us both. This cruise, these dolphins, this moment was priceless. It was not frost or descension or combustibility. It was surprise. It was joy. I had almost forgotten about the karat contest, had nearly forgotten about my own blue heart.

Beholding the wild dolphins, their playfulness, I wondered aloud to Jeff, "Why let go?"

"Holding onto some stuff hurts, I guess," he said.

Jeff would be right. Clinging to a blue diamond dream of another life was cutting me open; a mirror split down the middle. My queerness would find a safe harbor within what may be perceived as an unlikely place—not with a fellow queer person, but with a man—a sweet, thoughtful, goofy and expansive man.

When morning came, we finally landed in Mexico, in Ensenada. Jeff and I took a tourist bus through the shanties and lavender fields, up through mountainside cliffs, to see the famed La Bufadora. La Bufadora is a marine geyser created by a pocket of air in an ocean cave where, from deep inside, waters erupt over sixty feet into the sky every thirty seconds to a minute. We stood beside the spectacle on one of Ensenada's many brick and asphalt bridges. The ocean bubbled with froth before the geyser shot up into the air. If the geyser was to be exceptionally reaching, the swelling oscillations below us were even more extreme, with deeper dips, fuller peaks.

"Ooh, a big one!" we would exclaim.

We were sprayed with ocean mist and renewed by the healing powers of La Bufadora. Jeff and I shouted and gasped and giggled as the ice-cold seawater shot to great heights before retreating, just to show us its descension, combustion, and surprise all over again.

After a full day in Mexico, we could feel our plastic hope expanding so we returned to the ship where we huddled in the jewelry shop, standing around glass display cases, marveling at gems we could never afford with our social worker salaries. The tuxedoed man held up the velvet box to a harsh florescent light. The blue diamond gleamed, then dimmed when he shut the box with a snap.

The small crowd of cruisers crept in closer, waiting to hear the results.

"Alright, folks, the answer is—one karat! This here blue diamond is exactly one karat! A ten-thousand-dollar value! Okay, let's get to it! Our raffle winner is...." He cleared his throat and narrowed his eyes to read small, printed numbers from one red raffle ticket.

Jeff and I scanned our raffle numbers, saying them one by one under our breath.

But we were both wrong, so we let go of our estimates. We let go of the high-value blue diamond, as well as ten thousand possible lives of various spectral colors and depths, to choose this one karat, this neon path, this current.



A Journey into Anubis

by Michele Moreno

Pink Light

by Arielle Burgdorf

When Jean was younger, she took all the money she'd saved from waitressing and blew it on a plane ticket to Iceland. It was her first time traveling overseas, and from the plane, everything looked lush with possibility. Lush, until she realized Reykjavik was incredibly expensive. Even the most modest hotels and restaurants went far beyond her budget. Every golden, poster tourist fantasy she'd been promised—the Blue Lagoon, waterfalls, black lava, Aurora Borealis, the sturdy little ponies—out of reach.

Her first few days were miserable, trapped in the hostel where she'd agreed to work for free in exchange for a bed. She scooped bowls of granola, washed dishes, scrubbed toilets, and answered questions from violent couples arguing their way through backpacking trips.

In her spare time, she went to the library and read for hours because it was the only free place she could think of. The building was very modern, a Nordic paradise of slanted glass windows, clean lines, minimalist furniture. She felt as if she'd stepped inside a design catalog.

Alone for hours, Jean obsessed over the Icelandic language, Íslanka. She couldn't cobble together much, but the characters alone were works of art. In English, she read about the history of the island. Íslanka was ancient; you could still hear traces of saltwater and arctic thyme in its rhythm. Young Icelanders could read texts from the very beginning of their country with little trouble. Íslanka transcended time, embracing past, present, future.

On the guest computers she read about how her favorite poet, Anne Carson, was the writer-in-residence at Vatnasafn in 2008. Vatnasafn was an art space created by the American artist Roni Horn. It housed a collection of melted glacier water contained in 24 slim glass tubes. The website described it as "The Library of Water," which made Jean revisit her definition of the term library. Was a library simply an assembly of texts? A text being, in the academic sense, anything you could read (an outfit, a film, a book, a body). And in this case, didn't these glaciers, like Íslanka, hold communal memory, the entire history of the island buried in their sediment? Was this enough to merit a library?

Jean clicked on the photos and zoomed in on the water. Gray pixels filled her screen. She imagined how the shape and color of the liquid would change based on the season and time of day, the light refracting, so that every visitor might experience it differently. But the more she looked, the stronger the urge came on to destroy the columns of water. She was surprised at this current of violence welling up in her. Images of broken glass flooded her thoughts. She wasn't sure what this vision signified, but was confident it represented something anti-social.

A loudspeaker announced the library was closing in 30 minutes, first in Íslanka, then in English. Jean wanted to check out a book called *The Blue Fox*, but the librarian informed her that she would need to be a resident in order to do this.

“Please. I’ll bring it back in a few days, I promise,” Jean begged.

The librarian laughed.

“You know how many times I’ve heard that one?” she said. “We’re not a charity.” Jean was about to put the book back, when a solution appeared behind her in line. His name was Jökull. Wordlessly, he took her book and added it to his own pile of DVDs.

Outside, she thanked him. He waved her off.

“It’s nothing,” he said. He started to ask questions, where was she from, what was she doing here, did she have a boyfriend. She felt obliged to answer, but eyed him warily. He was the kind of person many people found handsome, tall and thin like a Dane, with an asymmetrical haircut and green-edged glasses, very hip. But she did not find him handsome; his personality was too aggressive. When she mentioned the arrangement at the hostel, Jökull interrupted her.

“Fuck the hostel,” he said. “You’re staying with me.”

He started to walk and motioned for her to follow. Jean wasn’t sure she wanted to stay with him, but Jökull was right. The thought of going back to the hostel was unbearable.

Jökull lived near the center of the city in a compact but mostly clean flat. He had a TV, a small kitchen, a bookshelf, an expensive bike propped against one wall, and a fold-out couch where he hosted visitors from time to time. There was also, he offered, his bedroom. Jean shook her head.

“Couch is great,” she smiled.

There was a German girl staying there too, curvy and rosy-cheeked, with golden curls. Her name was Annaliese, but Jean kept almost calling her Heidi because she reminded her of the story. Annaliese had spent the wretched winter months working on various sheep farms. Now, she explained, “I want to fuck and party.” She was always drinking white wine and laughing, no matter the time of day. Jean liked her immediately, and because of her, decided to stay the night. They spent the evening warm and drunk, telling stories and teaching each other pop songs until Jökull pulled out an acoustic guitar and ruined everything.

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In the morning, Jökull went off to his job at a coffee shop down the street. Jean was a little surprised he had a real job; everyone she’d met in Reykjavik so far had jobs like DJ

and graffiti artist. At first, she wasn't sure what to do with herself, but since Annaliese also had no money or plans, she convinced her they should hitchhike to Strokkur, the famous geyser. She had seen photos of Strokkur at the library, impressed by the immense, energetic spray arching up like a spire, reaching up to 130 feet high. She was dying to see it in real life. When she'd hitchhiked before it had been pretty dicey, but Iceland was supposedly a safe place for young women to do that sort of thing.

Unfortunately, the morning was cloudy and gray, threatening a storm. They split a pack of chocolate-covered raisins stolen from a gas station and waited in the spitting rain for someone to take pity on them. After an hour, a man stopped, but didn't take them very far. They had to find a few more rides, and Jean got to use the Íslenska phrases she remembered, but mostly the drivers wanted to talk to Annaliese about sheep farming. Eventually, they made it to Strokkur. The tourists who had taken the official bus stared at them in confusion, like they were wild elves that had appeared out of nowhere. In thick mud, they stood and watched the water bubble up. Nowhere near 130 feet, a comparatively weak spurt. Jean scolded herself for being disappointed in nature. Why did humans always need everything to be giant in order to be awed?

Another article she'd read at the Reykjavik library came to mind. In 2015, an artist called Marcus Evaristti dyed the geyser pink with fruit juice. Icelanders were furious. They arrested Evaristti and fined him for obstructing nature. Jean sympathized with their point of view. It reminded her of a quote from her favorite architect, Gianni Pettena. Concerning the Southwestern American land artists, he explained:

"The artist, in trying to escape the overwhelming 'fullness' of the city, is frightened by the overwhelming emptiness of the desert and feels the need to superimpose a sign on this void, to fill it with language, to impose his own alphabet on nature."

She believed language was born from fear of the unknown. The human urge to use language (or bright colors) to fill the void of silence was overwhelming. Artists were always trying to impose their own alphabets in nature, especially in Iceland. They thought it did not belong to anyone, and therefore could belong to them. It was irresistible; a whole island of white noise, deep valleys, snowy tundras. They especially loved the whiteness. Artists praised Iceland's purity and untouchedness as if those were neutral concepts.

"The nothingness of open space," Roni Horn wrote in her notes on Iceland. "The emptiness. The possibility of infinity. The fool-me-endlessness." Jean remembered the Library of Water. A way of bringing order to the overwhelming unknown. Was Horn preserving truth, or obscuring it with her own narrative? She wasn't sure.

On the one hand, she saw Evaristti dyeing the geyser as just another typical masculine attempt at land domination, a territorial pissing. Secretly, a way of coping with his own fear at the immensity of nature. The ultimate hubris, to think one could "improve" the natural world. And yet.

And yet, the photos of his pink geyser installation were some of the most breathtaking things she'd ever seen, even with the shitty resolution. A burst of pink light exploding across a virgin blue sky. Pining for the heavens, a soft pink cloud returning home. To Jean, these were poetic images, strangely natural in their unnaturalness.

She had seen plenty of fountains dyed hot pink for Breast Cancer Awareness month or neon green on St. Patrick's Day. This was different. A subtler shade of artificial. Evaristti's geyser gestured towards nature, the pink hues of sunset. If not exactly in perfect harmony with nature, it was not in conflict with it, either. The pink geyser existed in its own space, alien yet legible. Fantasy masquerading as reality.

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The geyser erupted again. The crowd applauded, but Jean found herself dismayed it wasn't pink.

"I'm not sure what all the fuss is about," Annaliese said. Jean shrugged. It was too hard to be impressed by the beauty of nature in wet socks and freezing rain. They posed for a few obligatory photos for friends back home and then left, anxious to be back on the road.

Hours later they arrived home soaked and cold, ready for sleep. But Jökull had other plans. First, he promised to make them a nice dinner, which they gladly accepted. This turned out to be spaghetti, which was not particularly exciting but they were both too famished and exhausted to complain. Too late, they realized he thought of this as an exchange and expected something in return. He put on a French arthouse film about a threesome Jean had already seen and shot them both hungry glances. When this didn't work, he tried to play them against each other.

"First one to give me a little kiss gets a spot in my bed," he said. She and Annaliese looked at each other and laughed, then changed the subject. They were not going to trade spaghetti and a comfortable bed for a sex. Jean thought Annaliese was beautiful and would've slept with her in a second, but she gave off very straight energy. After the film ended, Jean tried to announce that she was going to sleep. But Jökull forbade it, insisting that it was Friday night, they must all go out to the clubs. She reluctantly agreed, not wanting to be an impolite guest.

The three of them hopped the drag of perhaps five main clubs in Reykjavik. The only differences Jean could discern were that some of them played techno, some played house, and some charged too much for drinks. Because it was summer, the midnight sun was out, giving everything a surreal touch. The silver light made for a grotesque spectacle, illuminating young people vomiting on the cobblestones, stripped of the secure cover of night.

Around 4 am, Jean announced she would return to the flat, assuming Annaliese would accompany her. Instead, she gave Jean an apologetic shrug and decided to stay out. Jean felt betrayed, a sudden gulf forming between them. She already sensed what

would happen in the morning, Annaliese silently emerging from Jökull's bedroom in only a slip. She walked back alone under the glaring sun, her feet blistered and sore.

When she returned, Jean collapsed on the pull-out couch. She dreamt about columns of water shattering in the air, sediment spilling over the tiles, searching for a way back to the sea.

Seven Days

by Barbara Shoup

Piero's Truest Friend

Of the hundred or so boys in our school near Grazziano Crossing, six distinguished themselves in their maturity, first among them the painter, Piero della Francesca, whose works live here in our city of Borgo San Sepolcro and far beyond. Piero's younger brother, Francesco, entered the Camaldolese Order at the age of thirteen and, in time, became prior of the Abbey, host to the great men of learning who traveled through our city. A cousin once removed supervised the construction of the Palazzo Venezia in Rome. Boys of the commune variously became the Bishop of Camerino, served in the court of Sigismondo Malatesta, and achieved great wealth as merchants and ambassadors.

I, Lorenzo di Santi, am known for one thing only, and it is enough for me: I am Piero's truest friend. We are old men now, our days on this earth numbered. His world has gone dark, his hand stilled, but his mind—it is a marvel. Mornings, when it is cool, we sit together in the shadow of the church of San Francesco and I listen to him repaint his masterpieces in words, wrestling again with calculations and colors, remembering the satisfaction of geometry—a living world emerging from the perfect structure of lines and numbers he created to hold it, agonizing over the long-ago failure of a hoof or hand. He is harsh with himself sometimes; he has always been so. When he dwells on his failures or on the disappointment of his father and brothers, which has plagued and weakened him all his life, I remind him of his Madonna del Parto in Monterchi, the triumph of his mother's face.

"Would you have spent your life counting their money in lieu of that?" I ask.

"No, no," he says. "You are right, my friend."

And falls silent. We both do, seeing again her alabaster complexion flushed pink; her eyes half-closed, as if she is dreaming. She is great with child—Mary awaiting the birth of Christ, her blue gown loosened in the front and on one side to allow for the swell of her belly; her right arm bent, her hand resting on her stomach; her right, akimbo, the palm of her hand turned back.

I imagine it is Piero she carries, her first and most beloved child. The one most like her, the one who loved her best, nursed her through the most gruesome of deaths, and so deeply mourned losing her that he very nearly lost his way.

He never returned to Monterchi but carried her with him always in a miniature of the fresco, a traveling altar with his mother, the Madonna, in the center; an angel at either side of her, each holding open the brocade curtain of the tabernacle in which she stood. The angels are mirror images of each other, of my sister, Chiara, who has loved Piero all her life and would gladly have become his wife. She tends him now in his

darkness. Each morning, upon waking, he raises his hands and she lowers her face so that he can see it again with his gentle, knowing fingers.

His Mother's Death

Upon receiving news in late October that his mother, Romana, was gravely ill, Piero and I made the journey to the city of our birth from Rome, where he had been in residence at the Vatican Palace. Piero's urgency to reach his mother was such that we made the seven-day journey in six, walking late into the night, rising before dawn. We barely noticed fellow travelers, the occasional thundering hoof beats of horses, the rattle of carts. The cloudless blue sky above us could not allay our deep apprehension, the last golden leaves raining down, lit by sunlight, did not ease our hearts.

Upon arrival at his family home, Piero went directly to his mother, the dust of travel still upon him, and found her suffering and delirious from the pain of surgery done to uproot a tumor from her breast. It was like a painting of St. Agatha we had seen, he told me, his face pale, his eyes filled with tears. A terrible sight: the festering wound big and round as a plate and, revealed deep within, three white bones, like rungs of a ladder, glistening in her chest.

She suffered five days more, and during those five days Piero did not leave her. During this time I waited in Piero's quarters, grieving for my own impending loss at her death, for Signora Romana had loved me as a son, secretly bearing news of me to my own mother when she could, reassuring her that I was well and happy in the work I did as Piero's companion and assistant. I was unwelcome in my own home. In the eyes of my father and brothers I would ever be the son who had betrayed his family in choosing to serve a friend and, as such, I was as a ghost to them. Only my sister, Chiara, defied them, professing her love for me, treating me with abiding kindness, carrying blessings from our mother who dare not see me for fear of our father's wrath.

But what else could I have done, called to serve Piero by God?

We were schoolboys when it happened. I was already a disappointment to my father in my failure to absorb even the most simple principles of the abacus; Piero was brilliant in his command of mathematics, but had no interest in putting it to use in his father's business. Rather, he wandered through the town, slipping in and out of workshops to watch artisans at work. He allowed me to accompany him, spoke to me of the holiness of numbers, trusted only me to see the drawings he had begun to make, laying line and form upon them, each a kind of prayer.

One night when I was but eleven, I dreamed the drawings came alive—charcoal lines disappeared beneath strokes of pink and blue and gold and green grew into angels, saints and penitents. Landscapes dotted with mountains, fields, and towers.

A monk emerged: Myself—wearing not a simple brown or gray robe, but a splendid blue one, sprinkled with stars. Waking, I knew what it meant, recognized the richness and color of the robe as God's voice granting my vocation. He had brought

Piero to this earth to praise Him through marvelous works, and He had brought me here to serve my beloved friend.

“It is your family you were brought to earth to serve,” my father said, when I told him of this vision. “It is I to whom you answer. *That* is God’s will.”

In truth, it was no more than tradition that made him want to hold me. The deficiencies in my character and capabilities he had been so quick to point out for as long as I could remember should have made him glad to let me go. I had no head for business, no heart for the acquisition of gold, and a fever in my youth had stolen my hearing but for a few registers, all of which would have made it unwise to delegate to me any responsibility whose outcome required proficiency or negotiation.

His denunciation sorrowed me, of course, even after his death. But I never once repented spending my life as Piero’s servant and companion, reverent witness to the creation of worlds my own eyes could never have fathomed--miracles of line and color that flowed from God directly through his brush. The deep sense of purpose this commitment afforded me every single day of my long life, the memory of each painting Piero made, lighting up the dark cave of existence, more than tipped the balance from sorrow toward grace.

Still, being in San Sepolcro, where I might encounter my father or my brothers in the street, always brought with it a heaviness that mingled now with the knowledge of Signora Romano’s suffering and Piero’s deep sadness, which I felt as my own. Above Piero’s quarters, where I awaited news of Signora Romana’s death, the healers hovered with their potions, the family prayed at the bedside—all but Piero’s father, Benedetto, who paced, muttering what might have been prayers or might have been the devouring anger he never failed to express when something was taken from him. He could not bear the sight of his wife clinging to Piero’s hand, knowing that, as her life dwindled, it was this errant son’s nearness she craved. She clung to his hand, gazing upon him even as she received the Last Rites, her own hand falling away from his only when her eyes closed the last time and her soul was lifted from this earth.

She Is Laid to Rest

In the hours after Signora Romana’s death, the family gathered round her corpse, weeping; then there was the bustle that always ensues in a house once a soul has made that final passage. Women walking up and down the stairs, bearing bowls of warm, scented water with which to wash her body, garments in which to clothe her for the grave. Men making arrangements for the burial and the mourners’ feast.

In time, Piero returned to our quarters. His face was ashen, his eyes sunk into the dark circles made from lack of sleep. He was at this time in the middle of his fifth decade, but that day he looked seventy. We did not speak; we did not need to speak. He did not weep. In time, the tears locked inside him now would pour through his brush, and what he made of them would be a glory to God.

Meanwhile, he must brace himself for tomorrow's funeral, all the more difficult for knowing his mother would have wanted a simple burial. When she married Piero's father, he had been a dealer in hides. She had not shared his ambition to raise his family to the merchant class, and never grew accustomed to the fashionable clothing and valuable jewelry he believed bestowed honor upon her, or to the rich taste and malignant gossip of the merchants' wives with whom he expected her to mingle.

But the funeral of a beloved wife was an occasion to extol the lineage of the family. So, Benedetto had Romana's body wrapped in fine silk, and it was borne on a draped bier through the streets of our town by prancing horses bedecked in ornamental coverings. Clergy and mourners followed, accompanied townspeople carrying colorful banners and candles flickering in tall decorative shafts. At the abbey, a requiem mass was said for her soul. Then, at last, she was laid to rest. A requiem mass was said for her soul before she was laid to rest.

I was not family. My place in the procession had been behind the prestigious guests dressed in their somber garb and the members of the Confraternity of Santa Maria della Misericordia in their regalia, so I could only imagine Piero walking at the front with his father and brothers, head bent, in the otherworld to which he escaped when the world became too much to bear. Only after the interment could I go to him, briefly rest my hand on his shoulder to bring him fully into the moment—a silent reassurance that I was with him and would not leave him through the long mourning banquet that would soon commence at the family home.

We led a simple life together: work and prayer, just bread, cheese, and wine twice a day to sustain us. We had so long shared the rhythm of our days that words were rarely necessary. We spoke by gesture and with our eyes. Now the plenty of the banquet table, the greedy mourners filling their plates, the racket of their conversation overwhelmed us, and once Piero had fulfilled his duties in accepting the condolences of the guests, we removed ourselves to where the women mourned—my own sister, Chiara, among them.

Her plain face lit up at the sight of him, and Piero went directly to her for the quiet consolation only she could give. She had long ago accepted that he would never marry, and loved him as I did: completely, with no expectation but to serve him. We serve him now, as the moments of lives dwindle. We are his eyes, we intuit his every need, we are his comfort as he fades toward the light.

That day, Chiara stood, held out her hands to Piero, and he took them, shedding his first tears. Silent tears, that made his face wet and shining.

"Io so. Io so," she murmured. I know.

"E impossibile che le se ne sia andata." Piero said, his voice cracking.

"Si, impossibile," Chiara said. "But she is at peace with our Lord now, resplendent in the crown of heaven. We cannot wish her to return to the sorrows here on earth."

I saw the sadness on her face. We both knew that had it not been for his mother, Piero might have left San Sepolcro forever upon relinquishing his rightful place as heir to all his father had worked so hard to accomplish. We might have spent the whole of our lives wherever he was called, instead of coming back each time he was offered a commission so that he could be with her, each time leaving before the work was complete when the rope of family tightened around him and he could no longer stay. Now there would be little reason for him to return.

In fact, the family had already begun to chafe him. Benedetto had become renewed in his determined that Piero should at last prepare himself for the patriarchy of the family and threatened to suspend the meager allowance that allowed him to continue to work toward the glory of God with his paintbrush. Piero's brother Marco was equally determined to claim that patriarchy for himself, an honor he believed he had earned through his successful business endeavors and devotion to the family. Patrons were pressing him to resume work on commissions he had not yet completed—not the least of which was an altarpiece honoring the Madonna della Misericordia meant to grace the hall of his family's own confraternity among them.

They had no way of understanding that for Piero time was like the ocean, each day one of an infinite number of waves breaking on the shore. Only I understood that he worked to the call of an ocean inside him. He would complete the altarpiece at this call and no other—and, as I knew she would, the Madonna reigns now in the confraternity's chapel. Flanked by Saint Sebastian, the two Saint Johns and Saint Bernardo of Siena; surrounded with a constellation of lesser saints who draw the eye in a circle toward the annunciation at the top, the scenes of the predella below, she blesses the members in their good work, inspires constancy in their commitment to the poor and suffering among us.

But it would be years after his mother's death until Piero returned to San Sepolcro and took up the brush to bring the altarpiece into being. Now Piero turned further and further inward, escaping to the world of numbers, as he so often did when the grasping disorder of daily life threatened to overpower him. It had been so since we were boys in school together.

Others struggled in Abacus School under the stern hand of our teacher, I more than most, but it was as if what we were meant to learn had always been as an open book inside Piero's head and all he must do was close his eyes to see it.

He had patiently taught me what was necessary for me to know, bringing the numbers to life by taking me round on market day, dazzling the merchants with his scribbled calculations that translated the angles of cheese, the lines in a bolt of silk, the volume in a pitcher of goat milk into geometric constructions that enabled them to place a value on their wares. I let my father believe that I learned these things to please him, but it was Piero's good approval that I craved. So I learned—slowly, but well—because he also showed me how numbers lay beneath everything in God's world.

“Everything is made of them,” he said. “Look.”

He opened the leather folio he carried with him always, and in a few strokes sketched the image of an angel with Lucia's face. Then, with a ruler, he bisected her, drew slanted lines from the top of her head to either side of her gown, another like a floor beneath her feet.

"A triangle," he said. "Now—"

He circled her with his pen, touching each point of the triangle, revealing a sphere.

My world shifted. From that moment on, all I looked at reduced itself, became at the same time simple and miraculous. I was lost to my father's house forever.

The Call to Monterchi

It seemed a miracle when, little more than a fortnight after Romana's death, news came of a commission to paint a fresco for the altar of Santa Maria Momenta in Monterchi, the nearby town of her birth. A wealthy wool merchant in the town, Romana's brother Paolo would pay for it, perhaps as a way to have his beloved nephew with him in his time of grief. Certainly, to honor Piero's loyalty. Of all Romana's children, only he had defied his father in refusing to sever the bond with his uncle when the two families quarreled over business matters more than twenty years before. In any case, Piero instantly sent back word of his acceptance—and the next morning, at sunrise, we left Borgo San Sepolcro to begin the journey.

It was the end of November, the fields along the road glittered with frost. The trees with their visible bones might have come from Piero's notebooks—black lines and angles from which whole worlds would grow. The realization that my rosary had gone slack in my hand considering what these worlds might be shamed me, and I resumed my walking prayers, sliding the smooth beads across my fingers.

Lord of mercy, hear our prayer. May our sister Romana whom you called your daughter on earth, enter into the Kingdom of peace and light, where your saints live in glory. Eternal rest grant unto her, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon her. May she rest in peace.

Midmorning, Monterchi appeared on the horizon—a blur of yellow stone and red roofs, bell towers reaching for the sky. We climbed toward it, passed through the city gate and continued climbing to Paolo's home at the top of the town.

He greeted Piero with a tearful embrace, ushered both of us into main room, where his wife, Donatella, did the same. They embraced me, as well—which brought tears to my own eyes for it brought to mind Senora Romana's kindness.

"Warm yourselves." Senora Donatello gestured toward the fire.

Paolo drew two chairs to join the ones they had been sitting in before our arrival.

They begged Piero to tell of Senora Romana's last days, which he did—sparing them the worst, as I knew he would. What good would it do them to know how she had suffered? She was still the young Romana to them, full of light and life, the adored sister of five brothers—Paolo her favorite among them. She had come of age in the house Paolo and his family lived in now, and the presence of her girlhood spirit was felt in the stories he told of her that morning.

The fresco Piero was to make would be to honor her, Paolo said. Santa Maria Momentara was a small church outside the town near a stream known since ancient times as a place where pregnant women's prayers for a safe birth might be answered. His travels had taken him recently to Florence, where he had seen Taddeo Gaddi's *Madonna del Parto* in the church of San Francesco di Paolo.

"You must know it, of course," he said.

I saw the Madonna in my mind's eye: her rose-pink gown, one hand peeking out from a brocade shawl to support her swollen belly, the holding forth a red book. Her narrow eyes, inscrutable expression. Her elegantly tilted head.

"Since Romana's death, I cannot forget her," Paolo said. "I want—" His voice wavered. He leaned toward Piero, grasped his hand. "I want Romana to be remembered in this way, I want the women who come to Santa Maria Momentara to feel that she is there with them, praying with them for the blessing of a safe birth for their children."

Piero was without words, overcome.

"*Lo farai per me?*" Paolo asked. "For the glory of God?"

"*Si, zio.* I will do it," Piero said.

At Paolo's insistence, we stayed for the midday meal. Advent would begin the next day, and he beseeched us to spend this solemn time in Monterchi as guests in their home, but Piero declined. We would take lodging in the monastery of Santa Maria Momentara, Piero, where would be near his work and the prayers of the monks would bring it blessing. So, after the meal, we bid Paolo and Donatella goodbye and made our way back down the hill to the church. There was yet a chill in the air, but the sun warmed us as we walked and soon it came into view, a humble structure nestled in a copse of bare trees—butter-yellow against the blue sky.

When Piero opened the door, a shaft of sunlight illuminated the wall opposite it, where his *Madonna del Parto* would live for all time. But now he just stood looking at the light, letting its radiance speak to him about beginning.

We Prepare for Her

We woke to church bells throughout the town ringing in the first Sunday of Advent, whose holiness felt greater for the knowledge that as the season prepared us for the birth of our Lord, we would be preparing the wall of the chapel for Piero's Madonna.

Almighty God, grant us the will to greet our Savior with our good works when He comes, so that we may be worthy to be on His right hand and possess the kingdom of heaven. Throughout the day prayed this prayer for the first Sunday. At its end, we shared a meagre meal with the monks. Prayers and hunger would fortify our spirits in the weeks that followed.

Monday morning, Paolo sent his men to construct the scaffold to Piero's specifications. The planks must be able to be moved up or down to allow us to reach from top to bottom of the wall. They must be wide enough to hold us, as well as Piero's brushes and paint pots, and the tools I would need to apply the plaster foundation for the fresco he would paint. The men also brought the lime and sand I would need to mix the plaster, an iron trough to mix it in, and a bucket for carrying water from the stream.

We worked from sunrise to sundown, stopping fifteen times to pray the Saint Andrew Novena as the season of Advent required. We ate a small portion of bread and cheese, said the novena for the last time before falling onto our sleeping pallets at night. *Hail and blessed be the hour and moment in which the Son of God was born of the most pure Virgin Mary, at midnight, in Bethlehem, in piercing cold. In that hour, vouchsafe, O my God! to hear my prayer and grant my desires, through the merits of Our Savior Jesus Christ, and of his Blessed Mother.*

Each night I dreamed the Madonna, waiting in Bethlehem. Each day I woke into her piercing cold. It made a scrim of ice that must be broken for my morning ablutions, rose up through cold stone floor, numbing my knees as I knelt for morning prayers. It penetrated my layer of clothing as we walked from the monastery to the church, where icy winter light fell through the windows.

If Piero felt the cold, I did not see it. From that first day of our labors, Piero lived not with me, in the cold world, but in his universe of numbers, where he sought the bones of his composition within their order. I, too, lived in a world of my own once I began my work each day—caught in the careful preparation of the plaster upon which he would paint. Plaster that must be perfect if it was to properly receive the paint and fix it so that his Madonna would live in this humble church forever, to the glory of God.

My whole body, ancient now, with ever diminishing strength, still remembers the heft of plaster on my hawk, the ringing of the iron trowel upon it as I scooped exactly the right measure, the slap and swish, slap and swish of it on the wall—a kind of music against in my hand. The quiver of anticipation running through my blood with the knowledge that, soon, Piero's design would be known to me.

I had known this acute awareness of my body in the Vatican Palace, in the palaces of Leonello d'Este in Ferrara and Sigismondo Malatesta in Rimini. I had known it in churches far grander than this small chapel in Monterchi. But never had it been more keen, more all-consuming than in the days preparing the wall for the Madonna dawning in Piero's mind.

Paolo had provided lime putty of the finest quality: fat and fresh, properly aged and pure white. This ensured that, over time, it would bleach the surface so that it reflected the colors Piero would lay on it. The sand was free of any element that would cause the plaster made of it to weep or cause salt to migrate to the surface and form a coating on the finished work. I ran some grains through my fingers, and they felt sharp and angular, as they should—impossible to roll like a ball over my fingertips. Two parts sand, one part lime putty. I mixed them in the trough, my arms aching from the effort, my heart beating just a little harder as it always did when heat rose from it with the slow stream of water I added from a clay jug. The alchemy of these elements changing form unsettled me, despite Piero's faith that it was evidence of God at work.

Leaving the plaster to cure for several days, I readied the wall, washing it clean, then wetting it thoroughly to receive the rough coat necessary to support the *arriccio* on which each day's *intonaco* would be applied. For this coat, the plaster must be heavy must be heavy on the hawk, thrown on with the trowel, and floated in circles with a firm pressure. I started where the plaster was first laid on the wall, spattering a little water ahead of the float when I needed it, to ensure the plaster would be even, then scratching it with a metal comb to better hold the *intonaco* upon which Piero would paint.

When the coat was dry, we measured and marked the wall, creating what might have been a page from an enormous folio of his geometric constructions. I had not asked to see his drawings of her while he worked. I did not want to see the numbers upon which she was made. I waited, preferring the slow revelation of line and volume becoming flesh, becoming garments and wings, ermine and pomegranates. Touchstones of the world God had made for us.

On the Eve of the Birth of our Savior, Piero used charcoal to draw an outline of the composition to verify the correct proportions on this larger surface. He drew the arcs of curtain, the background with a free hand, but he had made cartoons for the Madonna and her angels—cutouts scaled to size, the details drawn in charcoal. Now he positioned the Madonna on *the asse di simmetria*, adjusting her according to numbers and angles that only he understood. To the untrained eye she would seem exactly in the middle of the wall, and I could not help but feel proud to see that this was not quite so. The left side of her was just a hint farther past the line of symmetry than the right, which I knew, in the finished painting, would direct the eye like a sleight of hand.

When he was satisfied that she was perfectly placed, I transferred the image to the wall, carefully pricking holes along the lines of the drawing, then dusting them with pigment from a cotton bag, brushing the residue away with a bouquet of feathers.

The Madonna emerged when I took the cartoon away, monumental, even though only a ghost of what she would be. Her face, Senora Romana's young face, beloved of his childhood.

There was but one cartoon for the angels, which Piero flipped creating a perfect symmetry in the figures, offsetting the different distances of their feet from the Madonna's gown. But the two angels had just one face: my sister's. I did not speak of

this to Piero; he did not speak of it to me. How could either of us have said what it meant, even if we had known it?

Once the angels and the brocade curtain in place, Piero bid me mix the red ochre with which he would brush on the outline. Seeing the faces of Senora Romana and my sister on the cartoons had diverted my attention so that only now, as the drawing emerged in full, I fully understood how different Piero's Madonna del Parto would be from any other we had seen. One hand rested on her swollen belly, above which the Girdle of Thomas those madonnas wore would have been. She did not hold the closed a closed book, the implied presence of the Word of God. She made no regal gesture, no altar framed her. She wore no sumptuous gown or shawl. She stood in the entry of a round tabernacle, a pregnant woman who might have been any woman with child come to pray for a safe birth, but for the angels with ordinary faces on either side of her, holding back the curtain in a moment of revelation.

We Celebrate the Birth of Our Lord

on the eve of Our Lord's birth, we climbed the hill and walked up through Monterchi to Paolo's house. I was startled by the sudden warmth, the cacophony of happy voices that greeted us. By the closeness of Paolo's embrace—and then Donatella's. And the children! So many of them! Paolo's and Donatello's five sons, grown now with children of their own—beautiful little ones, rosy-cheeked with excitement.

I felt bewildered after so many days of silence, disconcertingly near tears for I could not help but think my father, who celebrated even the holiest of days meagerly, in a rigidity of devotion that he believed made him more pure than others in the eyes of God. I saw now that it was evidence of no more than his parsimoniousness, for how could God look upon my father as more pure, more deserving of his love than Paolo and his family were? The trappings of their celebration were not sumptuous, as some we had seen in our travels, but rich in their simplicity, presented in gratitude and joy. This made me savor the taste of the good wine they offered, to enjoy its sweetness in the spirit with which it was given. To be a part of their happiness together seemed a kind of prayer. It must have seemed so to Piero, too, for he sat among them, a contented smile on his face—a smile I never saw when he was in the company of his father and brothers.

At sunset, one of Piero's sons brought in an olivewood log as large as the fireplace could hold and set it on red-hot coals remaining from the fire that had burned through the day. Donatello and her granddaughters garnished it with dried figs and slices of apple and pear; grandsons laid on branches of juniper and laurel. We prayed to Our Lord, asking Him to summon the return of heat and light to the earth, and then Paolo set the log ablaze to the cheers of the children. The light from the fire softened the creases on his face, the candles flickering throughout the house made a yellow haze, halving each person and object within. The scent of the burning tree, like the scent of the oil made of the olives it had borne, and the scent of the blackening, disappearing fruit and the crackling branches of juniper and laurel mingled with the scents of the food Donatella had been preparing all day and now brought from the kitchen—spaghetti with clams, cod fried with peppers, cheese with mustard, cooked pears with chestnuts—each

dish more delicious than the last. Though it unsettled my digestion, as I had eaten no more than brown bread and cheese since our work here had begun.

I was glad for brisk air, the walk among friendly townspeople to San Simeone for midnight mass. For the hush upon entering, the sleeping babe in the *presepio* looked over by the two cows brought in from the pasture, big, beautiful animals who seemed to understand why they were there and stood perfectly still on each side of him. For the beauty of the mass said to commemorate the birth of our Savior. For the Madonna in the church below the town—a ghost on her wall, awaiting Piero's brush.

A light snow was falling as we and I made our way back to the monastery in the darkness of this holiest of early mornings—the whole world shining, as if lit by God. I felt blessed in the life He had chosen for me, blessed by the voices raised in faith and hope still ringing in my ears.

*Tu scendi dale stele/O Re del Cielo/e viene in una grotto/al freddo al gelo.
From starry skies descending/Thou comest glorious King/a manger low thy
bed/in winter's icy sting.*

Seven Days

Snow continued to fall, blanketing the world white as far as we could see, soaking our boots as we walked to Santa Maria Momentara the day after Christmas. The air was sharp and frigid. The chilblains on my fingers ached, my wet feet burned with cold. The monks had kindly placed small braziers with burning coals near the Madonna, and I warmed my hands with gratitude. But I soon forgot my discomfort as I set to working the plaster for the *giornata*—first with a spade, then a trowel, until it had the consistency of an ointment.

When it was mixed to my satisfaction, I climbed the scaffold with my bucket of plaster and one of water, which I set on the wood plank. After marking the composition on the *arriccio*, Piero had cut the cartoon in pieces—one for each day of work—and now I set today's piece in place to mark the borders of the *intonaco* on the wall. I dipped a large bristle brush into the clear water, sprinkled it over the dry plaster, then laid on the plaster—thin, but not excessively thin—troweling and floating in a circular motion. Smoothing, smoothing until the surface was as marble, no human mark upon it. When it had dried enough to hold the cartoon without marring the surface, I set it back in place and pounced it as I had pounced the now hidden drawing beneath.

On that first *giornata*, golden pomegranates, brimming with seeds, bloomed on the deep red brocade curtain. Cold winter light fell through the round window, illuminating the wall. The very air in the little church seemed holy to me. There was sound but the pigment giving way beneath my pestle, the quiet splash of water poured for mixing it in the glazed dishes, which I filled and refilled all day so that the paint was always fresh. The rhythmic swishing of Piero's brush.

I felt the pure concentration with which he worked, understood that, working, he was no more than the brush. He loved painting in fresco because it was the most difficult of forms. He must paint quickly and boldly. He dare not make mistakes, for they could not be painted over, as in egg tempera, or rubbed away, as in oil—but must be plastered over, smoothed, begun again. And always the race with time to complete the day's section, calculating when, exactly, the golden hour would occur—that hour near dusk, just before the plaster locks up, when it is in the perfect state to receive the layer upon layer of translucent color that will shine up through the fresco for eternity.

Those colors must be made only from the earth itself. Clay, chalk, lead, resin. Roots, berries, tree bark, saffron, cinnabar. Lapis Lazuli, very dear, which came from far away Asia. The dried bodies of insects! The tusks of elephants! The mucus of snails! Grinding the pigments, feeling the color beneath my fingers, took me to places from which they had come—fields and forests I knew, exotic lands I could only imagine. It seemed a miracle every time to watch Piero make life of them. He did not like to speak about his work, other than the necessities of its preparation, so I did not ask whether, painting with the stuff of God's earth, he felt closer to Him. It seemed that he must, for I felt it myself and I was but the hands making things ready for him.

Nights I dreamed the *giornati* floating against a black background, searching for and finding each other, becoming whole with no need of the laborious work I must do each morning to layer the *intonaco* to accept them with no evidence of the joint. I dreamed Senora Romana, the child Piero in her arms. I dreamed Chiara as she had been as a girl in the summers of our youth, before she must take the womanly duties that dulled her spirit.

Day, the real pieces of the fresco emerged beneath Piero's brush.

The opposite side of the curtain.

The face of Chiara on the angel to the left of the Madonna, her lifted hand.

Her green robe, her red shoes and pink wing.

The Madonna with Senora Romana's serene face. Her braided hairpiece, a gold halo. Her neck, graceful as a swan's. Her bent arms: one resting on her swollen belly, the other at her waist, as if to support the weight. The top of her simple pregnancy gown made of Lapis Lazuli, the most dear pigment of all, from faraway Asia. The ermine of the tent's interior behind her, so real and rich it seemed it would be soft to the touch.

Chiara again, but opposite—all but the skirt of her robe.

The red skirt of Chiara's robe, her green shoes. The glorious blue folds of the Madonna's gown.

Thus, as God made the world in seven days, so Piero brought the Madonna and her presenting angels to life in the chapel of Santa Maria di Momentana, begun on the

26th day of December in the year of our Lord 1459 and completed on the third day of the year of our Lord 1460. We did not stay to see her celebrated by the town, but left Monterchi at dawn the next morning to travel, as always, like pilgrims, searching for grace.

The Everlasting Tide of Innocence

by D. B. Gardner

Fran perched on the edge of her bed, hands on knees, glaring across the hall at the laundry pile spilling in a tangled knot outside the dryer, struggling to fathom how things had reached this point. Outside the window, the push mower sat idly in the long grass. More than dismayed, she wormed her feet into her slippers and trudged down the hall, trying to ignore the cheese-stuck plates heaped outside her daughter's bedroom door as though waiting for a hotel maid, and instead glanced into the bathroom. Teen magazines, Justine and J-14, lay scattered across the floor, open to glossy photos of Whethan and Boy Pablo. She went across the hall into the mudroom—enduring the stench of neglected kitty litter, a straight-up violation of the promise the girl made to her allergy-stricken mother to obtain the animal in the first place—then marched out to the kitchen, shoved aside the partially consumed yogurt containers scattered across the counter, and started the coffeemaker. With the morning not yet half-over and her exasperation mounting, Fran wandered out to the patio in search of solace. A nail brush from a bottle of dreamy periwinkle polish sat firmly stuck to the glass table, but before Fran could pry it up, she heard the low hum of the pool pump, and kneeling down near the skimmer, found a beach towel, partially sucked in, and wrestled it free.

One thing had become crystal clear. When it came to the girl, Fran had arrived at the end of her tether. She doctored a steaming cup of coffee with a reliable dose of sugar and took it out to the wooden bench the Captain had erected for her beneath the boughs of a willow. The morning air was crisp, and Fran inhaled deeply, cradling the cup close to her nose, and soberly assessed the situation.

This much she knew: to compensate for his frequent and prolonged absences, the Captain spoiled the child. His work often sent him to far corners of the globe, and he'd long ago taken to sending the girl a gift from a distant port each time he was away. The package Fran held in her hand bore a stamp of Anchorage, Alaska, though the postmark was most likely a decoy—where the gift was mailed from. It could be a voodoo doll, an exotic painting of the goddess Marici, an Inuit carving, or a boomerang.

Fran lipped her coffee, checked her watch. It was nearly noon; the girl would be up soon. She laid her boney chin with her palm, the package against her leg, and weighed the decision. The Captain never understood Fran's frustration over his lavish treatment of the girl. To him, Kimberly was still the bouncing baby daughter on his knee, not an insolent thirteen-year-old. But when it came to Kimberly's latest punishment—being careless with her things, specifically her phone—Fran wasn't about to cave. And after what she'd encountered this morning, the girl didn't deserve anything, let alone another gift.

She slapped her knees and stood, her mind made up, and trudged in through the mudroom, the ammonia of the litterbox biting her nostrils, stormed to the end of the hall, shoved the plates away from the girl's door with her foot, and knocked. "Kimberly?"

“Don’t get in a squeeze.”

“A what? Pumpkin?”

Boyband pop blared from inside the girl’s room. “Music box, stop,” the girl yelled, directing the smart-speaker. The song faded, and the door flung open. Kimberly stuck her arm across the doorway. “What’s up—Fran?”

“There’s news—from your father.”

“Daddy!” The girl hopped around, clapping, and performed several pirouettes. “Is that mine?” she said, pausing long enough to finger the package at her mother’s side.

Fran jerked the box away. “No—well, sort of. First, can we discuss your behavior?”

“Oh—god, Mother! Why you be pressin’?”

“Why—am I—does it feel like I’m pressuring you, Kimberly?” The mother kicked a pile of clothes aside and nudged into the room.

Kimberly batted her eyelashes, conjured a remorseful pout, and draped her arms over Fran’s shoulders with a hug so feeble it wouldn’t have made a stuffed toy squeak. “I’ve been a dell.”

“Dell?”

“Yeah—a big fat dell,” said Kimberly pulled away. “You know—devil from hell? Come on, Fran, I’ve played you that song before? *Devil from hell, you made my heart bleed. Devil from hell, you’re such a dell,*” she sang.

“I’m afraid—I don’t. Kimberly, as long as we’re talking—*for a change*, I’d like you to stop calling me Fran. I’m your mother.”

“Sure—*mom*,” the girl replied with an impish smile, freckles dancing at the top of her upturned nose.

In years past, that face would have melted Fran’s icy resolve. But this time was different. “Why did you contact your father? I wanted to be the one to inform your father about *the incident*,” said Fran.

“All I did was send him an email. I miss him.”

Fran’s arms crossed her chest. “Do you miss your phone?”

“That’s not fair!”

“Fair?” Fran started to pace in front of the girl. “Buying you another eight hundred dollar phone doesn’t exactly sound fair either.”

“But—it’s—been—four—days,” Kimberly whined, her outstretched palms flipping open and shut with each syllable.

Fran stamped her foot. “Kimberly Iris Campbell. Your father shared your email with me. You made it sound as if the phone *accidentally* fell into the pool.”

Kimberly plopped at the edge of the bed, pulled a pillow to her chest. “Well—that’s what happened.”

“It didn’t *fall* in. You threw it across the pool to Ashley.”

“Who happened to be wearing a softball mitt.”

“Who happens to be a ballplayer who can throw, unlike you.”

“So, I misjudged—a little.”

“You misjudge a lot. Like thinking I’m your personal housemaid, for one.”

“It’s cause I’m missin’ my phone, Mommy, I’m going loco,” said Kimberly, leaping to her feet, a hand shoved under each armpit, scratching at the floor like a chicken, “I’m funky with the got-no-phone sweats,” sticking her fingers beneath her nose, flopping into the wicker chair. “Why doesn’t Daddy just call?”

“We’ve been over this before.”

“I—know,” said the girl, hand gesturing like the head of a duck, “he’s not allowed to have special ship-to-shore privileges unless it’s an emergency.”

Fran squared her jaw. “Does this seem like an emergency?”

“Well—no.”

“Didn’t think so.” Fran patted the girl’s thigh. “Now, let’s think. When did Daddy last write?”

“Um—four days ago.”

“Exactly. So he won’t write again for another five days; that’s his pattern. By then, he’ll be at the port of LA, and if all goes well, meet us at the rental in Manhattan Beach. We only have the house for three days this time, so be ready come Friday morning.” Fran drifted to the window. “I hope your father can make it. He was expecting some rough weather.”

“I know. I’m so worried.” Kimberly eyed the package swinging at Fran’s hip, arms outstretched, fingers waggling in a fit of puerile humor, mouthing the word—‘gimme.’

Fran plodded over and handed the package to the squirming girl, who instantly ripped off the pull tab, dumped the contents onto her bed, and, drawing her breath like a two-year-old before a tantrum, squealed, “It’s the H2O-phone with a zip-pouch! It’s waterproof. I can take it snorkeling.”

“That’s terrific, honey,” Fran said and trudged thanklessly into the hallway.

The girl dove onto the bed. “Oh—Daddy, you’re the best. Thank you—thank you,” she beamed, rolling side-to-side, phone clutched to her chest.

At the sideboard halfway down the hall, Fran paused to comb her hair with her hand, leaning into the mirror. “Better get home soon, Captain. Six weeks is long enough. We need to have a talk—about the girl,” she whispered sullenly, expecting the words to bridge the fourteen-hundred-mile gap between her and her husband’s ship, steaming eastward across the Pacific.

* * *

Lightning splintered the sky outside the helmsman’s window. As the strobe decayed, the sailor gazed into the inky blackness and snared a glimpse of the turbulent sea. His grip tightened on the wheel, more to keep his balance than to steer, as another punishing wave spilled over the bow. The freighter heeled side to side, lurching about in search of a balance point, and the ship’s off-course alarm flooded the bridge with a near-deafening blare.

First Mate Benjamin Stewart, the ship’s most able seaman, crossed the tottering steel enclosure and silenced the horn. The eighteen-year veteran propped himself against the console and studied the maelstrom. It had worked its way south from the Arctic, overtaking the Vancouver-bound vessel more quickly than anticipated.

“Mr. Ross, plot a new course,” Stewart ordered the helmsman. “I’ll take it up with the captain if we’re late to port.”

The next wave lifted them higher still, and the seven-hundred-foot freighter nosed over the top and charged headlong into the breach, sea rising all around, staccato flashes punctuating the black; jagged ghosts of light skittering across the bridge. Stewart wiped the fog from the window, focusing beyond the acres of steel containers to the short white mast nearly two football fields away, bobbing in the void.

“Give us a heading of west, southwest, Mr. Ross. We’ll fight our way out to deeper water and wait for this monster to pass,” he said. Seaspray exploded once more as they burrowed into the coming swell. “Were the lashings inspected this morning?”

“Yes, sir. The calibrations were completed before lunch.”

Stewart warily eyed the swaying cargo, then picked up the phone and rang the stateroom. “It’s Stewart, sir? Yes, sir, it’s a strong one. Right. On my own accord, yes, sir. Thank you, sir.” He hung up the receiver and pivoted toward the helmsman. “We’re to keep to the new course.”

Less than ten minutes later, Captain Donovan Campbell’s indomitable outline appeared at the threshold. He latched the door and shook the rain from his jacket and boots, staggered across the bridge to the radar screen.

“Good work, Mr. Stewart,” the Captain boasted, “We wouldn’t have been able to run through *this* bastard. Hold steady—the worst will soon be behind us.” The barrel-chested man lumbered to the window, slid it sideways, rain pelting his face, and stuck his head out, gathering his best view of the trackless sea. “Give me a reading,” he said as he drew back.

“Wind speed hovering between sixty and seventy knots for the last thirty minutes. Out of the northwest, sir,” said Stewart.

“Very well. Hold firm, Mr. Ross—we’ll be crosswind soon. Things could get dicey.”

With a grinding cry, the vessel skittered down another wave. “Will this ever let up?” shouted Stewart, trying to keep his balance.

“Sir, look,” said the helmsman, gesturing madly toward the bow, where the metal lashings were vaulting into the ocean like pogo-sticks, breaking lose one-by-one, nearly a dozen in all. “Oh, shit!—Captain, we’re losing some of the deck chairs!” the helmsman yelled as a column of containers toppled into the sea.

“Steady, Mr. Ross, this doesn’t need to be an avalanche.” Captain Campbell ground his fist into his palm. “How many, do you think, Mr. Stewart?”

“I saw three go over. No way to tell for sure,” replied Stewart.

“Be sure to get a full report when this clears and log it onto the manifest,” said the Captain. He went to the radar screen and ran his finger over the map. “Another hour or so, and we’ll be in the clear,” he muttered under his breath, “Time enough to get to my girls.”

* * *

Early that Friday morning, sipping coffee from the comfort of her poolside lounge, Fran regarded the mist over the distant creek, thick as an ice-cream mustache. A strand of sunlight found a heron, regal blue, gliding effortlessly over the reed-lined channel, departing more gracefully than Fran’s disappointment as she reread the Captain’s email:

Won't be home tonight for the beach bonfire, sorry.

Fran's airy sigh moaned like a budget concertina as she rose from the low chair and crossed the lanai, pool skimmer in hand. Three steps into the shallow end, she snagged the plastic bundle and brought it to the edge. Music poured softly from inside the pouch; the girl's phone was still playing. Fran tapped at the buttons inside the bag until the thing shut off, then stormed into the house to wake the girl.

* * *

"You left it behind intentionally, didn't you, *Fran*?" the girl accused. Kimberly glared out the passenger window at the trees and houses flitting past, stalking them like prey.

"It's only for three days. It'll do you some good."

Kimberly adjusted her aligner. "Three days," she said, chewing her fingers, "might as well be forever. The Jeg Iz Spellin's new single is supposed to drop tomorrow. I'll be snoozin' like Susan."

"You should have thought about that before leaving your phone in the pool overnight."

"Uh—Hello? Mars to Fran? It was in a waterproof pouch."

"That doesn't make it a turtle."

The girl flicked off the car radio and crossed her arms. "I don't suppose you brought your eReader."

"Actually—I did," Fran replied glibly. "If I give it to you, will you read an actual book?"

"If I stop talking—will you *actually* drive faster?"

"Kimberly Jo Campbell," the mother said with a groan, "we'll be on the beach in less than an hour. Can't you at least be civil?" She glared over at the sullen girl. "Oh—why do I even bother?" Fran shrugged. "It's in the console."

The girl popped open the dash, jammed a cord into the eReader, and turned it on. "Oh, wait," she said, tugging an earbud out, "Did I mention I had a dream about daddy's ship. It was in a bad storm. Nobody hurt, but—freaky, huh?" Kimberly blew a bubble, tucked the AirPods into her ears, and except for the occasional cracking and popping of gum, silence set in, and Fran soon found herself ruminating over countless times the two had read *Charlotte's Web*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Wind in the Willows*, and *Harry Potter*. She nudged Kimberly, "What is it?" pointing to her ears.

Kimberly paused the narration. “Hannah Brine.”

“Never heard of it.”

“Daddy got it for me. It’s about this woman from Louisiana who goes to live with the monarch butterflies in the mountains of Mexico, then one night, she turns into one.”

The mother grinned. “Fiction, right?”

“It’s a popular book. Been translated into thirteen languages.”

“So—the butterfly effect, literally.”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

* * *

“Well, Fran,” Fran muttered to herself, “go ahead and stand there, doing nothing, mother of the year, watching your daughter rush into the edge of a churning ocean. May as well take her bungee jumping—or sky-diving.” She curled one arm over her head and waved. “Kimberly!” she shouted, her voice trying to overcome the pounding surf.

A soccer field away, the girl scrambled up from the sandcastle—hair dancing in a tangle along her sunbaked shoulders—brushed off her knees, and stared back at the cottage. A wave trickled in around her ankles, going from inches to knee-deep, then peeling back like spent linen. The mother yelled once more, and Kimberly pointed to her ears, shaking her head.

Fran spread her fingers, holding them high, making a five, and flashed it twice.

Twenty minutes later, Kimberly plunked down onto the kitchen chair. “When do we eat, Fran. I’m starving to death!” she complained, hair twisted into a towel above her head.

“I’m not sure you realize what that phrase really means,” Fran said, bent over inside the refrigerator. She carried a platter across the room, laying a hand on the girl’s tawny shoulder as she placed it on the table. “You going to finish your sandcastle after lunch?”

“There’s nothing else to do—without Daddy.”

“He’ll be here in the morning. We can have breakfast together.”

“Okay,” said Kimberly. She propped the napkin ring on its edge and flicked it with her finger. It twirled like a pinwheel across the waxed mahogany tabletop. “I saw some skateboarders in the city park—by the big red caboose.”

“That’s nice, dear,” Fran answered feebly. The ocean, being boy-free, was perhaps not so dangerous after all. She dipped a carrot into a bowl of ranch dressing.

Kimberly unwrapped the towel from her hair and shoved herself away from the table. “Maybe I’ll get dressed and —”

Fran sprang from her chair. “Hang on,” she said, opening a drawer on the kitchen island and pulling out the phone.

“I can have it back?” squealed the girl.

Fran held it over her head. “You had it less than a week, then left it overnight in the swimming pool,” she scolded. “At least *try* to take better care this time.”

She kissed her mother on the cheek, climbing Fran’s arm to reach the phone, then danced out the door, the pouch spinning like a propeller at her side.

Slightly irked by the exchange, Fran watched as the carefree girl bounded down the steps toward the ocean. She put away the leftovers, and an unopened bottle of prosecco greeted her daringly from inside the refrigerator door. The dishes could wait.

With a beach read paperback plucked from the rental home bookcase, Fran sauntered out to the deck and situated herself comfortably into a lounger. Under the shaded comfort of one of the broad umbrellas, hours seemed to vanish with the ebbing tide. A voice rang out, perforating the trance. It was Fran’s name being called, gliding up the windy shoreline. Fran raised up from the book to find Kimberly near the shoreline, waving for her to come out. She folded her book and trekked down to the breezy shoreline where the girl’s lithe frame lay coiled effortlessly around the sandcastle, patting, sculpting, adding the final touches. The shoulder-high sunset seemed to complete the fairytale scene, so Fran plucked Kimberly’s phone from the girl’s towel and snapped a photo.

Kimberly scrambled to her feet excitedly and snatched the phone away from Fran. “Takes pretty good pictures, doesn’t it?” she said, punching the buttons inside the pouch. “Underwater, too—see.” She handed it back.

“Is that a sand-dollar?”

“Uh-huh,” Kimberly nodded.

Fran closed her billowing shirt over her chest, looking back at the house with a wan smile. Beneath the umbrella—green-canvas flapping in the breeze—her beverage and novel awaited. She turned around, admiring the winsome girl, bronze-backed,

hands-on-hips, watching a pair of seagulls hover over the sea. These wondrously beguiling days with the exuberant little beast would come to an end soon enough, thought Fran. “You want to come up? I could make hot fudge sundaes?”

“Not yet. I saw a starfish earlier. I want to get a picture,” the girl said and tore away.

Fran trudged up the beach to the deck and nestled into the cushy lounger. Less than a thirty-second sprint away, Kimberly tumbled amid the crashing waves. Fran glanced up nervously from her book until eventually, the girl scrambled into shore and plopped down to resume work on her sand structure.

“I brought another, just in case.”

The familiar voice behind her startled Fran at first. She dropped the book on the deck and coiled around. “Why, prosecco, my favorite,” she said, rising to wrap both arms around the Captain’s neck.

“I ought to bring this more often. Cheaper than a necklace,” said the Captain, once she’d loosened her grip. He gestured toward the lounger, the elation melting from his face. “Sit,” he said and nestled in gloomily beside her.

“What is it?”

“I’ve been put on leave. Six months.”

Fran ran a hand across his stubbled cheek. “Oh—dear me, no.”

“There was a mishap, a stretch of bad water.”

“It happens.”

“Not to me, it doesn’t. And this time was expensive—for the company. Or should I say, for the insurance company?” He cradled her hand and planted a grateful kiss inside her palm. “I can begin looking for other work come Monday— if that’s what we decide.”

“Will it come to that? Oh—Don—I’ve never seen you so troubled. What was the cargo?”

He rubbed the back of his head. “There were 44,000 of them, Frannie, with a manufacturing cost of three-hundred bucks a pop. Christ—that’s a goddam fortune!” The father glanced up, hearing Kimberly’s shouts as the girl came sprinting up the beach.

“Daddy! Yay—daddy, Daddy!”

“My—angel!” he roared, rising to greet her at the edge of the stairs with a hug, lifting, twirling, carrying her up.

It warmed Fran’s soul watching them reconnect, listening to their chatter as they crossed the deck. “Honey, did you thank Daddy for his gift?” she said.

The girl unlocked her arms from her father’s waist, beaming. “Oh, yes, thank you,” she said, hugging him again, her arms overlapping. Then, with a jolt, she suddenly jerked away, looking around. She walked to the edge of the deck. “Oh, no—No! My—my phone!” she shrieked, realizing the phone pouch no longer dangled from her wrist. Kimberly spun around, pointing to the ocean. “I left it next to the castle,” she told her parents, horrified, and she peeled away down the steps.

The Captain promptly removed his shoes and socks, rolled up his pant legs, and chased after the girl, the pair arriving together at the muddy mound of sand, ankle-deep in water. The girl charged furiously about the emptying moat as the wave pulled back, searching without reward before the next arrived. Along came the mother, wading in beside her husband, shadowing the girl as they scanned the surface of the turbulent water, ever-wary of the undertow, Kimberly charging ahead, her feet barely touching the sand.

“There it is!” the girl squealed and triumphantly snagged the pouch from the wave’s crest as rolled over.

“I found it!” shouted the mother, some thirty feet away, stumbling in the heavy surf with a phone pouch in her hand.

“Here’s two more,” said the father, perplexed, pushing his way through the flotsam, holding forward the pair of rubbery bubbles as five more plastic cases, each carrying a phone inside, floated past his knees with the next wave. As the trio inched their way closer together, dozens of pouches, then hundreds more, began to pile in around them.

“This couldn’t happen in my worst nightmare,” the Captain moaned quietly to himself, absorbing the phenomenon with disbelieving eyes.

“It’s—amazing!” Kimberly shouted, her face a shimmering wet glow. “Just like the end of my dream—the ship and the storm—the phones. How did you do it?” she said as she splashed over and leaped into the Captain’s arms, the pair tumbling into the onrushing surf.

Cicadian Rhythm

by James Callan

I knew something was a little off when my four-year-old son, Tommy, walked inside from a warm, sunny afternoon without the bowl of soapy water and bubble wand I had furnished him with, but rather, a little black beetle turned over on its back, its tiny legs wiggling up as if to wave hello, but far more likely, its attempt to right itself and be free of its inconvenient, inhibiting position. Tommy bringing a bug in the house wasn't all that surprising. It didn't infer anything odd was afoot— what young child wasn't expected to be curious of the world, bugs and all?— but it acted as a precursor to what came next, which was more than a little odd indeed.

Tommy began by calmly saying to me in a patient and polite tone of greeting, "Hello, Mother." I laughed because he had never called me mother before. To my very best recollection, Tommy had never before deviated from calling me Mommy. Always Mommy. In fact, he prefaced every sentence spoken to me with that unvarying, uniform title. Every single sentence. It goes further than that. He said mommy so much, often interrupting his own sentences by beginning anew, always with a mommy, that I usually began to tweak at the word a little less than halfway through each day because it becomes so godawful irritating. I only go on about it at such length to emphasize how startling and unexpected it was to hear Tommy address me as Mother, and how such a simple thing could leave me not only surprised, but a little alarmed.

So anyways, my little boy comes in with a small black bug instead of the paraphernalia for blowing bubbles and says to me in an uncharacteristic tone and a very uncharacteristic word choice, "Hello, Mother," then proceeded to offer me a detailed discourse on the intricate beauty of the vine weevil, which presumably was the name to the species of bug presented to me upon his palm. But how the hell would Tommy know that? "Isn't she beautiful, Mother?" Again, Mother. And to *conclude* a sentence, no less! Now, I was certain something was not quite right.

"How do you know it's a she?" Surely, you couldn't. I mean, on a weevil? It's not as if it has a pair of tits. A visible camel toe. A respectable cock to assure you otherwise.

Tommy pointed to the rear end of the overturned insect, using his pinky, which even being his smallest finger and him being only four-years-old was still far too large to indicate anything other than the weevil itself, as a whole. "It's quite plain, Mother," he told me, none of his usual rambling, words tumbling into other words way of speaking. "Observe the sternites, here and here." I leaned in and squinted. From what I could tell I was looking at a bug's ass. What in the fuck is a sternite anyhow? I asked Tommy, but not like that. I asked like this: "What is a sternite, Tommy?"

To which he replied, "Sternites are the plates that form the sternum of segments on insects."

This explanation had left me as befuddled about sternites as the time before its explanation. Which wasn't out of the ordinary when it came to explanations offered by Tommy. But usually my lack of understanding that followed one of Tommy's explanations came from their absence of having any concrete point, or, for that matter, an explanation at all. Either that, or his explanations were interrupted too many damned times by his own interjection of the word mommy that whatever would-be coherent elucidation he had meant to deliver was irreparably butchered and bombarded to the point that it became an undecipherable and segmented toddler's jabbering, which I suppose is exactly what one may expect from a four-year-old child.

What one does not expect, however, is some seemingly, actual, scientific explanation delivered in calm, smooth oration, no mommy interjections whatever, all of which going completely over my head because I lack that left hemisphere stuff. Or is it right? In any case, I was starting to wish Tommy had just come in with the wet bowl and bubbles and said to me "Mommy, look the, Mommy, come look at the, Mommy, bubbles!" How much simpler the day would have gone...

"The vine weevil is a small specimen, so it may be difficult for the untrained eye to note, but the sternites, here and here, you will observe when looking closely, have hardly any separation between them. Virtually none whatsoever. This contrasts with the male vine weevil, which would display a wider gap between the sternites. It's really as simple as that, Mother." He smiled up at me. "It's as simple as blowing bubbles."

I came close to telling Tommy that bubbles can actually be quite difficult to blow if, say, the solution is not soapy enough, or not soapy at all for that matter, or if the wind is severe or if... but I held my tongue, I kept quiet, deciding it would have been petty of me. So I nodded instead, smiled down at my four-year-old son, and wondered what in the hell was going on.

He went on and on about the weevil, telling me how he is marveled, bewitched even, by its compound eyes, how its metasternum and abdominal ventrites were sleek and elegantly put together, how their design held comparison to a newly waxed jet-black Porsche, how its tarsal claws could help it scale 180 degree plant stems, even remain upside down on the underside of a leaf, how, ultimately, he thought Weevil-Man would have made a more convincing superhero than Spider-Man, despite the wild success of the latter. "Did you know, Mother," Tommy told me with the clarity and composure of a sage professor or some gentle naturalist, words spoken as if through the vapor of an upheld cup of calming, chamomile tea, "that I find the vine weevil, its succinct form, its simple shape, its exterior sheen, to hold more beauty than the blush-hued rhododendrons that you grow, the very same ones which the vine weevil devours and destroys?"

"Wait, so, it's weevils that are destroying my rhododendrons?" I couldn't believe I was consulting my four-year-old son about gardening. My sincere tone startled me, my very real hope for good advice on pest control made me truly aware of how fucked up this was becoming. But then there were the rhododendrons to consider, so I went ahead with my quest for advice. "The weevils are the ones destroying my beautiful flowers?"

“Well, in point of fact, they are destroying the leaves. Eating them, anyhow. Destroying them, if you will, in the same way you, last evening, destroyed your steak.” The steak dinner we had last night was immaculate and juicy. I certainly did eat it with a particular gusto. Still, I would not say that I *destroyed* it. I became flustered by my own pointless inner dialogue and musings that I told Tommy I didn’t want to hear about weevils anymore. I made him put it outside.

To appease him, I put him on the couch and turned on *Frozen*. I told him I was going to step outside, attend to the rhododendrons. He sang out, rather than spoke, “Let it go, let it go,” and explained to me that the weevils are something I would not be able to eradicate. Tommy assured me they are highly successful creatures and capable of far more than I am. I must have looked insulted because he kindly added “relatively speaking, you a human being in a human world.” Then perhaps I looked satisfied, maybe even smug, because he revoked all kindness, going on to conclude “or any world, not relatively speaking, just speaking.” He then told me that *Frozen* was incredibly fucking stupid so I went through the DVD collection and in the end nothing would do but *A Bug’s Life*, which Tommy watched twice, back to back, without a pause for comment or break for urination.

This sort of thing went on for about five weeks. Well constructed, elaborate, presumably correct, scientific sermons on insects, each one a streamlined oration of dizzying detail, all of which coming from the mind of four-year-old child. There was further talk of weevils, or other beetles, ladybugs and scarabs, fireflies or the elm borer beetle, or non-beetles, other insects, crickets, ants (which we discovered was the title of another children’s animated film, though spelled “Antz,” and purchased online to watch upon arrival, which we did, and even I enjoyed as Woody Allan is the voice-actor of the main character and I just love Woody Allan), butterflies in the day, moths in the night, and more than all of the rest, possibly combined, cicadas. Tommy was obsessed with bugs. Devout to the cicada.

Then suddenly, completely, without any warning, Tommy comes in through the door from a warm, sunny afternoon with a bowl gone completely dry and a pink plastic bubble wand and says to me, “Mommy, can you, Mommy, can, Mommy, can you please get me some soapy water, Mommy.” Then held up his bowl to me and played with Lego Duplo blocks while he waited, constructing a rudimentary truck instead of some impressive, to scale model of a cicada in flight.

I cried in joy. And watched the soapy bubbles catch the sun, listened to the delighted, simple giggle and exaltation of a four-year-old boy through the open window, then squashed the little vine weevil with my thumb that I suddenly noticed on the kitchen counter.

*

17 years have come and gone. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve seen *Antz*, but it’s a number certainly more than I’ve seen most other movies, and certainly less than I’ve seen *Annie Hall* or *Manhattan* or just about any other Woody Allan film (and there are

a lot!). But one thing I can tell you is that Tommy, who now goes by Tom and no longer calls me Mommy but Mom, in all of those 17 years since five weeks after he brought in that vine weevil and suddenly went bug mad, possessed by the ghost of an entomologist or maybe some freak isolated case of severe autism, has never again reverted to that same, or even similar, condition. Tommy, or Tom, has been, Mommy's, or Mom's, perfect little angel, or perfectly normal child and now young adult, ever since.

That is, until halfway through the semester of his junior year at the University of Wisconsin. Then, as sudden as his first infliction 17 years ago, he goes all rabid for six-legged critters again. The way I hear it from his business ethics professor, he raised his hand in lecture, was called upon, and then gave a 45 minute declamation on butterflies, the different types of evolutionary strategies they have developed, aposematism, mimicry, blah blah blah. He was asked several times how any of what he was saying was relevant to business ethics. The professor's repeated question was fully ignored, answered only by an impassioned upheaval of more butterfly lore, a mishmash of facts, a torrent of detailed information on butterfly larvae, caterpillars, how they have five different developmental stages, how those are called instars, which some girl in the back row misheard as stars, then took it upon herself to talk about astrology, thinking the class had become an open dialogue to discuss anything at all. The class learned from the girl that her star sign was scorpio. The class then learned from Tom that scorpions are not insects, as many suppose them to be, but arachnids. I, myself, raised an eyebrow at that fact. The arachnid thing, not the star sign stuff.

Tommy, I mean Tom, had once again assumed the one-track mind of a bug junkie. A zealous, insectophiliac nuthouse. Which wouldn't have been that bad, really, had he been pursuing a degree in entomology. That supreme, hyper focus would boost his test scores, his overall performance, his GPA. But no, it wasn't worth a damn to anyone pursuing a business administration degree. His mad and creepy fixation on insects only served to hinder his collegiate pursuits. It lowered his test scores, his overall performance, his GPA. And then Tom stopped going to class at all.

He went to the fringes of the soccer field, or the baseball diamond on the campus grounds. He'd find a bare patch of earth and sit and watch and wait and marvel and maybe even worship the little fucking critters that populated the undergrowth.

What's perhaps even worse is what was going on with his girlfriend, although now I can call her his ex-girlfriend, because that is how things turned out in the end. And it didn't take long getting there, to the end. Theirs had been a long and lovely relationship, one that first budded during freshman orientation, then never stopped blooming, bright and beautiful, cultivated over two years into a rich and warm union that gave off strong future-daughter-in-law vibes. Tommy smiling each time I asked him about her, saying words like soulmate, she's my entire world, and even though he was a kid and his world had to be small because I knew he'd never been beyond the borders of the states adjacent to Wisconsin, I still believed his love was as real as any big-world love.

But after all that, a few sermons on hive life, ants and bees, soldiers, pollinators, pheromones that could do just about anything, crazy things, no different from mind

control, complete possession, like turning toddlers into mad scientists, frenzied entomologists, all at the drop of a hat, and that's how fast it all happened, their breakup, like the drop of a hat.

And can you blame the girl? She had a phobia of bugs. A real bad one, from how I've heard it. And then Tommy goes all hyper autistic, one-track-mind, insect fanatic. I mean, for fuck's sake, it's a given that wasn't going to work out. And it's not like I could calmly explain it to her that it was no big thing, that she just had to wait it out, four, five, maybe six weeks, and then, just like a cicada, another 17-year sleep, a big, big break from those creepy-crawly antics, before another short-term bout.

I had worked it out, or at the time believed I had, still testing the waters of my theory, when Tommy, er, Tom, oh god does it fucking matter? When Tommy was going on and on about cicadas, how one species, his favorite species, spends on average 17 years under the earth, munching on roots in their nymph form before emerging, mating, depositing eggs and dying, a short five-week finale after a long, dark wait.

And sure enough. It took just over five weeks. 37 days. That's all it took. The fixation died. No gentle fade out, no easing into it, but a sudden stop, a cold-turkey, hard-line, talking a mile a minute about stick insects and wood lice one moment to not talking at all, but crying, incoherent, Tommy missing his girlfriend who won't talk to him, despairing about the irreparable damage his GPA has suffered in his 37-day hiatus from class, how it would very soon amount to him flunking out of school altogether.

*

17 years have come and gone. Again.

I can tell you exactly how many times I have watched *Antz* during that stretch of time, and will do so now: that number is zero. Or maybe even negative one, if that is possible. Because once I put in the DVD and it started playing from the end credits, right where I had left off from the last viewing, but instead of just going to the DVD menu, I pressed the rewind button and watched the film, muted, in about double speed, backwards. It took about thirty-five minutes.

Why'd I do it? No idea. Maybe it was pheromones. Or maybe it was my turn to go a little crazy. I mean, does Tommy have a monopoly on lunacy? No, he does not. And anyways, how I spend my time is my fucking business. But since I'm sharing my business, I'll go on to tell you that when I finally did get to the DVD menu I decided not to watch the film. I mean, again. Properly. At normal speed, unmuted, and in forward progression. Just looking at those ugly animated ants, I knew I'd never watch that godawful drivel again, Woody Allan or no. I guess I was off bugs. Bug off! I wanted to scream at them, and did. Or did, in any case, if there were any in the room present yet unseen. If not, I still screamed bug off! But not to anyone or anything.

Yes, I was certainly off bugs. And I think we can agree, with good reason. So you can probably guess how many times I'd be watching *The Fly*, or what started it all, *A Bugs Life*.

Tommy is now 38, and prefers to be called Thomas. He is married and has two lovely little boys, Eddie and Ted. One day, Ted, who goes by Teddy, tells his older brother Eddie, who goes by Ed, that he has found something weird, something cool, something moving. Ed follows Teddy, who is leading his older brother by the hand and tugging with urgency, laughing in the pure delight and wonderment of being a child. Teddy lets go of his brother and points upward to the underside of the roof to an old woodshed that their father sometimes, but rarely uses.

Teddy is mystified, too young to work out what that bulging blob that hangs down and outward is, why it makes a buzzing sound, and most mysterious of all, how it moves as if covered in hundreds, perhaps thousands of bees. Ed is a good two and a half years older than Teddy, so he sees the bulging blob that makes a droning buzzing noise and moves as if covered by a thousand bees for what it is, a bee's nest, occupied by hundreds if not thousands of bees. Teddy reaches for stick to prod it, explains to Ed, who clearly is not in the know, how Pooh Bear sticks his uncovered hand down to the elbow into bees' nests and is gratified by the delights of his favorite, and perhaps sole food, honey, food for the soul. Ed, in all of his big-brother wisdom, explains to Teddy that he is not a teddy bear, furthermore, that he is not a cartoon teddy bear, furthermore, that he is not a bear at all even if his name is Teddy, that he is barely 4 years old, and that to prod the bee's nest is actually a really fucking bad idea.

The next day, Tommy, father of two, sits down to breakfast and smiles at his wife as she brings him a steaming plate of blueberry pancakes, then smiles at his children who rearrange the blueberries to make smiling faces. Tommy takes all of the blueberries off of his own pancakes so the children have enough berries for their unsophisticated artwork, but withholds one single berry which he places in the center of his pancake and pretends that it is an ample, well-tanned breast. He then devours it, the pancake, and surveys a morning scene that just may be the very moment in his life that exemplifies contentedness and joy.

Unfortunately, that very moment does not turn out to be the epitome of contentedness and joy. It turns out to be something altogether different. Contentedness and joy, usurped, thrown out the window, replaced by a fervency to examine the complex and minute subtleties of each and every facet of insect life. Yes, it was that time of the cycle. That roughly five-week bout of religious fervency, unyielding reverence, for all things insect.

Suddenly, pancakes no longer inspired the imagery of a well-tanned breast. Instead, each brown, buckwheat disk became the glorious compound eye of a vine weevil, a Pharaoh cicada, a globular orb, unblinking in the first light that has reflected off of its ten-thousand facets in 17 years.

To the question from his wife asking if he would like another pancake, Tommy answered that the compound eye is made up of many ommatidia. The mostly blank, slightly puzzled faces of his family stared at him in silence. I doubt very much they knew what ommatidia are. Considering Ed was only six, and Teddy even younger, only four, it actually may be more of a concern if they did know what ommatidia are. If they nodded sagely and knowingly, going on to explain how each ommatidia acted as a lens, focusing light and detecting color, how some of the larger, more globular compound eyes of insects, like the dragonfly for instance, could basically see in 360 degree angles, using all 30,000 ommatidia to take in the circumference of its surroundings, well, that would have been fucking weird. And besides, that's exactly what their father had said. Then went on to say a whole lot more. He would, continuously, for five weeks, give or take.

Now, this time I did explain Tommy's bizarre condition to his beloved partner. This time, marriage on the line, fatherhood at peril, I thought I couldn't just watch things unfold, even if it did paint me as a fucking lunatic, explaining that my son is possessed by some sadistic entomologist or perhaps the spirit of a Pharaoh cicada, or perhaps a Pharaoh, though Tommy had never been to Egypt let alone outside the Midwest. So when Melissa, Tommy's wife, calls me up, breathing between sobs on the line, me well aware that it has been another 17 years since the last time Tommy went buggy, I wasted little time standing around. I cut Melissa off, told her it would be okay, that I would explain everything, and that I was coming over immediately.

Well, I got there and started explaining it all, meanwhile getting these looks from Melissa like I was the one that was batshit mad when clearly my son was, him jabbering a ceaseless fount of entomological facts in the background, Teddy laughing at his father, thinking it's a game, Ed crying for him, knowing it's something very fucked up and wrong, maybe even fearing that whatever it is may be genetic, might pass down from father to son.

I go on explaining what sounds like science fiction to Melissa, telling her the most important detail, the saving grace of it all, the silver lining that is hard to acknowledge, difficult to make out within that swarm of locusts, buried beneath that army of ants. I tell her it's temporary, few and far between. But I'm not sure her sobs are leaving enough of a gap for her to take in a single thing I'm saying. So I hug her, hold her, pat her back, and am grateful that the room is now empty. That Tommy, Teddy, and Ed have gone outside.

Of course, had I known about the bee's nest I would have left Melissa where she was standing and run outside. I would have stopped what I could not know to stop at the time it happened. And of course it happened. It had to happen. And that, in many ways, is the end to this story.

Teddy, enthused by his father's sudden interest in bugs, takes him by the hand and tugs at his arm, leading him to backside of the old shed, explaining that he has found a giant bee's nest. Teddy no longer needed to be tugging on his father's arm. No, in point of fact, he had a hard time keeping up with his father, who was now running, started sprinting, the moment he heard from his son about the bee's nest behind the shed.

Teddy was laughing, giddy and playful as four-year-olds are who are playing with their fathers who's interest and joy is as keen as their own. Look! He pointed up, as if any pointing up was necessary, as if the massive, sagging bulge of loud, buzzing, vibrating, kaleidoscopic swirling blur of gold, brown, and black was inconspicuous or subtle. As if it didn't stand out like a sore thumb, a stung thumb, a thumb swollen with bee venom, a thumb ballooning with inflammatory toxins.

Tommy was going on about how bees can become very aggressive around their hives, how they are prone to agitation and that they attack in swarms. He was not warning his son, trying to prevent an accident. He was merely informing his son, educating him and indulging in his own obsessive fascinations. Teddy was thrilled to see his father so very much alive and at play. It encouraged him to offer to stick his bare arm into the heart of the bee's nest, just like Pooh Bear, and his father oohed and aahed at the prospect, telling him it would induce a furious counterattack.

When his toddler boy smiled a small-toothed grin and reached out for the nest with his little, pudgy fingers, he felt no fear, only exhilaration. He was exempt from terror. Immune to danger. His father's own eager smile ensured him the game was safe. It was okay to thrust his bare arm up and into the big, big, nest. Just like Pooh Bear.

We found out that day, that moment really, that Teddy was allergic to bees. When his heart stopped and he swelled up beyond recognition it was confirmed. When Ed came crying, tugging his mother by the arm to show her what had happened behind the old shed, there was Tommy, enthusiastic as ever, continually spewing out information on bees, how and what their venom is and does, ranting about amino acids, enzymes, and all manner of no-one-cares and are-you-mad as his youngest son lay dead at his feet.

Five weeks later, when Tommy came out of his stupor, his insect fit, he experienced the weight of what had happened behind the shed. It hit him like a punch in the stomach, as if he hadn't known, even though he witnessed it. He learned, too, that Melissa had left him. That she had taken Ed with her and that lawyers were involved, that divorce was imminent, that child custody was out of reach.

One day, not long after losing his family, Tommy sat outside and felt the sun come out from behind a cloud and bath the summer day in a wash of warmth. Just then, the cicadas came alive, triggered by the heat, and called out by the thousands. They outsang the birds, the frogs, and even drowned out the wind and the ruffling leaves. It was deafening, all at once obnoxious and hypnotic. Tommy walked out into the field and under the tall poplars and lost himself in that bombardment of sound. He lost himself, all aspects and all literally, when he put the barrel of the gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger, making the only sound that was louder than the cicadas themselves.

*

Years later, feeling cramped and claustrophobic lying in bed, I decided to have one of my walls knocked out, an act which would nearly double the size of my bedroom. The

adjacent room, practically unused, had been Tommy's when growing up. When the wall was taken down the contractors told me that they discovered something curious. Within the walls, between my current room and Tommy's old one, there was a wide collection of pinned up butterflies, beetles, bees, and all sorts of other insects, encased in glass and meticulously labeled and catalogued. Many of the entomological curios had been damaged, but the surviving ones were supposedly worth a great deal, some dating back over a hundred years.

I can assure you, the money was not at all what peaked my interest. In fact, interest is not the right word, but rather, horror. Yes, that's fitting. My horror was peaked by the mere presence of that macabre collection, more so knowing that it stood, as if on display but entombed, like Pharaohs, or like the Pharaoh cicada for 17 years, within the walls of my very home. Right beside where little Tommy had slept.

Then I saw it. The wide frame of cicadas. It spanned dozens of species, rows and columns of varying sizes and colors, but all of them cicadas, all of them beautiful in their own way but wasted on me, having no love for bugs, all of them ugly, all of them awful. It dated 1917, the name of a film I had recently watched and believed with absolute conviction was better suited to winning best picture than *Parasite*. And that is all these many bugs were to me now, whether that factually were or otherwise, each and every one, a fucking parasite.

I didn't care about the money. I donated the collection to a science museum, and soon after wished that I hadn't, that I had smashed them all, burned them all, broke each and every frame and glass casing and individually plucked each husk of an insect into a living spider's web just to dishonor those ugly fucking critters that nested all these many years in my own home.

I deduced it was an entomologist, not the bugs themselves, that possessed my son, or haunted him. I believed it was the man, not the insect, whose spirit infiltrated Tommy once every 17 years. Through the use of the cicada husks beside where my child had slept? Who knows by what means. Witchcraft is as confusing to me as entomology. But I was convinced it was the man, the scientist who collected and catalogued the bugs, not the bugs themselves, that I should detest and loathe. And I did. Believe you me, I hate that man -- or perhaps woman, although 1917 is well entrenched in an era that would suggest a man -- yet I can't help but hate those insects too. Every single one. Each fucking bug, the trillions of them.

*

One night, I left the expanse of my new and spacious bedroom and walked out into the warm summer evening to my beautiful rhododendron bushes. I often would cut the flowers, collect them, and lay them on Tommy's grave. Teddy's too. I took out my shears and selected the most beautiful of blooms. I felt a tickle at my wrists and turned my arm to reveal a little black vine weevil. I thought of those formidable tarsal claws, their ability to scale what to them would be many Everests, knowing that as they scaled my wrist and

now my arm it was those very claws that made me feel that faint sensation, that tiny, little itch.

I pressed my finger into my arm and pinned the vine weevil. I turned him into muddy ink, a stamp upon my forearm. I dropped the rhododendron blooms and stepped upon them as I made my way to the garage. I came back to my beloved, flowering bush with a gas canister in hand. I doused each lovely flower, each dark green leaf, each sun-reaching stem, then I went back to the house, I found the pack of smokes that have been there since before Tommy was born, I took it with me and returned to the rhododendron bush which I prized almost as much as if it were family, I put an ancient cigarette between my lips, I lit a match, or tried to, failed, lit a second, successfully, and smoked a fag for the first time in four decades, then with full conviction that I was doing something that needed to be done, a removal of a late-stage cancer or an appendix about to burst, I flicked the glowing ember of my butt into the rhododendron bush and wept. Wept in sorrow, for my child, my grandchild, and maybe a little for my rhododendron bush. But wept also, in joy, in relief, knowing it was over.

The Lawnmower

by Leah Browning

His wife sent him outside, one morning, to mow the lawn. It had been weeks, some of the neighbors were complaining, they'd gotten a letter from the HOA.

It was a Saturday, a sunny day. There were beers inside in the fridge. He was almost done when one of the blades broke. A piece of metal flew out and caught him in the leg.

On the way to the hospital, he lay in the back seat with towels wrapped around his shin. He was teasing his wife, as she drove. If she had just let him relax, none of this would have happened. No one got hurt while sitting on the couch. Ha ha.

She was tense, as she drove, and didn't turn around. She'd left the children with the next-door neighbor.

The wound was deep, but they cleaned it and stitched him up. The bone wasn't broken. A nurse bandaged his leg and sent him home, no harm done.

A week later, they got another letter from the HOA, this time threatening them with a fine. He was still resting his leg, but it seemed to be getting worse. His wife bought a new mower and paid one of the teenagers down the street to finish the lawn and trim back the hedges.

He got a fever. When he went to the doctor, it emerged that the leg was infected. He ended up in the hospital.

They pumped him full of antibiotics and sent him home after two days, and then when things didn't improve, told him to come back. He lay in the hospital bed and stared at the ceiling.

When his wife brought the children to visit, he tried to joke with them. They were bored, though, and just wanted to watch the little TV hanging on the wall. They crowded onto his bed and fought over the remote control.

The infection didn't subside, and finally a surgeon made the call. They were going to have to amputate part of his leg. Good news, though: he would be able to keep his knee.

His wife came to visit, alone this time. Neither one of them knew what to say. She was somber. He wanted things to go back to the way they had been before, when he could jostle her out of a bad mood. Maybe this will save us on socks, he said, but she just put her head in her hands.

When it was all over, he got a prosthetic leg with a metal tube where his shin had been. To make the children laugh, he sometimes took it off and let it sit on its own chair at the dinner table with them. He called it Howard.

They moved to a single-story house. Going up and down the stairs day after day was too difficult for him. The new house was still near the kids' school, but it had a yard full of rocks and native plants, and no homeowners' association breathing down his neck.

The following spring, they drove to Sedona for a vacation. One of the kids wanted to go hiking. They chose an easy trail, and his wife packed up an economy-sized bottle of sunscreen and a box of energy bars.

It was all right at first, but finally he had to stop. He waved the others along. They were all wearing red T-shirts and shorts, and he watched them disappear from view.

The uneven ground was difficult to navigate, and for the first time in a long time, he wished he had crutches again. His stump ached. He sat on a flat rock and removed Howard. Without the children, it didn't seem funny. Just a chunk of plastic and metal.

One hiking boot was laced onto the prosthetic foot. His wife had tightened the laces through the eyelets and around the little hooks. Inside the other boot, on his real human foot, he could feel a blister forming.

He wasn't wearing a watch, and he had to keep getting out his cell phone to check the time. His family had been gone more than an hour. Other tourists walked past holding their cameras. He was sweating, even sitting still.

In the distance, against the backdrop of the red rocks, he saw his wife and kids, in their matching red shirts, round a corner. They weren't alone, though—at his wife's side was a tall, muscular man in a tight shirt and very short shorts. Other hikers overtook and passed them, so they were walking slowly, he could tell.

The children arrived first, bounding up to him like puppies, and the adults followed. His wife's face was flushed. She was carrying the pack, which she removed and set on the ground. "Stand in the shade with Dad," she said, "and I'll get you some water."

To her husband, she said, "Look who I found!"

The man in the tight shorts was someone she'd known in high school, a German exchange student. "He lives here now," she said delightedly, and the former exchange student reached down and affectionately rumbled the hair of the youngest child.

It took a minute to reattach his leg, and everyone had to wait. Tiredness made him clumsy. As they all walked toward the trailhead, his wife chatted animatedly, once

even putting her hand on the German man's arm, steadying herself, she was laughing so hard. It had been a long time since he'd seen her like that.

Two of the children were starting to bicker; someone wanted to trade seats when they got back in the minivan. The sun was hot.

As they finished loading up the kids, his wife gave her friend a hug, and the German got into a shiny little sports car and drove away.

"We should get some food," she said. She seemed deflated. Without asking, she walked around to the driver's side so that he could take off his leg. She could always tell when he was in pain.

"Old boyfriend?" he asked, once they were back on the road.

"Oh." She glanced at him quickly. "No."

He watched the mountain scenery slide past the window. "Too bad," he said lightly, "because he is gorgeous."

And then there it was again, her laugh. They both relaxed a little.

He turned up the air conditioning and put on a DVD for the kids. There was no way to know what would happen, was there? A year ago, he had been a different person, and if he was honest with himself, so had she. Everything had changed. Everything would continue changing. All they could do was try to keep up.

Stone Cottage

by Marco Etheridge

The glass-walled studio projects from the seaward end of the cottage, an afterthought built two centuries after the foundation stones were laid. Viewed from the outside, from anywhere in the damp fields that surround the stone cottage, the studio has the appearance of a translucent wart.

A man, a painter, stands inside the cramped studio space. Before him, on an easel, rests an over-large rectangular canvas. The painting is not finished, not quite, but the scene depicted in bright oils is clear to the eye. Sea and surf in cobalt and cream, rock reefs in black, the grass of the fields an impossible green, the endless sky cerulean and white.

The painter raises his eyes above the painting, stares past the safety of the enclosing glass. Stretching away and below is the exact scene depicted in the painting, alike in form, but devoid of colour. The sea is dull as slate, the surf tame and flat. The jagged rocks are frosted with grey ash, as is the sand on the beach. The impossibly green grass lies buried beneath drifts and miniature dunes of pumice. The world outside has been stripped of its colour.

If the painting were complete, there would be a signature in the lower right corner, G. Thorvald, for Gregory Thorvald. The painter could finish the painting from memory, or imagination, but it will not matter whether he paints his signature or not. Gregory Thorvald doubts that anyone else will ever see this painting. In this he will be proved wrong, but only just.

Out of long habit, Thorvald studies the afternoon sky. There is no quick rent of blue to break the pulsing grey monotone, no fleeting glimpse of sunlight. The painter expects no more than he sees. Clouds of ash have buried the world and blotted out the sun. There is no sign that the sun or sky will ever return. Natural light for painting is a thing of the recent past.

Gone too are the rhythm of sunrises and sunsets. Each new day is marked by a twilight that rises from the inky blackness of night. At the end of the day, the same twilight fades back into an unlit void. There are no stars now, no moon, no glimmer of light on the sea.

Thorvald seats himself on a wooden stool. He reaches for his briar pipe, then for a battered tobacco tin. He fills the bowl of the pipe with meticulous care, not spilling a single precious strand. He cradles the unlit pipe in his hand, mentally calculating his remaining supply of tobacco. Which will run out first, the smoke or the world? It is a question he cannot answer. He strikes a match, waits for the flare to subside, then holds the flame over the bowl of his pipe.

Smoke billows up the glass panes, whiteness obscuring the already obscure landscape beyond. The whirls of smoke reach the plank ceiling and hang there above him, waiting as he waits.

The pipe sucks and crackles as he draws on it. Outside, the wind keens against the ash-covered land. As the painter smokes, he counts the days in his thoughts. Was it thirty now? Yes, a month since the first shocking news reports. A massive supervolcano explosion at the Yellowstone caldera. The eastern half of the States buried. Then in Iceland, another cataclysmic eruption as Katla exploded. Hekla and Grímsvötn followed, and what used to be Iceland blew itself into the skies over the North Atlantic.

Five days later, the ash clouds swept in from the sea and blanketed the land. Ten days and every radio signal morphed into buzzing static. His cellular phone became a piece of useless junk. He has not seen a vehicle in two weeks. He is marooned on an island the size of a stone cottage.

Thorvald is trapped. South or north, the nearest town is thirty kilometres away. His old Land Rover still starts, but he doubts it will get far sucking ash into the air cleaner. He is not in a hurry to take his chances. The last garbled radio signals spit out grim news of towns and cities succumbing to deadly food riots and marauding gangs.

The cottage is a lonely outpost on the loneliest stretch of this rocky coast. There were damn few neighbors to begin with. Those that there were have fled or died, he knows not which. So he does the only thing he can do. He smokes, sits, and waits.

The monochrome day is waning, and, for the moment, so is the rain of ash. Thorvald's eyes search the landscape. He sees the dry-laid stone walls that mark the course of the road. Drifts of ash and pumice choke the western faces of the rough walls. The twin lines of stacked stone rise and fall over the contoured hills, appearing and reappearing as they climb to the dim horizon. And the walled-in road is empty, as empty as the landscape it passes through.

Then Thorvald looks again. Appearing over the nearest rise, as if sprung from the ash that buries the road, he sees two trudging figures. One is tall and thin. The other is short, no more than the height of a child. Both are swathed and cloaked against the dust and ash. He cannot see their faces.

Thorvald presses his nose to the studio glass, hands cupped around his eyes. He squints into the gloom. Yes, now he can see them. They are holding hands. A parent and child? A cloud of disturbed ash obscures their legs. They appear to float along the road as ghosts.

Something wallows along in their wake. The taller wanderer is pulling a wagon or a trolley. Thorvald sees a back-stretched arm and a hand on a handle, but no more. Whatever bumps along behind the tall figure is hidden beneath the roil of churned-up ash.

They are closer now, rounding the turn that leads past the cottage. Thorvald sees that the taller one is too slender to be a man. A woman, probably young. The other is a child, a boy by the look of it. The woman and boy vanish from Thorvald's view as the road snakes in front of the cottage.

Thorvald dashes through the cottage and squeezes into the narrow mudroom above the front steps. He peers through a diamond window set in the center of the door. The young woman and boy are standing at the head of the lane that leads up to the cottage. The two seem to be arguing. Thorvald cannot hear their words, but he can see their hands. The boy speaks with gestures. He points to the cottage. The young woman shakes her head. He points again. She shrugs, and the two travellers step into the narrow lane.

Thorvald opens the door and the strangers stop in their tracks. He sees two pairs of eyes staring at him. Their faces are hidden under hats pulled low and dirty scarves are swathed over their mouths. For a moment, no one moves. The ash at their feet swirls and settles. Now he can see the utility wagon behind the woman. The contents of the wagon are covered with a tarp and secured with crossed bungee straps.

The woman pulls the scarf down below her chin. Thorvald sees a young face, much younger than he would have guessed. She can't be older than twenty-five, probably younger. Under the smeared grime of ash, he sees that she is beautiful. The boy does not uncover his face. He looks up at the woman, tugs her hand, but she does not look down, does not move. Her eyes remain fixed on Thorvald. The silence grows awkward before Thorvald speaks.

"Welcome. You'd best come inside. You can leave your wagon."

There is another silence. Again the boy tugs the woman's arm. He takes a tentative half-step toward the open door. She nods to herself, her eyes still locked on Thorvald's. Then she allows the boy to lead her to the door.

Thorvald speaks to her as he would speak to a skittish colt.

"I'm Gregory Thorvald. I don't bite. Just brush the ash off as best you can before you come inside."

The boy looses his hold on the woman's hand and begins beating the ash off his jacket and pants. A cloud forms around him and drifts away. The young woman ignores the boy.

"I'm Ella and this is Toby. We don't mean to bother you or cause trouble. We thought this place was empty like all the others."

Thorvald nods and holds open the door wide.

"Better if we talk inside before the cottage fills with ash."

He leaves the front door open and backs through the mudroom and into the cottage proper. The boy is the first to follow.

“Hang your coat wherever there’s a hook. And shoes off, please.”

The boy stares at him for a long moment as if the words need to sink in. Then he nods his head. He slides out of his jacket, reaches up to hang it on a peg, and bends to the laces of his boots.

While Toby is bent over his boots, Ella squeezes in behind the boy. She pulls the front door shut behind her. Toby kicks off his boots and a puff of ash follows. He reaches out a stockinged toe and pokes her feet.

“Right, Toby, I get it. Shoes off.”

The boy’s face is solemn. Before Thorvald can say anything, Toby slips past him and burrows into the end of the sofa closest to the peat stove. Ella removes her boots and stands in front of Thorvald.

“Thank you for inviting us in. I was worried we wouldn’t find a place.”

“You’re welcome. Please, have a seat. I think this calls for tea. Toby, would you like tea?”

The boy looks at Thorvald as though he has been asked to take the throne. He nods his head without saying a word. It’s Ella’s voice that answers.

“Toby don’t talk. You get used to it. He’s never said a word since we’ve been together.”

“You’re not family then? I assumed Toby was your brother.”

Ella shakes her head. Thorvald sees raven hair and sharp dark eyes.

“No, I found Toby. Or he found me. It was during the riots, after the ash came and everything went dark. People were running around, smashing shop windows and each other. I was just trying to get away when I smacked into Toby boy. He was standing still as a statue, tears turning to mud on his cheeks. I grabbed him and we ran. Been running ever since.”

Thorvald feels the dim room pressing in on him. The air is close with the smell of peat burning in the stove. He loses the thread for a moment, then recovers himself.

“Right, tea. Sorry. Let me get the kettle on.”

In the kitchen, he fills the kettle and lights the stove. He puts biscuits on a plate, thinks of the hungry boy, adds more biscuits. The numbers click in his head.

Enough stove gas for three weeks, maybe, but that was figuring one person. Now it's three. Food to last two weeks tops. There's enough water and peat for months, enough to keep them warm and wet whilst they starve to death. Cheery thought.

He loads the tea things onto a tray and carries them back to the front room. Two faces look up at him, two more than he is used to. He sets the tray down.

"Who's for tea, then?"

While the boy Toby destroys the plate of biscuits, Ella tells Thorvald of their journey. Two days of raining ash was all it took to drive people mad. Or drive the mad ones madder. First there were food riots. The cops tried to stop the looting. Things got rough and the looters killed a cop. After that, the madness got bloody.

"I was running for my life. Then there was Toby. Like I said before, I grabbed him and we ran. Been three weeks heading south, hiding in barns and huts. We saw this place and figured it was good for the night."

Thorvald puts down his empty teacup and raises a bottle of brandy. She nods, holding out her cup. He pours her out a hard shot, then one for himself.

"Cheers."

"And the boy, he's not spoken at all?"

"Not a word. And there's no need to whisper. It don't do no good. He's got ears like a fox."

"If you've been three weeks sleeping in barns, what would you say to a warm bath? I can't promise hot."

Ella tosses off the brandy in one go and rises from the sofa.

"I'd kill for a bath."

Thorvald looks at her, sees a thin coil of springs and energy, long arms and long legs, and flashing eyes.

"No need. I'll just get the water going."

It was the better part of two hours getting them both bathed. Toby sat outside the bathroom door the entire time Ella was in her bath. She soaked until the water was cold and waited beside the door like a dog.

Then Thorvald heated more water and it was Toby's turn. Ella went in at intervals to check on him, leaving the bathroom door open. Thorvald learned that the boy would not abide a door between himself and Ella.

While they were in the bath, Thorvald swept up the spilled ash as best he could, cursing it as he always did. Now Ella and Toby were back in the sitting room, scrubbed clean, each of them wearing one of Thorvald's jumpers like a nightshirt.

Thorvald serves them a supper of tinned beans, kippers, and crispbread. The boy eats like a machine, not looking up until the food is gone. Ella eats a little more slowly, but with no less enthusiasm.

"That's all there is I'm afraid. No sweets to follow. Sorry, Toby."

If the boy hears him, he gives no notice. His head lolls back on the sofa and his eyes close.

He reaches for the boy's empty plate. Ella rises from the sofa.

"Here, let me help."

They stack the plates and cups. Ella follows Thorvald into the kitchen.

"Just in the sink is fine. The washing up can wait."

Ella raises her chin to the back of the cottage.

"What's back there?"

"My studio. That's the rest of the tour I suppose."

He leads the way and she follows. He strikes a match, lights a candle, then another. She stands beside him, taking the room in.

"You're a painter."

"I am. Have been all my life. Until now."

He hears the soft patter of bare feet, and then Toby is wriggling into the studio between them. He stares at the painting on the easel, then stares up at Thorvald.

Toby watches the painting as if it were alive. He sags where he stands, leaning into Ella. He begins to nod, and Ella slips an arm around the boy's chest to catch him. She turns Toby out of the studio and pushes him through the kitchen and back into the sitting room.

"Right, it's getting late. Ella, you take the sofa for yourself and Toby can bunk with me in the loft."

The boy is awake in an instant as if he's been stung. He's shaking his head and clinging to Ella's hand.

“Sorry, what I meant to say was Ella and Toby should take the sleeping loft. I’ll bunk on the sofa.”

“Goodnight, Thorvald.”

“Greg, I think, at this point.

“Goodnight, Greg.”

“Goodnight Ella, Goodnight, Toby.”

He watches Ella help the sleepy boy climb the ladder. She disappears after. Thorvald stokes the stove with fresh turves of peat. He throws a quilt over the sofa and settles himself for the night.

* * *

Blackness has given way to gloomy twilight when Thorvald opens his eyes. Someone is moving around in the kitchen and in the drift between sleep and consciousness he is waking in a different cottage on another continent and he is two decades younger. The woman in the kitchen has red hair and a fierce temper and Thorvald loves her madly. Then the undertow of memory pulls him back and it is Ella in the kitchen making tea.

He rolls upright on the sofa and wraps the quilt around his legs. He listens to the muted noises from the kitchen and then she is there, walking toward him with a mug of tea in each hand.

“G’morning, Greg. Did you sleep alright? Sorry for booting you out of your bed.”

Thorvald stretches out a hand to take the tea she is offering.

“Cheers. Good Morning yourself. Is Toby still sleeping?”

Ella nods her head and takes a sip of tea. She sits on a low stool beside the peat stove.

“It’s the only time I get to myself. He sleeps like the dead in the morning. Whimpers and squirms all night, but goes quiet for a few hours right about now.”

The tea is good and strong and hot. Thorvald is happy to have it and happy to have someone bring it to him. A question pops into his head and he blurts it out.

“If he’s not said a single word all this time, how is it you know his name?”

“Found it written inside his jacket. Laundry pen or something.”

“Do you think his parents are dead?”

Ella looks up to the loft above their heads, listens for a moment, then nods.

“Things got ugly. There were a lot of bodies in the streets.

“You have to understand, I was running for my life. I almost ran over the top of him. He was just standing there in the middle of all that mess, crying his eyes out. I couldn’t leave him there all alone.”

“You saved his life.”

“Maybe so, but I don’t know if I can save the rest of him. I think he saw his parents killed. That or some other horrible thing.”

There were noises above them, the sound of bare feet on wooden planks. Ella rose from her stool.

“I better get another cuppa.”

The day is spent cleaning the cottage and washing travel-grimed clothes. Toby is an eager puppy at Thorvald’s heels. Wherever he goes, the boy is his shadow. Toby vanishes every few minutes, checking that Ella is still close at hand, then reappears.

They need water for laundry. Thorvald shovels away the ash that blankets the walkway to the pumphouse. Toby shovels his own section of the walk. Inside the pumphouse, Thorvald shows Toby how the petrol generator works. Toby is a quick study and quiet as a mouse. He finds himself liking this strange silent lad.

Thorvald engages the electric pump. He shows the boy how the water is piped from the well to a holding tank mounted behind the cottage. Then he leads Toby into the kitchen where Ella is waiting. Thorvald lights the big boiler ring to heat water, conserving gas be damned. What point in rationing the cooking gas? A week more or less, what does it matter? The end is finite and inevitable. No one is going to stop by to fill the propane tank. May as well wash clothes, cook hot meals, and enjoy this moment on the edge of hell. Why not?

The gloomy excuse for a day passes into darkness. Tubs are emptied and the kitchen floor mopped. Damp laundry is strung from lines crisscrossing above the peat stove. Toby had been fascinated by the old-fashioned hand wringer, insisting that he be allowed to run the crank.

They take their tea in the humid room, flushed and hungry from the efforts of scrubbing and wringing. Their meal is much the same as the night before. There are sardines for kippers, tinned beans, and cream crackers. They eat until the food is gone, happy to have it.

Toby snuggles against Ella, the two of them curled together on the sofa. The boy's eyes are drooping to half-mast. Thorvald smiles at Ella, gathers up the dirty dishes, and carries them to the kitchen. He rinses the dishes, stacks them in the sink, then walks into the studio.

Thorvald lights a single candle against the darkness. He sits on the wooden stool and stares out into the black night. His hand reaches for the briar pipe and the tobacco tin. He packs the bowl but does not light the pipe. The night will be long and black. He has time.

He hears a rustle of bare feet and then she is there beside him.

"Toby drift off, did he?"

Ella nods her head, her hair the same shade as the night.

"The only time I get to myself."

Without another word she leans in to kiss him, one cool hand snaking behind his neck. Her lips are on his, sweet and warm. His heart beats once, twice, long enough to taste the ghost of a fierce woman with red hair and green eyes. The memory of her lifts his arms. His hands find Ella's shoulders, and he pulls back from her kiss.

"I don't want this."

She stands before him, close, her eyes on his. He expects anger or tears, but she offers him neither. When she speaks, her words are direct.

"Who's to know? For that matter, who's to care."

"I'd know. I'm old enough to be your grandfather, or damn close anyway."

By way of answer, Ella pulls a second stool next to his, perches herself on it, and leans against him. Thorvald picks up a woolen lap rug, drapes it over her legs and bare feet, then wraps an arm around the whip-thin young woman.

"What do you want, then?"

Thorvald waves his free hand at the unfinished paintings, at the candle flame reflected in the dark glass, at the black night outside.

"I want what I've always wanted. I want light and colour. I want the skies to open and the sun to beam down. I want to see green and blue and white, smear them on a canvas as thick as I like."

"And maybe you want someone else?"

“Ah, she’s long gone, twenty years now. Taken away by a stupid, ordinary accident. And she was anything but ordinary.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It changes nothing. What about you, Ella? What do you want?”

“Right now, I want what I have. Food, shelter, a warm bed, seeing Toby smile. I don’t see any future, none that I can hope for. What I want is to be rid of regrets.”

“You’re too young for much in the way of regrets.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. I don’t regret the things I’ve done. I regret the things I’ve not done. I regret not living like a wild woman, drinking and dancing, making trouble for everyone. I regret turning down so many of the boys who wanted me, even the ugly ones. Especially the ugly ones. They’re sweeter than the pretty boys and more interesting. I regret being a good person like I was saving something for later. I should have spent it all, every bit of myself.”

She tucks in tighter against him, settling herself like a cat.

“Go on, grandpa, smoke your pipe.”

Thorvald feels the forgotten pipe still in his hand. He fumbles one-handed for a match. She takes the box from him, strikes one, offers him the tiny flaming brand. He puffs the pipe to life and shakes out the match.

“Greg, how long can we stay here?”

Straight to the point, this one. There’s no sense hiding anything. So he tells her about the propane tank, the food, how long that will last. Maybe two weeks. There is peat for the fire and the well is still good, but the food will run out. Starving to death is a bad way to go. They could fish, but he has had no luck. Maybe the ash killed all the fish. He does not know.

“Two weeks until the food runs out. Then we start to starve. That’s not a good way to go.”

“Can we leave?”

“Yes, but leaving isn’t the problem. Getting somewhere else is the trick.”

He tells her about the Land Rover. It starts well enough. The old girl might be good for a hundred kilometres, she might be good for twenty. He has one good air filter. How long it will last with all the ash on the road, he does not know.

The patter of small feet interrupts their talk. Toby appears out of the darkness, wrapping himself around Ella, and for a moment they are three linked as one. Thorvald raises his hand from Ella's shoulder and ruffles the boy's hair.

"Right, bedtime for you two."

They disentangle themselves and say their goodnights. Toby takes Ella by the hand and leads her away.

Left alone, Thorvald smokes late into the night, pondering how he can give Ella and the silent boy what it is they want. It comes to him, finally, in the blackness of the wee hours. By the flickering light of the candle, he begins to clear the cluttered studio.

* * *

It is morning and Thorvald has Ella and Toby in the studio. He poses them as he wants them, exactly as they came to him in the long dark hours. Ella wears a tatty bathrobe and Toby is clad in a faded jumper that hangs below his knees.

"Right, that's perfect. You need to be still, both of you."

"Why am I holding a broomstick?"

"All in good time, Ella. Now be still."

Ella grumbles under her breath. Toby looks up at her with eyes wide. Thorvald hunches over the unfinished painting, drawing a cartoon in charcoal. His fingers move across the canvas without hesitation, sure and deft. Two figures take shape in the foreground of the bright landscape. Hours pass and his models begin to fidget. Thorvald takes pity on them. He drapes a linen over the canvas and shakes out his aching hands.

"Well done, you two. That's enough for today. I've got a bit more to do here. If you could fix us tea, that would be lovely."

Ella and Toby stretch and moan. The boy leans forward to peer at the covered canvas.

"No peeking, not until it's finished. Off you go."

When the studio is empty, Thorvald uncovers the painting. He mixes a lean oil of burnt umber. With a very fine brush, he paints over the charcoal lines, sealing the cartoon. He does not stop working until Ella calls him for tea.

The food runs low in the days it takes to complete the painting. When they are not posing, Ella and Toby help Thorvald pack the Land Rover with everything that might be useful on their journey.

In the days that follow, Thorvald paints as fast as he can, as fast as he dares. It is a race between the emptying larder and the almost completed canvas. Never in his life has he painted so swift or so sure. Every brush he lifts is the right one. Every brushstroke leaves just what he intends.

Seven days pass before the painting is complete. Their supply of food is almost gone. It is time to go.

Ella and Toby stand in front of the covered easel, waiting for Thorvald to lift the veil. The boy is shaking with excitement. Thorvald sweeps the linen away from the easel with a flourish, careful not to brush the wet oils.

Ella draws in a sharp breath and then a huge smile breaks across her face. Toby points at the painting, his mouth hanging open. Their eyes turn to Thorvald, who is grinning like a happy child. He sees the tears in Ella's eyes and he knows.

"Are you sure we can't take it with us?"

Thorvald shakes his head, still grinning.

"No, the oils won't be dry for at least a month, maybe more. If we move it, it will get ruined, coated with ash, or worse. Better that we leave it here."

It is time to go. They stand before the painting, each absorbed in one last long look. Ella has to take Toby by the shoulders and turn him away. They file out of the studio. The painting remains on the easel, the only source of colour glowing in the fading, ashy light from the monochrome world outside.

Outside the studio, beyond the cottage, Thorvald coaxes the Land Rover to life. Gears grind and the tires bump down the rough lane. At the roadway, he stops. Ella sits behind him, holding Toby in her lap. He blows out a long breath and looks south. The empty road snakes away between two stone walls drifted with ash.

"Well, here's to luck then."

He released the clutch and the Rover lurches onto the road. A cloud of ash rises in their wake, blotting out everything left behind.

In the empty studio, a painting on an easel. Two figures stand larger than life before a vivid background of sea and sky and rock. Ella is Boadicea come to life, sprung from the heath and turf. Toby is her adoring acolyte.

She stands a warrior queen, looking beyond the horizon, her face wild with fierce joy. A necklace of shark's teeth perches against the bare flesh below her throat. Her raven hair is ruffled by a sea breeze, entwined with feathers, bones, and wooden beads. She is clad in leather and animal skins, fitting attire for a wild woman. Toby wears a short toga, his features shining with love as he looks up at his queen.

The painting glows as if with its own light, illuminating the dim studio. Waves of colour gleam against the grey gloaming that falls over the world outside the glass. And in the lower right corner of the painting, traced with the point of his finest brush is a signature. G. Thorvald.

A Son Without Compassion

by Micheal Lockett

Jeff zips off the exit toward home. He's wracked with visions of his mother's rickety house on the hillside. It's the sore thumb of the block. Not the Wal-Mart, John Deer version of nice. Not the neighbors' tidy two story, vinyl-sided houses. They all have hanging baskets of geraniums, pristine grass, and pinwheels blowing in flower beds of petunias. Jeff's mom's yard is overgrown and full of junk.

It's twenty more minutes of travel and dread to Clearview, the little rust belt town where Jeff's mom lives. When he arrives, he parks his car on his mom's street. He gets a good look at the place. It looms over Jeff like a monster. It's worse every visit. Always more stuff. It's hard to believe how things have gone downhill since Jeff's dad died. Jeff's dad was a handyman who kept things tidy. He had a heart-attack in front of his work shed in the side yard. Jeff was seven years old when it happened.

Straight out of the car, Jeff notices how his dad's work shed has caved in the center. The roof lays over its trusses like a wet blanket. Next to the shed, the riding mower sticks out of a big hole in a weathered tarp. It's seized-up in the grass. The grass is knee-high around it. It reminds Jeff of a gallery crawl he recently attended in Pittsburgh. One of the exhibits had a black and white photo of rusty old cars. They were bumper to bumper like a traffic jam in a forest. The title of it was *The Futility of Life*.

On the house porch, there's a sofa also under a tarp. It surfaced a few years back, shortly after Jeff moved out. Jeff's mother says she loves the retro floral print on it. She says she wants to get the living room cleared out before she brings it inside. It has to be dry-rotted by now. Can't apply logic though, Jeff reminds himself. The sofa's piled high with a mountain of junk, what Jeff's mom calls her thrift store treasures. There's shelves to a bookcase, a walker, a tire that might fit her car (nearly like new, she says). There are bags of clothes, bins of pots and pans. There's another bin of toys, mostly old He-Man action figures. Jeff's mom says they're hot ticket collectibles. Folks on Ebay would pay top dollar for them. She just has to figure out how to list them on the site. All the junk blocks the living room window behind it, and it's been shut up for years. Jeff's mother started to bring random shit home shortly after his dad passed. She plays up its usefulness, what she will do with it, but never does. This has only gotten worse over time, and by now, she's a full-fledged hoarder.

Jeff takes a deep breath up the steps that lead to the porch. Jeff looks over all the junk. Jeff hasn't been home in four months, even though it's only three hours from Pittsburgh, where he now lives. Jeff steps into the yard with his hand over his eyes to block out the sun. He inspects the roof. A large chunk of tar paper has blown off the front corner. As he looks up, he steps to his right to get a better look. Jeff stumbles backward over a stroller in the yard. "God damn it," he curses. He just catches his balance before he falls down the steep hill.

Most of the old tar paper is cracked and rippling off the roof. A good storm, and it'll be gone. Jeff's patched the roof to hell and back, but it all needs to be completely

redone. Too bad Jeff's mom doesn't have money. She lives off his dad's survivor benefits. She says she gets some other money from Social Security, but Jeff's not entirely sure for what. Maybe being crazy. Maybe her bad back.

Jeff's feels defeated, but he's determined to patch the worst spot on the roof. He's purchased the stuff to repair it, and he hopes the tarpaper hasn't gotten ruined in the shed. The house is a money pit. Jeff certainly doesn't have the money to fix it. He's a dishwasher at Chili's and barely gets by. Jeff moved to Pittsburgh for culinary school after high school. However, he dropped out in his second term. He might re-enroll. Cooking has always been his thing. It's the tests he can't pass. Plus, the line cook and three of the waiters at Chili's are distinguished alum. It doesn't say much for the degree.

Jeff's mom sticks her head out the front door. She smiles and says, "Jeffie" to greet him. She is a hummingbird of a woman, just shy of fifty, with a pixie cut. She steps onto the porch. She has on a dress over pants—a mix match of polka dots and stripes, an ensemble that really completes the package. Jeff imagines a run-way voice-over for his mom, Cindy. *In this versatile number, Cindy breezes from her days feeding stray cats to romantic evenings sifting through the neighbors' trash.* Jeff can't help but laugh. That's only funny for a moment though. Probably because of what happened to his dad, Jeff fears she could drop dead any day.

"Should I be expecting a sibling?" Jeff asks. He turns. He gives the stroller a nudge with his boot. It rolls a bit across the yard. "Damn near killed myself on the thing. You need to get rid of it."

"No, sir. I just picked that up from a yard sale. Five bucks. You never know when someone will need one. You know what those cost new?" Jeff's mom asks. She picks up the lid of a tin garbage can on the porch, where she stores cat food. She pulls out a handful.

No arguing with the woman, Jeff thinks. He watches his mom toss the cat food onto the grass, like one would toss bird seed. The cats, mostly feral strays that have gravitated to his mother's house over the years and multiplied, appear from the junk in the yard. Three cats crawl from the cluttered sofa on the porch. They give a big yawn and stretch. They scurry off the porch for the food in the grass. It's competitive eating. Their little sharp teeth crunch up the dried bits.

"If I can keep the rain out, I can get this place in shape," Jeff's mom says. She reaches back into the can. Then, she tosses another handful of food.

"I don't know, Mom," Jeff says. "That roof is bad."

I call bullshit, is what Jeff really thinks. Fixing the leaks won't change a thing. He'd never say it right out, even if it's God's truth, though. So, Jeff gets one of his dad's old ladders from between the fence and shed, the same spot where Jeff's dad left them the day he died. He gets tar paper, a bucket of tar, a hammer, and nails from the shed. Luckily none of the supplies has gotten too wet, in spite of a hole in the center of its roof.

"I call spotter," Jeff's mom says.

She sounds like a kid playing a game. This reminds Jeff of how she was when he was growing up. He, more so, saw his mom as a playmate. She always had a thing about aliens, and she and Jeff would search the night sky for UFOs. She had Jeff convinced every jet, every star, every blip in the sky was an extraterrestrial spotting. Sure, he believed all the stuff when he was little. Then, around age eight, after his dad died, Jeff decided all the alien stuff was a bunch of bull, because...it was. He would still go along with it though, since it seemed important to his mom. Then, around age ten or eleven, it just got annoying. Seemed it was all his mom ever talked about, almost manically. He'd say, "Mom. I think that's just a plane. Mom, I think that's just a star," to steer her off the topic. Then, she'd argue with him. "No. It's not," she'd say and point out the odd shape of an aircraft. However, Jeff saw nothing out of the ordinary. Just the standard issue American aircraft.

Finally, one day, Jeff had enough. On the porch, Jeff's mom came out with her binoculars to search for UFOs. Jeff said he was tired of hearing about alien crap. Jeff's mom stormed into the house. He could hear her inside. It sounded like she was crying. After that, she never mentioned anything about aliens or space again. Jeff tried to apologize. He even said he saw a strange orange light in the sky, but his mother just shrugged him off.

Around the same time, the other kids on the block asked, "What's with your mom?" Seemed they noticed she was a little off too. Jeff made it a point to hang out at other kids' houses. That way he didn't have to explain her odd behaviors to them. Besides, his friends' parents always seemed to like taking Jeff on. Jeff milked every bit of their sympathy. He always looked like he was having the time of his life in his friend's clean, wall-to-wall carpeted houses. He'd tell his mom not to pick him up after little league practice in her old Chevette. The car was cluttered, rusty, and reeked like gas fumes. Instead, Jeff would soak up the air conditioning in his friends' parents' minivans. Most evenings, he'd bail on a Coco Puffs for dinner out on the porch steps at home. Instead, he'd head to his friend's houses. He'd splash in their above ground pools while their dads barbecued at the grill. Deep down, though, Jeff felt awful for ditching his ma. So just as his friends made plans for sleepovers, Jeff would head home. Always. Even if he had to walk alone in the dark. Even if his friends couldn't understand why.

As Jeff climbs the ladder, his mom talks to one of her cats. Jeff looks down at her.

"What are we going to do, Scruffy? Why don't you get up there and help Jeffie?"

She stands with her hands on her hips in that get-up of hers. The cat circles her ankles. Jeff can't help but laugh endearingly at her. He shakes his head.

Aside from his nerves on the pitchy roof, the repair goes smoothly. It only takes about an hour. Jeff heads down the ladder with the tar bucket, hammer and nails, when he hears a "whoo-hoo."

Jeff looks over his shoulder. His mom puts her finger to her mouth pantomiming a gag. "Eugenia," his mom mouths. Then she rolls her eyes.

Jeff's mom and the neighbor Eugenia Yarger have been at war over the state of her place for years. There've been several fines from the township for property code violations. The complaints are all anonymous. Jeff's just as sure as his mom Eugenia's the source. Part of Jeff wishes Eugenia would back off, but then again, he feels bad for Eugenia. She has to live next to the eyesore, after all.

If it wouldn't look obvious, Jeff would climb back up the ladder to avoid Eugenia. Instead, he keeps going down it. He steps off the last rung, firm on the ground, as his mother and Eugenia greet each other. The way they say each other's names is civil at the surface, but it takes on the undertone of two rival Aztec warriors. If it weren't for small-town Christian values, Jeff's sure, one would sacrifice the other by ripping out her heart.

"Look what the cat dragged in," Eugenia says. She stands at the edge of her perfectly cut property line. Jeff's mom's grass nearly reaches her knees. "God bless you. God bless you for helping out your momma. You're a good boy, Jeffery. Good, indeed. Mom's blessed to have you. You do what you can. Lord knows. How long you in for?"

"Ah, he's alright," Jeff's mom says. She crinkles her nose and swats her hand in the air.

"Thanks, Ma," Jeff says. "I'm just in for the day."

Jeff's mom puts her hands on her hips. She keeps her back to Eugenia.

Eugenia wears a pink plaid housedress. Her hair is rolled tight to her scalp in her usual Saturday curlers. She's prepping that hair volume for Sunday worship where she plays piano up the street at the First United Methodist. Jesus, Jeff thinks. You've never heard a meaner rendition of *Up From the Grave He Arose*. Then he thinks, shit, Eugenia looks just as crazy as his mom.

"That's a shame," Eugenia says. "There's so much to do."

Jeff's quick to turn away from Eugenia and his mom. The way Eugenia's words land, he's sure, they're about to square off.

"Oh, here we go," Jeff's mom says. "It's always the same old, same old with you. Now, what's your problem?"

"Jeffie's more than welcome to use our mower. I'm worried about snakes in this high grass. Maybe you can get some of that rubbish off the porch too. That's a rodent's paradise."

"I got cats, Eugenia! Cats! You're worried about snakes. Rodents. But you called the township on me because I have too many cats!"

Jeff walks away toward the shed, glad he's got a can of tar to put back.

Eugenia ignores Jeff's mom. She speaks to Jeff as he walks away. "God bless you, Jeffery. You know if you ever need a decent place to stay when you're in, we've got a spare room."

"That's mighty kind of you, Ms. Eugenia," Jeff says without missing a step, without looking back, without meaning a bit of it. "But I've got work tomorrow."

"Well, aren't you the giver. You operating an orphanage for grown men with moms?" Jeff hears his mother ask Eugenia.

Jeff keeps going for the shed.

The women really lay into each other.

In the shed, Jeff looks through the hole in the sagging roof, up into the blue sky. Eugenia's dig (and Jeff's sure that's what it is) about a place to stay really bothers him. Lord knows, that's why he day trips. He hasn't set foot in his mom's house for two years on account of the condition inside. It's something he and his mom have never talked about. There are plenty of places in town where Jeff could crash, for sure, but not a single one is home. Truth is, Jeff has scheduling preference at Chili's. He's off every Sunday and Monday, but he'll never tell a soul back home.

When it gets quiet, Jeff peeks his head out of the shed. He sees Eugenia storm off. His mom's on the porch opening a new tarp out of its package.

"Help me put this up," Jeff's mom says. She stretches the tarp open in her arms and holds it up to the side of the porch facing Eugenia's. "Maybe this will block Eugenia out."

Jeff helps her out.

Later that evening, Jeff and his mom pull into the lot of the Clearview diner. Besides pizza, it's the only place to grab a bite in town.

In the car, Jeff's mom pulls an aerosol deodorant from her purse. She sprays her pits before they go inside. Then, she hands it to Jeff, like its good pot or something, like hey, you want a hit.

They both laugh.

"Get your feminine antiperspirant out of here," Jeff says. He holds back his breath from the smell.

"Hey, It's magnolia blossom," she says, as she gets out of the car. "You should be crawling out of your skin to smell like one."

Jeff and his mom walk down the narrow aisle of the diner. It's the usual cast of home perms and overalls. The townies seem to all pause for a moment at the sight of Jeff and his mom. They're quick, though, to steer their eyes away from the town crazy, at least with Jeff looking out behind her. He imagines the whispers behind their backs. Go ahead. I dare you to say a word, Jeff thinks as he pursues the diners.

Jeff and his mom take their seats. She puts her hand softly on his arm. She doesn't say anything when she does this, but Jeff takes the gesture like, hey, it's good to see you, son.

She tells the waitress, who looks like a high school kid, "Better be good grub. You're serving America's next top chef, you know."

Jeff is embarrassed. He's never told his mom he's dropped out of culinary school. When his mother asks him about his classes, he says they're fine. Nothing to really talk about. He's quick to move on to other things.

Jeff's frustration from the day seems to fade at his mother's touch. He feels the weight of every time she's told him he's the love of her life. Being with her, for a moment, at least, feels good. But Jeff would give a million dollars if she had someone else to dote on. Maybe a handsome, genius little brother. Hell, even a burn-out boyfriend with a loud motorcycle would do, if it meant there was someone to share the burden of her.

Jeff decides to bring up the house, just after the waitress serves their sandwiches and fries.

"What do you think a new roof costs?" Jeff asks. He reaches for the salt and pepper. "I'm sure, more than you and I have put together."

Jeff's mom swats her hand in the air, like she's shooing off flies.

"Ever think about selling? The house would be a great fixer-upper for a young family in town. You could probably even turn a little profit. Find something more manageable, like a nice little apartment," Jeff says.

"Pssst. Yeah right. And what about all my stuff? Besides, who'd take care of all the cats?"

Jeff wants to ask, how many cats in the past year his mom has scooped up off the street with a shovel or found bloated, dead out back. He's sure Eugenia Yarger's husband has been poisoning them, since Eugenia complains they piss on her porch. To boot, Eugenia's husband once told Jeff that antifreeze and canned tuna was a sure recipe to get rid of pesky cats. Unfortunately, there's never been any sure proof of this, and Jeff can think of two or three other people on the block capable of such a horrible thing.

"How many cats do you have now?" he asks.

“I’m down to nine,” Jeff’s mom says. “Thanks to Eugenia and her husband. If I ever get proof. Besides, the house is worth something. When I die, you can sell the place to pay for my funeral.”

Jeff’s mom says this as she eyes up her cheesesteak. She uses both hands to close the bun and lifts it to her mouth.

Jeff’s speechless. He watches his mom bite into her cheesesteak. Onions fall from the end of it onto her plate.

Jeff takes a bite of his own buffalo chicken sandwich.

“Did I tell you?” Jeff’s mom says with a mouthful. “So, I’m sleeping in my chair in the living room, and I wake up to this crinkling sound, like plastic wrappers.” She places her sandwich on her plate. She wiggles her hands in front of her mouth like a critter. “There he was in the corner of the living room. A raccoon. His eyes glowing. You know how their eyes glow at night, Jeffie? That little bugger stole a box of my Little Debbie brownies. Even the cats are just looking—you know the way the cats’ ears sort of perk up, like, man, who’s this weird looking cat, right?”

She puts her fingers to the top of her head like cat ears, and she wiggles them. “I call the raccoon Brownie. Ah Jeff, he’s the cutest thing,” She says. She covers her mouth with her hand as she chuckles.

Jeff realizes he’s frozen mid bite. His eyes feel wide.

Jeff swallows hard and says, “Doesn’t sound safe. Where you think it’s coming in?”

Jeff figures once they get back to the house, he’ll look in the cellar, find the hole and block it. He hates to admit it, but Eugenia’s right about the rubbish attracting varmint.

“Who knows,” she says with a shrug. “Besides, Brownie’s harmless. He’s welcome to come and go as he pleases.” She takes another big bite of her cheesesteak.

Jeff hasn’t seen his mom this giddy in some time. Not since her excesses on UFOs.

After dinner, Jeff drops his mom off at the house before he heads to Pittsburgh. He tries to shake off the idea of his mom squatting in the living room with a raccoon. But he doesn’t look into it. It’s *her* house, and she’s perfectly fine with it.

Jeff kisses her goodbye. He feels the tickle of peach fuzz on her cheek when he does.

Jeff can never call his mom. The landline has long been out. She has a government funded cell, but unless she's on it, she keeps it turned off. No matter how many times Jeff has shown her how to check her voicemail, she swears she can't remember how. It's become a running joke. This comes up again during her routine eight o'clock Sunday evening phone call with Jeff. Jeff's a pacer on the phone—well, at least when he talks to his mom. She asks Jeff again how to access her voicemail. She says she's expecting an important call from Social Security for a benefits review.

"There's a little envelope icon at the top of the screen on your phone," Jeff says. He swipes the dirty clothes on the floor by his bed out of the way with his foot.

"OK," Jeff's mom says. "Let me get a pen and pad to write this down." Jeff hears his mom riffle around the house. "Where the hell are all my pens?"

Jeff hears drawers, things falling. His mother sifts through papers. She lists random things she comes across in her search.

"Oh, there's my tennis bracelet. Just needs a clasp. I thought I lost it when it broke. Cool, my *mammogram*, *be sure and get yours* water bottle from the health bazar at the medical center. I wondered where I put that. You know, I have pink lawn flamingos here. I found them in Mrs. Mayhue's garbage when her kids cleaned out her house after she croaked. Can you believe it? I found three. I think they're the originals. These things sell online for \$20 bucks a pop...Awww, Jeff. It's a picture of you in your little league uniform, when you were eight, maybe nine. I remember the time you struck out and cried. So after the game, I took you for ice cream at Scoops. Remember that?"

"I don't remember that," Jeff says. "At all."

"You were playing that team in blue and gray. What was that team?"

"I don't know," Jeff says. "My voicemail messages to you are probably floating in the galaxy somewhere."

As soon as it escapes his mouth, Jeff regrets his poor choice of the galaxy for a point of reference. Ever since the UFO debacle, Jeff's been sure not to reference anything related to aliens or the universe or space.

Then, Jeff's mom says, "Tell you what, you yell a message into the sky later. I'll tell you what I hear, after it crosses the galaxy."

After Jeff hangs up the phone, he actually sticks his head out the open window of his apartment. He yells, "You're nuts, woman" into the night sky.

The next time Jeff talks to his mom, he asks, "Did you get my message?" He clears an ashtray and beer cans off the sticky, carved-up coffee table in his apartment.

"Now, Jeffie. You know I can't figure out my voicemail."

“No. The one I yelled out into the sky.”

“Jeffie! You didn’t do that, really? Naw,” she says. She laughs. “Oh wait, hold on a minute. I didn’t get it directly, but I intercepted it from the aliens. They say, “Jeff, you’re the one who’s nuts!””

Jeff’s not sure whether he should be amused or horrified. He’s both. *What are the chances she’d come back with the similar message?*

“Oh did I mention...” Jeff’s mom segues. “I’ve been feeding Brownie chips. Right out of my hand.”

Jeff hears that spark in his mother’s voice, the one he saw in her eyes when she first mentioned Brownie. This makes Jeff worry he’s opened Pandora’s box.

“Mom, you shouldn’t be messin’ with that varmint.”

“Varmint! I’ll have you know, Brownie is a class-act raccoon. Only varmint around here’s that two-legged snake next door, Eugenia. She called the township on me again. The code guy said if I don’t get the yard cleaned up in a month, it’s another hundred dollar fine.”

Jeff thinks of how many fines his mother’s racked up. She says the magistrate only has her pay ten dollars a month based on her modest income. Jeff can’t help but think, as the fines mount, she’s got to be near a lien on the property.

He almost bring it up, but instead, there’s an awkward silence between him and his mom and—

“Earth to Jeffie,” she says. Jeff imagines she cups her hand around her mouth mining a loudspeaker.

Jeff’s certain she’ll go down the rabbit hole with the alien thing, like when he was eight. *What should he do? What should he do?*

“Shoot,” Jeff says. “I got another call coming through. Probably work. I better go. Love you, Ma.” But Jeff can feel his mom linger on the line. “I’ll see when I can come in to help with the yard.”

Jeff stacks his own dominoes. He thinks over his schedule. He wonders how he’ll find the money for gas or the time.

“Hey, thanks,” Jeff’s mom says. “Love you. Bye.”

Jeff and some friends go clubbing on a Saturday night downtown, Pittsburgh. The stage lights flash red, blue, yellow, and green in sync to the thumping base of dance music. A pretty brunette chats Jeff up at the bar. He buys her a beer. When she asks what Jeff does, he tells her he's a dishwasher at Chili's. She says she has to go to the bathroom, she'll be right back. Jeff's eager to keep talking. However, she walks out of the women's room, then straight to the other end of the bar. It's as though the two have never met. It's a slight brush with romance, something at twenty one Jeff has never, ever gotten too near. He can't help but think she ditched him because he's just a dishwasher. It's a hard taste of people's hang-ups. The Bacardi and Cokes go down smooth until two a.m. Jeff wakes with an *oh shit* in the morning. He flies into Chili's twenty minutes late. He realizes early into his shift he still has a buzz. He can smell the cigarette smoke and the booze coming out of his own pores on the dish line. He grows nauseous, as the day wears on. He gets some aspirin from the office, and he drinks Cokes to ward off a full-on hangover.

Jeff takes a spatula off the edge of the counter to wash. Ginny, the sorry old biddy who works the grill, the type of downer everyone on shift sort of works around, goes ape-shit on him. Jeff's not sure why. There are at least three others hanging clean on the rack in front of her face.

"What's it there for? Good luck?" Jeff asks. He puts the spatula right back in the same spot. How can someone be so uptight? he wonders.

When Jeff takes his break, Ginny's in the breakroom. She lines up a fork and knife and a Diet Sprite. She bites into her plain chicken sandwich (just a patty on a bun). She peers over her glasses to read a gossip rag in her usual spot. It's as though everything she does implies, *mine, mine, mine*. Ginny's a life of order and misery. Jeff considers, at least, there's a loving freeness with his mom, even if she's a mess.

Jeff sticks his head out the door for a smoke, sure to steer clear of Ginny.

Jeff's cell phone rings. Eugenia Yarger's number comes up on the ID. God damn! Eugenia's made Jeff's number the complaint line for his mom. Eugenia usually starts her calls with words like *heartbreaking*, *worry*, and *Christian duty*. This is the version of Eugenia who sends over warm meals to his mother in Tupperware she'll never get back. However, it's just a matter of time before the complaints start. This is the other version of Eugenia. The one who always has an angle, the one who keeps calling the township on Jeff's mom. Jeff jumps at the opportunity to put Eugenia on speaker phone in the break-room. He expects, like last time, his coworkers will gather around, bent-over, stifling laughter while Eugenia prays in her pitchy voice to *the Lord Jesus in Heaven for little Jeffie and his momma*.

"It's Eugenia," Jeff calls out to his friends Destiny and Jake who are earshot in the kitchen.

They rush to the door smiling.

“Sweet,” Jake says.

But when Jeff answers, Eugenia gets right to it.

“Jeffie. When are you coming home? For Christ’s sake. Your mom’s really lost it.”

This is a first. Eugenia’s angry toward Jeff. Her tone conjures up the image of someone hurling stones. Jeff notices Destiny and Jake stall in the door, their mouths gaped wide open.

Jeff’s amiss with his usual go-to which is, “There isn’t a whole lot I can do.” He’s not sure what it is, exactly, Eugenia’s getting at.

“You need to stop making excuses,” Eugenia says.

Jeff can feel his stomach sink. His heart races. He swallows. Eugenia’s stones hit pretty hard.

“And you don’t even know it, Jeffie. You don’t even know it. Poor thing’s been wandering around town all hours of the night with a stroller,” Eugenia says.

“Whaaaa—” Jeff starts to ask.

“A stroller, with who knows what in it! Probably a dead rat!”

It’s then that Jeff blows his stack with the biggest line of muther F-, cock-sucking, mind your own goddamn business, that’s ever come out of his mouth. However, Eugenia gets the last word, and man, it’s one hell of a blow.

“You know what you are. You...” she says, “are a son without compassion.”

“Compassion,” Jeff yells. “You know everything I’ve done for my mom—”

Jeff hears a click and the dead tone of the receiver.

Destiny and Jake cover their mouths.

Destiny asks, “Jeff, are you alright?”

At the same time, Ginny peeks over the top of her gossip rag with a scowl.

“What the fuck are you looking at?” Jeff asks.

Jeff feels dreadful, out-of-sorts as he scrapes bits of food from plates into the garbage bin and hoses ketchup from the serving trays. It helps him a bit to apologize to Ginny, even though she shrugs and tightens her lips, when Jeff does this.

Jeff heads for Clearview at four o'clock straight from his shift, still in his stained red Chili's shirt with the pepper logo on the front. The evening summer air whips through the car window as he zips down the highway. He sips a Mountain Dew and gnaws away at a box of Little Debbie Nutty Bars. His mom is heavy on his mind. The thing about the stroller? Why? As the cars flash by, he thinks over his last phone conversation with his mom. She said she hadn't seen Brownie. Jeff can't shake the idea that she ended up scraping Brownie from the road with a shovel, maybe after he was hit by a car. He envisions his mom singing lullabies to a dead raccoon that's bundled up in a baby blanket. Jeff's convinced, after years of walking the line, his mom's finally gone over the edge. Damn, Eugenia's right. Something needs done.

When Jeff rolls into town, he's the only car on the road. He makes the ascent down the hill-of-a-street home. He passes Eugenia's house with an F-you. His tire rim scrapes the curb as he pulls near the sidewalk. By then, it's night. The headlights beam up the hill. The cats scurry across the lawn. As Jeff gets out of the car, he sees his mother in the soft glow of the porch light. She's fussing with the stroller.

"Jeffie," she calls out as she gets up.

Jeff hears the surprise in her voice, but Jeff walks around the car without saying hi.

"Mom, you gotta listen," Jeff says as he charges up the steps.

His mother steps back and furrows her brow.

"Eugenia called," Jeff says. "Something about you out all hours with a stroller."

"Well, when did you and Eugenia become pen pals?" Jeff's mom says. She folds her arms and wags her head from side-to-side.

"Hear me out. Answer me," Jeff says.

She doesn't answer.

"Mom. Mom. You can't be doing that. People already think you're nuts."

"What about it? Like I care what people think," she says.

Jeff steps past his mom. He peers inside the strollers. Thank God, there's no roadkill. In fact, there's nothing inside.

Jeff lets out a man-are-you-crazy laugh.

Jeff turns to his mom. She stands near the house door. She opens it and waves Jeff in with a let-me-prove-something grin.

She's really soft with the door. She hunches low when it opens. She hushes Jeff, who thinks it's been two years since he's crossed that threshold. He braces himself for a good look at it. He stifles his breath when hit with the shut-up, cat piss smell of the house.

For the first time, Jeff sees it. Really, see it. The moon casts a light over piles of rubbish. It's only cleared enough for the door to swing. From there, the floor is completely covered. The junk looks a foot deep in places. The abandoned items of everyday life lie like ruins, like every hope and dream Jeff figures his mom has ever had. In the corner, there's a pile of clothes next to his mother's reclining chair. On top of the clothes pile, the glow of three little sets of eyes strike Jeff.

He hears the crinkling sound of snack cake wrappers.

"Brownie's not a *he* and Brownie has a brood," Jeff's mom says. Jeff can't quite see his mom's face, but he hears her exhale.

"I haven't seen Brownie for three days. She'd never leave her little ones behind. I take *them* out in the stroller at night, thinking maybe, just maybe."

Jeff's mom steps through the room, like Moses parting the waters. She picks up one of the raccoons. She finds footing in the rubbish and lurches to hand it to Jeff. Jeff gasps at the sight of the little raccoon's curious face. Its paws rest over his mom's hands. Its feet dangle in the air below its plump belly. Jeff reaches out for the little critter. Its little paws wrap around Jeff's finger. Jeff draws it into his chest. It's a tiny thing, like a squishy softball. It's warm and soft against Jeff's chest. Can't be more than a few weeks old.

Then, Jeff's mom hands him the other two. He struggles to keep them in his arms, but they grab onto his shirt. They yank his hair as they climb up him like he's a jungle gym. He fumbles to keep control of them.

"Maybe she's gone to find another place for them because we're—," Jeff stops himself. "You're handling them."

"For three days, Jeffie," his mom says. "Think about it. She would have just moved them. No. Something's up with Brownie."

That night, Jeff and his mom—it's her idea, take the little raccoons out in the stroller. Jeff tries to talk her out of it, at first, but what she says makes sense, possibly, at least.

"Maybe if she's lost somewhere or trapped, she'll track their scent," Jeff's mom says.

Jeff's sure there'll be talk tomorrow of the town crazy and her wackadoo son, but the two walk around town. Jeff's mom pushes with the stroller. They rub little Debbie plastic wrappers together. They shake a box of snack cakes and yell, "Brownie! Here Brownie!" Let them all think what they want, Jeff decides. The years of hiding it, trying to manage it all— it lifts, at least for the time being. *Who cares what others think?*

The night is so vibrant. The navy sky is crisp with so many stars. The streets are quiet. Jeff feels like he and his mom and those little raccoons in the stroller, with the sound of its wheels rolling across the pavement, are the only, strange beings to cross a vast galaxy.

But a little way down the road, Jeff sees a jet cross the sky. Jeff's first instinct is to point out everything ordinary about the jet. He's nearly ready to explain why it isn't a UFO, but he stops himself. In fact, Jeff sees something odd about the shape that makes it seem unusual.

Then as Jeff looks away from the sky, it comes towards them...the thrilling sight of two glowing eyes.

Julie's Mother Died

by Naomi Goldner

Julie's mother died. She got the call while in line to board the plane to say her last goodbyes three thousand miles away from where she now calls home despite the fog and people that don't take the time to dress like they mean it.

She had hoped that at least for this last trip Daniel would join her even though he couldn't stand Marilyn, maybe he would leave his cells at the lab with his five student assistants and give her mother some respect on her way out of this world.

"Just drop it, Julie, I'm not going, stop whining for God's sake! Let things happen as they should. Be a big girl." Daniel was reading in bed with the side lamp on, his round glasses sitting on the edge of his nose, curls falling stubbornly on his forehead. He lifted his gaze up for a moment, to look at Julie; he imagined her face was frowned and her eyes red, from crying hysterically for two days since her last attempt to talk to her mother. He thought to break down and reveal his sly plan and tell her, but luckily it was only her back that met his gaze; sitting on the edge of the bed in her creamy-green sweater, the one with the big brown buttons in front. He thought of touching her shoulder gently, or maybe just patting her back to get her to lighten up, but he couldn't.

"She's dying, Daniel, you'll never see her again." Her voice quieted down to a whisper. "I need you there with me."

During her last visit, just a couple of weeks back, when they didn't know that her mother's cancer had traveled to her brain, Julie slept upstairs in the guestroom, to be closer, to hear her mother breathing and be there to get her a glass of water at night. There was a new sort of stillness in the air, a heavy knotted stillness, different from the stillness of her childhood, when it was quiet because that's how mommy liked it to be, so she could sit in the living room with company, or relax her stockinged feet up on the ottoman reading the latest work of the latest writer after a long day of teaching little children how to read and write and spell and subtract and multiply. That was a different stillness back then, the kind where the phone would ring and pleasantly startle her mother just as she was getting into the scene, or listening to her neighbor reveal a painful memory that won't let her move on. She would think of letting the machine pick up, but her curiosity would win after the third ring, when she would excuse herself and quickly place her feet on the fuzzy off-white rug and run to the phone barely catching her breath.

"Hello?"

She didn't recognize the number and almost didn't answer.

"Julie?"

"Dad?"

“Oh, Julie.”

“Dad, is that you?”

“She didn’t make it, baby, she couldn’t wait for you, she—”

“Dad? What? Where are you, what happened?” She stood in place, her bag at her feet as the line detoured around her, people pushing gently to get on board.

“She died, Jule, mommy died. She was asleep, Nora and I were right there with her, she was calm. I promise, Julie, she was ready to go.”

Angela

Julie almost believed the fish dream that her mother’s live-in caretaker had the night of her arrival during that visit last month; in the dream, Julie had come down to breakfast wearing a black shirt and went straight to the fridge to take out a plate that had three fish on it.

“I never dream of fish ‘less there is pregnancy,” Angela promised, looking Julie directly in the eye, Julie shying away to pick at the loose thread on the hem of her shirt. “Every time a lady in the family has a baby comin’, the fish swim in my dreams one way or another.”

Julie laughed and lifted her head up to see Angela look more serious than before, her black eyes staring just slightly above her head, as if someone were standing there behind her.

“Can I pray for you girl?”

Angela asked her to lie down on the couch and get comfortable, to close her eyes and imagine her body filled with light all around, and that her stomach had a rainbow going into it, a rainbow of light. Julie cringed at the thought of Daniel seeing her like this, her thin ballerina body flat on the beige suede couch, her hands at her sides, and this big black woman hovered over her, mumbling Jesus’ name in between deep breaths, armpits sweating right above Julie’s nose. She thought she might tell him, the fish dream and all, just in case he would find it funny and they could lighten things up a bit together being so far apart. But he never called her that night, and by the next, she had decided to more easily forget.

M for Marilyn

They had been trying now for exactly one year. Every month her bright red blood began to trickle into a flood on the right day, leaving her empty and sad and angry. There was something in that rhythm that used to comfort her, she would feel part of

something larger, connected, she tried to explain this to Daniel when this feeling began to turn into a deep hatred to all that lived in this world, every month.

Her body had betrayed her month after month, her false symptoms revealing themselves as little devils--the fatigue, the nausea, the tender breasts. Marilyn's soft voice would try to comfort her over the phone, it had taken her and daddy a year, at least, it takes time, she would say, over and over again, give it time, the stress will only make it take longer.

"I know, mommy, it's just so hard to deal with this all the time." She was sitting cross-legged in her baggy jeans, cat purring in her lap, stroking the space between her ears, round and round with one finger in a figure eight.

"What about Daniel? Is he making you feel special enough through all of this?" Marilyn was happy that money wouldn't be an issue for her daughter as long as she stayed married to him, but many nights found her lying awake at night worried that her little girl wasn't loved enough.

"Oh, whatever. You know Daniel. He believes in tough love, he always has." Julie began to feel the dark place inside her swell up. "He's fine, but he can't stand to see me like this every month."

Daniel didn't really believe that Marilyn was sick. He didn't deny the cancer, he just thought she was exaggerating, as always. He himself had never met a woman so full of energy and life, and he hated her for it, hated her for always being in his face, for having so much to say about everything when they would talk around an overflowing table, about anything that would come up. She even had a point to make about his work in the lab, and how it was important in many ways, but that he couldn't expect to figure the whole world out by peering into a microscope all day long. *Life happens out in the world*, Daniel, she had said after Julie had broken down and cried about him never coming home in time for dinner. Daniel dismissed Marilyn with a waive of his hand, and laughing, raised his glass toward Marvin, who hadn't bothered trying to slip a word in all evening.

What she didn't tell her mother every month: I want to have this baby for you. Before you die. I don't want to have to name my child after you. I want you to be there when I scream from pain, to hold my hand when I push with all my might. I don't want the baby to only have one grandmother, to only know you from photos in the album, from stories I will tell, from the lullabies I will pass on from you every night. I want you to be happy, mommy, this will make you the happiest woman on earth, we can go shopping for tiny outfits, we can decorate the room with star stencils and mobiles. I don't want to find a name that starts with M, mommy, this baby needs to come before you go.

Nora

Nora couldn't care less. She was the first born, thick body, brown hair, nothing like Julie who had come out so small they called her a quarter-pounder throughout most of her childhood. Nora was away, far away, making money working around the clock in her tailored suits conquering the world one ad at a time. She could care less about babies and lovers and marriage and a home— she traveled so much for work that she often forgot which key opened her front door this time, to this high rise condo or that industrial loft that some designer had turned into a magazine spread. Nora called her parents on the same day and at the same time every month, because otherwise she would never get around to it. This was after her mother's diagnosis. Before that, Thanksgiving dinner was her check-in point, with one reminder call to Marilyn a week before to get the veggie version of the turkey for her, and to please not make a fuss about it at the dinner table again.

She knew Julie must be trying to get pregnant, it was in the storyline of her fairy tale, but first she needed to actually have sex with her husband, Nora would tease Julie in her mind; Daniel was a good looking man, indeed, but she could simply not imagine him in a heated passion no matter how hard she tried. And she preferred not to try too hard.

Nora never thought her mother would really die; knowing she existed in the world was a pillar for her in her wanderings. Everybody gets cancer nowadays, she reassured herself whenever the fear crept into her body, from the feet up. If anyone can be a survivor, she knew it would be her mother.

Marvin

Marvin pulled the blanket tight around Marilyn's neck, throwing his head back to stare at the ceiling for several long moments. *Deep breath, swallow hard, wait until the sun goes down, they need you to be strong, then it will be okay, when you are alone at night, in the bed all by yourself, in the vast loneliness of the dark, then no one will hear you, then it will be the right time.*

Her delicate features blended together, eyelids resting quietly, shut. Marvin stroked her skin with the back of his finger, feeling the coolness of her face, the life now gone from her body for just under an hour. He was here now to say goodbye, he had words chasing around in his head, memories flashing around the room and disappearing, in vivid colors—the morning she had come back from the doctor and wouldn't speak a word, her face stiff with disgust and disbelief, the long nestled nights dampening his shirt with the tears of her sleep, her tired posture working hard in the bright kitchen where for the past two years she had taught him a dish a day, preparing him for the rest of his life without her. How she always held the juice glasses up to the sun-lit window after taking them out of the dishwasher and before placing them in perfect rows behind the glass in the kitchen cupboard, how she only chewed on the left side, with her mouth always sealed tight, her lips slightly curved upwards, but not hinting a smile.

With her love, Marvin felt like he could be anything he wanted to be, as long as he let her decide the big things, and he was happy like that, never complaining, ready to move when the house was too small after Julie was born, ready to move when it was too big and lonely as the nest was left behind. He had said enough to last him a lifetime before he met Marilyn—this was his usual reply to Daniel’s constant vocal observations of how Marilyn seems to never shut up.

“Let them talk, Daniel, it keeps the air clean, helps them feel heard. Us, we don’t have to say what we think to make it true. Men are more confident, Daniel, you should know this better than anyone.” Marvin liked Daniel, he believed that he could make Julie happy, and he was smart, with that there was no arguing.

Died

“Dad, I’m about to board the plane, what should I do?” Julie was talking louder than necessary, a woman in front of her in line turned around, appalled. Her father’s words were not finding their way into her; she was at once devastated and relieved yet unsure what happens next or where she was going from here. The rush to see her mother froze still around her body. She should call Daniel, she needs to tell him.

“Excuse me, Miss—”

“Dad, where’s Nora, can I talk to her?” Julie stuck her finger in her other ear to block out the noise of the airport, the screaming baby in his father’s arms, the flights being announced over and over, the low hum of wheels on runways and engines warming up.

A tap on her shoulder made her swirl around to face a lipsticked and mascaraed flight attendant with an apologetic smile on her face. “Excuse me, Miss, but I have to ask you to step aside from the line.”

Julie dropped her arm, covering the phone with the fabric of her pants, pressing it firmly into her leg, grinding her teeth, her lips pursed, staring directly into the flight attendant’s black pupils.

“Miss? You’re blocking the way, and we ask that you finish your conversation before—”

Julie’s knees melted under her, her head swirled, flashing patterns of stars before her eyes. She dropped the phone on the gray carpeted floor and collapsed, sobbing loudly, her head nestled into her bag, arms at the sides of her head—she didn’t make it, she couldn’t say goodbye, it was too late, she lost her mommy, she was gone.

Julie felt the flight attendant’s firm hand on her back, moving up and down with her heavy breaths, trying to shush her, to tell her everything was okay; she heard noise

and talking and people swerving uneasily around, but she couldn't stop, didn't want to stop, didn't care what happened next.

"What happened?" Daniel's voice startled her.

Daniel picked the phone up off of the floor and squatted next to Julie, placing his hand on the back at her neck, his eyes searching around for an answer. The flight attendant shrugged and shook her head slowly "I don't know, I just asked her to move aside, she was on her phone--"

"Hello?" Daniel pressed the phone against his ear, "Hello?"

"Daniel--is that you? Is Julie okay? I thought you weren't coming up with her."

Daniel's heart sank hearing Marvin's choppy voice, he could sense the tone, he'd heard it before, he could always tell the truth when he heard it, when the time was right for it, when the facts met up with the theory, when there was proof, a statement that could be backed up. A dead body is as true as you can get.

"Yeah, Marvin, of course it's me," he stood up, turning his back to Julie, "I'm here with Julie, at the airport, I wanted to surprise her."

Daniel felt deflated. He had planned it meticulously, spent over an hour on the phone with the airline to arrange for a seat next to Julie, to get the time off from the lab and prepare everything to be covered while he was gone. He had had to torment Julie for days when she just wouldn't stop asking him to come with her, he had to calm all that bubbling inside and be careful not to uncover his secret --all this to see her face when he boarded the plane after her, to see her reading the in-flight magazine, hoping that nobody coming up the aisle would sit next to her, at least not any heavy breathing fat man that would want to talk to her for five and half hours. Daniel lived for these moments, when he would break long stretches of disappointment and longing with his cleverness, when he could finally expose himself to her, with all his love and honesty, his honest attempts to make her happy. She wouldn't look up from her magazine until he was seated comfortably, when she would smell his familiar scent and move her gaze just slightly to see the pattern of his shirt- the one she bought him for his birthday two years ago that everyone always complimented him on. She would gasp and jump up in her seat, throwing herself at him, thin arms around his neck. *I knew you were scheming something - you sneaky boy!* she would whisper in his ear, and then she would rest her head on his shoulder, firmly holding his hand as the plane took off on the runway.

"Daniel, Marilyn died. Can I talk to her again? Is she okay? Thank God you're with her." Marvin sat down on the chair by the phone, across from the big hospital window, the bright sun illuminating the valleys and creeks in Marilyn's forehead and at the corners of her eyes. Nora gently placed her hands on her father's shoulders, her mother's last words ringing in her ears from a few days back, ringing loud in her ears, to please take care of her little sister, please.

“Julie’s fine, she’s with me, we’re about to board the plane, we’ll see you when we get there.” Daniel shoved the phone in his jacket pocket and lifted Julie up, picking up her bag and walking slowly to the gate. As they approached the ticket stand, handing off their boarding passes to an over-smiley man, Daniel leaned over, whispering in his ear, “Her mother died, that’s all, she’ll be alright, sorry about the fuss.”

On board, Julie held Daniel’s hand tightly, closing her eyes and melting into the seat. She touched her belly, under her navel, feeling the warmth of her body, and she remembered Angela and the fish, the rainbow light and the praying; she wondered if Angela had shared the dream with her mother before she died—perhaps one morning after bathing her and dressing her, after changing the stained sheets while humming through her lips, maybe as she brushed her thinning hair, or while rubbing her frail feet with vanilla lotion—Julie could see Marilyn’s face light up at once, a slight smirk on her lips, as Angela described to her the fish on the plate and what it all meant, the strong conviction in her voice promising Marilyn that her daughter was going to have a baby.

Sunshine on Crumbling Stone

by Rachel Racette

Above the cracked sidewalk and beyond the telephone pole coated with layers upon layers of flyers, there stood a slab of brick. The lone section of wall was caked in dozens of fresh and fading coats of paint and at the foot of the wall, between patches of dead grass, sat a dilapidated shrine. The small space was filled with burnt out candles, various dead flowers and a few soggy stuffed animals. There were no names, no pictures to indicate who the shrine was dedicated to. Only two words remained visible on the wall; **Bless Life**. Painted in recently applied red letters stood stark against a backdrop of fading gold.

'Bless Life?' She wondered; fingers curled into the fabric of her coat. But what among these forgotten and rotting offerings could be cause for celebration? What life was here left to bless? Tch. How like mortals, she thought, pale lips pressed tight. To be so dedicated to one thing, only to discard it when it became too much trouble to care for. The young woman sighed, her breath a puff of grey smoke carried swiftly into the night. She shook her head and pulled her coat closer, turning away from the discarded shrine and continuing on her way.

The lone woman's steps echoed down the silent street as she passed windows long gone dark. But the darkness bothered her not. She'd long grown used to her odd, ever-changing work shifts. Most times, she would return home with the moon high above her head. The routine had become... comforting. Still, despite expecting it, she frowned at the light flickering in the windows of her shared house. She sighed once more, quickly climbed the stone steps, and with the key already in hand, she let herself in.

"Kept late again, Hannah?" Greeted a feminine voice, ringing as soft as a silver bell. Hannah smiled, unable to keep hold of her previous annoyance. Warmth curled across her skin as she hung up her heavy coat. Her friend's voice was a balm on her weary bones, even if a part of her wished Lily hadn't waited up for her. Discarding her hat and scarf, Hannah hung them in their proper places, and then slipped off her shoes, pushing them into their proper place next to Lily's.

"Only as late as necessary." Hannah replied, marching into the next room, steps silent against the worn wood. It was in the living room that she found her roommate, Lily, curled in the overly large and bright yellow chair she'd insisted on buying, even though it clashed so violently with the rest of the dark décor. Which, Hannah realised with a smile, was probably the point. An ironic physical representation of the two of them. "You know how demanding people can be." Hannah sighed. Lily barked a laugh, deep and loud despite her slight petite build, her sharp thin shoulders trembling with the exertion.

"Do I ever." Lily snorted, marking her page and setting her book on the small table next to her. She stood, brushing off imaginary dust as Hannah paused, propping her shoulder against the doorframe, and unceremoniously opened her arms. Ready to

receive the usual embrace that immediately proceeded her return. As expected, Lily rushed her darkly dressed friend without hesitation, wrapping the taller in a tight warm embrace.

“Still, don’t you know its rude to keep me waiting?” Lily mumbled into Hannah’s shoulder. Hannah chuckled, wondering if Lily realised her scolding words had little impact when Lily was pressed so firmly against her friend and holding her as tightly as a child would a teddy bear.

“You didn’t have to wait up for me.” Hannah chided; the effect lessened by the soft tone her voice had taken. Turning, she took her friend’s thin arm and lead her up the stairs. Beside her, unbothered by the fact her roommate was basically dragging her to bed like a child, Lily shrugged. Lily moved to match Hannah’s pace, falling against her taller friend’s shoulder, eyelids drooping despite her previous giddiness. They settled into a comfortable silence the rest of the short trek up the stairs. If Lily noticed how Hannah slowed to match a pace more comfortable to Lily, she didn’t acknowledge it.

Hannah didn’t bother turning on the light, having long since memorized the layout of the bedroom, and even then, it wasn’t like she’d ever had trouble seeing in the dark before. Never mind the fact she had no interest in depriving Lily of even more sleep by waking her with a bright light. Lily needed all the rest she could get.

Gently, Hannah lay the younger woman down, draping the heavy pink comforter over her and tucking her in with a practiced swiftness. In the dark, Lily smiled and snuggled deeper into her swath of blankets, and within moments, she had drifted off into a deep dreamland. Yet still, Hannah remained, one slender pale hand smoothing back Lily’s errant blonde locks.

Then, all at once, Hannah’s demeanor dropped. Her smile fell, her shoulders drooped, and the ever present chill that chipped at Hannah’s bones returned with a vengeance now that her friend’s gaze no longer shone on her. For a moment, Hannah considered waking Lily, then immediately cast down the idea, shaking her head as she silently rose and left. Shutting the door gently, she turned and shut her eyes, pausing in the hallway lit only by the moonlight streaming through the window. She breathed, deep and slow. Her shoulders trembled.

Hannah took another, deeper, harder, breath, chastising herself for nearly breaking her composure, but then, didn’t her walls always crumble around Lily? Lily; who brightened the world with her smile, whose eyes made emeralds quiver with jealousy, who wore golden silk for hair. Whose bright supernova soul was too much for her mortal flesh to bear.

Suddenly, unbidden, her mind returned to the image of that abandoned shrine. *Was that to be Lily’s fate one day? She wondered brokenly. Her memory caked in mud; the ashes of her words washed down the drain? Never to be relished again? Were Lily’s bones bound to be cast out, forgotten and buried in order to make way for the newest*

fleeting thing? Was her warmth meant to be lost on the winds of humanities ever pressing onward storm?

No. Hannah thought savagely, fingers curling at her sides. The familiar chill abating in the heat of her sudden outrage. *No.* Hannah swore in the safety of her mind. *Even if the mortal world forgot her dear friend, she would not. She would **refuse** to forget such a lively soul. It was the least she could do for someone who had given her reason to appreciate life and humanity again—*

Pain. Sudden and sharp yanked Hannah out of her spiraling thoughts and back to reality. Raising her hands, she found small crescent shaped wounds pocketing her palms. Hannah sighed, shoulders slumping as she watched the minor injuries mend before her eyes. Leaving unmarked pale skin, not even a hint of crimson left. To live a life forever unmarked by the living. Now wasn't that a funny thing?

Hannah took another deep breath and straightened her skirt; she waits for the chill to return. For her errant emotions to fade back into the background of her immortal mind. Pivoting on her heel and striding down the short distance to her own room, she entered, shutting the door with a quiet *click*. With a twitch of a finger, the small candles littered around the room burst to life, their flickering light dancing across the fading wallpaper.

When Hannah had moved in, she hadn't bothered to change much, so the pockets of painted flowers remained on her walls. Obnoxiously bright and cheery and *fake*. Hannah had long learned to live with the pictures. It was not a difficult task, given how little time she spent in her room.

Without hesitation she strode past the neatly made bed she rarely slept in to her large mahogany wardrobe. From within its shadow-ridden depths she pulled forth her cloak, immediately setting it about her shoulders and locking it in place with a single silver clasp in the shape of a skull. Then, pushing her arm deeper than the wardrobe possibly could be, she clasped the staff of her tool, and as she brought her arm back out, she drew forth a gleaming seven-foot long scythe.

Throwing the impossibly sharp blade over her shoulder, Hannah shut the doors and moved to retrieve the sealed envelope that sat innocently on her desk. She tore open the bone-white seal and drew out the contents. As she read the list of souls she had been tasked to collect, she slipped on her worn heavy boots and leather gloves. Standing and marching towards the window, Hannah snapped her fingers, causing all the candles to go out.

Slipping her scythe into the darkness of her cloak she climbed out and onto her windowsill. She slides the window shut behind her, leaving just the barest sliver of space to place a small, thin stone. Old and worn down by decades of her rubbing it between her fingers to soothe her nerves, and more years still, using it to prop open countless windows.

As Hannah dashed across the rooftops she wondered, not for the first time, what Lily would think of her, if she really knew why Hannah had such long and odd hours. She wondered how long it would take before Lily saw fit to go to the workplace she thought Hannah worked at. She wondered if Lily would live long enough to check.

A gust of frigid ice swept through her, catching and tugging at her feet, nearly causing Hannah to slip. Stuttering to a halt, Hannah shook her head hard, short dark locks whipping against her cheeks. She couldn't afford to be distracted, not when there was so much work to be done, and so little time to accomplish it in. But as she made to move, her eye was drawn to a familiar sight. She froze, eyes narrowing as she dropped to the street below. Hannah strode silently and swiftly across the concrete and stopped, staring down the same discarded shrine she had seen barely half an hour ago.

Those brightly painted words stared back at her, looking far more sinister than they had any right to. Hannah blinked, and suddenly found her own hand pressed firmly against the cold bumpy stone. She couldn't help but wonder how many coats of paint had been brushed across this wall. How many messages and images had been covered up, lost to the test of time and the fleeting whims of humans? Hannah blinked again, and her gaze was drawn back to her own hand. Her fingers were trembling.

Hannah threw herself back, ruffling the faded flyers, some ripped off by her sudden, violent action. She watched the flyers flutter to the ground like ashes.

As if prompted, the unwanted memory of her brethren's jeering words echoed in her ears. For months they'd been telling Hannah to **stop — abandon the mortal!** Hannah shut her eyes, gritting her teeth against the onslaught as the shadows she thought of as a second home grew longer and darker and suddenly *very* unwelcoming.

Suddenly, Lily's bright smiling face filled the space behind her eyelids. An image of warmth and comfort, when suddenly the vision turned dark, because of course it would. A whimper fell from Hannah's lips as she imagined Lily turning to dust, taking all the light and joy Hannah had hoarded these past six years with her. Horrified, a dry sob fell from Hannah's lips. She fled, the sidewalk cracking even further in her wake.

Rushing away, as she would the rest of the night, Hannah went through her list as quickly as she could, frantic to return to her friend as quickly as possible. Terrified by the shadows and phantom memories that she feared would scatter from her hands like ashes if she lingered away too long.

When she finally returned home, the sun had already risen, and the house was silent as a grave. Hannah paused, heart beginning to pound as she listened for a sound, *any* sound, of life. Of Lily. But nothing greeted her. Not the sound of Lily cooking breakfast, even though Hannah had told her a hundred times not to, or the crisp sound of Lily turning the page of one of her beloved romance novels. There was no music, no laughter, not even the scritch of Lily's pencil against paper as she wrote and drew.

Pulse roaring in her ears, Hannah dropped her scythe, the metal echoing like a gunshot against the hardwood as she rushed towards Lily's room. Bursting inside, Hannah's breath was violently torn from her throat before she could utter a word. On the floor, legs tangled in pink blankets and white sheets, lay Lily. Pale and still and looking too much like a *corpse*. Hannah dropped to her knees next to her friend, immediately searching for a pulse. A sob bubbled from Hannah's throat as the vein fluttered under her fingers.

Without hesitation, she hefted her friend, cradling her as she raced outside, crying for help. Thankfully, their neighbour was more than willing to drive them to the hospital. Upon arrival, Lily was wrenched from Hannah's hands, swept out of sight and drawn deep, deep, deeper within the unflinching sterile white walls.

Hannah waited for over four agonising hours, only to be told that the doctors were unsure if her friend would survive and that since she was 'not family', she would not be able to see her. Would not be notified till after family—family that were either dead or distant. Family that Lily no longer spoke too. Blood relatives that had *abandoned* sweet, wonderful Lily –

Dazed, her pulse roaring in her ears along with the fury Hannah knew she couldn't unleash. Anger was not what these tired mortals deserved. They only had minds to help Lily. Hannah would only be in the way – worse, Hannah's presence would likely make things worse. Given her immortal reaper status. She wondered bitterly if her presence would make those who laid weak, helpless, and waiting to be healed would make things worse? She almost laughed as she let the Doctor's go. What else could a being made for death do for the sick and injured aside from dragging them closer to their deaths?

Hannah walked away from the hospital all the way to that crumbling wall. She sat at its feet, nestled between the drenched teddy bears and decaying flowers, drowning in the black fabric of her cloak, and *cried*. Truly cried for the first time in her existence. Loudly, and without abandon Hannah wept, hidden from passersby with her supernatural glamour. She did not move from her spot, even when the insistent call of duty roared, the sound shaking her to her core. For the first time in centuries, Hannah ignored her purpose. There were plenty of reapers, they could make do without her. They had for centuries before.

Time passed uncaringly, light falling into dark and then light again without consideration for the mourning woman. Hannah paid little attention to the passing times, what did it matter? Lily was most likely dead, or far from Hannah's reach. Hannah couldn't tell which choice would be worse. Couldn't the world just stop for a moment? Didn't it know something precious had been lost? Or was it going through the motions? Pressing on, as Lily would have wanted. Or perhaps, Hannah was the only one broken. After all, Lily was only one mortal soul among millions.

Was this what her kin had tried to warn her of? This pain, this – *void*? Hannah wished so desperately she could go back to normal, she wished she had listened to her

brothers and sisters. But of course, that was a lie too. And the thought of never having met Lily brought on a new onslaught of tears that Hannah let herself be drowned by.

An automobile pulled up and parked beside the concrete wall. Hannah raised her head, numbly watching as the driver opened the door, but the person within did not get out of the car. Although her face was in shadow, it was easy to tell the driver was sad. There was something about how she turned away from the sun and rested the weight of her hands on the steering wheel, something about her silent composure, that caused Hannah to sigh. The young girl watched the driver lean out of the car and stretch her hand out towards one of the burned out candles. Towards Hannah if her glamour hadn't been hiding her.

"Did you know them?" The unknown woman asked, voice oddly familiar. Hannah shook her head, then inclined it towards the woman, eyes narrowing as she attempted to identify the newcomer's aura. "A pity." The woman breathed, retracting her hand. "But such is the fate of mortals; fading to dust, their memories buried with the bones of their loved ones." Hannah pursed her lips, rising to her feet. The woman raised her eyes, catching Hannah's with a grin. "Wouldn't you agree, little Reaper?"

Hannah gasped, but before the first syllable could pass her lips, the woman had reached forward and pressed a single finger to Hannah's trembling lips. She hushed her, retracting her gloved finger and flashing Hannah a sickeningly sweet and sharp smile. Hannah swallowed, the temperature around her dropping with the realisation of who, or rather what, this woman was.

"Why do you linger with that mortal?" The woman asked, smile still painted across perfect crimson lips. "That one especially is not long for this world. So why do you stay? Why haven't you gone to collect her yet? What could be so special about such an average and unimportant person like Lily Miles, that would give a *Reaper* reason to play human for so long?"

Hannah frowned, nails ripping the flesh of her palms as she clenched her fists, yet this time. She expected the painful prick of her own nails to draw her out of her emotional state, but Hannah felt nothing. Or rather, she felt nothing satisfying, nothing that would free her. She wanted to scream. To slap that look off her superiors face. To whip out her own scythe and seal her own fate. How *dare* she insinuate Lily was— but instead of reacting violently like she wanted, Hannah simply rolled her stiff shoulders and replied with;

"Why would one of the *Original Reapers* pay attention to a being of low rank, such as myself?" Hannah spat tersely. She would not rise to the bait, even if it were tempting. If the elder wanted a reaction, Hannah would not supply one. Yet the older woman's smile deepened, as if she were happy with Hannah's words, even if there was a hint of grief and pity in those ancient eyes. Hannah felt... praise? instead of the expected degradation. The older reaper cackled, throwing her head back.

“My, what a mouth you have, little one.” She sang, grinning wickedly, dark inhuman eyes narrowing. “Do all of you have such disrespect for your elders?” Hannah said nothing, sure her answer would mean little if anything at all, to the elder. She saw that whatever question or test the elder had wanted to conduct, Hannah had already given her answer. The Reaper hummed, turning her piercing gaze back to the wall.

“This is your first time, yes?” She murmured, hand stretching back to the candles past Hannah, caressing the air like one might the flesh of a lover. Many emotions swam in those bottomless eyes, sorrow chief among them, and suddenly Hannah felt she were intruding. Hannah dropped her eyes, turning from the sight. *First time?*, she thought. There had been others who felt like her? Hannah wondered if this was how her brothers and sisters in arms saw her, and Hannah’s own eyes *burned*. Their mocking gazes and stern soft-spoken words — they no longer seemed cruel.

Perhaps she should have listened to their warnings, perhaps it was not too late too... *no*. Hannah was self-aware enough to know her feelings ran too deep. But what was she to do now? Suddenly, her world felt *wrong*. The ground no longer steady and sturdy beneath her feet. She felt ill. Maybe another long cry would help?

“Do not linger in your grief.” whispered the elder, drawing Hannah out of her downward spiral. “They are not meant to live as *we* do. It would not do for you to handle them like glass, little one.” She paused, turning her gaze back to Hannah’s, but this time, it was not so fierce. Not quite so sad. “If you care for this fading flower, *be there*. Stay and love them with all of your heart and hold those memories close long after they are gone.” She paused, lips twitching, but said no more.

Breath violently stolen from her lungs; Hannah recalled her friend’s condition. What remained of her stubbornly clinging warmth drained from her, settling like a heavy cooling stone in her stomach. How *was* Lily? How much time had she spent here? Was Lily dead? Had she passed while Hannah had selfishly wallowed in her own pitiful sorrow?

Before Hannah could dig herself deeper, something was thrown into her chest. Scrabbling, Hannah nearly dropped the item as she swayed. Once she regained her balance, Hannah dropped her gaze to the item clasped between her hands. Dark eyes widened as she stared down at the small leather-bound book in her hands.

Her journal. Small and worn from so many years, the spine barely holding together. The one Hannah *knew* she had left on her desk, locked in a drawer. Gaping, Hannah raised her head, heart pounding as she met the elder’s soft expression. She blinked, fighting back tears as she pressed the beloved possession to her chest.

“You have time left yet before her collection; I suggest you not waste it.” With that, the elder Reaper turned away and shut the door, the automobiles engine humming to life. “Remember what I said little one.” The Reaper called over her shoulder as she began driving away, voice echoing unnaturally down the quiet street.

Hannah watched the black vehicle till it turned out of sight, feet frozen in place. Her thumb swept lovingly across the blank cover as she sniffed. Taking a deep breath, Hannah scrubbed at her face, swallowing her remaining tears. Then, she tucked the book against her side, and leapt into the air, starting nearby birds as she flew towards home.

Inside, Hannah shed her filthy and frozen clothes, scrubbing and drying quickly, changing into the blue dress Lily had bought her early in their friendship, so long ago. Then, ignoring the small pile of letters cast across her desk, and the glint of her discarded scythe, Hannah re-clasped her cloak, unsullied by her time in the dirt. She rushed across the rooftops, unseen under the midday light, book pressed against her chest, her cloak flaring behind like a pair of dark wings.

It took little time to arrive at the hospital, and though it would take only a *sliver* of her power to slip past the staff, she walked to the front desk and asked a nurse to guide her. Despite her cleaning, she must have looked like a wreck, for the moment the nurse met her eyes, the fight drained. Soon, Hannah stood before Lily's room, and for a moment, found herself unable to move. Hannah swallowed, shakily opening the door and stepping inside before she could convince herself to flee.

Her heart nearly stopped as she took in Lily's pale (*paler than before, pale as a corpse*) features. Lily's hair had lost its shine, dark bruises hung under her eyes, and she looked to have lost more weight than seemed possible in such a short time. Hannah's eyes prickled once more as she approached the bed. Silently, she settled in the chair, reaching out to clasp one skeletal hand.

"Lily?" Hannah whispered, her pulse roaring in her ears. Icy clawed hands curled around Hannah's shoulders, points hovering over her pounding immortal heart. Had she been too late? Please, any deity that was listening. Please don't let her be dead. Please, *please* don't take my golden lily away. Not yet please —

"...Hannah?" Lily croaked, blinking away the haze. The soft voice sharply claimed Hannah's attention. Hannah dropped next to Lily, fingers trembling around hers. Then, Lily *smiled*, and warmth bloomed in Hannah's chest once more, sending the cold running. A laugh fell from Hannah's lips; Lily's eyes were still so bright and beautiful. Still full of the life that had drawn Hannah in the first time they met. "You're here." She wheezed, weakly squeezing Hannah's hand.

"I'm here." Hannah confirmed, squeezing back. "I'm sorry I haven't been around. I had... some things I needed to work through. But I'm here now, and I'm not going anywhere." Lily smiled, nodding, as understanding as always. Hannah knew that even if she had the breath, Lily wouldn't push her for answers.

"What's that?" Lily asked instead, eyes dropping to the book in Hannah's lap. Her brows pursed, then she flashed white teeth. "You're wearing the dress." She gasped, shuffling back and sitting up with Hannah's aid. Dropping back against the small

mountain of pillows, Lily's smile turned bittersweet as her chest heaved for breath. "Did the... did the nurse tell you then?"

"No but... I know. I know." Hannah answered, dropping her gaze. Lily had been dying for years, and nothing short of divine intervention could save her now. Hannah swallowed and handed the book to Lily, watching as she ran her trembling fingers ever so gently over the worn cover. Lily shot her a curious look, still caressing the precious possession.

"This," Hannah began, taking the book and opening it. "This is my book. My story." She said, answering Lily's silent question. Emerald eyes sparkled, and Hannah smiled, settling the possession back in Lily's lap. Hannah paused, took a deep breath, then linked her fingers with Lily's, holding her like a *person*, for the first time. "Lily—Lily this is *my* life. Written here and unseen by anyone else, and I can't think of anyone better to share it with."

"Read it to me." Lily asked, handing back the book and lying back. Hannah complied; her hand clasped in Lily's. She read long into the night, long after the hospital had fallen asleep, the moon shimmering through the curtains, caressing the young women's forms as they lay, side by side. Not once did Lily shy away, instead pressing closer as Hannah recited her long, lonely years. Whether Lily believed her words remained to be seen, regardless, she did not silence or degrade her friend.

Later, from the shadows came the woman, the Reaper, a shinning scythe in hand. Hannah raised her head, but even as tears spilled like glistening gems down her cheeks, she stood, smoothing the blankets over her friend. Then, brushing back pale brittle locks she pressed a kiss to Lily's cracked lips, stealing the last of her sunshine's warmth as the elder reaper swung.

Time has little to no meaning to beings untouchable by death. This being said, Hannah took time, the same day each year, for she kept count now, to visit that crumbling wall. She came, always with a gift of flowers or candles in hand. Until one day, so many years later, she came with a companion; an older woman, just as pale and dark as herself, and when they left, painted around the crimson words Hannah had judged so long ago, were perfect white lilies.

Long Flight Home

by Samantha Cooke

Emel slammed the door of her red Hyundai closed and swung her bag over her shoulder. Her feet ached from a ten-hour shift at Olive Garden, where she charmed guests with her British accent and pleasantries about her grandchildren. Taking out a pack of Salem Slim Lights, she lit up a cigarette. It was a final moment of peace before entering her parents' home, where she was not only the primary caregiver for her dying mother but the only companion for her perfectly healthy ninety-year-old father.

She took a drag off her cigarette and sent a message in the group chat she had with her three daughters, who were excitedly texting about Christmas plans. Emel had decided at the last minute to join them up north for Christmas, putting aside her worry over leaving her parents for a few days.

"We can handle it," her father had told her. "Go see the girls."

"It'll be the first Christmas all my girls are together," Emel had explained to her manager with tears in her eyes when she asked for time off.

Of course, she had to accept her daughters' offer to buy her plane ticket. Her emergency funds had been drained when she moved back to Florida to be with her parents. She didn't even have the luxury of living paycheck to paycheck; she lived shift to shift, hoping to make at least one hundred dollars each shift.

I could have been something.

Emel dropped the cigarette to the driveway pavement and stomped it out, only to bend over and pick it up so she could throw it away in the outside trash bins. It was nearly midnight; surely both her parents would be asleep, and she could just walk in and go to her room after checking her mother's oxygen tank to make sure it was functioning.

Emel walked through the front door of the old home. When they had moved to the States from London when Emel was fifteen, the house had been brand new. Over the years, her parents had put in a pool for their grandchildren, kept a perfectly manicured lawn, and filled the two extra bedrooms with furniture for Emel and her sister so they would always have a place to stay.

Now, fifty years later, the house creaked. The deck leading to the pool couldn't hold weight. The lawn was mown, but the once-immaculate garden had died and never been replanted. *That's what happens with age. Your body creaks, your knees can't hold weight, and things that were once beautiful aren't replaced when they die.*

The thought led Emel to memories of her sister, Narin, who had died years before of the same disease that was now taking her mother.

Emel took off her shoes and peeled off her standard Olive Garden uniform—black pants and a stiff, white button-down shirt—and changed quickly into her housedress. She would remain awake for another few hours before she fell asleep, and in her alone time, she would play games on her phone while watching Bill Maher on HBO.

First, though, she needed to go check on her parents.

She walked down the white-tiled entryway, through the dated kitchen (they still had floral wallpaper), to the room her mother slept in. Her father had elected to sleep in a guest room years ago, as he and her mother alternated coughing fits and pained joints. Emel stopped in the open doorway. To her surprise, her mother stood in her nightgown, yelling at someone who wasn't there.

"I'm not going with you. Go away!" her mother yelled at the wall. She turned and walked slowly away from the wall, her body bent over from age. Suddenly, she turned back around and pointed at the wall. "You sent me off when I was fifteen! Why would I come back with you?"

"Mom?"

Emel hesitated. Somehow, she knew what was happening here.

When Emel's mother was a teenager living in a small village in Cyprus, she had been married off to Emel's father. Arranged marriages were not unheard of back then—with an exchange of goods, as fathers sold their daughters off to young men in the village—and Emel's mother had been no different.

At fifteen, Emel's mother had been sent away to marry Emel's father, and she gave birth to Narin exactly nine months later. Left alone in a new home with a stranger to sleep next to and a newborn baby who cried more than normal, Emel's mother began letting the building blocks of resentment form shapes in her body. But because she only had an eighth-grade education, she didn't know the word for resentment. She wouldn't, even as she grew, suffered a miscarriage, moved from Cyprus to London, gave birth to Emel, secretly celebrated the death of her wicked father-in-law, and years later, moved to America with her husband, daughters, and the remainder of the family she had married into. The resentment built and built, manifesting in the form of mysterious illnesses and threats of dying if her daughters didn't clean their rooms.

Emel knew what was happening as she stared at her yelling mother. The resentment had finally broken free.

Eventually, her mother stopped yelling and found her way back to bed. Emel remained in the doorway until the only noise left in the bedroom was the sound of her mother's oxygen machine, which hummed like the sleep machine Emel had used on her daughters when they couldn't sleep.

Once Emel was sure her mother was asleep, she went to the guest room her father was using. Looking in, she found him awake, sitting in front of the television watching an old Arsenal soccer game.

“Dad, I think mum was just yelling at her parents.”

Her dad waved a hand dismissively. “She does that, Emel. I just let her do it.”

Emel had always gotten along with her father. They held intelligent conversations over politics, relaxed by watching soccer matches together, and commiserated in misery over her mother. Emel knew this only added to her mother’s building blocks of resentment, but her father’s kindness had filled the void created by her mother’s meanness.

That void had given Emel resentment of her own, especially after Emel had children and watched her mother act like a stereotypical grandmother: home-cooked meals, extravagant presents, warm hugs, and stories told to her grandchildren over late-night cups of tea. Sure, Emel was glad her daughters had such wonderful grandparents, especially since their own father had left when they were young. However, she couldn’t help but feel a nagging resentment that her mother was to her grandchildren what she had never been to Emel.

Emel left her father to sleep and went into her own room. Sitting on the old bed, she messed with the television remote and looked at her reflection in the mirror hanging on the closet door. She looked at least ten years younger than she was, with bicep and shoulder muscles that had always been well defined: first from practicing gymnastics as a teenager, then from lifting trays of heavy food over the last thirty years.

On nights when she was this tired, both physically and mentally, Emel was thankful her daughters hadn’t followed in her footsteps. Emel had lived a free life, bartending and serving throughout her twenties because she had never found something she was truly passionate about.

Which was ironic since the Turkish translation of her name was *passion*.

When she met the girls’ father, it had only made sense for her to settle down with him. He had wooed her with a sense of humor and, at the time, she had felt the urge to become a mother, so when he asked, she said yes. She had been nearing thirty, and college would always be there.

Besides, she still hadn’t found her passion.

Three daughters later, he packed up his crystal meth pipe and left Emel alone with the girls, never looking back. He also took with him any chance Emel had of going back to school. Emel worked hard, though. And even if her daughters never had the nicest things, they had a mother who loved them.

Even if Emel's resentment got in the way sometimes.

Emel turned on HBO, put on her reading glasses, and leaned against her pillow. She was asleep before Bill Maher even got through his opening monologue.

#

The next morning, Emel was awake first. She turned on a pot of coffee, pulled down the pill dispensers for both her parents, and wiped down the kitchen counter in hopes her mother wouldn't find something to nag about. Emel texted her daughters, asking her oldest what her children wanted for Christmas and her other two if their boyfriends were coming as well.

Over the years, as Emel's daughters had introduced her to their forever loves, Emel had mentally checked off boxes for each of them. Her oldest daughter's husband was kind, and when he became a father, he had surpassed any expectations Emel had had for him. Check. Her middle daughter's partner came from a troubled past but had emerged with an intelligence—both emotional and otherwise—that Emel respected. Plus, he loved science and philosophy, just like Emel. Check. Her youngest daughter's partner took care of her. Check. Emel gave herself a mental pat on the back whenever she noticed she didn't resent her daughters for finding good men but rather admired and loved them and their partners.

Her mother shuffled into the kitchen, and Emel wordlessly put a cup of coffee in front of her as she sat down. Her mother's frame, which only held about ninety pounds these days, shook as she reached for her coffee cup and the round of pills that accompanied it.

"How did you sleep, Emel?" It was always the first question she asked Emel every morning, even when Emel was a little girl.

"Fine, Mum. Did you have a bad dream last night?"

Her mother placed her coffee cup down and looked at her. "*Neden bahsediyorsun?*" She always switched between Turkish and English, which Emel appreciated.

"I'm talking about how you were up and yelling when I came home last night. You don't remember that?"

"Are you crazy?" her mother asked.

Startled, Emel laughed. "I think you were talking to your parents, Mum. You were yelling that you weren't going with them. That they had sent you off when you were just a girl."

Emel's mother shrugged. "I don't remember that."

After a moment of silence, Emel reminded her mother that she would be leaving in three days to go see her girls. Her mother waved her off.

“We’ll be fine. It’s not like you do much anyway.”

Emel bit her tongue, physically and figuratively, deciding not to waste her breath on recounting for her mother everything she did do for them. How she had given up living in a basement apartment her oldest daughter’s home to return to Florida so she could take care of her parents. How she accepted the brunt of her mother’s verbal abuse and worked four nights a week, far beyond her body’s limits.

When Emel’s mother had finished her coffee, she shuffled back to her room, where she sat in a recliner and spent the day in front of the television. Even though Emel tried at least once a week to get her mother to at least agree to go for a drive, her mother had committed herself to spending her last years with reruns of soap operas and the Turner Classic Movies channel.

Emel was off work for the day, so she would spend her morning cleaning and running the pool vacuum to suck up the fallen leaves. Then she would have time to herself to curl up with her little ladybug.

The ladybug in question was the main character of the children’s book Emel had been passively working on for the last ten years, ever since her youngest daughter graduated from high school. The idea had come to Emel when she was waiting tables at the Cheesecake Factory and a toddler left behind a stuffed ladybug.

Emel had held the ladybug up for one of her younger coworkers to see and had been reminded of one of the rare occasions she had taken her children to a restaurant. Her oldest daughter had left behind her baby doll. They had made it all the way to their driveway before realizing what had happened, and Emel hadn’t had time to go back and get it before her shift that night.

The guilt resurfaced as Emel stared at the ladybug, and she tucked it into her apron pocket, vowing to find a way to return the ladybug to its family. It would be a long flight home for the ladybug, but Emel had a feeling that this worn plush was a fighter. When the family came back to get it, they were gracious to Emel for keeping it safe and not just tossing it. The toddler squealed with joy and grasped the ladybug with pudgy hands that reminded Emel of her own daughter’s.

On the way home, Emel wept as she thought of how fast her children had grown and how much of their lives she had missed due to working two jobs when they were younger. When Emel pulled the car into the driveway, she took out her phone, texted her middle daughter—who was in college studying creative writing—and shared the idea for a children’s book with her.

Now, whenever Emel had downtime, she tapped away on her old Dell laptop, playing pretend with the ladybug. She had thousands of words written. She knew it

would need to be pared down, but she was in so deep and enjoyed the adventures she made up for her ladybug. The ladybug had become Emel's escape, and even if she never did anything with the work, it felt cathartic to bring the ladybug back to its owner. It felt as though Emel were making amends with the abandoned baby doll from so many years ago. In a way, it felt as though Emel was on her own flight home.

Emel hurried through her chores so she could relax in her bedroom with her laptop open. When she was finally able to sit down and open her computer, she heard yelling coming from her mother's room. Her father was out on his afternoon walk, during which he went up and down the street for twenty minutes a day, so Emel had to respond to the yelling.

When she walked into her mother's room, her mother stood in her housedress with her back to the open door, pointing at the same spot she had been yelling at last night. "Stop coming! I'm not ready to go yet. I'm not leaving Emel!"

Emel assumed her position against the doorframe and watched as her mother continued screaming.

"Why would I come with you now? You never took care of me. I was always alone! I would never do to Emel or Narin what you did to me!"

Emel's mother paced back and forth, mumbling to herself in Turkish. Emel picked out some of the words—*hate*, *sad*, *hurt*—and for the first time, she could understand the pain her mother was in. What had it been like for her mother to be sent away to marry a man she hadn't known? Luckily, Emel's father was a good man, but what if he hadn't been? The fear her mother must have felt! And she only a child!

Emel looked at her mother and saw beyond her physical self for the first time. She wondered about the emotional scars her mother held, the burden of resentment that had burrowed inside her over the years. She considered how that pain had affected Emel when she was growing up. How it affected Emel even now. How that pain might have even been passed down through Emel to her own daughters. Not on purpose, but surely her daughters had felt the resentment that had overflowed from her. Three generations of women affected by a pain that just kept growing. Emel thought of the times in her daughters' childhoods when she had had to make a conscious effort to not take her stress out on them. Being a single mother had been a full-time job, one Emel had felt she had sometimes failed in, and Emel's biggest hope was that her daughters didn't resent her the way Emel did her own mother and her mother did hers.

Emel let her mother be. Perhaps she was working through the anger she felt. Perhaps Emel could take a page out of her mother's book and do the same. She prayed her daughters forgave her for a struggling childhood, and Emel realized it was only fair to offer her own mother that same forgiveness. Resentment could be a vicious cycle, but forgiveness could break it.

Walking into the kitchen, Emel put the tea kettle on and scooped two sugars into a teacup for her mother. She hummed the new Adele song to herself, making a mental note to ask her daughters what the lyrics were. When Emel heard her mother stop yelling, she carried the hot tea into her room and sat on the edge of her mother's bed. Her mother stared blindly at the television screen, breathing heavily.

"Mum?"

Her mother blinked, then turned and looked at Emel. Emel held the teacup out to her mother, who took it wordlessly but smiled in thanks. Emel remained sitting on the edge of the bed, and her mother pointed to the television.

"Do you remember when we watched this movie in London?"

Emel recognized the film immediately. She used to put it on for her daughters whenever they were home sick from school. Their small feet would try to mimic the dancing they saw on-screen.

"The girls used to pretend to be in the movie."

Her mother laughed. "You and Narin did too."

"Really? I don't remember that."

Of course, Emel did. She remembered standing next to her older sister, ribbons in their hair, as they danced. But this was her mother's favorite story to tell, and Emel felt her mother deserved to relive the moment of peace she seemed to feel whenever she told it.

"You would always fight over who got to be Gene Kelly . . ."

As she told the story, Emel laid beside her: two women whose paths of resentment ran parallel yet intersected at a shared hope: to be better than the mother who had come before them.

Wrong Number

by Samara Doumnande

“You’re so selfish, mother!”

“Yeah, well so are you!”

“Don’t you want to be a part of our lives?”

Silence hung in the air.

“I said, ‘don’t you want to be a part of our lives, mother?’”

Diane and Pearl Baker stood face to face, outside of Pearl’s apartment, their eyes searing into each other like fire onto wood. Earlier that afternoon, Diane had phoned her mother several times, but each of her calls had been fruitless. All calls had gone straight to voicemail. And now here she was standing outside of her mother’s apartment, with the door shut and inches behind her mother’s back. Pearl was gripping the brass handle as if her life depended on it.

What was behind that door anyway? And why didn’t her mother want her to see it? Diane hadn’t stepped behind that door in three solid years.

Before then, apartment #675 had always been a warm and inviting place where almost anyone could come for a visit. Pearl’s door had always seemed open back then. Friends and family were always stopping by, as she was an excellent hostess. She was always cooking. And she loved to entertain, preparing quite the feast for one occasion or another. Family holidays always took place at Pearl’s place.

But then something changed three years ago.

Three years ago, Pearl began to shut herself away from her family.

Diane’s heart thudded in her chest and she felt dizzy as she ruminated on the reason why. Shaking her head, she pulled herself from the dizzying thoughts and settled her eyes on the two children who stood beside her.

Shelby and Michael were a year apart from each other in age. Shelby was six. Michael was seven. The two siblings had risen early that morning and had entered Diane’s bedroom to wake her up. Apparently, neither had slept well, and both had gotten up from their beds in the middle of the night. Shelby was the first to rise, then Michael. When Michael joined Shelby, the pair sat in the kitchen talking about how much they missed their grandma. When eight a.m. came it was Michael who asked his mom if they could visit with Grandma Pearl.

But Grandma Pearl didn't want them here. In fact, she was trying to get rid of Shelby, Michael, and Diane as fast as possible.

Diane looked up from her children and gazed into her mother's eyes. She had to try one last time. Just one last attempt.

"Your grandchildren..." She gestured to Michael and Shelby. "They miss you... they want to see you, mom."

But the only response Pearl gave was a blank stare.

It took a moment to sink in that she wasn't going to get anything more beyond the blank stare. So, she stood there in silence as well, returning the gaze. But then it hit her, and she got it and she knew what she must do. She had to leave. She couldn't subject her kids to any further pain: this kind of rejection their grandma was emitting into the atmosphere. So, she placed an arm around each child's shoulder and quietly whispered, "It's alright. Grandma loves you. She's just sick right now. And I love you too. So, it's gonna be okay. Are you guys okay?"

Shelby nodded her head in a slow motion, as she bit on her bottom lip. Diane could tell she was trying to fight back her tears.

Michael's face was soft yet serious and sad. Diane wondered what his thoughts were.

"Come on, guys," said Diane. "Let's go."

#

Pearl Baker closed the door behind her.

"Ugh! I thought I'd never get rid of them. Don't they have anything else better to do than to disturb me while I'm trying to relax and make myself a drink?"

She made her way to the kitchen and poured herself a shot of tequila and swallowed it in one gulp. She poured another and did the same. Then another and then another.

It didn't take long for the effects of the alcohol to set in. Before long she was calling out to her long-deceased son.

"Did you hear that, Hakeem?" she slurred.

There was no response, but she continued in her speech.

"I said, 'did you hear that Hakeem?' Diane thinks I'm selfish. I'm not selfeesh. She's selfeesh because she won't let me drinks. She wants to steal all my drinking time

so's I can spends it wish hers and thas kids. Well, ain't nobodies gots time for thats. I's got to drink. I's got tas drinks and thinks. About yous and mees. My Hakeems. My poor, poor Hakeems."

The more she drank, the more she continued to slur. She continued to talk out loud to her deceased son Hakeem for fifteen more minutes. Finally, her body began to feel heavy and a sudden headache set in. It pulsated between her ears.

"I's goth to lay downs."

The apartment was untidy and cluttered, from years of neglect. Pearl had to be careful where she stepped. There were dirty dishes, clothes, towels, linen, books, magazines, and trash everywhere. Though the apartment was not yet hoarder status, it was pretty close.

Stepping over a trail of dirty dishes and laundry, she made her way to a small bedroom at the back of the apartment. This room was just as dirty as the rest of the place. Boxes, books, and trash, covered Pearl's bed sheets. Pushing them to one end of the bed, Pearl got in on the other. She settled her head on her pillow and fell fast asleep.

#

Pearl fell into a deep, drunken sleep. In fact, she stayed in bed for an entire day, waking up only for a few moments at a time only to fall back into an even deeper kind of sleep. Never once did she get up to get something to eat or drink, or to shower, or to brush her teeth or to use the bathroom. Only one thing got her to rise. And that was the ringing of the phone on her nightstand.

At its first ring, Pearl's eyes snapped open. At its second, she answered.

"Hello."

She was surprised at how normal she felt. Usually, by now she would be suffering from a hangover.

"Hello, is this the Suicide Prevention Hotline?"

Her heart pounded in her chest. *Oh my God*. Was the poor soul on the other end of the line thinking about taking his life?

In a shrill voice she spoke. "Uh, no... uh... I'm sorry...you have the wrong number."

"Oh, fuck it. Fuck them and fuck life. I'll just end this shit right now."

She felt dizzy at the caller's words, her heart racing.

There was a tremor in her voice as she spoke her next words. "What... what do you mean?"

"I said fuck life."

Pearl gripped the phone so tightly her knuckles turned white. There was still a tremble in her voice as she questioned the stranger on the other end of the line again, "you're not going to call?"

"No, I'm just gonna end this shit right now.

There was a thud in her chest from her heart. The hair on the nape of her neck lifted. "You're... gonna take your life?"

"That's what I'm saying."

"But you can't." The words slipped from her lips without her even realizing it. In that moment she could swear she was talking to her dead son, Hakeem.

"Why not?"

Pearl's gaze settled on an 8x10 picture frame on her nightstand. A man in his mid-twenties with deep brown skin, round chestnut eyes, and a flat button nose gazed back at her. He had a muscular build, but Pearl had known him to be about as warm and gentle as a dove.

Liquid jewels slipped down Pearl's cheek.

In her mind's eye, she could see this man—with the same round chestnut eyes and deep brown skin—in his youth, running into her arms, excited to see his mommy, after a long day of preschool.

"Look, I don't know you, but I know if you go today there is going to be someone you leave behind who is going to miss you. And they will never get over the pain of losing you. Do you hear what I'm saying, Mr... Mr... may I ask your name?"

"It's Lionel. Lionel Rawlings."

She had to talk him through this. She couldn't save Hakeem, but maybe she could save this poor soul. It was like a second chance. A second chance to stop another young man from doing what her son had done. She had to try. Maybe if she just calmed him down a little. Talked to him about other things... anything but death. She took a deep breath. It was going to be a challenging task, but she knew what she must do. She had to distract him first. So that he could trust her. Then he'd open up to her and hopefully she'd talk him into changing his mind.

"Where are you from, Lionel? I live in Baroque, NY in the Berkley Springs area. Are you local?"

"Yes. Same city as you, but in the Forest Point neighborhood."

"Ah, my children went to school in that neighborhood when they were younger. School #42 on Craig Street. Are you familiar with it?"

"Yes, that's the street I'm staying on now."

"It's a nice area. Lots of parks and playgrounds—a good place to raise a family. Do you have a family, Lionel? Any kids?"

"No kids. Just me and my mother—" There was a heavy sigh on the other end of the line. "Look, lady. You seem nice and all, but I gotta go."

Panic seized Pearl's heart and her lips began to tremble. "No!—I mean why? If I let you go, you aren't going to commit suicide, are you?"

"That's exactly what I'm going to do."

"Don't go yet. Just stay on the phone and talk to me. Just... uh..." She didn't know what to say or do. In a few seconds Lionel was going to hang up and possibly kill himself. In desperation she blurted out "just uh... tell me why you want to kill yourself."

The phone fell silent. She didn't mean to blurt out those words, but she had panicked. She knew she had not done enough to earn his trust. Who was she that he should answer her question? She was a stranger on the phone who he never met. And now because she had blurted out these words she wondered, *Have I lost him? Is he going to hang up on me?*

Lionel's voice pulled her from her thoughts. "You're not going to believe me. You're just gonna call me crazy."

Pearl said a prayer of thanks in heart for this break of silence. Her heart skipped a beat as she said, "No, I won't. Try me. Just tell me. I promise."

"But you won't believe me, so what's the point?"

"Just try me. Whatever it is, I won't judge you. Promise. I'll just listen. Just tell me. Okay?"

Lionel sighed and then cleared his voice. "Okay... Demons are gonna burn my body from the inside out by midnight tonight. That's why I wanna commit suicide. I was trying to reach the suicide hotline because I thought maybe they could come up with a solution to help me, but I don't know if that would have worked because what if the demons were to possess the people at the suicide prevention hotline before I even got

the chance to call. They already possessed my mom. They keep possessing everyone around me. Everyone keeps saying I have a mental illness and that's how I can tell they are possessed. My mom and the doctors are possessed. They say I have schizophrenia. But I know they're just too possessed by demons to know any better. I hope you're not possessed. You don't think I'm sick do you, Ms., Ms..."

"Pearl. Pearl Baker. And no, you seem fine to me." She felt miserable in her heart for lying to him. But she knew it was the only way to gain his trust.

"I can't trust anyone Ms. Baker. Everyone thinks I'm sick. They want me to take my psych meds, but the meds accelerate the process of the burning of my body. That's what the aliens have told me."

"The aliens?"

"The aliens I hear in my head. They talk to me telepathically, you know. They have some sort of superhuman powers that allow them to do so. I don't have to move my lips to communicate with them. Somehow, we communicate with our thoughts. They hear my thoughts and I hear theirs. I'm not sure how it all began. One day I just woke up and I just started hearing aliens—or voices, as my mom and the other possessed people would call it." Lionel sighed again. "I don't know why I'm wasting my time talking to you. I mean, it's just no use. I don't want to die in pain, Ms. Baker. These demons are going to burn me from inside out. They said that they are going to start the process at eleven-fifty p.m. It's now eleven-forty-eight. I only have two minutes before it begins. I gotta go. I have to end this shit now while I still have the chance. Before I have to feel the pain of an internal hellfire."

She was about to lose him again. She gripped the phone tighter. "Wait! You can't go. What about your mother?"

"I have to go!"

"No, wait!"

She could hear Lionel sighing again on the other end of the line.

"Just give me one more minute?... Please. I just have another question."

"I gotta go!"

"What about your mother? Aren't you worried she's going to miss you? Have you ever considered that?"

There was both irritation and fear in Lionel's voice. "Well, I'm going to die anyway. I told you they're going to burn my body from the inside out. Might as well go in a less painful way by making it quick with a gunshot to my head. I mean, before the demons get to me. Mom's gonna lose me either way. Don't you see, there's no use?"

“Well maybe those aliens are wrong. Have you ever considered that? Maybe they got it wrong. What if you take your life for no reason at all? You say you can’t trust anyone, but how can you be so trustful of those aliens? What have they ever done to earn your trust so strongly?”

There was silence on the other end of the line. After a few moments Lionel spoke. “Hmm, I never considered that. I honestly don’t know.”

“Your mom, though. Aside from her telling you to take the meds. I’m sure she’s done lots of things to earn your trust.”

“Yeah.”

“Would you mind telling me about one of them?”

“I don’t have the time.”

“Please, just try.”

Lionel sighed again. “Okay...My dad is dead now, but when he was alive, he was abusive to my mother. He beat her nearly every day. And he was not only physically abusive, but he was also verbally abusive. However, despite these things she managed to feed me three square meals a day, help me with homework, and give me all the love and affection any kid could ever ask for. Those are some of the things my mother has done over the years to earn my trust in a nutshell.—I gotta go now, okay? It’s already eleven-fifty. The burning has officially begun.”

“Are you feeling any burning sensations?”

“No, but—”

“But just stay on the phone with me.

Lionel gave another sigh.

“I’ll be back. I gotta go.”

The phone fell silent again. Pearl gasped and her heart thudded in her chest. Did she just lose him or was he coming back? What did he mean by saying he’d be back if he had to go? Did he mean he was going to go kill himself? If he did then there was no way for him to come back. She was both startled and perplexed.

“Lionel,” she breathed. “Lionel, are you there? Please come back and talk with me. Lionel, please.”

The only reply she received was dead air.

"Lionel," she tried again. "Please tell me you can hear me. Please. Please come back."

At that moment her voice cracked, and she fell into despair. Three years ago, Hakeem had passed away in much the same way. Three years ago, she had gotten a phone call in the middle of the night from her son who was threatening to take his life. She had pleaded with him for three minutes then told him she was coming over to his place, to a white townhouse on Craig street, in order to take care of him. But when she had gotten there it was too late. Hakeem had put a lead round nose bullet in his left temple.

What Lionel did not know, was that Pearl, had had a son who was mentally ill too. Hakeem had been living with voices inside his head since his college years, but three years ago, they became unbearable. No matter how much medication Hakeem took, somehow, he just couldn't shake off the voices. The doctors had tried everything. Every psych med upon God's green earth, but unfortunately nothing the doctors did could ease Hakeem's torture. The voices would harass Hakeem everywhere he went. Cursing at him, insulting him, and threatening him: Threatening him and everything he loved. He lived a life of terror and torture. There was seldom a moment awake when he did not hear voices. But he did find some peace in sleep.

Still, the voices distracted him from nearly all pleasures of life. He could not enjoy his family, he could not enjoy music or the quiet peace of reading a novel because the voices were always talking to him and/or about him, sometimes at the highest volume.

These distractions kept him from enjoying his blessings. He had worked hard in college to earn a degree in business administration but due to the voices, he never used it. He went on disability straight out of college.

He had a mom and a sister who loved him fiercely, but he could not enjoy their love, because whenever he was around them, he was always in a tortured state.

Even when alone he was in a tortured state.

"I can't take it anymore mom," Hakeem had yelled into the phone three years ago. "I'm gonna end this shit, right now."

Pearl wiped away the tears forming in her eyes. She prayed silently to the Lord, lifting her head heavenward.

She would try again. "Lionel, Lionel, can you hear me?" She sniffled quietly, wiping away tears.

An eerie silence was her reply.

"Lionel."

But then she heard some shuffling on the other end of the line. It was soon followed by Lionel's deep raspy voice.

The color returned to her cheeks.

"Yeah, Pearl, I'm here."

Pearl's heart fluttered with happiness. She smiled and her eyes, which had fallen dim just a few seconds ago, began to sparkle.

"You're back," she breathed. Pearl rubbed her shoulders.

"Yeah, I told you, I'd be back. I just had to go use the john."

Pearl smiled inside, holding her hand to her chest. *Ah, so that's what he meant.*

The joy was short lived, for she knew there was still work to do. "So," Pearl began, taking a deep breath, "we were talking about your mother. Uh... you no longer trust her because she wants you to take the medication?"

"Precisely," answered Lionel, "but I don't think it's her fault. She's just possessed, is all... by demons."

"Where is your mother, Lionel? Is she there in the house with you?"

"No. She's at work. She's a nurse. She's at the hospital right now."

"So, you're home alone right now?"

"Yes."

"Does she know about the thoughts you've been having? I mean the suicidal thoughts?"

"No. I didn't tell her because she's possessed, and I didn't want her to try to stop me."

"Tell me some more about your mother. What was life like before you got diagnosed with schizophrenia?"

"Oh, things were great after my dad died. She took me out every weekend to the local diner for breakfast. And to church every Sunday. Mom sang in the choir and led Sunday school and even joined the PTA at my school. And when I joined the basketball team in high school, she was there cheering me on at every game."

"She was so excited when I got a full scholarship to study mechanical-engineering at Baroque University, and just as disappointed when I had to drop out."

“Why did you drop out?”

“The aliens... I mean the voices. They became too much for me. I couldn’t concentrate with all the voices in my head. It was too hard to study and make good grades. So, I just dropped out. And eventually, I was diagnosed with schizophrenia.

“I’m sorry you had to go through all of that Lionel. Can I ask you to do one thing for me?”

“I suppose.”

“Look at your watch. It’s twelve midnight. You weren’t burned alive. You survived, and those aliens lied. I’m going to need you to trust *me* now Lionel. I’ve already proved you can’t trust those aliens. But I hope I have proven you can trust me. I think maybe you could use some help. Would it be alright if I called some good people to get you to the hospital so someone can take care of you and help you feel better about those voices?”

There was silence on the other end of the line. Then Lionel’s voice cut in, "I guess so."

#

That was the last of it. Pearl had poured every bottle of alcohol down the kitchen sink. She rubbed her forearms and exhaled. Twenty minutes ago, she’d gotten Lionel the help he needed. Lionel had willingly given her his full address and she had contacted 911 on her iPhone while he remained on the landline. She had continued to stay on the landline with Lionel until the paramedics arrived and when they did, Lionel accepted their help. He was admitted to Kingsley Hospital, on the south side of town. Before ending the call with Lionel, Pearl gave him her number, letting him know he would always have a friend in her and that he could call her anytime he wanted to talk. Lionel in turn handed his phone to the paramedics who informed Pearl they would take it from there, telling her that Lionel was in good hands and assuring her he would receive the care he needed.

"God willing, what I drank the day before yesterday will be my last drink. No more alcohol for me. No more wine, gin, rum, or tequila."

She looked at the clock on her kitchen wall. It was just past one in the morning, but she felt a burning desire to contact Diane and the kids. She had been an awful mom. An awful grandmother. An awful everything and she had to make it right with her family.

No, this call couldn't wait. She had to call her daughter today. Right now. Right here. She navigated her way from the kitchen to her bedroom, stepping over the same dirty laundry, and dishes that cluttered her apartment two days ago.

She found a clean surface on her bed and grasped the phone on her nightstand. After dialing seven digits, she heard a voice on the other end of the line.

"Hello?"

Enough

by Vivian Cardenas

Juliet threw out her hand, catching her balance on the metal bathroom stall wall as a wave of dizziness and nausea crashed over her. A stringy thread of blood trailed down her wrist towards her elbow, a match to the blood smear on the stall wall and the red handprint above it. The sharp tang of blood mixed with the too-sweet perfume of air freshener and who knew what else made Juliet's stomach lurch.

Juliet swallowed. Tried. Her throat snagged, her breath hitching in uneven puffs as she forced her gaze towards the ceiling. This couldn't be happening. This wasn't real. She wouldn't look. If she didn't look down, it would just disappear. It wouldn't be real.

Please, god, make it go away.

Another uncontrollable tremor seized her body. She pressed her hand harder against the cold metal wall, trying to brace herself, but it did nothing to still her body. Her legs. She couldn't make them stop. The shaking. She reached down. Grasped her knee, trying to force her legs still. Her hand hit something wet and warm. She looked. She tried not to but couldn't stop herself.

A baby.

Mottled skin, purple and red. Mucous. Blood. A whitish, rubber-like cord protruded from its stomach, wrapping around one of its legs before disappearing between her legs.

It squirmed, its tiny feet jerking out and pressing into her abdomen. The baby flung out its arms and coughed, followed by a weak cry.

"Shhh, shhh. Don't," Juliet pleaded. She reached her hand toward the baby and flinched back. She couldn't touch it. What if someone heard? What would they say?

Oh god, this couldn't be real! It didn't make any sense. She wasn't pregnant. But apparently, that didn't matter because a baby had just come out of her. Here. In this bathroom. A nebula of swirling pain and pressure had blended in an incoherent eddy of confusion as some instinct as old as humanity took over, forcing her to reach down and pull the thing out from the grasps of the toilet bowl.

Sure, she'd gained some weight, but that was just because of her schedule. Since taking the job at one of the biggest law firms in the country seven months ago, she hadn't had time for exercise or eating healthy or all that other stuff she used to do. She slept at the office half the time, her workload making the thirty-minute commute home a drain of time she couldn't afford.

All she'd wanted was some ibuprofen. And maybe some chocolate. Just the basic needs of any woman starting her period. No woman went into a grocery store hoping to walk out of the bathroom with a baby!

A baby.

In eight hours, she'd be presenting her project – her project she'd given up five months of her life building – to two of the most prominent partners in the firm. The future of her whole career depended on her being there. She hadn't killed herself in law school, drudged through three years at a no-name law firm, gotten her dream job, and sacrificed her whole life for the job, to lose it all by having a baby in a public bathroom the night before the most important meeting of her life. She was going to be at that meeting. And walking in with a baby wasn't an option. Juliet wasn't one of those people. One of those people who had so little control and purpose in their lives that they ended up on some stupid reality show. She had her life together, each hour accounted for. Her life was carefully mapped out: a five-year plan, ten-year, twenty. A baby wasn't part of any of it.

The door blurred in front of her as a shock of pain spasmed in her abdomen. She bit down on her teeth, grinding them together. The pain intensified, sharp and hot like a knife slicing her from the inside. She leaned back and closed her eyes as the pain slowly subsided.

A speaker crackled in the ceiling above the next stall over: "Barney's Grocer will be closing in fifteen minutes."

The baby's wane cry intensified. The ceiling spun, the metallic stall walls collapsing inward as Juliet tried to slow her breathing. This wasn't real. This couldn't be real.

Breathe. Breathe. One thing at a time. She only had to concentrate on *one thing*: getting out of this bathroom without anyone noticing her. That was it.

And then what? The baby was still attached to her, and she couldn't just walk out with a naked, blood-covered baby. She'd be seen. And the blood. Handprints. Blood streaks. She didn't even dare look into the toilet.

The baby's face turned bright red as its cry morphed into a full-on wail.

"Please stop," Juliet said, choking back a sob. Flinching, she set her hand on the baby's chest. It was warm and slimy and a string of bloody mucous clung to the side of its head. Juliet had to look away. The crying abated. Some.

Oh, god, she had to get out of here. But how, and then what? Her eyes dropped to her cell phone lying on the top of the toilet paper dispenser. She swallowed, a new type of pain rising.

She couldn't call him.

She couldn't. She'd left. Seven months ago. Three years together, and she'd gone. Clean break. That was the easiest. Her new job would be too demanding. It wouldn't have been fair to drag things out, and it wasn't like she'd completely blindsided him. She'd warned him. The night they'd met. He'd asked her out, and she'd told him straight up: she was on the career path. No kids, no family. She could still see him standing there, hands in his jeans, his dark curly hair looking like he'd just pulled his hand through it, stubble for a beard.

"It's just a drink." He'd said with that little half-grin of his.

It was never supposed to be more than that.

But then suddenly it was three years later, and somewhere along the way, it had stopped being her life, but theirs. Where work had become something she'd done to get to the weekends. Where evenings had become a bike ride or cuddling on the couch or watching a movie instead of squeezing in a few more hours of work.

And then she'd gotten the call.

Another wave of pain. The phone faded in and out of focus as the throbbing peaked. The baby's wails intensified again, shattering her restraint.

Juliet grabbed the phone, her fingers scrolling through her contacts before she was even aware of what she was doing. Her finger only hovered a second over his name before pressing call. Not looking down, she pressed her other hand more firmly on the chest of the crying baby. The crying wavered and then slowly subsided as the phone rang.

"Please pick up," she whispered. Her hand shook, her knuckles hitting her cheek in a stuttering rhythm as the phone rang again and again. The baby whimpered. The speaker above crackled and then went quiet again. Juliet's heart raced. It was almost midnight. Was he awake? Would he even answer if he was?

"Juliet?"

Juliet nearly dropped the phone. Mark. Her chest tightened at the sound of his voice in a way she didn't think was possible anymore.

"Hello?"

"Mark." Juliet's voice cracked. The shiny metal of the stall walls wavered. She clung to the phone, her hand aching from the pressure. She opened her mouth to say more, but her throat swelled. Her head dropped as a cavern opened inside her, the sound of his voice releasing a torrent of suppressed ache and yearning. Everything she wouldn't let herself feel since she'd left. Everything she'd tried to bury under her

projects and clients – anything to not think of him – rose to the surface in a massacre of emotions. Seven months.

A gulf of silence expanded on the other side.

“Mark.”

“I’m here.” His voice sounded wary and distant.

“Mark, please. I don’t know who else to call.” Juliet’s hands trembled, and she realized her whole body was shaking again. Another wave of pain clamped onto her abdomen. She sucked in a breath, trying to hold in the moan that gripped her.

“Look, Juliet. This isn’t really a good time.”

The line went silent again. Juliet bit her lip, choking back a cry. She wouldn’t cry. Closing her eyes, she gritted her teeth against the war inside her. The words were right there: *I’ve had a baby. I’m scared. I don’t know what to do.* But they wouldn’t come.

“Juliet? You there?”

“Mark, I need.” She sucked in a breath the wave of pain expanded.

“Juliet? Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

Juliet shook her head, unable to get any words out.

“Etty.” Mark’s voice softened into a plea etched with the weight of everything that had existed between them. Everything their life had been, the good and the bad and everything since. Juliet closed her eyes, aching for his touch. His warmth. Knowing that if he was just here, maybe they could somehow fix it all. Juliet swallowed.

“I need help.”

Silence.

Juliet took another shuddering breath as she tried to keep the pain contained.

“Mark.”

Juliet’s phone buzzed. She yanked it from her ear just in time to see an image of a dead battery flash before going dark.

“No, stop. No, no, no, no.” She held the power button, but the phone didn’t respond.

A woman's voice crackled from the speaker above: "Barney's Grocer will be closing in ten minutes. Please bring your items up to the nearest register."

Juliet closed her eyes and leaned her forehead against the metallic stall wall. The baby began to cry again, weak and stringy as if it didn't have the heart or energy to really try.

Juliet's trembled as she wiped her hair away from her face with the back of her blood-stained hand. Her chest hitched as the weight of her situation fell over her all over again. She was alone, the store was closing, she had a meeting to get to in eight hours, and no one would be coming to help her.

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Juliet shoved open the door of the bathroom stall and stumbled forward. Each step sent a shot of burning pain radiating from her abdomen. Her legs wavered beneath her as she reached for the bathroom sink to steady herself. She barely recognized her reflection in the mirror. Sweat covered her face, and her brownish blonde hair had matted against her head. Smears of blood crisscrossed her forehead. Pressed to her chest was her blue cardigan where the baby and placenta were concealed. The placenta she'd just ripped from her body, the pain so intense she'd almost passed out. She didn't think it was supposed to hurt like that, but she had no time to think about it. She had to get out of here. She could already feel the blood seeping through the ball of toilet paper she'd wadded in her underwear. Her grip tightened on the edge of the sink as her vision swayed.

The next step. She'd gotten out of the stall. Now she needed to get to her car. But the cardigan, the baby beneath, felt like a beacon. A bright light displaying to the world her shame.

A tall brown trashcan stood next to the sink. She froze. A hazy, fog-like idea forming, thick and disjointed. Her gaze dropped to the mound wrapped inside her cardigan. She swallowed and shook her head. No. She couldn't.

The baby wriggled. Part of the cardigan fell away, revealing the reddish purplish blob of the placenta. Juliet jerked her head away as her stomach churned. She released a huff of breath. Oh god, what was she going to do? Even after she got out of here, the baby wasn't going anywhere. She couldn't take care of a baby. She had a job. A plan. A future.

Her eyes landed back on the trash can, the sickening pit in her stomach roiling.

No one knew. Not a single person. Not even she'd known she was pregnant. What if no one ever knew? She could walk out of the bathroom as if nothing had ever happened. Her life wouldn't need to change. She would wake up tomorrow, nail her presentation, and her life would go on just as she'd planned it. Her gut tightened as the

whole thing played out in her head. Her heart beat frantic against the tiny warm body pressed to her chest.

She reached a hand towards the garbage, and suddenly it was like she was in two places at once: in her body and watching from above. She saw herself taking off the garbage lid, pulling out the brown crumpled paper towels, and setting them in the sink. She grabbed another handful and another until the sink was overflowing, and the top half of the trash can lay open and inviting.

“Barney’s Grocer will be closing in five minutes.”

Juliet’s breath stuttered as she stared at the gaping hole in front of her. And then, without hardly even thinking, she held out her blue cardigan and let it slide right into the garbage.

And. Nothing. No cry. No jostling. Juliet stared at the blue cardigan lying amidst the crumpled paper. And then, almost mechanically, she began to place the paper in the sink back into the can one handful at a time. In moments, the cardigan was completely buried. Juliet set the lid back on top.

Just like that, it was done.

The world swayed as Juliet took a hesitant step back. No sound came from the trash can. She took another step, then another. A shriek of pain shot through her whole body. She nearly fell, barely catching herself on the edge of the sink. Black spots prickled at her vision as she tried to straighten back up.

“You have to promise not to laugh.”

Juliet’s head jerked up. Mark. That was Mark’s voice. She tried to stand, her vision blackening again as she did. But that wasn’t possible. He couldn’t be here.

“I won’t,” someone else said. A far distant part of her recognized the voice.

And then Mark was at her side. But it was all wrong. He wasn’t in the bathroom but sitting at a bar, and she was sitting next to him, the details around them hazy as if looking through a frosted window. It was the night they met. A night that even then hadn’t seemed real. It had been too natural, too right. Like they were two old friends reconnecting after years apart.

Mark raised his eyebrows as if he didn’t remotely believe her.

“Come on, it can’t be worse than me trying to create my lemonade empire,” Juliet said, already regretting the admission.

Mark looked down, rolling the bottom of the glass around the coaster, the grin on his face – boyish and embarrassed – spreading wider than ever. “I wanted to be an animal rescuer.”

Juliet tried not to laugh. She really did. “Like the crocodile hunter guy? What was his name?”

“Steve Irwin. And I don’t think he rescued animals, but no. I was much more macho than that.” he smiled, looking away again. “You know, like birds and squirrels in my backyard. My pet dog.”

“Your dog needing rescuing?”

“In my seven-year-old imagination, yes,” he said. “She’d been attacked by a bear. Not a real bear, but you know, I’d convinced myself she needed doctoring anyway. I had her wrapped up in a dozen of those ace bandages, toilet paper when that ran out.” He shook his head at the memory. “I even hung a sign above the front door of my house: ‘Mark’s Animal Rescue Service’.” He held out his hands like he was spreading a banner.

“You ever get any business?”

He gave her a sideways glance. “I knew you’d laugh,” he said, his own soft laughter joining hers.

“It’s cute!”

“A neighbor girl found an abandoned kitten once.” He paused. “We thought it was dead. Practically just bones, but when I picked her up, she opened her eyes. Took three weeks of waking up every two hours through the night, feeding her with this tiny dropper.” His face had become serious, his eyes distant as he looked down at his glass. “The thing lived for nearly twenty years. She died a few years ago. I’d gone home for Christmas.” He paused. “It was almost as if she’d been waiting for me to come back.”

Mark’s voice faded in and out like a weak radio reception and then was gone. The bathroom walls filled the gaps until the memory had dissolved completely. Juliet grabbed the edge of the sink, her arms shaking as she pulled herself back up to her feet. Her head spun and gut twisted. She looked to the door and back to the garbage can. Mark.

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The car jerked as the tires hit the curb, coming to a halt. Juliet rammed the gear into park and leaned her head against the steering wheel. Even with her eyes closed, the spinning didn’t stop. Slowly, she turned her head. A row of townhomes stood just beyond the sidewalk, an even line in both directions, the light next to each front door glowing bright. Seven months and everything looked the same as the day she’d left.

Almost all the windows were black, but not the one directly in front of her. A soft glow filtered through gray curtains.

Juliet pushed back from the wheel, sending her vision spiraling even more. Her hands trembled as she reached for the doorknob and pushed it open with a lurch. As she grasped the car door and heaved herself up out of her seat, her pants clung to her, sticky and wet. The ground beneath her rolled, the lights fading in and out as a gush of warm liquid flowed from between her legs.

Blood. So much blood.

Juliet clung to the door, trying to force her mind on what she needed to do. Up the sidewalk, onto the porch, to the door, and that was it. Only thirty more feet, and this would all be over. She was almost there. Closing her eyes again, she focused on her breathing, the rise and fall of her chest. She had to do this. There was no other choice. Meetings. Clients. Her future.

She ducked back into the car and pulled the cardigan towards her from the passenger seat. The baby inside jerked, its arms splaying outward and escaping the wrapped folds. It didn't cry as she awkwardly pulled it into her arms. She didn't look at it, just wrapped the cardigan back around it, blocking it from her view.

Memories came back in flashes: stumbling back to that garbage, throwing out crumpled paper, nearly fainting with the force of pulling the cardigan-wrapped baby out of the garbage, everything else a blur. Stumbling to the door. Down the hall. The sliding doors. Freedom. Her car. Buzzing. Everything buzzing and shady, nothing looking and feeling quite right.

Mark. All she had to do was get to Mark.

A steady flow of fluid seeped down her legs as Juliet stumbled around her car, leaning into it to keep herself standing. The edges of her vision blurred, the light coming in and out of focus as she staggered up the sidewalk. Each step felt like climbing through thick mud, her feet slow and unresponsive. Figures flitted in and out of the shadows of her periphery. She turned, nearly falling, but there was nothing but shadows cast by the porch lights. Whisps of laughter twisted through the branches of a giant oak tree, dying and turning cold. Juliet's head spun, and despite everything looking right, it felt as though she were seeing at the world from upside down.

Juliet clasped onto the railing of the front porch, the black iron slick against her wet palms. Two steps. That was all, but it felt like mountains. She teetered up, her breath coming in staggering bursts. Her eyes locked on a bench they'd picked out the summer before. It was still there, perfectly proportioned beneath the window. In front of it, a bright red stain shone bright against the gray wood stain, clearly visible even in the dark. It was her fingernail polish. She'd accidentally dropped the wand the very day they'd bought the bench. Mark had said he'd sand it off. Not to worry about it. But it was still there.

Juliet stared at the stain, trying to make sense of it. But her thoughts gurgled about in her head, sloshing and uncoordinated. The door. She needed to get through the door. Only a few more steps. She lurched forward, seizing the doorknob by instinct. She turned. It stuck. The door. It was locked. Why?

The floor rolled. Juliet teetered to the side. She tried to catch her balance, but her arm wouldn't move. Something was holding it down. Her cardigan, something heavy was wrapped in her cardigan. A flash at the edge of her vision. A bathroom. A baby. The world swayed, and she threw out her free hand, a hollow thud sounding through the darkness as she caught herself on the door. The darkness crept in around her vision, and her stomach twisted. That baby let out a weak cry, or maybe it was her. She swallowed, trying to fight the burning in her throat.

The door swung open, and Juliet toppled forward. The floor bowed, and she barely managed to get her feet back beneath her. The light shuddered as her vision narrowed into a tunnel. Mark. His face. He wasn't smiling. Why wasn't he smiling? Juliet reached out, tried. Her arms were like lead. If she could just get to him, but her feet didn't respond.

"I made this for you." She heaved her cardigan towards him, her words barely more than a slur. She wanted it to be funny, to make him smile the way he used to when he saw her, but there was nothing.

Mark lunged forward, barely catching the bundle before it fell. A sharp cry. Juliet tried to step but couldn't find her feet. She had to tell him something. Something important, but all her thoughts felt as loose and slippery as butter. The floor. Why was she on the floor? Mark, his knees hitting the floor next to her. And then everything went dark.

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Juliet jolted as if startled from a dream, her chest hitching as if catching her breath. An orangish pink haze surrounded her, making the gray stained porch look a sickly brown. The red fingernail polish stain beneath the wood bench was gone. Had Mark sanded it down finally? The edge of the wooden bench dug into her shoulder blades uncomfortably. Where was Mark? He'd been sitting right here next to her, hadn't he?

A high-pitched squeal cut through the air, dissolving into a fit of laughter. Juliet stood, walking to the railing of the porch. Just beyond, a little girl, three at most, swung from a swing hanging from the tall oak tree that sat between the two townhouses. The girl's hair was pulled back into pigtails, two whiffs of curly brown hair.

"Higher, daddy!" She giggled, her voice rapturous with glee.

And there was Mark.

Time seemed to freeze, the haze fading a bit as he came into focus. His hair just as curly and messy as ever, though longer than she remembered.

He was smiling. Not his half-smile, not his polite smile. His real smile. The one that was so rare. The one that Juliet had always felt was just her own. But Mark wasn't looking at her. He was looking at the little girl.

The little girl kicked in glee as Mark grabbed the swing, pulled it back into his chest, and then let go, his deep laughter blending in with hers. A warmth filled Juliet as she watched, a warmth she couldn't quite place. Foreign, but at the same time, familiar and safe.

Juliet was about to step out to join them when a phone rang, the tone high and shrill. Juliet looked down, surprised to realize her cell phone was in her hand. It rang again, the vibration sending a shiver up her whole arm. She turned it over, exposing the screen to the strange light. The numbers were blurred, but somehow, she knew who it was: work. Her meeting. She was supposed to be at her meeting. They must be wondering where she was. Juliet took a step back from the railing. They'd all be sitting there, waiting for her presentation.

Mark looked up, his eyes meeting Juliet's. His smile faded. Juliet's grasp tightened around her phone as it rang again.

"Daddy, more!" The girl called, but Mark didn't move to push her again. The swing slowed, the girl's laughter fading. Mark pulled the girl up from the swing, cradling her into his arms. The girl wrapped her arms around his neck, nuzzling her head into his neck. Mark set his hand on her back and leaned his head into hers, his eyes finally dropping. And then he turned, not towards Juliet and the house, but away.

They were leaving.

"Mark, wait," Juliet called. The phone rang again, so loud now it pressed into her eardrums. Mark didn't turn. Juliet tried to silence the ringer, but there were no buttons. She just needed Mark to wait, just for a moment, so she could explain. This meeting was important, but it would only take a couple of minutes. She needed to tell him, them, to wait for her. That she'd be right back.

Juliet stepped towards the stairs, but an invisible pressure pushed back, halting her progress. A suffocating panic gripped Juliet's chest. Mark and the girl were getting smaller as they walked away.

"Mark!" Juliet screamed, fighting against the force holding her, but the harder she pushed, the tighter it became. Her phone rang again, the sound becoming a part of the pressure, locking her into place. She tried to drop the phone, to throw it away, but it was stuck to her palm. She shook her hand, trying to break it free, but it wouldn't budge.

Mark. She could hardly see them now. She had to stop them. They couldn't leave her. Not like this. What if she couldn't find them again?

The pressure around her thickened, the ringing now everywhere and constant. Juliet couldn't breathe. *She couldn't breathe.* She tried to scream, couldn't. She needed to get to them. To explain. She could fix it. She could make it right. She just ...

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A blur of noises and smells came in and out of focus, fading almost like an echo. Distant murmurs. Clatters. The sound of a cart rolling. A hint of lavender. Juliet blinked her eyes and closed them again as the white of her surroundings bled together into a blob. Her head ached, murky and dark, a choking grip of darkness pulling at her. Panic. Desperation. She'd been dreaming. The details bobbed up and down in the darkness, nothing clear. Mark had been there, and someone else. Something terrible had happened.

Juliet forced her heavy lids back open, and the room slowly came into focus: pale blue walls, a mounted TV, light shining in from a wide window. A blue and green patterned curtain hung from a rod connected to a tiled ceiling. Beeping. Slow. Even. Tubes flowed out from her hand to a metal stand where bags of liquid hung. She tried to lift her hand, but it felt like it had been filled with cement. She closed her eyes and tried to root herself, to ground herself as she grappled for the loose ends of her memory. But there was only a deep fog. She was in a hospital room, but how did she get there?

She opened her eyes, taking in the room again, looking for clues. A weighted urgency pressed against her ribs. She was supposed to be somewhere, somewhere important. She tried to lift her hand again, but it barely moved. She stared at it, trying to force it to obey, when she noticed someone in the chair next to the bed. A man, hunched over, his elbows on his knees, his face hidden behind his hands, dark curly hair rumpled.

"Mark." The words escaped her lips, barely more than an exhalation of breath as her throat tightened, choking off anything else.

Mark's head shot up. The skin around his eyes hung heavy and puffy, the whites of his eyes lost in a web of red.

"Etty."

Juliet breathed in the sound of his voice, the way he said her name. Years of emotions: memories, hope, peace, happiness flooded into her, all just from the sound of that one word. He was here. Oh god, *he was here.* The heavy pressure that held her chest loosened as Mark gently took Juliet's hand, wrapping his hands around hers. A million questions filled her mind, but just for a moment, she wanted to feel him. His touch. So steady. So real.

“You’re okay. Everything’s going to be okay.” A gruffness reverberated through Mark’s voice. “You lost a lot of blood. But hey, they found you more.” The corners of his lips tilted upward, but the smile faded as quickly as it had come.

Blood? Edges of something pricked at Juliet’s memory but still too dull to understand. She tightened her grip on his hand as her chin began to quiver.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Mark said, squeezing her hand. “She’s okay. She’s small, early.” He swallowed, “But they say she’s going to be okay. She’s in the NICU. As soon as you feel up to it, you can go see her.”

Her.

NICU.

The warmth of his presence vanished, and a sinking cold crashed into the void. Images crackled, breaking through her awareness like shattered glass. Metallic stall walls. Pain. Mark’s house.

A baby.

Nausea rose in her throat. Her whole body felt like it was buckling inward, collapsing onto her spine, her lungs flattening as her airways cut off completely.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay. Everything’s okay. I’m here.” Mark said, his voice soothing as if she didn’t do anything to him. As if she hadn’t abandoned him and then shown up a few months later with a baby. Juliet pulled her hand from his as hot streams of horror and shame engulfed her.

He shouldn’t be here.

A baby.

“Breathe, Etty.”

She shook her head, pinching her eyes shut, trying to make it all vanish. If she could only go back in time and erase it all. Her chest, so tight. She opened her eyes to find Mark inches from her face. Black dots crept in around the edges of her vision.

“Etty,” he whispered as he pressed his hand to her cheek, his fingers tangling in her hair around her ear. His eyes latched on her own, refusing to let her go.

The block in her rib cage released, and her lungs filled as something between a sob and groan escaped. His thumb stroked her cheek, pulling a tear away with it.

“She’s strong.” Mark’s words caught, but he didn’t turn away. “And beautiful.”

A baby.

Juliet leaned her head back. The ceiling tiles blurred together above.

“I didn’t know I was pregnant.” The confession spilled out before she could stop it, shame warping her voice. Mark’s head dropped down, but he didn’t pull away.

“I was in a bathroom. In a grocery store.” It hurt to say the words. She kept her eyes on the ceiling so she wouldn’t see Mark’s reaction. She remembered the garbage can. What she’d almost done. A sickening horror clawed up, making her want to vomit.

“I didn’t want. I couldn’t.” Juliet’s throat constricted, cutting off the words she couldn’t find, an explanation she couldn’t give. Not for herself, and not for him.

Mark pulled away, both hands grasping his head as he turned toward the window.

The curtain around the door pulled back, the clash of metal sliding against metal, shattering the little world where, just for a moment, only the two of them existed. A nurse entered the room. She was short with a tight ponytail high on her head, giving her a severe look. Though she had a warm smile as she came to the side of the bed.

“Good to see you up,” she said, her fingers sliding over a tablet in her hands. “I just need to check your vitals, make sure everything is looking good. Then I’ll let the doctor know you’re awake. She’ll swing by to fill you in and answer any questions you have.” Her eyes darted to Mark, who hadn’t moved. His back was still to them, bright light shining in from the window beyond. Light too bright to be morning.

And then the last gear shifted into place, and Juliet remembered. Her presentation. It took only seconds to find a clock on the wall: eleven thirty-seven. She’d missed it. Five months of work. There had to be dozens of messages on her phone, each one becoming increasingly urgent. She waited for the panic, the crushing weight of what her blunder would mean. The partners weren’t the forgiving type. The job was cut throat by design, thousands of junior associates fighting to be one of the few who would rise up above the rest. And this had been her chance.

But the panic didn’t come. Instead, something else niggled its way upward. Relief. But it didn’t make her feel any better. She wanted the panic. She wanted the desperation. She’d given everything she had for that job. She’d worked so hard.

At the same time, another image filled her mind: Mark. The little girl, both of them walking away from her. And she couldn’t stop them. No matter what she did, she couldn’t get them back. The feeling of darkness watching them go, the anguish of being left behind.

The nurse moved to the machines, little clacking sounds filling the emptiness of the room as she transferred data. “You had everyone worried there for a bit, but looks like things are leveling out.” More clacking. “Your baby is doing fine. She’s just having a

hard time keeping her body temperature regulated, but once she's figured that out, she'll be good to go."

Mark's hands moved down to his hips, his head drooping.

The nurse adjusted the tubes in Juliet's hand and checked the bags on the tower before turning her attention back to Juliet. "Is there anything I can get for you? Ice water, a heated blanket?"

Juliet shook her head, and the nurse left, pulling the curtain back closed around them.

"I thought you were dead." Mark finally said, and the pain in his voice cut so deep Juliet felt it in her very soul. He turned back to her, his eyes red.

"I thought you were going to die, right there on my porch. The blood." His words cut off, and he shook his head, a bit of color draining from his face. "And I couldn't do anything. I couldn't save you." He collapsed back into the chair, his face disappearing behind his hands.

Juliet swallowed, trying to find what to say.

"You left. You *just left*." Mark's words sounded like a groan. "No explanation, nothing. No returned phone calls, not even a text."

Juliet couldn't hold his gaze. "I left a note."

"A note?" Mark scoffed. "As if three years was what, a one-night stand?"

"I didn't think you'd understand?"

"You didn't even give me a chance! And suddenly, you're dying on my porch, and there's a baby." Mark's words cut off as his chest heaved. "And I don't know what to do with any of this. I thought you'd died. Right there in my arms, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. You were leaving me all over again, and there was nothing I could do." Mark's hands shook as he pulled them through his loose curls. He didn't look at her.

"I was scared," Juliet finally said, her voice trembling.

"Scared of what?" Mark said, a flash of anger piercing his words.

Juliet took a breath, steadying herself, fighting against the urge to run, to shut down, to change the subject, to do anything but have this conversation.

"I'd just been offered my dream job," Juliet said, fighting to keep her voice steady. She could still feel the emotions, all of them. It was as if she were still standing on his

back porch seven months ago, phone in hand, exhilaration draining into a cold ache. Hesitancy, fear, sadness, resolve, desperation. The mix of emotions inside her swirled, so intense she could hardly wrap her mind around them. "I'd just gotten my dream job, and I didn't want to take it." Juliet closed her eyes. "I'd worked so hard for so many years. And I had it. *Finally*. And suddenly, I didn't know if I wanted it." She looked at Mark, yearning for him to look back. "Because of you."

Mark shook his head like he could hardly believe what he was hearing.

"We had this life together, and it was good," Juliet said, the words coming out now in a rush. "It was so much more than good. We were happy. I was happy. And everything between us worked. So perfect, so easy, and what are the chances of something like that lasting? What if in a year, or two, or five, it wasn't like that anymore? What if, somewhere in between, we broke completely, and then what? I would've given up my dream, and I would've been left with nothing."

"So that's what I was? A placeholder?"

"I told you, the very first day. My career came first."

"Three years. I never once asked you to change. You don't think that if I wanted something different, I would've said something?"

"But I wanted something different!" Juliet took a deep breath. "All I'd wanted for most my life was to be some big shot lawyer, and then." Juliet shook her head, not knowing how to make him understand. "Suddenly, I wanted that life with you. The whole thing. And that scared me. It wasn't what I'd planned or expected. I didn't know what to do with it all. I knew the job. It had a clear trajectory. It was safe."

"So you left?"

"I couldn't do both. I couldn't be the job and have a relationship or family. I wouldn't have been fair to anybody."

"You didn't even give it a chance."

"I didn't see any other way."

"So you just *left*?"

"I was wrong!" Juliet's chest heaved. And suddenly, she could see it all: the past seven months as clear as if she'd lived it. Their life if she'd turned down the job and stayed at that small law firm, stayed with Mark. Finding out she was pregnant, being terrified, both of them, but coming around. And that fear turning into joy and anticipation. Moving in with Mark. Transforming Mark's spare room into a nursery. All of them here in this hospital, so overjoyed and happy, their baby daughter between them healthy and safe.

“I chose wrong,” Juliet said, the weight of the words so heavy she felt they would bury her. She turned away, unable to bear the pain any longer. The pain she caused. The life they could have had together, all of it sitting there in the space between them. The life she’d traded in for a job at a firm that cared only for their bottom line, churning through junior associates as valuable and expendable as coffee filters. The ache of the past seven months, the memories of the past three years, solidified like a jagged stone and sunk slowly into Juliet’s chest, each edge catching, then shredding, as it dropped deeper.

“I never stopped loving you,” Juliet said, the words nothing more than a whisper.

The silence between them spread. Mark made no reach for her, wouldn’t even look her in her face. Juliet closed her eyes, trying to hold the tears, but couldn’t. The best thing in her life, gone. She’d ruined it, and there was no one else to blame.

One minute. That was all she’d allow herself, and then she had to get herself together. It wasn’t just about her anymore. She had a baby. A little girl. She didn’t know how it was going to work. There were no plans for this. She had no idea what the next hour would look like, let alone tomorrow or a month or year from now. She was more scared than she’d ever been in her life, but she wouldn’t run. Even if she had to do this all on her own. No more running.

Mark sniffed, exhaled slowly, and then cleared his throat. “Our daughter. She have a name?”

Juliet shook her head. “I haven’t had a chance to think about it.”

Mark nodded, sniffing again.

“Maybe we could get drinks sometime, talk it over.”

Juliet’s heart stuttered, and for a second, she felt like she couldn’t breathe. “There’s a good chance I’m unemployed, and I have no idea what I’m doing next or where my life is going.”

He shrugged, the shadow of his smile lifting the corner of his lips. He reached over, wrapping his hand around Juliet’s.

“It’s just a drink.”