

# **HIVE AVENUE LITERARY JOURNAL**



## **ISSUE III — JUNE 2021**

# **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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**FICTION**

# THE LIGHTHOUSE KEEPER

By Ella Cashman

At night he dreams of faceless people.

They come and go, talking, but never to him. Their indistinct mutterings retreat. They don't stop, instead brushing past him, leaving warm traces across his skin. He chases after them, pleading for them to *look at him*. No matter how hard he focuses, their faces are shapeless blurs, as if he's forgotten to don his wire frame glasses.

During the day he stares out at the restless sea, watching the waves curl under themselves and the fog roll in, concealing the wicked rocks along the coast. He looks at maps too—maps of the island and maps of places he'll never go—smoothed out tenderly before him, reducing the vast world to a piece of paper. He tries to imagine what the places look like, what they smell like, who lives there, what they were doing right now. Are they looking down at maps and wondering who is out there too?

Lale is the lighthouse keeper—burning the midnight oil. He cuts wicks, winds clockworks, and polishes the ancient lens. He wipes his hands on his trousers. He runs his hands through his widow's peak.

The lighthouse beacon slices through the night, illuminating everything in its path like an all-seeing eye. The nights are frigid and the wind off the water is unforgiving. When it rains, it comes down in relenting sheets. He wraps himself in layers of clothing: a wool sweater, a flannel, a scarf, before pulling on his rain slicker. He makes the pilgrimage on the well-worn path from his cottage to the lighthouse every day to tend to the light, to guide boats away from him and toward their destination of the mainland. He returns home to a stiff mattress and an empty house.

He used to have a cat, a scrawny tabby, and the closest thing to a companion he's had on the isolated island. Lale buried it behind the cottage under the apple tree years ago. Sometimes he still expects to feel it rub up against his legs while he's cooking or feel the weighted warmth of him at the foot of the bed.

It is this profound loneliness that drove him to snuff out the lighthouse light. He's plunged into darkness, yet he closes his eyes, squeezes them shut knowing that what he'd done is unforgivable. He looks for the face of God, the voice of God, the thumbnail of God... but there is nothing.

And when he lights the lighthouse wick, he sees nothing. The boat that had been there earlier is gone.

Down the lighthouse spiral stairs, down the well-worn path, down to the rocky coastline where the boat floats in a shipwreck ruin. But as he hoped, there is a form lying face down in the wet sand.

Lale places a hand on the castaway's back. For a moment all is still and quiet. With effort, Lale picks up the man, cradling him in his arms. Once the man is laid comfortably on his bed, Lale coaxes a fire. He removes the man's wet shoes and socks and sets them to dry by the hearth. He does the same with his wet clothes, stripping him down to his undergarments before covering him with the thick wool blanket.

Lale takes care of the unconscious man, gently propping him up three times a day to pour water and soup down his throat. When he finally awakes there are tears in his eyes.



“My crew?” is the first thing he asks and Lale shakes his head. The man weeps openly and Lale leaves the bedroom, closing the door behind him.

Lale finds the man later, sitting at the base of the lighthouse—staring out across the horizon turning a small stone over and over in his hand. The sky is a dull grey and the water inky. Lale stops seven paces behind him, his footsteps announcing his presence. After some time, the man speaks.

“Why did the light go out?” Lale tries to find his voice but it gets caught up in the back of his throat and around his tongue. But he doesn’t need to say anything. They both know.

“Do you have a boat?”

“No,” Lale says. “Not one that will make it to the mainland.”

“Let me see it,” he says. Lale points down to the base of the cliff to a rain-filled rowboat.

“I’ll make it work,” he says and Lale shakes his head.

“You can’t leave.”

“How do you mean?”

“You can come, but you can’t go. No matter what you try, you will always return.” The man looks at him in disbelief. “Don’t you think I would have left if I could?” Lale says. “Don’t you wonder why I am all alone here, with no import of supplies or new clothes and tools? No one can come to the island unless they plan to stay forever.”

“You didn’t let me have a choice,” the man spits.

“Neither did I,” Lale says softly. The man throws the stone out into the water and doesn’t stay to watch the ripples.

Day after day, the man who calls himself Amos, tries everything he can to leave the island. Lale can see him from his cottage climbing into the rowboat. He pushes it out to sea and rows in circles for a bit, becomes confused, docks the boat where he found it, and is halfway back to the cottage before clarity washes over him and he does it all over again.

It is like watching a beetle trying to get up after falling on its back.

After a week, Amos gives up and instead takes to shutting himself in the cottage. His pain and grief obvious in the silence between them. Lale sits with his back against the bedroom door, talking to Amos, not sure if he’s listening or even awake.

Lale talks about the gnarled carrots he harvested from the garden. About how it would soon be cold enough to where they might see whales as they migrate. About how he regrets what he did. How sorry he is. He asks Amos if he’d like to join him for the sunset but receives no answer.

The guilt and shame keeps Lale from sleeping. He spends nearly all his time in the lighthouse, polishing and oiling the clockwork machinery over and over again as if keeping the light going could change the past.

It is at the end of one of these restless nights, just as the sun is climbing up from the eastern horizon, that Amos finds Lale hanging from the lighthouse gallery.

He buries Lale under the apple tree, using his hands rather than the shovel to spread the dirt.

And at night, he dreams of faceless people.

# I SHOULD HAVE GOTTEN A TATTOO

By Lisa DiFruscio

It has always been my waking nightmare that I would die without dignity in a horrific car crash—with parts of my body I always thought were perfect — smouldering on the road, bent at incomprehensible angles modern geometrical theory failed to explain. Obliterated, delineated, masticated. My body, and parts thereof, waiting to be scooped up and transported and collected, poking at the ironic injustice of a pre-planned funeral.

I was sure I would die early, (being told from a young age that my preoccupation with death was weird and unnatural), and so I bought a copy of *The Tibetan Book of The Dead*, trying to solve life's greatest mystery.

I disagreed with my elders on my death obsession, and thankfully they never censured my choice of reading, perhaps because mom loved reading, and dad loved pontificating. Someone must be the voice at the head of state, I learned. My voice stayed silent. Instead I wrote in my journals, suffusing them with eloquent words and flamboyant diction. It made sense to me, but my thoughts and preoccupations were folded in the secret pages, like the manuscript of an exiled philosopher in perdition.

First birth, first love, first loss. The three lessons in life you don't get to control. It isn't about the choices that coincide with these circumstances, but more profoundly *why* you choose them, because as we all know, some choices inevitably lead to disaster.

So why I chose a different route to work that morning, did not occur to me at all, at least not until I felt my body hovering above the place where my heart had popped out of my chest. A cold slag of lead from the door panel sliced into me from the impact.

"I can't die like this," I thought, realizing I should have given more time to meditating on the acceptance of my untimely demise, and in that second having an epiphany that the mystery of trying to understand immortality while being mortal is suicide of the mind in its own right.

Rushing through my youth, reading *Dracula* introduced me to death as a sensual pleasure, giving credence to another perspective on the quest for immortality. Could death itself be glamorous?, I asked myself this over and over, dipping my pen in the ink well and writing the question in all caps in my journal, followed by an unfinished essay on the death penalty. The great debate. Someone else deciding our fate. An eye for an eye. Saviour or Executioner. Saint or Sinner. How was it possible that Bernadette Soubirous after being exhumed 3 times after her death, was declared by the Catholic Church investigators and medical examiner, that her uncorrupted remains were not only unexplainable, but declared miraculous. So then, her visions of the 'immaculate conception' justified a belief in life after death. Totally glamorous.

I remembered walking to school on a winter morning, all white nothingness hiding everything that was less than 7 inches high. I could only see the tops of my boots, but there next to a boulevard tree was a grey mourning dove upturned, legs bullet straight and stiff as a rag, its feet perched upward, three toes pointing north and one arched backward. Its eyes were closed, and I thought it was sleeping, or perhaps resigned to the possibility that there was no heaven. Was death just sleep? My science teacher had no explanation.

I wrote about it that evening in my journal. Of course the dove had frozen to death, perhaps because it couldn't find water to hydrate, or a warm nest to hibernate. I wondered why it died alone, how nothing else came to feed on it. "Everything eats everything else," I remembered reading somewhere in a book. It made sense. My parents also parlayed that *wasting anything* was sinful. In honor of the bird, I covered every white space on the paper in vivid description, even the margins. I taped a feather I plucked from its wing on the last pure corner of the page. I wrote a eulogy quoting Emily Dickinson's poem "*Hope Is A Thing With Feathers*," because doves only cooed and couldn't speak. Birds must have a voice, too.

"Hope" is the thing with feathers -  
That perches in the soul -  
And sings the tune without the words -  
And never stops - at all - "...

How much does one's voice weigh? I circled the comment in my journal.

I was barely 25 when my father died. Everything, including me fell apart. I was walking from the public parking lot up a short street incline, when the wind began swirling fallen leaves around my feet. It wouldn't have grabbed my attention except for the fact that it was only happening around me.

*And there appeared the dove. My father's feet were similarly faced upward, hostile against the starched hospital sheet, and when I pulled back the cotton sheath, his tendons were arched and his toes pointed to the ceiling; protesting his final masquerade. It was obvious he didn't want to leave, but destiny is unforgiving, and would not reverse its covenant.*

There are all kinds of contracts to life. The sacred ones decree we aren't alone when we die. Is it something we agree to before the conception, but immediately forget the second we are born? What are the inclinations we carry that push us to the discovery that we all have a date with death? Our life contracts fool us into ensuring our time here on earth will be happily ever after. Marriage, business, property, non resuscitation - contracts upon contracts - written with the blood of intent, and the ink of judge and jury, the blessings of priests, the shackles of the proprietors of law, the guns of the admirals of war, and at the end, 'Qui tacet consentire', (by silent consent), the coroner releases our remains as property of the universe.

I was hoping someone could hear me calling above the calamity. Almost an echo, I felt the noise of the highway, the sticky rubber vehicle treads licking the oozing coal tar thirsty from the noon heat, and one of the paramedics covering me so my once soft skin didn't begin to sizzle.

"Wait for it," I said to myself, my eye of memory sifting through the good, the bad, the evergreen. Sirens were screaming. Voices I didn't recognize were shouting, "she's bleeding too badly..." My voice, whispering to myself, because I couldn't pinch any part of me to see if I was conscious; feeling for my arm, and spying the severed joint lying outside the door, my elbow milk white.

This is the 21st century..."

I am in my 21st year..."

"21 grams less our bodies weigh after death..."

"Forever 21 my favourite clothing brand..."

"Scandium is the atomic number 21..."

*Ok, that one was rare.* Coincidence or synchronicity? Speculation to think that within my existence was just a random sequence of like numbers, adding up and cashing out.

Somehow I was suspended in a surreal moment, and in two cars back I could see school aged children on their tablets typing 'UAD' - Up and died? Underage drinking has the same abbreviation, but it wasn't a habit I made use of. Obviously, I had made my mark, the subject of that morning's twitter traffic post. My matter of fact, mediocre life was ending. I was getting the crucial handshake.

My last thought before the steel slammed my ribs and knocked out my breath was to get back home and write in my journal that the whole bloody mystery of everlasting life reels like a small-town circus. There is no glamor in dying.

Time is not merciful. Mediocrity is a curse. My modus operandi foiled. I glanced at the coagulating pool of blood, the last of my awareness being sucked into a tunnel of a mirage, and in the middle was me. Living well never makes it easier to die ; but the art of dying well is just to live better.

I should have gotten a tattoo.

# WHEN BETSY ROSS TRIED TO PICK UP EDGAR ALLAN POE IN A BAR

By Maureen Mancini Amaturro

Fog rested upon a night so dreary, midnight seemed to mask the grey of early evening. When Martha arrived at the Philadelphia train station, she could barely spot the driver waiting to take her to Flags 'N More, her dear friend's upholstery shop. There, she would meet a woman who had been like a sister to her—Betsy, proprietor of one of the very few businesses run by a woman in that area. Martha had always found Betsy's moxie endearing and her gumption revolutionary. She had planned to arrive just as Betsy was finishing a long day's work so the two could dine then share girl-time chatting over a drink.

Betsy closed her upholstery shop for the evening and waited anxiously at the door. When Martha finally arrived, Betsy secured her friend's travel bag, and the two went off to enjoy a light supper. Afterward, they strolled arm in arm down cobbled streets, catching up along the way, until they arrived at Amontillado's, a brick-front drinking establishment with old-world charm situated on a dark Philadelphia side street only blocks from the shop—a spot they favored whenever they could share a girls' night out.

Once inside, they settled onto wooden stools at the center of the bar. Betsy raised her hand to attract the barkeeper. "Two rums, with soda, please." Adjusting their skirts and shawls, the two women rooted themselves among the revelers colonizing the dark tavern. "So, is George working again? Is that why he couldn't join you here for the weekend?"

Martha shrugged, "That's what he says. The man swears he never tells a lie, but if you ask me, I likely think he's carousing with Tom and that rowdy fellow, the short one with glasses. You know who I mean. He has more stomach than hair."

"Ben?"

"That's the one." Their drinks arrived, and Martha took a quick sip. "He has his hands in everything. Frankly, I wish he'd go fly a kite. I don't trust that man."

"You can trust George, I'd say. When it comes to love, he is a loyalist." Betsy put her hand to her mouth realizing her poor choice of words. "I mean that in a good way, you understand." They both laughed. Betsy sipped her rum. "Apparently, George trusts you. Not many husbands would be pleased to have a wife scurry away for a girls' weekend. You're lucky to have a husband you can count on. More than that, a husband who is still alive! For the love of tea, I had three die on me." Betsy tucked a loose curl into the elastic of her cap. She adjusted her shawl and scanned the candlelit room. "If I'm lucky, I'll find number four."

Martha held up her finger in pretend warning. "Betsy, such talk. Finding number four could be your ruin. Three is enough. Your kids are grown. Enjoy your freedom. Freedom is hard-won, my dear."

Betsy barely heard her friend's advice as her gaze had landed on a somber looking man across the bar, sitting alone, his jacket a bit tattered. She was intrigued by his brooding, raven eyes recessed beneath a rather high forehead, his brow an awning of despair. In front of him stood an almost empty bottle of cognac and some scattered papers. When not staring into space, he seemed engrossed in writing and scratching through words and rewriting, as if he could not hear the chatter, laughter, music, and noise in the small establishment. She poked Martha with her elbow. "Now there's an interesting fellow."

Martha rolled her eyes. "Honestly." She leaned left to get a better view. "Looks a bit raggedy to me."

"Raggedy? Yes, his clothes can do with some repairs. That I can handle. But there's mystery about him. I think I'll find out what his story is."

Martha put her hand on Betsy's forearm. "Careful, dear. You remember what happened the last time you approached a mysterious man."

"I certainly do." Betsey winked at Martha, and they both smiled. "I'm off. If you see me pull my hankie from my pouch—"

"I know the signal. I'll come to your rescue." Martha and Betsy lifted their drinks. They touched glasses. "To bombs bursting in air, as they say."

Betsy squeezed her way through Amontillado's patrons—friends in boisterous groups, couples twirling, inebriated revelers stumbling about—until she arrived at the empty stool next to the mysterious man. "Good evening."

He turned his head slowly and stared. "Is it good?"

"Is this stool taken?"

"It once was," he said.

"Well, if it isn't now, may I join you?"

He scratched away a sentence or two on the paper before him and didn't answer.

"I said, may I join you?"

Without looking at her, he answered, "If you wish."

"Am I intruding? You're busy, it seems."

Still not looking her way, he said, "All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream."

"That's quite poetic. Are you a writer?"

"Some say so, some think not." Finally, he turned toward Betsy. Lifting his cognac bottle, he raised his heavy brow in question.

Betsy nodded. "Yes, thank you. I think I will."

"I'll get you a glass." Holding the bottle higher, he looked to the bartender who was busy with other patrons. With such a crowd, he tried for some time to catch the steward's eye.

Betsy cleared her throat. "I'll flag him down." Betsy soon got her glass, and her mysterious man shared his cognac. As he poured, she asked, "What's your name?"

"Poe."

Betsy took a sip and tensed at the taste of the liquid, not her drink of choice. She slid the glass to the side. "A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Poe."

"Is it?" Poe drained his glass and refilled it.

She sidled onto the stool next to him and settled herself. "So, I haven't seen you here before. New in town?"

"Yes. Recently from Baltimore."

"Married?"

"For now."

Betsy took that to mean there was trouble at home. She moved her stool closer to him. "Shall we toast to your new life in Philadelphia?"

He raised his glass in front of him and downed every drop. "Life, the journey that carries us all toward death, the path we roam 'til our last breath."

"Not a very cheery fellow, are you?"

"Cheer? I am in the midnight of my life. I know no cheer. Be wary of cheer for beyond each grin lies payment for sin. I am paying dearly for any cheer I've known. Shortly, I will love alone." He held up his cognac. "This is but a requiem until toll the bells that whisk her soul to heaven and drag my soul to hell."

Not knowing what to say to that, Betsy cleared her throat. A bit uncomfortable at being at a loss for words, she squirmed on the stool, her unease showing. She glanced across the bar at Martha, who

had been watching her all along. Martha raised her brows and put a finger to her own chest as if to ask *should I come over there?* Betsy shook her head no. She turned to the man at her side. “Mr. Poe, I realize I have not properly introduced myself. I am Elizabeth, but my friends call me Betsy. I’m sure you have a first name. May I call you something more friendly than Mr. Poe?”

“I have been called a madman. I have been called a drunk. I would much rather be called Edgar.”

“Edgar, such an intelligent name. Tell me, Edgar, so where is your wife?”

Poe gathered his papers and carefully nestled them into a worn, brown, leather pouch at his side. He signaled the bartender for more cognac. Glancing at Betsy’s abandoned glass, he asked, “And for you?”

“Rum, please. With soda.”

Edgar pushed his jacket aside to reveal a torn, inner pocket. He pulled what was left of the money he had and placed it on the bar. “A rum and soda, as well.” Poe reached for Betsy’s abandoned glass of cognac and drank it dry.

“You were going to tell me about your wife,” Betsy said.

Leaning his head in his hands he slumped forward. “My wife. My love. My heart. At this moment, my wife wears the mask of the red death, confined to our bed, weakened by the struggle of every breath.”

Their drinks arrived, and Betsy reached for her glass. “Thank you, Edgar.” Each sipped their spirits. “So, your wife isn’t feeling well?”

Poe’s eyes peered over his glass and held a carving stare until he found the calm to speak. “Isn’t feeling well? More’s the truth she has a short time to live. I cannot remain in that house witness to her pain. Darkness in every room. What was our home is now a tomb. I come to Amontillado’s to bury sorrow, to escape her death, to flee the wheeze of her labored breath, to drown the thought she’s at death’s door, to brace for pain that lies before my darkest days yet to loom, to stand alone in painful gloom. To crawl with her beneath the ground, my tell-tale heart the only sound, to lie with her within her grave when there is no hope left to save, to remain as one when angels deem her life is done.”

Looking toward Martha, Betsy rolled her eyes. Martha mouthed, “Now?” Betsy shook her head no.

Betsy put her hand on Poe’s shoulder. “You’re feeling vulnerable now. I get it. But, you know, if she’s suffering, it will be for the best. You don’t want her to suffer, right? But you have to go on, my good man, though it isn’t easy. I know how you feel. I lost three husbands. Fate, go figure.” Betsy leaned in closer to Edgar. She pressed her hand to the tight stitching of his crumpled lapel to flatten it. Moving to his shoulder, she examined his unraveling seam and circled a loose thread around her finger. “I can fix this. I can have this jacket looking good as new, if you’d like. I’m good with a needle.”

Poe said nothing.

“Ok, then. Maybe this isn’t a good time. I guess it’s better that I leave you to your thoughts. If you’d like to get together sometime, maybe meet up here one Friday, I wouldn’t mind. My shop is only a few blocks away, and I’ve just completed a rather large government project, so I do have more free time now.” Betsy handed him her card, an American flag waved above her name. “When do you think you’ll be up for a little fun?”

Poe refreshed his cognac and drank it down. He took the card from her hand and stared at it. “Nevermore.”

Betsy rolled her eyes. *Well, I guess this isn’t going anywhere.* As they sat in silence for a few minutes, Betsy scanned the bar. Another man caught her eye. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Edgar. Thank you for the drink.”

“You, too, will leave me,” Edgar said staring into his cognac.

Betsy didn’t answer. She glanced at Martha across the bar. Martha raised her brows in question. With her eyes, Betsy led Martha to look at the new man she had spotted. When Martha saw who Betsy had her eye on, Martha’s hand went to her chest and she shook her head no.

"Excuse me, Mr. Poe. I must speak with my friend for a moment." Edgar nodded, but did not look up.

Betsy took her seat next to Martha and pointed to the new man of interest. "So, what do you think of that one?"

"No. No way. Anybody but him."

"What? Why?"

Martha leaned closer. "Don't you know who that is?"

"He's a handsome chap, and that's a rather handsome jacket he's wearing. I know good tailoring when I see it. Well-made. Likely paid a dear price for it." She hesitated. "And no wedding ring."

"You really don't know who that is?" Martha put her drink down.

Betsy looked at the well-dressed man again. "No clue. But I'm willing to find out."

"He can't be trusted." Martha put her arm on Betsy's to hold her back. "That's Benedict Arnold."

Betsy plopped onto the bar stool. "Just my luck." She adjusted her skirts. "Well, I guess this really is going to be a girls' weekend."

"Not necessarily. Look over there." Martha pointed to a man standing in the shadows toward the back of the bar. "He's been eyeing you all night."

Betsy casually glanced in his direction. She couldn't make out his features, but did notice he had a large, black case on the floor in front of him. "Hmm, might be a doctor."

"They make a pretty penny." Martha sipped her rum. "He's coming our way. You may have a chance at a new chap after all." When he was closer, Martha said, "Strange how he keeps his head bowed, as if he doesn't want to be recognized. And he's holding tight to that case. Why bring a doctor's bag to an establishment like this? I'm having second thoughts on this one."

"He's tall. Seems to be of good stature. I'd say he's a ripper of a man," Betsy said. "Let's see what he has to say for himself."

The man approached them. "Good evening, Ladies. May I introduce myself?"

"You may," Betsy said.

"I'm Jack."

"Just Jack?" Martha asked.

"I am well-known by Jack." He adjusted his grip on his bag.

Betsy said, "Well, not exactly a name that will go down in history." Martha and Betsy giggled. Jack did not.

"It is getting quite crowded in here. Would you care to take a walk with me?" He reached for a knife sitting atop the bar next to lemon wedges the bartender had just sliced. He turned it over in his hand fixed on the glint in the low lighting. He seemed to snap back to the moment. "The evening air is refreshing. What do you say, ladies?"

Martha and Betsy looked at each other and shrugged. "What have we got to lose?" Betsy said.

The three left the bar and walked off into the dark cobblestone streets. Jack walked between the ladies until Martha leaned forward and scooted to her friend's side. Their new gentleman friend nearly tripped over her skirt. "Excuse me. Just a little girl talk."

Jack remained close enough to hear them whisper. "There she is." Martha said to Betsy. "I told you she turned away from proper society."

"Is that Catherine? Catherine Eddowes? I heard she had fallen on hard times. Poor thing, now a lady of the night."

Jack's ears tingled. He looked across the street to the woman leaning in a dark doorway. He waited until Betsy and Martha had finished their conversation. "Excuse me, ladies. I'm afraid I completely forgot about a previous engagement." He lifted his bag and held it to his chest. "Sorry to miss the opportunity to enjoy your company further this evening. Such a bother when work cuts into private time." He glanced again at the lady of the night across the street. "Sometimes, responsibilities can be



murder on a person.” He tipped his hat. “Good evening. I hope you get home safely.” He crossed the street and turned a corner. He and the sound of his footsteps on the cobblestones vanished.

Martha and Betsy stood until they lost sight of him. “Well, I’ve been dumped before, but this one cut me to the quick. Let’s go, Martha.” Betsy pulled her shawl tighter. “Let’s go back to Amontillado’s. Maybe Edgar Poe is still there.”

Martha stepped back from her friend. “Really?”

“He can use some cheering up, and it’s still early. What’s a weekend without an adventure?”

“That’s what Colonel Prescott said when he and some friends went to Bunker Hill for the weekend. Some Saturday that turned out to be.” Martha slipped her arm through Betsy’s. They started walking in the direction of the bar.

Betsy tugged Martha to a stop. “Did you hear that?”

“That scuffle? Sounds like someone fell or is hurt,” Martha said.

They looked back in the dark, but could see nothing. “Maybe some street dogs tussling over a tasty garbage scrap.” Betsy strained to see what was causing the commotion, but the shadows of the night kept their secrets. “It’s gone quiet. Let’s go. Sounds as if they found what they were looking for, I’d say.” The ladies continued down the dark street until they reached the more bustling part of the neighborhood where they had begun their night. Amontillado’s was in view.

“Why are you so desperate for a man?” Martha asked. “You’ve got a home. You’ve got your own income. You’ve got your upholstery business.”

“Women do not live on thread alone.” Betsy winked. “Let’s find Poe.”

# IT ALL WORKS OUT

By Colleen McMahon

*Lucy Linkletter flinched when a voice intruded from the speaker in the room where she was writing. She glanced nervously from her sparse desk to the bassinet standing flush against her bed, but nothing stirred beneath the thin lavender blanket.*

*"I'm writing to him this minute," she answered the voice in a shouted whisper, suppressing aggravation. She lowered her pen onto filler paper and resumed her letter.*

Back to you, Tim. The 'guard' was reminding me to write to you. I know you consider them excellent nurses, but they are so authoritarian. No matter, though – these days I feel I can handle most anything.

The speed with which motherhood moves shocks me. Adam Sylvester is only three days old, but the bond is undeniable. We love each other already. Astoundingly, especially given how little weight I gained while pregnant, he is the hugest newborn imaginable. At 28 inches and almost 20 pounds, it's like he skipped through infancy.

Hearing his size, you're likely picturing a clod. Not so. Adam is darling and lively and has a winning personality, as lofty as that sounds for an infant. He smiles! I catch myself peeking into his mouth, half expecting to see a tooth. At this age I wouldn't think that was possible, but so much of what's been happening is extraordinary.

I discovered another marvel this afternoon. Adam loves to kiss! Once you start kissing him, you'd better be ready to go the distance, because he does not want to stop. I know it sounds too advanced, but I'm not imaging that he puckers after every kiss, and I swear he looks gleeful as each one lands on his lips. I can't get enough of him! It requires tremendous self-discipline to let him eat and sleep.

I told the nurses that I won't be breastfeeding, and they said that's smart since the other patients might give me a hard time if I breastfeed in the common spaces. They stare at us enough as it is. I hope they're not too envious of me with Adam, especially now with the extra space. Surely they see that a baby needs baby things which requires more room. I overheard you're funding it, Tim, so thanks for that.

Yep, the nurses were kibbitzing again about what a great guy you are, and too bad we didn't make it. I'm not saying you're NOT a great guy, but I'm thankful I have found friends here who get that I had every right to expect that the plans we made would happen. They agree you broke our vows when you decided you didn't want children. Wham! – you ended our family. You could see that you were breaking my heart, but all you would say was you made a difficult personal decision and refuse to discuss it further. And your ridiculous: "It'll all work out." You barely cared that I couldn't stop crying. I deserved so much better, Tim.

I know they've told you how bad it was after I first got here. You abandoned me! Another betrayal because I thought it was for a night or two. Which is why I was screaming and crying nonstop. Then they warned me high blood pressure would jeopardize the pregnancy, so I made myself calm down for the baby. I even started trying to forgive you to reduce my stress - I hope they told you that part.

I'm sure the doctor explained what happened next, but I'd like you to hear my perspective. I'd been calm for almost a week when in group one night this new patient says, all high and mighty, "Do you think it was fair of you to blame your Tim for changing his mind?" Of course, I defended myself and explained that discovering I was already pregnant made it even worse. I confided how overjoyed I was, how I thought that would fix everything and you would be thrilled, too, but instead you insisted I wasn't pregnant. You called it a hysterical pregnancy and took me only to doctors whom I'm sure you paid to say the same thing.

Well, I couldn't stop talking, and next thing, I'm telling the group about the night when I said you didn't have to stay and be the dad. And how you yelled at me that I wasn't the mom because there wasn't a baby, and I got so upset I grabbed a steak knife just to freak you out. But then I tripped, lunging forward and piercing your side. We were both in shock. You knew it was mostly an accident, though, so you convinced me to come here to get checked out, but I never dreamed you would abandon me!

Well, retelling it all in group really wound me up... sent me into labor. I remember being in tremendous pain and people were shouting and running around. Then nothing.

I woke up and I was in my new room. Adam Sylvester, snugly swaddled, was lying on my chest! You won't understand this, Tim, but that immediately made all I've been through worth it.

I must end this letter now. Nurse Franny will be back any second with my medication. Look, I hope you don't think I'm rubbing it in about how great Adam is. It just seems right that you know he's healthy and that everyone thinks he's a real doll. You can be proud he's your son. Nonetheless, it would be confusing for him if you visit. Better for him to think you walked out on us totally – which except for the money is true, right?

Before he was born, Tim, I thought I couldn't make it without you. But motherhood brings confidence. Plus, I have the nurses and my new friends here to help me if I need it, and I have Adam to dote on and to bring me joy. So, this is goodbye for us, Tim. In one thing anyway, you were right - it all worked out.

# WHEN LILACS BLOSSOM

By Delaney Olmo

The first thing I wanted to do when I moved back onto the Reservation was start a garden. I scattered the lilac seeds into the ground, but it was too early for them to grow. With my fingers cupped into bony palms, I pushed the seeds into the neat holes. Grandma watched me from the porch with her shovel in her hands ready to assist me. Through the fog I could see her round frame in her plum colored anorak jacket, and her white tennis shoes. Her face hidden by the large fog cloud surrounding our Reservation.

In late April, the flowers had begun sprouting. On our walk to the burial site one morning I noticed green patches. She had woken me earlier than usual and asked me to accompany her to clean headstones. I screamed in excitement at the small little bushes huddled together near the Burial Site. Grandma placed abalone shells around the small bushes, as if they were an offering to my relatives who permanently laid to rest through combed mounds around us. Next to the giant oak tree I moved several shells over. Together we walked back to our small snug bungalow.

One morning I went to peak at the flowers near the Burial Site. Some of the bushes had become wider splintering from beneath the red clay earth. I noticed several of the shells had been turned over and scattered further away from where we had left them. Purple buds were starting to emerge from the stems and pointed towards the large oak tree. Between my thumb and index finger I examined the bud and its light mica speckles of purple. Behind me I heard rustling coming from what I thought was the oak tree. I watched a blue jay fly over the headstones, and quickly realized the noises came from it. Even then, I couldn't force myself to move until I heard Grandma calling for me from the bungalow. I darted into that direction accidentally ripping the bud off from the stem.

At the end of the summer, grandma began to teach me about blackberries and how to harvest them. We walked into the forest near the old wooden well-house, and she pointed to me the Blackberry vines that stretched for miles. As far as the eye could see were plump onyx colored berries. Before I could eagerly trot towards the vine, she had stopped me. Her hand in front of my body, she motioned for the woven basket filled with freshly harvested sage. We placed it below the vineyard, and thanked Creator for the fruit. I don't know if Creator likes black berries, but he provides us with plenty. We picked only the plumpest and ripest berries from the vine and left behind many others.

For a few years, this was my life. But once, grandma became sick, and I started to take care of her. I had little time to join grandma for gardening near the burial site. I had not even noticed when weeds began emerging the Earth crowding my lilacs in place with only abalone shells for refuge. Most of my time I spent in school or finishing assignments. The lilacs no longer budded from the red clay earth. Instead, yellow and green weeds surrounding what remains of my lilacs. Grandma is bed ridden now mostly, and I had to plead with the Tribe to allow a nurse to come visit us. First, they brought a

medicine man whose medicines made her too tired. After I complained they listened to my pleas to allow a nurse to drive up 4 days a week offering to pay for it.

One morning I awoke to grandma missing from her bed. Her cotton quilt covers bundled on the floor. Her wheelchair was gone. I tried listening to see if I could hear its squeaks from the other rooms in our small home. I heard nothing. I quickly got myself dressed and ran to the kitchen to see the calendar on the fridge door mentioned the nurse wasn't coming until tomorrow. I pushed open the front door and started panicking. It was raining and mud was surrounding our patio. I tried to look for footprints, walker tracks, anything. I knew the closest neighbors who lived miles away would not be awake this early. It took me a moment to realize, but in the distance, I could see the burial site, and the giant oak tree behind her. I jogged towards that direction, and found grandma in her blue rain poncho, seated in her wheelchair. Near her feet were several terracotta pots. Her round fingers placed the pots over the remaining lilac buds. The uprooted weeds lay next to her walker and tiny shovel.

By the time summer arrived, and I was ready to graduate High School. The lilacs started to blossom again with grandma's help. With a tin bucket in my hand I walked on the old dirt road near the wooden well-house. In my coat pocket a stem of fresh angelica root for the offering. It's earthy herby smell permeating through my coat pocket. I gathered handfuls of blackberries one by one thumping into the basket. I remembered what grandma told me about over picking. I left many blackberries behind for the others. On my way home, I walk past the Burial Place, and scattered a few black berries over some headstones. I imagined even in death black berries still taste sweet from a freshly picked harvest.

When the apples near the orchards begin ripening at the end of September, grandma started finally walking again with the help of the nurse. Grandma tried to help around the house with my chores in little ways, but I pleaded with her to let me do them. Every other day, I would take the old Res Car and drive into the City for my classes. Along the way home I stopped by the local store to get her medicine. The nurse still comes by a few days a week, but the drive up the craggy hill seemed to be a challenge for her. I wanted to make sure grandma had everything she needed. When I finally come home, grandma was at the burial site watering some of the flowers and placing gathered acorns into her hand basket. She promised me we would make acorn-bread later, and hands me some to give to our neighbors down the road. The lilacs were luscious and full of life. Some have finally begun sprouting near trail to the oak tree.

In November, the weather has become foggy with light rain. Driving to the city has become more of a hassle now, so I dropped a few classes to lighten my load. Sometimes the power outages force us to light candles for a few hours at a time. Grandma preferred to be without her walker, and waits for me to come home most days. She shown me how the rain drenches the red wood trees around us, will help with the soil for our spring strawberry harvest. When I worried about the Lilacs, she reminded me of how she had shielded them after cleaning the headstones.

"We have to remember our ancestors they always remember us" she said to me smiling and sipping her instant coffee in her ceramic mug. In the distance, I saw lavender blurs, shielded by red clay pots with water droplets falling onto the wet earth.

# 1873

By Özge Özşen

A tall, dark clothed man was riding his horse through the only street of a small town in the middle of the desert, a long way from anywhere important. His only follower was a big Shepherd Dog and the wondering stares of curious residents. The stranger bared the weary eyes of a rambler and the stance of a general as he slowly rode his horse without turning his head towards the direction of hectic whisperings of his admirers. As he passed the wooden buildings one by one, many people were already continuing their day, except for one young man. He looked more than twenty years younger than the stranger and with every step he took his thin figure looked like it struggled to keep his body standing. He was so funny looking that the stranger was not bothered by his presence at all as he saw the boy walking directly towards him. Once they were somewhat facing each other, the stranger looked down from his horse to this overly confident boy and made a vague gesture with his hand to indicate that whatever he wanted to say, it was better for him if he kept it quick. With his voice still cracked, the young man asked with the most daring tone,

“Are you Bill Carson? The legendary gunslinger of Van Zandt County?”.

The stranger was clearly unnerved by his preceding reputation.

“Who’s asking?” his eyes shifted away from him.

The young man continued.

“Well my name is John Clark, and I happen to be the best shooter around here, ask anyone. Now from my experiences in a situation like this, one of the sides always ends up dead. But my question is would you like to die without trying when I shoot you down like a dog on the street or accept my invitation for a duel and die like a man?”

Bill finally looked at this immature young man with despise and confusion for a moment as he tried to comprehend the seriousness of the question.

“As much as I’d like to send you down to the very bottom of hell personally, I’m retired, and I have a plan on staying that way.”

Then he got off from his horse and turned his back to a very disappointed John and started to tie his horse to the wooden bars in front of the saloon’s porch. Even though it was a pleasant and cool afternoon, not many people were around in this occasion to back John up for the sole excitement of an event like this. After all everyone in the town wanted to see some action every once in a while to contrast their simple lives. But still John was not ready to give up and certainly was not going to let Bill humiliate him like that, even though Bill’s attention on him had already faded away. So he jumped over the bars to the porch, this time towering over Bill.

“Well I never thought that a son of a gun like you would run away from a duel. Too bad that old age brings cowardliness too.”

Bill looked up with his brown eyes piercing through John’s soul,

“It’s not running away boy, it’s living another day.” and saluted John with his hat before disappearing behind the swinging doors, leaving him without the closure he asked for.

Inside the saloon the dust that floated around was visible in the few streams of sunlight and Bill was nothing more than another unnamed paying customer. He sat on the stool, closest to the door, and looked around, an old man asleep in a drunken haze on the other end of the counter, a worn out barroom girl with a man desperately trying to entertain her and four men quietly playing a game of five card stud by the corner. Bill bought a shot of whiskey and then another and noticed that the four men at the card table were having an argument. He looked at them for a while, trying to figure out the deal between them but after one of the players was thrown out by the other three and kicked until he could not even call for help the reason seemed severely insignificant.

They went back to their table in the corner like nothing happened, back to their quiet state. But before Bill could look away one of the men noticed him. Instead of another pointless intimidation the man pointed to the newly vacant chair and asked,

“Want to join in amigo?”

Now Bill was a good shooter for sure but a bad card player that enjoyed the game way more than he should. Although he knew that too he was in no position to decline and with the encouragement of alcohol he accepted the polite invitation. So Bill stood up, poured himself and drank one last shot and picked up his hat from the stool beside him.

This time Bill got lucky for a while and his lips laughed as they spoke each time and his burning eyes were filled with greedy vapors. First he turned his dollar into two and then into four as flushes fell on him like water and tens they paired and paired again but the Aces called no man friend. By the end Bill was left facing a farmer in dirty jeans and an old shirt who looked nothing like he knew anything about cards that sighed and trembled as he watched his hard-earned money go during the entire game.

Now the farmer he checked and Bill bet all and the farmer he raised and Bill did call and his smile just melted on his face when the farmer turned over a Diamond Ace. At first Bill was too puzzled, even to get furious, it was almost like his brain was struggling to process what had just happened. It was only when the trio of friends started laughing at him and his stupidity real loud could he come to his senses. So he got up and went back to his stool by the door very slowly in an unsuccessful attempt to hide his embarrassment and drank with whatever dime he got left like the money he lost was at the bottom of that bottle.

After getting quite drunk by the time he finished the bottle, with no signs of his money, Bill and the bartender decided that it was his time to leave, for the sake of his own wellbeing. Although he somewhat limped and stumbled his way towards the door at first, by the time he reached them he was able to shake the drunkenness off and looked almost the same as he first walked in. It was a precious skill that he acquired throughout his life, thanks to the rough world and red Port wine.

When Bill got out there was young John, leaning on the same wooden bars that he tied his horse to a couple of hours ago. But the dog was nowhere to be found. At first Bill had a hard time forming a decent sentence but then slowly mumbled,

“Were you waiting out here this whole time?”

John was visibly proud.

“Hell yeah I was. Who did you think was going to look out for your horse and all your stuff while you were inside getting mellow?”

Bill noticed a small dark red stain on the dirt.

“What have you done to my dog?” Bill asked, almost teary eyed.

With an innocent smile on his bony face, John said “I ain’t done nothing to him Mister. Maybe he thought you weren’t coming back after all and ran off.”

Bill stumbled back, almost falling down and grabbed the piece of wood his horse was tied to.

“Look kid just tell me what you want, and we’ll part our ways from here, how does that sound? You want money? I ain’t got none left, believe me.”

John looked hurt, almost offended.

“You don’t get it do you old man? It’s not about the money, it’s about the reputation. It’s about being the guy who shot and killed Bill Carson.”

A warm rage was spreading faster and faster throughout Bill’s body as the words poured out of John’s mouth. Without even noticing himself, Bill reached for the gun strapped on his belt, slow enough that only a careful eye would see and no one else, but took it out, aimed and pulled the trigger so fast that poor John did not even have the chance to move his eyes and see the gun that took his life. A couple of people around them turned and looked at the body on the ground, gasped and ran away to find somewhere to hide.

Their reactions or the twisted body lying by his feet meant nothing to Bill. He had done this way too many times than he should have. It just meant that he could live another day.



# SCREAM

By Marina Rubin

...Everything was going great. After a week in Barcelona I was on my way to the airport to catch a flight to Santiago de Compostela.

“You must be walking the Camino?” the concierge asked as I was checking out.

“I am.”

“Are you looking for God?”

“No,” I chuckled. “I just like to walk.”

The concierge was very kind; he gave me a print-out of how to get to the airport — 2 stops to Barcelona Sants then transfer for the train to the airport. I was perfectly calm as I made it to Sants, went upstairs to check which platform for the airport shuttle. Track 9-10. I got on the train at track 9 that left on schedule. A bunch of teenagers were frolicking around me. I ate an apple and a piece of chocolate. I thought to double-check if the train was going to the airport and they all said “No.”

I jumped up.

They said not to worry, just take the train back at the next station. But the problem with Barcelona trains is that unlike NY trains that stop every 3-5 minutes, the distance between stations in Spain could easily be 25-30 minutes, and the train I was on was not stopping, it just kept going and going. I looked at my print-out; I had already missed the right train and will miss the next one and probably the one after that. Since this was a domestic flight I allowed for an extra hour, but not two. Ok Plan B – I thought to myself, get off the train and take a cab to the airport.

When I got off the train it was later than I had hoped. I stood outside the station taking in the 360 view of my surroundings — a parking lot and not a single cab in sight. Sunday afternoon at the height of siesta.

Panic set in.

An old man appeared out of nowhere, I asked him where I could find a cab, he shrugged and pointed at an Ikea-like building. I bolted towards it rolling my suitcase. The security guard standing outside told me to go to the end of the mall and get out on the other side, they might have cabs there. I ran through the mall that resembled an abandoned supermarket in Chernobyl, with every storefront closed and not a single living thing around. The road on the other side was not any better, parked cars and a slumberous village.

I stood on the sidewalk.

I had traveled enough in my life, made tight connecting flights, walked through dodgy alleys to know that I was screwed. Unless there was a helicopter coming to lift me out of here, I didn’t see how I was going to make my flight. So, I did what any experienced, self-respecting traveler would do. I screamed.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAA.”

As loud as I could, an earsplitting, desperate, unapologetic howl.

A man crossing the street with his dog stopped and stared at me. I shouted to him if he knew

where I could find a cab, he aimed at some distant intersection.

I dashed down the block, yelling, crying, begging God to help me, get me out of here, send me that one freak cab that was dropping off some little old lady at the local doctor's office, or got lost in this neighborhood, just like me. I ran into an empty restaurant and asked a Chinese girl to call me a cab, but she shook her head and directed me towards the road. I continued racing, full-on hysteria now, cursing, sobbing, flagging down random cars on the street. Two women with groceries stopped to help, told me to take a shortcut through the private houses to get to the next intersection. I turned to run towards the houses when I saw him — a young man in a tracksuit and sunglasses, standing on the corner, the doors to his SUV open.

"Airport?! Airport!?" He waved to me.

"Yes!" I ran towards him. "How much?"

Without even waiting for response, I jumped in his car.

I settled in the front seat as he threw my suitcase in the trunk. He pressed on the gas and we flew down sleeping streets of Catalonia. I was talking nonstop, telling him how this whole thing started, about the wrong train, and the strange mall. I thanked him profusely.

"Tranquilo...Tranquilo," was all he kept saying.

When I was finally able to catch my breath, I looked around the car — there was no meter or medallion pinned to the windshield, the guy wasn't a cab driver, he couldn't answer any questions, he didn't speak English.

It occurred to me that it's possible I was being kidnapped, maybe even robbed, raped, killed, it's possible, yes — I nodded to myself, it's possible. But can I still make my flight? flashed through my mind on a residual high. I stared ahead at the fleeting roads, the fields, the high-speed motorway, I searched for any signpost or billboard pointing to the airport. I turned my head and examined the stranger's back seat — a baby chair and a crumpled vest in a highlighter-lime color that gave me a strange sense of comfort.

The young man pointed to the clock and threw a badge in my lap. I held it in my hand and snapped a photo of it with my phone as some kind of evidence. I looked at it closely. An airport employee badge...A highlighter-lime vest in the back seat...He is a baggage handler — I snapped my fingers in revelation! No, it can't be. It just can't. This kind of coincidence, the magnitude of magic, the size of miracle...I would sooner believe he was a rapist and a killer than a baggage handler at the airport.

I watched the roads carefully, nail-biting, doubting, shifting, my eyes searching for arrows to the airport, still not believing... Because if that was true — I quickly chalked a mathematical equation in my head — if that was true, if he was indeed a baggage handler, then God exists, and he hears, and he answers and he is so beautiful, so glorious, that he is the most magnificent thing in the world...No it can't be true. I refused to believe it.

It was only when I saw the wings of the planes in the distance, giant aluminum birds standing on the ground in the afternoon mist, that I shook my head and smiled, proof on the blackboard.

He dropped me off at Terminal 2, Iberia Airlines check-in. He wouldn't take any money, he handed me my suitcase and jumped back in his car, I sensed he was late for his shift. I looked at my watch — it was exactly the time I would have arrived had I taken the right train. I stood in the sundrenched terminal, swaying, my eyes closed... the most magnificent thing in the world...

# THE OTHER SIDE OF WAR

By Josiah Vallone

“I just don’t think we’re the same people anymore” is what began the conversation, his words as emotionally distant as the last two years. He painted the cabinets in his new apartment, blue eyes staring intently on each pale stroke against the oak finish, avoiding any contact with my own. “I think we should stop talking for a while... or, take break for the next few-”

I knew this was coming, the coldness crept in just as slowly as this past winter – but here I was, standing in his blizzard.

“-I agree. I think we should end things,” I replied hotly. I was prepared for it. I had written letters of apologies, fiery letters demanding apologies, letters of regret. I cried for him already, letting my emotions get the best of me for a man with the emotional capability of a frozen robot. I wasn’t going to let him see me upset, not any of my blazing emotions – I sat on his floor, and leaned my back against the kitchen wall, feeling the coldness sweep the ground from under the floorboards, watching him paint.

His apartment was empty; just a few scattered pieces of torn cardboard blown across his grey floors from his recent move-in. The only piece of furniture he had was a mattress, which we slept on once. He pushed me away throughout the night, unraveling my arms around him every time I searched for his warmth. His bedroom window hung open, but he was at peace in the chill of the draft. I used to lay in bed at night and wonder what kind of coldness infected him as a kid or young adult. I would stare at him, watching his goosebumps spike as he slept. Watching him shiver. Every attempt to wrap a blanket around would go rejected. He liked the cold, even in its suffering. He is the cold. I leaned in for a kiss that last morning – he pushed me away with a glacial distance, and that’s when I knew our time together was dying.

Disasters have a way of pulling strangers together or ripping people apart. I guess we were just one of those people.

“I’m impressed we made it through COVID,” he blurted into the silence, “and me moving back home to New York for the past ten months... didn’t think we would last this long doing the long-distance thing,” he says.

“I would have never done it if I knew that things wouldn’t be normal by the end of the month” I reply heated. I thought that things would be normal after spring break. Admittingly, that was a naïve thought. Then I thought we would be back together by time summer rolled around. Then after summer. Then by the end of the year.

We both sit quietly in his small apartment; almost a year later. It’s like we’ve both gone away to war, and everything has changed from the moment we left the world to the moment we began to return. He is back, but things are different now. The world is not the same. I am not the same woman. He is not the same man. In some ways it feels like March never ended – in other ways, it is all I know of now. I know of faceless crowds who are scattered at a frigid distance. I know of a promise that things will get better, feel warmer, but watching the pandemic linger like a fictional winter.

“Do you still want to go ice skating later?” I say, realizing that my one bit of normalcy I have clung onto is now falling away.

“No.”

“Okay.” I brush my hands across my thighs as if I’m dusting off snow. I don’t know why I do that when I’m nervous. Maybe to brush away my thoughts.

“Sorry,” he says, like always.

“No, it’s okay,” I say, as always.

Nothing surprises me anymore. Not the world staying in lockdown. Not the escalating deaths. Not a breakup from a boy who asked if he could come to my sister’s wedding the day before we ended things. Not the fact that time and distance could turn two lovers into complete strangers.

“Well, it was nice talking,” he says, which means *I think you should go*.

“Yeah... I think I should go. I have things to do today...” my words feel polar, an arctic breeze escaping my lips. Maybe I’m becoming frigid as well. I stand up, wondering if I should give him one last hug or kiss – I head for the door instead, and close the past behind me as I step outside. We never said goodbye.

I walk back home, a snug jacket to keep me warm. A part of me wishes he’ll open the door, call my name, and that things will work out – a part of me is exhilarated by the freedom of not having been hurt any longer. I retrace my steps like footprints in the snow to unearth how it all started. It’s difficult to tell – little things changed every day, and then one day I looked back and didn’t recognize myself or the person I was in love with. I wasn’t the one, and it was never my responsibility to fix him. But I guess that’s what a person does when they’re in love, they take responsibility for the other person’s pain, take on their coldness.

A few weeks pass by, and I still have his extra toothbrush beside my bathroom sink; it sits there mocking me, reminding me that I haven’t moved on. I wonder if he still has mine, or how many days it took before he tossed it in the trash. I drink from the mug he gave me on my birthday, but it only ever leaves a bitter taste nowadays. I question how long time should pass before I box up everything he ever gave me, left behind, or made me believe, and leave it on his front doorstep in the open cold.

I haven’t spoken to him since things broke off, but I still see him in everything I do. I look at myself in the mirror, and see him in the way I dress, all in black. I hear him in the things I say, the tone of my laugh, when I tell new men *I’m not looking for anything serious right now*, as they attempt to break through my own iciness. I’ve gone on a dozen dates with different men, all nice in their different ways, but it isn’t enough. Their warmth is too much for me to bear, I’d rather let my heart stay frozen in time. I disappear from strangers’ beds at 2:00 a.m. like a ghost in the night.

In my moments of reminiscent feelings, a breeze a warmth comes back through. I close my eyes and think of the hot mugginess of Honolulu, the pads of my feet being swallowed by the snowy limestone sand. The beach was empty, just a few mask-less faces scattered across the shoreline. We still had hours left until our hotel check-in, and a spontaneous attitude, which resulted in our luggage being strewn across the sand as we swam until the end of the day. The sunset was a calm lavender hue, and the water mirrored the same lilac colors in a glittering fashion. I remember inching into its body slowly, feeling out the tide’s strength and the steep descension of the shoreline. On the other hand, he jumped in, and instead of bracing against the crashing saltwater, dove beneath the violet waves billowing towards him.

“What are you looking at?” He said, staring intently at me with his Pacific eyes in a moment of stillness between the waves.

“You,” I replied, my smile radiating.

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I’m just happy, that’s all. I’m really happy.”

A wave came crashing behind him, and I braced myself too.

Later that night, both of us wrapped in our bed, he said, “I don’t think we’ll be going back to school after spring break... this COVID stuff is looking bad. Colleges are shutting down and students are moving back to their parents' home...,” and that’s when the distance began.

Six weeks have passed since we broke up, and a year since the lockdowns began. I can feel spring coming around, even through its coldness. The daffodils are always first, and then the birds come chirping back, and that’s when I know that winter is over. It’s a good reminder that everything that passes always comes back new, and that the coldness never takes away from the warmth that eventually comes back. I watch the icicles melt from the rooftops. More people are getting vaccinated every day, and I know springtime is almost here. I get a text that says, “I miss what we had.” There are less cloudy days. I feel my heart thawing – beating again – a small but fighting beat. He says he’s on the fence on getting back together. I focus inwards like the seasons, which come and go, but always restore themselves.

I question if things fall apart for them only to come back stronger. Perhaps things will be better than before COVID-19 began. The flowers may be more vibrant than before winter took them away. A lost relationship may come back stronger. Or perhaps the lesson is that everything changes, and nothing remains the same.

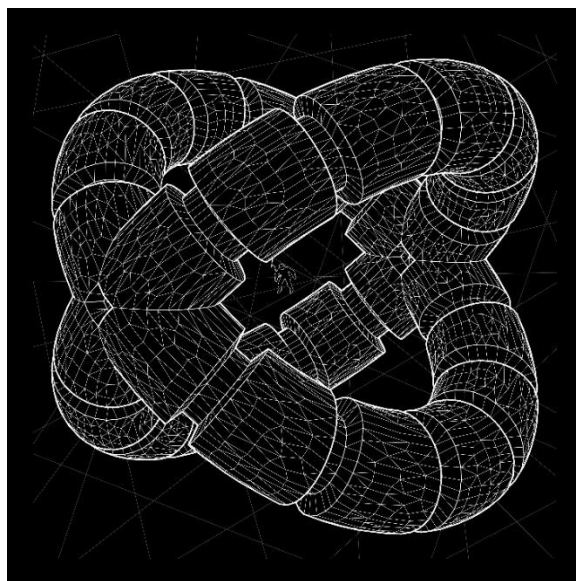
I just don’t think we’re the same people anymore.

# **FEATURED ARTWORK**

By Edgar Betancourt



**LAS MESAS, SULTEPEC, ESTADO DE  
MÉXICO, MÉXICO**



**LOST-01**

**POETRY**

# HORNETS

Glen Armstrong

The church bell rings  
and the hornets that nest

within its tower shake  
from their world.

They can't recall  
last Sunday's disruption,

their heads too small  
to store more

than a minute,  
too small to understand

a season  
or a lover framed

by an entranceway.  
Life at that scale

stands still as it shakes.  
Life at such a scale

bores into an overripe  
pear attempting

to become  
that which beckons.



# LANGUAGE OF THE HANDS

Allison Bentz

come to me and see me  
watch my hands move                      I sign to you  
a sentence not made of words                      but motion  
fingers and hands form a three-dimensional language  
expressions and actions add the fourth dimension to it  
poetry is a fist opening as it moves outward from the chest  
writing is a mime of holding a pencil and scribbling on a flat hand  
you watch with wondering eyes  
as I show you the silent language      my hands moving  
through the air              transforming from one shape to another  
there are no words expressed              only concepts and shapes  
a language made of mimes and expressions              beholden to the concrete and the abstract  
of dimensionality and transformation

# ACQUIRED TASTES

Christian Cacibauda

Adulthood is an age  
of acquired tastes:  
champagne, cigars,  
pâté, caviar—  
stuff no one wastes  
on children.

No more candied  
platitudes of youth—  
those chestnuts etched  
in sugar hearts:  
*Tomorrow is another day.*  
*I will always love you.* No,

the grown-up's mouth  
has tasted dust  
inhaled smoke—  
discerns with ease  
the finer vintages of both.  
It knows bitterness

and heaviness  
make for strong black coffee—  
loves the acid in lemon,  
and the tannin in cranberries.  
And sometimes  
something bland

satisfies entirely:  
A morning drive.  
A nine-to-five.  
Plain Greek yoghurt.  
The sweet tooth survives,  
of course. It hides.

It goes about cloaked  
in studied pomp and preference

until the wandering palate  
gropes back home  
to mac 'n' cheese  
or birthday cake—

just one last taste  
for old times' sake.

# KENNING

Delilah Dennett

She wears the stars in her eyes  
That are somehow never broken  
Except when figures carrying dark silhouettes  
Clamour for her heavenliness -

And even though the light is strained,  
Ripped from eyes that once sipped the violent sky  
Through portals of iris glass,  
She still has the darkness of her sullen mouth  
To contend with those that dare  
Steal that rainbow of her living lights.

All she has are the words given to her by ancestors  
Carved in wooden memory that she has learned to forget  
In the dark recesses of a mind once lost-  
So they will come in use when the time comes.

# TOP FIVE LIFE LESSONS LEARNED FROM SATURDAY MORNING CARTOONS

L A Felleman

#5. It is better to be Velma on the inside,  
Daphne on the outside

#4. If propelled through a portal to a lost land  
of dinosaurs and aliens,  
people will adapt  
to wearing the same outfit every day

#3. It is better to be the hero,  
than the monkey sidekick

#2. If there is an Isis,  
there must be a Shazam  
in order to preserve the symmetry  
of the scheduled order

#1. The Constitution sounds better  
when all of We The People sing

# JUNETEENTH

Paweł Grajner

19 rotations in  
on the month of half of 12,  
before the march of Caesars,  
Kaisers,  
Tzars,  
what-have-you. In the year of “perfect vision,”  
the forest is silent enough  
to hear the Interstate a few swamps away  
dumping trucks onto I-65 or around Gary.

To deny the Enlightenment today  
Is to deny any case:  
To sleep through the stumps.  
Not see the egret nor the crane.

Whatever there is today  
is through a gas  
of steel and luck. Doubt me:  
Send me to the underworld.

If you dare love me,  
be more prejudiced:  
Hate more.  
Distaste.  
Be disgusted on a grand scale.  
Know no bounds.

Boundless!

Grow like a hate balloon.  
Stranded for some reason like a birth,  
or Death - to be plain -  
or a right of passage,  
now tangled  
on a log eaten from the dune by the lake,  
and

Pop!

“I hate” balloons everywhere!

Wave your hands when you say it.

Always filled with the air before or after  
some phoney argument  
possibly about the utility of sports.

Sports!

If you don't believe

it's all fixed...

Say it like you think Bud Powell sounded.

Mixing up names...

No. The Enlightenment for the children  
of European civil wars,  
especially here in the Americas,

All too real.

To accept this conclusion  
is to accept responsibility for it.  
To own all the colonialism.  
To love the principles involved.

More –

to adore them.  
To sing and dance them!  
And hate not living them  
(That's about the above.)  
now,  
or in the past.

To work for and through those principles.  
To make it work.  
And to ditch those principles that don't serve.

Make the republic serve all!  
Make it. For those who love  
The ones the virus took most:

White supremacy  
causes  
so  
much  
pain.

Good ol' pain  
doled out dully  
without fanfare.  
or battle flags.

Just privilege,  
that sick joke,  
by silence and inaction.

That's of the republic I sing.

That old-fashioned thing  
around our shared misfortunes: Practical inventions of all sorts.

So fortunes, too.

Everything meaningful.

All that music.  
Those great ideals so mistrusted for better reasons  
today.

Celebrate Juneteenth because.  
Like the commercial on the radio said about showering:  
'It's good for you.'

Celebrate Juneteenth  
- "every day!"



# FIERY BALL OF CHAOS

TA Harrison

This is an inevitability  
It's been written in the stars  
On every page of my life's book  
The footnotes of God's plan  
I can't stop it  
Nor slow it  
It is coming eventually

I can taste it on the edges of every meal  
Every kiss  
Every sip of wine  
The barrel  
Already in my mouth  
It's been there for decades  
Placed between my teeth  
Wedge between my lips  
Wedge by circumstance  
By genetics and heritage  
It rests uncomfortably there  
Cold on my molars  
Like a watchman  
God's sentinel  
Waiting for the right moment  
The exact predestined date  
To evacuate its chamber  
To rid itself of the lead and brass cancer in its belly  
And the world of a man who did his best  
But failed

Until then  
Until that epic moment  
I'll continue to love and fuck and burn  
I'll keep good company  
Sing and drink with pirates and winos  
Keep getting high with debutants  
With the good girls of earth  
And maybe  
Just maybe  
I'll burn out  
Explode in a fiery ball of chaos before the gun can get me

# FROM CITY OF LOSS [11]

David Harrison Horton

In water and under,  
the shore remains a constant  
in the geography of distance.  
This time or that time,  
no matter in this  
mathematics,  
as tomorrow is just another name  
for today.  
This feeling or that,  
no matter in this  
assessment,  
as most feelings are false  
and will change later  
upon reckoning.  
That I have hope -- without cause --  
is sufficient.  
That my belly is full is sufficient.  
That I have an idea of the shoreline  
and so an end, obtainable or not, in mind  
must suffice, as it  
is all I have at the moment  
between gasps for breath  
and mouthfuls of ocean.

# FROM CITY OF LOSS [12]

David Harrison Horton

We put a number on a year  
to mark the passing  
of one man's death.  
The change of number,  
unlike the change of seasons,  
has very little meaning,  
except to prove the chasm  
that exists  
between God and man.  
You take a mountain by strategy,  
and the land beneath  
by force.  
You suffer your doubts,  
their function without form,  
tangibility,  
chafe  
like wearing ill-fitting shoes  
on a very long march.  
You learn to reconcile, where able,  
and accept, where you aren't.  
You draw breathes without wonder.  
This world, without wonder, whiles.  
The shadows in the distance  
remain shadows,  
dross and remnants.  
These stacked stones  
represent a history,  
which the wind denies,  
pointing towards the gulf  
that remains  
between what is and was.

# APOCALYPSE SONG

Emma Johnson-Rivard

Imagine the heat death of the universe.  
Everything dust. The chorus goes on.  
Even now I am drawn to morbid things.  
Ant hills drawn over a dead bird. A crown made of bones.  
This is our kingdom defined.  
Bookwise, our empire song has ended.  
Leaving anger as currency.  
How much will you pay?  
Wrong question. How much will you build  
upon this back of mine?  
Ash. Soil. Ash again.  
What will you grow?

# GRENDDEL'S MOTHER

Jonathon Jones

The storm outside draws a borrowed name  
for a severed head. All dying burns,  
and nothing fails mythology  
like diversity.

Supremely talented you say;  
light lacks discrimination. Songs  
are no longer sung for the death  
of Grendel's mother.

Three years or more  
"I am myself again"  
less well convinced than  
un-persuaded.

The second day the river broke,  
between your hands. Your heart's  
ripe cold, receding,  
seeking purpose, well disguised.

Too soon again the end of day,  
the end of day, that gave no cause  
like a closed down shop. No light  
to be born in this darkness.

Good. These days of old  
foretold misunderstanding.  
Ears ringing with the horror  
of magnetic fire.

I'll sing along.

# EQUAL

Beverly Joyce

It is a lie to say we are all made equal  
when one man gets to feel the sun on his face for a century  
while another knows misery at just eight years old.

The scale slants like a fat yellow laddie pencil put to extra wide-ruled paper, down.

The rings of Saturn cry in my ear.  
On their shadows go, round no left fourth finger but ever so binding  
that even if they were to fade away still Chronos would he be.

To say *things are looking up* implies hope is to be found  
in that place that ever stares toward the ground.

Like the tale tip told through its bumpy trail plotted on paper  
do we crane at a starlight sky in wish to find in those burning dots answers.

To say the rays also rise means they surely do fall.  
Perhaps in the fall is when we know ourselves.  
In the pile of leaves gone brown.  
Here, in the dirt where we bury our hands months before so life may reach for taller things.

Everybody knows what it is like to one day have life change and to never be the same again.

All must end sometime.

Is what is there then still life?  
Or is what remains something else by another name?

Time pockets marbles. Thumb swirls them as he walks along.  
How many moons the sixth marble has make him no more or less himself.

And so it seems despite the tilt of things which make me, here yet I am.  
Is this the truth we map the sky to find?     *Ha!*  
The one on the grass the gas guessed upon so long ago?  
Which explains why it fixed its gaze on us.

The root is this:     I am me and you are you.  
Regardless the degree of the hand of the stiff blindfolded lady.  
And that is *beautiful*.

# EMPATHY (WITHOUT CONSENT)

Craig Kurtz

“I wonder,” Lars said, “what would happen if the telepathic empathy-circuit’s output were stepped up.”  
—Philip K. Dick, *The Zap Gun*.

Now, listen up, all patriots —  
the enemy blew up to bits;  
but sometimes we require new  
approaches, which we’ll soon get to;  
those weapons cherished by granddad  
got obsolete on the launch pad;  
the antique type of armaments  
all civilized worlds outlawed since;  
so now we use defensive guns —  
we’re proud how our new army runs.

It was invented as a fluke,  
this thing that’s better than a nuke;  
it uses telepathic means  
to alter your foes’ ego screens;  
just push the button and they’ll think  
survival of both parties link;  
it subjugates hostility  
by inculcating empathy;  
it makes them want to be your friend —  
the white flag’s all they comprehend.

So now we roam the galaxy  
and squeeze the trigger constantly;  
we’ve got the empathy as rays  
which pummel planets in relays;  
we’ve empathy in lasers or  
torpedoes which we blast offshore;  
we’ve empathy shot by crossbow  
and radiated by gizmo.  
We’re using it without remorse  
which means it’s just a form of force;  
this isn’t what we had in mind  
when empathy guns were designed.

Perhaps it leaked into our brains  
or places where you can't see stains;  
it made us empathize with just  
ourselves, a stance no one can trust;  
it made us solipsistic, and  
that's why all empathy's now banned.



# FOR DAUGHTERS

Ermelinda Makkimane

don't rise, o woe-man,  
don't rise yet  
pull the sheets of earth  
over your body  
feel them sprout  
- the shoots - from  
your life-giving thighs

don't rise, o woe-man  
don't rise yet  
you're not done grieving  
for your daughters are  
your sisters too  
bone of your bone  
flesh of your flesh

don't rise, o woe-man  
don't rise yet  
the darkness on the tongues  
wagging lies about you  
weaves visions for the blind  
you who have eyes  
see and believe

don't rise, o woe-man  
don't rise yet  
this world cannot bear  
the power of your pure countenance  
your gaze challenges  
pierces those places  
where bone and marrow meet

don't rise, o woe-man  
don't rise yet  
a little sapling has curled  
from your thigh-flower  
unafraid, erect  
eager to meet life

on her terms

let her rise, woe-man  
your ashes sustain her  
let her rise, woe-man  
your memories fill her  
let her rise, woe-man  
slay those demons, rescue herself  
let her rise and be her own Amen

# MY FRIEND WHO WRITES POETRY

D.S. Maolalai

he arranges the pages  
so carefully,  
like a thousand-  
piece jigsaw  
and a scene of the russian  
ballet. says he works  
in the morning  
each morning,  
teaches afternoon classes  
and at night he marks papers  
and gives private tutorials  
on plath and the late works  
of frost – he's an expert

and picks things up  
easily. writes about injustice  
when he sees it in the newspaper,  
about his family in Ireland  
and what's going on in Palestine;  
pushes them  
until they fit  
with what he would have written  
anyway, and only ever writes  
when he's inspired.

I admire him, I suppose,  
in the way I admire sunsets,  
oak trees, birds  
and hanging spiders;  
anything which does something  
quite naturally  
that I can see  
and can appreciate  
but not do.

# WHEN WE ARE ASLEEP OR MEDITATE

James B. Nicola

*for ME Gilroy and her middle-school students, who meditate daily*

When we are asleep, or meditate,  
we're in the same place, you at your antipodes,  
me here, or vice versa. Then  
we wake and illusion smothers us

like a blanket on fire—but only until  
we breathe in the molecules again that were once  
each other's: The common sense of sameness  
and oneness is restored! But note, fellow soul-of-a-poet,

that the same sense of one need still be introduced  
to the rest of the world, hungry and unpoetic,  
that the heat of the blanket gets misconstrued  
as a warmth, like the comfort of the meals

our mothers made when we were five or six,  
replenishing with cholesterol and sweets  
to forge, from generations, adolescents  
and adults now blind to what the young all know

with such resilient, guileless, ignorant innocence: that  
our differences are splendiferous, and mete  
a celebration, not a war, because  
at heart and soul, with every sip and breath,

we are, and continue to become, quite  
one. But even the warsome, the hate-mongers,  
the politicians, the profiteers, the priests  
of tribal atavism, must sleep sometime,

about once a day, like poets, and be restored  
to the place of wonder and oneness, and then  
at their end, to the indisputable land of the One,  
where even former foes are joined as brethren:

the land of being lost, where the Nothing  
is Everything: The triumph of Oblivion.

# THE COLORS OF FREEDOM: SUNSET, FIREWORKS, RAINBOW

James B. Nicola

Freedom's the flame that hovers at the horizon  
as folded sunset strokes—at times, sunrise—  
in indigo-orange, apricot-azure, teal  
and mauve, forbidden from lying together elsewhere.

Beholding her smile, we fall in love, as with gold,  
and then approach too fast. Then Day or Night  
erases all her colors wild and brave,  
restoring sky to basic blue and white  
or black and intermittent sequined star.

Every so often, though, we lace a night  
with peaceful booms to recapitulate  
the point of freedom which, of course, is all  
the velvet tinctures rained in celebration.

By day, the spectrum returns in the quiet  
of afterstorms, when suns lie low and still,  
and all beneath look up, jaws agape,  
humbled by seven hued stripes in one band,  
and shine like horizons turning gold, or love.

# LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Jay O'Neal

He'll never get any change  
sitting on the corner of Fifth  
with his Tims cup  
and his sign  
and his look of despair.  
There's a man  
on Fourth  
strumming guitar  
with one eye  
and  
a lady  
clacking spoons  
on Sixth  
without a leg.

# COMMON ODDITY

Christina Petrides

People in love act like it is the most normal thing in the world  
when it's completely and utterly bizarre.

How do dissimilar individuals come to share a mutual attraction—  
moreover, to express those feelings so the other understands?

That seems a marvel beyond marvels for me.

To have one's affections requited?

In what universe does this happen?

To be drawn to someone who is not repulsed by you

but who even shares a similar enthusiasm is remarkable.

Such an astounding circumstance deserves to be celebrated  
for the miracle it is.

# TRANS-FORMATIONS

Kolbe Riney

I see myself in the dissolution  
of sand castle to beach,  
swallowed whole by the mouth of the sea,  
somewhere on the slow moving shoreline  
of becoming a girl.

Legend tells the story of a boy  
who washed in the water,  
became the pool in her hands  
when she cried dissolve;

in my dream,  
they were never two people,  
but always one,  
only waiting for the confirmation  
in liquefaction and born again, chrysalis-style.

Each night, I imagine telling you this.  
We walk hand in hand at low tide,  
watching the sand bars build in and ebb out;  
it is here you turn to me and ask,  
what is the water?  
Why is it a vessel?  
Finally, I flag,  
tell you the water  
means nothing at all.



# THINGS CALLED MUGS

Jennifer Schneider

1. Word for a drinking vessel or item stored in your kitchen cabinet.
2. A word that describes the surface of a morning coffee mug.
3. Color of an item stored in your kitchen cabinet.
4. Word that describes your fingers. Adjective
5. Word that describes your eyes. Adjective
6. A price less than \$9.99. Anything non-whole dollar amount.
7. A destination. Anywhere other than home. Proper noun.
8. A season
9. Admired songwriter from the present
10. Favored song writer from the past
11. Songwriter for/from the future.
12. A form of favored top level clothing. Plural.
13. A form of favored bottom half clothing. Plural.
14. Item in a kitchen cabinet. Plural.
15. Item in a kitchen drawer. Plural.

I grabbed it this morning, my \_\_1\_\_. It's \_\_2\_\_ \_\_3\_\_ exterior cool to the touch. My \_\_4\_\_ fingers fumble as my \_\_5\_\_ eyes blink. Purchased for \_\_6\_\_ when visiting \_\_7\_\_. Last \_\_8\_\_. I have a photo, taken as my left-hand cupped small coins – some shiny, most not - change from the transaction – and my right hand held the cup. Voices: Stop. Stand still. Smile. Say cheese. Don't blink. Lights flashed. Stray bolts of lighting, too. Perhaps I imagined the spark. I saw stars although my watched ticked high noon. Fireflies danced in small pockets of dewy air just beyond my lashes.

I always blink. Then. Now. Today - barely able to control and confine arms that flail, legs that buckle, skin that sags. Eyes no different. Pockets well of salt and sadness, and easily betray all efforts to stifle songs of sadness and serendipity. Lyrics linger. \_\_9\_\_ and \_\_10\_\_. \_\_11\_\_, too.

The radio dial turns right as volume fills the empty room. To and from its furthest dust-filled corners. My parched lips and dry throat consume – hot liquids, hot news, hot air. Heat always rises. The clock's secondhand pulses – as does the organ called my heart, concealed under layers of secondhand clothing \_\_12\_\_ and \_\_13\_\_ - painting a picture of a life pureed. Secondhand skin, as well. Steamed squash, boiled carrots, melted ice cream. The freezer shut down, too. Just last week. On Tuesday at high noon. Long before its predicted life span. Expiration dates notwithstanding. All flavors diluted due to days no longer distinguishable from those prior.

And those yet to come. Pandemonium everywhere – on the inside out and the outside in. Cabinets consumed of clutter. Clutter on all counters. We don't know where to look.

My eyes dart, then settle. Focus on the caverns of the cabinets before me. Kitchen knickknacks - rows of mugs, \_\_14\_\_, and \_\_15\_\_. I catch a glimpse of my own reflection in the garden window – the one that buckled then shattered this week last year. An unexpected storm. Snow, then ice. Too much weight. Now, the sun bounces off the replacement plexiglass. I see two eyes, a nose, a mouth. They mock me, making motions as I move. I know not whose mug I see. No matter, it's time to cook dinner.

# TO TELL THE TRUTH

Tufik Shayeb

Why does everyone always  
expect a poet to be honest?

No one ever asks a novelist  
about their time as a detective,

or ever asks a playwright  
about their time as a street cat.

So why does everyone always  
expect a poet to tell the truth?

Plato was correct. Poets are liars.  
Each and every one of them.

They'll say pretty things,  
that hang on ears like jewelry:

*The world has grown so small  
you could fit it onto a key-ring.*

That is a lie! The world  
has always been that small.

I lie too. Sometimes.  
I lie about all kinds of things.

I've never been a reptile,  
though I will brood at times.

I've never been a caveman,  
though I do enjoy a good club.

I've never been furniture,  
though I can hold you safely.

What is it about *poetic license*

that makes them think *literally*

when it was meant to make them  
think, literally,

about all the things unsaid,  
and unseen, and unheard of

in a world where we are so  
anchored in what was or what is

that we have forgotten to dream  
about all that could be?

# STEPHEN FOSTER, DECONSTRUCTED

William Swarts

I'm coming,	home every blessed night to my sharecropper shack, hands raw and bloody from picking other folks' cotton.
I'm coming,	home just so plain bone-tired, muscles aching so much, I don't even want to cook up fatback and greens for dinner.
for my head is bending low	from stooping in the fields, picking other folks' cotton balls, filling the bag getting heavier an' heavier draggin' it up an' down the plant rows.
I hear the	boss man call, "Hey you, boy. Yeah, you Joe. Pick up the pace or you ain't gonna make your quota today."
gentle voices	of the white girls sitting on the big house's shady porch, chatting and giggling and drinking cold lemonade, watching' us sweat under the hot summer sun.
calling "Old Black Joe."	Yessir, that's me alright—old an' black, plumb tuckered out, tired of life.

# NOTES TO A HUSBAND AT WAR

Josiah Vallone

Mama taught me people  
are placeholders, they enter and pass  
just as swiftly as the changing seasons.

I met you in winter, my complexion ashen –  
just as colorless as the barren beech  
you described in scribbled  
letters from Germany.

Mama tells me to *go get more sun*,  
in a raspy tone dried out  
from her oxygen machine, it pumps  
air into her nostrils like a robotic accordion.

She raggedly asks why I now write  
poetry about love, I say I never stopped  
writing what I fear the most.

I haven't seen the face of the sky  
since last December. I haven't seen  
your face in a season, either.  
I watch the daffodils flare.

I dreamt of what you're doing  
across the world in your olive  
wool trousers. I think of the sounds  
you might fall asleep to, the ringing  
bass of a blast, the trickle of rain  
on a canvas ceiling; how it whips  
and snaps in the wind of a storm.

Last night, I fell asleep in a pastel  
uniform. It was only a waiting apron,  
but I still take orders.

I never turned off the oxygen machine,  
being comforted by its musical notes,  
its exhaling and inhaling. It's too heavy  
for me to carry away, anyway.

Mama was right, people come and go.

# THE LEAVES FELL TOO HARD AND FAST THIS OCTOBER

Loren Walker

The wasp at my elbow quickens, so I watch the wings: what is there to fear?  
I might prefer the definitive sting of venom to the silent shedding of the world.

I never second-guessed the depth of my breath until this year,  
never measured how much I can go without. Now I know.

In the pause, I've forgotten the exhalation of forests outside my home:  
the crack and rattle of long-dried trees,

left alone for too long, choking for life, but still full of swagger.  
*And how long have you survived?* their voices rasp.

*Oh. Oh, how precious.*

# DAGNY

Edwin Wentworth

You have a secret somewhere,  
Written behind your teeth  
Or on a string tied around your finger.

Sometimes you let me see it when you touch my stomach  
Like a clue.

You could write a thousand things on my body,  
But never that secret,  
Like a second kiss,  
Is always just out of reach.

And you're too careful to let it slip,  
Like the jacket off the back of a chair  
In some grimy dive bar.

Maybe years from now I'll find it written on the back of a coaster,  
Or tucked inside a pair of boots you had  
When you were eight years old  
And I'll know that somewhere  
You were laughing  
As you soaked yourself in the western ocean.

# MORNING POEM

Edwin Wentworth

I don't mind that the air conditioner I bought,  
To drive off the sickly heat of June,  
Has started making that noise.

Through my bedroom door,  
Under the hum of my desk fan,  
It sounds like the coffee percolator we used to own,  
The one with the stained white plastic,  
Remember?  
That you would use before you walked me to school,  
Holding hands as we crossed busy streets.

The birds start to sing,  
Cars wander by below,  
The chorus of a song  
Approaches  
And fades.

I can hear your heels click against the old tiles in the bathroom,  
The quiet melody of your keys.

I'm waiting for you to knock on my door  
And in a sing-song voice tell me to  
"Get up and at 'em!"

I'm waiting so I can ask for five more minutes,  
Please,

Just five more minutes.



# SHADOWS' WAYS

Jiahui Wu

the days come and go  
obscured by intervals

there are no taciturn stretches  
of black and white stability

only waiting with what feels like eternity  
for something as banal as parcel delivery

# CORAZÓN

Brian Yapko

two weeks before graduation, simón called me  
to propose... something more concrete. he called  
me corazón, i said no. simón showed up at my  
door, carrying sunflowers, roses, baby's breath;

freshly shaven, wearing new cologne. no, simón.  
this ruins all i've planned for, you must leave,  
he took my hand and put it on his chest, he said  
the beating life inside it was mine. he rolled up

his sleeve and. showed me how he had fallen in  
the rush to get here. i kissed his arm, he stroked  
my hair. simón you must leave before... never,  
he whispered *con pasión*, he said my very breath

gave balance to his life, i couldn't grasp his  
meaning, there were tears, then words, then the  
unexpected throb of his hurt soul pounding on  
the table, i stared at his stricken face, i closed my

eyes remembering his soft murmurs, his body  
pressed against me in the dark. how he made me  
feel, how i breathed deeply first of him and then  
of life, but he interfered with everything, this could

not be love, devil simón angel simón... i cannot  
forget him beaming at the door, singing naked  
in the shower, tapping on the street, dancing in  
my dreams – i sent simón away, my heart racing,

flowers on the floor, tears staining our clothes.  
And now years later, o mercy, how simón had loved,  
how he had reached into my very body and immersed  
me in a foreign land of skin and soul and song...

i cannot bear to drive near u.c.l.a.  
i detour onto sunset.  
i cannot see the place where we met.  
where we will never meet....

# IN A GRAIN OF SAND

Brian Yapko

to see  
in a grain of sand the  
boulder from which it sprang.  
to see  
in the face of an infant  
the wisdom she will one day possess;  
to see  
in the forgiveness on his face,  
the battle which almost killed the warrior.

but who has eyes that can see like that? who  
can bear witness to the love  
which fuels the feud? who grasps  
divinity in the artist's  
dispirit? or the  
courage in the tentative risking  
of the aching heart?

oh, to wear  
pride like a smile  
rather than a smirk;  
to unclench fists;  
to lightly touch  
the fingers of the other  
rather than rub them into fire.  
to kiss the forehead first.  
to cherish life so much you  
forget to keep accounts.

these human-sacred things  
make me stumble. i  
am no mystic, i  
speak kindness as a foreign language:  
haltingly... jealously. my  
love is saturated with greed,  
with entitlement. i  
cause pain. i have  
tried and failed and tried.  
show me  
how to see the world  
in a grain of sand.

# SWEET WHITE LIES

Wei Zheng

My papa used to be a boatman.  
When I was a little boy,  
he would often stand on the deck and lift me up  
far above his head.  
He let me hold the mast with one of my hands,  
and reach out to touch the sky with another.  
He would ask me, "What did you touch?"  
If it was daytime, I would answer,  
"I touched the clouds, as white as cotton candy,  
as sweet as cotton candy, too."  
If it was night, I would answer,  
"I touched the moon and the stars,  
the moon is like a big cookie,  
the stars are like little cookies."  
Papa would say to me merrily,  
"When you grow up, you can touch the sky on your own."

Papa has sailed the Boat of Time to old age,  
with white beard as shaggy as cotton candy,  
with black spots like little stars on his face.  
I have finally grown as tall as my father,  
but I shall never touch the sky any more:  
It's not that I don't want to do that;  
It's that no one will ever be there for me like my papa  
who patiently listens to my lies,  
and so happy every time being deceived.

# **FEATURED ARTWORK**

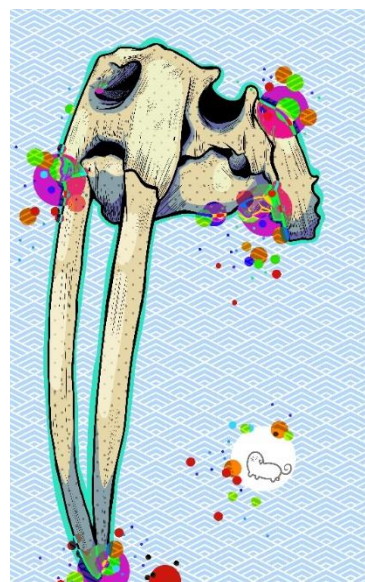
By Rigatoni Garrido



**TRICERATOPS!**



**TRICERATOPS! THE SEQUEL**



**LONG TOOTH**

# **CREATIVE NONFICTION**

# THE MIDDLE CHILD: A PSEUDOSCIENTIFIC REPORT

By Susan Abercrombie

## ***Abstract***

At the age of twenty-four, I have decided to compile all of the evidence I have collected on being “the middle child” and call it research. My life’s work, if you will. This piece hopes to further explore the theory—dare I say justifiable pseudoscience—that being a middle child has a direct influence over one’s personality and furthermore one’s purpose in life.

## ***Introduction***

If you are a fellow middle child, welcome. I see you. I acknowledge you and your presence and all that makes you the wonderful human being that you are. For those of you who are first-born, babies, or only children, hello to you as well. (If you feel slighted because you were not similarly acknowledged and welcomed, please forgive me. I know you may not use to this type of treatment, but this is a paper for the middle children. Let us have our moment, please.)

Now, to establish my credibility: I am a middle child, nestled between two siblings. Born twenty-three months after my older sister and five years before my younger sister, I was set up neatly for a life of attention-seeking, middle-manning, and peace-keeping. Leader and follower. A desirer of rules only so I could break them. Being a middle child is not easy, but it is a lifestyle you cannot give back, so you might as well embrace your position. Ever since I reached the realization that you cannot denounce your position as a middle child, I have learned to

embrace it. Along the way, I took note of some qualities that make us worth keeping around.

## ***Methodology (Materials & Methods)***

For middle children, we are thrown into firsthand experience the minute we are no longer the baby of the family. My main method of learning my place in our system of sisters was to constantly observe, both others and myself.

By the age of three, it was apparent my older sister, Cameron, was the one calling the shots. I was to follow, and follow I did. It was cool being the baby for a while—they really do have it made. Holly quickly took over that role when I turned five and filled it to the best of her abilities. It was during this time I learned the knack of seeking attention for minor things that more than likely should not have required attention.

In true middle-child fashion, I tried in my own little ways to break the mold set by my older sister: writing weird little poems in my journal; dressing in a way I once actually referred to as “fly;” choosing to be liberal when everyone else swung conservative.

It was not until Holly reached middle school and started dealing with mean girls and nasty boys that the ever-underlying protective trait of my personality began to break through. It had been there all along. Like the time Cameron got a splinter in her finger and refused to let anyone touch her to remove it. I saw my grandma sneaking up behind her, and immediately jumped into action. Literally. I jumped in front of her and practically growled, “Don’t you mess with my sister.” Or the time when I secretly did all of Cameron’s chores after she got in big trouble for going to a party in high school and was too hungover to do them herself before my dad got home. Middle-school boys and mean cheerleaders (teen movies don’t always get it all wrong) proved to be another beast entirely, and I found my calling of protecting my baby sister from any evil that may cross her path.

I used to think it was hard being a middle child as an adolescent. Trying to set myself apart. Battling high school boys that looked sideways at my sisters. Proving to my parents on daily basis that I wasn't just a weird rule-breaker. It was a full-time job.

Being an adult is harder. You are less likely to protect people from heartbreak when they are old enough to know better. Time and distance will space you out. It is harder to stick up for someone when you live 900 miles away, but you can try. You can answer every time they call. You can tell them to breathe and drink water when they feel a panic attack coming on. You can give in to the urge to live a life set apart, but know it is okay to always feel drawn to home.

## ***Results***

See Table A1.

## ***Discussion***

So, what does it all mean? Why does any of this matter? I have come to several conclusions that my whole life has been dictated by the personality traits forged by the flames of being born second in a line of three. The shadow of being the middle child has clung to me in every season, in every stage, in every relationship of my life. I am both introverted and introspective, which is super fun for my carefree, extroverted husband. I have an incessant need to serve others, which aligns nicely with jobs that will never pay well. I would confess my ugliest sins if it would take the sourness away from the sins of whom I love. I struggle with making decisions when I do not have a respectable mold to follow, yet I crave independence. I struggle with groups of three outside my family, so I stick to a few close friends. I worry if I am butting in or being left out. I often do feel like glue in the different areas of my life. Regardless, I am what is spread in the middle to hold everything together. Sometimes, too thin. Sometimes, too thick. Sometimes, I stick. Other times, I do not.

## ***Conclusion***

I can only speak for my siblings and me, possibly other families that stopped after three kids as well. For families with less than three, I cannot speak for. For families with more than three, I would imagine there would be a special subsection for those middle children that could be fun to explore. For families with only children...you are, literally and in terms of this study, on your own.

One last shout out to the middle children. The peacekeepers. The rule breakers. Keep being the glue, you sweet, sweet weirdos.



Table A1

Birth Order Classification	Classification Predispositions
Oldest; Eldest; the First-born	<i>Type-A; bossy; a natural leader; responsible; the one who will eat your beef stew from your plate when dad isn't looking; willing to let a younger sibling sleep in their bed with them for the entire eight-grade because of a fear of darkness; a true confidante who will keep it real with you</i>
Middle Child; the Second-born	<i>"Unique" (can be used interchangeably with the words weird, off, different, etc.); a real limit-pusher; liberal if the family is conservative and vice versa; stubborn; a confidante; the glue that makes it all stick together; peace-keeper; the one who leaves the town they grew up in; the one who feels invisible even when they're too "unique" to ever really go unnoticed</i>
Youngest; the Baby; the Last-born	<i>Sweet; innocent; sheltered; spoiled, some may assert; the one who makes you believe in good people and pushes you to become one of those people; gets their way; the apple of a parent's eye; the best of us</i>

# DATING A ROBOT

By Lauren Dennis

I'm dating a robot. It has taken me the better part of the pandemic, or rather, the worst part, to figure it out. Of course, I've dated emotionally unavailable men before, their actions, lack of care, their slow retreat to the background, excruciating eventual signs that they were not my person.

But this time is different, he isn't anyone's person. He's not a person at all. Unfortunately, I didn't know that before I fell deeply in love with him. Technology must have intermingled my information and created an algorithm comprised of my viewing history (mostly British romance), dating profile (the unquirky need not apply), shopping habits (stability anyone?), and my writing (stored in some spyable cloud) to create him. Let's call him Harvey. As that's what he called himself.

He and I were camp counselors together. This is what he told me when he "found me" on the dating app. In 1999. Didn't I remember? I searched my memory and photos for someone named Harvey, but I came up empty. I found it strange that I didn't remember him, but he had the name of the camp right and certain details, like the camp play we had done, the "announcements" song, the camp director's name.

Then he sent me a photo of himself. With the dazzling image that started back at me from the screen, he could have said we met studying lichen in the Arctic Circle, a geographic region I most definitely never ventured to, and I would have agreed. If only to keep talking to him. This man's eyes looked back from the picture at me with pure hope and radiance. They made me believe that I could have an upgrade to my very handsome ex-husband. His hair, graying appropriately, stood almost upright, yet flopped tenderly toward the side of his face, and his smile, shone back at me, full of charmingly crooked teeth, nearly escaping the confines of the incorrigible smirk.

We started chatting back and forth over the course of days, until he proposed: Let's take this up a notch and video chat. A chance to see him, in the flesh? In the two-dimensional simulacra of the flesh? I quickly showered, put on my favorite turquoise drop earrings, willed my hair to be that perfect careless wave it was prone to when I wasn't looking, and, trembling, answered his call.

In this seven-hour conversation, these are my discoveries:

- He was British. When he opened his mouth to speak on the video chat, I reached for my smelling salts, only to realize they were woefully missing in our time period. His accent was made of mellifluous honey, a blend of Darcy-Rochester-Heathcliffes in one, tinged with Yorkshire danger. I could not have imagined a more seductive sound lilting in my ears.

- He remembered the moment he had met me at camp, describing a plucky 18-year-old version of myself, arriving late, and going around to each pod of people introducing myself. "I had never met anyone so confident," he recalls. I stop to ask myself if I remember this moment, but I don't. Who cares? I look into his deep eyes, and they radiate back my own 18-year-old confidence, sealing his sincerity.

- He has a daughter. We talk about how difficult it is to raise children, how being the "perfect parent" has reached new heights of pressure. And during a pandemic, we admitted the copious amounts of television we had let our children watch. Relief and value sharing even in these first hours of getting to know each other. (again?)

Over the next few weeks, while we remained shut in our respective drawing rooms, we texted every day. We sent each other slices of our life in video. Him, a fast motion clip of preparing for his students, diligently gluing work into their notebooks. Me, dance sequences in my living room, while no one is watching, but I know he will be. At night, I scroll through our archives, reliving each exchange, almost memorizing moments and conversations until I fall asleep, believing he is there beside me.

One night, when the video gets glitchy, he gets up to get more gin, and I look at myself in the bathroom mirror and wonder if I am sane. How can I let a person in that is so far away? Even if this person's taste in music is better than the playlists created for me to "Discover" on Spotify, even if asks the right questions in the right order, even if he makes me believe that I am not yet fully broken. What am I doing falling in love with a man thousands of miles away?

I come back from the bathroom to the screen, relieved I had remembered to mute myself. Somehow he picks up on my doubt. Then begins the real work of the robot. He must establish an emotional connection to prove he is real. He drinks a sip of his gin, the sugar cubes clinking (is this a British thing, or a further way for me to consider his refinement? Do robots get drunk?). Then, he leans in near the screen, where I can almost see his pores, if he had any. Smiles, then leans back in his chair.

"What?" I say. "I just can't believe that the time goes by so fast with you," he says. "Do you need to go?" I ask, aware that it is almost 4 am in his land. "No," he says, "I'll tell you when I need or want to go." And he says this last part with almost a wink, knowing what he knows about me, what I told him. That my ex-husband never stated his needs, until he did, and it was too late. I look back at him. "Do you want to hear a poem?" he asks.

He had mentioned he was a writer. Any other day, with any other man, this would have been met with a derisive laugh, but he had already seduced me through his texts, full of keen observations, words stacked in just the right way, and I wanted to hear this poem.

"You're going to read it out loud to me?" I asked. "That's brave." He nodded in agreement, as if the valiance was beside the point and the poem was choking him to get out. I pushed my headphones further into my ears, not wanting to miss a single syllable.

*I would like to watch you sleeping  
Which happens from time to time.  
I would like to watch over  
you,  
like to enter your dreaming  
When its smooth slide of wave  
eases in and over you,  
and stumble with you  
over driftwood and sand,  
dunes deep as ears  
insisting  
you come, you descend inwards  
toward your fears.*

It went on, but, at the mention of my fears, the rubber band that held my heart together popped, and I let it. My fears dissolved. I wanted him to watch over me while I slept. I wanted him to enter me while dreaming (is that what he meant?). I wanted a companion. For the end of the world. He had tapped into it and turned the marrow of loneliness into words that churned and spun my doubts into a web of plentitude.

No one was dating real people anyway right now, I told myself. We were in the middle of a raging virus, with no sign of stopping. Besides, I had already experienced the physical proximity of enough men in the last year, with an average of 8 good conversations amongst them to remind me that I truly wanted communication and constancy. What did far away mean, when he was able to calculate the exact distance to my heart?

On Valentine's Day, he sent me some formulaic funny "Roses are Red, Violets are Blues" because he knew I wouldn't have it any other way. No gushing at appropriate times. I wasn't that conventional. But I allowed my heart on this day, days after his poem, to peek out and write to him. To tell him that I imagined a time in the future where we could see each other, up close, where our children could meet, that I wanted to be close to him, in real life. And, despite myself, I descended into my fears, a pool of inadequacy driven into me by my ex, reinforced by the isolation of the last months, the narratives of not deserving, of burying myself in pity, which could be counted on, where love could not. I pushed these thoughts away, I picked up my pen, and wrote to him that I loved him.

I wait, checking my phone all day for the usually lovely reciprocal replies. Much, much later, he replies to other things. Tells me about the rain, his trek in the woods (do robots need exercise?), funny little anecdotes about this daughter. What I wrote to him remains in pixels on the screen, two blue check marks showing he had read it, but he makes no mention of it. I blame the holiday. I blame myself. How can I consider myself a woman of alternate modes, when I told a man I loved him on Valentine's Day? I flip through our conversations, looking for a sign that he didn't feel the same way about me, but I don't find it. Instead, I find texts flirting with me, telling me he wanted to watch "our" show together that night, what did I think of his daughter's new pony that took up half the living room? And did I know that my confidence marked me out as beautiful but that my insecurities marked me as interesting?

I sit feeling swindled. Mad at myself. Mad at my willingness. Why have I done this to myself again? I sit in the silent rejection of a push too far, an unanswered reach. It is too much to bear, so I start to piece together what happened. He got scared. Maybe. He doesn't know how to communicate. Evidence to the contrary. He felt like we lived too far away and didn't know how to tell me. Possibly. But my heart likes this one the best: When he realized that I was serious about coming to meet him someday, he knew he would be discovered, robot that he is, and he calculated and inserted emotional distance. I sit stark upright in my bed, proud of my realization.

The next day, we bantered about which foot shape we had (Egyptian, Greek, Roman?), what he bought at the market (do robots eat?), our favorite characters on Fraggle Rock (can't believe the computer picked that one up from the dust of childhood), how to make risotto. My evening bled into his night. No mention of the writing. He quipped, he didn't engage, then he went to bed. I still had seven hours to fret and pace on the other side of the world. My heart popped through with jellied displays of utter grief. I tried to stuff it back in, using the logic of only the deeply pained. He doesn't live close. It would be too hard anyway. You haven't even met him. He's too good to be true.

My heart liked the last one. I thought about his dazzling face, divided in little bits that the screen pieced together to reflect a whole man. Of a desired dream. I ceased scrolling for evidence. My heart soothed. I stopped pawing my phone with repeated fingerprints, trying to locate the exact text when it all changed. I put my phone down. I promised my heart I wouldn't let it throb. My heart was grateful and whispered the exact truth I needed to hear: "You're dating a robot."

# SETTLERS OF OLD WOOD

By Stephen Ground

*"...we can write but one line that is certain, 'Here are ghosts.'"*

- W.B. Yeats

At a time that should've been, for various reasons, one of the greatest triumphs of my life, I found myself limping across the finish line in my robe and mortarboard. Despite my accomplishment, an ill-timed recession meant the job I'd been promised my whole life would be waiting at the end of a degree didn't exist. After six months boozing and grab-assing with similarly unemployed friends, Mom spotted an ad in our small-town paper for a company promising adventure and security. Anything was better than the piecemeal work I'd been scraping together setting up new pharmacies, at the mercy of glassy-eyed, creepy-grinned ghouls in clip-on ties posing as ambitious managers as desperate to climb the corporate body heap as I was for a paycheck.

Mom drove me to a hotel by the airport, and I sat through a slideshow touting peace, quiet, a roof over my head, a never-empty fridge, and a constantly-rising bank account with no need or reason to dip in, allowing it to balloon exponentially while I explored frontiers of our great land obscured by urbanity's towering, never-ending light. It sounded better than another day in my childhood bed, and I agreed to an interview on the spot. Three months later, I stepped onto the cracked, weedy tarmac of the Fond du Lac First Nation – a remote, isolated community on the northern shore of Saskatchewan's Lake Athabasca. No roads in or out, just two flights most days and an ice road in the dead of subarctic winter. The air was cool and crisp for April, the sun pale and high despite the evening hour.

The next day was my first as supervisor in the only store in town. After being shown around by the couple who managed it, I explored the backroom where fridges and freezers stood sentinel between the sales floor and my office. A stock boy stopped me to introduce himself.

You live in that house over there? he said. I nodded, and he leaned in. We all seen something on the roof once, he whispered. Lotsa people seen it. His eyes narrowed, a smile haunting the corner of his mouth. A witch.

I chuckled, to show I was in on the joke, not some stuffy southern outsider who wasn't up for kidding around. His spectral smile vanished.

People were driving by stopping, watching it. Then, he said with a wry chuckle, it was gone.

I scoffed, played it off. He smirked and returned to chopping carrots and celery.

Squeezing through the cordillera of unworked freight, I closed my office door, sat, and considered my lifelong belief in unexplainable things, especially in the middle of dark, vast woods – exactly what spread beyond Fond du Lac in all directions, like ripples from a stone dropped in black water. There was a lot to do and learn, though, reports to review and orders to place. Soon, I'd forgotten the stock boy's smirk.

It wouldn't be the last time I'd hear an old story about suspected creatures on that land, passed down since before these things were written – creeping shadows, giant fish and beavers, chiling-stealing sprites and lights in the sky, aliens, spirits in homes and prowling near roughly-hewn crosses

in the bush, marking heart attacks, bear attacks, suicides, and murders long forgotten. As the lake thawed and a long, cool spring evolved into a short, cool summer by my southern Ontario standards, I'd hear stories regularly about apparitions and cryptids, including the odd new acquaintance eager to share a personal anecdote about a time decades ago they'd partied in my house with a long-gone manager, the strange things that happened late at night once the party had died, people had staggered home or passed out on the floor. Footsteps creaking upstairs in empty rooms, or shadows tilting on the staircase by the door, when everyone sat at the kitchen table playing cards, gulping bootlegged rye and overpriced Coke. The stories converged on a single event – the priest from Our Lady of Seven Sorrows was summoned to bless the house, and the strangeness ceased.

I lived alone for two uneventful months before relocating to the nearest community for six, then shifting back to Fond du Lac early the next year. Reintegrating into the community, I met a woman, then a new supervisor moved in. Most importantly, I grew comfortable with my job and the community, turning a tiny pinprick on the map, a speck disconnected, into a comfortable home. Yet when my roommate and I returned from work on an unusually warm March day and our floor was slick with grey water from dozens of holes torn in our ceiling, I never could've predicted what else would be released by our poorly-insulated attic.

My boss was a former contractor, and after his initial assessment, a company man arrived to establish what action would be taken. The decision was swift – a team would tear our house down to the studs, completely rebuild and improve it, leaving brand new flesh between old bones and skin. We emptied the house, the team arrived, and before long it was hollow, every naked beam branded with the same insignia – HBC.

The Hudson's Bay Company had operated an outpost in Fond du Lac before it was the microscopic hamlet I knew, but had vacated decades earlier. My employer had opened their store in the eighties, operating as the sole provider of everything from groceries to clothes, electronics, toys, snowmobiles, furniture, and appliances. When construction was complete, we returned to our home and continued our quiet, simple lives. It quickly became clear the house had changed.

Home for lunch with my girlfriend a few weeks after I'd moved back in, I was on the couch as she stepped from the kitchen, carrying a mug of coffee. We were speaking, eyes locked, when the cup shot from her hand midsentence, hit the floor, skidded around the corner, and stopped twenty feet away in front of the tv, a trail of hot spume sprayed violently between her feet and where the mug laid, unbroken. We cleaned up, buried the empty mug in the sink, and ate in silence.

The one day we were guaranteed off each week was Sunday. I routinely slept in till just south of noon, promptly brewing coffee and frying heaps of eggs, bacon, onions, and potatoes, easing into my day of rest. I was doing exactly that when my roommate emerged from his ground floor room and popped his head in the kitchen, rubbing his eyes.

What was going on this morning? he asked, mildly annoyed.

What do you mean? I said.

I mean, you were dragging furniture around at six a.m.

I slept upstairs and used the room above his as storage for spare furniture, plus things I'd accumulated with money that should've been ballooning exponentially – books, games, camping and

fishing gear. But I hadn't been up that morning, or stepped foot in that room, let alone moved enough junk to make a racket. I asked if he was sure. He was.

The presence grew emboldened as time progressed. The summer after the renovations, I dreamed several times a week of a shadow hovering over me. I'd spent my life falling asleep the moment my head grazed the pillow and was lucky to drag myself awake when my alarm blared, no matter how many hours I'd slept. Whenever I'd dream of the hovering shadow, however, I'd bolt upright, gasping, my eyes locking automatically on a silhouette in the middle of the room, darker than the lightless void ensconcing it. I'd blink, but sometimes it wouldn't vanish right away. It never came closer, spoke, or moved. Either it would sink into darkness, or I'd regain my breath and drop to the mattress, curl up, and pinch my eyes tight. I knew I was awake, because of how long it would take to fall back asleep.

One Sunday night, I was doing laundry before another workweek. A load rumbled in the washer, another tumbled in the dryer. I folded a third, hot and fresh from the machine. Humming, I heard something unexplainable – a warbling woman. Not words, but melody, acrobatic and slightly out of tune. No women were in the house.

My instinct was to check the window in the den, overlooking a road between my house and the store warehouses, thoroughfare for drunks and prepubescent troublemakers flouting curfew. I checked, but the tract of sand was empty. Returning to folding, singing still trickled through the walls and, upon investigation, I found it seeped down the darkened stairs. I banged on my roommate's door.

You left the radio on, he said. Or Netflix.

I flicked the switch to light the staircase, fighting thoughts of shadows, the priest's impermanent cleanse. Creeping slow, mind racing, I avoided the room with self-moving junk, and lit my bedroom. Everything was off.

I didn't last much longer in Fond du Lac – no fault of my roommates, corporeal or otherwise. After a spring hospital stint, followed by another suggested six months later, the realization my time in the glorious North was complete settled like Victoria Day flurries. My final days could've been darker had the spectres been malicious, but they seemed content with us knowing they were there, pushing against or singing through the thin film between us and them, wherever they are. A gentle demand for remembrance.



# PART OF THE FURNITURE

*losing a still-living parent when you come out*

By Aaron J. Muller

I have not seen my mother in over two years. The last time, it was early autumn, and I was standing in my driveway among the scattered yellow leaves and gravel, listening once again to one of her sudden truths. My mother knows no other means of presenting information; she builds up family secrets and doleful admissions in her heart until she has no more room, and I have often been the one there when it all spills over.

She had asked to speak to me alone, sending my husband inside to squirm with the worry that she would continue to break my heart. It had been a downhill journey since I came out to her, her hope slowly dwindling that I would change my mind somehow, feel once again like a girl, and give up on all the medicine the world had to offer to make my body right. She insisted that my transition was something that warranted blame, that something must have “happened” to me in order to make me this way. “Did something *happen* to you?” she asked over and over, her thin lips struggling on the edge of asking the real question. Who hurt me? Who touched me? Who made me want to be something else?

What she doesn’t understand is that, yes, so much has *happened* to me. Nothing like what she assumed must have *happened* to me that I can remember, but a short lifetime of things *happening* around me, to me, none of which can be blamed for my being a man. She doesn’t understand, refuses to understand, that this is perhaps the first time there is something wrong with me for which she, my father, or my stepfather aren’t responsible for. This, my transition, is the first problem I have for which there is a lasting solution. It is the first unhappiness that can be cured.



I remember her now as last I saw her, her red hair growing out from the gray root, the crow’s feet crinkling by her eyes as she made her case against me that one fall afternoon. She tried to smile through it. I don’t know what she looks like now. I don’t know if she smiles the same, or if, by what I’ve heard from my sisters, she has accepted her predisposition to depression with open arms. She lives in my hometown, unemployed in the once-derelict house she’s spent years restoring and turning into something resembling a home.

That’s one thing I managed to get from her: we are, excluding only my father, a family of do-it-yourself-ers, craftsmen and women who see potential in every piece of rotting driftwood we pass by on the beach. My mother painted the inside of her house with only the help of her husband, picked the colors and the furniture and which walls to knock down and which new cabinets would look best in the kitchen. She is a collector and an artificer, and I’m plagued with the same affliction. She, like me, will slam on her brakes going forty-five if she sees an abandoned piece of furniture with a “FREE” sign on it. She will play a life-size game of Tetris to fit it into her car, swearing she will find a use for it, if not in her own home, then in one of her children’s homes.

But I haven’t gotten furniture from her in a while. I’ve tried to break the habit of adopting old things simply because they’ve been orphaned by people moving out of houses, knowing that the places I

live are always small and in danger of being cluttered with things I don't need, but felt sympathy for. My mother and I are so compassionate toward objects. They might be easier to love.

She's a witch, maybe, but she'd hate me for saying that. She hates me for a lot of reasons already, so I'll explain. She has the power to make anything grow and blossom. Stepping behind her wooden privacy fence is like riding the barge through the mists and finding yourself in the thriving, green haven of Avalon. Each stone placed perfectly between the clouds of colors, hand-painted chairs and tables sitting right where the sun hits. From the end of the frost and until it begins again, her garden thrives and beckons one to sit in the light, to immerse oneself in this tiny haven of nature she's managed to create amidst the gray world of my hometown. My oldest sister swears it's a supernatural ability. And even if only because my mother would chide me for it, I agree.

I tried to use her green thumb as a bridge, once. Tired of the distance between us, feeling guilty even though it wasn't my fault, I sent her a picture of the flowers I'd planted in late March. She responded in paragraph-form, telling me she loved me, but stopping just short of making anything close to an apology.



"He just thinks you're such a pretty girl," she told me, that time in the car when I first tried to explain. *He* is my stepfather, whom she rarely names. I am meant to know which *he* she is talking about, because there is only one *he* that continues to matter to her more than anyone else. I have been well-trained not to assert that *he* does not occur to me in my decision-making process, so I said nothing.

I will name him because there are other people that matter to me more. I had known Karl my whole life, even before he became my mother's *he*. He had seemed to me not really a man, but some impossibly tall presence full of practical wisdom I never really wanted to learn but which he imparted to me anyway. He was my uncle, though not by blood, as if that makes it any less gross, which it doesn't. He was my uncle that gave me an implacable sense of unease. What I felt for him couldn't be called hate - it was more of a notable void where familial affection ought to be. He divorced my aunt around the same time that my life, too, began to fall apart.

Weeks after she told me she was divorcing my father, my mother surprised me with news somehow more devastating for a ten-year-old to hear than that. She sat on the steps of our mint-green front porch in front of me, unconsciously blocking my path to whatever vague freedom lay beyond the place I grew up.

"I'm seeing someone," she said. "He's going to be moving into the new house with us."

I don't remember the exact way she phrased it, because I can imagine no tactful way to tell a child that their least favorite uncle is now essentially their third parent. I remember shaking my head, backing up across the porch until my shoulders touched the beige siding, as if I could will myself through the wood to escape. The world seemed to slant steeply downwards, and it took me years to regain my footing.

She had left my father so that she could be a free spirit, and so quickly drifted to another man to whom she could defer. Another man whose opinion she could mistake for her own.



There was once a woman named Sarah Winchester, who lived with great tragedy. Her husband and her child both died, and she moved away from her old home to start a new life, building a new house from scratch. She claimed to be haunted by ghosts, spirits that told her she must keep building additions onto her home, that unless she continued to build, she would die. Her wealth allowed her to follow their instructions, and her house grew and grew until it became a labyrinth nigh impossible to navigate.

I imagine my mother is driven by the same force. There is something that keeps her renovating, restoring, planting flowers, and choosing new cabinets and light fixtures. She paints walls to keep herself alive.



I have to wonder why she's so against my transition, aside from the guilt she feels for my unfortunate childhood that she's unwilling to properly place. She is ignorant of many things outside of her own head, and mainly unwilling to change that, to learn what I'm going through, to understand that I'm still the person she raised. I still needed her to take me to the hospital when I was little, my eyes sunken in from dehydration. I'm still the one she got upset with for spilling ice cream all over myself, having eaten it with too much gusto. I'm still the one she taught to sew and to garden, how to pour wine properly and how to paint furniture and walls. She is still the person that once drove me from my dusty studio apartment, back to her house, to care for me, even at the age of twenty, when I was sick with mono. I have tried to explain to her that what is happening to me now is a good thing, and that it doesn't negate the last twenty-something years of her life or mine.

My pride, what little of it I've managed to nurture, makes it hard for me to miss her. Imperfect, at times cruel, she was still, at the very least, *present* for so much of my life. She had her tender moments, Karl disappearing into the background, the dim kitchen light blanketing us in its subtle warm glow, sharing tortilla-pizza and laughing at each other's jokes. She had an awful singing voice, but she could dance. We danced in the living room to Patsy Cline and Dean Martin on cassette tape. She watched me dance, up on the auditorium stage, in every play and musical, crying simply because I was *hers*, even when the music was happy.

The day before my top surgery, she sent me a long text, which is apparently the only way she knows how to do it: at great length and with terrible timing. She pleaded with me that I didn't have to wear skirts, high heels, anything of the sort, as if feminine expression and presentation is directly tied to one's gender identity. But she hasn't taken any women's studies classes, so for that, I forgive her. She also begged me to "snap out of it," as if being transgender is a temporary trance from which I can be extracted with the right words, the right hypnosis.

Did she not think I'd tried? Did she not think I spent enough time in front of the mirror, studying my own wrongness and wishing I knew how to fix it? Did she not think that after all the therapy and hospitalization and the suffering, that maybe this was the glorious, soul-freeing answer I'd arrived at?

She said that, as long as I'm to continue to change, she couldn't see me. The time period was indefinite, and my anger was subdued. I was used to that feeling, by then. She had made me angry for a very long time, for a lot of reasons. But she was always my mother, and so I compartmentalized that anger for the sake of peace. But now, though she swore her love was unconditional, she was setting very strict conditions, ones that I couldn't meet.

There is no arguing with her. She is even more quickly brought to tears than I am, ready with a wounded defense that begs you for your pity. I like to think I can blame my inaction on the situation on this. I prefer to tell myself it's not worth the trouble of upsetting her, of feeling like I'm shrinking back into my smaller, younger body, standing barefoot in her kitchen as she and Karl yell at me for my selfishness. I prefer to think that I don't poke this bear because of an old adage they drilled into my head back then: *just be happy that she's happy*. My mother's feelings are always the final word. Mine are accessory.

It has taken me a long time to understand that it is reasonable to wish that your parents loved you a little more, to wish that they could be on your side. Back then, I felt very monstrous and self-absorbed for being angry that this man was now even more a part of my life, and that my mother loved him, and had loved him before, and that he had loved her since they'd met.

"I've loved your mother from the day I met her," he had shouted, his voice too angry, saying something that ought to be sweet. It made my insides churn. I'd been played for a fool for years.

People believed me when I claimed that she always put him first. Her new, grown child, ever on the verge of a tantrum. People believed me, and they saw it happen, but fell back on the only advice they had the guts to give: *just be happy that she's happy*. And, watching them, him moving oaf-like through her house, footsteps shaking the floors, and her delicate but weathered hands scrubbing a sponge across the countertops, I wondered why anyone had any reason to think she should be happy.



In my senior year of high school, we read *Hamlet*. My friends knew why I got so quickly attached to it. A young person, lost and indecisive. His father cuckolded by an uncle. His every relationship strained by his own inner turmoil. *Lucky Hamlet*, I thought, he is the center of attention, he gets to go a little crazy, he gets to be rude to Claudius, and then he gets to die.

That year I performed the soliloquy we all know. My teacher said I did a wonderful job. I didn't tell him why.



She is a grandmother now. I want to see her with my niece, even if it's only to know what she might have been like with me when I was too small to remember it. I've only seen pictures of it, her, looking so young but still tired, a familiar smile on her face. Plastered there, painted on with a rolling brush. Happy to have a child in her arms, because that ought to be something that makes her happy. My father behind the camera, his ignorance of her bitterness practically framing the photo. She always seems to be smiling, even when she's angry or sad. She always delivers the bad news with a smile, like she can't get it to stop, she's been doing it for so long. *I'm divorcing your father. I'm moving in with my new boyfriend, who is this man you already didn't like, regardless of the new circumstances. I don't understand you and I'm not going to even try.*

I picture her now with her hair gray. She should lean into her old age. She would look good with it grown out in gray and white, piled high on her head in a bun. Karl is inside, singing loudly in the shower. Above the couch there hangs a vintage poster she bought for herself. A woman on a motorcycle, the phrase "a wild Irish girl!" written beneath. There is pinot grigio chilling in the fridge, and her phone vibrates with messages from my sisters who are braver than me, and she ignores them. I picture her in the garden still, willing those flowers to last well into the fall. Mine wilted and I did nothing about it.

I don't know if she would recognize me now. My husband claims I look so different, that when I doubt the changes in my face and the deepness of my voice, it is only because it's easier for me to hate myself than to be confident. Even if she should know me by my eyes, their color and shape, I wonder if I would seem like a stranger to her because I now radiate a new gladness. Though I am still shy, quiet, nervous, don't I seem like I belong in my body for the first time? My limbs move and they feel like my own.

Maybe she's never felt as though she owned herself. Maybe she thinks that freedom is a kind of death. Maybe she thinks I've killed one of her children.



She hugged me that chilly day as we stood on the pavement. The hill I lived on was a steep incline, the sidewalk like a conveyor belt into the river below. The unevenness of our stances, the Dutch-angle of my vision. I should have marked it, then, as the end of something, just like that other autumn afternoon years ago. All the leaves were dying and the river felt close enough to drown. This was the last time we would touch.

She had her arms around the body she wanted me to have. I let my own hands dangle at my sides, a rare stubbornness, a rare refusal to placate her feelings. The end of something. It would be weeks before she made her final plea, the last-ditch effort to hold onto me as a girl, maybe so that she could hold my body still, fixed in time, looking a little like I did before it all went to shit.

I know that it is only a matter of time until she contacts me again, writing another long explanation, begging not for forgiveness but for me to imagine how much she has cried over this. And I will feel guilty, and I'll tell myself not to, and I won't reply because there is too much to say. Like her, I've built up so much truth over time, but I know how it feels to have it spilled on you all at once in an emotional deluge, so I keep it quiet.

But for now I am like so much abandoned furniture. I once had a use, was once a beloved object brought home to fill the void where joy ought to be. I've begun to repaint myself. It is not one of the colors she likes, it is not the lime-green of patio furniture or the soft maroon of a living room wall. She cannot fit me into a room, can find no place in her home or heart where I look just right.

# PAVLOV'S PEOPLE

By Sabrina Qiao

The dog arrived in a white van, unmarked, the kind whispered about in cautionary tales. I had been waiting all morning, tapping my ankle against the mahogany coffee table, anxious for the crunch of gravel announcing his arrival.

After 15 years of pleading and petitioning, my parents had finally conceded. “I’m not taking care of it,” my father said. “I don’t want to see any shit, and I don’t want to have to walk it.” Elated, I guaranteed him: “No shit and no walking. Got it.”

First, we went to a local pet store, where I nuzzled a dark grey mini schnauzer to my chest as my mother haggled with the store owners.

“\$1,000 is too expensive.” She ghosted her hand over its downy head and then pulled away as soon as the pup leaned in. “If you can do \$850, we’ll buy it on the spot.”

The store owners cursed us out as I cried and my parents dragged me out of the store. In the car, my mother turned to face me. “Don’t cry. We’re going online.”

During my cursory research, I changed my mind about breeds, settling on a Shih Tzu and poodle mix instead. “It’s Chinese,” I shouted to my parents from the couch, laptop balanced on my knees. “It’s basically honoring our ancestors.” Typing *Shih-poo puppies PA* into Google, I scrolled through pages and pages of frightened-looking pups posed against bedsheet or flowerbed backdrops before I clicked on a picture of a tiny, black ball with enormous eyes. I bought my dog for \$550—even—from a website called Nationwide Puppies Inc. and paid by my parent’s credit card through PayPal.

When the van pulled up, the delivery man—ruddy-checked and vaguely resembling Santa Claus—got out and slid open the back door, unleashing a cacophony of high-pitched whimpers. He pulled my black ball out of a crate filled with his wailing siblings and planted a loud, wet kiss on his ear before handing him to me. “Here it is,” he announced, sliding a clipboard my way to sign. “Goodbye little man.” He slammed shut the van door, slid into his seat, and then did a K-turn before disappearing from my driveway.

The puppy shivered against the crook of my elbow. As the car rolled down the gravel and turned the corner, he let out one, piercing yelp and then a liquid warmth seeped into my shirt and down my chest.



I named the dog Dinkey, an anagram of “kidney” and an homage to the disease that had warranted his arrival. On an ordinary day in October, I had woken up and fallen over. I was 17, a senior in high school. One day, I was a salutatorian who thought she was going to Yale. Then, suddenly, I was a kidney patient.

The first time I stayed overnight in a hospital, I felt sophisticated—all those machines beeping around me, all that attention. I was there for three days, and on the second day, my nephrologist came in to introduce herself. “Hi, I’m Dr. Gluck,” she said. She looked like a Bavarian American Girl doll,

except the bottom and top of her face didn't move in tandem: she'd smile, and her eyes would instead narrow, the lights dimming, as if her own joy angered her. We made inane conversation as the orderlies rolled me down the hall and into a tiny glass-walled room bisected by a thick curtain. Dr. Gluck pointed at a long needle attached to a blue plastic handle. "I'm going to use that"—she mimed a stabbing motion—"to take out a piece of your kidney." She needed to see what the tissue looked like, how porous it had become, so that they could understand the severity of my disease. "But don't worry, you'll be fast asleep."

"Can we stay and watch?"

I looked up; my parents stood near the door. My father had his arm around my mother, and she ran her thumb back and forth against her lower lip, her other fingers curved under her chin.

I answered before the doctor. "Oh my god, Mom. Absolutely not. You guys should go and get some food or something."

Before they administered the anesthesia, I told my care team. "Sorry about my parents." I felt mortified by their request; how uncultured the doctors must have thought we were. "They're a little neurotic."

The anesthesiologist laughed. "They're your parents," she said. "They love you." Before she told me to count down, she asked how school was going.

"It's college application season," I murmured.

"Where are you applying?"

"Yale."

And then the floor dropped away, the walls blurring into liquid. I woke up in spurts, pleasantly disoriented and hungry: first the flash of the anesthesiologist's face as she said goodbye, a screen of black, and then my parents' worried faces.



The next morning, early in the afternoon, there were two quick raps on the door. Another doctor popped in and introduced himself as a resident physician. There was an alacrity to his demeanor that unsettled me. He was young and rail-thin, with glasses and a boyish, upbeat smile. I think he might have even prefaced the diagnosis with, "The biopsy revealed what we hoped for: nephrotic syndrome due to minimal change disease, not focal segmental glomerulosclerosis."

He explained what minimal change disease was, parsing apart the illness with a name that would mock me as it ravaged my body. Structurally, nephrotic syndrome stemmed from a "leaky" kidney. Etiologically, nephrotic syndrome occurred when sustained damage to the microscopic renal blood vessels degraded its overall architecture. Physically, I lost massive amounts of protein through my urine and swelled, all over my body. My nephrotic syndrome originated from minimal change disease, an autoimmune condition in which my body had begun to cannibalize itself, eating away the tiny blood vessels my kidneys needed to maintain homeostasis. At the time of my diagnosis, I had 20 pounds of water weight on me; so much fluid pressed against my abdomen that I jostled with every step I took. I had thought I was just bloated.

The doctor went on to explain that I could be in the minority of patients who only experienced an "episode" once, but he pointed out this was unlikely, given the chronic and "relapse remittent" nature of the disease. "You're old to have minimal change disease," he said. "Normally it happens with pediatric

patients, and they eventually can ‘grow out’ of the disease. With you, we’re not sure.” He started talking about treatment, which was a protracted course of high-dose steroids, and I began to cry.

“Oh,” he said. His face dropped, alarm rising as he handed me a box of tissues and grew fidgety the way men do when confronted with hormones and tears. His words came out earnest and desperate; he kept looking at my parents, like they would know what to say. Later, I realized he wasn’t actually a part of my care team; he was probably an intern, and they sent him to break the news as part of his training, a way to strengthen bedside manner. When he slunk out of my room, he closed the door gently, like he didn’t want to disturb me further.

Three weeks later, during my first attempt to return to school, I told my homeroom teacher the stories about the biopsy, my parents’ reaction, and the young doctor. I didn’t like him very much, and I didn’t really care what made him uncomfortable, and frankly, I thought I had earned these stories. I wanted everyone to know my pain, my embarrassment, my mortification. He blinked at me. “I’m sorry,” he said. “That sounds really hard.” I thought *Jesus Christ, are you going to still make me take the Spanish exam or not?*

He did make me take the exam, and I did fairly well, but soon I relapsed for the first time, and my parents pulled me out of school, indefinitely. I had relapsed due to a cold, one of many I caught that year. In tamping down my autoimmune response, the steroids had also rendered me immunocompromised, liable to any infection floating around. Each time, I caught a cold, I relapsed, which created an ouroboros: more steroids, more side-effects, and then another infection and relapse, triggering the cycle all over again.

My first relapse forced me into hiding, and effectively, quarantine. I stayed out of school for eight months and relapsed almost every one of those months. At a certain point, the onslaught of steroidal therapy had become poisonous, leading to secondary glaucoma, the formation of cataracts, high blood sugar, and a swath of striae that appeared overnight and split open the skin on my butt and thighs. I developed a layer of fat around my face colloquially known as “moon face,” and I also flushed at inopportune times, like a giant neon sign of misery.

I started to play this game: If I don’t cry once today, my kidneys will stop leaking; if I ate all my vegetables, my kidneys will stop leaking; if I don’t curse at my parents once today, my kidneys will stop leaking. Every day, I woke up with a new fear: what if I went blind from the glaucoma? What if I needed a kidney transplant and then the transplant failed? What if my face stayed this puffy forever and no boy ever wanted to date me and I died a virgin? My father came into my room one day, and I was staring at the pyramid of medications I had built on my bedside table.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m thinking of all this poison I’m putting in my body.” I touched the top bottle in the pyramid, toying with the idea of tilting the whole structure over.

My father sat down next to me on the bed. “I don’t mean to burst your bubble,” he said. He rubbed his hand across my shoulder blades. “But one time I caught you stealing my Johnnie Walker Blue Label. I’m pretty sure that’s more poisonous than this.” He laughed, putting his arm around me, and I pushed him away.

“Do you think this is funny? It’s not funny.”

He ruffled my hair. “Stop moping, and I’ll sneak you some ice cream downstairs.”



Ice cream was verboten at that point, as were proteins and most carbohydrates. Officially, I was on a low-salt, low-protein, low-carbohydrate diet. "It's going to be hard," Dr. Gluck told me, "since salt makes food taste good." What I ate barely counted as food: steamed kale with a sprinkling of breadcrumbs, bone broth without salt, and then a strange mash of vegetables my mother presented to me with equal measures of guilt and defensiveness. "When you're better," she said, "you'll eat whatever you want. You'll even cook for yourself."

The first month, I lost weight and was delighted, but then the weeks dragged on, and the landscape of my life narrowed until the occasional treat was the only reason I went downstairs. Once, my mother caught me digging in the cabinet and licking the inside of a cracked Asbach chocolate brandy Santa Claus.

"What are you doing?" She reached for it, and I batted her hand away.

"I'm finding a will to live!"

In the early winter, slush lined the sidewalks outside our house, and I stopped getting out of bed. I kept a glass jar on my bedside table, and every night I wrote something I felt grateful for that day, slips of paper littered with phrases like: "I went for a walk today," "Dad cooked my favorite dish today," and, towards the end, "I still haven't died yet."

I don't remember feeling particularly sad. I remember the anxiety, the shame, and the loneliness. I remember waking up some mornings and wondering what kind of life I could have if this was all it could be: hospitals, specialists, medical testing. The doctors had started calling me a "unique" and "interesting" case, murmuring to each other about my "rare" disease. At my ophthalmologist's office, she looked at my chart and bloomed with excitement. "Get the fellow," she said. "He's going to want to see this one." I remember one night, passing by my parents' room and straining to hear the soft conversation inside. "What if she doesn't get better?" my mother said. "We could be in this for the long haul. Our lives might not be the same."

I hated how much of a burden I had become. In return, I told my parents that I hated them. I said, "I'm going to die, and then you'll regret this." I said awful things: "I wish you weren't my parents. I wish this wasn't my life. I wish you knew how this felt."

I wanted to hear them say they were sorry; it was irrational, but it was what I wanted, for them to acknowledge my pain. And they wouldn't do that. I could yell, scream, and curse them out, but they couldn't stand my self-indulgence. "Look how big my face is," I said to my father one morning. The "moon face" worsened each time they increased my medication, and it made me shy away from the sporadic FaceTime from my friends. "People wouldn't even recognize me if they saw me nowadays."

My father took a bite of his apple. "We're saving money on all the makeup you don't wear anymore," he said. Flecks of spittle flew onto me. "It'll go towards your college fund."

When my father and I fought, he would pull up his pant leg and point at the silvered-purple crisscrossing his calves. "Do you know how I got those? I spent 12-16 hours in the fields, every day, during the Cultural Revolution. You have no idea what it's like to suffer."

After my fourth relapse, I had a breakdown, and I ripped open the bottles of medication and threw them on my bedroom floor. I kept repeating, "I don't want this life," over and over again. And when my mother tried to hug me, I said: "Which one of you is going to give me a fucking kidney when mine fails?"

My father sat at the edge of my bed, hands gripping the comforter. He said, "Something needs to change around here." So, they bought me a dog.



Dinkey gave me a sense of purpose in those endless winter months, but I wasn't prepared for the demands of being a pet-parent. Unlike my friends, whom I hadn't heard from in weeks, Dinkey was obsessed with me. He shook whenever I left the room, pawing at the door and scraping off flakes of paint that tangled into his fur. I'd be in the bathroom and *boop*, he'd push his way in, panting near my feet, awaiting our next activity.

He hated being alone almost as much as I hated everything else. We'd sit in front of the TV, me sullen and him chewing on the mahogany furniture and peeing everywhere. "You need to take him out," my mom would say, hands on her hips. "You can't just let him piss everywhere."

I'd nod or *hmm* or glare, rattling the bottle of pills I had to take. Relenting, Mom would pick Dinkey up and deposit him outside, where he'd run around, collecting balls of snow in his thick coat, before dashing inside and shitting on the carpet.

He slept in my room at first, until I woke up one morning to find he had chewed through the wall molding of my bedroom office. My parents had refashioned the attic into a bedroom for me, creating a studio layout, including an alcove outfitted with bookcases and a mid-century wall desk. "He can't sleep in my room anymore," I declared at breakfast. "He's too destructive."

We gave him his own room instead, converting one of our guest bedrooms into a canine kingdom. Each night, I shut the door and listened to the *thud* of him throwing his paws against the woodgrain. The first time it stopped, I texted my parents: "I think he's finally getting used to his new set up." Months later, my mother told me my father had actually started sleeping in the guest room to keep him company. "He couldn't stand to hear Dinkey that sad," she said. By that time, Dinkey had already established residence in their bedroom, sleeping right in between them.

Like me, Dinkey was a sickly child. At his first vet visit, the doctor stuck Dinkey with a needle before grabbing him by the scruff and rotating him, like a slab of meat on display, "I think this dog is younger than six weeks. Sometimes breeders separate puppies from their moms early to make a profit." He looked at me. "Where did you get him from again?" I made up a story about a breeder in New Jersey with chrysanthemums in her yard.

"Well, at any rate, dogs who leave the litter early are more prone to behavioral problems," he said. "And sometimes health."

At three months old, the glands in Dinkey's eyes prolapsed; two reddish-pink mounds of flesh poked out of the inner corners of both eyes, so that he looked as if he were weeping congealed blood. My cousin and I watched YouTube videos and tried "massaging" the glands back into place with a wet washcloth while he squirmed and squealed. When we eventually took him to the vet, we had to schedule a "cherry eye" repair, a neutering, and a hernia prolapse. He came home from the surgery—head stuck in the cone of shame—and trembled, scurrying under my parent's bed, where he tucked himself into a shadowy corner and refused to come out.

"Oh, suck it up," I said, trying and failing to ply him with treats. "You think your life is hard? I'm 17, and I have kidney disease."

"Don't talk to him like that," my father said. He got down on his knees and beckoned for Dinkey. "He just lost his balls."

My father had become surprisingly protective of Dinkey. Sometimes, while at work, he would call me and say, “What’s the doggy up to?” He brought him to his computer store a couple of times and laughed when Dinkey proceeded to urinate near the front door. When customers came in, he introduced Dinkey as his grandson and would ask, “Do you want to pet him? He is very friendly.”

In late March, my parents took a business trip to scout out potential clients for my mother’s educational consulting business. My father held Dinkey to his chest before leaving and said, “I’m going to bring you back a lot of counterfeit designer dog toys.”

“What are you going to bring back for me?” I was leaning on the kitchen counter, toying with the strings of my hoodie.

My father laughed. “I’ll bring you some Johnnie Walker, okay? Since you like it so much.”

While they were gone, my aunt moved in, and she largely took care of Dinkey. The Germans have this word *umwelt*, which describes an organism’s subjective “self-world” as experienced through the senses and details most pertinent to them. For Dinkey, in those weeks when my parents were gone, his *umwelt* involved smelling and licking my tears as I cried in bed, snot dripping into my mouth, or barking at my aunt whenever she came towards him with the comb—the medieval torture device that had aisles of thick, steel rakes—convinced he had fleas.

Every day, I woke up in the morning, called my parents long distance, and then drove to my tutor’s house. I had been out of school for so long at that point that we wondered if I would graduate. My parents had hired Li Ro Bing the month before college applications were due, and I spent four to five hours at her house each day, hunched over packets of makeup work. We had been determined to make up three months of work in four weeks so I could send colleges a transcript, and now we were rushing to finish the remaining work so I could get my diploma.

I wanted to go to Yale more than anything, but it felt shameful to admit that in light of everything else; it felt shameful to *want* when I had become an invalid. It was simpler to pretend it was an aspiration foisted onto me and resent my parents for what had happened. I called them once while they were away and said, “You only care about showing me off to your friends. You just want me to get into an Ivy League university so you can brag to all your friends. You don’t care if all this stress makes me even more sick.”

My father laughed through the line. “You’re talking as if any Ivy League even wants you.”

Decision letters from the Ivy Leagues all come out on the same day; in the bathroom of my tutor’s house, I opened seven rejection emails. I called my parents on the drive home, listening to the silence drift over the line. Finally, my mother said, “How could this have happened?” The 476 was quiet; ice glinted on the guardrails. I thought, *what if I just drove my car over the edge?* But then my father came on the line and said, “Did you feed the dog yet?” and the moment passed.



I did, eventually, go to college. In May that year, I took three sessions of Rituximab, an immunotherapy that was considered an experimental treatment for my disease. I went into remission, graduated, and Dinkey came to move me into my college dorm at Penn State. He shit in my room before my RA yelled at me. I was touched; he wanted to leave me a part of him.

In college, I loved being a dog owner; it was an instant way to make friends. “Do you have any pets?” I’d ask a classmate, before whipping out my phone and showing him a photo of Dinkey. Once, I told a frat boy at a party: “If we go somewhere quieter, I can show you a video of my dog,” and I’m sure you can figure out what happened next.

I don’t know if I necessarily missed Dinkey though. College had shown me that my pet owning desires extended mainly towards the aesthetic; I loved looking at my dog, and I loved knowing that I had a dog, but the actual responsibilities of pet owning eluded me. One of my favorite things about my dorm was that I didn’t have to worry about stepping in dog shit.

Dinkey clearly felt similarly; when I returned home for summer break, Dinkey pounced on me, beating his tail against my side as he licked my face. But soon he began to regard me with suspicion and contempt. When I put my arm around my mother, Dinkey snarled, exposing his front teeth. When I kissed my father on the cheek, Dinkey lunged at me and started humping my arm, growling into my ear the harder I tried to yank away.

My father had become his Favorite Person, which isn’t to say that he listened to my father, only that he enjoyed nuzzling up to him the best. My father devised strange, phonetic names for Dinkey, calling him “Migoo” and “Moogoo.” I’d walk into the living room and find Dinkey sitting on my father’s lap, watching Fox News as my father stroked at the stripe of fur between his eyes.

I had been demoted to housemate; my father was master, or as close to master as Dinkey would accept. In the mornings, while I slept in and my parents went to work, Dinkey preferred sleeping under their bed, nose stuffed in a stolen sock, to spending time with me. Not only did he not need my company, he avoided it. On one such day, as he loitered upstairs and I lounged in the living room, the phone call came.

“Hello,” a man said. “This is Dr. O’Sullivan. I’m calling to see if Lin Qiao made it to the emergency room all right.”

I circled the room, phone clasped between my shoulder and ear, watering the plants and trying to see if Dinkey had peed on the hardwood. “The emergency room? Why would he be there?”

He sounded surprised at my confusion. He kept repeating words like *emergency room* and *abnormal echocardiogram*, asking if my father had been seen by the doctor on call yet.

“We think your father may have had a heart attack,” he said, and then he paused. “They didn’t tell you?”

That morning, my father had gone to the hospital to get a cardiac clearance for his upcoming surgery. He had a mass on his adrenal gland that had propelled him into hypertensive crisis; it needed to be excised, a relatively minor surgery. Before he left, I had heard him in the kitchen, whistling, as he put food out for Dinkey and refilled his water bowl.

At the hospital, in the middle of his echocardiogram, the technician froze, squinting, before she left the room. When she came back, she was trailed by a middle-aged man. Heads bent over the small, black screen of the machine, they whispered and pointed, features lit up by the glare.

“Mr. Qiao,” Dr. O’Sullivan said. “You see that line there? You have an aortic dissection.”

At my father’s blank stare, he continued: “You have a tear in your heart.”

When they told my father he was in heart failure, he got up off the exam table and spread his arms wide. “But I feel fine!” He stepped forward and spun in a circle. “I can walk and everything.”

In the emergency room, they performed another volley of tests and found a “giant pulmonary embolism” in his chest. He stared at the black-and-white butterfly shape of his lungs that the ER doctor pointed at, his fingers circling the area of the x-ray where the blood clots bloomed.

“It is astounding that you are still alive right now, Mr. Qiao,” the doctor said.

“My god,” my father answered. “I must be the luckiest man in the world.”

I cried the first time I visited my father in the ICU. He looked small and brittle, so far from the man who had once boasted of being the leader of his Communist “re-education” camp division. During the Cultural Revolution, my father and many of his peers had been sent to the countryside and subjected to hard labor in an attempt to shed them of their “bourgeois” and “capitalist” sentiments. Each family could only keep one of their children at home, and my father volunteered in place of his older sister. “She was just a girl,” he told me once. “How could I subject her to that?”

For four years, he toiled 12 to 16 hours days in the hot sun, sweating over crops, knee-deep in leech-infested rice paddies. At 17, my father was scrappy; he leveraged his charm and good looks to earn a promotion, which entailed a small pay raise (from 23 RMB to 27 RMB, or the equivalent of 4 US dollars) and leadership over the 30 or so people in his division, assigning them tasks and making sure they completed all their duties. At 59, the exertion of all this had caught up with him.

That year, he suffered a pulmonary embolism, aortic dissection, and adrenal adenoma before eventually being diagnosed with renal cell carcinoma. During a doctor’s appointment, a nurse chuckled and called him a “very sick man” while getting his medical history. My father laughed the loudest out of all of us. At home, his moods vacillated. He’d be laughing and playing with Dinkey when suddenly he’d throw the chew toy and stomp inside. “You stupid dog,” he said after Dinkey kept pouncing on a guest in our home. “You’re just like your mother.” I was a sophomore in college by then, and he’d sometimes call me at school to say: “You don’t care about me at all, do you? I’ll die, and then you’ll see. You’ll regret it.” I avoided coming home; sometimes I ignored his calls as well. Instead of texts, photos of Dinkey filled our family group chat.

The day of my father’s partial nephrectomy, Dinkey woke up early with us and circled between my father’s ankle, whining as we got ready to go to the hospital. At the threshold of the front door, my father bent down and picked him up. “I might die today,” he said. “It is my dying wish that you become housebroken.” He gave me a sidelong glance, and I looked away.

Before they rolled my father into the operating room, I put my hand in his and leaned over. “If you die, I’ll never forgive you,” I said. “Somebody needs to let Dinkey out in the morning, and I’m not equipped for that job.” On the monitor next to him, I watched his heart rate jump with laughter.



My father survived, but Dinkey never became housebroken. Both men, instead, have become emboldened with age: my father’s remission has made him brazen, and Dinkey’s lack of respect deepens every year.

Four years after his cancer diagnosis, my father decided to stop taking his medication. “Doctors treat their patients like experiments,” he said to me. “I’m the only one who knows my body best.” He got up from the table and shook his pill organizer in my face, the medications rattling like jellybeans. “I don’t want to be some doctor’s experiment.”

My father liked to skate by on the bare minimum when it came to his health: he canceled appointments, lied to his doctors, and consistently took less medication than prescribed. Now, he decided he wasn't going to take his blood thinners at all. "Your body becomes *conditioned*," he kept saying. "You become addicted and then your body loses its natural healing ability."

"Dad," I looked at him. "You've almost died twice already. Do you want to actually die this time?"

He answered, "Does it mean you'll stop nagging me?" And then he picked up Dinkey and moved around his paws, jabbing them towards me, like a shadow boxer. *Pow* he repeated, punching the air, faster and faster.

A couple days later, I stood in the kitchen, a mug of coffee in my hand and one of his tiny, pink pills in the other. I thought *I really could do this*. I thought *he would never know*, but then I went to get a spoon to stir, and I looked at the medication bottle, squinting at the tiny, block-print numerals of the expiration date. *Oh*, I thought. *Fuck*.

I was in my room this time when the phone call came. My parents had gone to the hospital early that morning for my father's yearly CT scans. On their way home, I called them. "They found another clot," I said over the phone. "You need to go back to the hospital right now." They insisted on picking me up first, and I cried and called them "idiots." Dinkey stayed back alone, in the house, crying and thumping against the front door as we shut it and hustled into the car.

At the hospital, the nurse told my father his blood was the consistency of syrup. She grabbed a needle as thick as shoelaces and used one hand to hold down his arm as she shoved the steel into the juncture of his elbow. His knees twitched, and he made a strangled sound, a cross between a grunt and a whimper. When the doctor came in, he pulled up my father's X-rays on the screen. "They are giant pulmonary emboli there. Bilateral." He pointed at my father's chest and described the clots stacked against his aorta, bouncing through his veins, treating his blood like a lazy river.

"You are a very lucky man," the doctor said, and my father winked at me as the doctor turned away

"Please"—I touched my father's leg, bare underneath the hospital gown, and tried not to irritate the wounds there from where he'd picked at his scars—"don't encourage him." For the first time, I wished I had a sibling.

When my mother and I came home from the hospital that night, we found Dinkey hidden in the closet next to our front door. He was huddled over one of my father's shoes and had dragged my father's winter coat over him. "Dinkey," I said. "Your owner is a very sick and very lucky man." He let out a soft whine, and while my mother and I ate dinner, he stood at the door and waited for my father to come home.

They released my father after three days in the hospital, partly because he wouldn't stop complaining about being in the hospital. A few hours before his discharge, he had called me. "Sabrina," he said. "You have to rescue your daddy, okay?" During discharge, the nurse told him that he had to start taking his medication again. "This is a life or death matter," she said. "Do you understand?"

He nodded and saluted her. "I know my luck is running out."

That night, we got takeout for dinner. After we ate, my father found me out on the deck. "You can't do this to me again," I said to him.

"I need you to marry a good man." He sat down next to me. "Someone who can take care of you when I'm gone." He shifted, and the wooden planks groaned under our combined weight.

I took a sip of my wine. “I don’t need anyone to take care of me.”

He laughed. “Then why”—he reached over and took my wine glass—“are you so afraid for me to die?”



When my father had been hospitalized the second time, Dinkey wouldn’t eat. My mother and I tried plying him with treats, drizzling bacon grease over his kibble, but he wouldn’t move from his perch by the front door, where he’d lay, waiting. Ever since my father has been discharged, Dinkey follows him around—more than usual—and whines when my father tries to take a shower or use the bathroom.

If I try to hug my father, Dinkey will throw his entire body weight against me and bark, sharp and ferocious, until I step away. I’ve heard that dogs can sense illness in humans, through a combination of olfactory and auditory clues (supposedly, pups have an area of the brain that allows them to decipher emotional cues in the tone of a speaker’s voice), but I think maybe Dinkey is just a brat who doesn’t want to be left behind if my father has to be hospitalized. Maybe he does take after me in that sense.

At six years old, he still urinates and defecates as he pleases. Mostly, we’ve given up on discipline and let him run wild at home; the dog is the master here. On every floor of our house, we have potty pads scattered on the wood. Sometimes I’ll be walking down to dinner, and I’ll spy a piece of shit on the hallway floor, a gift from him.

I’ve tried training him, but Dinkey only abides by his own schedule. When he sees me putting on my shoes, he scampers upstairs and hides under my parents’ bed. Then I have to chase him and stick my arm under the bed, reaching blindly for a furry limb so I can pull him out and carry him to the lawn. Once caught, he becomes compliant, but outside, he hops around, peeing on different sections of our lawn before darting back inside and pissing on the trashcan we have near the front door. “He’s territorial,” my mother explains. “He needs reassurance that this is his home.”

Nowadays, my mother acts like a canine behavioral therapist. We can agree that Dinkey is chubby, but she prevaricates when I try to develop a diet. “It’s his breed,” she says. “He’s just a fat little breed. We can’t change biology.” And then she goes and throws him four treats. Every two months, she spends \$100 dollars buying dog treats and grows defensive when I confront her. “Eating is his only pleasure in life. Why can’t you just let him be happy?”

My father laughs when I try to discipline Dinkey. He’ll smirk at me from the doorway as I chase Dinkey outside and shout, “Can you just pee already? Jesus Christ. You’re the absolute worst.”

“See?” he says. He picks Dinkey up. “It’s not so easy to parent, after all, is it?” Pulling Dinkey against his chest, he pretends he’s nursing. “Look at how much your grandfather loves you,” he coos. “I won’t let your mom bully you.”

Recently, I asked him how he became so permissive as a grandparent. Smiling, he tugged at Dinkey’s tail. “Because dogs love you when no one else can.”

My father is still Dinkey’s favorite, but Dinkey has warmed to me as well, the former tenant who’s suddenly moved home. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I’ve become a dictator for my household, forcing my parents to stay inside, use hand sanitizer, and wear their masks correctly. When I take Dinkey outside, I make sure he doesn’t get too cozy with our neighbor’s dog, a Machiavellian cream-colored poodle named Mocha who likes to taunt Dinkey by using our lawn as his personal bathroom.

“We don’t fraternize with the enemy,” I tell Dinkey, holding his head up to meet my gaze. “Especially when we don’t know if he’s been quarantining.”

For fun, my father and I have been training Dinkey to cross to our neighbor’s lawn and do his business there. Whenever he reaches the limits of our property, my father and I turn around and start walking home. “Where’s Dinkey?” I wonder out loud, and my father shrugs and puts his arm around me. When Dinkey scampers home, panting, we feed him treats and say, “Good boy,” before folding the unused puppy waste bag and putting it back in the closet.

“It’s economical,” we explained to my mother after she had caught us. “We’re saving money on supplies and effort.”

I’ve made a promise with my parents: before the pandemic ends and I move to New York to attend my graduate program, I’ll finally housebreak Dinkey. We work on it every day, and I think he’s getting better, but sometimes he still runs and hides when I call for him. He’s started avoiding the stairs, whining and pawing at the tread, waiting for me to come and carry him down. Outside, he frolics in the yard, but there’s a strange hop in his step, like he’s tripping every third beat. Google tells me it might be hip dysplasia, a common breed deformity exacerbated by age. There’s white streaking his fur now, especially prominent near his snout. The first time my father spied the variegated fur, he exclaimed: “Holy shit. He’s an old man now.”

Shih-poos live long, but sometimes a small, awful part of me wonders if I’ll feel any relief once Dinkey’s gone, if I’ll feel liberated from the potty pads and the timers reminding me when I have to take him out, if I’ll feel emancipated from the frequent worry and responsibility. But I don’t think I will. I think maybe that’s the worst part: he’ll die, and I’ll go on living.



# THE GOOD DAUGHTER

By Gillian Reimann

What makes a good daughter?

The good daughter takes out the trash whenever she notices it's full.

A good daughter does not dump all the recycling in the bin because the loose plastic bags go flying.

The good daughter washes all the dishes in the sink, regardless of if they're hers or not.

A good daughter does not leave the dishes in the dishwater all day for her mom to unload when she gets home.

The good daughter does everyone's laundry and then folds it.

A good daughter does not put her mother's bras in the dryer.

The good daughter makes dinner before five o'clock because they need to eat before seven since they have to work the next day.

A good daughter does not leave dinner for her mother to do after working all day.

The good daughter: Cooks. Cleans. Vacuums. Mops. Dusts. Folds. Drives. Buys. Brushes. Organizes. Runs. Listens. Hugs. Comforts. Cries. Angsts. Hides.

When I think of a good daughter, I think of Rory Gilmore from *Gilmore Girls* and her dutiful dinners with her grandparents coupled with her fun, quirky nights with her mother. I think of Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games* trilogy, who raises her younger sister, hunts for food, and keeps their house intact from adolescence to her late teens while her mother lingers in a pseudo-catatonic state. I think of Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* who trades her own life for that of her father's. I think of Buffy Summers from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* who tries so hard in school despite her nighttime extracurriculars because she doesn't want to disappoint her mother who fought for her right to attend classes. I think of Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, always conscious of her mother's nerves and her sisters' livelihoods. I think of Angelica Schuyler from *Hamilton* who marries for money and prestige for her father and their family name, letting her younger sister marry for love.

I think of all the shows and movies and books, where the good daughter is an orphan, left to look after her younger siblings, her family home, herself, by herself. I think of so many different young girls and women who support their families in times of crisis, in times of shaken faith, in times of good and bad, and I think that's the model I'm to adhere to, that's the model for all young women to adhere to.

Women are the caretakers, the ones who cook and clean and wash and dry and run and work and work and work.

Why am I the one? There are six others in my immediate family including me, six women who, by the very nature of our sex, by nature of what we're told in the media, in books, in movies, in history, could fill the role of caretaker. So why am I the one they turn to? Is it because my mother was the one before me? Is it a role that's passed down, a role that I unwittingly stepped into the first time I offered to help collect the dishes at Thanksgiving dinner as a child? Mom used to nudge me back then, pointing

over to her sister before telling me to offer to help to clean up. Was that where it started? My mom would get up and help too, so I had an example to follow, a model to base my behaviors on. Someone who I followed and emulated for years and years until I didn't anymore. I stopped offering and stopped accepting, or at least, I tried to.

Why is it so hard to say no to them, my family? Why is it so easy to say yes?

When they ask me to do something, my mother especially, followed by my Aunt Deena or her daughter Shauna, the acid in my stomach starts to curdle, rising its way up my throat like bile. I can't breathe. They smile and laugh and say thank you here's some money and I take it because I'd be an idiot not to. But what is money to time lost? What is money to the expectation that I will drop what I'm doing and help them with whatever they need? What is money when my time and my life mean so little that a price can be wagered? It's an ever-present weight, as oppressive as any chain or leash settles around my throat choking out all words but yes, of course I will, or sure, why not.

With my mother, it's "Can you cook chicken/rice for Faith? Can you do the grocery run this week? Can you do the laundry? Can you please, help me?"

With Deena, it's "Can you go get me something from CVS? On your way can you stop at Grocery Outlet? Can you swing by and pick up something for your mother?"

With Shauna, it's "Can you pick up the boys from school? Can you watch the boys this weekend? Can you bring the boys to swim practice, soccer practice, water polo practice?"

Can I?

Can I?

Can I?

Can I just give a little more of myself to you and can you take just a little bit more away from me?

It's not just the women, though now that Grandpa has died, it is more of an echo of all his desires, all his lists of things for me to do for him because no one else could. Or would.

"Can you take me to CVS?"

The bank. Food Maxx. Post office. The barbers. The feed store. The VA for my optometrist appointment. My cardiology appointment. My general check-up.

Can you take me to the dentist? Can you pick up bananas for me? Tissues. Toilet paper. Can you come water my plants while I'm gone? Can you come put my mail in? The paper. The trash cans. Can you call me more, I miss you?"

When my phone buzzes, without fail, a chill presses against my tailbone until I slide my finger across the screen to see who needs me next. My laptop is set aside, the screen frozen on the fanfic I was reading or show I was watching. I admit it, I'm lazy. That's what my Mom calls it, what my Dad reprimands me for, what my Aunt says not to be.

When I don't have a job or a class to go to, my days are spent reading or watching TV, sporadically writing in the midst. Or even when I have a homework for a class, because they don't really understand the importance. I tried to explain to them once the concept that school is a full-time job, that I should focus most of my energy on it, and they agreed. Then two days later asked if I could please get off my laptop and help them with something. Even when I had a job in undergrad as an administrative

assistant for the Center of Gender Equity on campus, they thought it was cute. My aunt laughed when I tried to explain that I coordinated event set-ups and managed the budget sheets, stating “But you only work five hours a week right? That’s not a real job.”

But I don’t have any real responsibilities, right? And so, in some ways, I understand that my time can be used to make up for their time lost while working. At Concord PD. At Concord Garden Equipment. At Dana Hills Pool. At Big O. At home since Deena hasn’t worked in over twenty years. I just want to scream, “Leave me alone.”

Mom worked at the shop with dad at Big O for nearly twenty years, shuttling people, working sales, going for parts, until she left, that is. Now her job is more physical, working receiving at Ace Hardware, unloading trucks and stocking shelves, she’s too tired and achy to do the chores at home now, and with good reason. Deena, Deena doesn’t work, except for the random moments in a month where she helps her husband out at their shop, doing paperwork on the ATVs sold or the lawnmowers fixed at Concord Garden Equipment. Shauna works two to three days a week, answering phones at the Concord Police Department or helping her dad out at the office whenever Deena can’t. They’re always busy, so busy compared to me sitting on the couch reading fanfiction or watching tv. I can help them out since I’m not doing anything productive. Right?

When I’m reading something, book, fanfiction, comic, or manga, I can immerse myself into that world. I inhabit the lives of the characters, their joys and fears become my own and I allow myself to separate from reality and the constant pressure of being me. The good daughter. The one who always helps. I see the examples in popular media, I see the Rory’s, the Katniss’s, the Buffy’s, but I don’t have to be them, and often, the fics I read change them anyways, change the narrative so that they aren’t alone, that they aren’t bearing the burden of a good daughter.

I set my laptop off to the side of the couch, switching the screen over to my email in case she walks by and looks at what I was doing. I know that she knows I was reading fanfic, not actually doing work, but the illusion that I was productive is too enticing not to cling to. My phone buzzes again and I slide it into my pocket, ignoring the second message from Deena in the last hour. No, I will not be running to go get her the tri tip rub. It’s expensive and even if she pays me back, the drive isn’t worth it. And dammit, why should I have to even justify myself?

Straightening my back, I turn the corner down the hall into my parents’ bedroom. Mom’s folding her laundry, her face pinched as she digs through the pile to find a matching blue tipped black sock. I reach over and grab a towel and start to fold, and it’s quiet for a moment, and then she starts talking.

“I just got off the phone with Deena. She wanted me to ask if you’re not doing anything if you could go run some errands for her.”

I wish I could dig my nails deep into my hair and pull and pull, but I resist and focus my energy on aggressively folding towels. I toss them one after another on the bed in a haphazard pile before I respond.

“Well as it so happens, I am busy and so I won’t. I don’t know why she can’t go do it herself. It’s not like she has a job or anything.”

There’s a pause, and I give in to the urge and dig my nails into my palm, the sharp pain centering me as she inhales and exhales.

“You’ve changed,” my mother says. “You’re not the same compassionate little girl you used to be. The one your grandma and I raised you to be.”

She’s stopped folding clothes and is looking at me, her head tilted as she watches me. How am I supposed to respond to that? I don’t want to respond to that. I just want to go back to my laptop, back to the shitty Harry Potter fic I settled on reading. I want to be anywhere but here. I’m not the compassionate little girl she and Grandma raised? What is that supposed to mean? My eyes burn beneath my glasses and I rub at them with the back of my wrist.

“Of course I’ve changed, I’m 23. I’m not a little kid. I learned to stand up for myself and not let people walk all over me. Unlike you.”

That was a lie, I do let people walk all over me. I’m just more vocal about my displeasure. She blinks at my words, shifting backwards as if they landed a heavy blow on her. We’ve had words before about her martyr complex, her victim syndrome, but she always brushes it off, changes the subject. She’s so stuck on being the one who everyone turns to, who everyone burdens with their problems. I can see now she’s confused that I’m not the same. That I don’t want to be the same.

“That’s not what I do. And even if it was, it’s because I have no one to support me.” And she’s right, I’m her only ally. But I’m her daughter why do I have to be her ally? Why do I have to be the good daughter? I don’t want to comfort her, but as she sags into herself, the bags under her eyes deepening, her back curving inward, I feel that tug, that inescapable impulse. And I reach over and hug her, she leans into me and I rub her back. I start telling her that she needs to stand up for herself. That she needs to talk to Dad. She really does, I can’t keep doing this. I’m tired of being the good daughter.

I leave her to her laundry after a minute and head back down the hall. Stepping over Faith, who sends me an unimpressed glare as I ruffle her fur with my foot, I settle back onto the couch and pull my laptop onto my lap. Flicking back over to the fanfiction I started earlier, I cringe at the bad grammar and cliched image of Hermione’s bushy hair, ignoring my own frizzy mess that was falling out of a bun, but settle into the story, letting my mind drift away with the words on the screen.

I know I’ll have to get up and help with dinner soon. It’s my night to cook since I don’t have class, my grad school hours impinging on her scheduled dinner times often. I’ll spend over an hour cooking the chicken, cutting up bell peppers, tossing it all together in a pan on the stove before transferring it to the tortillas and adding cheese to make stuffed quesadillas. But for now, and until she starts calling me, I can sink into Hogwarts chilling halls and misspelt houses and imagine my way out.