

HIVE AVENUE



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HIVE AVENUE



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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CHLOE CATTANEO

呀 (ya)

I am 6 and we're moving. We is me and Dad and the turtle, Sparky. Mama isn't coming with us. She's going to stay in California with our old house and the orange trees and our tire swing. Mama and I painted the tire swing little by little, sneaking into the garage to steal paint cans while Dad was at work.

The new house is a haunted shack with turrets and human bones and smashed pumpkins infested with flies and boarded up doors and windows. The roof is on fire and the chimney is falling over. The grass droops like dead things. Dad starts to get out of the car.

"But we can't go in there. It's haunted."

"No, Adam, it's not. Come on."

Inside it's freezing hot and burning cold at the same time and funny stains crawl down the walls like worms, but my new room is much bigger. Dad helps me set up a little fortress with my boxes in a corner and my sleeping bag. The racecar bed Dad promised me is on its way in the moving van, with my two Star Wars lightsabers and four boxes of legos and the paper Leo and LJ wrote their home phone numbers on so we don't have to break up the Loyal Order of Destruction.

For dinner Dad orders Chinese food and tries to poison me by putting snap peas in the rice. Mama always pretends snap peas are space worms and gasps in horror when I eat their heads off. Dad just slaps them on the plate.

"I think there's mold in the hall."

Dad chews.

"It could take over and kill us."

Dad shakes his head. "Eat your peas, A. You're not a baby anymore."

I kick the table legs. Dad sets his jaw like he's holding a rock in his mouth. I scrape my fork against the edge of my plate. Dad takes a long sip from his water glass. I pile all my food into a mound and smash it down with my fist. Dad gives up and snatches my plate away.

On the way back to my room, the floor tries to swallow my feet. The stairs turn into an avalanche. The rocks roll over me and push me down and crush my chest and my neck until I can only see a tiny piece of the black-stained ceiling through the pile of rocks on top of me. Suddenly that gap is filled by Dad's upside-down face.

"What are you doing?"

He pulls me out from under the rock pile and sends me to bed. My room is huge. A monster stalks across the far wall. He has red eyes and feet the size of trucks and carries a sword. Blood drips from the tip of the sword and the ends of his talons and the points of his fangs. I pull my sleeping bag up to my eyebrows. Mama always knows when there is something bad to protect me from and crawls into bed next to me and puts her foot against mine and wiggles her toes until I laugh. I always know when there is something bad I need to protect her from too and I squish into bed between her and Dad and put my toes against hers.

The monster on my wall snarls at me with a voice like dead leaves scraping down a rainy sidewalk. His mouth opens so wide I can see all his rows of teeth, like a shark's. He's going to hurt Mama. He's going to hurt Mama and I won't be there to save her or put my foot against hers. I jump out of bed and sit with my back leaning against the door so nothing can get in or out. I sit there the whole night.

The next morning Dad has an idea. He lets me eat lucky charms for breakfast and asks me if I want to go check out the park. I shrug. Dad tells me to get my jacket.

Our new street is one million miles long and half a million miles wide. There isn't even a street sign. The trees are much bigger than the little elf houses crouching behind them, with cloudy windows and wilting porches. The houses have gardens full of bumpy squash bigger than my fists and leaves dripping with brown and green slime. The whole street is an ocean of leaves. The trees are so tall the sun is blocked and the sky is dirty white again. It smells like rot.

The next street is the same as ours, except for the duck sitting by the sidewalk. It's the biggest duck I've ever seen, and it has purple eyes. It stares at me as we walk past, so I yell and start to run at it before Dad grabs the hood of my jacket and yanks me back.

"Leave the duck alone, A," Dad says.

The duck, which has retreated farther back from the sidewalk, looks at me smugly. Once we're a safe distance away, I can hear the duck quack after us.

"Dad, it's laughing at me."

Dad laughs too, then he reaches down and messes up my hair. Dad messes up my hair when he's happy or proud of me. Last year when I played T-ball and I hit a home run in a game, Mama flew at me and lifted me up and twirled me around so I was dizzy and sick and laughing and dipped me upside down and I watched the other T-ball players running around with their shoes hanging down from the sky. When Mama put me down Dad walked slowly over and said, "Good job, A," and messed up my hair. Then we all went for ice cream. Mama and I fought bad guys on the way there.

The park is in the center of a big crater and the slide is half-sinking in quicksand. There are two other kids, but they're babies. I know they won't be any help in getting the slide out of

the quicksand or fighting off bad guys, if there are any. At the park in California the slide was way, way higher than this one. When you sat at the top you were the tallest person alive. The trees looked like pieces of broccoli, and the cars going by on the street looked like toys. Mama took me there this summer. I held her hand on the way there because Dad told me to hold tight to her hand, not because I was a baby, but because I needed to protect her. I was the pilot of a rocket on the swingset, blasting off so high my heels scraped pieces of the sun right out of the sky, and then the chains weren't in my hands anymore and the sky was the ground and then my chest felt like there were tiny needles in it and my arm felt like it was falling off. I yelled for Mama and all I could see was hard blue sky punching me in the eyes and grass swimming through the sky prickled with mulch. I saw faces and heard yelling but no Mama. Some other lady was lifting me up. I was scared and I was crying not because it hurt but because I'd lost Mama and it was my job to protect her and what if a monster had gotten her? Then I saw Mama standing by the slide. Her face was white. She wasn't looking at me, but she looked scared.

I have to fight off the bad guys all by myself here at this new park. I'm just about to land the very last punch on a monster, maybe a smaller cousin of the one who came to my room last night, when Dad drags me away for lunch. Peanut butter and jelly. He doesn't cut the crusts off like Mama does, but when I complain he tells me to stop acting like a baby or I'll have to make lunch by myself. I bite my lip and stare down at my plate. "Mama would fix it," I whisper.

Dad doesn't say anything for a second. Then he pushes back his chair and leaves the room.

I finish the rest of my sandwich, except for the crusts, and tiptoe down the hall to Dad's room. His door is closed and there's no noise inside. I tiptoe back to my room.

The monster guarding my wall is gone in the daytime. It's safe to go to sleep.

The next day Dad's still not up at two o'clock in the afternoon, so I have pop tarts and watch cartoons, then I decide to walk to the park again. I write Dad a note to tell him where I've gone and stick it under his door, and I draw little pictures for him because he can't read my writing very well. Mama can always read my writing and writes out captions for Dad in her purple pen. Purple is Mama's favorite color. This summer, Mama and Dad had to go away for a little while and I stayed with Nainai. While they were gone Nainai and Dad talked on the phone a lot and Grandma would make her mouth really small and her voice really tight and quiet. I made coloring pages for Mama except I colored everything purple. Purple cars on a purple racetrack under a purple sun. Then I sneaked Mama's pen and wrote my name-- my Chinese name, which Nainai showed me how to write-- in a big heart.

Today the sidewalk is purple with leaves and last night's rainwater. I splash my way down the street, fighting a few bad guys who swing down out of the trees, and then I get to the street where Dad and I saw the duck yesterday.

The duck is still there, sitting next to the sidewalk. It eyes me suspiciously as I walk up to it, but it doesn't move away. It really is the biggest duck I've ever seen, maybe even the same size as me, with an explosion of feathers in every color imaginable and an orange bill. Maybe it's a cousin of the monster on my wall too.

I give my best battle cry. The duck quacks, just as loud. Mama says "quack" is the silliest word she's ever heard and the word for duck in Chinese, which is *ya*, sounds exactly like a quack. When I was little, just a baby, Mama read me a book with all the animals in Chinese. When she read *ya* she would say it like a duck. After that whenever Mama or I saw a duck we would race to be the first one to yell *ya*. This summer I started always winning, because Mama wasn't paying enough attention. She was always looking in the other direction and holding her stomach or her head like it was hurting her. I would squeeze her fingers and she wouldn't look at me, so I'd squeeze them again and she'd turn and say sorry, she'd just been thinking about something else, and smile at me and say *ya* in her voice like a duck.

I stomp. The duck glares at me and swells up until it's definitely even bigger than me. I yell again and run at the duck. It quacks, a really loud one this time, and runs away from me, down the side of the sidewalk.

Ha!

I start chase. Down one street we go, around a corner, through a garden, over a bridge, through a gully, we run so fast the trees and the ground and the flat sky blur together. We run until it starts to rain.

The duck stops so hard I almost fall over. Catching my balance, I look around to see where we are now. It feels like we've come miles and miles.

We're standing on the sidewalk in front of one of the dwarf houses, which is surrounded by huge, twisted trees with arms like giants. Hanging from one of those giant tree arms is a tire swing just like ours at home. The tire swing is painted with messy stick figures. Mama and I did a much better job on our swing. There are two tall stick figures, one with a triangle for a skirt, and two little stick figures. One of the little ones is holding a teddy bear and they all have smiles. Over the group there is a painting of a sun.

I sit down on the sidewalk. The duck stands next to me.

The air is white with water and the sky is soggy. My hair is dripping in my eyes, and the only thing I can really see through all the rain is the tire swing. The duck quacks softly. *Ya*.

Mama was sitting on the floor with her long hair dripping in her eyes and her shirt on inside out and rocking herself back and forth mumbling under her breath. I heard her say *ya*. I put my shirt on inside out and sat down next to her and rocked and whispered under my breath *ya ya ya ya*. But she didn't see or hear me there. Dad made me leave her alone, because he said I was upsetting her, which isn't fair. I just wanted to sit with her in case there was something scary and she wanted me there to help. I woke up in the night because I knew Mama was upset and I had to protect her. But when I looked in Mama and Dad's room it was empty and when I went to the living room Mama was still sitting on the floor rocking. Dad was sitting in a chair, and he was so tiny his feet didn't even touch the ground, and I tiptoed back to bed because I knew Dad might be angry if he thought I was upsetting Mama again.

I look at the duck with its millions and millions of colors of feathers and its purple eyes. "The bad guys got her," I whisper to the duck.

"You couldn't fight them off all by yourself," the duck says back.

DEGEN HILL

TRANSITORY

The days were getting longer. Or at least they felt that way. Dust flew into the air as Karl Neesham's tattered boots plodded through the streets. Cars with broken windows were strewn about, and the houses that still remained had metal blockades over the doors. The sound of gunshots ripped through the silence of the deserted streets. Karl pulled his black trench coat a little tighter as the wind whipped dust against him, as if trying to permeate the already dirty clothes he was wearing. The cans of soup and assortment of electrical parts in his cracked leather bag weighed heavily upon his back. Scavenging was now a necessity, but each outing carried risks. Risks that Karl had deemed worth taking.

He walked on, taking in the quiet around him. The perpetual moving, shifting, and aggravating momentum of society had come to a grinding halt in 2043. People around the world had become unsatisfied with all the rules and regulations and societal norms and everyone just stopped. They quit working, they stopped contributing, and as a result, society, as it had come to be known, now ceased to exist.

Karl looked over and saw a broken microwave on the side of the road. His thoughts shifted to when he was young and how he would take apart his mother's kitchen appliances, ever curious about the inner workings. Later in life, he became an engineer, working on tech for the military. Despite his early ambitions, he, like billions of others around the world, had grown tired of the hierarchical structure of not only their jobs, but of the social class system that had divided society so aggressively.

For Karl, the long hours, the low pay, the glass ceilings, and soul-crushing day-to-day duties had finally proved to be too much. Monotony and tediousness had eaten away at him until there was no other choice. Around the world, humans unequivocally and resoundingly stopped working. Naturally, society descended into chaos, a world where rapacity ran rampant, and survival became paramount. The individual overcame the collective in the most barbaric way; apathy had overcome empathy. A year after The Stop took place, there was no region left on Earth that could be classified as a functioning society.

As Karl walked on, he passed by a green military jacket lay strewn in the street and he thought of the day he had quit, unaware of what the future would hold, but convinced that he was making the right choice. Now, seven years later, Karl was beginning to have his doubts. *Be loyal to what matters* he would tell himself, uncertain if he was reminding himself of his values or trying to justify the irreversible situation he was part of.

Making his way around the back of a worn-down house, he dropped his utility bag to the ground and looked around before rapping three times against the cellar door. The rusted joints creaked, and the doors popped open, revealing a young face smudged with grease and soot. Karl handed the young man the bag, looked around once again, and then entered the cellar, quickly closing the doors behind him.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" asked Lew.

"Let's hope so," said Karl while hanging up his dusty black coat.

Lew walked towards the metal table in the middle of the room and turned the bag upside down, dumping out the contents. Along with the soup cans were various cables, assorted engine parts, and odd bits of machinery that Karl had thought might be of some use in the future.

"More soup?" asked Lew, picking up a dented can of beef stew.

"Sorry, they were all out of caviar."

"Well, at least you got the cables. You think we'll be able to finish it?" asked Lew, glancing at the supplies. At 25, he was just as curious as he was as a child when he had first moved in next door to Karl. However, everything else changed. After losing his parents at the start of The Stop to violent marauders and moving in with Karl, he had become tough, willing to do whatever it took to live in this new world.

Karl thought about how many times he had answered the question posed by the young man. Over the years, Lew had always been by Karl's side, helping him tinker with small projects and the impending question of "you reckon it will work?" never failed to get both men thinking about what the future held in store.

"With some luck, we just might have what we need," said Karl, looking at the blueprints he had painstakingly drawn up. For years, Karl had designed and built advanced radars for the military. The authority on micro-radar systems, Karl had written several articles on the subject. Despite his interest in the work, the monotonous years spent grinding away for the U.S. military had finally pushed him to his breaking point.

After soldering one of the recently acquired wires into place, Karl pushed the welding goggles up his forehead and looked at Lew, "Ready."

Lew flipped a switch on the side of the machine and the green screen lit up, emitting a quiet hum throughout the sparse room. He looked up at the ceiling, hoping the jerry-rigged antenna on the roof would work this time. The beam on the screen's surface quickly moved around in a circle as both Karl and Lew looked at it, quiet, but hopeful. A faint pulse flashed on the screen. Again, the beam circled around, and this time, the pulse was stronger.

Karl grabbed a map and began calculating the distance to the blip. He set the pen down, turned to look at Lew.

"It's from beyond the city. Less than six hours by foot."

"What is it?"

"I," he began, unsure of how to answer. "I don't know." The darkness in the room illuminated the light coming from the screen as both were transfixed on the pulsing dot.

"You think someone's out there," asked Lew, looking up at Karl.

"Looks that way. Could be a broken piece of tech, but maybe it's something else. Something valuable." Karl couldn't be sure what exactly the blip was, but like Lew, he was eager to find out. Supplies in the city were running low, and if there was a chance of finding something useful beyond the city limits, he knew the risk could be worth the reward.

"I'll check it out tomorrow," he said.

Before Lew could protest, he continued, "It would be foolish for both of us to go. Someone has to stay here and man the fort; keep an eye on all our precious items."

"Precious," Lew muttered with a smile while picking up a spark plug from the table, "how silly of me to forget."

Karl smiled and then looked back at the pulsating light, closed his eyes, and thought *the most important step a man can take is the next one*. Tomorrow. Tomorrow he would head out, and for better or for worse, find out what exactly was causing the blip.



Karl woke before dawn and quietly got dressed. He grabbed his utility bag, checked to make sure his knife was strapped to his belt, opened the cellar door, and headed out into the early morning hours.

The minutes turned into hours, and hours turned into discomfort as Karl made his way through the forest. Step over step of rubble, broken glass, and rugged terrain had begun to take its toll on Karl's worn boots. He had been walking since 4 a.m., hoping to avoid the ever-watchful thugs who didn't believe in the notion of 'individual property.' The outskirts of town posed the most risk, so Karl twisted his route to ensure his trip out of the city remained unharried. Now, walking through the forest, amidst green trees, wild bushes, and most noticeably, a cleaner sort of quiet, Karl took a deep breath.

He had never gotten out much into nature as an engineer. Projects and deadlines and meetings and drawing boards and bosses in decorated uniforms had kept him busy. He stopped walking and pulled out a map and a compass. The sun was overhead, and from his

position on the map, he knew he was close. To what, he wasn't sure, but he felt it. The wind played with his light brown hair and blew across his face.

"State your name and business," a voiced yelled out. Karl turned towards where the voice had come but saw nothing but trees. His hand moved down towards his waist, ready to draw his knife if need be.

"I'm not gonna ask twice!"

"Karl," he responded. "Saw the blip."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a woman in a white robe and a broad-shouldered man in a black jacket emerge from the surrounding trees.

As the woman got closer, Karl noticed her long blonde hair and the way she moved, uncharacteristic from the agitated pace of those in the city.

Standing about a meter from him, her blue eyes bored into him.

"Why are you here?"

Karl could feel his heart beating but looked into the woman's eyes and said, "Saw a blip on my radar. Figured it would be worth checking out. Due diligence and all that."

The woman stared back at him with a hint of a smile. *How is she so clean?* thought Karl. Everyone in the city had a certain grime to them, including himself, but this woman, in her white clothing, was immaculate. He looked over at the man and saw a gun holstered on his waist.

"And who might you be exactly?" he asked, turning back to the woman.

Without responding, she simply asked, "What did you do before The Stop?"

"I don't see how that's any of your business."

"You came to us," she said. "Answer the question."

"I was a weapons and technical engineer for the military. Missiles, sensors, radar, those sorts of things. And you are?"

"You can call me Arella. Please, follow me."

"Follow you where exactly?"

"You're here because of the blip. So, let me show you."

The woman turned to walk from where she had come. Karl, looking around the forest for some sort of confirmation of the absurdity of the situation, followed her, with the man following behind.

"So, you were part of The Stop?" she asked.

"Well, me and the rest of the world."

"Not everyone," she said. "Why did you stop?"

"I don't think society was happy with where it was going or what it had become. So, we took the next step forward. Technologically backward, perhaps, but ideologically forward. I guess you could say that sometimes you have to break the wall of your house to get a better view."

"Yes, but you, Karl, why did you stop?"

As they continued walking, he thought for a moment before answering, "People are always going to have problems regardless of what type of system we live under. But this is the fallacy of empires, rulers, masters, and leaders. No one is primary. Men should not rule over men; people should be working together, the same way that all the cells of your brain cooperate, you don't have to force them together in association. You don't have to make your brain cells cooperate. You don't have to arrange a treaty of some kind; they just do so. I can't remain indifferent to the fact that I was living a life controlled by someone else and controlled by 'technological innovations.' I had become a slave to society. I was living a middle-class life, caught up by consumerism, and going to a job that I wasn't passionate about. In the end, I, like so many others, wanted out."

"And are you out now, Karl?"

"I'm free from the social constraints of what society was before The Stop. I had reached a point in life where I could actually step outside myself and see who I was based on the sum of influences I've had on my life up to that point. I took control of my own narrative, freed myself from the bonds of the me defined by those prior experiences, and now I'm living a free life."

"Life is transitory."

He turned to respond, but wasn't sure how. As the group stopped walked, she gestured ahead at what lay before them. A huge valley unfolded below as the clearing around them thinned out. Green, lush grass with trees that seemed to form a wall around the valley below. In front of them, the scenery appeared to flicker, like a tv trying to maintain a clear signal. Arella grabbed something, almost out of mid-air, and moved it to the left. A 3-meter-tall flickering hexagonal panel swung open, and then, for the first time since The Stop, Karl heard sounds from a life long ago, sounds he thought he would never hear again. Cars, people talking on the street, laughter, music. Arella guided him around the panel and through the opening. Karl's eye's widened as he took in his surroundings.

"What is this?"

"It's life."

"It's a functioning society," he said, staring at what he saw before him. It was nothing like what the city he had left this morning had turned into. He looked through the hexagonal

space and saw a new city, full of life, one that was clean, and moving, almost alive. Huge buildings reached towards the sky, small shops flashed their neon signs, and both people and white tramcars were moving about, something that seemed to be non-existent where Karl lived, a city that Lew had once referred to as "post-apocalyptic."

"Lost, but not forgotten," Arella said, looking down at the sprawling city. "Karl, I'd like to ask you a favor, and perhaps, I could do you one in return. This panel," she said, pointing at the hexagon, "is part of a system of sensors that have allowed us to sustain our way of life. But, like all things, they need maintenance. Otherwise, our way of life might be vitiated."

"What is it you're asking?"

"Our society has needs. What we have created, or in other words, continued to maintain, requires constant efforts. For some time now, we've needed more engineers to help maintain our shield," she said, gesturing to the giant panels of hexagons that, from the inside, gave a view of the outside world while still maintaining their geometric outline.

"You're offering me a job?"

"A few weeks ago, we put out a signal, the blip, and you're the only one who has had the means to check it out. So, to answer your question, I'm offering you a chance to be a part of something bigger than yourself."

Karl stopped, remembering the same slogan being said when he was first interviewed with the Army's Robotics Division. At the time, it had sounded like a grand statement, a promise of a future that he could be a part of. Now, it sounded like a stranglehold on the life he had sacrificed so much to have.

His eyes fixed on Arella and he said, "This might look like the world we knew, but it's not. Your offer comes with expectations and requirements, and I assume you'd want me to stay here?"

"Running water, electricity, transportation, the rule of law -- our society has everything you could want."

Karl sensed a small, dull ache in his chest as he was again reminded of his first job interview, where they had promised him a salary, bonuses, holidays, and all the other perks that came with a job provided he gave up his time to help their corporation grow. The thought of it made him sick.

"At what cost?"

Arella smiled. "There will also be responsibilities and an agreement to abide by our society's laws, our system of governance, and way of life. I understand that choosing to be part of The Stop must have been liberating, cathartic even. Look at your life now, out there," she

said, gesturing to one of the transparent panels, "is it how you imagined? It all seems a bit futile to me."

He thought of his small workshop and his life in the city, foraging for food among the broken-down buildings and the amenities of life that no longer existed. He thought about the feeling of stability he had felt before The Stop when everything seemed locked in place, secure, stable, and suffocating.

"There's a kind of hope in futility."

"But is it fulfilling?"

"I'm living the life that I want to live, with no strings attached or deadlines to meet or anyone to answer to except myself."

"Are you living or surviving?" She knew he had thought about this question before, just like many others who were now "free" on this Earth, or however they now described themselves. "I'm offering you an opportunity. You can go back to wherever you came from and continue living, or surviving, or whatever it is you do out there. But if you want something more, a purpose, a *life*, you can come back and live here under our rules and as a member of our society."

"I could just help you fix them and then go about my business," suggested Karl.

"Working with our technology and familiarizing yourself with our first line of protection is too great a risk having you come and go as you please."

"Well, I appreciate your offer. It's a lot to process. I had wondered if there were people who had carried on with the old way of life but never thought I'd see it for myself. Tell you what, if I ever return here, you'll have my answer."

Arella nodded. "I know you think of it as sacrificing your values, but think what you'll be gaining."

"I'll keep that in mind," said Karl as the man in black gestured up towards the open hexagonal panel from where they had entered.

"One last thing," said Arella, "If you ever come back here and do not intend to stay, life as you know it will cease to exist. We must preserve our way of life and will go to great lengths to do so."

"Understood," said Karl.

"And remember, our history is not our destiny." Karl nodded as he turned his back to the thriving city and stepped back into the forest on his return journey to the barren city he called home.

The walk back seemed to be quicker than his journey out as Karl became lost in his thoughts. Thoughts about what he had seen, what he had been offered, and thoughts about

what he'd tell Lew after he got back home. Arella's words echoed in his mind, *our history is not our destiny*.

When he arrived back at the house, he went around back and found Lew, occupied with a mess of wires leading into the cellar.

"So, what's out there?" he asked, looking up from his work.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Karl said.

"Let's hear it!"

"A job offer."

"A what?"

"I couldn't believe it either. There's a god damn city out there, insulated behind some kind of holo-dome, which, I take it, needs a repairman. There's an entire society. Electricity, cars, money, everything we used to have. I guess some people haven't made peace with what's happened. Or maybe they're happy with the life they've created for themselves. Either way, what's out there is nothing more than an idealized version of the life we lived before, full of constraints and expectations and statutes."

"I don't want any part of whatever's out there," Lew said

"I expected as much," said Karl, thinking about the rigorous expectations Lew had had as a college student, being forced to study philosophy because his parents thought engineering was not meant for someone of his intellect.

As the wind whipped against both men, and dust swirled up from the streets, Karl looked back towards where he had come, thinking of the society under the dome that had refused to stop. *Our complete ignorance of what the future held in store might have taken us unaware, he thought, but at least it was our choice.*

MADELEINE BELDEN

TALK THERAPY

The young woman, an obviously nervous new client, hesitated in the doorway as if deciding whether or not to go through with her first therapy session.

"Hi, I'm Piper," she finally said.

"Ellen. Any trouble finding the place?"

She said no, that she lived in Park Ridge. The next town over from Arlington Heights, which is where my office is located.

"So you're Tina's friend?"

"She said you're the best. Focused and grounded."

"How nice," I said. We shook hands. Hers was small and clammy. "Please, make yourself at home."

The walls in my office are a soft yellow, the desk in a corner by the water cooler. There's a comfy blue couch. Big pillows. Small white blanket if needed. A coffee table with a box of tissue.

It's important that clients feel comforted by the space. That it feels like a sanctuary from the outside world. That they know that nothing bad is going to happen to them in this room.

Piper was very attractive, maybe 26 or 27 and in great physical shape as her shiny black leggings and tight red tank top revealed. She'd thrown on a long, gray cardigan as a cover up. She had a big wavy mop of blonde hair. She reminded me of a compassionate cheerleader who was always kind to the unpopular girls when no one else was.

Piper sat on the couch. I sat across from her in my Windsor chair—a gift from my husband the day my practice opened twelve years ago. "Coffee? Water?"

"Nope," she said.

"You said you've never done therapy before," I said, taking a sip from my water.

I explained that by speaking honestly about herself—not the easiest thing to do—she would arrive at insights. Those insights would inevitably change her perspective. Inevitably guide her to a happier life.

I settled back in my chair. The first thing I do with any new client is establish trust. If you expect *them* to open up to *you* then *you* have to do that as well. Level the playing field. Tell them about yourself. A few things you might tell anyone at a dinner party. I love being a therapist. I have good friends. I've been happily married to a good man for 14 years. All true.

I also throw something painful in there. Something honest about myself to let them know I'm human. To guard against me becoming their guru. A bulwark against transference. "Also, Piper, I've been trying unsuccessfully to have a baby for several years. It hasn't been easy. Okay. Why don't we get started. How can I help you?"

She glanced uncomfortably around the office—her eyes finally settling on the box of Kleenex on the coffee table, her face sheepish. She told me that for the past few months she'd been seeing a married man.

"Tell me about that," I said.

Her slender neck was suddenly blotchy. She crossed and uncrossed her legs. A tear slid down her cheek. She brushed it away. Quickly.

"It's okay to cry here," I said. I waited for more. Nothing. I needed to prod her. "Obviously his being married is not ideal."

She blushed. A deep crimson. "I think about his wife all the time," she said. "How I'm hurting her—how we both are. My father had an affair when I was 12. I saw the hell my mom went through. Hang up calls. Waiting by the front door. Drinking herself to sleep. Him telling her she was crazy when she confronted him. It totally ruined my childhood. I'm not even sure I want kids. I wouldn't want to risk doing to them what I'd gone through. So I knew I shouldn't get involved with a married man. Except that he told me how lonely he was."

"So," I said gently, "it's a 'my wife doesn't understand me kind of thing'?"

"It's a little more than that. She's mean. She rages at him. Everything is about her pain. Her despair."

I leaned in. "Look, I'm in your corner. But to play devil's advocate for a second—and I'm going to be brutally honest—your relationship with this man started in a fog of deception. You don't think that translates into other areas? Like him lying to you about his relationship with his wife?"

She brushed a lock of silky blonde hair behind an ear. "I hadn't thought about it like that," she said.

I let this sink in. "On the other hand," I said, injecting some levity to maintain common ground, "who knows? Maybe the wife's just a narcissistic bitch."

Immediately I wondered if my attempt at humor was the wrong move but then she laughed. I exhaled. Laughing is good. It means your client is letting their guard down and they are more open to see things they couldn't see before. Because the reality of any therapy is that in order for it to work the therapist has to in effect decimate their client's old mindset in order to rebuild a new one.

"Chip said—"

Huh. Weird coincidence? Chip is my husband's name. I told myself what I was thinking was ridiculous. The odds of her married guy being my married guy were probably a million to one. "How did you two meet?" I said.

She was his personal trainer.

I felt a stronger twist of discomfort. I'm a shrink. I think I'd *know* if my husband was cheating.

Four months ago, though, my husband had hired a personal trainer to come three times a week to the gym in his office building. Which is located in Park Ridge. Where Piper said she lives. I swallowed. My mouth was suddenly dry. "So," I said, eyes trained on her, "you go to his home then?"

"Office," she said.

A bomb went off. Just like that. Decimating me.

"Shit," I said, spilling my water glass onto the coffee table. As I grabbed some tissue from the box and mopped up the liquid I tried hard to process the fact that she was no doubt talking about *my* husband. My still good looking at 47 avid runner along the lake carbohydrate dodging account supervisor husband. Chip fuckhead.

"Can I help you clean that, Ellen?" she said.

I finished wiping the spill and then steadied myself. Got up. Lied about a sudden low blood sugar (which I am prone to)—and grabbed a candy bar that had been sitting in my desk drawer for three years. I forced myself to choke it down. Just to keep up the charade. Told myself not to cry.

The clues were there all along: in the past few months Chip had purchased new clothes. A sexy car. Whitened his teeth. Contemplated adult braces.

I forced a smile. I have always prided myself on my professionalism. On my darkest days—in the past few years there have been countless—I always had my professionalism to prop myself back up. A colleague once referred to me as the shrink's shrink. I really believe in what I do for a living. Really believe in talk therapy.

Obviously I had to refer this slutty home wrecker to another therapist. It didn't matter that I was dying to find out details. Do you laugh together? Does he love you?

Did he tell you about Langley Rose?

Then I had a different thought: what if I told her that at the *end* of the hour? Not ethical. Neither was sleeping with someone's husband.

"Ellen?" she said. "Ellen?"

I snapped out of my reverie. "Sorry. What were you saying?"

"I just wanted to know if you were okay," she said.

"Oh. Thank you. I'm good. You're so kind. I think my mind drifted because I was just trying hard to understand," I said, "how the situation went from 'let's try and shrink your gut' to 'let's go out for a drink?'"

She looked uneasy. "You sound different. Than before."

Calm down. Do your job. You are on the verge of losing control. That can't happen.

In as gentle a voice as I could manage I said, "That came out wrong. Please let me try again. I was simply wondering why a beautiful, smart talented young woman like yourself would start a relationship with someone else's—I mean—an *unavailable* man?"

"Well—"

"Also," I said, "I need to know—as a therapist—who made the first move?"

"Why is that important?"

"I'll explain in a minute." I said, forcing a light-hearted smile. "First, though, I really need to know."

"I'm not really sure," she said.

My heart raced.

"There was this guitar in his office? I told him I play the guitar also...you look pale. Are you sure you're okay, Ellen?"

How had I not noticed he wasn't playing his guitar anymore? I suddenly recalled *one* remark, okay maybe several nasty comments—about his making a racket whenever I tried to watch *Masterpiece*—and he suddenly gets rid of his guitar? He didn't get rid of it, though—he took it to his office. I had a rush of nostalgia. He used to play all the time in front of our fireplace.

"Well anyway he and I," she said, "just started to have this *connection*."

I glanced at the pert breasts. Slender waist. Toned thighs. This was a sex thing? I put down my pen and notebook. Felt a fresh bloom of hurt unfold inside me. Chip ruined a 14-year marriage to get laid?

"Be careful. Sex is always good at the beginning," I said. "You don't want to confuse a physiological thing with genuine intimacy."

Just then I noticed the picture on my desk of Chip painting our garage in his sunglasses, blue boxers and nothing else—he didn't want to get paint on any of his clothes. He saw me taking his picture and started laughing and almost fell off the ladder. It is my favorite photo of him.

I jumped up pretending to need a different pen and discreetly shoved the photo into a drawer. "So," I said, returning to my chair. "You were telling me about the sex?"

"No. You were talking about sex. I was talking about a connection."

A shimmering black rage coursed through my veins. I sat there, trying to bottle my emotions. My grief. My confusion. Feelings of isolation. I needed to get a hold of myself. A client was witnessing me coming apart at the seams. Then, in addition to a failed marriage, I'd have a failed career. I had to end this. Now.

But then she said, "Just to give a clearer picture of how things are with us, Chip told me that the sex is just a bonus."

This felt like a shot across the bow. He'd told me that same exact thing. The first time we made love. Sixteen years ago.

Bile rose up in me. Sour. Bitter. I forced it back down.

"Why are you here?" I said. "What exactly drove you to go into therapy?"

"Tina was right," she said. "You don't mess around." Then her face got somber. Her posture slumped. The gobs of luscious blonde hair seemed to go limp. "He told me all I have to do is give him the go ahead and he'll leave his wife."

Another explosion. Bigger. Atomic. "It sounds like everything is perfect for you. Why would you need therapy?"

Her previously bright blue eyes looked suddenly deep and soulful. "There is something holding me back. I don't know what. I think maybe because of my dad I've never been sure what real love is. I need the help of a professional. Someone objective. Like you. To help me figure out if I'm really in love with Chip."

The rest of the day passed in a blur. My other clients got shortchanged. I couldn't concentrate. Couldn't stop fantasizing about confronting my husband. After my last client I took the train to Jefferson Park and walked home from the station. Chip wasn't home. I called out but he didn't answer.

The first three years of infertility treatment were grueling. Painful hormone shots. Harvesting my eggs. Fertilizing them in a laboratory and shoving them back inside my uterus hoping one might take. The disappointment every month. By the time the fourth year rolled around the stress was taking its toll on us both. Just when we were about to give up, a miracle: I got pregnant.

Those eight and a half months were the happiest of my life. Maybe the experience meant a little more to me because it had been so difficult to conceive. Also, I'd never realized how I'd carried the loss of a sibling until I'd gotten pregnant with my own child. When I was eight my three-year-old brother died from a heart ailment.

I had named my baby before I'd even met her. Chip told me not to because it might be bad luck, but I did anyway. Langley Rose.

I bought Langley her first Halloween costume—a tiny pink tutu. Loosely planned her wedding. Nothing major. The kind of flowers. Type of caterer. Small details. The minute I'd finished getting her nursery ready I stopped feeling movement.



I climbed the steps to the second floor and opened the door to what would have been my daughter's room. I went inside. Looked at the crib that I'd painted myself: white with tiny pink roses on the headboard. Every night when I get home from work I come into this room and do the same thing: sit on the floor and read *What to Expect When You're Expecting*.

The doctor had induced labor eleven months and nine days ago. On a Wednesday morning. 11:30. It was shockingly sunny in the hospital room. It felt like God punishing me—making that room bright and cheery when I had to deliver a dead baby.

After, I asked the nurse to put her on my chest. I kissed her tiny head, full of soft blue-black hair. Smelled her baby smell. Chip stood frozen in a corner of the room in those ridiculous blue scrubs. Staring at the floor. At least cry. Get mad. Do *something*.

I pictured Chip running his hands through Piper's hearty blonde locks. Smelling them just before he made love to her. Whispering that his wife was unhappy all the time. Always raging at him for even the little stuff like his having left a window open when the air conditioning was on.

I almost laughed right there in my daughter's room thinking about that particular fight and the insane degree to which I'd overreacted. I didn't talk to him for two days. Two full days! I just hadn't known where to put my grief. I think it hadn't really occurred to me that Chip might have needed a place to put his grief, too.

"Ellen? Are you here?" he said, climbing the stairs. He started to say something else, but when he saw which room I was in he stopped talking. Didn't move past the door frame. Since our daughter died he'd refused to come in this room again.

I opened my mouth to confront him but, for some reason, wavered. Some rebellious streak in me did not want to go all raving dark *again*. Because he expected it. I didn't want to give him what he expected. I smiled the kindest smile I could. Told him that I'd thought about him today. Hoped he had a good one.

He was a little taken aback. Then Chip surprised me, too. He actually came into the room and walked over to where I was sitting cross legged on the floor with my pregnancy book on my lap. He gently placed his hand on the top of my head. Stroked my hair.

I'd forgotten that he used to do that. Whenever I'd had a bad day. This had been a wretched day. I blinked back tears.

"Have you eaten?" I said, looking up at him.

"I—you haven't asked me that question in months."

"I haven't?" I said. I thought for a second. Realized that was true. "So what's the answer?"

"I'm actually really hungry."

"We have nothing in the house," I said. Then—without knowing why—I added, "Sorry. About that."

He glanced at the crib. Back at me. "Feel like a pizza?" he said.

I heard a little something in his voice. The lilt was different. Vulnerable? I hadn't heard that specific tone in his voice in at least a year. As a shrink sometimes I have nothing more to go on from a client than a tiny shift in the tone of voice.

"What about the carbs?" I said.

"Fuck the carbs."

My stomach growled—the first time all day. For some reason I had an appetite and a deep-dish pizza sounded good. Then I surprised myself realizing maybe my wanting to eat dinner with Chip was more than just a rebellious streak.

"Do you mind calling?" I said. "I'm going to grab a shower."

I put some music on in the bathroom. The shower felt unusually good and I took my time. I dried my hair and threw on a pair of old faded jeans and my favorite tee shirt (red and white stripes) and tied my hair back into a ponytail.

"Oh," he said when I went downstairs. "You look different. Kind of like a teenager."

That was *ridiculous*! I still liked hearing it though. Instead of heading to the kitchen Chip led me the other way. To the living room. On the floor, in front of the fireplace, he'd set two plates of pizza. Two glasses. A bottle of wine between them.

I hadn't had a drink in three and a half years. Not a drop. Because I had been either trying to get pregnant or I was pregnant, or I was so depressed that the last thing I wanted was alcohol: adding a depressant to a vast depression. For the first time in ages a glass of wine sounded wonderful.

He'd made a fire. "I love this house but it's always been drafty. Mind if we eat here?"

We ate and drank and talked and—much to my surprise—we laughed. Chip told me the funniest story about his boss who had a drug problem. His wife staged an intervention and used one of the conference rooms. The wife accidentally left the speaker phone on and Chip and his coworkers eavesdropped.

Gales of laughter from Chip and I as he told me what he and his coworkers heard. Nasty sordid details.

"This is *tragic!*" I said in between waves of giggles, trying to catch my breath. "Why are we laughing at someone else's pain?"

"Maybe because it's not our pain?" he said. "Or? It's just some really funny shit."

Then we opened another bottle. As we drank Chip said I'd made Langley's room beautiful. "She would have loved it. Every single day of her life."

We were quiet then. For the first time in months I felt relaxed. I even felt oddly relieved. As a therapist I couldn't really see a way back to being who we were before. If our marriage is over, I thought, so be it.

I wasn't going to think about Piper. I was going to enjoy the warmth of the fire. The pizza. The silky wine. The way Chip was looking at me. He suddenly leaned in, reached behind my head, and removed my ponytail.

"Now," he said, his fingers lightly caressing my hair, "you look like you're in your mid-twenties."

We made love in front of the fire. Cautious at first. Reminded each other what we liked. What we didn't like. Then we did it again in our bed. This time quick and fierce. Piper's pouty lips and toned body flashed in my mind. And I understood that maybe I was having sex with him just because someone else wanted him. There was definitely some of that. But there was also something else. I just didn't know what it was.

When I woke up the next morning I had expected to feel hungover and full of regret, but I wasn't either. I felt different. Better. Lighter.

Chip had gone to work but he left a note:

Last night was amazing.

Chip

It was sunny in the kitchen. I poured a cup of coffee and hoped this peaceful feeling would stay with me. Thought about the past six months. About Chip.

I had a good day that day. A few of my clients remarked that I seemed really on my game. Really handy with the insights.

The rest of the week was also good. Peaceful. Productive. I shopped for groceries. Bought a book of guitar songs for Chip. Cooked dinner. I even went forty-eight hours without crying about Langley. I was still hurt by what my husband had done but alongside that hurt was a knowledge that his behavior in the Piper department was complicated.



I had meant to call Piper the day after our session to refer her to another therapist. I just kept putting it off every day, thinking that it was because I didn't want to hear her voice again. But then I realized I really wanted *one* more session with her.

No idea why. Only knew I was on the track of something. I just had to be careful not to get caught. I could actually lose my license. I *was* going to refer her to someone else. I *was*. Only not yet.

But then, the following Tuesday, Piper dropped another bomb on me.

"I'm pregnant," she said.

I couldn't move. I felt myself falling down the rabbit hole again but this time deeper. Into a darker abyss. I blinked. Stared at her stomach. Flat as a board. This was Chip's child. I wondered if that child would inherit his dark brown eyes or his light skin. It burned easily.

"How far along?"

"Three months," she said. "I've never had regular periods so that made birth control a lot harder."

Of course. Getting pregnant had been effortless for the two of them. Something that really couldn't be helped.

"Have you told the father?" I said.

She appeared sheepish. Uncomfortable.

"You need to tell him."

This time I canceled my other clients. I'd never canceled in my life but my mind was rubble. Mush. No idea how to digest Piper's news. Chip's news. I got into my car and drove around for hours.

The house was dark when I got home. I had a clear plan: I'd get a drink. Wait for him to walk in the front door and pounce. Tell him I knew everything. That I thought he was a coward to go the affair route. Even though I probably drove him to it.

As I headed for the kitchen I heard a noise. I listened again and it was coming from inside the house. I reached for my phone to call the police but then realized it didn't sound like a home invader. The noises sounded soft. Like a puppy whimpering. I followed the noise. Upstairs.

Chip was actually inside Langley's room. Sitting in the white rocker. Sobbing. I'd never seen him cry. Not when his beloved dad died. Not even in that wretched hospital room. This wasn't ordinary crying, either. This was deep rolling waves of grief.

I couldn't pounce now. Even I wasn't that cruel. I understood what he was feeling. I just wished I'd known the shape Chip was in before this.

I tiptoed away. Crept back downstairs, pretended to come home. That everything was normal.

That night I made Chip's all-time favorite dinner: scrambled eggs with truffle oil. We ate in bed in front of the television, laughing at sitcoms. Chip came home for dinner every night that week.

You'd think the Piper pregnancy would bum me out, but it had the opposite effect. Knowing everything made it easy to pretend to know nothing. Somehow—aware that our marriage could be over *any second*—made me appreciate every minute. For the first time I understood what it meant to be in the moment.

"Chip broke up with me," she said at our next session.

"What?"

"He said that he thought he still had feelings for his wife."

I took a second, so surprised. I had no idea how to react. How I felt. "That's...I thought you said she was a bitch."

"He said that."

"So he doesn't think that anymore?"

"He said she was a lot better. That he'd forgotten what it was like before."

Tears slid down her cheeks.

I had no idea how to respond. But then the therapist in me took over. "I know you're hurting right now and this will be difficult to process..."

She looked at me.

"...but I think maybe it wasn't real love with Chip. I think maybe you were re-creating the situation with your father cheating on your mother in order to resolve it," I said.

She wiped away another tear.

I cleared my throat. Gathered my courage. "What did he say when you told him about the baby?"

"I didn't tell him."

"*You have to*," I said, outraged on Chip's behalf.

She studied her hands. "He wouldn't want me to keep it anyway," she said, her voice unsteady.

"How would you know that?"

"When we first got together we took a walk and there was this pregnant woman—nine

months, I'd say. When we passed—Chip turned and looked back at her. Then I noticed he was super quiet. I asked if he was okay but he didn't answer. I said it's amazing how big pregnant women get. How you can see that it's like a real baby in there. He looked at me with this odd expression—kind of fragile, maybe? Then he told me he didn't want to talk about kids. They weren't his thing."

I needed to let him go. Chip. I saw that clearly now. He'd made a child with someone else. It was wrong for me to keep pretending. It was time to grow up. A few days later I asked him to meet me for dinner at a restaurant we both liked—a big noisy crowded place with great burgers.

I was going to be supportive. Kind. Understanding. I was going to apologize for my behavior after the baby died. For not being there for him. And I was going to mean every word.

I got to the restaurant first. I'd been nervous all day and hadn't eaten since the day before. I'd just ordered us a bottle of wine and the moment the waiter left I saw Piper.

She and a female friend were sitting on the other side of the restaurant and it looked like they were engulfed in a somber discussion. Piper looked a wreck and the friend was obviously comforting her.

Running into Piper now would be a disaster. I slouched down. Covered my face with my menu. Chip was going to be here any minute. Just then I saw him out the window, waiting for a taxi to pass so he could cross the road. I grabbed my purse, jumped up, apologized to the hostess and flew out the door. Ran to the other side of Lake Street. That's the last thing I remember before I passed out.

I woke up in the hospital.

"How do you feel?" Chip said, gently.

I swallowed. My throat was dry. I felt weak and disoriented. He told me my blood sugar had crashed. I'd gone into hypoglycemic shock. I suddenly remembered about the close call with Piper. Suddenly Chip kissed my cheek, tears at the rims of his eyes. He whispered that I was pregnant.

"I lost the baby," Piper told me at our next session.

I was dumbfounded. I tried to think of something to say to her but my mind was a big blank useless screen.

Her eyes were hollow. Empty. Dark circles underneath them. She looked like a wreck. Like she hadn't slept in days. Right now she was trying not to cry and I reminded her that it was

okay. Handed her a tissue.

"Sorry," she said, grabbing hold of the entire box and settling it onto her lap. "I'm a complete mess. I never even got a chance to tell him."

I kept waiting for the therapist in me to take over. Know what to say. This time, though, I just sat there. Useless. Frozen. This was Chip's child.

"You look just as bad as me," she said.

"Yeah?" I said, sitting up straight.

She held my gaze. "My doctor said most women miscarry their first pregnancy."

"That doesn't make it any easier," I said gently.

She blew her nose. Wiped her eyes. "I just didn't expect to feel this destroyed, you know?"

"Tell me," I said.

"Remember?" she said. "I wasn't sure I even wanted kids? Well now I know I *want* them."

"So," I said, my voice soft as something dawned on me, "your reaction to losing a child taught you something invaluable about yourself."

Her eyes were red and swollen. She blinked. Nodded. "Yeah," she said, thinking. "I guess it did."

At the end of that hour I told Piper that I had to refer her to another (hand picked by me) therapist. Out of respect for what she was going through I didn't tell her that I was pregnant and put on bed rest by my doctors. I just said I was taking a leave of absence from my practice.

I walked her to the door, stuck my hand out but she managed to surprise me one more time. She pulled me in for a good long hug. Whispered how much I'd helped her over the past few weeks. Gotten her to see things about herself and her behavior that she needed to see. Even though they were embarrassing and painful. And she understood now how much better life was going to be, from here on in. Even though she'd lost a child.

W. T. PATERSON

CATCH AND RELEASE

Marv called every contract a catch and release. He said karma made sure the game stayed rigged, that you got out what you put in. You see, this high-powered law firm contracted us to work an auto collision case. Some well-paid schmuck turned without signaling and plowed into a family man in an SUV on his way home from work. Dead on arrival. Grieving family. The whole shebang. A week later, me and Marv walk across an overgrown lawn to the surviving family's house at dinnertime to ring the bell. A body moves past the bay window lined with Tibetan prayer flags. This widowed wife, Ms. Perry, answers with eyes ringed red, still dressed in black, hair wild from sleepless nights, staring at the hulking figures in her doorway. Marv introduces himself using his real, searchable name: Marv Holliman. Because, karma.

Every time Ms. Perry blinks, she does it twice. Marv introduces me and I wave from the hip through a tight-lipped smile. I blink twice when she makes eye contact. I tell her we need to talk about the lawsuit she's filed against the driver. Marv asks if it would be ok if we treated her to a lawn-care service in exchange for hearing us out. He finger-whistles at a waiting pickup truck with a ride-on mower idling in the back. Ms. Perry looks at our white button down shirts rolled up at the sleeves, maroon neckties loose against our collarbone, and product-free hair blowing against the evening wind. Too caught off guard to slam the door in our faces, she agrees and inside of twenty minutes the front sitting room smells like fresh cut grass and gasoline. The woman places steaming teacups in front of us without noticing that she forgot teabags. She apologizes for being so scattered, dabs her eyes, sits in the recliner opposite us, and says it must be allergies. It's not allergies.

The dense scent of gasoline is sitting on the back of her tongue the same way as the day she leapt wailing from her car into the arms of a firefighter who had to plant his feet to hold her back at the scene. It reminds her of the white blanket rolling back and the busted face of her dead husband that flashes every time she closes her eyes.

"Did you know the car signal was invented in 1929?" Marv asks, pushing the fingertips of one hand against the other. "Didn't become law until the 1960's."

I hold the teacup near my mouth but never take a sip.

"Why so long?" the woman asks.

"Change doesn't happen until it's profitable," Marv says. A small girl peeks in from the kitchen holding a bowl of macaroni and cheese that's gone stiff from cooling. The spoon stands upright like a flag on the battlefield. She's pig-tailed and no more than ten. "Signals became

law when the government realized cops could write tickets for cars not having them, or not using them."

"Less money pulled from government funding," I say, and look at the girl who watches me not drink while I watch her not eat. I wave with one finger. She motions back like a crab pinching the air, like there's too much talking, like maybe she knows why we're here.

"The inventor, Oscar J. Simler, based early turn signals on hand gestures," Marv says, and runs through sign language for right turn, left turn, and stopping. Marv doesn't mince words as tells her the idea died out with the advent of electricity, and how all modern safety is built on the backs of corpses.

It's true and it's not. Modern safety is built on capitalism by people who have figured out how to pull money from tragedy. Someone has to sell those glowing exit signs, those roller coaster seatbelts, the front-door deadbolts. Altruism doesn't drive an economy. Those human-helping devices aren't donated, they're sold by opportunists living the dream.

"I'm suing the driver, though," Ms. Perry says, cocking her head.

"Should she be eating?" I ask, and point to the girl. She ducks behind the wall and the bowl drops to the linoleum floor. The spoon bounces with yellow macaroni stuck to the sides. The woman peels out of the recliner and skulks into the kitchen. She whispers for the girl to go get a bath ready, and to take two more big bites. For daddy. I look at Marv.

The woman sits down again. In the back of the house, pipes clang with rushing water and this widowed mother rubs her eyebrow with an unsteady hand.

"Drop the suit," Marv says.

"No," the woman says. She blinks twice. Her eyes pool. Her cheeks get so rosy that'd you'd think she was in love.

"You have the life insurance payout coming, and auto," Marv says. "You and your girl, you're already set."

"I need to take a stand," she says. Her voice cracks. "Make an example."

"Against what? Bad drivers? The non-use of turn signals? We live in America where mass shootings are sexier than serial killers." Marv says. "Where moral values are handed down by pop stars."

The woman sits back.

"Sorry, but your cause isn't important enough to make someone else money," Marv says. I gulp the room temperature non-tea water in one fell swoop.

"After legal fees, court costs, years of suffering...it's just not worth it," I say.

The little girl shrieks from the bathroom. It sounds like she can't shut the valve off. The woman pops from the chair and hurries to the bathroom. The water halts. My empty cup

catches the final rays of the dying day on the porcelain rim. Marv pops a cigarette between his lips and looks at the prayer flags dancing outside the window. He's lost in a daydream when Ms. Perry returns.

"Do you believe in karma?" he asks without looking at her. "What you get out is what you put in?"

"You need to leave," the woman says. We nod and thank her for the time. Anger means we got through. The macaroni bowl is still on the floor as we let ourselves out. The girl spies through the cracked open bathroom door.

Outside, Marv tosses the unlit cigarette to the asphalt and stomps it with the heel of his shoe. He asks if I want to swing by *The Lucky Dragon* for takeout.

"Not hungry," I say, but my stomach screams in betrayal.

"Get in," he says, and drives us away from the manicured suburban home to the restaurant where he pays for my meal.

That night I sit on the edge of the bed in Marv's guestroom with a belly full of General Tsao and watch him feed his wife Bailey with slow spoonfuls of baby food. The glowing television turns her skin pale, canned laughter promising happiness and advertisements for the next thirty minutes, her dark curly hair unruly and fraught. She resists, and Marv pleads in broken whispers to take two more big bites, please, for him. When Bailey collapsed from the stroke a year ago it took the light from her eyes, and from Marv's. He thought he deserved it. Ever since, he's doubled down on contracts and if money is the measure of happiness we should be swimming. My bank account is fat enough to start anew ten times over in different cities with different cars but I can't imagine a life away. Marv's guestroom is the only place that feels like home anymore.

A few winters ago my brother Timmy died. Throat cancer. We didn't know until it was too late. Both of my folks lived in a nursing home because my mother suffered from dementia and my father couldn't walk anymore. They cried inconsolable tears. A month later, my dad was gone. My mother kept asking where he was, and how Timmy was doing. I didn't have the strength to be honest. But she knew, even if she didn't, because her body withered to nothing. By spring, she was gone too.

Work let me go. They said I took too much time off, that the bereavement PTO wasn't built for multiple deaths in the same year, that they were sorry but financial advisors had to be there for their clients, that they have an image to uphold, and something about showing up drunk, or bloodied, or not sleeping under my desk. They packed my life into a box and kicked me to the curb.

Marv and Bailey took me in. We'd all known each other since childhood.

"I grew up on this side of the street, Gideon over there. We'd be in our yards and wave, but we couldn't play because we weren't allowed to cross the street," Marv said. Bailey listened through a wine induced stupor happy to hear the story for the thousandth time.

"One day I got the nerve to cross. Looked both ways for a half-hour and booked it," I said. "Grounded for a week when Mom found out."

"Remember the first time we got together?" Bailey asked, pushing up Marv's pant leg with her naked toes. He smiled and winked. Something about skinny-dipping in Lake Winnipesaukee. Being around them made me feel seen.

I spent a month in their guestroom losing weight and ripping through smokes. Every night was an argument with lawyers about how to dissolve my parent's estate if I couldn't afford the taxes. My thumb, callused and burned by the hot gears of lighters, lost its imprint.

"If you need money..." Marv said, and I waved him away time and time again until I got the idea that he wasn't offering a loan, but presenting an opportunity.

"Off the record?" I asked one night.

"Catch and release," he nodded and tossed a contract to the foot of my bed for more money than I'd ever seen. "Mums the word."

A week later we sat in a plush diner booth and told a grieving father over coffee that we knew about his coke habits, about the affair, and that it was his own negligence that threw his son from the roller coaster, not a faulty seatbelt. We told him to drop the suit. His soul broke in two right in front of us, and I didn't feel so alone.

Then another contract came. And another.

Before I knew it, I had more money than a person could spend in a lifetime. My parent's estate dissolved because I sent lawyer's calls to voicemail and left them to rot. While approaching what felt like true un-tethered happiness, my small apartment paid for in cash, all debt wiped clean, Bailey collapsed in the kitchen.

Sitting on the bed watching Marv spoon-feed his beloved mashed peas and applesauce, the game did seem rigged. The same insurance companies that denied his claims time and time again also contracted us for shakedowns.

My phone dings. Suit dropped. Payout confirmed.

Marv helps Bailey to the twin bed in the corner of the room and pulls a blanket to her shoulders. She looks at him like a stranger. He wheels the TV around so she can watch until sleep provides gentle relief.

Marv sits at the round kitchen table and quietly asks if I'm still awake. I don't answer. He says that if anything ever happens, this journal will clear me. He holds up a blue college bound notebook and rifles the handwritten pages. It's nearly full. For the next hour, he writes

checks and stuffs envelopes, probably bills, because even basic necessities demand their pound of flesh.

When Marv is done, he tucks the journal into a drawer next to the stove and falls asleep on the uneven couch. Just before dawn, our phone dings with another contract.

A few days later we drive to the bank, and then the post office. I stay in the car sipping Dunks. Two creams, no sugar. Marv's errands never take long. By the time the coffee swishes the bottom of the Styrofoam, we're en route to a tech firm in Boston who say they're getting slammed by government fines over payment processing regulations. The Office of Foreign Asset Control has cost them \$3 mil in under a month, and because it's the government, the firm feels like they have no recourse to push back. OFAC reps will be in town and they've requested our services to scare them off. Not as a government organization, but as people.

A receptionist prints badges with our faces and QR codes onto white squares. She has us push our thumb against a scanner in the vast downtown foyer.

"You aren't reading," she says, and squints into her screen.

"I'm a nobody," I say, and show her my print-less thumb up close. She goes flush and manually scans us in. We take the elevator to floor twelve. A manager, this guy in a faded blue polo and khaki pants, greets us with a cold handshake like he's been sweating for days. He leads us to a windowless conference room. Employees track our trek with scowls, like they know who we are, like we're getting ready to take something from them. The manager closes the door and we're alone.

"This is what we can swing," he says, and jots a number on a yellow sticky note. Marv looks and says the number is generous. He'll make them triple it just because he can.

A woman walks in and my heart stops. It's Ms. Perry. She doesn't blink. Neither do I. Her name appeared nowhere in the contract, which makes sense because the people that hire us prefer anonymity.

"Gentleman," she says, and sits down at the head of the table. Marv eyes the glowing exit sign over the door. The back of my neck pools and absorbs into my flimsy collar.

"Ms. Perry," Marv says, and hearing her name out loud puts me further on edge. The manager leaves the room and the three of us are alone.

"Karma," she says, and Marv smiles from the corner of his mouth. She slides a folder to us. The printed pages break the job down into the details we need. The whos, the whats, the whys. The top sheet reveals that this is her company, that she's one of the founders, that she is unwilling to lose both a husband and a business that took years to build. I get it.

"Why this number?" Marv asks, tapping the yellow sticky note.

"We put office renovations on hold in that amount. Our company promised gender inclusive bathrooms by Q2, but with OFAC, we have to bump it another year at least," Ms. Perry says.

"And if we can't pull this off?" I ask. I track Marv's eyes to Ms. Perry's ears. Small pot-bellied Buddhas dangle from the lobes.

"You can," she says. "The company would go under and I'll expose you on my way down, but you can do this."

A door opens and the manager guy walks in. He whispers that they're here, the OFAC people, and looks at us like a bookworm who hired a jock to fight the bully in the parking lot. Marv nods and looks at me.

"Can they track accounts?" I whisper. My money, my future, is in the Cayman Islands, in Swiss banks, in shell companies offering fake scholarships.

"Who cares," Marv says, and gears up for battle by rolling up his sleeves. We leave one conference room for another and walk down a long hall. The docket says we're employees in customer support if anyone asks. OFAC is imposing fines on the American based payment processor instead of the banks that allow illegal international activity. Since the processor only operates within the US, they should be in the clear for international transactions, but apparently the government thinks otherwise. They're calling it a preventative measure and imposing non-refundable fines. My skin goes hot at the idea.

Marv stops the manager before we enter the larger meeting room.

"Triple this," he says, and tucks the yellow sticky note into the guy's sweaty palm. Zero hour, outside the door, he can't say no. He looks at Ms. Perry.

"Do it," she says, and enters the meeting to greet her guests.

"That'll gut us..." the manager whispers.

We sit against a long wooden table. An enormous flat screen television hangs on the wall with two cameras on the top like fish eyes. Natural light floods through reinforced glass windows like the room is aquarium tank. Staff and team leads lean back in the roller chairs and stare us down unsure of who to direct their frustration at.

The government suits are too old to be considered young, a guy and a girl. Their clothes fit with custom tailoring, which means they're more concerned with appearance than execution. Diverted attention means we can kick the legs out.

The woman taps on a touch screen control panel to start her slideshow. Her painted nails click against the surface.

"Thank you for hosting us today," she says, and smiles. She picks the edge of her long nails. The slideshow fills the large screen with a yellow badge, blue key, and blue balancing scale. The Department of the Treasury. Thugs with badges.

"We value whatever hot takes you have for us," the guy says, like we're all friends, like we can ask whatever we want without judgment, like he's the type of guy that Googled hip turns of phrase.

"Why are you stealing our money?" Marv asks, and the room holds its breath.

"That's not the way we like to peep the sitch," the guy says, and tries a laugh. No one else laughs. In one shot, Marv has isolated him. The guy clears his throat and adjusts the knot of his blue necktie. "Because of trade embargos and sanctions with other countries, we need to be vigilant in..."

"Not our problem," Marv says.

"Where does the money from fines go?" I ask, and look at the woman. Ms. Perry leans against the plate glass wall and fights a smile.

"National debt?" the woman says like the punch line of a joke, like someone told her that humor is that fastest route to trust, like we're all supposed to chuckle and bend over.

"Whoops," Marv says. He leans back and leaves one hand on the wooden table. The room subconsciously follows. The guy sees the staff disengage and stands.

"This isn't up for debate," he says. Now he sounds like a dad, the type of dad who doesn't understand that their kid might be different, have a unique identity, might push for gender inclusive restrooms, and the distance grows.

Marv pulls out a cigarette, tucks it between his lips, and lights up. He pulls a drag and exhales through his nose.

"Sir, you can't smoke in here," the woman says.

"That's not how I peep the sitch," Marv says, and the room chuckles.

"Please," the guy says. "I have asthma."

"Do you believe in karma?" Marv asks. "That you get out what you put in?"

Ms. Perry dismisses the room and the staff exits. She dims the windows and it's three against two. In less than an hour, the OFAC reps agree to offer suggestions instead of imposing fines, to monitor transactions that raise flags, and provide assistance if needed. They sign a new agreement drafted by legal, and leave.

On the way out, Ms. Perry stops us at the elevator.

"Who's idea was it?" she asks. We don't answer. I can't pinpoint what she's referring to, so I stay quiet. The elevator door dings open and we step inside. They pinch shut.

"Namaste," Marv says in the final seconds of openness, and we descend.

That night, the television painting the room with ghosts, Bailey shrugs away from a spoonful of squash.

"Smoke?" she says slowly, and sniffs. "You promised..."

Marv puts down the spoon and rubs his jaw. He brings the dishes into the kitchen and runs the water but doesn't wash anything. From the bed, I watch him experience the crushing weight of being forgotten, and being remembered, and then forgotten again by the people who love us most.

My phone dings. Contract fulfilled. Payout confirmed.

Not a minute later and the screen lights up with an incoming call from an unidentified number. It goes to voicemail. Marv turns off the water and helps Bailey to bed. She looks at him like a stranger again, staring as he falls asleep on the couch after she's tucked in.

I check the voicemail. It's the FBI and they want to talk. No other info given.

Bailey mumbles from the bed loud enough that I crane my neck to see if she's ok. She points to the curtains.

"Win," she says. "Win."

The window looks closed, but I wonder if she's trying to warn me, trying to say someone is outside looking in.

"Marv," I whisper, but he's breathing too deep to be awake. Something in my chest goes light like the air is thin. I tiptoe next to Bailey's bed in the dark and follow her finger. The dark panes reflect the television, happy people jumping out of a canoe into still water.

"Win," she says again. "Winnipesauke."

And then she is asleep, and I am alone.

The morning errands hold thick to silence. Bank, post office, onward. I sip Dunks in the passenger seat and watch the clouds roll by. No new contracts. Marv gets back in and pulls onto the freeway.

"I'm disappearing," he says. "Bailey too."

The worst year of my life crashes back into focus. Loss of family, loss of income, floating from abyss to void.

"The FBI called," I say, and Marv accelerates. Cars honk as he dips in and out of lanes without signaling. It'd be just as dangerous using a blinker. Safety features don't always translate to safety.

"Consider karma," he says. All those people we manipulated, all those wired payouts, it was only a matter of time before someone pulled the trigger. It's the OFAC people, I can feel it. The government doesn't like getting bullied, and so they ran to big brother.

Marv offers a cigarette and I take it. He slides it between his lips. I spin mine between my thumb and first finger. We're driving so fast that it feels like we aren't moving.

"I'm scared," I say.

"The journal," he says, and flicks a lighter. He sucks until red-hot embers crackle the tip. I hold my cigarette against his until there's fire in my lungs. We drive until our sticks are ash. I don't have the guts to tell him I already read the journal. He takes an exit. "It's time to move on. All of us."

We roll by Ms. Perry's home, our windows down to relieve the vents, and see a For Sale sign in the front yard like a battle flag. The little girl with pigtails sits on the front steps with plastic dishes and plastic teacups waiting for a car that isn't coming back. She holds the cup to her lips but doesn't sip. We make eye contact. I wave with one finger. She pinches her hand like a claw and looks to the driveway. All at once, everything becomes clear.

You see, Marv and Bailey took me fishing on Lake Winnipesaukee when my life fell apart. We spent the day in a canoe casting lines under the blue sky. I caught a fish, and then let it go. Then Marv caught one, and set it free. Then Bailey, and we realized we kept catching the same fish over and over. Isn't that something? All day, we traded turns with that fish until it got late and we headed to shore. Our catch sizzled on the grill while we joked about how another canoe could have rolled up, how they would have poached our catch, that a fish in the wrong hands would mean none of us would get to eat.

The thing is this: Marv took all the money he made from contracts and sent it to the people he broke. Everyone except the government. Because a fish in the wrong hands means no one eats. Because, karma keeps the game rigged. You get out what you put in.

You see, the morning of that fishing trip Marv went into town and came back with a large orange cooler. He didn't tell me what was inside, but I saw it wiggle and buck when he loaded the boat. The three of us spent the day on the clear lake under the thick summer sun until our stomachs screamed. I closed my eyes and imagined throwing myself overboard, drifting to the murky bottom, and waiting for a fishhook to pierce my cheek until they reeled me to the surface, unable to breathe, flapping and fighting against the sun.

When my eyes reopened, I heard a splash and thought nothing of it until my line snapped taught and I reeled in the luckiest, most miraculous catch from the cool waters of Lake Winnipesaukee.

KEN ECKERT

LADY ALBRIGHT'S PURLOINED TOASTER

Scene 1

London, August 1873. The sitting room in the home of Lady Linda Alsquith Albright in stately Whitechapel. The room is richly decorated with tapestries and rugs and antique portraits of the Albright patriarchs. Linda, a stately young woman in her mid-twenties, sits at a table writing at a desk in the late afternoon, waiting expectantly for her boyfriend to arrive home from Edinburgh.

She picks up the telephone to call.

Linda. Hello? Are you delivering today? Oh, after 7, that's okay. Can I have the combination for two. Yes, that's right. No, no problem, 7:30 is fine. It's 14 Speckle Lane. Yes, that's right. Thank you.

She returns to writing. A door opens downstairs and wind chimes ring. Footsteps are heard. Jake Wizenshaft, a well-dressed man in his late twenties, comes up the stairs.

Linda. Jakey! How was your trip?

Jake. Hello, kitten! How are you?

Linda. Rowr!

Jake gives her a long kiss.

Linda. Did you have supper? Are you hungry?

Jake. A little.

Linda. I've ordered Chinese. But they don't open until 7 today, so it will come late.

Jake. That's all right. I have other plans for you until then! (he winks at her)

Linda. Naughty horny Jake!

She laughs as Jake sweeps her off her feet, carrying her towards the bedroom and placing her on the bed. He begins to remove his shirt as she giggles. He draws off Linda's shirt, and unclips her bra, leaving her topless on the bed. He whistles. Linda giggles again, and reaches her hand

into Jake's underwear. He starts to breathe deeply.

Scene II

The two are sitting on the couch, eating off Styrofoam tubs of Chinese food. Jake is contentedly eating; however, Linda has a frustrated expression after Jake's somewhat disappointing performance. Jake does not notice, and Linda finally becomes exasperated enough to sigh loudly.

Jake. Hm?

Linda. Nothing.

Jake. Didn't you sigh?

Linda. No.

Jake (feeling hurt). Linda, what do you mean, my disappointing performance?

Linda. What? There was no disappointing performance. You were fine.

Jake. Really?

Linda. Of course.

Jake feels puzzled, but says nothing, trying to hide a guilty expression.

Linda (suspiciously). What guilty expression?

Jake. What?

Linda. Why do you have a guilty expression?

Jake (avoiding her glance). I don't.

Linda. You're looking away.

Jake. You can see that I'm not. I'm confused.

Linda. Did something happen in Edinburgh you're not telling me?

Jake. No. Business meetings. The same as ever.

Linda. Then why a guilty expression?

Jake (fumbling, trying to hide an incriminating letter covered with lipstick kisses). I have no guilty expression.

Linda. I want to see that letter.

Jake. What letter?

Linda. The incriminating letter you're trying to hide.

Jake (evasively). How would I have a letter in my sweatpants? What are you talking about?

Linda (almost in tears). Oh—right. But then why are you being evasive?

Jake. I'm not, Linda. Why are you crying?

Linda. What? I'm not crying.

A lion prowls through the room, sullenly growling at both of them. It is a symbol of infidelity.

Linda. Gasp!

Jake. Infidelity?

Linda. A lion!

Jake. What lion? It's Max. (*He points at the cat.*)

Jake looks at Linda as though she is an idiot.

Linda. I don't like it when you do that.

Jake. Do what?

Linda. Look at me as though I am an idiot.

Jake. But I didn't.

Linda. You did.

Jake. But you've just been looking at me.

Linda. I'm confused.

There is a loud explosion.

Linda. No, there isn't. We didn't hear anything.

There is.

Jake. No, there isn't. There was no sound. Ah, I think I know what's going on now.

Jake produces a dagger from beneath the folds of his robe and—

Linda. Okay, stop. I'm sorry, Jakey. Look, you, there's no dagger, and he's not even wearing a robe.

Jake produces a light-saber from—

Jake. Bloody 'ell. It's the narrator. For f—'s sakes, you're pathetic. What, are you just being a cock-block because we got some action and you didn't? Both of us know there's no light-saber. And how is there a light-saber in 1863, or Chinese food?

Linda. It was good, though.

London, August 1973. The home of Linda Albright in stately Whitechapel.

Linda (giggles). Now he's just making up shit. Is Whitechapel stately?

Jake. At least he has a year where telephones exist.

Linda. Oh, right.

London, August 1973. The home of Linda Albright in stately Marlborough.

Linda. Better.

Jake. Don't encourage him. He's just jealous 'cause we got sex and he didn't, and now he's messing up the narration.

Linda. He's kind of a pest. Doesn't he invade our privacy enough already?

Jake. More than enough.

Linda. It's kind of creepy sometimes, but I guess he's necessary.

Jake. I know. But jeez, take some pride in your work.

Two days later.

Jake. No, it isn't. It's two seconds later. No time passed. What do you think you're doing?

Six weeks later.

Jake. Screw this.

Linda remains distracted by Jake's disappointing performance.

Jake. What?

Linda. Oh, ignore him—you know it's just nonsense.

Scene III

Dubai. It is April 2013. Linda and Jake are now an elderly couple. Their car has broken down on the highway, and Linda sits, forlorn in the car as Jake tries in vain to understand a GPS system that is not in English. The sky is rumbling. Both look worried, as they wipe sweat off their brows and the wind picks up.

A police car slowly idles up. Two threatening looking Arabs exit the car and angrily approach the car of Linda and Jake, aggressively fingering their batons. One glances at the sky and gives a defiant smile.

Jake. Finished with the funnies?

Linda. Sure, but give me some more of the paper.

Jake. Done.

The Hadron Star Cluster. Central Base. A sentry robot scuttles by as Admiral K'ul, a senior officer, enters the access codes to the generals' tent. Entering, he grimaces to see that the battle plans are still unfinished for the Bet offensive planned for—

Linda. Give it up already. No one is paying attention to you.

Jake. I'm going to the kitchen to make coffee. Want some, sweetie?

Linda. Yes, Jakey. There's new milk in the bottom shelf—I think the milk on the top isn't fresh anymore.

Jake. Oh, shoot.

Linda. Are you messing up my clean kitchen?

Jake. I knocked a cup on the floor and cracked it. It's okay, it's that one that was all stained.

Linda. Just throw it away.

Jake. Didn't you know I dropped it?

Linda. No.

Jake. There was nothing? No "he tips over a cup and it hits the floor noisily"?

Linda. No.

Jake. Nice. Some stupid garbage about Dubai, and not even reportage about me dropping a cup!

Linda. What can you do.

Jake. Now he's sulking, I bet, because we wouldn't respond.

Linda. Do you think so?

Jake. Yes, now there's no description at all. Coffee's ready.

Linda. Time for bed, Jakey.

Jake. Well, that was abrupt.

Linda. Nothing—how long have we been sitting here? A good hour? And nothing described about it? It makes it look like we're going to bed right after you gave me the coffee.

Jake. I think we need to get a new narrator.

Linda. Call in the morning and ask for one.

Jake. Are you comfortable?

Linda. Mm.

Jake. "They get into bed, and snuggle."

Linda. Ha.

Jake. "They fall asleep in each other's arms."

Linda. "Jake snores all night."

Jake. "No, he doesn't."

Linda. "Linda wakes up, and her boyfriend is replaced by Tom Jones."

Jake. "Jake wakes up, and his girlfriend is replaced by Brigitte Bardot and Claudia Cardinale."

Linda. Greedy. You'd never satisfy them both.

Jake. "Jake proceeds to satisfy them both."

Linda. You wish.

Jake. Good reportage, isn't it?

Linda. Much better than what we had.

Jake proceeds to satisfy them both.

Jake. You see? Well played.

Linda laughs.

Linda. Well, we'll see in the morning. It might just be me, though.

Jake. That's okay.

Linda decides that the sexual tension is overwhelming, and she leaps up and tears off her shirt; she then unclasps her bra and tosses it away from her with a flourish. She faces Jake hungrily.

Linda. Oh, what a pervert.

Jake. Now, now, he's on the right track. Let's see where this is going. It's getting interesting.

Jake stands to face her back. She eyes his enormous bulge saucily.

Linda. I wish!

Jake. It's the absolute truth.

Linda sees that it's only a trick of the shadows, and she rolls her eyes.

Linda. That's more like it. That's the absolute truth.

Jake. Well, this is bullshit.

Linda's hair drops below her shoulders, and she pulls it away, causing her large breasts to stand more firmly.

Linda. Too much information.

Jake. And your hair isn't long enough to cover your—

Linda. Okay, okay, you don't need to explain everything. You can leave some things to the imagination.

Jake. At least when we really did have sex earlier, that wasn't reported.

Linda. That's something, then.

Linda gives a short snort of laughter.

Jake. I wouldn't call it a snort, but close enough.

Linda (addresses the narrator). So, you're back on the job? Are you going to narrate properly, then?

There is a short silence. They hear the TV downstairs.

Linda. Oh, I left the TV on. I thought you turned it off.

Jake. I thought you turned it off.

Linda. Can you turn it off, and be good, then?

The TV turns itself off.

Jake. That's impossible.

Linda. Don't complain. Now you don't have to get out of bed.

Jake. True.

Linda. Now, why don't you make peace?

Jake (addressing the narrator). I'm sorry I yelled at you. But that's the way it is—we have bodies and you don't. There's no good you being jealous of us. You're a narrator—you can do some things we can't. We just have to work together.

London, August 1963. It is a quiet night in the bedroom of Linda Albright, and her boyfriend Jake Wizzelshaft. All is well.

Jake. Wizenshaft.

London, August 1963. It is a quiet night in the bedroom of Linda Albright, and her boyfriend Jake Wizenshaft. All is well.

Jake. Nicely done. A good close.

Linda. But what about the next scene? What are we supposed to do in it?

Jake. Not our problem. We'll worry about it tomorrow.

Linda yawns.

Linda. Night, night, honey.

Jake. Zzzz.

Linda. Zzzz.

Curtain.

*Previously published in *Learning to Crawl: Ten Stories* by Ken Eckert

KATIE MITCHELL

WARMED

Jane swiped right when she found him on Tinder. He mostly looked the same. She had heard from mutual friends that he had gone full festival, attending the more obscure ones in addition to the mainstream ones that sold out almost immediately. His photos featured him with long hair, short hair, and serving tea. It was difficult to tell what he was like now.

They decided, through a series of convoluted and non-committal messages, to meet up.

He invited her over to his house. She lied that she was busy and messaged him a few days later with a time (7pm), and a public meeting place (a trendy restaurant in Oakland, halfway between their houses). She wasn't used to taking control of these situations but felt in this case that she had to.

Jane got to the restaurant first. It used to be some kind of industrial warehouse but had been renovated sometime in the last few years. She'd taken other dates here before and they'd been impressed with her taste. There was a DJ spinning records at the top of the stairs, and the music blanketed everyone ordering odd little plates of food: crispy tofu with black bean sweet chili sauce, vegan macaroni and cheese, and something called the #CBQ, a meatless burger made of chickpea, bulgur, and quinoa. The atmosphere was lively and twinkling. There was an air of gentle pretension, as if to say, you should feel really lucky to be here, amongst all this wellness and diversity and culture.

Jane went to sit at the bar but worried about how to settle the bar bill without making Scott wait. And there was also the question of her recent sobriety. She didn't want any extra fuss. She wanted to appear easy and collected, cool and unconcerned. She sat down on a wooden bench across from the bar instead. She pulled out her phone. She realized she was so nervous she was shaking.

She'd spent two hours getting ready, adorning herself carefully for him. She curled her hair, put on makeup, and then brushed the curls out and blotted the makeup away. She chose her outfit with him in mind, trying to look at herself through his eyes. She put a little makeup back on and took a photo of herself in the mirror, which she sent to Karen. "I don't even know if this is a date," she'd written along with the photo. Yes, they'd matched on Tinder, which had date-like connotations, but their history seemed to limit what this meeting might be.

It had been nearly ten years since they'd seen each other. When they were nineteen, he came to visit her at college, and they got drunk on Jell-O shots and Natural Light and made out in her bed. It was possible they had done more than make out, but if they did, she couldn't remember. She had gotten really drunk that night, had gotten really drunk almost every night that year. Her parents had just separated because her mother found out that her father had been having an affair. She remembered sitting on Scott's lap and crying. Scott sat in Jane's desk chair, and with her perched on top of him, the chair spun, rocking them both. She laid her head on his shoulder and he kissed her forehead.

Jane saw Scott out of the corner of her eye first. She threw her phone into her bag. She turned her head away from him, pretending not to see him, and then back towards him again, waving a little, watching as he took a running leap at the bench and slid down towards her until their hips bumped.

"Hi," he said, pushing his shoulder into hers, like they were old buddies.

"Oh, hi, what's new?" Jane laughed, reaching her arms around him and pulling him into a hug. What an inadequate question. She felt a twinge at the bottom of her stomach, that well-worn path of self-loathing.

He squeezed her tightly into him, saying "Oh, a lot," into her ear, before releasing her, pulling back a bit, and looking into her eyes, full on.

He smelled like weed and body odor. The combination made her feel dizzy and nauseated.

It wasn't until they were seated across from each other at the table that she could fully take in how handsome Scott had become. His skin was tan and seemed to radiate heat, in a gentle way. She couldn't hold his gaze without feeling like they were marooned on their own island, the next land mass thousands of miles away. She forced herself to meet his eyes until it became unbearable, when she'd break off to collect herself before going back in, looking at the tables next to them, registering their distance from her. The distance seemed to double when she looked at him. His gaze held steady, trained at her, the whole time.

He smiled at her, and she smiled back.

"I love this spot," Scott said. "I'm so happy you suggested it."

"Yeah, it's great."

"I would've suggested it, but I never know with peoples' budgets, you know. This place is a little expensive."

"Oh, is it too expensive? We can totally go somewhere else," Jane said.

"No, it's cool. We have to get the CBQ. It's so good," he said.

"I'm up for whatever," Jane said.

A waitress appeared, a beautiful black-haired woman wearing a black halter top and spiky, angular jewelry. Jane watched as the waitress turned her body towards Scott and he ordered for them. She could almost see the electricity of his attention turn away from Jane and towards the waitress. The waitress left, taking their menus, and Scott looked at her again.

"I ate a little bit ago, so I smoked so I would be hungry again," Scott said. "Do you want some?" he asked, holding up a vape pen. Jane could see the yellowish liquid floating in the glass chamber.

"No thank you," she said. Even before she got sober, she had never been that into weed. It made her feel panicky and paranoid, two feelings she could easily conjure on her own.

Jane wished she could close her eyes and let Scott warm her, like she was a lizard on a rock, and he was the sun. She lifted the glass tumbler to her lips and emptied the last of her sparkling water into her mouth. The lime wedge hit her lips and she flinched. She could taste its citrus tang, cold and shocking.

"I'm married," he said.

"Oh?" she said. Her heart sank, she felt the cold shock of disappointment turn inward against herself for thinking this could be a date, a real chance at something romantic, or at least physical.

"Yeah. She's my best friend. Well, we used to date. And then we broke up. But she asked me to help her out, you know, get her Visa, so I said sure."

"Oh, ok," Jane said. She was in fact still reeling from the weed conversation; she wasn't sure what to do with this new information, the emotions the information prompted in her.

"Yeah, well with my mom and everything. I just felt like it was a good thing to do."

She nodded. That made more sense. Jane remembered his mom being from Colombia. After their junior year of high school, his mother had sent Scott back there to live with his aunt and uncle and cousins, in the hopes of straightening him out. Jane remembered his mom lived in the only apartment complex in town. She'd known a few other kids who'd lived there, had gone over to their places for group projects. But most of the kids from their high school lived in big homes on big lots with backyard swimming pools, like Jane. She'd been depressed at the apartment complex, felt sad for the people who lived there. Jane remembered Scott's white father lived in a big house like hers, with his new white wife.

"We're not together anymore," Scott said. "But we do live together. And she works with me too. She's really close to getting her green card, so we can get divorced soon."

Jane traced the rosacea spread across her chest, ran her fingers along the gold chain that fell atop the red raised bumps. She saw his eyes flick down to her neckline, the movement there.

"And now, do you have a girlfriend?" she asked him.

"No, not really," he said. He considered this for a moment. He looked somewhere beyond her, maybe at himself in the mirror behind her, maybe at the reflection of her back in the mirror. Jane wondered how she looked from behind.

"What does that mean, not really?" she said. She laid her elbows on the table and leaned in closer to him. She put on a grin to soften the question.

"I was seeing someone seriously for a few years, but we broke up. And now I'm seeing this girl named Holly who is kind of living with me and is also working with me. But I met someone else who I'm more interested in, so I have to tell Holly." Jane saw Scott searching her face, for a trace of reaction, for reassurance, for guidance on what to do.

Jane pictured all of the girls who once loved him, who probably still did, a beautiful harem all living together in his house in the Berkeley hills.

"How do you meet all of these people?" she asked. It was the first thing that came to her mind, and she allowed it to flow out through her lips. It almost sounded judgmental. She almost raised her hand over her mouth in shock, like with the gesture she could unsay it, or put the words back in. She stared at him gamely instead.

"I don't know," he smiled. "At festivals mostly, through friends. How do you meet people?"

"I don't, really," she said.

"I don't know," he said again. "I used to think I was poly, but now I think I'm just single."

Jane laughed at that, real and unrehearsed. A hearty laugh. He smiled. Jane could tell Scott wasn't sure if she was making fun of him. She liked that she'd made him unsure.

"You know, you kind of remind me of this girl I danced with Argentina. I thought about you when I danced with her," Scott said.

"How did she remind you of me?" Jane asked.

"I don't know, she really looked like you. Like the same hair color and eye color. You almost look like you could be Argentinian," Scott said. Jane loved this, the idea that maybe she would read as something other than a basic privileged white girl.

She remembered the church mission trip she and Scott had gone on when they were fifteen. She had never drunk alcohol or kissed a boy. Scott had sold weed and mushrooms to everyone in their high school, it was rumored he even sold to some of the cooler teachers. Nearly every kid in their town went on the mission trips to Mexico hosted by the Presbyterian

church, regardless of their religious affiliation. The trips, it was tacitly known, were less for the sake of religion and more for the parents to feel like they were doing good in the world, and to keep the wilder kids from spending their entire spring break drinking and smoking in the hills behind the high school.

Scott sat next to her on the youth group bus and told her how much he liked her.

"I really like you," he said, looking at the side of her face as the bus drove down the dirt roads of Tijuana. The church had divided the kids into teams, and each team was assigned a different color. He wore an orange bandana tied around his bicep. Her blue bandana was tied around her head. When they reached their destination, they would unload buckets and bags of cement mix from the back of the bus and carry them through the neighborhood where they were building homes. The little kids loved Scott, they climbed all over him and he gave them piggy back rides, teased them in Spanish.

"Yes, but why?" Jane asked him, turning to meet his gaze.

He turned to face forward again and said, "I don't know, I just do."

This disappointed her. Even then, she wanted to know why, wanted to hear him articulate what made her special—to him, and in general.

Later, he slid his arm around her shoulders as they all sang worship songs around the bonfire. Her stomach flipped and burned. She felt the eyes of the youth group leader on them and shrugged his arm off. He didn't try again. When it was time to go to bed, she laid down in the tent she was sharing with three other girls and remembered how the weight of his arm felt on her, the snaking of it around her shoulders. As the other girls slept, she imagined turning her face to his and kissing him. She played the whole thing, from start to finish, reality to imaginary, over and over in her mind until she joined the others in their innocent slumber.

The waitress appeared with their plates of food. Scott started in right away, dividing up the CBQ burger and putting half on his plate.

"Why did you move away from San Francisco?" he asked. She'd forgotten that she'd told him this after they'd matched and messaged in the app. She didn't want him to think that she'd never moved away from their high school town. The question of why she didn't live in the city anymore put her at an uncomfortable crossroads. She considered being palatable.

"I was assaulted in my apartment, so I left," she said. He looked down, then back up at her.

"Was it someone you knew?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said. "He was a guy I was seeing. But he had a girlfriend. Not the whole time. But when he raped me, yeah, he had a girlfriend." He got quiet. She found it hard to know which details to give. She hated to repeat the word assault or rape. Once she uttered it,

she liked to let it live singularly, and then refer to it only vaguely, with a rising eyebrow or knowing nod paired with the word *that* or *it*. She felt unreasonably and unfairly exposed, and she felt bad for what she forced people to consider when she told them.

"That sounds like a bad situation. I'm sorry," he said.

"Sorry for the downer," she said. "I know it's kind of heavy."

"No, it's not you. I just don't always have something to say. Sometimes I'm just quiet."

"It's a mark of real love if you can be quiet with someone," Jane said, realizing the implications of this statement after it had left her lips, surprised at her own boldness. It was as if simply being near Scott made Jane push past what normally constrained her. She felt a new openness inside of herself.

The bass of a new song pounded, the synth coated their skin and prickled the hair on their arms. A low, hypnotic voice sang out: *all you wanna do is kiss me*. A beat swayed, off-kilter and meandering. On their table, the dishes between them vibrated slightly. Time slowed. She felt hold and cold. She felt feverish. They looked at each other and this time she didn't break his gaze.

Jane felt a new urge now. She wanted him to close his eyes so she could study him, without him watching her. She would lift her hand but keep it hovering in the air, leaving an inch between it and his face. With her hand suspended there, she'd be able to feel if his skin was really radiating heat, if the buzz she felt was coming off him.



"Don't underestimate her" is the nicest thing a man has ever said about me. But then it wasn't a man who said it, was it? It was a boy. Does that still count? I don't know. We were seventeen and I've never been able to forget it, or forget how we'd climb the hill behind his house to lay down in the itchy dry grass to kiss each other until our lips were red and numb.

He was my first boyfriend. He was never technically my boyfriend, though, was he? Because when he asked I told him I wasn't into labels. So when he cheated on me I guess it wasn't really cheating, a fact he reminded me of while we broke up, after assuring me that now I wouldn't have to get him a birthday present.

Before that, and way before my future relationships made this one look sweet and innocent (we waited six months to have sex), he'd invited me over one Saturday night, and I'd gone after I finished babysitting the neighbors' kids. His friend was there, I don't even remember his name, and they were listening to Bruce Springsteen, *Brilliant Disguise*, I think.

I was nervous to be there—back then I was nervous to be anywhere, always feeling like I didn't belong, like someone would find me and kick me out.

"We should play this one for the show," his friend said. They had started a band and were strictly into Springsteen. "Do you know who this is, Jane?"

"Bruce Springsteen," I said, like I was being tested. I didn't even know then to be offended at the question, at his tone of condescension. I was just relieved I had the answer.

"Hey man, don't underestimate her," my not-boyfriend said to his friend.

It seems pathetic, but I can't remember a kinder thing being said about me, by a man, that is. There have been I love yous, yes, of all varieties: heartfelt, pleading, conciliatory, whispered. David told me he loved me more than anything in the world, told Karen he was going to propose, had phone sex with a woman also named Jane on a boys' trip to Austin two months later, tried to hide it from me: then, broke up with me, told me he wasn't sure he ever loved me at all.

I was offended at the phone sex more than anything—how cowardly to not just fuck a live woman, and with my name, no less.

Then there's John, who used to tell me he loved me all the time while he was fucking me.

He raped me.

The I love yous, in my experience, are cheap. That hasn't stopped me from chasing them. Seeking that little hit of dopamine, telling myself it's all I need, until I'm ravenous and wired again, feeling like I'll die if I don't hear those three little words.

I've said *I love you* first, even when it felt like it would kill me.

I've asked, *do you love me?* and *why don't you love me?*

I've done other things, too.

I've dressed my body. Performative femininity, dainty and uncomplicated: a shirt baring my shoulders, protruding collarbones, a gold chain hanging down the center of my breastbone. A soft curl of the hair, a tan knee, a bony, exposed ankle. Dark lipstick and a waist cinched in by a belt to look small, hourglass-y. Performative femininity, dainty and uncomplicated.

I've undressed my body. Spanking and moaning and fingernails and crying "daddy," bruises and scratch marks left behind. Blow jobs—so many blow jobs—on boats, in a car, in parents' houses, in dirty bedrooms. Sex I don't even know if I like, when I don't feel like it, when I want to feel beautiful and loved.

I've drank. Beers: from bottles, thrown back like one of the guys; shotgunned in the backyard; inhaled from a green tube with a funnel on top; chugged in a game of flip cup. Chilled glasses of wine before dates, clinking cheers with my roommates. *I have to be tipsy for this.* Shots: tequila with salt and lime, vodka from a water bottle, rum for a year in college and

then never again, fernet in San Francisco. Fancy cocktails at tiki bars, at renowned restaurants with artisanal ingredients and fresh herbs, at home with LaCroix and lime, gin & tonics on first dates. He asks, "Let's get another?" and I breathe easier.

I've done drugs. Cocaine snorted through a twenty-dollar bill, through a straw, off a tiny gold key. Ecstasy, a pill broken in half and the powder licked from his hand, lining our cheeks and gums with the gritty leftovers.

I've asked to be underestimated, begged for it, wanting someone to tell me just how bad I am, to prove my self-loathing a worthy use of time, to prove my fears right.

On a hot Sunday, when I was dating David, I went over to his house one time and walked outside to meet him in his backyard. The morning after, our faces inches apart in bed, he told me that I looked so pretty and had felt so happy as I was walking towards him. I was wearing an orange cotton jumpsuit that cinched in at the waist, a V-neck that showed my cleavage, and all of my gold jewelry: thick gold hoop earrings, a delicate chain strung close to my neck, and two longer necklaces, one with a half-moon and the other with a small puffed heart. My hair was frizzy and pulled half-back and I was sweating. I remembered I felt self-possessed, confident. When I asked him why, he said, *cause you're mine*.

I am afraid that it will never be enough. I am afraid of my hunger.

Ever since John raped me, I've turned into a different person. I stopped drinking, cold turkey, just like that. It's like I exorcised all the bad parts of myself, and all that's left are the celibate, good parts. And who wants that?

I want to see my presence as a gift, but I wasn't raised like that.



A week after they met for dinner, Scott texted Jane that he had been off the grid at a festival and now was in Big Sur for the week, but would she want to meet up again soon? Jane was surprised to hear from him so soon. Her stomach fluttered and she responded quickly, saying yes, she did want to meet up. She wasn't sure what exactly to make of their previous meeting. She remembered why she'd held her distance from him in high school. He was a little dumb, in an innocent way, and some of the things he said annoyed her. Still, he was really cute, and the way he looked at her made her feel pretty and light-headed, in a good way. She thought he might be a good first person to sleep with, after the assault.

The next day he posted some photos from Big Sur, his arm slung around a smiling, brown-haired woman with a jewel stuck to her forehead in between her two eyebrows, a curled

gold hoop through her nose, and a large, ornate necklace resting in between her two breasts. They seemed to be in a yoga studio, whose window overlooked the rocky seaside cliffs of Big Sur. The caption: *My beloved*.

He texted again a few days later with a link to a yoga studio. He suggested they meet up for a class, and then grab dinner after. The class was easy, and Jane felt herself performing for Scott in a new way, going deep into each pose to impress him.

After, Scott took her to a ramen place on Piedmont Avenue. They sat at the low bar, and he angled his chair towards her. He ordered them seaweed salad, a pot of tea, and the pork katsu ramen for himself. He gestured toward her and she ordered the same.

"This place is so good," Scott said.

"It looks amazing."

"It is." He seemed pleased with himself. "And it's about a million times better than the ramen we used to make when I was in jail."

She widened her eyes at him.

"It wasn't a big deal or anything—I got arrested in Texas for selling weed and I had to go to jail for like 30 days. They had top ramen in the cafeteria, and we used to steal the packets for later. And then we had these big clear plastic bins under our beds for storing our stuff. I was in a big group cell. After dinner, like super late at night, we'd empty out the bins and wash them out and then fill them with hot shower water and dump in all of the stolen packets of ramen."

All she could muster was a half-hearted laugh.

"Yeah, it was actually really fun. Although the ramen was always kind of crunchy. The shower water would only get so hot, you know. Actually, you know what, when I was there, someone send me this book that I think you would really like."

"Oh, really? What book?"

"Ah, fuck, I'm going to forget the name now." He picked up his phone and scrolled through it, the screen inches away from his face. "Here it is, it's called *The Celestine Prophecy*." He turned the phone towards her, displaying a grainy photo of the book's cover.

"Cool, I'll add it to my list," Jane said.

"Yeah, I remember you loved books and stuff back in school." Jane nodded and smiled at Scott. She felt like she was smiling at a child.

"So, what's up with Big Sur?" she asked.

Scott grinned. After seeing his post on Instagram, Jane had done a deep dive on the woman in Scott's photo, and learned that she was a fairly well-known kirtan yogi named

Lakshmi Dharma. She'd also been able to figure out that Scott had met her at an ecstatic dance festival, and that he was most definitely fucking her.

"Yeah, it was pretty awesome. I don't know, man, Lakshmi and I have been kind of orbiting each other for a few years now. And we just finally clicked. After the festival she asked me to go to Big Sur with her, so of course I went. She did kirtan for Judith Lake's yoga workshop at Esalen. It was fucking amazing. We just have this insanely strong connection."

Jane nodded. She knew Judith Lake, the impossibly beautiful, thin, and perfectly tattooed teacher whose classes always sold out. Judith's classes felt primal, like she was their charismatic cult leader, mother earth incarnate, and they'd do anything she asked. Mat-to-mat, the students sweated and swayed, chanting to the Hindu goddesses Dhurga, Kali, Lakshmi.

Lakshmi Dharma. As far as Jane could tell, Lakshmi was not born Lakshmi, and was raised by wealthy white parents in Santa Barbara, California. Not that Jane wasn't. But her name was Jane, for fuck's sake. Jane googled her and found her website, which read: *Lakshmi Dharma is a spiritual being having a human experience on this beautiful planet we call earth!!! In this life, she has been called to serve the divine as a yogini, Kirtan artist, and Ecstatic Dance facilitator. She began singing, dancing, and performing right out of the womb and is blessed to have been teaching her passions for over 10 years now!!! Lakshmi's dharma calls to yours, as her devotional service is intended to include ALL beings in experiencing DIVINE LOVE AND LIGHT!!!!!!*

"I'm super happy for you," she said, which she sort of meant. "Are you still seeing the other girl?"

"Well, Lakshmi is my primary partner now. But I'm still allowed to see other people, to play, just casual stuff. I'll use condoms with anyone else but not with her."

Jane felt a tiny rise of hope inside of her.

"And can she see other people?" she asked him.

"Yeah, but I don't think she wants to. She wants to know if I sleep with someone else, but I told her I don't want to know if she does," he said.

"I wouldn't want to know either, Jane said. "Like, I'd want strict rules around it. No mutual friends. Or maybe designate a specific weekend for sleeping with other people. But if I knew I'd just obsess over it."

"Right?" he said.

Jane was glad they agreed. She also wondered if it was true, what she'd told Scott. She thought what was truer was that she'd never be able to be in an open relationship, or polyamorous, because she'd be so consumed by jealousy. She'd be completely incapacitated to do anything else besides worry about the relationship. With all of her boyfriends and not-

boyfriends, she'd been suspicious, so convinced of their infidelity that she'd essentially sabotaged the relationships to their painful ends. She'd gone through their phones, hurling accusations and insults, and then when they'd get upset over being accused, over their breached privacy, she'd cry and flail and swear to do anything to get them back.

She couldn't help but feel that polyamory was like settling for scraps. Maybe it was the other way around. Scott seemed able to manage it. He seemed to have endless hunger and bandwidth for connection, no matter who it was with. In his world there seemed to be so much talking and checking in and connecting. Jane felt tired thinking about it.

A sensation of disgust rose in her once again, starting at the bottom of her stomach. It had started on the drive to yoga class earlier that evening. It was stronger than the usual internal monologue, which was so constant sometimes she barely even registered it. She felt this rise like a tide, coating everything inside with a thin acid, until she had spat out the words, alone in her car: "I don't want to be good anymore!"

They did and did not surprise her, these words. She couldn't have said exactly where they came from. Since she'd stopped drinking, it was harder to find ways to rebel. Rebel against what? She couldn't exactly say. But she knew that, despite her late-night fantasies of grabbing Scott and kissing him, she wouldn't. Not now.

He turned towards her and spread his legs so that one of his knees almost touched her hip, and the other, her knee. He scooted to the edge of his chair, closer to her. The side of her thigh brushed his. She flinched. He didn't move.

"It's crazy when these things work out though," he was saying. "I'd met Lakshmi a few years ago at a festival, I think I even danced with her. She didn't remember me."

Scott lifted the stone teacup to his mouth, took a sip. "But even if she had remembered me, it wouldn't have worked out all those years ago. She had a serious boyfriend."

Jane nodded, thinking of the soft meandering way they were circling the thing that felt so obvious to her, the way he and Lakshmi had circled each other for all those years until finally they had intersected, an intersection that had felt so obvious to Scott. Jane wondered what her intersection with Scott would bring. She was tired of waiting, she wanted to skip to the ending, regardless of what it would be.

"It's almost like it's meant to be," she said.

"Yeah, for as much as anything is meant to be," he said. "You know the idea of synchronicity?"

She nodded, yes. "I had a moment of synchronicity tonight," she said.

"Oh really?" he asked. He seemed to lean closer to her, almost imperceptibly.

"Yes," she said. "You know how the teacher read that poem tonight during savasana? The one by Mary Oliver? It goes, 'you don't have to be good...'"

He nodded, yes, he knew it.

"Well, tonight when I was driving over, I thought of that poem. That first line specifically."

"Seriously?" he said. "No way."

She nodded, smiling. "Yeah. I love that poem, it's one of my favorites." She didn't tell him about the disgust, about the desperate way she spat out the wish. *I don't want to be good.* About how it had very much to do with him. How she wanted him to break this spell of her celibate sobriety. How she didn't want to have to be the one to do it. But, at the same time, how afraid she was of him, or anyone, doing it.

"Whoa," he said. "Really? That's crazy."

"Yeah, it was really weird," she said. "When it happened, I wasn't even surprised. It was more of a recognition, like, yep, this is happening, I knew it would happen. I don't know, it's hard to explain."

"No, I know what you mean," he said. "It's kind of like with you and me."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, like, we came across each other on this dating app so many years after seeing each other. It feels like synchronicity, right?"

"Yeah, it does," she said.

"Like, it just sort of feels inevitable. Especially when we were trying to meet up that first time and none of the dates were working and we kept having to reschedule."

She nodded, remembering how she'd lied to him about being busy when he asked her to come to his house, how she thought maybe he just wanted to fuck her, how that had felt too scary. "Yeah, I knew we would see each other eventually."

"I wonder what the reason is," he said.

"The reason?" she asked.

"The reason we have been brought together now. Someone once told me that if you see someone random three times, it means they have something to teach you."

"I'm not random," she said.

"I know, but I still think you have something to teach me," he said, a lopsided grin spreading across his face. She felt self-conscious about what hers looked like, but she couldn't help but feel warmed by his smile. It reminded her how she'd felt about him all those years ago, how she'd felt the same way again the week before.

"Also, the universe is super random and sometimes things just happen, like, in patterns, and there's no meaning to it," he said, sitting back in his chair.

The big bowls in front of them that had contained ramen were empty, the leftover broth had long since cooled. She had a chill from her damp yoga clothes.

"Yes, maybe so," she said.

"You ready to go?" he said.

She nodded and they walked outside together.

They walked side by side and she wondered if he would grab her hand, or if she would grab his. She thought about synchronicity. She wanted it to be true that things always meant something, that it wasn't just that the universe worked in patterns. She wanted it to be special that they had reconnected, not just that her path had crossed with his, like it was destined to do, not only with each other, but with many others over the course of their lives. They'd connect and then disconnect, each flung back into the big pool of people, knowable and then unknowable in an instant. Maybe it was only a bit of controlled chaos the way they had reconnected. She wanted to hold on to that good feeling, that moment of reconnection. If only the good feelings could last forever: the first sip of alcohol, the moment right before a first kiss, that momentary freedom, the exhale of relief she felt in her whole body when the teacher read out loud to the supine class: *you don't have to be good*.

They got to her car and she held her breath for a moment as she turned to say goodbye.

He smiled. She wondered if he could read her mind, or if it was still written all over her face. Her mother had always told her she'd be a terrible poker player.

"Can you drive me to my car?" he asked, as if she should have guessed this, and had been rude to not suggest it herself.

"Yes, yes, of course," she said, feeling stupid, looking down at her keys, feeling the cold tinkle of them as she found the one to open the car.

It always went this way. She felt wounded, and she knew she'd withdraw into herself for a while longer still. She wanted things so badly, but it seemed she wasn't meant to have them. They couldn't be hers. She thought about all of the men she had kissed and fucked and loved when she was drinking. It seemed to have happened so easily then. It reminded her why she started in the first place: it made her bold, made it simple to want what she wanted, and to get it.

It was like the past fifteen years she'd been someone else, had stepped into another skin and did things and said things and felt things. When she stopped drinking, she'd taken the skin off, and at first it had been a relief. It had been comforting to feel so young and new. She'd

needed to be taken care of. Now it was frustrating. She felt clumsy and stunted. Cheated. Like everyone else had figured out something and no one had told her, and she was just now learning it. She resigned. Maybe she'd run out of kissing and fucking and loving. Maybe she was all used up, done. Was it this hard for everyone? She thought about how you could miss certain behaviors even after you'd evolved out of them. She missed the illusion of ease. Drinking like she had was not easy in a whole other way, but in that moment of tunnel vision, right before you got what you wanted, lit from within, everything was fucking perfect.

"Here I am, right here." He pointed at a green Dodge van.

She pulled over to let him out.

"Well, bye," she said, looking over at him one last time.

"I had fun, let's do it again," he said, leaning over to hug her.

She felt his arms around her tighten. She reached her arms around his back. She felt the muscles of his back under his t-shirt, under his golden skin, moving to pull her in. He was warm, warmer than she was. Between them, her seat belt tightened, restricting her movement and pinching the skin of her arm.

"Yeah, definitely," she said. "Definitely."



When he left me in the car that night, I felt impossibly lonely. I was so tired of hearing my own voice in my head.

I started my car and raced down the dark highway. There was a cold, full moon overhead. There was no one expecting me at home.

I took the next exit and wound my car around tight bends, climbing higher and higher. By the time I peeled over to the wide shoulder I was buzzing with a dangerous energy I wanted to feed.

I slammed the car door shut and climbed on the hood. I stood there, looking at the dark hills below, how they unfolded in front of me. There were small homes nestled carefully into the hillside, almost precariously. The hill flattened out to the gleaming bay, holding the city lights' reflections on its surface, the glittering mass just on the other side. It looked close enough to jump, to be caught by a jeweled net of promise and illusion and hope. Maybe it really was that easy.

This lookout was where the cool kids had come to make out and smoke weed in high school. Scott had brought me here once. He had smoked weed and I let him hold my hand, nothing more.

"This is so beautiful," I kept saying that night, and it had been, it still was now. I had felt him staring at the side of my face, willing me to turn towards him to plant his lips on mine. I had been scared. I hadn't wanted to. But then after he dropped me off and I snuck in through my bedroom window, once I was safely alone in my bed, I wished I had let him. All I would've had to do was look at him, he would have done the rest.

My phone buzzed in my clutched hand and without even looking at the screen I threw it, hard and fast over the edge of the hill. I watched it sail through the air, down and down and down until I lost sight of it. I heard it crash somewhere far below. I tilted my head back, open to the sky, and from my mouth I released a sound, high-pitched and scratchy. The hills bounced my own sound back to me. My throat burned. My eyes watered.

It was what I could do.

ALFREDO ARCILESI

TANGERINE STRANDS

The little girl and boy were screaming.

Not the bad screaming.

Not *Mia's* screaming.

Lucretia stood in the outer schoolyard, looking through the fence that separated her from the scene of the crime she had created two months prior. Of all the kids packed into the limited pen designated for kindergarten students, her eyes and ears couldn't help but track the running, laughing—*For now*, she thought—screaming little girl and boy, engaged in the age-old interplay: the fluttering of the little girl's long hair; the little boy's outstretched hand; the former barely outrunning the latter, whether by choice or biology, laughing, screaming, most times out of exhilaration, sometimes because a primitive thought told her she was in genuine danger; the way the invisibly tethered pair navigated the other children, who were merely sitting ducks oblivious to the fast-paced game of tandem sparrows; the little boy finding a latent gear, accelerating, reaching with a clawed hand, closer, closer, closer; the little girl abruptly turning to avoid his fingers; the chase slowing down—*this time*—to recover for an encore, or dying altogether, the dangerous game saved for something as distant as another day, or as close as the next recess.

And outside of this customary exchange, outside of this playground within a playground, Lucretia felt relief, for the little girl and boy had yet again successfully avoided recreating the history that had taken place in there.

She and *Mia's* history.

A history she had forgotten until last week.

Lucretia had looked forward to the first day of school. Her mother had dropped her off at the side of the building, wished her good luck on her first day of school, and drove away to the job that paid their rent. *Mia's* mother, on the other hand... well, if she had work, she had clearly called in sick so as to protect her daughter from Lucretia.

It was in the gymnasium, where the buzzing student body waited to be assigned their new teachers, that Lucretia had felt the summer's sunburns in her gut, the summer's scraped knees all over her body, for she had seen for the first time how and in what condition *Mia* had spent *her* summer—thanks to that single moment in June.

Thanks to Lucretia.

The little girl and boy were screaming again.

Not the bad screaming.

Not *Mia's* screaming.

Not yet, Lucretia thought.

She looked away from the potential violence, and focused on the one obstacle she would need to overcome if now was indeed the time to do what she hadn't any real courage to do. But when the obsidian eyes of Ms. Jackson, perched atop the steps leading to Lucretia's assigned door, met hers, she panicked, resorting to blindly surveying the vast schoolyard available to her.

She knew her new world by heart: the field that was home to two continental versions of football, haloed by quintuplet tracks; faded baseball diamond; fully-loaded play area—just some of the perks of becoming a full-day student in the first grade.

The perks, however, did nothing to perk her up.

Everyone was out here, relishing their twenty minutes outside the stifling classrooms, trying to capture as much of the lingering dog days as possible. Everyone who stole glances of *Mia*, who never saw, but must have felt the judging eyes. Everyone who gossiped, but pretended otherwise, as if the school was ripe with other *Mia*'s.

Everyone was out here.

Except *Mia*.

Lucretia could bear the *Mia*-less vista no longer. Heavy guilt shepherded her heavy legs toward Ms. Jackson. She could have claimed to have felt ill—she was, after all, sick with nerves—but opted for a watered-down lie that the hateful teacher would likely deny. "Can I get a drink, Ms. Jackson?" Her voice cracked, supporting her cause.

Ms. Jackson smiled, opened the door, and held it for the stunned Lucretia. She eyed the teacher as she crossed the threshold. The woman indeed appeared to be the same Ms. Jackson who had cradled and cooed the wailing *Mia* on that day in June; the same Ms. Jackson who glared and yelled at the culpable Lucretia. *Doesn't she remember me?* Lucretia mused. *Doesn't she remember what I did?*

The hard handrail felt like a slippery serpent of electric nerves. With legs of quicksand, she began the long ascent. She caught up to her pounding heart upon reaching the second-floor landing. There, the pair of heavy doors guarded against her, protecting whom she sought. But they were no match for a mousy thumb pressing the latch.

The click of the stairwell door did nothing to interrupt the hushed voices wafting over to her from the opposite side of the hallway. While the volume of the conversation rose with every step toward the only open door, specific words refused to clarify themselves. Still, Lucretia discerned two voices: one she knew, but scarcely heard during class; the other could have

belonged to either relief or dread, for Mia's mother was prone to classroom visits between the usual drop-offs and pick-ups—which contributed to the list of gossip topics.

Please be Mrs. Atwood, she thought.

Lucretia reached the door, and listened for whether or not she would abort her mission. When her heart, thudding in her ears, skipped a beat, she heard not dread, but relief—*Mrs. Atwood!*—and turned the corner just as another thought occurred to her: *Mia's mother could still be in there, not talking.*

Two pairs of eyes looked up at her from their respective desks. One pair looked back down just as quickly. The other pair held her gaze. "Hey, Lucretia." There was a tinge of surprise in Mrs. Atwood's voice. Surprise turned to concern. "You okay?"

Lucretia knew she looked as disheveled and antsy and nauseous as she felt. "Yeah," she croaked. "Just..." She couldn't lie about needing a drink; she had passed the fountains on her way over.

"Too hot outside?" Mrs. Atwood offered.

"Yeah," Lucretia exhaled, relieved for the out.

"Well, you can take your seat if you like. Recess is almost over, anyway. Speaking of..." Mrs. Atwood rose from her desk. "Girls, I'll be right back. Gotta use the ladies' room." She turned to the damaged thing at the far end of the second-last row, peeling a tangerine. "We'll talk some more about it later, okay, Mia?"

Lucretia wondered if Mrs. Atwood saw the pain, suffering, and sadness that animated Mia's barely nodding head. She wondered if Mrs. Atwood knew that *she* was responsible for those emotions. *Of course, she does*, Lucretia reminded herself. *Mia and her mother and Ms. Jackson for sure told her what I did.*

Mrs. Atwood flashed Lucretia a smile on her way out.

Victim and criminal were alone.

Lucretia remained at the door. Staring at Mia, like the other kids. Talking about her, like the other kids, except her conscience was the mouth, tongue-tied, inarticulate. Her meagre vocabulary boiled down to a single thought: *Just do it, chicken!*

Paring herself from the linoleum, Lucretia shuffled toward the row of desks in a wide arc, simultaneously avoiding and gravitating toward the back row. Her eyes never left Mia, who busied herself with her tangerine. As she drew reluctantly closer, Lucretia was afforded a profile view of the baseball cap—a *major* topic of gossip—that never left Mia's head. Having reached the beginning of the back row, she then trudged the never-ending trudge toward her ill-placed desk at the very end.

Each timid step brought her closer to Mia.

Each fearful step brought her closer to the damned baseball cap... and what it hid.

Each outright terrified step packed more and more of Mia's citrusy snack into her nose.

Standing behind her chair, which sat behind her desk, which sat behind Mia, Lucretia wondered why Mia's mother—who had witnessed the unfortunate seating plan during several of her visits—allowed the criminal so close to her daughter.

Lucretia heard Mia's chewing slow, saw her back stiffen, growing uncomfortably aware of Lucretia's presence, and the lack of chair legs scraping against the floor.

Chicken! Chicken! CHICKEN!

She collapsed, rather than sat in, her poorly-assigned seat, and couldn't help but fall into the week-long habit of studying the bit of naked scalp visible under the rim of Mia's baseball cap. She memorized the bony ridges, the shallow pockets, the pronounced point where the skull met the spine, the precise number of pink and red bumps. She knew each of Mia's five beauty-marks intimately, and no matter how many times her eyes played with them, she couldn't settle upon a shape, pattern, or design. She believed that if the school day were longer, she would finally be able to count each terribly short bristle of thin hair.

A fresh burst of tangerine invaded Lucretia's nose. The odour divided itself: southbound, to her stomach, where it mixed with and churned breakfast; northbound, to the mysterious region of the brain where scent converted to imagery. There, she saw that bright June day, not too dissimilar from the little girl and boy outside. *Did he catch her? she wondered. Is she crying?*

Chicken! that other part of her taunted.

What if she doesn't believe me?

Chicken!

What if she screams and cries again?

Chicken!

What if she hits me?

CHICKEN!

Another burst of tangerine perspiration. This time Lucretia didn't see the little girl and boy, but another film entirely: the claustrophobic kindergarten playground; Mia clutching the back of her head, bawling in Ms. Jackson's arms; Lucretia trying her best not to join in on the bawling, but failing, trying to give back the long brunette strands of hair wrapped around her stubby fingers; Mia blaring her refusal; Lucretia covering her blubbering face, her snotty nose detecting something flowery, something fruity.

Yet another surge of Mia's tangerine, and Lucretia realized that Mia's envied, rope-like hair had been washed in tangerine-scented shampoo that day in June.

"I'm sorry." Lucretia craved to be heard, perhaps even to be forgiven, and yet she didn't understand why Mia was turning to face her.

"For what?" Mia asked.

Lucretia couldn't believe the question more than the fact Mia was actually talking to her. *Did she forget, too? Like Ms. Jackson? Does her mom remember?*

Mia started to turn away.

The tangerine had completely assimilated with Lucretia's stomach contents, and out came a vomit of sorts: "I'm sorry for pulling your hair and for making you cry and for making all your hair fall out of your head and eyebrows and everyone talking about you and looking at you and not playing with you and making you not want to go outside and play..." As she purged, she saw the most peculiar thing: a smile. Mia had never looked so pretty. Lucretia thought Mia had been pretty on their last day as kindergartners, when she had asked if she'd like to play tag, but this was...

...beauty.

Lucretia sealed her spewing. She noted a sliver of pale orange flesh stuck between Mia's big teeth, somehow enhancing her beautiful smile.

"You didn't pull all my hair out, Luke," Mia said, her voice tickled by a suppressed laugh.

Lucretia—"Luke" to her only friend, Mia—saw two of the girl before her. Both Mia's lost their beautiful smiles as they took Lucretia's hand, and asked her why she was crying.

"I thought I..." Tears drowned the thought. "I thought I pulled out all your hair when we played tag that time."

"No," Mia said, beautiful smile nowhere on her lips. "I was sick."

"Sick? Like a cold?" Lucretia sniffled as if she bore the illness.

"I got leukemia," Mia said, the word somewhat shaky on her tongue.

Lucretia tasted the foreign word. "Lu-Luke-Mia?" She beamed. "Luke-Mia? Like our names?"

Mia smiled another one of her rainbows, tangerine pulp and all. "I never thought of that."

"What's Lu-Luke—"

"Leukemia," Mia corrected. "It's a bad sickness, but I don't got it anymore because the doctor gave me medicine, but the medicine makes your hair fall out. My mom is going to come to class one day soon, and help me and Mrs. Atwood tell everyone about it."

On the one hand, Lucretia was relieved to be off the hook. On the other, she now wished *she* had been the cause of Mia's hair loss. "Is that why you don't want to go outside?" The regret of the inquiry came as swiftly as Mia's radiant smile faded.

"I want to, but I can't do too much stuff, like running. I don't like the way the other kids look at me, and stuff." Now it was Lucretia's turn to wipe *her* duplicate self from Mia's brimming eyes.

The school bell rang, setting off an uproar outside.

Mrs. Atwood returned as if on cue. "You girls okay?" She hadn't noticed the swollen eyes. They smiled. "Mia, all good?" An extra smile from Mia.

Once again, Lucretia was gifted with the back of Mia's baseball-capped head, the way she would remain until the glancing and gossiping kids were summoned outside for more for-granted play. She leaned forward, and whispered each word louder than the next, for the rowdiness was racing up the steps. "If you want, I can play with you outside next recess." She saw the beauty-marks closest to each of Mia's ears rise ever so slightly, and she knew her friend was smiling.

And though the children were screaming in the hallway—not the bad kind of screaming; not *Mia*'s screaming—Lucretia caught Mia's whisper: "Maybe we can play tag."

M. C. SCHMIDT

COMMON DECENCY

There was a note stuck to the Dolls' front door by a single piece of scotch tape. Computer-typed, three of its four edges had the soft look of having been folded and torn, folded and torn, folded and torn to better frame the brevity of its message, which read:

*Dear neighbor,
Please stop cutting your grass with your shirt off. Think of the children.
Sincerely,
Common Decency*

Mr. Doll hesitated at the sight of the note, a fast food sack held at his side. He considered its petition, wondering what about his body had left its author so aggrieved. He turned and scanned the street, a hand pressed to his belly in a self-protective gesture, his eyes seeking clues from the cul-de-sac's houses and yards. Sprinklers waved hypnotic arcs. Flags rustled in their lintel mounts. In a distant driveway, a boy with an upturned bike worked intently at oiling his chain. All seemed proper on Mercy Court.

While not a witless man as some believed from his lumbering nature, Mr. Doll recognized a limitation of his own cognitive talent as concerned people and their motivations and the countless ways they made the world unknowable. So, after a moment, he pulled the note from the door, resigned to think of it as just another of life's mysteries.

Mrs. Doll was not so submissive. "The rats!" she cried of their neighbors. "They're ageist, every one of them!" she said. "I saw it on their faces when we moved in here. 'Oh! Look at that old couple moving into our neighborhood! What a scandal.'" She was hunched in the posture of an old-time movie sleuth, orbiting her husband who stood immobile on the living room floor. Their lunch remained in the unopened fast food sack on a TV tray, Mr. Doll silently wishing for her to come to the end of this episode so they could eat it.

"Which of them do you think it was," she said, "Sanderson? Something funny about that guy, the way his right eye rolls around all of its own accord when he talks to you, while the left one stays dead on target. Have you ever notice that? Oh, who am I talking to, of course you haven't."

Mr. Doll could envision a mailbox with the name Sanderson stenciled on its side, but could produce no mental picture of its owner.

"What about that 'alternative lifestyle' couple two doors over? Those weirdos seem like the judgmental type." Mrs. Doll paced one more full rotation around her husband and then jerked to a stop, as if overcome by epiphany. "No! Do you know who it must have been? That hussy from the center of the cul-de-sac, I bet. Ms. Prim-and-Perfect. Out there evenings, power-walking in her little pink tights, with that broom-up-her-ass posture and those perfectly level plum-bob tits. She doesn't know it, but I see her. Looking over into our yard when she passes by, judging us."

As his wife continued, Mr. Doll's attentions began to wane, refocusing on his growing awareness of needing the bathroom.

"And we've all seen that little Chinese baby she's got. It sure wasn't her husband's ivory prick that spit out that geisha girl, so who does she think she's fooling with that pious act anyway? And for that tramp to speak ill of my man?" Here, she raised Mr. Doll's shirt to reveal the medicine ball orb of his belly. She took it in her hands and shook it, which only further imperiled the state of his bladder. The wings of her underarms swayed haphazardly. "This is a man's body," she said. "A real man's body. Not the skinny-jeans-wearing tight-waist body of that little sugar tank of a husband she's got. His sad little balls in a votive on her nightstand, probably." Mrs. Doll stooped and kissed the top of the hairy globe as one might the head of a favored child. She stared up into her husband's eyes, then shook her head as if the words that followed were a solemn and deeply-held truth. "She's got his balls," she whispered. "That's who we're dealing with. That kind of a monster."

On it went like this until Mrs. Doll, having worn herself into a state of fatigue, staggered to the sofa, allowing her husband—who paused briefly to ensure she hadn't arrived at a cardiac emergency—the freedom to visit the bathroom.

In the days that followed, Mr. Doll learned the name of his wife's suspect: Mrs. Kelly. He wasn't sure if Mrs. Doll had recalled the name, or if she'd asked around the neighborhood, or if she'd simply made it up to provide her villain a concrete definition. But it was a name she came to invoke periodically in slurs both material and abstract. At lunch, three day after the arrival of the note, Mrs. Doll had studied her Vienna sausage and saltine cracker sandwiches and mumbled, "Look at those old fools eating meat from a can." At her husband's confusion, she'd explained, "Oh, just that Mrs. Kelly."

On Friday of that week, Mr. Doll rose early—while Mrs. Doll slept-off her nightly custom of staying up into the morning to decry their cable service's After Hours programming, murmuring to herself about the smut that passed for entertainment these days, getting to the

end of program after program—and he mowed their lawn. In a humble offering to decency, he wore a t-shirt and the longest shorts he owned.

The upper edges of the sun had barely risen above the tree line when he powered down his mower. Mr. Doll rested his arm on its handle and stood on the sidewalk in the considerable quiet that always accompanied the conclusion of this work. He was appraising his lawn, satisfied with the neatness he'd made of his small square of the world, when a bright voice at his back solicited his attention: "Well, you've certainly gotten a jump on the rest of us."

Mr. Doll startled and turned to identify the speaker. She stood on the sidewalk behind him, all white teeth and summer sun.

At his fuddled expression, the speaker said, "All I meant was that you're getting an early start. The rest of us are going to have to play catch-up." There was a wink in her voice, something rhetorical that he wasn't socially practiced enough to understand.

"Mm," he intoned, nevertheless hoping to convey an understanding.

"I don't think we've met. I'm Mrs. Kealey."

The name made a connection in his brain. "Kelly?" he said to himself.

"Kealey," she said.

"From the center of the cul-de-sac?"

"Yup. That one right there."

Mr. Doll's eyes followed Mrs. Kealey's gesturing to the very house where the villain lived. Then he squinted and took his first considered look at her. She was young with dark hair and average features of an arrangement that he would have described as 'pretty.' She wore pink athletic spandex that revealed a slit of flesh above her waist.

"So? How do you like the neighborhood?" the pretty Mrs. Kealey was saying.

He stared into her face and then at the sidewalk, quietly testing the air around her for some trace of the monster Mrs. Doll had described. He sensed only brightness and affability. To her question, he nodded a terse approval.

"Oh, good!" She exhaled with a relief that suggest a negative appraisal of her neighborhood might destroy her. "I just love it here," she said then waited for a response. When none came, she continued, "Well, it's just about time I go wake up the little one—and the big one," she added with a roll of her eyes. "Oh my gosh, wait! I didn't think to ask your name. I'm sorry. That was so rude of me."

"Doll," Mr. Doll said.

She reacted as if his name were an elusive piece of a puzzle she'd been working: "Oh, I get it now!"

Mr. Doll stared.

"Your sign," she explained, pointing into his yard. To the left of the front porch was a wooden sign, handmade by him at the request of his wife, which read, *Doll House*. "That's adorable. I'll be honest, I see it when I walk by and I always thought, 'what?' But, no, that's cute. I love it." She locked eyes with Mr. Doll and, using these two points of connection as a foundation, graced him with a broad and affecting smile. "Okay, I'll be seeing you." As she sidled past him, she took obvious care to not make contact with Mr. Doll or his mower and not to place an errant foot on his fresh-cut lawn, a thoughtful gesture that he couldn't help but appreciate.

Over the next few days, Mrs. Doll settled down somewhat. She removed the note from her TV tray, where it had been close enough at hand to periodically rekindle her anger, and hung it instead by a magnet on the refrigerator. When the lawn began again to appear bushy and formless, Mr. Doll nevertheless crept away early to manage it, afraid that, if reminded, she might push him out the door without his shirt or his pants to protest their neighbors' intolerance through naked demonstration.

He was blowing grass from his sidewalk when he heard the soprano tones of Mrs. Kealey's voice above the sound of the motor. She was crossing the street toward him in the company of her tiny daughter, a child of an age that the childless Mr. Doll couldn't guess, but of a height that was comparable to a five-gallon wet/dry shop vacuum he'd lately been considering buying. She was of Asian descent, as his wife had said, with hair of a glossy black that inspired in him a vague longing to pat her on the head.

"She's pretty," he said of the child, who now hid from him behind the fit, golden legs of her mother.

"Oh, she's a little monster sometimes, but I guess we'll keep her." Mrs. Kealey mussed her daughter's lovely hair. "We were just about to go in to get ready for the day but wanted to say hi." She stooped and said, "Okay, Maisie, say goodbye to Mr. Doll. Say goodbye, honey." In what appeared a compromise between this command from her mother and her fear of Mr. Doll, the child stepped forward and blew him a kiss in a rote gesture that made her mother giggle.

Mr. Doll watched as they walked away—the galloping steps the girl took to keep up with her mother, the playful way Mrs. Kealey swung her daughter's arm from their joined hands, their private conversation which distance and his own bad ears robbed of words, leaving only the music of their voices—and he felt happy to be their friend.

The encounter lent a lightness to his morning, but by the time his wife rose, the Kealeys had slipped from his mind. He didn't think of them again until that evening when Mrs. Doll

broke a three-day sobriety from denigrating their neighbor. They were seated on their respective sofas watching an episode of a colorful and fast-paced network dance competition. "Oh, I hope that one goes tonight," Mrs. Doll hissed about a petite, dark-haired salsera who spun in nauseating circles across their screen. "She reminds me of that Mrs. Kelly."

Reflexively, Mr. Doll said, "Her name is Mrs. Kealey."

"And how do you know that?" Mrs. Doll turned from the television to address him. "Has she done something else? Is there something you haven't told me?" The sleuthing look had returned to her eye and its focused appraisal of him encouraged a line of sweat to form beneath his eyebrows.

"No. She hasn't done anything at all."

"How would you know? Have you seen her? Have you talked to her?"

Mr. Doll stared at his knees and allowed his response to fully form before speaking. "There isn't any proof," he said finally.

"Hmm," his wife considered. "You want proof? Her character is proof. A woman like that is as ugly on the inside as she is put together on the outside." She paused here to allow her husband to speak, but he pretended not to notice, as if absorbed by the television judges' critique of the heaving dancer. Mrs. Doll leaned toward him. "And what about her daughter? Right there is proof your Mrs. Kealey is a little tramp."

"There are other explanations for that."

"Occam's razor," she said as if it were a trump card. "The simplest explanation is the most likely. And the likeliest explanation here is: Mrs. Kealey is an adulterous tart. Do you disagree?"

His response felt like a confession, a weight being lifted from his shoulders: "I've found she's very nice."

Mrs. Doll rose from her sofa in as bolting a fashion as her worn-down knees would permit. "You did talk to her! Oh, that two-faced floozy! And you!" she said, pointing in accusation. "You poor, sweet, dumb man. Don't you see what she's done? Skittering out of her roach hole, after leaving that hateful thing on our door, with a painted-on smile so there's no way you could think it's her. Like a killer returned to the scene of the crime." She shook her head at him with a look of profound sympathy. "It's such an easy trick for a pretty thing like her. And like any dumb man, you fell for it. You poor, dim, dumb-bunny."

"I think you're wrong," Mr. Doll said. "I think that Mrs. Kealey didn't do it."

Mrs. Doll's mouth hung open at this, her jaw rhythmically working to one side then the other. She took a seat on the edge of a sofa cushion then stared across the living room at her husband. She seemed unsure how to proceed, this resoluteness being unlike him, this

willingness to push back on her view of things. "Well," she said, in a voice of an alarmingly high register, "maybe I'm wrong then." She took the remote control and paused the television on an image of the animated owl who pushed insomnia pills. "Tell me about her," she said. "No, really, go on. You're right: there's no proof. And she's clearly made an impression on you, so—tell me."

Mr. Doll fidgeted then reluctantly recounted the story. The early mornings. Mrs. Kealey on her runs. Her pride in the neighborhood. Her daughter the size of a shop vac.

Mrs. Doll listened intently. When he was through, she said only, "Well, that's just great." Then, with an eerily satisfied smile, she restored the television.

The subject of Mrs. Kealey didn't come up again. Days passed, and the Dolls' lives regained their routine. If there was anything amiss, it was Mr. Doll's sense of satisfaction at having coaxed his wife from the brink of unreason, at having had the rare experience of winning her to his way of thinking. When it next came time to mow the lawn, he again rose early. This time not out of fear, but with the hope of visiting with his friend.

Even before he had a chance to pull the starter rope on his mower, he heard the reverberating slap of Mrs. Kealey's storm door. He looked to the center of the cul-de-sac where she braced herself against a slatestone porch beam to stretch and hold the flat of one foot and then the next against her bottom. She bounded from the porch in a sprint, but when she saw Mr. Doll, she smiled and jogged to greet him. "Good morning, Mr. Doll. I think it's going to be a hot one today."

He pondered the sweat that had already stuck his shirt to his back and started to agree that it likely would be. Before he could, however, Mrs. Kealey tilted her head and smiled. "Oh, hello," she said past him.

Mr. Doll turned to see his wife trudging toward them, down their sloped driveway. Her house shoes smacked loudly against her heels. She was dressed in the shapeless, floral nightgown that she wore night after night but that never seemed to wrinkle. The term 'psychotic' didn't occur to him in connection with the smile she projected, but had it been suggested to him, he may have nodded at its aptness of description.

"Well, hello there," Mrs. Doll said, as if having stumbled into their company by chance, her voice grandmotherly sweet. "You're Mrs. Kealey, aren't you? My goodness, aren't you lovely."

"Oh," Mrs. Kealey said, "thank you. It's very nice to meet you, Mrs. Doll."

"Agreed. Although I have to say: I feel that I know you already. Just the other night, Mr. Doll went on and on about you. You and your lovely little daughter."

"Ah, wow, that's sweet," Mrs. Kealey said with a flattered crinkle of her nose for Mr. Doll, who dropped his eyes to his feet.

"He is sweet, isn't he?" Mrs. Doll placed a hand on his sweaty back then immediately recoiled it. "'I met the nicest woman,' he said. 'Our very own neighbor from the center of the cul-de-sac.' Well, you can imagine how I was charmed by his story, we being older, you know, and remembering a time when neighbors were honestly neighborly to each other. That's why we moved here, of course, a downgrade now that we're older. The single story to save our knees. And these modern high flush toilets Mr. Doll needs to accommodate the magnitude of his private business. But we'd started to fear there was no sense of community here at all. No one welcomed us when we came. I had to pursue an introduction to the few neighbors we have met. Until you reached out of course, bless your heart."

Mr. Doll raised his eyes to find the smile on Mrs. Kealey's face had soured—still traceable in the contours of her lips, but fallen as if to disrepair when a sickening realization overcame a previous joy. The deep breath she took then was showy and dramatic. "Oh. My. Gosh," she said, emphasizing each individual word. "You poor things. I am so sorry—on behalf of all of us. Someone should have planned something to welcome you. Why didn't I think to do that?"

"Oh, now. Don't worry a bit about it, dear."

"No," Mrs. Kealey said, pointing an arm behind her to invoke the entirety of the cul-de-sac, "these are good people, Mrs. Doll. You need to know that. But, you know, life moves so fast now, not like it used to be probably, and everyone works—not that I'm making excuses. I just...I feel so horrible."

"I only meant to compliment you," Mrs. Doll said, saccharine sweet. "I wasn't fishing for a dinner invitation or a party in our honor or something, and I wasn't trying to slander anyone. Only to say we appreciate your kindness."

But it was evident from Mrs. Kealey's face, even to Mr. Doll, that the good reputation of Mercy Court factored heavily into her personal sense of worth, and that the affront communicated by Mrs. Doll had left her shaken. "That," she said, "is exactly what we need to do: I want to invite you to dinner, you and maybe some of the neighbors—Mr. Sanderson, the Drakes, whoever's available."

"Oh, let's not bring others into it, not on our account. And anyway, we eat dinner so early, you know, people our age, peckish by mid-afternoon. Maybe, though, you could have us over for just a quick visit."

"Yes! Let's do that, please."

"Tonight?"

"Tonight...shoot, my husband works late tonight. He's in logistics. His schedule is such a nightmare."

Mrs. Doll's smile grew pinched, communicating the reserved stoicism of one who feels slighted. "I see," she said then allowed a silence to linger between them. "We understand, of course. Anyway, it was the thought that counted, as they say." She twisted in her house shoes and started up her driveway.

"No," Mrs. Kealey called, stopping her. "You know what? Tonight's perfect. It's a date. Just walk on over whenever you're ready."

"Mm," Mrs. Doll hummed with satisfaction. She took the few steps back down to the sidewalk. "You dear thing. I can't believe my husband tried to keep you all to himself." Here, she pinched Mr. Doll on the fat above his waist.

The plan set, Mrs. Kealey excused herself, stuttering phrases of etiquette and offering pleasantries and smiles that begged forgiveness before leaving them.

The Dolls remained where they stood, neither looking at the other. A feeling had formed in Mr. Doll's gut that, had he been more able with language, might have inspired him to say something profound to his wife, such as: "You're planning something horrible—don't." But, instead, he focused on a squirrel in the yard opposite their own as it jumped and skittered, enviably frivolous and carefree.

The house at the center of the cul-de-sac smelled of lilac. Mrs. Kealey met them at the door in a dress that was fitted and patterned with flowers, and bespoke effort having been gone to on their behalf. The Dolls arrived in garments chosen for such concerns as breathability, sweat-wicking, and generosity of waistband elastic. It was nearly five o'clock when the evening began.

"How was your dinner?" Mrs. Kealey said, escorting them into a family room that appeared neater than Mr. Doll had been led to expect from modern sitcom depictions of families with toddlers, neater in fact than the Dolls' own primary spaces. "I hope you saved room for something sweet." The couple took seats at either end of a sofa and were offered coffee and a sponge cake that, in a self-scandalizing tone, Mrs. Kealey admitted was not homemade. On behalf of them both, Mrs. Doll refused the coffee and accepted the sponge.

"Well," Mrs. Kealey said, upon arranging herself on the chair opposite them, "The little one tried to wait up for you, but she fought through her nap today then ran out of gas about forty minutes ago." Her posture was erect, her bare legs crossed at the knee.

"What a shame," Mrs. Doll said, her cheek swelled with cake. "You say Mr. Kealey is working tonight?"

"As usual. Logistics," she said again, "such a nightmare."

"It must be hard to find yourself alone so often," Mrs. Doll said. "I'm hardly ever away from Mr. Doll now that we're retired. How does a person combat that kind of loneliness, I wonder? Sometime, you'll have to give me tips on just how one can fill their free hours—although, I imagine an older woman like me wouldn't have the stamina for the hobbies of someone like yourself."

"Someone like myself?"

Mr. Doll chewed his cake, imagining ways he might contain whatever it was his wife was planning.

"I only mean to say you're young, vivacious, attractive," Mrs. Doll said, then added with a pout, "and, yet, still all alone in the evenings."

"Well," Mrs. Kealey said, having affected a subdued alarm at the burgeoning strangeness of this conversation, "I'm hardly alone ever." She indicated a photo of her daughter hanging on the wall behind her.

"Yes, but you said it yourself: children nap, children get off to bed early. And, anyway, adults have adult needs." She made a show of looking past Mrs. Kealey's perplexed face to study the girl's photo. "Would you look at her though? Isn't she a sweetie? But—I'm straining to see a likeness. It is your husband she resembles?"

"Mrs. Doll," Mrs. Kealey began, "our daughter is—" but here Mr. Doll interjected with a wild bout of coughing born of discomfort and inexactily swallowed sponge. "Mr. Doll," she said, redirecting her attention, "are you sure I can't get you something to drink?"

Mr. Doll struggled for breath and, when he found it, pursued an answer to her question by running his tongue along the roof of his mouth: it wasn't wet, but not dry exactly either, and this left him unsure how to respond, and so he didn't.

With an expression of concern, Mrs. Kealey turned to Mrs. Doll.

"Have you lived on Mercy Court a long while?" Mrs. Doll asked, untroubled.

"Hmm? Oh...about four years now I guess—is that long? I'm not sure. Is Mr. Doll—"

"And you like it here?"

"I do, yes," she said, finding her way back into the conversation. "Mr. Kealey sometimes talks about our next home, but I'd be happy to stay here as long as I can."

"It's wonderful you take such pride in our neighborhood."

"I really do. All the homes are so lovely. And the people are so—I don't know, quiet, I guess? Comfortable?"

"For now, I suppose. Though, how long can you expect that to last, really?"

"How do you mean?" Mrs. Kealey said, her brow rutted.

"Just that neighbors come and go. Any time at all someone could move in who isn't so quiet or comfortable. Maybe someone moves in who doesn't keep up their lawn or fix a gutter that's come loose. One bad apple and—poof! Not perfect anymore."

"Well, 'perfect' isn't exactly the word I should have—"

"That is, of course, unless a concerned person undertook to bring that new neighbor into line, I suppose. It would be their civic duty, wouldn't you say?"

"I mean...I suppose so, at a certain point."

"Exactly: at a certain point." Here, Mrs. Doll cast a long, satisfied look of vindication at her husband. When she resumed with Mrs. Kealey, her tone had turned trenchant: "And maybe that point, to someone as put together as yourself, someone as young and fit and lovely, would be a neighbor who's too old or ugly or overweight. I suppose you'd have to bring them into line as well, wouldn't you?"

Mrs. Kealey set down her coffee on a flower-shaped coaster. "I don't think I understand what we're talking about here."

"Think on it, maybe," Mrs. Doll challenged, "I'll bet you figure it out." She squeezed her husband's knee tightly. To their hostess, she said, "I'm going to need to use your bathroom now."

"Well, it's—straight down this hall behind me," Mrs. Kealey directed, her voice sounding querying and uncertain.

Mrs. Doll's responding smile accentuated a coldness in her eyes. She rose and shuffled down the hall.

Mrs. Kealey leaned forward and whispered, "Did I say something to offend her?"

Mr. Doll wrinkled his brow and opened his mouth, silently cycling through potential words of explanation. Before he could find them, his attention was taken by a distraction down the hall. Mrs. Kealey wasn't attuned to this subtle change in his behavior and so failed to heed the warning it might have offered her, the warning that Mrs. Doll had reentered the room and that she had crept-up quietly behind Mrs. Kealey's chair. Mrs. Doll lowered her mouth and spoke into the parted center of Mrs. Kealey's hair, cooing, "Mrs. Kealey..."

Startled, Mrs. Kealey turned, and when her face made contact with Mrs. Doll's bare breast, there was the forceful sound of flesh clapping against flesh.

Mrs. Kealey rose, as did Mr. Doll. She screamed, and he took a step toward her, resolute to find a solution to this strange predicament.

Mrs. Doll was nude from the waist up, a site that Mr. Doll, himself, had not seen in more years than he could remember. She was lightly shimmying her upper body and yelling at Mrs. Kealey: "This is a woman's body, honey. This is a real woman's body. And that," she said,

outstretching a finger toward Mr. Doll, "is the body of a real man. Love it, baby, don't libel it! How dare you shame that beautiful man?" She lifted her breasts, draping them over her palms like limp socks. The left of those breasts bore the make-up impression of Mrs. Kealey's profile. She took a step toward their host, and the woman jumped, turning for assistance to Mr. Doll, her eyes wide and terrified.

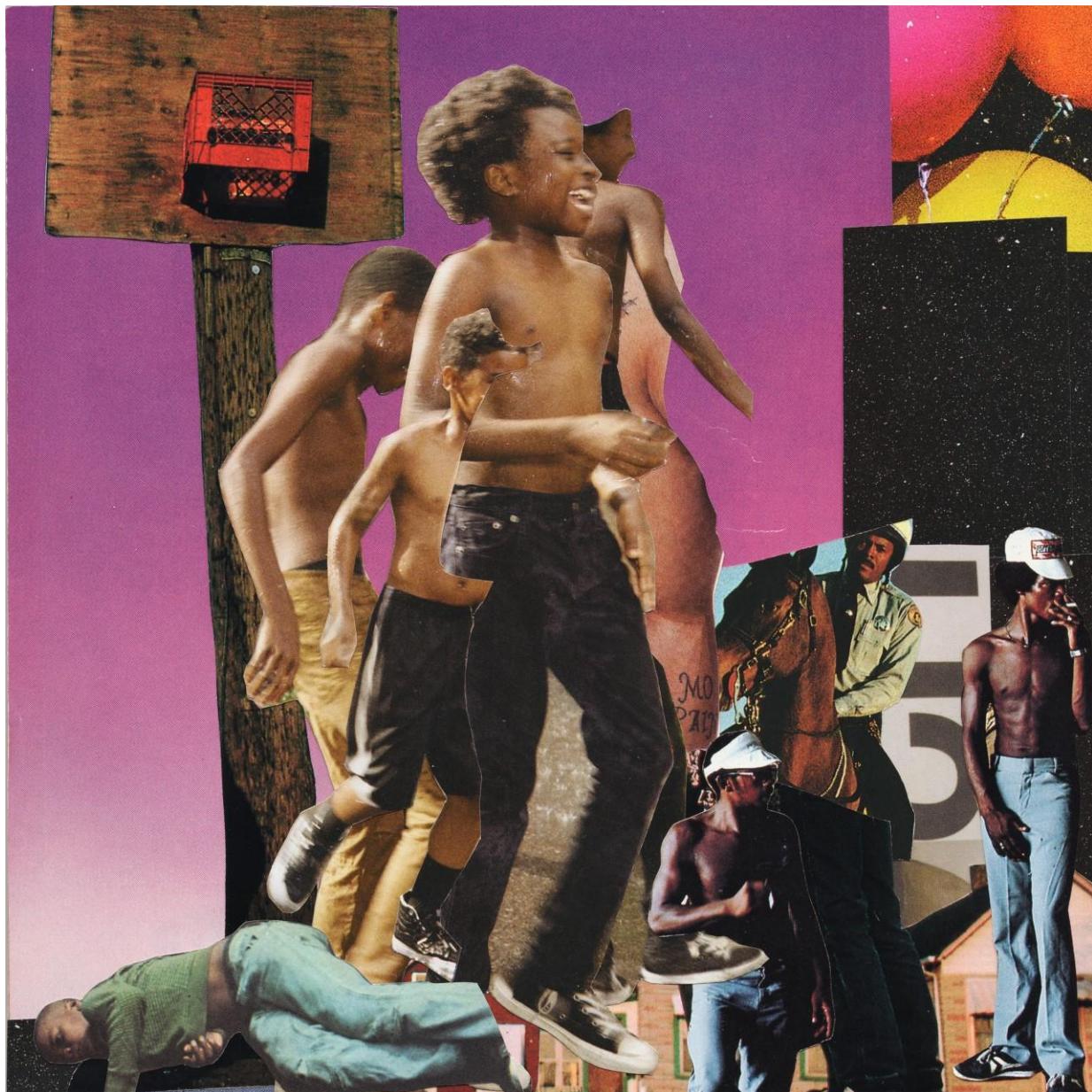
As his best attempt at extenuation, Mr. Doll settled on: "Coffee would be nice, thank you."

Mrs. Kealey scrambled away from the pair of them, Mr. Doll shuffling after her. He heard the front door open and then a scuffle and another scream. When he arrived at the door, he found Mrs. Kealey prone on the porch, her limbs entangled with those of a skinny teenage boy who was pinned beneath her. The boy moaned and attempted to free his hands to address a bloody nose. On the lawn, there laid an awaiting getaway bicycle. In the outstretched fingers of the boy's hand, Mr. Doll saw a note stuck to the middle finger by a single piece of scotch tape. Mrs. Kealey freed herself and scooted like a trapped animal to a corner of the porch. The boy sat and pawed at his nose, the note having fallen from his hand to cling loosely to his shirt. It read:

*Dear neighbor,
Please start jogging with your shirt off.
Sincerely,
Inquiring Minds*

And, in a rare moment of the universe responding to the idle wishes of the everyman, there came the topless Mrs. Doll, bounding toward the boy through the Kealeys' front door.

MOONLIT



TAY BUTLER

EMMA RICHARDSON

PORTRAIT OF FAITH IN WAR

My grandma's hands look like the meat of an apple
that the sun has gently bathed perhaps too long

they are busy, always, with pfeffernüsse, and palatschinke
and even when she sits, they wring themselves
as if mourning the absence of a dish towel

Mostly though, they are nervous when she prays
gesturing in ways designed to go unnoticed, conducting

a symphony of whispered pleading while war
swept her doorstep, and Vienna streets
daily proposed a new destruction

Her prayers were forged from kerosene and poppy seeds
hoarded under the bed, rationed only enough at a time

Hands closed tight as curtains, she prayed
for rescue, or an end, or above all, a miracle

This, I think, is when her hands learned to shake

MADDIE EPLEY

60 SECONDS IN MY BRAIN

the plants make me angry,
with their tiny,
cat-sized
bite-holes
so close to perfection but still missing
the point,
or maybe I like to blame the cats
for the already-dying,
yellowed-half-leaves I keep forgetting to water
anything to take my mind off of how blank the walls are—
necessary space for scattered thoughts
because god knows there's no room for them on my floor,
but the ceiling fan is on high
circulating cat hair and human skin,
my comforter a solid fortress against shivers
there's too many thoughts I want to say
but can't
because how do you articulate something you don't understand
like
sometimes my roommate spends too much time with her boyfriend,
I think,
and people like to get insecure for no reason.
And I can explain why my room's never clean, but
not why my mom hates me,
or why I'll never date a nice guy
or why I like people who ignore me
I can't tell if my feelings make me
angry
or they scare me
or if I just need to feed the cats

ELIZABETH HOUSEMAN

COMFORT

He kissed me as I dipped
In and out of sleep.
His mouth on mine,
His hands touching my hair,
I loved him then.
It poured out of my soul
And spilled into the bed,
All of that love,
All of that emotion.
I rolled over to see him,
To tell him, but my mouth
Wouldn't form the words.
He smiled though, eyes soft,
And I fell asleep
With the comfort that
I loved him
And he knew.

SHAMON WILLIAMS

LOVE, LIQUOR

My mom buried his memory at the bottom
of liquor bottles. When she really missed
him, she swallowed it all, like the last drop
could let her taste his heart again.

Sometimes, I find my fingertips circling
the lip of whisky bottles, clink the glass
against my grin. When I really missed my mom,
I might just lick the rim.

SHAMON WILLIAMS

UNDER THE DAWN

We woke for the first time
under the dawn in the bed
of your pickup truck.
You held out your hand to catch
the remaining universe,
then pinched your fingers
like you could pull the skyline closer.
It's easier than driving away.
We both know we've got to go back,
back to the cattle and the one stoplight town.
But you're stalling. I'm smiling.
Like cinders and smoke, we rise
and the gaffs of twilight shifts, spinning
solar fractals across your stardust freckles.
Each one I kiss as if to create
some reality that doesn't hate us.

JAI K

THE RENT IS LATE

March's rent will be late
as my couch has held me hostage
for far too long now
and I am not ready to get up.

Time springs forward in six days
and soon people will crawl out of hibernation
and invade the solemn quiet
as I will no longer be able
to be at one with my thoughts.

The sun will wake up earlier
and nestle in later,
while I need a little more time
to spend with the moon
in the shadows of silence and nonexistence.

Children will be free to run and scream
in the courtyard below my balcony,
so early in the mornings,
disturbing the peace of my precious,
most coveted sleep.

Soon the pool will be full
and every type of music will blast all at once,
and I wonder why we cannot all agree
that nature is the most beautiful sound
known to earth.

Basketballs will pound into cement.
Boys will yell

in honor of their macho achievements,
or losses.

Dogs will be forced outside for longer hours relentlessly barking
for any form of human interaction.

Parking spots will become impossible to find. Traffic will become the real nightmare.

Students will party every night,
and these walls are still as thin as my patience.

Whether here or there,
my depression has always hit harder
during the season of new beginnings, stemming from this place I chose to settle in just months
ago.

But from the moment I moved in
my dreams became so vivid,
and lucid,
and I seem to remember them all
because it is the only time you visit.
Although you never say much

I become immersed in your presence,
able to face the day a little easier
with something more to hold onto
other than your absence.

RAMON JIMENEZ

DEAR CULTURA

They claim to love you,
but behind your back, they laugh at you
calling you one sided and predictable.

When they read your last name,
they assume you work construction,
clean houses for the rich
or belong to a gun totting gang.

And when you tell them where you are from,
they instantly think of *El Chapo*
asking you about the show *Narcos*
lumping multiple cultures into one.

But I'm tired of them asking me to explain you
from that language that you were forced to speak
to the tequilas and the *comidas* that you love to eat.

I detest when they ask about your problems
the machismo and underage pregnancies
along with the alcoholism and poverty
without taking into account their responsibility.

I hate when they make you move for money
forcing you to wear a wide sombrero con *botas*
while you sing them *rancheras* and coplas.

I hate how they pretend to learn you
thinking that you will get them drugs
hook them up with some fine Latina
while they deport your entire *familia*.

I want you to know,
you are not their escape
their bottomless margarita taco Tuesday,
spring break of cocaine and drunken debauchery

You need to know that you are knowledge and power.
Not some flimsy product in packaging
catered to bland taste buds.

RAMON JIMENEZ

400 YEARS OF YOU

They said you smell fluorescent.
Cherries, lavender and rose petals.
Before you, the shackles of serfdom tied us to the ground.

We bowed on our knees to the kings of superstition
and they sat on their thrones of hollowed out bones.
But, then you arrived in this world.
Droplets of honey fell from the sky.

You freed us from the heads of aristocracy.
You gave us wooden muskets and sharp machetes
and we followed your commands,
snipping off the tight leash of despotism.

You saved us from the confines of the soil,
and you taught us your doctrine of industry and markets.
Even launching us into the stars above ,
and that is why they say you smell of progress and roses.

But, I smell urine,
your odor pinches me in the nose.
Because you live a double life,
miracle worker by day, demonic imp by night.

You are a god, but you are a sadistic one,
with a grand voyeurism for suffering
For the cotton, the gold, and the sugar
You forged our frail bodies into metal.

Whipping us and branding us like a herd of cattle.
Chopping off our hands when we failed to meet your goals.

But, you looked me in the eyes,
told me that you are atoned.

Washing your sinister sins with 50 bars of soap,
but, the smell of expired milk still extracts from your back.
And yet you promised me that you changed,
that you open doors of opportunity for all.

But, instead I see you lock that same door on hungry refugees.
Sitting back and relaxing in your fine leather chair,
while motionless bodies drown in the Mediterranean Sea
The fierce waves dragging rickety wooden boats into the depths.

You let money move freely across countries,
but you turn your back on migrants who move from place to place.
Train tracks, endless deserts and blistered feet with skin pulled back.
Beaten, and confined by your friends in Homeland Security.

Your doctrine states that we are all created equal,
So, why do some go to private school,
while the rest of us are tossed into trailer parks and ghettos?
Survival through sacks of drugs and an empty stomach.

Expecting us to pull "ourselves up" on less than a few bites a day
yet you and your friends drink martinis with big green olives.
Stuffing your faces full of mashed potatoes and red roasted beef,
as you watch the multitude step on each other for your pleasure.

A couple decades ago, you smashed up the Berlin Wall.
You stood tall and proclaimed the "end of history."
All alternatives to you were useless, and ineffective in practice.
Free markets, human rights and democracy were in the formula.

But in front of my eyes, I see your formula in practice,

you shake hands with men in suits, robes and military fatigues.
You meet with them in smoke filled backrooms.
You sit calmly with them at the dinner table.

Laughing historically at their bad jokes.
Drinking ruby colored wines from the finest grapes.
Sucking the life out of bright blue oysters.
Gulping down jumbo shrimp cocktails with horseradish.

At night, they tuck you away in a black suitcase,
hugging and shaking you with first born child love.
Those red and impish eyes sink and sag in sleep,
as you get wired onto off shore bank accounts.

You claim to be a bouquet of prosperity,
scented, appealing, omnipotent.
But underneath your onion layers,
all that remains is 400 years of stench.

DANIEL CALLAHAN

THE TABLE

I'm trying to remember the table cloth
the embroidered edges
white?

How it draped over
rested against my legs
we were all sitting there
circling the cloth
like a family
it was Christmas
or Easter
in the cloth there were creases
from folding
it matched the curtains
off white?

How they draped over the windows

outside
there was no snow
but the spider lilies bloomed
it was Thanksgiving
they blanketed your garden
red snow
biscuits were under a cloth
used white?
The cloth had a pink border
steam seeped out the sides
someone got up to get pepper
to get butter
we planted our elbows on the table
interlocked our fingers
said grace

I'm trying to remember the table cloth
folded up in the closet
how you brought it out only for special occasions
how it laid against the table
you smiling
your slate sweater
the burnt umber table
a chocolate cake
my birthday

if I close my eyes hard enough
you are like your garden
of resurrection lilies
and if I cry hard enough
how they always bloom
after heavy rains

YVETTE GREEN

THE DEBT

For weeping on my wedding day

and choosing not to walk away
from what I did not want,

I owe my younger self
Crisp white orchids on spindly spines
offering me beauty in triplicates—
not the orange Asiatic lilies
with which I walked down a cement aisle
near a man-made lake towards
A man who did not love me.

For failing to taste my own tears

and choosing to be wedged
between wisdom and weakness
when I asked everyone
but myself if I could walk away
while
8 months with child.

For all the bad choices that gave me abundance,

I owe myself
A purple sky that hosts sunsets
that sing love
and spring dreams that whisper lyrics
of who I am.

EDDIE FOLGER

STUNG

A handsome young honeybee
Landed on my arm
Smooth and stylish
In his tailored pollen pants
Striped polo
And flashing a charming smile.

May I sting you?

He politely asked.

I shook my head

I have been stung by your kind before.

He crunched his abs

So his stinger grazed my skin

I'm different.

I looked towards his advances

But if you sting me

You will die.

He scoffed at the thought.

You will die.

I continued

Your stinger will get stuck

And you will rip apart.

That's only if I leave you.

And what about your queen?

She has a hive full of followers

He leaned into me harder

I will not be missed.

I wanted to trust him
Despite his shifty beady eyes
And cocky humming
He sensed my hesitation
And pressed further in.

We will be together forever

I said
As I closed my eyes
And gave myself to him.

With a pinch of pain
He stung me.

But then I felt him
Quickly pull out
With a gleeful laugh
He stung my body again.
And again.
And again.

You bastard!

I screamed in agony.

But before I could confront him
He threw on his
Yellowjacket
And flew away.

LAURA LUCAS

BYRON BAY

i must go back to the place
where the air
is the colour of music
and the music
is the colour of all
things desired
where the sunlight is sweet
enough to drink
and everyone keeps
a full glass

LAURA LUCAS

MIRRORS/OXYGEN

here i am imagining you
imagining me
imagining the way we
imagine
each other
the way we imagine
ourselves
it seems both of our mirrors
were broken but we never cared
to fix them just tip
toed around the glass until
leaving the room

i imagine you
are happy
i hope this is the case
i hope the sun is always coming
around your corner
and who did you give your oxygen to anyway?
I never asked
but i imagine you don't give it away
anymore
i hope this is the case

MORGAN NIKOLA-WREN

SANCTUARY

I feel safe in the poems
that make monsters shudder.

I wrap myself in the poems
that grow comma-shaped claws.

I feel seen in the poems
that can scratch their story on my skin.
Words can evaporate so quickly,
you know?

And I want the truth
to be something more than swallowed
up by the air.

I want a story that sticks to me,
steady as a scar.

I have spent enough years
being told to prove my pain
after the bruises have hid
in years past,
after people have found
new names for themselves
after rummaging around
in my forgiveness.

So I love the poems
that slide through my window
on the heels of a nightmare.

I love the poems
that kiss my mouth with teeth
so hard, my lips can't help but bleed the words,
It was all true.

It all happened.
And I've got the print
pressed into my skin to prove it.

SARAH DECKRO

MOURNER'S KADDISH

My President sang Amazing Grace-
Charleston, head hung,
Let sorrow quake,
Shake hatred free.

Prayers slain,
Glass spilled light,
Torah tears,
Temple shatters,
No song to soothe.

*Violence for violence,
Fill lead loaded to explode-
Bored trickster spits,
Marrow of our dreams
Between his teeth.*

Purge our contempt.
Let barbed words fade,
Hymns strip fear,
Grace fill
To amazement –
We are more than this hate.

JEAN-LUC FONTAINE

AFTER THE BRACES COME OFF

So long, plaque-freighted braces—
 those two titanium bridges cabled across
my teeth. At fourteen the dentist
 strapped your wires tight, and that week,
all I could eat was mashed potatoes,
 brown bananas, and grease-streaked soup.
When I attempted to kiss a girl
 for the first time at the under-the-sea dance,
our braces hooked, and we wiggled
 like fresh-caught fish until we uncoupled
our link. But because of you, I met
 my best friend in P.E that spring as we tried
to hide the tooth-brush bristles
 that stuck out of our maws like porcupine quills.
And during those first strange months
 of my freshman year in highschool,
it used to comfort me to slide the skateboard
 of my tongue against your girders
when I waffled on a test or someone
 made fun of my lisp. I'm happy
not to have to deal with stray kernels speared
 between my teeth, or to hear the names
metal mouth or *circuit breaker* as I wander
 down the halls, but now, my tongue
feels lost as it smooths against my teeth,
 like a train zooming away without its track.

JEAN-LUC FONTAINE

HICKEYS

My blind date Lucy tells me that she hates hickeys,
and all I want to do is shout, *But I love hickeys*,
which might be a bad move on a first date,
but I adore those coral-colored continents of love
hidden in the gulley of my neck, those purple splotches
of passion, and even pronouncing the word *hickey*
gives me joy—the two syllables playing
air-hockey with my tonsils, my tongue wriggling
in my mouth, like an eel zooming through
the water. And there's so many hickeys to adore:
the drunken-one-night stand hickey stamped
on the neck by a parliament of lips; the hickeys
stained on the skin by my highschool sweetheart Sami
in the back of a movie theater, red and blue
like a pair of 3d glasses; there's even the imposter
hickeys I gave myself with a kelpy-smelling Sprite bottle,
trying to prove I had a girlfriend to all my pimple-
splattered friends. My parents used to point
at mine around the dinner table, their mouths a mess
of meatloaf and mashed potatoes, asking when
I was going to get a tramp stamp to match the love
bites swollen on my shoulder. But what's the point
of being embarrassed? No scarf or bad makeup job
can completely conceal those red frazzles of lust.
So why not celebrate passion's tender bruise, love's
small mistakes, how sometimes we forget ourselves
and let loose our inner leech—clasping upon
our dearly beloved and mapping their bodies with joy.

JAMES B. NICOLA

1939

There is a film from 1939
one of whose plot concerns is slavery.
In it an entire people is set free.
But lovers of this movie do not pine
for languid lifestyles blown away by wind.

When this film's heroine assassinates
the slaveowner and thereby liberates
the people, it's as if she hasn't sinned
at all; she murders with impunity.

Ding-dong, the witch is dead, the people cheer.

The Time of Your Life won the Pulitzer
for drama. In it there's a character
like Hitler and L. Frank Baum's witch.

Shall we
remark on 1939 next year?

JAMES B. NICOLA

BLANK NOTE FOR THE CENSUS FORM

I'm a person "of color." Of *colors*. Like you.
 White is a color and Black is a color,
 according to the First Authority,
 Crayola®. No skin's black or white, though, not
 albinos'; not the aborigines',
 who, granted, get closer to black or white
 than you or I could ever claim to get.

Combine all the colors of paint and you get black;
 mix all the hues of light and you get white:
 so the Second and Third Authorities don't agree!
 But if the Artist or the Scientist
 were to succeed in recreating me
 or my skin color, they'd need red and brown,
 green, yellow, blue, depending on my mood.

Crayola® many years ago removed
 the stick they so egregiously called Flesh
 with which I never could identify
 a single person's color. Now that it
 is gone from the box, I can safely say
 that people do not belong in a box
 but if you had to name the color of
 skin, you could say, well, why not just say Skin?!

And if you didn't like Skin, call it Flesh—
 with many many many many
 many many many many shades,
 like yours and mine: no two the same, so no
 two crayons the same either. Try to find
 a box, then, big enough to fit
 all the "flesh" crayons that there are:
 each one's alike in that it's unlike,
 just as you, so unlike me, are just
 like me, a person "of color." Of colors. Look. See.

JAMES B. NICOLA

THE HUMAN KITCHEN

Shoulder to shoulder my Salt and Pepper stand
 like do-wop singers on the street corner—
 the Marcels, mixed as motley, mooning blue—
 and proud as patriots, tight as tiers of teammates
 kneeling, awaiting the day's assignment. And
 their pageant's theme can only be fulfilled
 when they give up part of themselves to be
 part of some stirred and sublimated thing:
 an age-old pot with simmering stew or soup,
 a stainless pan with sauce, a slice of leg
 or thigh or breast where sprinkled dust is made
 invisible and purposeful as souls.

My Mustard Seed and Paprika, likewise.

Such individuality, jar by jar,
 vial by vial, matrixed by our will,
 fills up the shelf with flavor just as we
 flesh out Main Street, the Common, or the Mall
 of any modern Town, where shaking whites,
 blacks, yellows, reds, stand, swirl, stir, and are stirred.
 Plus browns from almost black to tan to beige,
 as variegated as the human flesh:
 Cardamom, Cinnamon, Cloves, Cumin, Curry—
 and that's just some of the C's!

I am neither
 a Master Chef or Master of Ceremonies,
 but marshal many forces to concoct.
 And once in a Blue Moon, when I get lucky,
 my cooking's elevated to cuisine,
 as sounds of disparate voices turn sublime,
 or underdogs prevail. The combination,
 like humans when humane, does real magic,
 and tastes like truth, or peace perhaps, or heaven.

[NB: The Marcels' "Blue Moon" hit #1 on the *Billboard* chart in 1961.]

JAMES B. NICOLA

THE FEEL OF A PETAL

You cannot show me black.
I dare you to find white
that isn't really gray
dark or light,
or purple or yellow variations,
or really textured surface, in God's truth.
Close your eyes—even in the thickest night
there's stuff.
Inspect albinos
and you'll discover pinkish tints laced all through.

Nor will you find a black man who's pure black,
a white who's white—there has never been
such a thing precisely
only flesh of variegated hue,
as broad a spectrum as the realm of brown,
all molecules and space and bonds between.

The labels spread the space and weaken bonds
for someone's use. But know the truth:
that *black* is black and *white* is white
only in Plato's merely mental heaven;
brown, neither prescriptive nor defining,
what with so many shades so delicious,
cannot help but be
evocative as poetry.

In Nature, each hue's spackled with its opposites,
like flowers,
and asks us to step close, breathe in, inspect
the feel of a petal
no matter how exotic
with an inquisitive finger, softly, slowly, humbly,
without our blustery audacity
disturbing our intrepid, natural self,
so as to know the new, foreign and fine.

TERESA SUTTON

TIME DOES NOT BRING RELIEF

AFTER EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

You warned that time does not bring
relief, that hundreds of places would hurt.

I drew your words inside and retired
into the dark, a new home,

where a thousand falling leaves
burned the sky and the ground shifted

below my feet as a million grains
of sand vanished. And my brother

was everywhere and gone.
You were right about finding no relief,

even with time, even in the places
my brother had never been, but through it

all, at my back, there was often sun
and sometimes even starlight.

KELLEY SCOLERI

EARTHLY OBSERVATIONS

Anyone who compares you
To the galaxies in the sky
Or the roaring waves of the ocean
Should not have the pleasure
Of knowing you.

While these earthly observations
may be beautiful,
They are easily observed,
But often overlooked.

Instead,
The one who compares you
To the gentleness
Found in the way the wind
Persuades the leaves to wave,
Enticing spotted sunlight
To dance through the trees
Shall have the privilege
of hearing you speak.

The one who compares you
To the peaceful comfort
Of birdsongs echoing through sunset colors
While petrichor covers the Earth
Shall have the privilege
Of taking refuge in your wisdom.

Anyone who recognizes
Your resemblance
To the subtle graces of the Earth
And the ritualistic miracles they bring
Should have the pleasure
Of knowing you.

EUGENE PLATT

LINES FOR A YOUNG POET

Poets should sleep sometimes
with other than the similes
and metaphors of their fantasies.
They have leave to play on the peripheries
of the boundaries of a prosaic society.

You have learned all this early,
and, truly, that's not bad.
If I had my life to live again,
I would seek emancipation early;
I could seek to know you very well.

Your poems have feeling,
your work a central nervous system.
Its hint in your beguiling smile
may lead many to seek solace in your words.
I pray you never betray their trust.

You have dark eyes and hair like a Hellene,
which reminds me of the ancient Greeks
who called poets *makers*.
Your creation is classic.
You make lines of love.

EUGENE PLATT

TO A SECOND GRANDDAUGHTER

O little Elena, you were sooo eager to come
out of a boring womb and play a spirited game
of catch-up with Maya, a big sister-in-waiting,
to narrow to nil her perceived head start
to a special place in your grandfather's heart.
Even in *utero* you were growing bold.

You just couldn't wait to reach the birthing center.
So! You made what would become your storied debut
in the middle of a snowy night on the back seat
of a nice but novice midwife's van on a roadside
midway to Seattle in the far-away-from-me
pristine-as-you-are Pacific Northwest.

Cherished cherub, congenitally fluent
in the ancient language of coos, listen up!
Even though I loved your sister first, trust me—
you will soon see I could never love you less.
To be second in such a sequence is circumstantial,
so it is, and of no lasting consequence.

Just as Maya was a morning star, more like Mercury,
you, Elena, are an evening star, a veritable Venus,
both of you blessings of the first magnitude.
Indeed, your birth has me filled with familial joy,
and I am thrilled with welcoming you to a world
I quite likely must leave long before you.

But not to worry: when inevitable death comes calling,
I won't say "Okay" and slip away without a fight;
I shall abide by a well-known Welshman's admonition:
Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
rage, rage against the dying of the light.

EUGENE PLATT

THE RITES OF THANKSGIVING

Note: Italicized lines from poem by Dylan Thomas

The place of feasting is prepared
with fair linen and lit candle.
The air is scented with anticipation.
It is almost like an altar.

God is great; God is good.

I take my place and, Pilgrimlike,
pause in praise of the nourishment
I am about to receive,
forgetting for the moment
all other blessings.

And we thank Him for our food.

I salivate over the beautiful beast
before me as the beast within me
awakes and raises its head in hunger.

By His hands

I begin by nibbling slowly
at a couple of cranberries,
simultaneously tart and sweet,
and sampling white meat of the breast.

We must be fed.

I cover my hostess with compliments,
then progress to the dark,
savoring her gravy,
meditating upon the juice.

Thank you, Lord,

I take some of everything
and enter wholeheartedly into
the beautiful spirit of the occasion.

For our daily bread. Amen.

LEONA VANDER MOLEN

IT'S HARD TO SLEEP WITH YOUR HAND ON A THING THAT'S BREATHING

We lay still
like stones, like
one of us
a past fling
to be laid
when he dies
be taken out
I won't do
I need him
he doesn't live
we don't talk

sex like reading
you can't unread
once you do
no more mourning
to the woods

when my heart
do not believe
of its mouth
turn the faucet

when the time
we are responsible

my partner, myself
separate burial grounds
could be dead
said it's illegal
to rest outside
he wants to
to the woods
this for him
to know loss
near me anymore
we're not friends

once you learn
it ruins things
they lose interest
just take it
and bury it

comes to eat
a word out
lies like water
to leave easy

comes for us
for burying ourselves

LEONA VANDER MOLEN

HOPES AND PRAYERS

When I say I fantasize pulling out
your teeth / pray you'll be pulling out
soon / I am trying to say help / no / hello
I need a professional diagnoses
When I lose my appetite for violent
media / I understand this to mean
I have lost my strength / my inner
violence has become weak / my innards
nothing but organs waiting for the off
switch / waiting for the buzzer / waiting
for the knife

That anyone assumes the bruises on my
knees are from anything other than praying
for myself is embarrassing. Am I embarrassing
you? Am I enough for you, too? A type of spider
will let her young eat her after they are born /
and I want to make sure you know / when I say
this / I'm finally being honest / I would never
do that for you.

GREGORY GONZALES

THESE AREN'T MINE: BUT DAMN IT'S A COOL STORY IN POETIC FORM.

'Something Wicked This Way Comes'
and it came from 'The Haunting of Hill House.'
There, 'It' carried the 'picture of Dorian Grey,'
Across '30 days of night,'
to the 'Mountains of Madness.'
Where, 'The Bad Seed'
'Beloved' a 'Bird Box' in
'The Bloody Chamber,'
Forged by 'Broken Monsters'
And a woman named 'Carrie.'

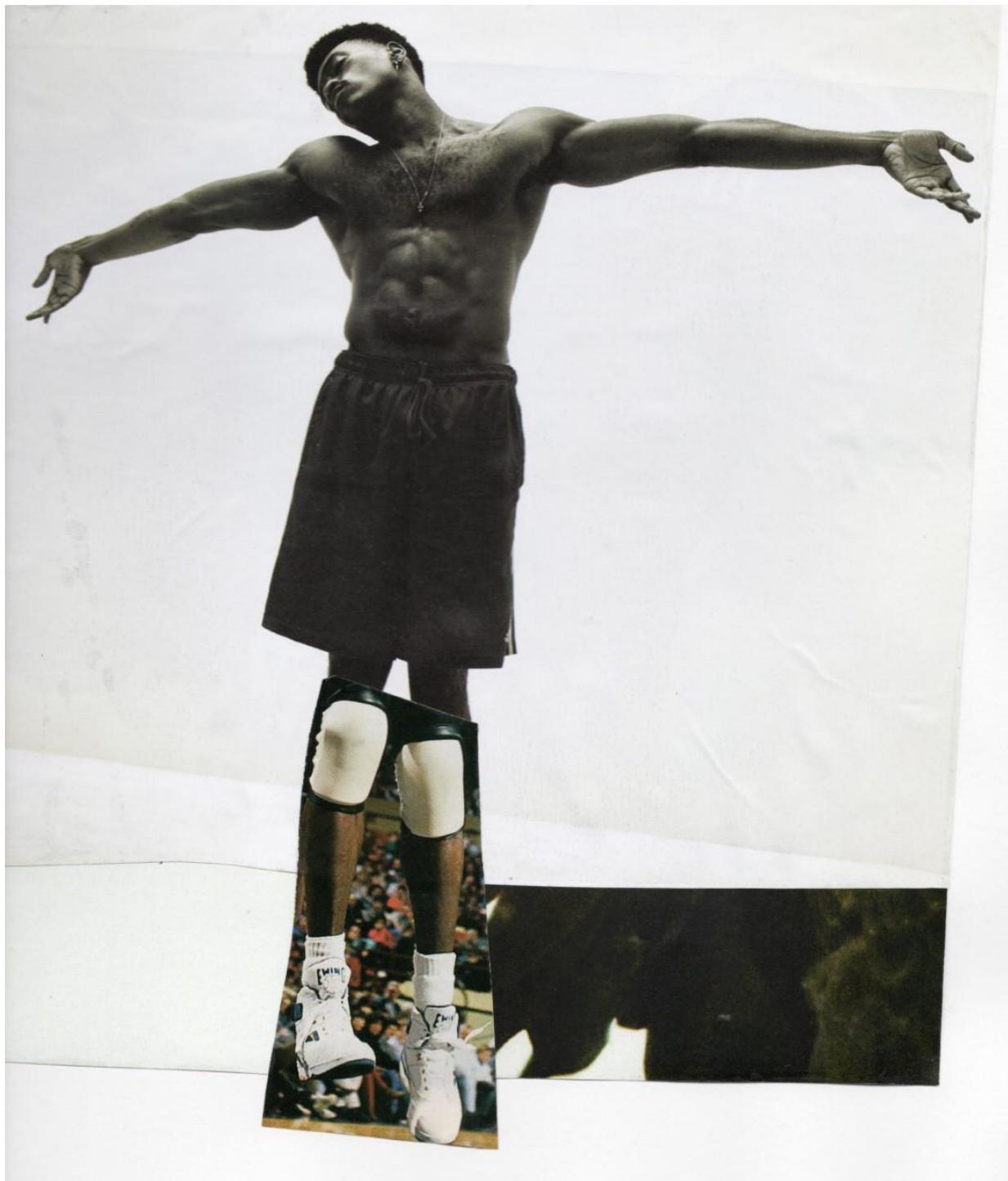
'The Changeling' then challenged
'The case against Satan,'
Just to 'Come closer' to
'Coraline,'
But they were Separated by the 'Damned Highway'
And a 'Dread Nation' that was 'Drawing blood'
From 'the drowning girl.'
All because the 'exorcist' was a 'fiend'
For a 'fever dream,'
Needing to 'Feed' 'The fifth child,'
While a 'Ghost story' shouted
'from hell.'

'The lesser dead' was mad at 'the good house'
For telling all the 'Gothic Tales'
In an 'Interview with a vampire.'
But, to 'let the right one in,'
Sitting at 'the library at Mount Char,'

'The little stranger' needed a 'minion'
of 'Meddling Kids' to find the 'Missing'
'Mongrels' during 'Mr. Shivers'
'Night film.'

If only 'Pandemonium' hadn't blocked
'The passage' with a single 'Psycho'
Who called himself 'Rebecca.'
Maybe then, 'The silence of the lambs,'
Wouldn't have disrupted 'the silent companions.'
Maybe then, 'Whispers' wouldn't
Fear 'The walls around us.'
Where 'skinfock' hunt 'slasher girls and monster boys'

PAT



TAY BUTLER

SUSAN ABERCROMBIE

RAYS OF THE SAME SUN

My heroine visits me often. Never in the morning, when the sun just begins to turn the world yellow. And never in the glow of golden hour when anyone can be made beautiful. No, my heroine visits me at night, and she tells me of her day.

She wakes with the same sun as me. She dresses her body without a glance in the mirror. She is edgy but classic, like a cutout from a fashion design sketch of the 60's. She wears rings on more fingers than just the one next to her pinky on her left hand to show she is more than just a wife. She wears red lips and blows a kiss to those who reject the shade.

She reads, writes, and regularly practices yoga. She has time for these things.

You know when she enters a room. She can stand in front of a group of people with no rapid heartbeat, no flushed cheeks. She speaks fluently, her cohesive thoughts fluidly changing shape into words. She waits her turn to speak but knows when it is time to open her mouth. She actually opens her mouth instead of thinking of the right response five minutes too late. She laughs at the right parts of jokes with a timely raised eyebrow and small smirks. You notice when she leaves.

She sticks up for the misunderstood. She sticks up for herself.

On the way home, she listens to the right kinds of music; you know, the good stuff. She makes plans for dinner, and she selects the restaurant with ease. She knows the perfect blend of wine to drink and does not hesitate to order with perfect enunciation when the waiter comes by. She is vegan, and she sticks to it.

With wine-induced happiness, she makes love to the man who loves her in their bedroom. Surrounded by plants and candles, she does not hide her body even in the flicker. She remembers to water her plants afterwards.

In the deep blue of night, she comes to visit me. She crawls in my bed, under my sheets, and holds me close. She tells me of her day, and I never breathe a word of mine.

"We are rays of the same sun," she says to me.

I fall asleep to this simplicity of her heroic tales.

By the morning light, she has slipped away, but she always returns at night to tell me of her better days.

And I envy her. God, do I envy her.

KRISTINA STOCKS

CUSCO

The taxi wobbles over the cobblestone and nearly clips an alpaca. The last three days have been spent trying not to puke—but I don’t know if it’s altitude sickness or the near constant stream of Pisco sours that have been stuck in my hand at Loki, the city’s most recommended hostel. “A Backpacker’s Dream”, the party destination for those headed to or away from Machu Picchu, is booked full: swarms of drunk Australian men, crunchy granola types, and exhausted travelers from all over the world—Northface jackets and comfortable pants, relaxed as they lay in hammocks.

Loki’s bar is massive, and throughout the blurry nights are chants of “LOKI LOKI, OI. OI. OI.”.

I’m one of the youngest people here. The autonomy has quickly begun to wear off and I cringe at the memory of a sozzled Aussie touching the small of my back the night before—I’ve got a boyfriend back home, a gap-toothed bassist who has a tendency to correct the pronunciation of band names who I haven’t spoken to in weeks. I won’t be surprised or disappointed when it doesn’t work out.

I press my face against the window of the cab as the colors of Peru whiz by—pinks, greens, yellows, blues, browns. Elegant Baroque architecture slotted against ancient stone. The oldest city in the Americas. The finely woven textiles and mountains blur together.



I woke up bedraggled and still a little drunk. *Water*. Twelve other backpackers snore gently, and I try not to swear as I stub my toe on the solid oak of the bottom bunk. I sneak out to the shared lavatory, but the view catches my eye. Marmalade orange roofs cascade the landscape and violet blue skies collapse into jagged peaks. *Viva el Peru Glorioso* is carved into the hillside. Cirrostratus frame the message. *Long live glorious Peru*. I grab the window’s ledge. The back of my neck tickles and I have no idea how long I stand here for, until I get a tap on my shoulder. Kailey.



We met the day before. She’s from BC but works in Alberta, which I think is kismet. She has a youthful face and thin eyebrows, with endearing freckles and a wicked sense of humor.

"Let's explore." She says to me, after ten minutes of chatting.

We chase one another down the steep, narrow paths. We peek inside a restaurant that has *Chu* (guinea pig) listed on the menu. We stop at a fruit stand. The vendor is an elderly woman wrapped in a shawl. She hands us the bananas, wider than they are long, nods her head, wide brim of her hat tipping. Kailey and I knock the bananas like swords and peel to reveal the flesh, some parts deeply bruised. I marvel at the sweet yet mealy consistency as we walk deeper into the heart of Cusco.

We make it down the hill to the Plaza de Armas, once the "Great Inca Square". Colonial churches dot the square, but it is the sandstone Cusco Cathedral we find ourselves in front of. I feel the petals of an elongated bell-shaped flower that dangles above us. Its orange pollen stains my fingers.

"Did you know the Spanish built this in 1654 with the hopes of removing Incan religious beliefs?" Kailey's nose is deep in her Lonely Planet book. I rest my head on her shoulder. There are children in ponchos carrying carvings, tourists with fanny packs and expensive looking cameras, and Peruvian mothers with babies on their backs, wrapped in patterns of abstract geometric designs. A little girl walks up to us with a ladder of wares, one that is nearly her height.

"Earring? *Doce sol.*" She smiles. She's missing one of her front teeth. She isn't much older than my youngest sister. I look at the silver earrings glinting in the sunlight and reach for my wallet.

We walk through a market and touch the soft wool alpaca sweaters. We decline vendors as they approach us with trinkets. I pick up a scarf for my mom and tell Kailey a little about my family.

"My mom is so worried. She thinks I'm going to get stolen or something. It's kind of sweet but she drives me crazy."

Kailey nods, and I ask her, "What about your family? Do you want to stop anywhere for them?"

"No. I really don't."

I don't press any further.

As the sun sets the outdoor lights flicker, and the plaza dazzles us with an orange glow. There is a dance in the square, a folkloric *huayno*. Kailey and I sway to the guitar, mandolins, *charangos* (lutes), violins, and *quenas* (flutes). A man invites Kailey to dance. He says it's called *wayñukuy*. He vigorously stamps his feet and swings Kailey back and forth to the music.

It's getting dark and we race up the incomparably steep *avenida de la raza* for a drink at our hostel. I suck in the thin air and disequilibrium sets in. I plead with Kailey to slow down as I catch my breath but instead, she spins me around in a flourish and whistles an off-tune lute impression. We are laughing as the last bits of sun fade on the city.

We pick up a 4L of wine that by the end of the night will have stained our teeth a pinkish red, calcified by a pack of cigarettes. In Loki's hallway we briefly chat with the troglodyte Australian crew, all muscles and tight tank tops who surely haven't been sober since they departed Sydney's airport.

After we poke fun at the rhythmic party chants, the interchangeable quality that each of these men have. Boys, really.

But I am not very different from them, more mature. I'm nineteen. I'm alone. As we lay in the hostel's courtyard, head and feet in the grass, we pass cigarettes and accidentally ash on our chests. Kailey is twenty-five, she has a career. I find myself admiring her intelligence and ease of self.

"I have no idea what I am doing." I say.

"Nobody does."

"You do."

Kailey ignores this and says,

"The Inca were one of the few cultures that found their constellations in the absence of stars. See there, the dark blotches in the milky way? They would have thought those were the animals, and the milky way was a river. What does that one look like to you?" She covers one of my eyes and points to a dark space in the constellation.

"A ferret." I say, and we both cackle as the wine muddles our brains.

I lightly squeeze her arm and stumble into the bar to get a couple waters. When I return, Kailey is sitting on a windowsill in a quiet corner outside the bar. One leg is extended on the ground, the other pressed against her chest. She's crying. I sit beside her, placing the water at our feet. The sill is hard and cold.

There are hard fluorescent lights outside the bar. Her face is swollen.

"What's wrong?"

She doesn't say anything for a long time. I watch the condensation trickle on the water glasses.

"I feel guilty for even being here. For enjoying myself."

I'm about to interrupt. Offer a cliché like, "you deserve to be happy" but Kailey continues.

"We didn't have heat in our house. We didn't have running water. All I can remember about being a kid is being cold all the time. My mom drank constantly after my dad died."

She studies the empty wine glass beside her, shakes her head.

"I found him. I found him after he killed himself." She pulls her knees against her chest.

I hand her the glass of water, and stumble back.

"I'm so sorry. That is so unfair. I'm really sorry, I – fuck."

At this, she sniffls and lets out a bitter laugh.

"Yeah. Fuck."

"I wish I knew what to say."

"Yeah. Anyway." She stands up and chugs the glass of water.

"We should keep talking."

"Nah. Let's get *shots*."

Before I can say anything, she is in the bar. I close my eyes and count the purple impressions left behind from looking at the fluorescent lights.

By the time I make it inside, Kailey already has a tray of shots.

"Courtesy of our friends over there." She lifts her shot above her head and grins flirtatiously at the Australians in their neon shorts. One grins back and waves us over. She downs another shot and I follow suit: one, two.

"Come on." She pulls my hand. The Aussies slap the table and sing.

"Here's to Ryan, he's true blue

He's a piss pot through and through

He's a bastard so they say

Tried to go to heaven but he went the other way

He went:

Down! Down! Down! Down!"

Ryan burps emphatically as he slams the empty pint on the table, wipes his mouth. He grabs a beer out of his friends' hand and plunks it in front of me.

"IT'S THE CANADIAN'S TURN."

I tilt the beer and the hands clap the table. *She's a piss pot through and through...*

I dance with Sam. He's from the Gold Coast. He's got curly blonde hair and tells me I am just his type and I don't stop him when he dances close and I feel the hardening in his shorts.

The lights are too bright, and Kailey and I alternate between shots, dancing, cigarette breaks, and time outside in the grass. We're sidled up beside one another and pass the box of

wine to new friends. They disperse and again it's her and I, the box of wine. She puts her arm around me. I want to tell her I'm happy we met, but instead we sit quietly.

Eventually we stand, and she says,

"You know, I've never told anyone that before."

We stay up until four a.m. I don't remember crawling into bed. This is not the only detail I can't recall.

I've made Kailey a promise.

Kailey bumps me with her hip.

"You ready to go bungee jumping?" She asks.

MATTHEW JAMES BABCOCK

SUBTITLES: 3

In seventh grade a mole appears on the underside of my penis. From wrestling practice with Coach Mowrer to Miss Hart's speech class, I begin to see the dark spot as a hole in the pink lifeboat of my happiness, a sinister period at the end of the most important sentence anyone could write about me. Around people who look older and smarter, I float mole questions and hear one thing.

"Cancer," people say.

Obsessively, I roll the mole between my fingers, braving the sore swelling with the stoicism of a Samurai. One day after choir in the cinderblock annex restroom, with a painful pinch I pluck the blight free, leaving a fresh red wound in the underbelly of my humperdink. But the blemish grows back, like some super-resilient pox, as ugly as malpractice, a black mark the universe awards me for trying to snooker biology.

The decades dissipate my fears, my wife and I have five children, but then my older brother gets melanoma. When I see him post-procedure, he looks like a Rottweiler chomped a hunk out of his ear. Cancer panic rattles my spine, and I hotfoot it to the dermatologist, never weighing the difference between my brother, an avid golfer, and myself, someone who rarely strolled about trouserless without sunblock. Into the arms of experts, I'm swept on a tide or worry, mortified at the thought of having to wander the world wangless.

The clinic, a blockish putty-colored building, features tinted windows like castle loopholes across the top. I shoulder through a glass door painted with ornate gold lettering into a cramped waiting room where portly men and women occupy all five chairs, hands folded, hypnotized by the floor. A monstrous bamboo plant sags in one corner. Children march in circles, brandishing battered Little Golden Books and scuffed toy boats and cars of bulky colorful plastic. The receptionist wears a hot pink muumuu, her blond hair rubberbanded in a ponytail stub. Her bulk fills the reception window, like a huge strawberry gumdrop softening in a swivel chair. She purrs into a headset mic and works a fax machine, credit card reader, computer, and phone like an eight-armed backup musician playing synthesizer tiers in a pop band.

"Mr. Babcock?" she says, handing me paperwork on a clipboard.

"The same," I say.

"Fill this out and we'll be with you in a minute."

Under a mounted TV that roars commercials about health supplements, I pen the intimate epic of my mole. A young brunette woman in black scrubs appears and ushers me down a narrow hallway into an exam room, where I don a loose hospital gown and lump my clothes in a corner then perch on a black vinyl swiveling stool. A knock signals the entrance of a frowning Hispanic nurse in aquamarine scrubs. She avoids eye contact and with unwarranted violence taps the routine of my condition into a computer attached to the wall on an opposable arm of black steel.

"Where on your body are your moles?" she asks. Glossy fuchsia rouges her high cheekbones like a custom paint job. Her bored eyes drill the screen. "Where should he look?"

"Back," I say. "Shoulder, my left. Could he look me, all over, and tell me what he finds?"

Her shoulders slump and her hooded eyes blink. A sigh escapes her nose. With one glossy scarlet nail she makes keystrokes, like a sadistic beachgoer stabbing ants.

"Anywhere else?"

Dryness cakes my throat. "My penis," I say.

Her typing stops. Her eyelashes, laden with mascara, flutter. She sits up, as if sobering herself for a drive after heavy drinking.

"Where on your penis," she says, tapping keys. "Left or right side?"

What possible clinical purpose could knowing that serve? My eyes dodge left and right.

"Right."

I snug the insubstantial gown around me like a starlet in a dressing room. The fabric is light gray and flimsy, a transparent cotton dotted with white starbursts. She stands and crosses the room.

"He'll be in to see you," she says, closing the door behind her.

When the doctor enters he does so with a brisk knock, a big grin, and rapid-fire throat clearing, the nurse at his back like a pissed-off page. Blond and bulldoggish, in a dapper white coat, he looks far too young to be practicing medicine on my dude piston.

"Let's get you checked out," he says with a nasal chuckle. "We get to that last one, we'll send Lucia out."

Lucia plonks herself at her station, as if being punished in the corner. The doctor's closed mouth makes the pleased chuntering of a suckling pig as he scans my skin through an illuminated dermascope.

"All right," he drawls, apologetic. He snaps on a latex glove and reaches for my lap. "Why don't we check this other one."

I hadn't suspected that anyone else would gentle my gentleman's gentleman, so I turn the gown from my lap, as if uncovering a platter of delicacies, and angle my organ into his sight.

He snaps the glove off and swings his arm back like a speed skater. One-handed, he squints through his scope, a lapidary assessing karats in my assets. My head stays level, but in my peripheral vision Lucia sits like a fountain carving, eyeing her computer screen.

"Nope," he declares with a pirate snicker. "No worries." I whip the gown over my loins, and he wheels his stool to a drawer, and gives me a pamphlet. "These'll tell you about problems."

The pamphlet illustrates an array of malignant moles, none even close to the nondescript nevus blotching my love bone. After a few pleasantries the doctor excuses himself and Lucia tags after him with all the dutifulness of a Puritan handmaiden.

In the reception area everything is signed, swiped, and scheduled and I turn to leave when someone calls "Mister" and my surname.

When I turn, it's Lucia, hip cocked like a chipper cruise director, hugging her clipboard, and she smiles and says what passes universally as the most meaningless of clichés but that today unseats the grand champion of understatements:

"Nice to Meet You."

SOFIA MARTIMIANAKIS

THE SCORPION AND THE SISTER

I'm three, sitting on your lap and laughing. It's one of my earliest memories. Both of my tiny hands wrapped around your dark brown tresses. I'm pulling, not fathoming how much pain you're in until you show me. Scalp set ablaze, you pull my hair in retaliation; tears well as I scream for Mommy. Triumph surfaces on your twenty-year-old face. I should have known it wouldn't be the last time you would hurt me.

Dad passed away two weeks before I left the city for grad school. Mom needed to grieve openly, which meant travelling to Greece to be with her siblings. So you, my older sister, stayed to face the arduous task of getting our home ready for market. Admittedly, I came to help when the majority of clutter had already been sorted. My car full to the brim, three boxes still remained near the front door. I asked you to keep them safe, books I hoped to one day read to my child, my Christmas stocking, the first novel I penned in elementary school. I would return for them in a few weeks. You denied my request, saying anything that wasn't claimed today would be thrown away. I noticed you were saving boxes for our brothers, who hadn't come to help, and called your bluff. Surely you wouldn't toss our childhoods to the curb. Next time I visited, I discovered I was only partially correct. Their boxes were safe, but my memories had been destroyed.

With such a large age gap, you made me an aunt just before I started third grade. I welcomed the opportunity to do right by the next generation. My nieces became the younger siblings I never had, jubilant companions on everyday adventures. You couldn't stand it; seeing the results of years of listening, mentoring, and secrets shared. The same teenage children speaking to me with compassion, yelling at you loud enough for the neighbors to hear. You grew resentful. Comments were whipped at me over the years, too volatile to repress; I was trying to poison your daughters against you, to usurp your matriarchal role. In an attempt to create distance, you set hoops of guilt for them to jump through each time we made plans. Invitations to family excursions withdrawn. Punishments doled out for a crime I pled guilty to, fostering a Hallmark movie friendship with your children. The type of healthy relationship I always wish we had, but you were incapable of nurturing.

Now, I sink by your hand sister. As a scorpion, you plead for a lift across murky waters; I feel safe trusting you won't sting me for then we would both drown. When the sting inevitably comes, you ask why I placed faith in you when you've never hid your true character from me. I sigh and say, "I know what the rest see, but I chose to see you as my older sister".

EDWARD LEE

ABSENCE

A child cries and I am undone. It does not matter where I am or what I am doing, when I hear a child cry I fall apart, and it is only with bone-shaking effort that I do not cry myself, though I must close my eyes against the pressure of tears in the corner of my eyes, and even then I am not always successful in keeping those tears from my cheeks. Minutes must pass before I can continue doing whatever it was I was doing; there have even been occasions when I have felt my legs weaken and have had to sit down, be it on a chair, or, if there is no chair to sit on, or even a wall to lean against, the ground.

My daughter is seven years of age. Seventeen months ago myself and her mother separated, and I went from seeing my daughter every day to only seeing her every second weekend. Every day I do not see her I feel her absence as a physical weight sitting heavily, painfully in my chest. Even now her absence is there, weighing me down as much as it did in the first few weeks, when the hard shock of it was fresh. It has not lessened, as you might imagine it would over such a long period of time; the only change it undergoes is when it increases as it does when, like the above mentioned times, I hear a child cry, or when I see another girl similar to my little girl, or - and these moments are sometimes as crippling as hearing an anonymous child cry - when I hear the word 'daddy' spoken by either a young girl or boy, and I instinctively raise my head, expecting to see my daughter even as I realize it is not her, with the resulting disappointment cutting through me with such force it is as though all that makes me a father is being severed from my soul.

Part of its relentless presence may be down to the depression I have suffered from for most of my life, which has always 'amplified' my stress and other negative emotions - this was certainly the case at the beginning before an increase in medication and months long therapy brought it back to manageable levels - or it may be some other reason I as of yet fail to understand, and may remain unknown to me for as long as I am feeling it so strongly, blinded to it by it blinding me. It almost feels like grief, but deeper, colder than any grief I have felt before, and one which does not seem to be passing, as grief is meant to pass, as we are told it passes, as I have felt the grief I have known in the past pass. Nor is it becoming a dull echo of what it once was, still there, present, but in the background, not a hinderance to life and its living, which can be the case when the grief is too great to fade completely away. What I am feeling is not a dull echo, nor is it a peripheral presence, leaving my life and my living of it

unaffected; it feels equal to what I imagine it would feel like if - and here my fingers tremble as I type - my daughter was no longer alive.

Maybe seventeen months is not enough for this feeling to begin its diminishing, maybe I need another seventeen months. Maybe less, maybe more. Maybe it will never pass, and I will need to learn how to make some semblance of peace with it.

I have spoken to other separated fathers - and, sadly, there are many out there, some made so by their own choices, others, like me, by the choices of others - and they have spoken of their own pain at being absent from the children's lives, yet few of them have said that they experienced it as long as I have, to the degree I have. I thought I might find comfort in seeking out other fathers, and my therapist suggested this as a way to alleviate the pain, but it has only added to it, with the pain of the few who cannot seem to adjust to the change causing me the most anguish, as though in seeing and speaking to them I am seeing myself reflected, and in this mirror image my own pain is doubled.

My daughter, thankfully, after being upset at the beginning that her parents were no longer together, has adjusted to the change in her life, and she is her happy, joyful self, quick to laugh and smile, eager to help others as much as she can, be it her family, helping with chores, or strangers on the street, giving money to any homeless person she passes - if I do nothing else worthwhile in this life, I at least know I had a hand in the raising of this wonderful being.

When I see her, when it is our time together, when I see her see me, see her face light up and hear 'daddy' issue from her mouth, and she runs to me, eager to be lifted up into my arms and squeezed tightly, the weight lifts from my chest, the pain dissipates, almost, but not quite - some pains are still present even when not felt - as though it was never there at all. For thirty hours - the time we have together, beginning Saturday morning and ending Sunday evening - we do whatever she wishes to do, go wherever she wishes to go, buy - toys and sweets, invariably - whatever she wishes to buy. I make her laugh and smile and she in turn makes me laugh and smile, and it feels as though I have not laughed or smiled since I last saw her. I feed her and mind her and play with her. I put her to bed and read to her. I listen to her and talk to her. And during all this, I can almost, *almost*, ignore the fact that when our thirty hours are over and she returns to her mother, the weight of her absence, the pain of it, will resettle deeply in my chest, like a child itself returning to its home.

FEATURED ARTIST:

TAY BUTLER



Tay Butler is a multi-disciplinary artist based in Houston, TX, while teaching and studying in Fayetteville, AR. Currently an MFA candidate of the University of Arkansas' Photography and Studio Art program, he received his BFA in Photography and Digital Media from the University of Houston.

Butler's work utilizes photography, collage, video, music, installation, and performance to identify and confront history, migration, memory, and identity. He begins with literature, folklore, as well as national and historical documents. This content is then digitized, photographed, cut, clipped, extended, collaged, shrunk, enlarged, exposed, uncovered, repeated, or redacted and placed into a new context. Constructing revisionist histories that are fictional but true, authentic yet imagined, the stories and scenes created act like braids and weave together a rich tapestry that can last longer than human memory.

ABOUT

IV 2

(COVER PAGE)

IV 2 combines a Nigerian tribal woman with an African-American model, representing a metaphor for the diaspora.

ABOUT

MOONLIT

(PAGE 76)

Moonlit has become Butler's most popular work. It won first prize in the Houston, TX African-American Annual Exhibition. It is currently on view in Contemporary Art Museum Houston's Slowed and Throwed exhibition, a major show in the city.

Moonlit will also be featured in a published art book by Project Backboard set to release Fall 2020.

ABOUT

PAT

FROM THE *DRESS CODE* COLLAGE SERIES

(PAGE 113)

Pat is part of Butler's *Dress Code* collage series, where Butler demonstrates the ubiquitous nature of basketball in his communities by placing elements of the NBA in art, historical works, everyday photography, fashion advertisements, and vintage imagery.