

Creative Writing
@
University of La Verne:

Senior Project Anthology

an ongoingly updated project
featuring samples from student senior projects

v 9 (July 2025)

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“Healthcare”

Gabriela Ramos

Just in case. My mother told me this when she first handed me my medical card at eighteen.

Just in case. I was not meant to use it if or when I needed medical assistance.

Just in case. What she really meant was, *Just in case you can't fix it yourself.*

Aguacate/Avocado

For weight loss or intestinal issues: once the seed is dry, grate it, apply the shavings to your meal, and eat.

Savila/Aloe Vera

When we moved she took the giant, almost 100-pound plant with her. It was the first thing she took even though others complained about it. Took up too much space. Too dangerous to be kept inside with the small kids. Landlady said we couldn't keep it outside. She kept it outside anyway.

It was watered by the A/C unit my stepdad installed when the aluminum foil on the windows seemed to help the southern California summer sun bake us rather than cool. The loud machine's drippings gave the plant the perfect amount of water. It kept the leaves soft and smooth as they tapered to a point in their gentle outward curve. Some prefer to cut away the spines on the leaves' edges, but they were less dangerous than a rose's thorns, and human skin was only vulnerable if brushed too harshly against the growth. The underside of

the leaves were a darker shade of green, more lily pad than lime, with subtle white striations. Ours was prone to sunburns, to becoming brown and brittle when placed in sunlight too long. Sweat drips on the outer leaves as we would take turns slowly rotating the plant. The water from the machine was enough to keep the leaves, rather than brittle or limp or too thin at the tips, always bouncing back from indentations made by fingertips to check firmness. Enough to need to only cut off the tip of a leaf to get at the miraculous gel inside.

The more we used the A/C, the more we needed the *savila*. Our skin would become irritated and flaky, the salty crust of dried sweat left by the machine sucking the moisture out of the air. We'd break pieces off the hip-high plant, hollow out the leaves with our fingernails, and slather it onto our faces, our chests, our legs, our arms. We'd sit in the living room, the only room the A/C actually cooled, whatever parts of our bodies we could reach slathered in the soothing gel to save us from dehydrated skin and heatstroke.

If we got sunburned, we didn't bother scooping it out. Instead we'd cut a larger leaf almost as long as my arm, hold it vertically to let the yellow diuretic fluid leak out, and take a knife to peel the upper half of the rind from the gel in one smooth, clean stroke. The bottom half of the rind held the gel like a serving tray. It was the best relief from the raw, taut skin that remained.

She gave me a small plant, one that easily fit between my hands when I cupped them together, to take with me to college. Just in case.

Huevo/Egg

Whip egg whites and apply onto burn to cool and heal.

Mayonesa/Mayonnaise

Without speaking a word, we come to a consensus. It was as if any speech would have caused lice to hide themselves, to cling onto our pillows and again infest our scalps as we slept. As if them knowing we were plotting against them would make them all the harder to remove. We each went off to gather the necessary supplies. One to grab the family-size jar of mayonnaise from the fridge, another to grab plastic bags, another to collect a few more eggs, another to fetch the canola oil, another to find enough hair clips, and the rest to set up the backyard.

We worked the mixture through our hair, trying to coat every strand and inch of our scalp. We sat in circle, my older sister applying the mixture to my unruly hair. I ended up coating my abuelita's short, thin hair. My hands trembled as they carded the mixture through her sacred hair. I didn't know what I was doing—my abuelita had done my hair for as long as I could remember. This was the first time any woman in my family had allowed me to touch her hair and, in my eagerness, I yanked a few strands out. She didn't say a word and neither did I when my sister grew frustrated at my tangled hair and yanked through a snarl. There was no gossip, no speeches about family or what it is to be a woman, no admonitions for not doing something properly. No music played, not a single hum. For once my raucous family and I were all quiet.

We then wrapped all of our hair up with our own plastic bag, each of us advertising a different discount or grocery store, and we sat in the afternoon sun. My cousin mentioned how if only we could afford to have blowdryers for the eight of us rather than the single old

model we had. Rags were placed at the napes of our necks like scarves or simply tucked into the yoke of our shirts to keep any of the juices from slipping down our spines.

In the hour that we left it on, we did other activities quietly out in the sun. I did homework, others painted toenails and fingernails, the older women shelled peas or plucked lemons from the tree we luckily had or from the neighbor's oranges that reached into our backyard.

After the hour, we washed our hair out using the garden hose.

Arroz/Rice

To brighten skin, after rinsing the rice, splash rice-water onto face.

Azúcar/Sugar

There'd never really been occasion to cry at this magnitude before. There was the occasional tummy ache, toothache, earaches and colds endured silently until they passed within a day or two. There were bruises and scrapes from when we'd pedal our bikes as fast as we could to purposefully launch ourselves onto the front lawn when the bike caught itself on the front gate's tracks. Cuts and eventually scars from trying to figure out just how many people can fit on a bike or how fast a shopping cart can go. Those were all easy fixings. The rush of adrenaline counteracting any initial pain and our mother's or grandmother's weird herbs and juices to take care of the lingering pain.

No bones were broken in our youth. Nothing twisted or fractured. Just because we acted stupid didn't mean we were stupid. We knew when to take risks.

This time was an accident. Yes, my sister was sitting on the table, but it wasn't one of the flimsy tables we used for parties that we stole from a rental place. She just happened to sit a little too close to the edge. I don't remember who told the joke that made my sister laugh. Her head flung back as her laughs reverberated from the concrete walls until she realized her body was following her.

Our reflexes all too slow.

She landed on the concrete wrong. I stood there and watched, dumbfounded. My mother ordered one of my older sisters to go bring some sugar. Even with my sister's snot running into her mouth as she sobbed, our mother didn't want us climbing onto countertops just for the bottle of tequila. Not like we hadn't done it before but she most likely didn't want to scold us more than she had to if she could help it.

For those few moments it took my other sister to get the sugar, I stared at my injured sister, her tank top letting me see the wrongness of her shoulder. There was only one thought in my mind. *How would she do her homework with her left shoulder sagging like that?* She was a lefty.

My mother shoved a spoonful of sugar into her mouth and gave her some water. My mother ordered my cousin to switch places with her, to hold down my sister. My cousin was older than us, almost as strong as one of the adults, and squeezed my sister to stillness. She told the rest of us to go inside the house. We did. Everyone else managed to look through the laundry window but I was too short, I could only catch glimpses through the slivers between my cousins' bodies.

I didn't see when my mother grabbed my sister's arm. There was no countdown, no "it'll only hurt for a second", no "close your eyes." She simultaneously yanked and twisted. My sister let out a high-pitched yelp, like when you step on a dog's tail but worse. Then a beat of silence. The sobs returned. My mother picked her up out of my cousin's hold and carried her to bed.

As my sister slept, my grandmother rubbed sweet smelling oil onto her skin. An hour later, my mother had changed into her uniform and slid the visor on, and left for work at a fast food joint.

Morro/Nightshade

Boil and eat the leaves for arthritic pain, for cramps, for nervousness.

Diente de León/Dandelion

There are times when I'm in the car with her that I wonder if she'll pull over to simply pick the yellow flowers from someone's lawn or the devil's strip on cracked sidewalks. She grows them in a couple of plastic pots and tends to them just as tenderly as she does her hibiscus flowers, cherry tomatoes, and bell peppers.

When I've asked her why she would grow weeds, she says,

They can grow anywhere, makes taking care of them simpler.

Flowers, leaves, stems, and roots, she throws it all into a small dented pot to boil. She lets it steep before she strains it, letting it cool down naturally, then shoves it into the freezer like she does with milk to extend the expiration date. Once it cools down to room

temperature, she fills up a jug and repeats the process. At the end, she has two or three gallons in mismatched containers.

She has me drink it whenever I'm home. It tastes earthier than regular unsweetened tea, as if I bit off the dandelion's head and let it rest on my tongue, let my saliva soak in.

Each of my mother's friends who come to visit leave with a water bottle full of the dandelion tea. Each for a different reason.

Drink this for your acne. You don't want to take photos with your skin like that.

Drink this to lower your blood sugar. You have to be careful with diabetes at our age.

Drink this for your blood pressure, that husband is causing you too much stress.

Drink this if you've got the flu.

Drink this, it'll help with the indigestion and constipation.

Drink this after work, you won't be as sore.

She doesn't tell me why I should drink it. Is it for my insomnia? For my contradictory oversleeping? For the paleness of my skin since I refused to go out in the sun long enough to tan? Or for the weight that I simultaneously gained and lost in my time away from home. Or for my quietness that must simply be unnatural.

I accept the glass and chug it down without argument.

Huevo/Egg

Use egg membrane as a makeshift bandage.

“Caregiver”

Mia Alvarez

Lorena’s husband had been dying for years, and she was too ashamed to admit she was tired of it. At least she knew she should be ashamed, which really was no different. It was her secret, which now, finally, she would no longer have to endure. This wasn’t the first scare they’d had since his illness, but she had a feeling this time was it, a feeling that was substantiated by the arrival of her sister-in-law, Sylvie, at the hospital.

“You’ve been here for how many days now?” Sylvie said, touching her arm; since she’d arrived she’d been touchy in the way people are touchy at funerals, and it made Lorena uncomfortable. “You should go home. Freshen up. Get some rest. He sleeps all day anyway. I’ll call you if there’s anything new. Go, really. Get some fresh air.”

It was a kind thought, if ignorant, because everywhere the air was him; everywhere the air was him dying. But she *had* been there for three days straight, and the hospital smell was getting to her. She never liked to be in Sylvie’s company longer than she had to, anyway, so she conceded, saying she wouldn’t be long. She looked over at her husband asleep in the hospital bed, thought of kissing him goodbye but decided against it.

She found it hard to focus on the road, so she rolled all the windows down. Cars whooshed by and the wind was so strong it was hard to take a breath in and she realized she was speeding. There was a red light ahead, and for a moment she felt tempted to just floor it, run straight through the cross traffic.

She pulled into the driveway, put the car in park, and sat for a moment staring out the windshield before cutting the engine. The house was in somewhat of a disarray, furniture moved aside from when the paramedics had to get him out on a stretcher. She moved the furniture back in place and then went about doing some quick chores, tidying up the living room and kitchen. The normalcy of these actions brought her a little comfort. Maybe not comfort, but at least it was something to do, something with purpose.

Often, as she went about her daily chores like this, she would lose herself in fantasies of another life. Sometimes it was simply that he never got sick and they went on, happy as they were, which was happy enough, happier, anyway, than most. Sometimes she left him after that argument. Sometimes they even had children.

Once, to her surprise, she imagined herself having an affair. They had met with a few professional caregivers, at her suggestion. He was dismally well-mannered throughout, though he never had anything to say about any of them after they left. One of the caregivers was a man about their age. She was surprised to take notice that he was attractive. When she walked him out, he lingered in conversation with her for a short while, thanked her for her time, said that she was very kind and that he was sorry for what she was going through.

“Thank you.” She was surprised, a little embarrassed even, by the sincerity in her tone.

“Of course,” he said, smiling. “It was nice to meet you.”

He reached out to shake her hand and put his other hand on top of hers briefly before letting go. It was a friendly, innocuous gesture, though for some reason it made her

heart flutter. She watched him get into his car, then realizing that she was watching him, turned abruptly and walked back into the house.

Later, she would fantasize about the kind, handsome stranger. She would smile to herself as she washed the dishes, the evening sun coming through the window warming her cheek, loose hair falling over her face. Everything around her becoming transformed, heightened, promising. The hot water on her hands, the warmth from the sun on her face, the breeze from the open window cooling her bare neck. She would swirl the sponge over a plate with abstracted tenderness, looking out the window. She would see herself getting into his car and greeting him with a kiss and them driving away. Then from the living room her husband would cough or call out for her and she would be pulled back to reality, get dishwater on her hair as she pushed back the loose strands and wipe her hands on her clothes leaving uncomfortable warm damp spots before going to attend to whatever he needed.

Of course this fantasy meant nothing. She loved her husband. Perhaps she only wanted a better secret than the poor one she had. The kind you fold pristinely and hide away somewhere, a tantalizing, back-of-the-underwear drawer secret. The truth, her real secret, was sad and mundane, made all the more treacherous for its mundanity.

After Lorena finished tidying up the house, she took a hot shower, put on some fresh clothes, and lied down on the sofa. She closed her eyes but couldn't sleep. All she could think of was him lying there in the hospital bed. Maybe she should call Sylvie. Maybe she should have kissed him goodbye. Maybe she should call her mother. God, no. Why did she think of that?

The last time she spoke to her mother was over the phone nearly six years ago, standing in the hospital parking lot after her husband's diagnosis. They were estranged then, too. Her mother almost didn't answer.

"He's sick, mom," was the first thing Lorena said. "They're telling me he's going to die. *Dicen que se va a morir.*" She hadn't needed to say it in Spanish, as by then her mother understood English well. She wasn't sure why she did. Her mother was silent for a few seconds before saying, "I'm so sorry, *mija.*" Lorena hung up in tears. Her mother tried calling back only once.

It occurred to Lorena that her mother might not even be alive now. She told herself she'd find out later.

They never did hire a caregiver, and part of her was relieved. She was aware of the possibility that she derived some pleasure from her self-sacrifice. Not pleasure, exactly, but at least she could reasonably justify the resentment she felt toward him. If all of her caregiving responsibilities were taken away and she still resented him, then she must be truly selfish and hateful. If instead she went back to loving him just as she had before, then his death might only be more devastating.

She tried to imagine how it might feel, once it actually happened. She'd been expecting it for so long. Grieving, in a way. Not in a way. It was grief. Only this kind of grief was a type of vertigo, like standing on your tiptoes on a precipice, not wanting to look down, not able to look anywhere else. It was only natural to want to step off after a while. She thought now about how there was no perfect translation for grief in Spanish. One possibility is *pena*, which can also mean shame.

It wasn't so horrible that she hated him for dying. That is, it wasn't unexpected. He would understand. He did understand, only she never told him. Usually she would hide her resentment, though sometimes she would be a little too rough when helping him, or sigh loudly, or sob in another room with the door open so he could hear. Had they talked about it, they might have found some comfort. But from a sense of delicacy, or shame, or stubbornness, she only ever made her resentment for him known indirectly, and from a similar sense of delicacy, or shame, or stubbornness, he refused to acknowledge it.

The closest they ever came to talking about it was on one of his "bad days." There were never any good ones. She was exhausted and frustrated, and as she helped him to sit, she let him fall roughly into his chair, almost pushing him down. He cried out, and she stood there, dumbfounded. Often to care for him entailed causing him pain, but this time she had caused him pain out of anger. When he was done wincing, he looked up at her, tears in his eyes. There was a different, much deeper pain in his face. His expression was understanding, apologetic. It enraged her. His generosity felt like proof of her wretchedness. She wanted to shove him, to scream at him, say the cruelest things she could think of. They were being shouted inside of her as she stood there looking down at his sorry face. *I hate you for making me like this. I never should have married you.* Then, as quickly as this rage had possessed her it went out from her, leaving her feeling gutted.

She collapsed onto her knees and laid her head in his lap and wept. She had never wept openly in front of him since his illness. He put his hand on her head and just left it there, didn't move it, didn't stroke her hair. Maybe he was confused, or too tired or depressed. Maybe he knew that kind of tenderness would have ruined her.

She thought of his hands now, lying limp at his sides. His hands were the first things she loved about him. They were quite larger than hers, but delicate, slender. Sometimes she'd examine them, holding them and turning them over in her own, and then kiss them, once on each hand. Or if he had his arm around her, she'd turn her head slightly and kiss his wrist. He had a habit of rubbing his thumb and forefinger together when he was preoccupied with something, like rolling an invisible ball of lint between his fingers. Though now his hands were frail and they shook, and sometimes when she looked at them she would feel a horrible impulse to weep.

She was nineteen when they met, and emphatically unhappy. Still living with her mother, whom she'd come to despise, having felt painfully unmothered her whole life. She was working two jobs. He was a graduate student at the time. They'd met at a party of one of her coworkers who happened to also go to the same college as him. She nor he really belonged there, and they ended up leaving early and sitting in his parked car eating fast food and just talking, and they talked nearly every day after that.

He was extremely gentle. His manner was quiet, soft, thoughtful. She'd never felt so at ease and safe with any other man, anyone at all for that matter. It wasn't as though he'd broken down her defenses; they simply dissolved. She told him how her mom was at best distant and at worst constantly critical, how she was trying to save up to move out, though that made her feel guilty. Why? Her mother needed her. How could her mother need her? Well, for one, she still often needed Lorena to translate for her. But her mother often criticized Lorena for her Spanish. In retaliation, Lorena would withhold translating English

for her. Maybe their whole relationship was a poor translation. She laughed at herself saying this. He didn't.

They said I love you about a month into their relationship. They were walking through a park on a summer evening, the lampposts drowsily turning on one by one. He was talking, she couldn't remember about what, his classes or his thesis, probably. She had realized by now that she loved him, and this worried her deeply. She felt herself trembling despite that it was warm. She tried to distract herself, listening to the chirps and whirs of the insects. She took a deep breath and looked up. The sky was almost completely dark. A small white moth was fluttering under one of the lampposts. She felt dizzy and sick to her stomach.

"Do you love me?" She said suddenly, interrupting him, her feet skidding to a stop on the gravel path.

He stopped and turned:

"Of course I love you," he said, as if there was never anything else.

She met his family over dinner. She tried in earnest to make a good impression, but it hardly mattered. His mother asked most of the questions. Where was she from? Her family? Was it just her and her mother? Had she finished her undergraduate studies? She didn't know *undergraduate* was a term. She thought it sounded diminutive, lesser than. What did that make her?

"I'm so sorry," he said later. "I didn't think they would be like that."

He was continually surprised by their privilege. His surprise and distaste at their behavior were earnest, which confused her. She supposed he was seeing them for the first

time, since being with her, from a different perspective, and that made her uncomfortable. She wasn't sure she wanted that kind of novelty.

She also wasn't sure if he fully understood their privilege, and more importantly, if he understood his own. He seemed not to be aware of all of their slights against her. He didn't seem to notice, for example, that she was bothered by the way they asked where she was from, and if her mother spoke English. What he *was* acutely aware of, however, was their appraisal of her education. Her intelligence and talents, despite what they thought, were clear to him, and he was perhaps more offended by his family's refusal to acknowledge them than she was.

On a few occasions, he asked if she was interested in going to college. He would help her if she wanted it. She had been feeling insecure about what she was doing with her life, which is why he had suggested it. What would she even study? He thought she had a talent for language; she could study literature, for instance, or find whatever appealed to her. This idea did interest her, but ultimately it frightened her more. She had a deep and almost inarticulate fear of never doing anything really meaningful with her life, but was even more horrified, and less explicably so, of trying to do anything meaningful in the first place. It seemed to her that on one side was indifference and on the other desperation, and it was easier to be indifferent than to be desperate. He brought it up a few more times, but her reticence on the subject eventually put an end to it.

They'd gone to Mexico on their honeymoon, spent beautiful days and nights walking on the beach, going to restaurants, exploring cities, museums. She had loved it, only she found herself struggling to communicate. He didn't notice, of course, that her accent

sounded off, that she couldn't find the right words, that she stumbled, misspoke, mispronounced. One night when they got back to the hotel room she sat on the edge of the bed and, suddenly disconsolate, began to sob. She was losing her language, her culture, forgetting how to speak a language that was part of herself, the language of her mom, and hers, and hers. She couldn't even think in Spanish. He asked her over and over what was wrong, and all she got out was, "I'm losing my Spanish." Had he known better, this would have been enough. He didn't. Relieved that was all, he laughed and offered her lighthearted reassurance.

One of the few very serious arguments of their relationship occurred about a year into their marriage. He had started talking about children, and she was waiting for him to stop.

"I just don't think I would be a good mother," she said. This wasn't the first time she'd said it, and that was usually all she said, only he wouldn't let it go.

"I think you would be. I mean, I can understand your feeling that way, especially with how things were with your own mother, but—"

"Oh my god, just stop. I don't need reassurance. I'm telling you. I don't *want* to, okay? I know I wouldn't be good at it, and I don't want to do it. Why can't you get that? I don't want to."

He paused, a look of genuine hurt on his face that made her angry, that encouraged her to continue.

"What?" She said. "Am I not enough for you or something?"

"I never said that. I just didn't know you felt that way."

She scoffed. “Yeah, well maybe my mom was right, if you want to bring her into this. You’re just going to end up leaving me.”

“Of course I’m not, don’t say that. I love you. Why would I have asked you to marry me then? I’m just confused. I thought...I don’t know what I thought, okay? I’m sorry. Just forget I ever said anything.”

“You know you could find someone like that,” she said, snapping her fingers. She wasn’t in control of what was rising in her. “Someone, prettier, smarter, successful, who wants you to put a baby in her.”

“Jesus, no. Don’t say things like that.”

“What? It’s true.”

“You don’t have to do this, you know.”

“Do what?”

“Push me away. You always do this.”

It went on like this for a while until eventually he walked out of the bedroom and she slammed the door after him. Sometimes, after these kinds of fights, she’d think about leaving him. She would see an image of herself, mournfully composed, calm, lovely. He’d know just by looking at her. He’d try to stop her but in the end would understand. In the end he’d always understand. But then he would open the door, very softly, this gentle and sweet man she loved so dearly. There would be tearful apologies and embracing, *I’m so sorry, I love you, I’m sorry too, I love you.*

“Are you sure you’re happy?” Lorena asked him one night after the argument. They’d already turned the lights off to go to sleep; often they’d have conversations in the dark like this, holding each other, before falling asleep.

“Of course. I love you.”

“That’s not the same as being happy.”

“For me it is.”

“Oh, sure,” she said, nudging him in the rib, laughing.

They stayed up for a while talking, about their honeymoon, the nights they’d spent walking on the beach, sometimes not even saying anything, just listening to the sound of the waves and feeling perfectly content just being near each other. They talked about their future, places they wanted to travel, having a quiet, calm life together, which they did, for years. The dailiness of their love was almost always pleasant, peaceful, sweet.

The first time anyone called her a “caregiver” was at the hospital. One of the nurses, a young, glib man, had asked her if she was “the caregiver.” She said no, she was his wife. “But you are the one who provides him his care?” the nurse said. She hesitated, and the nurse continued: “This is a bedpan. Now you’ll have him lift his hips, as much as he can, and slide it under, like this.” She wanted to curse at him, how dare he be so disrespectful to her, but she didn’t. At first she had cared for him fastidiously, carried out every action with unflinching gentleness. Then she just wanted each chore to be done with. She was exhausted.

She had almost fallen asleep when her phone rang, startling her awake. It was Sylvie. It wasn't looking good. She should come back to the hospital now. Lorena hurried out the door, her heart racing. This was it.

His breathing was labored. Sometimes it would stop for a few seconds. Then he'd take a heaving breath. Occasionally he'd even groan. There were two nurses in the room, checking his vitals, reassuring her that he wasn't in any pain, that this was all normal. Lorena asked if it was okay to touch him. Yes, of course, one said.

Lorena adjusted his pillow, then sat on the edge of his bed. She moved his hair from his face and kissed his cheek. She looked at his hands, and had a strong, almost irresistible impulse to kiss them over and over, as if to say, *I love you*, or, *I'm so sorry*. She did not resist it. She grabbed one of his hands in both of hers and kissed it over and over and said, out loud, "I love you." Sylvie, standing a couple feet away, was sniffing. She had told Lorena when she arrived that she'd already said her goodbyes.

This is it, Lorena told herself in that calm, sensible voice. She wanted to be held by him then. For him to tell her it was alright. She wanted his hand on her hair. She held his hand and kissed it again. He gasped and then was silent, didn't take another breath-

Lorena counted the seconds. This was it. This was the moment she'd been waiting for, preparing herself for, for years, those slow years of misery and shame. She would be free, free from the unremitting guilt, free to grieve outright. She felt terrified and giddy and desperate and calm. She was ready, ready to give in to that deep, unhinging grief.

He took in another breath, this one quieter, and let it go. Then another. Then he opened his eyes.

Behind her, Sylvie let out a whimper of relief. The nurses were busy rechecking his vitals. It may have been a fluke, a strange incident right before death. These things sometimes happened. But no, he was looking at her. He was breathing. He was alive.

“Lorena.”

Lorena let go of his hand and collapsed onto his chest, weeping. Later, the nurses would agree they had never seen such violent sobs of relief.

two poems

Monica Rosas

for you, I

plucked out every hair
stripped my skin

laid it on our bed
broke off a clavicle

to use as the door handle
stretched my tendons

hung each
as curtains for our room

removed my spine
draped it over a coat rack

unchained each disk
placed them on a jewelry dish

I pulled out each of my nerves
until I felt nothing

dear dad,

I wait for you

i stand
by the school entrance
and watch the shadow
of my red dress
wave
you like the brown
buttons that line down
the front, how it falls
right below my knees
I feel the linen
brush over my skin
with each breeze
I wait for you
-r voice to yell
I'm here.
I sit on the curb
Ignore the hot
cement
pressing into my thighs
and the tears that dry
In the corner of my lips.

I'm still waiting

three poems

Emma Garcia

Hand-Me-Downs

The box was swaddled in birthday wrapping.
The tape was crooked
and the box was dented.
ed.

Inside were your words. They looked worn out
wrinkled,
after years and years
of constant use.
They didn't even have a heartbeat when I checked its pulse.

When I get home I put them on, slipping my arms through the sleeves,
tugging my head through the scratchy cotton.
I can't get the words past my thighs. They are too tight
the arms too long
the color doesn't match my complexion.
I go to the store and buy
some other words
with a coupon. I carefully take the words home.

In the backyard I hose them down,
scrub them with my fancy hand towel, they moan under the hot water.
The grime is leaking into a nearby ant hill.

I borrow the clips from my mother,
hang the words on the clothesline,
and watch them drift in the wind.
The sun splitting between the letters.

I cut them sideways, sew on some new words that I've pulled out from the garden.
I match the colors to complement each other

I dye the words,
I repaint the words,
I stretch them out
and iron on some new ones.

I flatten them on paper. Let them rest overnight
so in the morning the words look
brand new.

I try them on. My arms ease into the sleeves,
my cheeks warm pink at the soft cotton.
They actually accentuate my hips.
The legs are not tight,
the arms are the perfect length,
the color even matches my eyes.

I twirl in the mirror,
I *love* these words. They fit
me
perfectly and I want more.

When I Said I Hate You

I actually meant
that my veins are pulsing
with boiling ice water,
frothing and roaring
like the outskirts
of a deranged hurricane,
 the pores on my face fault lines
 for earthquakes that mutilate
 the skin inside out, supplied
 by the years of a thick tsunami
 right behind the brown eyes ready
 to come beat down
 on those who don't *listen*.

I'll chuck them in a shredding
 tornado whirling
 with the faces of deceit,
 dishonesty,
 impatience,
 indifference,
 ignorance...

As I yank out a smile,

a no hearted laugh,

looking at you across the table,

your ashy hand on top of mine.

I Have What You Need

I'll cut out my uterus,
balancing the mirror on the ground, using a scalpel
to trace around the lining. Withhold my winces and breathe through the pain.

Careful to keep the cervix intact
and untouched, double check its durability.
Trust me,
it's strong enough to keep her safe.

Wrap both items in bubble wrap,
be easy not to shake it
and place them on a soft layer of cotton,
place my ripe ovaries of blue and pink
on either side, kiss each one promising them not to cry.

I'll wash my hands after, tape the box shut
and make sure it's tight.

I'll borrow your tied fallopian tubes
unwrap them and use it as the bow,
place it on top so you can
rip it apart.

Take out what's rightfully yours and hold her close to your chest.

“Sweet Pea, Revisited”

Tabitha Lawrence

I have this theory. There's only a certain amount you can care for someone and still want nice things for them. Of course, you want the people you love to be happy and fulfilled. But honestly, how happy can anyone be holding onto a shitbag like me, you know? Okay, it's a slight exaggeration. Still, I think I'm onto something here. Even just a little. If you really care about someone, there's that inevitable trapdoor in the back of all your well wishes, that I hope we live in squalor together and die alone together because you and me are in this together, man. Only when someone is truly irrelevant to your own well-being can you genuinely want them happy, and even then, it's like, I wish you the best. Just stay the hell away from me. I told this theory to my brother in the car on the drive over and I think he agreed, but he didn't say much.

And I don't know what else we could have possibly been expecting from that night, or why we were even invited. We had hardly tolerated Ruth in high school, so none of us had talked to her since graduation. And really, aside from the Kissick brothers, I don't think anybody kept in much contact with Matt. The fact that Matt and Ruth were getting engaged six years later was nauseating, sure, but it didn't really affect our lives. Still, the old gang got together a few hours before their engagement party to catch up and prepare ourselves emotionally for whatever hellishly awkward situations we were about to endure.

Everybody met at Lia Annady's apartment, bizarrely similar in décor and feel to the bedroom she had rented when we first left high school. Still the plastic crates of paperbacks

artlessly displayed in lieu of a nightstand (a half-full Chicago Bears coffee mug and an ashtray balanced atop a notebook), still the rope hammock chair where Mack Stephens slept last Halloween, still the strangely not unpleasant incense and litter box combo. But really, it was probably that ancient throw rug that made it feel so 90's after-school-special. It was in the living room, now. It's always curious to see how when we grow up, our mess just takes over the whole house. There are smells that don't go away and stains that just don't come out. She called it "ambiance." We didn't mind.

We used to all be so embarrassed that most of us stayed relatively local, (aside from Holly's art school a state over and Mack's brief stay at Wilmington, when one Wednesday morning in his third semester straight of academic probation, the football coach found him passed out drunk on the field and dropped his scholarship. We still tell everyone it was his tendonitis that kept him from playing). It didn't matter. Everyone who left always found their way back. Sometimes it felt like a blessing, though. There's something about spending the birthdays and holidays with your people that just felt right. It gave us a sense of permanence, purpose. Something about knowing that there's at least five people in the world that know what your dreams were and don't ask where it went wrong, who always know when to keep pouring the drinks.

*

Lia sat on the floor in front of the mirrored closet door, lining her lips with a deep burgundy pencil. I stood at the bathroom sink, wrapping her hair around a curling iron.

"I don't know, I can just feel it." Lia kept saying, insisting that something was off in the infinite non-courtship between her and Mack, which was apparently back in full swing

since they started working together at the community college. “He’s just somewhere else. All the time.”

“He’s probably gonna propose,” I said. “It’s been long enough that you can just skip the dating and march right down the aisle like everyone else.” Holly, who hadn’t looked up from her phone since we sat down, rolled her eyes at me and flipped her bird with the same hand holding her wine glass. Proof that she will stop at nothing to show off her engagement ring one just one more time. “And I’ll be the only damn one dancing to Single Ladies at your wedding.”

Lia shushed her but smiled just a little. When the Kissick Brothers had arrived, they both had a bong peeking ostentatiously out of the top of their sports coats. They had been out in the backyard with Mack, probably getting high to prove that nothing had really changed. When they were sufficiently baked and ready, they burst back through the door and we rapidly changed the subject. Holly pretended to be halfway through a story about violet versus plum versus aubergine for the centerpieces and allowed herself to be talked over until she could fade out, a trick we had perfected after years of almost getting caught shit-talking at our lockers.

Conversation turned to Matt (in which the conversation was approaching high school us to a tee) and how he used to smoke with us when there wasn’t any football practice. Wouldn’t always look at us when he passed us between classes, but on Tuesday after we’d find him waiting for us behind the tennis courts the way he knew we would walk. If it weren’t for tenth grade, when Ruth had taken to following us around and slowly driving us crazy, the happy couple would never have met. It’s funny how it’s always the relationships that start off as the butt of every joke end up on floral print engagement

party invitations. Mack stood up and announced that the process of the formal celebration would take roughly 4-6 hours in the enormous backyards of Matt's parents. He calmly suggested we take a couple shots before calling a cab.

*

If it's true that parties are a good Litmus test for how people want to be seen, the results were caught the shade between brilliant and desperate. One of the Kissick Brothers informs us that this phenomenon is known as "impression management" (because he too once took an Intro to Sociology Class) and we all just sort of nod, looking around. The backyard we had only seen four times was utterly unrecognizable. The grass lawn was packed full of tables covered in lace tablecloths and chairs wrapped in big, burlap bows (Very Pinterest-esque, you would say). There was a dance floor, an enormous spread of Mediterranean catering, handmade place cards, and a large table overflowing with gifts. The whole scene glittered with every type of unnecessary light source available: Christmas lights on every tree, rope lights strung between them, fake candles on every flat surface. We had to just blink for a second and take it all in. When we first saw the bride-to-be across the yard, laughing like a beauty queen at some unheard joke, it all made sense. Such a miniature person in a sparkling white dress (even though the invitation had said semi-formal), her red hair teased and piled on top of her head. We could see Matt deeper into the maze of chairs, the pleats in his navy slacks stretched across his lap in certain stress and a nice new paunch dipping over his belt. It was bizarre seeing the size and build that had made him such a sexpot in high school being worn in such a drastically different way. It was surprisingly depressing.

We were halfway to the bottom of the crystal champagne glasses before Ruth got around to greeting us. She embraced each of us in the way you do when you aren't sure where your relationship stands anymore (up on her little tippy-toes, one hand on each shoulder and a kiss noise in your ear as she touches her cheek to yours). She could not stop exclaiming how great it was to see us all, and how it was only appropriate that the people responsible for her biggest blessing (she stops here and smiles at Matt for emphasis) here to help them celebrate. Genuinely. She wanted to mean that. It was strange that once she said it, we could all feel a weird sense of ownership in their relationship. It seemed to be contagious, and buzzed on through the night as the champagne kept coming. Her sticky-sweet hostessing was so practiced that by the time she had walked us to our table (strategically placed as far to the back of the party as possible), we were practically happy to be there.

As the night went on, long after she went off to continue her rounds, I watched the most sarcastic and unaffectionate and best people I know behaving like show poodles. It's amazing, what you can observe when you feel stuck between being one-half of a proper couple instead of one-sixth of the binge-drinking guest. I felt like the only without an agenda on this particular night. I watched the Kissick Brothers stop to shake hands with Matt's father. They were co-narrating some wildly gestured story, pointing affectionately at the bride-to-be and simultaneously throwing their heads back in nostalgic laughter. Lia must have just scoured the party for biggest biceps in the yard and then latched on to the owner. For twenty minutes she alternated between feigning fascination and touching the man's enormous arm and anxiously glancing around to see if Mack was watching her. (He wasn't).

Hannah was with Ruth's tiny Irish grandmother, probably relaying her best wishes and making a point to include herself in a charming anecdote about their fairytale love. I'm sure she was convincing, if you could overlook her darting eyes, looking passed the woman to the ass of Ruth's cousin, Alex, standing just within earshot. She always had a thing for redheads.

When the couples started dancing, our group found its way back to the table with plates of food. Hummus and Dolma and arugula and baklava, all strange foods to see eaten by the same people who had still only months ago survived off of pizza bagels and Mountain Dew Code Red. We ate quietly at first, probably because everyone was focusing on keeping pace with each other (No one wants to be the first one finished, eying the other guests until someone else stands for seconds) and using the correct cutlery. We were thankful when Matt appeared at our table, buzzed and holding a delicately braised chicken leg in his hand. He greeted us loudly and promised to come catch up with us after dinner before returning to dance with Ruth. That seemed to be enough to bring everyone back from pretending we fit in there. In the sparkling wine buzz, the conversations formed and then blurred together.

*

"I'm no Calvin Klein model," I said unnecessarily, "But is it bad that it feels pretty good to see a gut on the guy that these girls would have killed for back in the day?" I draped my arm around the back of Lia's chair.

"There it is. Proof that Mack is compensating for something."

"Hannah almost did kill for Matt, if I remember correctly."

"No way, she only needed four stitches and that bitch had it coming."

“Look at how Matt kisses her on the nose. That was always his move in high school.”

“That was everyone’s move in high school.”

“Dammit guys, is that not a move anymore?!”

We watched the couples dancing together with a distinct nostalgia to proms in the gym. We listened to the story for the hundredth time about how Hannah *almost* gotten to go to Prom with Matt when we were all just freshman and he was a junior. If only her mother hadn’t grounded her (if only she hadn’t gotten caught by the vice principal behind the back field shed with his hand down her pants, more accurately, but nobody corrected her) she might have been the one dancing her life away with the quickly dilapidating jock. She said all this with a tone that said she thanked God she dodged that bullet, but her mouth stayed in a straight line.

When I went back for seconds (thirds, rather), I caught a rare moment of Matt alone and clapped him on the back.

“Big man on campus is finally tying the knot, eh?,” I said. He turned around wearily. It seemed that hosting was draining his will to live, but his eyes lit up when he saw me and he shook my shoulder roughly in the way that men learn to do to other men when they don’t know what to do with their hands.

“I know. I’m as surprised as the next guy,” He laughed. “And to Ruth, no less! High school us wouldn’t even recognize us.”

“You’re fucked up, man. This is your engagement party!”

But he waved it off, all nine years of it. “Your garage is where it all happened. It made things different.”

I think for a second of how my garage must have been so different for him than it was for us. We spent every day there because no one expected anything more from us anywhere else, which was probably the exact opposite of why he snuck there when he could. I felt, self-consciously, that he was thinking this too. He was looking back at our table over my shoulder and I followed his gaze, at Hannah still pouting and Lia scanning the yard, looking for anything else.

“Well, maybe not everything needs to be different.”

*

About an hour later, the older guests started making their exits. We were about to plan ours when the atmosphere started changing. The younger crowd lingered. Hannah had gone to the bathroom twenty minutes ago and I, as her unwilling but dedicated keeper, figured I oughta come look for her. Just as I got to the door though, I saw her through the window. She was coming up the stairs from Matt’s basement, his huge hands gently stabilizing her. And how typical of her, to look for one more opportunity to make a secret that I would have to keep. But they didn’t look guilty. They looked—warm, maybe? Pleasantly indifferent for the first time? I returned to the table and eventually, she did too.

We were all just drunk enough to dance and someone requested “No no, the OLD Justin Timberlake!” and it was the perfect storm for high-heeled twisted ankles and embarrassing Facebook photos. Even Ruth seemed to be having fun—not even that *Ruth* kind of fun, but the real kind. Her shoes were long gone and her careful updo was falling in crushed ringlets down to her gaudy white sleeves. If only fifteen year old us could see her

now, dancing on a chair while Matt kept her from falling, maybe we would have gotten along.

But then the moment was over. Matt had requested Amos Lee and scooped Ruth off the chair and into a tight embrace and when she squealed, “This is our so-ong!” full of extra vowels and suffocating love. It made us uncomfortable to watch, but probably for all different reasons. The DJ turned it louder. Someone must have called the Uber just in time. It was clearly time for us to go. We said goodbye, but the couple barely looked up. The Kissick Brothers shepherded a highly intoxicated Hannah to the front yard where I, long accustomed to her alcoholic exploits, instructed her to go throw up because I refused to pay for another vomit fee on any of their behalf. Holly and the Kissick brothers slid giggling into the back row of the van. Mack slid his coat jacket around my shoulders and helped me in. Hannah found a bush and shoved her finger down her throat, which was not something we were surprised to see or even appropriately disgusted by. She heaved into the mums and the music from the party reached us just barely through the open cab window.

“In the Image of God”

Alyssa Godina

Cassia stared at the pastel blue and pink streamers twirled over her head and wished she could rip them down. It was her baby shower, yet as she stared at the large image of a cartoon, genderless baby smiling across from her, she felt nothing but dread. Props of baby bottles, diapers and pacifiers were spread across the tables of her mother-in-law's living room. It hadn't been Cassia's idea at all to have this party. As far as she was concerned, Cassia was happy with just telling her close friends and family about her pregnancy and skip a party all together.

Cassia was excited to be a mother, but she found herself dreading this pregnancy. Cassia had been with Spencer for about two years. While Cassia loved him, she wasn't ready to marry him. Right before she had gotten pregnant, they had just expressed their love to one another. She was happy with how they were when she still had her own apartment and he would come over whenever he could. They would go out on dates at least once a week, but if they skipped a week, it had never been a big deal. There was no pressure to things.

Their relationship had only been a fraction of her world. She loved her job as a magazine editor in New York. Her friends and her would hit bars every weekend and explore the city. Everything had been perfect. Dates with Spencer were always relaxed, and she loved how once they were done, she would still have her own space. She had time for herself before she was pregnant. She loved her baby, but she hated everything it had brought her. Judith, Spencer's mother, became more involved in their relationship and demanded

their engagement. Spencer and the baby consumed Cassia's entire world as she was forced to quit her job due to Judith stating working while pregnant was not good for the baby. Spencer and Cassia were forced to empty their savings to buy a house that met Judith's standards and within a mile of her own home. All her time went to caring for her body and pregnancy. When she would have free-time, Judith interrupted her and lectured her how to become the perfect housewife. She missed the view of jam-packed traffic and the smell of smog-laden air from her apartment as she made her daily commute. Now, all she knew was the chalky smell of prenatal vitamins and Judith's floral perfume.

Cassia was not keen on making a big deal of the baby shower, but her mother-in-law had insisted. So, she was forced to sit in the middle of the room as women she didn't even knew filed in and sat at tables covered in bouquets of pacifiers and wine poured in baby bottles, celebrating her pregnancy when she doubted they even knew her name. It wasn't the baby shower games and gathering of strangest that filled her with dread though, it was the gift that came along with baby showers that had her planning an escape.

Cassia felt a dull pain in her stomach. It was too soon for a kick, at 13 weeks, but sometimes she would feel tiny phantom feet pushing against the walls of her abdomen. She would run her hands along the stomach, trying to feel the imprint of a toe. The skin on her stomach was already taut and she pat the origin of the pain. Her baby was the only thing giving her strength to manage Judith's crazy demands.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Mrs. Madison come toward her. Mrs. Madison had been the first of her mother-in-law's friends that Cassia had met. Her white hair was always perfectly curled and her lips always a ruby red. Cassia often wondered when women

like her got tired of putting on a show. Mrs. Madison placed a hand on Cassia's stomach.

"When the belly sits high like that, it's for sure a girl," Mrs. Madison said.

Cassia smiled. She had heard all the different old wife's tales about baby gender since her stomach begun to grow. At this point, she was convinced she must be having a genderless alien as no one could quite agree on the angle of her belly and what sex that indicated. Before she could offer a response, a stern voice spoke up.

"Oh no, Henrietta. We are not having a girl. It will be a boy to follow in my Spence's footsteps and take over the family business. After this boy, we'll then consider having a girl," Judith, Cassia's mother-in-law, followed her little spiel with a tight-lipped smile. She placed her hand on Cassia's shoulder, and Cassia nearly flinched from the cold. "Of course, we have to make the best of the time we have left considering her clock is ticking." Cassia was only 25.

Cassia wondered what Judith would do if Cassia ran to the kitchen, grabbed a knife, and stabbed the giant baby cake. Of course, Cassia wouldn't, but she wanted nothing more to lash out at Judith. After all, Judith had been the one who had wanted the party. Judith had picked out the cake, the color scheme, the giant babies everywhere, every detail had Judith behind it. This hadn't been what Cassia wanted at all. Her husband, Spencer, and her had agreed on avoiding anything of the sort; but, of course Judith had a different idea for them, as she always had. Spencer and Cassia wouldn't even be married if it weren't for Judith dragging them both to the courthouse when Cassia first found out she was pregnant.

She had already developed a plan before she told Spencer she was pregnant. She figured he would move into her apartment in the city and that they could raise the baby

together. She had been excited at the prospect at first, but it was Spencer who had been anxious. His face had paled at the news.

“I know it’s a lot, but Spencer, we can do it. If you’re not ready, I’m not pressuring you. I’m just saying I’m ready to have this baby, and if you aren’t, I won’t force you,” Cassia told him. She grabbed his hands and met his eyes. “What do you think?”

“I need to go call my mom,” he said. He gulped and excused himself to the restroom.

She sat back on her couch and stared at the exposed brick of her apartment. She had a hand on her belly even though there was no bump, it just felt right.

She didn’t know then she would regret letting Spencer make that call. He came back calmer and told her that he was all in. That night she went to sleep dreaming about her baby. She saw a little girl with Cassia’s brown curly hair and dark brown eyes that Cassia got from her own mother. The little girl might have the same buck teeth that Cassia had growing up till she grew out of them once her adult teeth came in, or she’d have Spencer’s perfect ones.

She was still deciding. She knew that she’d have to start saving for braces or glasses soon if her daughter had teeth and vision like her. She hoped their little girl had Spencer’s charismatic smile and Cassia’s independent spirit. She thought of her and Spencer walking down Central Park holding a perfect mixture of them.

However, that morning, she was shaken awake by Spencer into the nightmare of Judith standing at her door.

“Now, who is ready to make playdough babies?” Piper, Cassia’s best friend announced. Piper had been more than happy to take on event planning with Judith, filling a

role that Cassia couldn't bring herself to take on. Piper looked to Cassia and smiled. "Cassia will pick her favorites and the winners will get a special prize."

Chatter filled the air as the women in the party took their seats. Cassia wondered if they would still be excited knowing the prizes were gift cards to grocery stores. Probably so.

Piper handed some Play-doh canisters to Cassia to help her pass out. Cassia did so, but kept silent as she walked around the room. The women grew more excitable. She could hear mutterings of strategies and speculation about what the prize would be. A woman wearing a blue ribbon tapped Cassia's belly as she handed her the play-doh. "I am hoping he's a boy," she smiled. Cassia wanted to slap the woman's hand away, but she only smiled and kept walking.

Another woman who claimed to be Judith's coworker was giddy like a school child as Cassia handed her the play-doh. She also rubbed Cassia's belly, and the warmth of her clammy and lingered on Cassia's stomach. "I'm team girl!" she winked at Cassia. "You must be so excited!"

Cassia smiled and kept walking. How could she tell these women that this was possibly one of the worst days of her life?

"Okay ladies, get started! Make sure they look as close to a baby as possible! You have five minutes."

Judith sat in the center table. There was glow about her as she conferred with one of Spencer's aunts about how to make a face in the play dough. Cassia watched as Judith's slender fingers manipulated the dough with precision.

It was the same glow she had standing beside Spencer at their wedding. The same *I got my way* look. Cassia was haunted by Judith's smug expression that she could see past Spencer's shoulders as he read her his vows. Cassia had been happy when they first got engaged. But, she had thought they would have more time till they were actually walking down the aisle. She had fought for them to wait, but Judith pushed and Spencer followed.

"Well you love me, right? It shouldn't matter if we do it now, or after the baby."

"Spencer, I do," Cassia had said and placed a hand on his face. She had known they would always get married, just now do soon. "But don't you want to get married on your own terms? Not your mother's?"

"This is our terms, Cassia. We're going to do it anyway. Why not now?" The furrow of his brows made Cassia give in. She knew he was hurting, thinking she didn't want him. But, it had nothing to do about him. She wasn't ready for this and she definitely wasn't ready for Judith to sink her nails in her.

Of course, as they drove that night to tell Judith about their marriage, Judith had that same glow. She had won. And when she had hugged Cassia, that was the first of the phantom kicks. Cassia knew her child must be repulsed by her mother-in-law as much as she was.

Cassia moved her eyes to focus on another table making play-doh babies. The doorbell rang and Piper went to get it, but Cassia stopped her. "I'll get it, Pipes."

Piper smiled. "Okay, but be quick, we need you to judge soon."

Cassia moved past her and walked toward the door at a slow pace. She tried her best to stall and take as much time before returning to the party.

When she opened the door, she was met with the sight of a woman in a white lab coat and pantsuit. Her hair was in a sleek ponytail, not a stray hair in sight. Cassia could make out the blue embroidered logo, 'Designer Babies Inc.' on her coat. Perfection was her business. The gift was here.

"Hi, I'm Dr. Hayden Silva. I'm here for the baby registry."

Cassia wanted to shut the door in her face. She had known this was one of Judith's arrangements, but some part of her had hoped it wouldn't have happened. Yet, Judith had been serious when she discussed it with Spencer and Cassia as they told her they had planned to skip the whole baby shower and registry all together.

"How are you going to give up the baby shower registry? I had a baby shower for Spencer. Look how perfect and loved he is, I attribute the beginnings of that to the baby shower. Family and friends will be more than happy to buy the baby something off the registry," Judith tried to reason.

Spencer was quiet. He sat in the seat next to Cassia, but she felt as if she was taking on Judith's rage all by herself. Cassia spoke up, "We just think it's unnecessary for our child. As long as they are healthy, we're happy."

"Dear, I understand that, but you have to understand that the registry is so important. How else will your child be perfect?"

"My family never had one, and we all turned out fine." Cassia came from little money and it had never really bothered her. In a sea of perfection, she loved being raw and flawed. She always worked for everything in her life, and while, marrying Spencer definitely

increased her quality of life, she didn't want her child to strive to be perfect. "I would rather my child be born looking like Spencer and I, rather than some lab rat designed by strangers."

"Cassia, do you understand you are setting up your child for failure? Do you understand you are denying him the right to be somebody?" Judith scolded her.

"My child will be somebody regardless of them being genetically engineered or not. I don't think you understand Judith, but this is my and Spencer's child. You don't have a say," Cassia argued. She stood up and motioned for Spencer to get up. "Let's go, Spencer."

Spencer shook his head.

"Spencer? Come on, let's go," she urged. Judith smiled.

"Go on, Spencer, tell her what we discussed," Judith encouraged him.

Spencer had been quiet for a while before he said, "Maybe it is best we do the registry. After all, it is so important to my mother."

As Judith eyes lit up, Cassia felt her cheeks grow hot. and she watched as he wrapped his arms around his mother. Judith's eyes closed briefly as she rested her head on Spencer's shoulder. Cassia wanted to scream.

"I'm not letting you anywhere near my child."

"Cassia, it's just as much my child as yours. It's our decision," Spencer chastised her.

"Do you not see what she's trying to do?" Cassia asked. Her tears streamed down her face and Spencer had to hold her up as her knees buckled. Her grip on her child was slipping, even as the heartbeat raced in her stomach.

“Cassia, it won’t be so bad. Think about it, Spencer told me about how you wore braces. Now you won’t have to worry about that,” Judith teased and sat beside her. Her hand extended to rub Cassia’s growing bump.

That night, her dream of her little girl shifted to the same little boy in Spencer’s baby photo.

Now, as she stared at Dr. Silva, the embodiment of perfection, she could feel another phantom kick. Her hand went to her stomach. This woman was in charge of taking her little girl away.

“You must be Cassia James.” Dr. Silva smiled and held out her hand.

Cassia shook her hand and let her in. She was quiet as she guided Dr. Silva to the party. As some women spotted the lab coat, they began to squeal. Cassia could hear them whisper amongst themselves their predictions about what the registry was to bring.

Piper told Dr. Silva, “Hi Doctor, we’re just about to finish up the games if you’d like to set up in the living room over here.” Before Piper took the Doctor, she told Cassia, “Go choose the winner of the play-doh baby.”

Cassia walked around looking at the different variations of babies. Some had misshapen heads, lack of limbs, some barely even looked like babies. All were imperfect, except for Judith’s. Judith had sculpted a near realistic baby despite the green of the play-doh. Cassia wanted to grab it and smash it beneath her feet. But, she only took a step back and announced, “Judith is the winner!”

Judith smiled and stood up. As the ladies clapped, Judith held a hand to her chest and acted as if she had just won an Oscar. Piper was back and handed Judith an envelope.

Judith ripped it open and laughed to herself for a moment before holding up the gift card in the air. “It’s a gift card to Target. I’ll definitely be using this to buy my grandson some presents.”

Cassia didn’t even know the gender of the baby yet, how could Judith be so sure.

Most of the women said ‘aww’ in response. One woman, who Cassia did now know, said, “Aww Judith, you should use it for yourself! Cassia’s getting plenty of gifts for them!”

Judith waved her hand. “I’m a grandma now. It’s not about me anymore.”

The women laughed and applauded her. Cassia wondered how she could avoid what was to come next.

“Are we ready for the registry?” Piper announced. The women began cheering and hollering. Cassia felt like she had swallowed a great weight and was sinking into the linoleum.

They all moved to the living room where the couches had been rearranged to form a circular sitting area. There were three chairs opposite the couches, one for Cassia, the other for Judith, and one for Dr. Silva.

As they got situated, Cassia’s breaths grew heavier. The registry. Judith had arranged the possibilities list and consulted with Spencer on some aspects. She would recount how Spencer was the product of the registry each time she discussed it with them.

Cassia was banned from seeing the list. Judith lied and told Spencer it was because she wanted it to be a surprise. Cassia knew though that Judith didn’t want her ruining the chance of a perfect grandson.

Cassia slowly eased herself down on the chair, trying to steady herself. Dr. Silva reached out and grabbed her arms to help hoist her down. Her ruby lined lips turned up as she asked, “Nervous?”

“No,” Cassia lied. She was petrified.

“Don’t be.” Dr. Silva winked and sat beside her. She was young, only about five years older from Cassia. “I did the registry myself before I started working for the company. It’s nerve-wracking, but my son Apollo came out amazing. He’s actually one of our base models now.”

Cassia felt her stomach stirring. “Oh, that’s so great. You must be so happy.”

“He has been a dream,” the woman agreed.

The little girl Cassia has dreamed of centered in her mind. The little girl who had her hair. She had shifted the dream child to include Spencer’s perfect nose and vision. Ultimately, Cassia wanted nothing more than to have her and Spencer’s genetics combine and make their child. She knew that the registry list obstructed all of that genetic chance and would erase any trace of Cassia in her little girl’s face.

The women all settled into their seats. Judith sat on the other side of Cassia. She wore a large grin and reached over Cassia to offer Dr. Silva. “It is a pleasure having you today. I’m Judith, the grandma.”

“Dr. Hayden Silva. Pleasure to meet you.”

Piper clapped her hands, “Alright, let’s get started. Dr. Silva, would you like to announce the details of what has been funded?”

“It would be my honor,” Dr. Silva beamed and stood up. She held a clipboard in her hands and began, “I would just like to begin by thanking Judith and Cassia, and all of you beautiful women for participating in the registry. Our team at Designer Babies Incorporated are so honored every time a mother trusts us with her child’s future. We are also honored that beautiful women, such as you ladies, fund the genetic engineering for the mother’s dreams of a perfect child to be made. So, with that, I will begin. First off, the high IQ gene was funded by Henrietta Madison and Judy Caine.” The women erupted in applause and Mrs. Madison and Judy stood up to be swallowed in praise.

“Thank you, ladies,” Judith chimed in with a wide beam, “When our boy is Valedictorian, we will have you to thank!” Cassia felt her lunch beginning to bubble its way up her throat. While she liked to think of herself as smart, she didn’t want her child to feel any pressure of following suit. She didn’t care about IQ.

Dr. Silva continued, “Piercing green eyes were funded by Piper Smith and Lanie Rodriguez. Thank you, ladies.” Cassia had brown eyes. Cassia had her late mother’s eyes and she wanted nothing more for the baby to get her eyes, or even her father’s oddly wide-set ones. Everyone in her family had the same dark brown.

“Maybe he will be a model with those eyes!” Judith elbowed Cassia jokingly. The women laughed.

“If he makes it big, please make sure I get my cut of it!” Piper chimed in. Cassia glared at her, but she was too busy laughing to notice.

The list continued. No baldness, 20/20 vision, no freckles, straight hair, straight teeth, long eyelashes, dimples, musical ear, black hair, no family background of heart disease.

It continued and continued. Cassie reflected.

Male pattern baldness ran in her family as her grandpa was bald at the age of 20; she wore glasses but switched to contacts at 16, and got Lasik not too long ago. Spencer had straight teeth, but she knew the genetics for her teeth would probably beat his. Spencer had straight hair, but Cassia's was always a frizzy curly mess as her mother's had been. Both her and Spencer had freckles. They had begun to erase or correct every imperfection that Cassia could potentially pass down.

"Lastly, we rarely have this chromosome funded, much less selected. But, Y chromosome funded by none other than grandma, Judith Lee!"

The women erupted in applause and Judith stood up beaming as she accepted the praise. Dr. Silva began to clap, "This baby will definitely be one for the books. I want to thank all you ladies for your support and funding. Let's give it up for Cassia and her perfect designer son!"

Judith pulled Cassia to stand up with her. The women congratulated her. She could even hear a woman stating about how lucky she was—how fortunate she was to have so much funding.

Dr. Silva shook both Judith and Cassia's hand. "We'll see you tomorrow at 8 a.m. for the procedure. Congratulations, I am so happy you will have the baby of your dreams."

Cassia wanted to scream that the baby of her dreams would look like her. The baby wouldn't be a carbon copy of Spencer.

Dr. Silva shook her hand again. “I can’t wait for tomorrow! I will see you then.”

Judith offered to walk Dr. Silva out. Piper put on the radio and introduced the beginnings of a new game. Cassia could hear the excited chatter of the women as the flocked back to the tables. *They had just condemned my child and they’re over here fucking eating baby food out of diapers.*

She felt a small kick and ran a hand down her belly. She decided then she was not letting them erasing her little girl. Judith smiled at her and that was the first time Cassia smiled back.

In her pocket, she patted the keys to the car in her pocket. She had found where Judith had hit them in her room. She knew as the party was ending, she would slip out. Her flight back to New York was booked, her apartment was still there. Her little girl was coming with her.

“The Vase”

Hannah Cokash

A heated argument erupted from the garage.

Max dug her fingernails into the leather of the couch. Fighting was a common occurrence in Max’s household. Mother was the root of the issue, she never saw eye to eye with Max, or Max’s sister, Amara. The eldest, Amara, was too stubborn not to bite back. She stood her ground, after years of verbal lashings Amara had thick skin. But Max, the youngest, didn’t. She still lived with Mother. Always the peacemaker, Max didn’t like to fight. She held her tongue and coped with the rules of a strict household. Every day felt like walking on eggshells. She would never tell a living soul she was terrified of her own Mother.

The yelling only seemed to grow from the garage. What happened this time? Father looked over at her with an arched eyebrow, both of them hesitant on going towards the noise. To help Mother and Amara unpack from their road trip to see family. But she knew what would happen if they were to go into that moth-ridden garage, she would be forced to choose a side.

As Father continued watching a rerun of the *X-Files*, she opened the back door just a crack to eavesdrop on what the two were fighting about. Her small silhouette could barely be seen as she watched the way Amara crossed her arms and heard Mother call her, “Insane! You’re insane for driving like that, you do realize there’s another passenger riding with you right? Jesus--”

From this angle, Max could see how stringent Mother's back was. Her shoulders rigid, her voice rising by the second. It was Amara who she could see, the overhead garage lightbulb illuminating the lines underneath her eyes. She looked like she had heard this all before, Max could tell she was resisting the urge to roll her eyes. Max brought a thumb to her mouth and nibbled at her fingernail. There was a cold sweat on her neck.

Her older sister scoffed, an exasperated smile sketched across her face, "You need to calm down, I was going well within the speed range. You know what I think you're really mad about? It's--" Her gaze landed on Max.

Amara readjusted her purse and cracked a small but tired grin. Max felt safe, if only for a second. She wanted to grin too, badly, but the frown felt sewn permanently across her face. Max held her breath as Mother turned around, wondering what Amara was looking at, "Oh," She said, "You're here." Beyond that grin, Amara looked uncomfortable, shifting her feet from side to side, most likely from the wind that bit at their faces. It was cold tonight, but the grin offered Max little warmth. If anything, it looked forced now, like it never quite reached Amara's eyes, "I think your sister's just a little tired, what do you think?" Mother asked.

As if there was an invisible chain bound to her wrists, Mother tugged Max into the conversation, into choosing sides. There was no hello, no hugs, nothing had changed in the time she had been gone.

"Tired? You're the one who's tired." Amara shook her head, she opened her mouth and then closed it after Mother shot her a look. She settled for gripping her car keys.

Still trying to find her voice, Max fiddled with her fingers and looked between the two, “Oh well, you guys have been driving all day right? I’m..I’m..sure I would be tired too.”

Helping Mother unpack the car, Max didn’t get to say much to her sister, to tell her how sorry she was that she couldn’t stand up for her, that she was afraid of that scolding look in their Mother’s eye that would lead to another argument. Max was more than familiar with being on the receiving end of a conversation like this, she had grown used to the sound of venomous anger spewing from Mother’s voice but it didn’t make it any easier to stand up to her. It never did.

Words were used like weapons and it was always a draining affair. Perhaps it was Mother’s job and the long, grueling work shifts that made her lash out like this. Maybe it was the crumbling marriage with Father. But the truth, Max declared, was that it had always been there, her mother’s toxicity. Ever since Max could remember, it had followed the family. The cold stare and anger issues were generational. Grandmother had always been hard on Mother, not just mentally but physically. Because it was seldom talked about, Amara had to be the one to tell Max, Grandmother had been just as abusive around her as Mother was with them. The bag of problems had simply been passed down from generation to generation, those issues she carried were never healthily processed. They only bubbled and festered with age. Father stayed out of it. And then there was Amara. Max isn’t sure how Amara handled Mother all these years, how she never once seemed skittish in the face of a lecture laced with scarlet storm clouds. It filled Max with anxious bees when they fought.

Tonight was proof that Mother was losing it. It had never been about Amara's 'reckless' driving, it was about her past baggage catching up with her. And Max and her sister had become the punching bags, only now the punches were getting harder and harder to take. When it was time for Amara to leave, she didn't bother with a 'goodbye' as she got back in her car and drove away. The tires of her black Porsche screeched as she took off, Mother let out a laugh at that and headed inside. Max's eyes followed Amara's car until it disappeared into the neighborhood, whispering a 'sorry' only she could hear.

Back when Max was in elementary school, she used to laugh a lot with her friends. So much so, that one day, she peed her pants and was sent to the front desk to be dealt with. The school decided to call her mother. Max thought nothing of it, and awkwardly sat in one of the chairs with a blanket the nurse had given her.

Mother didn't say a word when she entered the building. She grabbed Max's hand and led her back to the car, sunglasses hiding her true nature.

It wasn't until they reached the car, and Mother had buckled her in after grabbing some magazines for her to sit on, did she take off those sunglasses.

Max opened her mouth to say something, but closed it when Mother slammed the car door shut, "Did you know I had to leave work for you?"

With her posture stiffening by the second, Max merely shook her head.

"Well I did, Maxine." She muttered, her voice rising by the second, "I mean, seriously, I left work for *this*. Did you ever take one, damn minute to think about how much time you've

wasted for me?” Again, Max was silent. Her mouth was open but nothing came out. This was her first time hearing such bitter words leave her mother’s lips, “I can’t believe this.”

A part of Max wanted to run back to her school teacher and hide behind her long skirt.

Mother ignited the engine, and it roared as it came to life. Max slightly flinched at the noise, her hands felt more and more rigid by the second, “I mean, you’re a big girl. This is embarrassing. I never did this when I was your age.” This was the first time she had seen Mother truly angry with her. All that venom was directed at her. Not Amara, like how it usually was, “Why’d you do it, what was the reason?”

Max flushed with heat, and the words came out slowly, “Well my friends said something funny and then we just started laughing and well--”

“Oh, so it was your friends?”

Max simply nodded her head and avoided eye contact for the remainder of the conversation.

“Will you do this again to me?” Mother finally said. She saw the way Mother’s hands gripped the steering wheel, “Answer me, now.” Max was too frozen to say anything. She wanted to be back home already. Mother turned around in her seat and reached for Max’s chin, gripping it in a cold, unrelenting grasp, “Yes. Or. No?” She snapped, raising her voice. Her nails dug into Max’s skin, forcing Max to look at her.

Max’s voice croaked out a small, “No.” before she went quiet again.

It was just an accident, she wanted to say, this happens to everyone. But the words felt stuck in her throat as she wrung her hands.

Once Max was alone in her bedroom, the tears came, a steady stream that trickled down her cheeks. Max had also lost her appetite at dinner, barely saying two words. Father had turned

a blind eye to this. The next morning, as she stared at her body in the bathroom mirror, Max noticed the deep, developed purple bruises around her chin and neck.

A couple of weeks later, after the fight between Amara and Mother in the garage, after Amara had stormed off in her car, nothing had truly changed.

Max immersed herself in her schoolwork and always studied in her bedroom. It was her only sense of escapism. But if she had it her way, she'd move into Amara's apartment. Anywhere was better than here. She took comfort in the fact that she was close to graduating soon. She was a junior. Max could wait this out a little while longer.

That changed after today.

In Chemistry today, her teacher had handed her back her test. Amongst the swarm of chit-chat in the classroom, Max was the only one who remained quiet. There was a nauseous feeling in her stomach when she realized how badly she had flunked. It was a D-. And Mother despised low grades like that. She was grateful that Mother wouldn't be home tonight until late. Her friends' comforting words did little to soothe her. All Max could do was think about the test all day during school. Maybe she wouldn't even tell Mother about it. Still, the nauseous feeling grew once the bus took her back.

Time danced by until the front lock snapped open. Max could tell it had been a long and tiring shift for Mother when she came home from work that night and promptly slammed the door shut. At the couch, and taking notes for her Psychology class, Max studied her body language. Her jaw was locked firmly and her shoulders looked tense. The last thing she

wanted to do was make Mother even angrier. She hid the bad test grade further within her binder.

Max stood up and walked over to where she was in the kitchen, apprehensive to leave space between the two. She asked her how her day was.

Mother, who had settled into washing dishes, suddenly turned to look at her. The way she was rigorously washing the plate she held in her hands, made Max cower her head a little, “Good I guess.” That was a lie. Mother turned back to the kitchen sink and muttered under her breath, “But it would have helped if these damn dishes had been clean when I got home.”

Max picked at her nails, curling forward into herself just a little. Some days at the elementary school she worked at could be especially tiring, Max understood that. But it made her feel awful knowing she had contributed to Mother’s bad day. She winced at the noise as Mother slammed the plate down and carried onto the metallic mixing bowl, “Well, well I can help. Let me dry, I’m sorry.”

She denied her offer, and passive-aggressively continued to clean every dish. Max was rooted to the floor as Mother started her usual lecture, “I mean, what’s so hard about doing a single chore. You think I want to do this when I get back from work?” Max’s feet were sinking into the floor at this point, she didn’t want to exist and Mother was yelling about dirty dishes.

This was Max’s fault. The panic that started to crawl over her like a rash was prominent in her voice, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.” Max walked closer to her, meaning every word.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” Mother mocked, “That’s all you ever say. It’s going to lose its meaning if you keep on repeating it over and over.” The house seemed too quiet, for Father was on a business trip and wouldn’t be back until tomorrow. It was just the two of them.

Max faltered, clenching and unclenching her hands. Something began to shift inside her, the youngest daughter. In the past, she had remained silent in the face of mild disagreements with Mother, rather than standing up for herself. She just didn’t want to start an argument and make things worse. She calculated and overthought everything she said, the time she said it, how she said it, the expression she had when she said it, her tone of voice...everything. But after hearing Mother say those words, after hearing the utter lack of compassion woven into her voice, Max couldn’t help herself. She couldn’t help herself from spitting out the next words, “Why do you think that's all I ever say?”

It was barely above a whisper but it was enough to make Mother turn to look at her. She turned off the water, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know what I mean. You’ve made me feel awful at countless birthdays, at school orientations, in situations where I needed you. Every slip-up turned into a lecture. The only words that could stop you from yelling at me were: ‘I’m sorry’.” Her mouth burned like acid, all the words she had kept trapped inside for so long were now bursting to the surface, “I’ve always been afraid of you, did you know that?” The last words came out as more of a whisper, Max put a hand over her mouth.

“Every kid is scared of their mother.”

“Not like this, never for this long.”

Mother's eyes watched her with an air of indifference. A second later, she was taking off the kitchen gloves, "Well then, 'I'm sorry' Maxine. I didn't realize I was such a shitty mother. Is that what you want me to say?" Her voice was dangerously calm but Max was past the point of backing off.

Shaking her head at her, Max bit her lower lip and felt the familiar onslaught of tears burn the corners of her eyes, "I don't know how to talk to you. Amara doesn't know how to talk to you." Mother busied herself with things around the kitchen: folding the dish towels, scooping at any crumbs on the counter, prettying up the pink Carnations in her favorite vase, "Are you even listening? You make us feel like shit, all we can say is sorry because if we try and say something else, you--you twist what we say. You make yourself the victim."

"Oh, you and your sister are the victims in all this? Is that it?" She turned her head to look at Max, her hands holding onto the vase.

Max raised her voice, "Yes!" Pointing a finger at her, she continued, "And you're just afraid that you might actually be fucking wrong for once. That you've failed us."

"I did the best I could raising you two. None of this is my fault, none of it." She could barely look at her daughter.

"I hate you."

"Get out of here then!" She shouted.

"Gladly." Max spit back.

That's when Mother threw the vase.

An hour had passed and now Max was sitting on the roof. She dangled her legs over the edge and studied the sunset streaked with pastel pinks and purples. She wished she could disappear into those colors, and feel them wrap around her like a blanket. But more than anything, she wished she could live someplace differently.

Blood trickled down her cheek instead.

Max felt the cut on her skin every time the wind combed through her hair. Her breath was shaky as she tried to focus on anything else.

She jumped at the sound of the window behind her suddenly opening with a click. A hand rubs her shoulder and Max knows within seconds it's her sister. She's still in her work outfit, and her hair is wound tightly in a bun. Amara joins her out on the roof, and bites her lip when she sees Max's face. Max immediately turns away.

Amara gently cups her chin, barely touching her, and turns Max to face her again, dapping at her cheek with a washcloth. Max seethes at the burning sensation, "Please talk to me, are you okay?"

"It's nothing."

Max can still hear the vase breaking, the sound of it making contact with the tiled floor as shards of glass went flying, "It's not nothing. Does it hurt badly?"

Without thinking about it, Max lied and said that it didn't. What would it change? Amara scoffed before applying some healing ointment, handing her a bandage.

Amara shuffled closer to Max, and said something about Mother. The mentioning of their mother was enough to make Max laugh, and graze her fingers over her cheek. Remembering being crouched in a corner as shards went flying at her face, scared to even move a muscle.

Despite the blood rushing through her ears, Max could hear the torrent of ‘No’s’ leave her mother’s mouth as the realization settled into her bones at what she had done.

“Max, tell me what happened.” Amara pleaded, “I’m here, and I’m not going to leave you, I’m not going to let anything else happen to you.” It didn’t matter how her sister found out, or what she said to make things better, Max was just happy to have her here. Amara’s voice grounded her. Instead of telling her what had transpired a mere hour ago, Max thought about what her life could look like if she lived with Amara.

They could watch their favorite movies together and go shopping. Getting up in the morning would be a leisurely thing to enjoy, they could take turns making breakfast throughout the week. The image of Amara and herself, cracking up together, was enough to make Max tell her, “Take me with you.”

“Max--” She started.

“You know I want to move out, Amara. Living here..I can’t do it anymore.” She could hear the hesitance in Amara’s voice, “Please don’t leave me here.” There was a trembling urgency in Max’s voice, as she looked back at her, “Take me with you, at least for a couple of weeks.”

“You know I would, I want to--”

Max tried to blink back the ball in her throat, fiddling with her fingers. She knew exactly what she meant. It was times like these where she hated being the last one to leave home, to leave the nest. Max could watch Amara spread her wings and fly away and not a day would go by where she didn’t miss having her here. The house felt empty, it’s walls barren of play wrestling, loud music, and the smell of cheap perfume. But, more than anything, Max craved that freedom to get away from here.

Amara gave her a knowing, sardonic grin, “You’re the baby of the house. She’ll want you here until you’re in your 50’s.” The joke was supposed to be funny, but Max couldn’t bring herself to laugh, not when she wanted to cry. Nothing was said between the two of them, they just looked back at the sun slowly disappearing over the distant mountain.

Max told her what happened earlier. All the while she played with her hands. Amara didn’t interrupt her or talk over her while she ranted. Besides the usual encouraging nod, she didn’t bring any attention to herself. Besides asking a few questions here and there, wanting to make sure she got the full story, she was quiet. To finally have someone listen was a cathartic feeling, as if Max could finally let out everything inside her.

“I’m sorry, Max.” Her voice started out soft around the edges, as she chose her words carefully. It was difficult to talk with Mother. She could be so frustrating. And now all that fear Max had carried, had boiled into anger. Max hated it here as she wrapped the jacket further around her waist, “I just wish I knew why she gets like that? Like I really truly don’t understand what makes her think it’s okay to treat you like that.” Max could hear the bitterness bubbling on Amara’s tongue like battery acid, “And it’s sad, you know? You think she’d be different after everything Grandma put her through.” Nodding her head, Max turned to look at Amara. She was right. There would always be a wall between Mother and them, “She has some real issues, I swear.” Amara murmured. They both let out a hum at that.

Max watched as Amara opened the window and reached for Max’s withered quilt, draping it over the both of them. The action made Max soften, the cotton fabric smooth between her fingers. Amara sighed, “I’m sorry I wasn’t here for you when you needed me, Max.”

She raised her eyebrows at that, “You don’t have to apologize for that. I should be the one saying sorry for dragging you into this mess. I’m...sorry.” Max wondered if she had to leave work early for this, her voice dropped above a whisper as she looked away.

“It’s always been a mess.” Amara offered a weak smile, “But you didn’t do anything wrong, okay? Yes it would have helped if you had done the dishes before she had gotten back, but listen, if she’s getting *that* angry and making it about her, and jesus--throwing things,” She shook her head, “Then this is her fault.”

It was Christmas morning, Max was young and she barely remembered what happened since it was such a long time ago. But she doesn’t think she could ever forget the sounds of them fighting in Mother’s bedroom. The door was shut so Amara’s voice sounded muffled but she could still recall how it made her feel.

Utterly helpless.

Max had angered Mother by accidentally spilling juice at the dinner table. And t was enough to put her in time-out. This wasn’t anything different, she was used to the scolding. It was the fact that it was Christmas morning and everyone else was downstairs, watching the movie, *Elf* together. Mother must have forgotten about her. Max was up in her room long into the afternoon. She wished she could remember what she had said to cause that type of treatment from Mother.

Later on, there was a knock at her door. She knew it wasn’t Mother because she never knocked.

It was Amara who found Max crying on her bed. The smile had disappeared within seconds from Amara's face. The way she sat down next to Max and asked her what happened only made her cry harder. It wasn't until she gave Max some tissues and pulled her in for a hug, did she tell her sister.

As Amara took her downstairs, wrapped her in a cocoon of blankets, and turned on Max's favorite Christmas cartoon, *How The Grinch Stole Christmas*, she told her everything was going to be okay. Max noticed her shoulders were holding too much tension, betraying her outwardly serene and soothing nature and words of comfort. Max wanted to say something before Amara promptly went back upstairs.

Even though the volume was turned to its highest degree, Max could still hear the sound of Amara confronting Mother.

"God, I'm pissed at her." Amara said through gritted teeth. After letting Mother walk over her for years, Max knew exactly how she felt. She was angry now.

It was starting to get cold out there but neither of them felt like heading inside. Despite being so close to the edge, this had always been a safe space for both of them while growing up. If it ever got too bad with Mother, they could always find the other one sitting out on the roof. The rusty, chipped brown paint of the roof tiles felt familiar under their fingertips. It offered them sanction. Amara would come out here to smoke and Max came out here to cry. Nothing ever hurt them here.

“I wish I could sit down and talk it out with her,” Max confessed, “But I feel like she thinks she’s okay. Like there’s nothing wrong with her. She doesn’t see how much her words hurt us.”

“It’s got to be addressed though.” Amara confided, sharing a look with Max.

“She won’t listen.”

“Then we make her listen. There’s always...I don’t know.” She could tell Amara was forming a plan in her head, the way she brought the quilt closer to her chin. Max asked her what she was thinking, “Well, there’s always therapy.”

To hear that last word felt like someone threw a bucket of cold water over Max. The realization of how dire the situation had become over the years rushed over her. Mother needed help. And Max was starting to realize that, especially after what happened in the kitchen. She had issues, and she needed to sort through those with someone who could really help. Max didn’t say anything for a while. They sat there on the roof as the sun became swallowed by the night. She could hear Amara playing with her lighter.

It could work, but that was only if Mother was willing to go. Max rubbed the back of her head, “I want it to work, I want therapy to be the solution for her, I really do. But you know how she gets, she’s stubborn. She’ll find an excuse to get out of it.”

“Not after what happened with you.”

“Fine,” Max decided, “Then we both talk to her tomorrow.”

“How to Fill Holes”

Krista Nave

There were bees in the wall. Buzzing, building, stacking cell upon cell in their vertical honeycomb, nestled between studs. They were louder at night, the way most noises were, as the sonance of sunlight was enough to drown them out during the day; then, Sasha could only hear them when she pressed her ear against the paint and plaster of the right hand corner of the room. But in darkness, the droning rose up several octaves, as if the bees had nestled deep inside her ear.

Sasha's ex-boyfriend had liked poking holes in things. Paper, fruit, skin. Arguments, sometimes, but they were too amorphous for him. Sasha had once opened a loaf of bread only to find that he had systematically punctured through each slice until they more resembled swiss cheese. That's how the bees had gotten in, swarming and squirming through finger-sized gouges on the outside of the house. Her boyfriend was gone, and the bees had moved in, in his place.

Since he'd left, it was hard for Sasha to fall asleep, the absence of another person like a safety blanket ripped away. She missed her ex's broad arm laid across her chest, his nose tucked into her neck. She spent several hours tossing and turning, punching the pillow into different shapes, digging her toes into the memory foam. She thought about how long it had been since she washed the sheets. The bacteria and dead skin cells came to life, crawling along her skin. Sasha swung her legs out of the bed and stood up. Honey oozed from the wall like

beads of sweat and pooled along the floor. She stripped the bed and headed to the laundry room. Her bare feet squelched as they sunk into the thick liquid with each step.

As the washing machine ran, Sasha waited in the backyard, slouched in a lawn chair by the shallow end of the swimming pool, algae-green waters lit up like a radioactive tank by the dim light of the moon. She did not smoke a cigarette, had never smoked a day in her life, but wondered if, the same way nicotine suppressed appetite, if it would curb other cravings. She would look like a sophisticated woman, loitering with purpose, smoke wisping from her lips into the cold air like dye diffusing through water. Sasha had once expressed this idle appreciation for the aesthetics of cigarettes to her ex-boyfriend. He had taken it seriously, not as the joke she intended it to be. He lectured her for an hour about the dangers of nicotine, called her vain for wanting to destroy her health for something so trivial. In the weeks after, he kept finding packs of cigarettes stashed in the pockets of her coats. Each time he confronted her, and each time she swore she had not bought them, had no idea where they were coming from. One time he tore up each cigarette, scattering tobacco along the floor like a trail of breadcrumbs and demanding she clean them up. Stretched to her limit after dozens of beratings, Sasha accused him of planting the cartons on her. He called her a crazy bitch, but the cigarettes stopped appearing after that.

Sasha was jarred from this reminiscence by a tickle on her feet. Looking down, she saw a stray cat lapping at the honey congealed between her toes. The cat lurched away when she leaned down to pet it. It lingered in the dark corners of the yard, watching Sasha with glazed yellow eyes. She held her body very still, hoping to lure it back, until she fell asleep in the chair.

In the morning, Sasha awoke to an empty lap dusty with cat hair. She was itchy with loneliness and arranged a date with a man she had been chatting with on a dating app for the last two weeks. He seemed interesting enough through text, told decent jokes and didn't overuse emojis, but she knew in-person conversation was a different beast, most men showing themselves as dull and self-centered. Her ex-boyfriend had never been boring, never seemed to run out of fascinating things to talk about. Sasha picked a small cafe to meet her new date in. The location was strategic: close enough to a movie theater that if he turned out to be a complete dud, she could convince him to see a film with her. Just to sit next to a body, feel the buzz of their skin a few inches away, would be enough.

Sasha ordered a cup of tea and a yogurt at the cafe, procuring a seat by the window to wait for her date. She wore a long-sleeve shirt far too hot for the spring weather, and the sun beat against her through the glass. Whispers of conversation from the neighboring tables tickled at her ears, the buzz of companionship that felt both grating and comforting at once. Sasha was ten minutes early, but even with that excuse she felt the acute pinch of anxiety, to be the only one alone and aimless. She pulled out her cellphone and spent the next few minutes refreshing an app that had no new updates, acting as if being engrossed in the task. Her idle mind could not resist the siren call of her ex's Instagram. His page was bereft of updates, her ex the type who saw himself above social media culture. The last picture had been posted by herself, two weeks before their relationship had ended: a photograph of the two of them, swimsuit-clad at the beach, squinting into the sun in a way that could be misinterpreted as a smile.

Forty minutes later, Sasha had to admit to herself that her date was not coming. She finished off her yogurt and glared at the spoon in her hand. She was reminded of something her grandmother used to say: The Devil took my shovel but God gave me a spoon. She still didn't know what that meant. When she had repeated the saying to her ex, he seemed to immediately understand it and, no matter how much she begged, he refused to explain, laughing that she was just too dumb to get it. The spoon tapped against the rim of the cup as she carelessly dropped it.

Sasha began texting her list of contacts, sending out feelers for who would be free tonight. Some went unanswered, others sent out vague excuses of prior plans or loads of work. One new text notification tugged the hook. Audrey, a mutual friend of her ex-boyfriend, revealed that she was hosting a small party at her house and invited Sasha to come. She gratefully accepted.

The bees were awake when Sasha returned home to ready herself for the party. While they had mostly kept to themselves, not venturing past plaster and paint into the bedroom, she could see a few of them fizzing through the room like soda bubbles. Sasha had the number for an exterminator scrawled on a post-it note clinging to the refrigerator, but she had been putting it off for the past few weeks, no matter how many times she had to mop honey off her hardwood floors. She stripped off her clothes as she entered the bedroom, heading towards the closet. Last year her ex had surprised her with a glimmering navy blue dress for her step-sister's wedding. It was sleeveless, to show off her arms, which he had always told her were her best feature. The same dress hung in the closet like a man from a noose.

While she regarded the dress, going back and forth in her mind on whether or not she should wear it, one of the bees landed on her shoulder blade. Sasha froze, afraid that even the slightest breath would scare the bee into plunging its stinger deep into her skin. It nuzzled against her. Sasha knew that bees only stung as a last resort, a kamikaze sacrifice to protect the hive, leaving stinger and abdominal cavity behind as it ripped itself in half. It was the hemorrhagic trauma that killed them. Sasha could relate. She let out a slow breath, back shifting with exhalation, and the bee hopped off, no harm done. Her phone buzzed with a text from the man who stood her up, a raincheck disguised as a watery apology. Sasha put on the blue dress and left for the party.

Audrey greeted Sasha at the door with a hug and offered to take her jacket, but Sasha waved her off. They briefly caught up, but after some shallow pleasantries, Audrey continued to make the rounds with her guests, like a hummingbird fluttering around the room, never staying with one flower for too long. Sasha clung to the wall like a fly, finishing a glass of wine within the first ten minutes. The taste sat heavy on her tongue, and she washed it down with another.

Eventually she found herself in conversation with a man whose name she had already forgotten. His hand was heavy on her waist. There was a wetness there, but she did not know if the sweat came from his palm or the small of her back. She was on her third drink, stem of the glass held precariously between thumb and index finger, threatening to drop to the floor with each belly-laugh she forced at the man's bad pickup lines.

A familiar voice cut through all other noise in the room. She had not asked Audrey, and Audrey had not volunteered, if he would be here, but she could not claim she wasn't

expecting it. She hadn't been waiting for him, had refused to look to the door with each new arrival. But if her eyes were to accidentally catch his in the midst of the crowd, then that was just a coincidence. Her ex-boyfriend was across the room, in the midst of telling a joke to a guffawing crowd. He was always so charming, so charismatic. They had met at a party just like this; him, holding court for his admirers, her amongst them. When he picked her out of the crowd, Sasha felt special. How lucky to be deserving of his attention. Now, he did not spare a glance for her. Her ex looked just as handsome as ever, something Sasha both appreciated and resented, but her eyes did not rest on him for long. Nestled under his arm was a girl Sasha had never seen before. Pretty, dark hair, freckled skin. Her dress was blue and sleeveless.

There were many days where Sasha wished she at least had the dignity of ending things with her ex. In truth, he was the one who had tired of her. At first she had been relieved to be free, to not be poked and prodded and judged and ridiculed and provoked. When he walked out the door, she swore at his back that she would do better than him; she felt like an idiot for staying with him for so long. He hadn't said anything in response, just smiled, a derisive curl to his mouth. But the men had panned out, the first dates never went anywhere, and desperation began to set in as loneliness tightened its coils around Sasha's chest. She hated him, and, shamefully, she missed him. Sasha began to suspect her ex was right, the words he had never spoken but lurked beneath the surface of each insult and apology: no one else would love her.

Sasha examined the girl's bare arms. What she had first identified as freckles, or perhaps moles, were actually small puncture marks, crescent-shaped like a fingernail, all along her

forearm from elbow to wrist. Scars of the same holes littered Sasha's own body. Her ex-boyfriend had already moved on, and here was Sasha, alone and pining and wracked with jealousy, hating a girl she should pity. A scream boiled in her chest; Sasha wanted to throw herself at him, tear at his skin until she left her own mark on him. His smooth skin was an insult he carried to each relationship.

Her hands clenched into fists until they threatened to break the delicate neck of her glass. At the thought of shattering this blameless thing, disgust welled in her mouth. It tasted like contrition. The scream escaped her throat as a whimper. Poor girl, she thought of her ex-boyfriend's new pin cushion. Deeper down, her mind whispered, poor Sasha. To be used and discarded. The man whose name she had already forgotten asked if she was okay. Sasha pulled his hand from her waist, the suckers of fingertips coming loose with quiet popping noises, and left.

The insomnia continued that night. Sasha stared at the ceiling and pressed her fingernails into the divots of her skin, but they were too small to match. The bees faded into the background like white noise. She closed her eyes and counted to one hundred. Sasha opened her eyes again.

Hovering above her was a rolling, black mass: not quite solid, a little bit fuzzy on the edges, in the shape of an almost-human. A buzzing built up in the air like thunder, vibrating deep in her eardrums and rattling her bones. Breath catching in her throat, Sasha reached over and flicked the light on. The shape exploded, bees scattering about the room in panic. She watched them settle against the walls and ceiling, black and yellow dots against white paint.

Holding her breath, Sasha turned off the light. The bees reformed and coalesced into the figure. It was almost a man, as tall and broad as her ex-boyfriend. It hummed and pulsed like a heart. The black cloud was still, tense and poised to once again scatter at the first sign of threat. She tilted her head to the side, and the bees mimicked her like a reflection. She reached a hand out, but it flinched back. She continued forward, pushing her fist through the chest of the figure, clefting it open in a hole as the bees dodged her hand. Their hairy legs tickled as they settled on her wrist. Maybe the bees had seen the pits and craters along her skin, had mistaken her for a honeycomb? She retracted her arm, and the bees lingered, waiting. Sasha slowly lifted the comforter off the empty space on the bed beside her. With great hesitance, the bees lay beside her.

When Sasha closed her eyes, the buzzing almost sounded the whisper of someone's breath, lying beside her in bed.

“Bury a Friend”

Cassidy Adams

Ride or die.

Someone of significance that will always be there for you. Regardless.

Hair stuck to glossy lips, being blown in the wind—a tangle of spider webs beginning to form. The driver pulls down the visor; the sun glares across her glasses. Stopping at the stop sign, looking left to right, cows eat the dead grass at the edges of the fence. A car passes. It’s the first one she has seen in miles. It makes her feel as though she just dropped on a roller coaster. Her heart begins to race. From the passenger seat, Josie turns up the radio, creating more attention to their van. The speakers waver in and out. It can’t seem to mask the pounding in her ears.

“I think it’s funny, don’t you?”

Pennie’s eyes shift from the road to the back seat.

“What?”

“Come on! You know!”

Josie moves her hand in a circular motion as if to stir up the thoughts in her head, hoping Pennie would pick the right one. Dizzied by the fear, she shrugged.

“What did we always say? As if we even knew what it would mean in middle school.”

Another stop sign caused Pennie to stop, almost too abruptly. Across the street, also stopped is a cop car. Cops always made her nervous, but she had a reason now. She watches

him look downward, probably typing something into his computer. She avoided eye contact. She counted to three, saving her from any California stops, hoping she wouldn't be stopped. Holding her breath, she waits until he begins to drive before she passes. Eyes are on the review mirror to watch as he continues straight. She worries he might turn around at any moment. She couldn't help but try to think of the right words to explain her emotions. It was something she had learned from her mother's therapy sessions. To figure out the right words and how to use them. There is a word for every situation and feeling. If you can figure that out, you can control your emotions and the situation at hand. It just doesn't really help when your mind is racing and your words are slipping out of grasp.

"Do you really not remember?"

Pennie remembered the sleepovers that turned into week-overs, obsessively watching shows and staying out late at night. She couldn't even count up all the days they had spent together. Their promises hidden somewhere in the back of her mind.

"We said we're each other's first choice to..."

Pennie was struck with cheesy jokes and phrases that had far less meaning when their choices weren't so important. In the back seat sat, or rather laid, the evidence to this very situation. How ironic.

"Help bury a friend."

Indecisive.

Someone who can't be settled. Though they are tossed and turned, falling apart at the seams, they can't seem to make up their mind.

It was the week before her twentieth birthday when it all started. She laid in bed, scared of what the future held. Thirteen days. Thirteen days and she wouldn't be a teen anymore. These thoughts started growing when her roommate came home bragging about her date. This girl just seemed to have the perfect life. She had constant plans every Friday night. It was like money, people, and school was never a problem. She couldn't imagine how she balances it all. Pennie had never been on a real date. She couldn't even remember if she'd ever given a fake kiss to someone, that way she could at least say she'd done that. A kiss was a kiss to Pennie and the fact she wasn't going to be a teen, but now go into being an adult without all these life experience began to haunt her. It broke her heart that she hadn't ever been in love. She'd never done anything exciting. Just gone to school and did what she had to do. The closest thing to romance she had done was create a poster asking her crush to the Sadie's dance, but it was for a girl in her French class. She was too shy to do anything like that. Secretly, she planned a way to sabotage it by misspelling something on the sign or writing the wrong name, but again she was too afraid of the consequences. She constantly wondered if something was wrong with her. She tried to keep in mind that as long as she remained a teen, she was allowed to make mistakes and take chances. Even though she was already technically an adult, she had yet to be treated like one. It was easy to let children make mistakes, but take away the "teen" and the consequences change. Pennie feared this change the most. She still could have a full-on breakdown and make it out the next day. But now? Why was it so hard? Were twenty-year-olds not allowed to make a mistake? Where are the lines drawn?

Pennie was always unsure when she grew up of what might become of her life. Perhaps she had always been conflicted. Whenever people asked her what she wanted to be or do, she shrugged. There were far too many options to pick just one. In elementary school, she thought she found the perfect choice: a princess. It offered so many luxuries and fancy privileges. Then as a teen, she learned there were too many rules and regulations in order to be a princess. She was tired of the many rules her parents had already created for her. Rules she has kept for herself long after her parents stopped keeping track. Plus, she figured her chances of falling in love with a British prince in her small town, on the other side of the world, was pretty slim. This wasn't the first disappointment of her life. The chances are quite slim for a lot of things, especially when it came to committing crimes. There are people who say things happen at the wrong place and at the wrong time, but that had never happened to Pennie, or at least it hadn't before. She questioned the possibility of how many things in the world were fake. Things that were presented to the unwilling victims in order to scare them. Wasn't that the point of all the princess stories growing up. That one careless move could leave you asleep in a field of flowers, or worse, awakened by the sight of a stranger. Questioning motives, Pennie tried to piece together her story. The one she'd be asked. It was just a matter of time.

Cliché.

*Someone who despite everything their body tells them, falls into the trap of betraying their original thoughts.
The worst crime of all.*

In the van, Pennie checks the time on the dashboard. Not that she had anywhere to be right now. She would truly rather be anywhere but here. Glancing over at Josie, she noticed her looking out the window. She couldn't figure out what she had done wrong to end up in this situation. The dead grass lining the street gave her an uneasy feeling. It was nearly afternoon and the sun began to beat down on Pennie's arms. She should have just got a tattoo.

Three days earlier and Pennie would have never thought about speaking to Josie. She had a long and in-depth conversation with her roommate about high school friendships. She told Pennie that she was still friends with a lot of those people, but not in the way she had imagined. This girl was the most popular girl in school and only a select few acted as real, true friends. She even confided in Pennie, that she wasn't entirely sure who her real friends were. When Pennie had gone home for spring break, her parent's welcomed her, but were barely there before heading out to their cruise. It bugged her that they were so last minute. She couldn't imagine planning out a huge trip without any sort of time or thought. It made her realize that she was the only one she could trust. She learned this at a young age though. Even when Josie and her had been the best of friends, she wasn't always someone to trust. In second grade, Josie tried to blame Pennie for killing the class pet. It wasn't her fault that Josie's bracelet got stuck on the cage and broke. It had only been an accident that the hamster ate a bead. They both swore to keep it a secret.

Pennie was good at secrets. She kept some in an old, childish notebook covered in stickers and glitter, complete with a flower pen. With that same notebook, hidden under her bed, Pennie set out to complete a list of things she had yet to do as a teenager. Or at least

things she hoped she would have done by now. She was only nineteen, but she'd never done anything impulsive. Not once taken a sip from a family member's drink when they weren't looking. Never kissed a stranger for kicks and giggles. Everything in her life had been thought over with plenty of overthinking. Even though she'd been in college for nearly two years, Pennie had yet to step foot in a college party. It always intrigued her, but she never knew anyone well enough to actually get an invite. With twelve days left until her birthday, she went to a party. She met with some classmates and danced with strangers and drank unknown substances in red containers. The next day she was pounded on by her own thoughts and all the other sounds around her. She woke up shaking. She wanted to escape.

She had gone into the liquor store hoping to find something only an eighteen-year-old and up could buy. Standing behind the counter, Pennie made a guess on what cigarettes might be the best. She ended up buying the ones that she had seen the most of, whether that be crumpled up in her parent's closet or in the parking lot of her high school. She didn't even plan on smoking the. The smell was disgusting enough. She bought a magazine too. One for her eyes only. What was she even going to do with it? It was silly. She almost told the cashier never mind. He looked at her in a weird way. She just knew it. He counted the money slowly. It was an empty day, as most people were at work or school. Her cheeks grew a crimson red, the heat creeping up the back of her neck. Pennie realized she was getting a little off track and needed to take her insulin.

Making her way back to the van, she noticed how empty the parking lot was. It made her feel like a teen who ditched school for a run on the town. She let out a sigh, looking

down at the items she purchased. She didn't even know what to do with them. Pushing open the side door, she pulled out the cooler, a small relief from the sticky weather. She prepared the needle, standing with her back towards the street. Over the hum of the machinery she had parked by, she thought she heard footsteps. Pennie turned around to find someone she thought she knew, but she couldn't quite make out. As he grabbed her, she stuck the needle into the side of his neck, pushing down the top. There wasn't even anything in there yet. Just air. He stumbled back out of shock, but quickly returned to the attack. Pennie remembered just one thing from her self defense class in eighth grade. She slammed her palm into his jaw and he fell backwards into her van, across the dirty, grey fabric lined with blue stripes. His collapsed body almost looked like he'd fallen asleep right there. Pennie was surprised she had actually managed to knock someone out. She looked at his body and then closely at his face. Pennie wasn't sure if he looked like someone she went to school with or an actor she'd seen on television. His breathing became shallow. Scared, she felt for a pulse. It was there. Pennie tried to pull him out, but his weight solidified him. Panicking, it was easier to fold his legs in on himself and slam the door shut.

Impulsive

Someone who commits risky actions. To be or not to be done without much thought.

Pennie was halfway across town, nearly two hours away, before she realized she should have made different choices. She pulled into the only place she knew. With her hands tight on the wheel, she realized she'd still been shaking. It took her a moment to realize where she was. She put her car in park and looked around, noticing the curb riddled with

chalk drawings of dogs and misspelled words. It all seemed colorful and welcoming. The street lined in gorgeous trees, shading her from the world. The grass seemed brighter, more alive. She sat outside her childhood home. That meant she was further than home than she planned to be. Hours away. She cried over the thought of it all. The realization hit when she felt her knee throbbing; her jeans ribbed, exposing her skin covered in blood. At least it was her own. Sure, it was self-defense. She could call the cops. But hadn't she attacked him too? And now? Now, he's in the back of her van. So, now on top of everything else, she's kidnapped him. Man-napped?

Being impulsive was either the best or the worst thing. Perhaps it was all about shifting your view. There are some things you would never do. For example, murder. Not that that's what happened, but what if the circumstances had changed? What if they deserved it? What if they had committed a crime? Does a double negative make something right? Are the lens shifted?

Feeling sick and scared, Pennie found something she could control and pulled out a clean needle, to complete her daily shot. Then she pulled out her phone to call her mom, but through blurry eyes, she saw someone, Josie, her childhood best friend, She paused on the sidewalk, squinted, and then waved at her excitedly. Pennie rolled down the window.

"Oh my god! I thought it was you! How are you? Wait, are you okay?"

Josie rattled the handle as if asking to be let into the van, as Pennie shook her head. Stepping away, Josie took in the scene. Pennie hated that she was standing here. Sure they had been best friends, but they hadn't spoken since high school ended. Of course, they saw what the other posted on social media and left sweet comments, but this was an entirely

different situation. That was life through a lens and filters. Josie was always pushy about things, making Pennie okay with the fact that they just seemed to grow apart. Once Pennie moved three hours away, due to her father's new job and her college acceptance, she figured it was just meant to be. Perhaps they weren't ever meant to be long term friends. Maybe they were just the type of friends you know growing up and laugh about good times with at a high school reunion. This certainly wasn't the reunion Pennie had ever expected.

"Please. Let me in."

This was clearly a demand. Pennie wasn't often given a choice with Josie. If anything, she had only been offered a small role in Josie's life as a best friend. Pennie was so used to following orders, she clicked the door to unlock, ashamed she had even taken so long in the first place.

Abnormal

Someone who is out of the ordinary; perhaps not seen in the best light. Straying from the boundaries; an unknown mystery.

Perhaps what scared Pennie the most was what the best choice was. She didn't know what her options were and although there is no set time on things like this, she felt like she was running out of it.

Josie came back from her garage, holding a rope. Pennie glanced around the streets as she rushed Josie into the van. She hopped in and they sped off to the nearest park. Pennie stayed glued to the driver's seat as Josie used her girl scout skills to tie up his hands and feet. This was just in case he happened to wake up and attack, again. Pennie was too scared to say

anything but the truth; everything had happened so fast, she began to question herself. Josie, always the brave one, suggested that Pennie just to go to the cops.

“They would understand.”

Josie climbed over to cup holders into the front seat and twisted her head around to really look at him.

“Do you know who this is?”

Pennie felt overwhelmed by the sudden question.

“No, I don’t know who he is!”

No! Just look at him! Like, really look.”

“Josie, I told you I don’t know what’s going on. Much less do I know some random stranger who decided that I would be the perfect victim to attack in the middle of the day! Why in the world would I know him?”

“Calm down Pennie! Doesn’t he look like that one actor from...?”

Josie snapped her fingers, trying to remember. She let out an uneasy laugh.

“That one show about the teens who have to solve mysteries. You know and then they get stuck in that weird world”

“Josie! Why does that even matter? This guy is literally in the back of the car right now!”

“Oh my god Pennie, all you have to do is explain what happened and they’ll believe you. Trust me. It was self-defense.”

Pennie looked at him laying across her backseat. Something moving in the distance caught her eye. On the other side of the park, she watched a cop on patrol She looked back

to the stranger; seeing him lay there made her feel uneasy. He seemed so out of place, laying there with the random receipts on the floor and a lost smiley face bouncy ball hidden under the seat.

“What if we just leave him here? It’s not like anybody would know.”

Pennie felt the panic rush over her again. Josie had completely lost her mind. She did this to herself. Her breathing became shallow, trying to escape her. Josie was far too calm. Pennie felt the tears sting at her eyes, the mascara burning, leaving her an utter mess, wrapped up in a blanket of emotions, trying to hide from the situation.

“I’m sure he’s just gonna wake up after his body recovers and lucky for him, he’ll find himself in a park. Probably much better than he deserves.”

Pennie nodded at the thought of some sort of acceptance as Josie continued in the background. How could she remain so calm? The idea of thinking calm made Pennie’s heart race. She began to question how well she really knew her. Had she always been so good under pressure? And then what would happen if someone found him? What if that police car decided to make another round? Damn it, she should have called someone when she had the chance. Now she was stuck with Josie making the tough decisions.

“At least with two people, we can probably get him out. I mean, wasn’t that your problem last time? Come on.”

Josie got out of the van, sliding open the door, his legs bounced out like a jack in the box. Such an evil creation. Pennie got out too, hesitantly. She reached out to check his pulse now. With shaky hands and breath, she waited. Waited for something. Anything. She pulled back her hand, turning to Josie.

“Check his pulse.”

“You just did.”

“I know but just do it.”

Josie reached for his neck. Nothing. They both grabbed his wrist hoping to find something there; some sort of hidden hint that he was still here. Nothing.

Panic

Someone who takes over your soul and fills every open space with worry, causing wild behavior. A sudden anxiety that overcomes you.

Once when her parent's weren't home, Pennie stalked through their room, looking for something exciting. As she had grown older, they didn't seem as close as before. Pennie was sure there was a reason hiding somewhere in that room. The room was dark and the lamp, covered in red fabric dimmed the lighting and tinted the room. Their closet was so full, clothes on the floor got stuck in the tiny wheels of the mirror door. Any sound downstairs made Pennie freeze and listen closely before she continued. Creating a stack of clothing, she pushed through until she found something interesting. Nothing gave an explanation for the distance, besides her father's cigarettes tucked into an old jacket's pocket hidden in a gym bag full of junk. Nothing quite interesting, at the time. Josie had been bugging her to steal the cigarettes just so they could try it. They had both accidentally caught her dad smoking in the backyard when they came home early from the mall. Pennie sat on the dirty carpet in front of the closet holding the pack, playing with the edge of the ripped package, debating. Pennie couldn't bring herself to do it though. She pushed it back into the jacket and threw the pile of clothes back on top of it and left the room. Josie said she

understood, but she kept making subtle comments about it for weeks. There was one thing she never told Josie about. She never told her about the gun she had found at the bottom of the gym bag. She had never told anyone. Her parents were strict and scared of any sort of harm to another individual. She wondered why her father had it. She couldn't bring herself to ask him. It was weird to her because he just didn't seem the type to own one.

Pennie and Josie race through the farmland, knowing not a lot of traffic resided there. Josie seemed to gain her calm again, but Pennie let it build up in her stomach. She felt sick; she wanted to go home; she wanted to feel safe and happy and calm. She didn't understand how some teen extravaganza turned out this way. And what had she even done? Bought some stupid items and drove to her old neighborhood. Gone to some idiotic party. What kind of teen's life was this? This was far from some eighties' movies. This was some other sick movie. She couldn't commit to any one thing, making her vulnerable and ultimately alone, but could she commit to the crime if it presented itself so easily? As they pass the cop, Pennie pulls over on the side of the road, getting out of the van. Leaving it running, she leaves Josie calling after her. At the end of the road, she finds the only thing that seemed to make sense.

Standing at the phone booth, looking through the damaged windows, carved with desecrate messages—those of hope and others falling apart. Pennie wondered which one she should take. To suffer through, leaving the booth and making the right choices, trusting in the world. Or to break down and cry to the only person who could save her. Growing up an only child meant protection and discipline. A double-edged sword. It just depended on the

right words used. What would save her now? She felt anxious as the phone rang, calling out to the unknown. She hoped they would answer. There was no answer. Pennie really was alone in this.

Josie came up, watching as Pennie hung up the phone after a few seconds, eyes on the street. Coming out of the booth, Pennie walks past Josie's annoyed posture and look on her face, back to the van.

"Where are you going?"

Pennie ignores her.

"You're right. Let's just bury him. No one would miss him anyways."

Advice was something Pennie had always taken with a grain of salt. She knew this was her first real step to becoming an adult. Throw away your fear and do what needs to be done. Regardless. Pennie tried to talk herself into it. A stranger meant nothing to her. How could he? Take away the connection and it's not like there was proof. Josie had promised worse things in the past. It scared her to think it was so easy.

Missing.

Someone who made the wrong choices and ended up elsewhere, whether that be on their own behalf or someone else's.

two poems

Masa Shah

my abloom angel

opens up her ribs
as if they were wings
and i, an astray
nomad, crawl
inside.

her warm flesh
swaddles me.
her heart
beat pulses
around
my abandoned
body.

i am cradled
with her inhales
and exhales.

her body is lush;
fruits & flowers
blossom from
kidneys & lungs.

inside her, i remember
the scavengers within
myself.

i feel the guttural croaks
of two ravens
inside my belly.

she begs,
read and her voice
booms and echoes.

veins curl into arabic
letters.

i cry
i am illiterate

read she
demands.

feathers cluster
in my throat as ravens
push themselves up. i feel
their claws clench
and pull.

*read, in the name of your lord
who has created you from broken
wings and the ashes of a widow's
nails*

my angel's body tightens
around me.

i open my mouth
to cough.
the ravens.
recite from within me:

*lā 'Ilāha 'Illā allah,
muḥammadun rasūl allah*

mimicking our
beloved arabian
prophet.
each letter sung
in a divine passion.

my eyes widen
with ecstasy.
and my own black
wings spread.

the ecosystem

a doe dozes off from summer
heat in a pond
her ears twitch as the pollen
swims through the air

tiny snakes nibble up the
seeds mushed between her hooves.

a larger snake gently
circles its tongue
along the doe's underbelly
the sharpness cuts
through the doughy skin

and the snake burrows
inside
laying her eggs
in the empty stomach
of this sleeping doe
the snake circles
the eggs tightly.

the friction providing
warmth for her young.
such an intimate decay
bodies inside bodies
die to form life into another
life.

“John's Journal”
by Michael Alerich

Journal Entry Filter: Newest to Oldest

January 15th, 2225

David and I buried Jane today.

I won't say where in case this journal is discovered. Jane's tens of thousands of maniac followers believe she's a goddess, and they'll never stop searching for her. The world is better off if she remains hidden beneath the ground where she can't hurt me or anyone else. I won't have someone digging her up and setting her free.

David and I wrapped her in steel chains and threw her down a hole. The powerful magnets at the bottom were strong enough to hold her in place long enough for us to do what we needed to do. I was able to jump down there with her and give her one last kiss. Jane pleaded with me not to do it, not to leave her like this forever. She screamed and begged until the cement filled the hole enough to cover her face, muting her cries.

When I close my eyes, I can still hear her crying. It's eating me up inside. I still love her.

Jane, as you lay there in the darkness, I hope some small part of you recognizes my love, when you stop to consider the place I chose for you. You used to love it here, remember? You said it had the most beautiful view in all of the United States, before things changed. Before the sky turned brown, you and I would come here to camp. We'd spend hours holding hands, just looking up at the stars in the clear night air above our little piece of paradise.

I already miss you.

I've kept this journal going for two hundred and thirty-five years. Looking back, I see you've been in every one of my entries, Jane. I've thought about you every day since we first met.

You're everything to me.

I wish things had been different. I'm sorry, Jane.

This will be my last entry.

January 30th, 2205

Jane killed one of my great granddaughters today. Little Victoria was only fourteen years old and had her whole life ahead of her. Jane knew how much I doted on this descendant of mine. I demanded to know if she'd done it just to get back at me.

Jane said it was a mercy, that no child should grow up in this horrible world. That if people couldn't survive outside anymore, then the Earth needed a reset. A complete purge of all of humanity, and then her and I could rebuild. Together, we could make the world green and beautiful again. She reached out her hand to me and asked me to come with her and start over.

Start over. It was a phrase that conveyed multiple meanings, I'm sure. She didn't just mean the world, she meant *us*. I don't know what my expression told her, but she lit up with happiness as she looked up at me. No woman on the planet could match the fiery passion in Jane's eyes, and they were now blazing with an intensity I hadn't *ever* seen. I'd fallen in love with Jane over and over throughout the years, and it was happening again. We'd both made a lot of mistakes during our relationship, some many couples would never be able to come back from. We aren't a normal couple, though, are we Jane? I won't lie and say I hadn't almost gone with you right then.

It was the wailing of Sarah, Victoria's mother, that brought me back to reality. I stood over the broken body of the girl Jane had killed. That moment seemed frozen in time. I was forced to decide between my most recent family, of whom I've become very fond, and the woman I'd loved for centuries. I thought of the amazing moments I'd had with Jane, but I also thought about Victoria's hopeful smile. She was happy to be alive, despite the challenges of survival in today's world. Her happiness reminded me of the feelings I used to have about life, feelings I hadn't felt in...I don't know how long. In that moment, I wasn't yet ready to see an Earth without smiling girls like Victoria.

Instead of going with Jane, I told her I'd never "start over" with a child murderer. She called me a fucking hypocrite. I told her she was insane. That set her off, and she attacked me. The fight lasted hours. Before she ran away, she told me she'd be back and would kill everyone else I cared about, until I had no one but her.

I need to get my family back into hiding again. I hope they'll understand.

I shouldn't have reached out to Jane and invited her over, but I still love her and thought maybe we could work it out. After this, I don't think it's possible. I can't risk giving her another chance.

Jane is dangerous to my family and everyone else still alive today. Something needs to be done about her. I'm going to find David and convince him to help me track down her down.

We can't kill Jane, but I have an idea on how to stop her.

January 15th, 2195

Jane changed the world today, like she always said she would. Of course, it was on January 15th, our discovery anniversary date. It was no accident. She knew what she was doing. She wanted my attention, and she got it.

President Daniels was speaking at an event in New Los Angeles, and Jane showed up. Jane marched all the way up to the president. Everyone else was shocked that she was able to make it that far, through the barriers, through the armed guards, and through the hail of gunfire they unleashed on her. As if bullets could harm her. As if their flesh, bone, and innards would not so easily yield to the power of her strikes.

On live TV, Jane ripped the oxygen mask off the face of President Daniels. Jane held her up by the back of the neck, like a trophy. She was showing off, letting everyone know what was within her power to do. It took the president several minutes to die, gasping for air. Many in the crowd tried to intervene. During those moments, Jane killed anyone who approached her, sometimes using the Presidents body as a weapon. Dozens lay dead at her feet before it was accepted that she just couldn't be stopped.

After the gunfire had faded, Jane addressed the cameras and gave a speech she'd probably been planning for decades. She went on about the inhospitable state of the world now, compared to the paradise it was two hundred years ago. She talked about how she would no longer tolerate broken promises to fix the world. She called for change and promised the same would happen to the next president, of any country, should they refuse to use all of power at their disposal to affect that change. She said that not only would politicians be targeted, but *anybody* who she felt wasn't directly contributing to making the planet livable again would get the same treatment. I swear, as she looked into the camera, she was speaking directly to me.

I'm going to take my family into hiding. They're vulnerable, even if Jane couldn't kill me. I don't think my grandchildren will want to go with me, but my great grandchildren have sensible minds. I told them I'd protect them. They'll come.

I'll call David tonight and tell him to find some place to lay low for a while, too. I don't think it's possible to lay lower than he is, but he'll appreciate the heads up.

January 15th, 2150

Jane decided to call us all together. David and I were reluctant at first, because of what

happened twenty-three years ago, but Jane said it was all behind her now. She said David and I were assholes, but there were more important things to focus on now. She said the three of us could stop what was happening to the world. She talked about when the water still tasted good, when people didn't need to wear oxygen masks for three quarters of the year, during the bad seasons.

She said talking won't cut it anymore. That we needed to start removing the obstacles preventing the earth from healing.

Her ideas were crazy. She talked about *killing* people. Important ones. She doesn't care if she's found out for what she is. She said none of us should be worried anymore. We're immortal, after all. What do we have to scared about?

Has she lost her mind? I think she has.

David and I agreed we wouldn't help her. We said we had new lives now. Families.

I shouldn't have mentioned that. She turned on me with a look of fury that terrified me. Beyond madness, beyond hate. I can't describe it. She'd outlived every patient in the history of mental health practice. I don't think there's a condition yet discovered that could describe her state of mind. The Jane I knew was long gone. I told her all this.

She said I owed her for what I did to her. She promised if I helped her, she'd forgive me, and we could be together again. Not anytime soon, but some day.

Jane said if we denied her, then she'd treat it as a betrayal. She gave us an ultimatum: assist her in saving the world and we'd be even. If we refused, she'd save it herself, and then punish us. She'd balance the scales for what we'd done to her.

I asked for a decade or two to decide, while I got things situated with the youngest of my family. Jane said she needed to know now.

I told her no. She left. Didn't say a word. a word. I hope I made the right decision.

January 15th, 2127

It took me a while to write this entry. I'm finally sober again.

Fifteen years ago...at least, I think it was fifteen years ago, I was with Jane at one of her granddaughter's homes. It might have been her great granddaughter's home, but that doesn't matter. My memory of that period of my life was really fuzzy, and sometimes I'm not sure what was real or what was a hallucination. Those days, I was high for months on end. The

amount of shit I was taking on a daily basis would be lethal for someone afflicted with mortality.

Anyway. David was there at the party, too, the first time I'd seen him in person in twenty years, though we kept in communication. He hadn't aged a day. Ha. It was good to see him.

I asked you, Jane, if you were ready to be together again. You said not yet. Things were going great with your newest husband, and you were happy.

You didn't even ask me how I'd been doing. You hadn't called or texted in years, even though you knew my wife had died and I told you I wouldn't marry again. Did you hate me that much? I looked at you, all happy with your newest husband. I hope you enjoyed him, Jane. He was young and strong that night, but it won't last. He'll grow old and be in the ground someday too, like the rest of our spouses. Why can't you see that you and I are the only ones meant for each other?

I showed up to your party with the intention to remain sober the whole time. What happened at the end of the party was David's fault, not mine. David brought the Chimera we both smoked. It's the only thing that still worked for me. Beer long ago stopped getting me drunk, but Chimera, the newest shit, that beautiful combination of amphetamines and opiates did the trick.

So, I got high. I'm sorry I dropped the baby. It wasn't on purpose, I swear it.

Your grandson, the father of the baby, shouldn't have attacked me. I didn't mean to kill him, or your new husband, but I was surprised. What were they thinking, attacking *me*? We've talked about this. If we are going to be around each other's families, they are supposed to be briefed beforehand. Accidents happen, and mortals are so fragile. If you didn't warn them, then you're to blame for the incident just as much as I am.

You'll have more great grand kids, Jane, and you can find another husband. Considering the grand scheme of things, what the hell are you so mad about? Get over it already.

January 15th, 2094

I've been seeing Doctor Leslie, a relationship therapist, for a few months now. Therapy wasn't something that existed when Jane and I first started seeing each other, and I can't say I entirely understand it, but I figured it wouldn't hurt to get a professional opinion on our relationship.

I told her Jane and I had an on-again off-again sort of relationship, going back a really long time. I didn't tell her our secret, though, of course. If I did, she'd probably try to steer the

conversation down a different path, maybe accuse me of some sort of psychosis or something. I just let her know that we've known each other since we were practically kids, and we've gotten together and broken up more times than I can count.

She asked me to tell her about Jane. I told her about the mundane things, like how beautiful she was, and funny, and brave and all those insignificant things lesser people see in each other. I told her how we were the perfect match. How *destiny* brought us together, and how when the last man on earth crumbles to dust and when the sun no longer shines in the sky, we will still have each other.

I thought the doctor would be able to tell me what was wrong with Jane and me. Maybe give me a straight answer about what we need to do to make both of us happy. She didn't have an answer. She suggested for both of us to come see her, instead of just me.

Today, I asked Jane if she would go see Doctor Leslie with me. She said no. She said I was only asking because she broke up with me a year ago. "Taking a break," I mean. She said I should continue seeing the doctor though, because it would be good for me.

What's that supposed to mean?

Well, if she doesn't want to go with me, then what's the point in going to therapy? I'm going to call Doctor Leslie tomorrow and let her know I'm done.

January 15th, 2093

Jane and I are taking a bit of a break, apparently.

Not breaking up, she promised. Just taking a break. Yeah, right. Whatever.

She said she wants to spend time with her family for a little while, and I could spend some time with mine. They grow old so fast, she said. Blink, and they're gone.

We argued. I told her that I only wanted to be with her. After my last wife died, I didn't want to start another relationship and watch that woman grow old and die, too. I just can't do it anymore.

Jane, you're the only one for me. Please don't leave me.

January 15, 2075

I'm not sure how long I'll keep doing these entries. I feel a bit lost for words.

I've tried to focus on the significant moments of my life for my journal entries. I'd think I would have been motivated to write about the deaths of the last of the children of Bianca and I, and how that made me feel, but I couldn't bring myself to sit down in front of the keyboard and type.

Since before I started this journal, I've found it hard to write about my children.

I've loved every one of them, and I'll cherish the memories made. However, does it make me a bad person if I'm *not* devastated when they are gone? How many times can a heart feel pain before it numbs? Does your heart break still, Jane?

There was a time long ago I would have really, truly mourned, but I fear that point in my life is long behind me. I've buried many of my children, and I'll bury many more, like a normal man will do with his beloved pets.

My children, unlike me, are mortal and are bound to the spinning of the wheel. The wheel turns, life ends, and life goes on. I may look upon the wheel, but ever shall I stand apart from it.

January 15, 2056

This year has been difficult. I feel this way sometimes when the wheel makes a full rotation. Mercilessly ever turning, ushering the death of a generation and the birth of the next.

My wife Bianca passed away a little less than a year ago. When she went, I was holding her hand as she lay in the hospital bed. I pleaded with her not to leave, not yet. To just hold on. I think she could hear me, because I could see the tears beneath her closed eyes.

Bianca was eighty-two years old. We'd met in Los Angeles, shortly after she'd moved there from the east coast, seeking to find fame in Hollywood as an actress. She was so beautiful, then, so full of life, and I know she would have succeeded in her goals if she would have continued down that path. Bianca had the same straight brown hair, chocolate brown eyes, and easy smile as Jane. They even had a similar laugh. I'd fallen in love, right there when I first met her.

Bianca wanted to be seen by the Hollywood moguls, but instead, she was seen by *me*. I promised her a different life, one that would be filled with adventure, excitement, and the love of a man for all of eternity.

As Bianca lay there, all I could think of was me and you, Jane, and I pictured in my mind that it was *your* hand I was holding, and that we were both old, dying and ready to see what comes next.

January 16th, 2028

It feels weird writing an entry on the sixteenth, but I was inspired.

I'm so happy right now. I hadn't seen Jane in person for two and half years. There were some things I thought I was going to say, about how she was wrong, but instead I just ran to her and kissed her.

I should have apologized sooner, Jane. I'll be better, I swear.

I let you tell me all about your plans for saving the world. I'll go to your marches, I'll hold signs up with you, and I can give up meat, too. I don't know if your ideas will fix things, but I'll do it for you, Jane.

January 15th, 2028

David arranged our discovery anniversary meeting this time. He was living in Tokyo, now, and begged us to fly out to him. I almost bailed. Money is pretty tight nowadays. I'd made some investments that didn't really work out, and I'd lost a lot of my discretionary funds. I made it work, though.

I got here before Jane. Her flight got delayed, and she won't be in until tomorrow. That ruined the energy of the trip a bit, since we wouldn't be meeting on the actual discovery anniversary, but that's alright. David and I were able to catch up. We used to be so close. He was still my best friend, but we both had our own thing going on.

What did David and I talk about mostly? You, Jane, of course.

David wanted to know how things were going between you and me. He knew we were living on different coasts, now. He asked if things were okay. I lied to him and said that things were great. I said we still talked every day and saw each other in person as much as we could. I didn't tell him you hadn't returned my calls or texts since that argument about the protests. You wanted to know why we weren't doing more to help fix things in the country. Jane, we've been through this before. *We can't fix things*. It doesn't matter how much we want things to be fixed, it's *never* going to happen. Just enjoy your damn life.

Were you lying about your flight being delayed? I don't know, but maybe it's better if you don't show up.

January 15th, 2023

David, Jane and I told our current spouses the truth about us. This was our third time doing so as a group, and I feel like it's become easier making that admission. Maybe I've grown to be better at making the revelation easier to accept, or maybe the times have just changed. Every generation seems to become more open minded than the last.

Regardless how many times we've done it, it's always a strange experience making the admission to our spouses, but we agreed we had to tell them eventually. My wife Bianca and I met when she was in her early twenties. Lately, people have asked if she was my mother. She had questions.

David's wife didn't have much of a reaction at all. I'm pretty sure he'd already told her, and just pretended he was telling her for the first time.

Bianca was surprisingly accepting and said that the existence of immortals totally made sense. Wow. The twenty first century is a great time to be alive. We probably could have said we were vampires or aliens or something and they would have believed us.

Jane, you and I admitted to our spouses that we were still seeing each other, but we had enough love in our hearts for both of them. We weren't just friends and business partners, we were lovers who'd been together a very, very long time. We explained how we'd learned the best way to keep our romance alive was to have our own hobbies and interests, rather than spending every moment of eternity with one another. We'd tried that before, and we'd learned our lesson. There were too many fights, literal fights sometimes, and though we loved each other, we needed a system to keep our love strong.

We'd revealed our secret multiple times in the past, with varying degrees of success. My wife didn't even slap me. She had more questions about my past than anything about Jane and me. Like I said, the twenty first century has been a great time to be alive.

Today was great day. I love you, Jane.

January 15th, 1990

I'm going to start an electronic journal on a computer. I was doing it by hand, but I lost the journal. I'll save copies on a disk to make sure that doesn't happen again.

I don't know how often I'll write. I'm not much of a writer and it feels like a chore to get these entries done, but I think they're important.

I'll try to get the entries done on January 15th, the anniversary date of when it all started. I'd

told the others we should always try to get together on January 15th, and that I'll write about the day we had. It'll be a fun record to look back on someday.

These records aren't just for us, though. I think the children of the future will want to read about us, in the times before we became heroes.

A first entry should probably talk about how it all started. I'm not willing to be specific. I won't say what year or where we found the fountain, either. My memories of the night are fuzzy at this point, but I will do my best to recount the events that made me what I am.

By we, I mean me, my best friend David, and Jane, the girl I'd been courting. There was a tremendous crack, coming from somewhere in the woods, beyond the park we'd been having our picnic. We were young and dumb, so of course we went to investigate. I'd explored the woods often, and so I was familiar and comfortable leading my friends to where I believed the noise to have originated.

A cave had appeared in the side of the mountain, where there hadn't once been a cave. A foul odor drifted from it, along with an eerie fog. As we approached the mouth, a terrible sound emanated from the depths. I cannot say if it was a scream, or a mere whisper. To this day, I'm unsure if I experienced the sound through my ears or if it was something that existed entirely in my mind. I was afraid, but I could not turn away. David, Jane and I entered the cave.

Down, down we went, a gradual descent that took us far beneath the earth. The tunnel walls were naked and neatly carved without a trace of imperfection. The three of us didn't say anything as we walked side by side. It was like some invisible rope was attached to our hearts and drew us forward.

The tunnel opened into an impossibly vast cavern, the borders of which existed beyond the limits of my vision. The cavern was empty save for the stone fountain and the thing that guarded it. The creature, monster, alien, or whatever it was had to crouch to fit inside the room. It indicated to the fountain before us and spoke its strange language in the terrible tongue we'd heard prior to entering.

It communicated that we had two choices: we could share the fountain's waters with everyone on Earth and eradicate all disease, or the three of us could split it amongst ourselves and live forever.

Jane, David, and I discussed our options. It's interesting to me now how comfortable we were at the time. I believe the thing was influencing our emotions somehow, to soften the fear we should have been feeling.

We told the thing what we decided. It bade us to approach the fountain. I stepped into the water, which was pleasantly warm. I remember looking up to see the thing bringing down a

finger larger than a mountain and pressing me under the water. I struggled until everything went black.

I have no memory of what happened after that. I remember stepping out of the cave, but when I turned around, the cave was gone. I was left with a new feeling inside of me, something that was absent before I'd bathed in the fountain. Jane and David stood next to me. They felt the same sensation I did. We were immortal, now. Somehow, we just *knew* it.

The world is an incredible place, but it has its problems. The three of us promised we'd use our new gift to make the world a better place.

three poems

Hannah Schultz

Ode to the David

They say you're made of marble.
Staring up at your summit, I think
you're made of snow.

In color, your hair would be yellow,
flaxen like ripe lemons.
Your cheeks the lightest pink,
the inside of a peach.
Your muscles somehow ripple
without moving—maybe vibrating
in unison with our footsteps so subtle
that no one can notice.

We watch you through lenses and screens,
secretly hoping to catch a giant in motion.
I watch you so close that my eyes see a phantom
twitch in your knee but I blink
and you're still. Your weighted slouch
has brought us to our knees.

You've trailed Goliath's severed
head by some strands of his hair.
But we watch you, knowing
what you could do if your casing
would allow it.

The David, I wonder if the artist gave you
a heart—buried deep under layers of ice,
sand, marble. Bones—under centuries old
dust too sacred to clean.

What would happen if a member of your audience

jeered instead, if they pulled a matchstick
from their pocket and struck it on your ankle bone?
What would happen if someone hefted to your podium
just to handle your thigh, or if they brushed
your cheek to check your temperature?
What moral impact would it have if they took
a hammer to your toe,
just to see if you'd break.

To the straight woman I think I'm in love with:

I wait for you. I hear laughter
from a far away conversation.

I don't like the taste
of laughter. I keep my mouth shut.

You're coming down the staircase.
Your hand feels railing, hits every curve—

and I think I'm the only one that notices
the way it sounds when you touch your skin.

The scent of your skin—like freshly washed
strawberries. I'd eat every one.

Instead, we share bread and wine. We talk about God
and you think She's a man. You tell me

about your ex boyfriends. Now,
you're *switching to girls*. Still, I lick

the lipstick off your teeth.
I taste blood.

Dirt gets in my mouth, I leave
it there. You touch my skin,

and my scales. Horns pierce my temples,
but you pretend to like me anyway.

A man walks up to me,
asks my name—you give him yours.

You laugh like it tastes good.

I was sitting at the window

when the dove hit.
No cracked
or broken glass.
Only an outline
like a crucifix
from the impact.
Two outstretched
wings, tailfeathers,
the side profile
of a head and a beak.
A man outside
palmed the dove
with a napkin,
wrapped its body.
A red stained
linen shroud.
Soft grey feathers
on the ground.
No blood—just
a tender neck
sagged to the side.

“Paradise”

by

Cara Musashi

The first memory I have of the forest is as a young girl, waking up to a dark night sky full of stars. They were unlike any I'd ever seen. They laughed in glimmers and giggled in shimmers, each alive and sparkling in their own way, glowing brighter as they said hello. I sat up surrounded by brightness, the ground pulsing in rolling waves of blue. To my left, moss reached up trees and over rocks in green vibrations.

“You’re far from home.”

I looked around but saw nothing.

“Are you running away, as well?” it spoke again, a low, silky tone.

“Who are you?” I asked. “Like you.”

I hadn’t learned what that meant, yet. “How?”

“...How?” it responded.

“How are you like me?”

“...Ah. You must be new.”

Was that supposed to be an insult?

I spent more time listening to the wind as it caressed my cheeks while breathing in the crisp air. The voice said no more, so I decided to ask for myself.

“Where are you?”

“...In the trees,” it replied.

“Are you the forest?” “No.”

“Can you come down, then?”

“If I wanted to.”

“So you don’t?”

It never replied. I guess that was my answer.

I spent hours in that spot before I mustered the curiosity to get up and explore. There were rivers and fish, too, their fins glowing in a rainbow of colors, no two looking the

same. Lantern-like pods curved over the streams, casting purple and pink beams upon the water's surface, reflecting back at me when I peered into them. When I dipped my hand into the water, microorganisms returned the touch, creating a turquoise shimmer that remained on my skin even after pulling away. I walked up to a tree that reached to the stars, blanketed by pulsing peach tinted vines that were slightly fuzzy to the touch. Despite their soft exterior, they were more than strong enough to allow me to scale the tree.

The forest seemed to go on for acres. I found myself traversing branches bigger than a skyscraper, chasing fireflies that flickered in pastels. Even after reaching the treetops, I could only see more foliage in every direction. I propped myself up against the trunk, breathing in the crisp air. For a moment, I thought I saw a pair of eyes gazing back at me. There was nothing there. Just the sound of leaves chattering in the breeze. The longer I sat, the more I questioned. Why was I in a forest? Is there a reason color flowed through the roots of the trees and everything in between? Where was I before this?

I don't remember falling asleep, but I dreamt. In the dream, I found myself in a house. It was small, the walls painted a dull beige. There wasn't much on them, just a few shelves lined with books and frames, but I couldn't make out what they contained. A static-like veil kept them hidden. I crept along the wall until I came to a room, slowly inching my head around the corner. There was a woman. She looked frustrated, angry, maybe. She was yelling, the sheer sound of it reverberating off the walls, causing them to quiver. Across from her, a man. He was yelling, too. I couldn't hear what they were saying. It was muffled. They went back and forth for a long time. I just watched. That's all I could do. Suddenly, the man lunged forward and struck the woman across the face. I flinched back, pulling myself behind the safety of the wall. When I awoke, it was still dark, though the forest was more than alive with energy. I jolted upright from where I had been slumped against the tree. Creatures chirped and birds screeched. My heart was pounding out of my chest.

"Good morning."

It was the voice again, only this time, closer. I turned my head to find a panther lounging upon the branch neighboring mine. He was as melanistic as the shadows themselves. I could hardly see him in the dim lighting of the treetops.

For a moment, I wondered if I was still dreaming. “You’re the one who spoke to me earlier.” “Indeed,” the panther rumbled.

I found out the black panther lived in the forest. He had for a while. Longer than I’d even been alive. He took great pleasure in reminding me of that fact, even though I couldn’t tell him how long I’d been alive. Only that I’d just woken up there. I tried not to focus on everything I didn’t know.

He wasn’t very talkative, but he showed me around the forest, leaping from branch to branch. He always waited for me if I fell behind, pausing to look back before continuing onward.

He taught me how to hunt. We caught fish from the rivers, and he told me which plants were safe to eat, and which weren’t. When I questioned the seemingly eternal night, he snorted and shook the water off his pelt. He said the sun appearing was like waiting for a comet. I didn’t really know what that meant, but I figured he meant that it hardly ever happened. He said that if I stayed to see the sun rise it would be a true miracle. I said that I would.

He laughed. I don’t think he believed me.

A few days passed like that. At least, I called them days since the sun never rose. When I went to sleep and dreamt about the house with beige walls and woke up back in the forest, that was a day. My dreams were similar—always involving the couple—but they took place in different areas. Sometimes they yelled at each other across the house. Sometimes it was over quickly. Other times, it lasted several minutes.

One night, I had a dream that was somewhere in between. I was seated in the kitchen, mulling over a dinner that I couldn’t taste but ate anyway. I always looked at the picture frames. They were less fuzzy than before. I could make out blobs of color. Many of the pictures contained three of varying colors and sizes. Others had only one big one. I wondered what they were. The woman was washing dishes. I could see the steam rising up off of the running water, making me wonder how she didn’t burn her hands clean off. Without thinking, I asked:

“How do you not burn your hands?”

“Years of practice,” she laughed.

I was shocked she’d heard me. Before I could respond, the front door swung open, slamming against the wall. I flinched. Her mood instantly changed, steeling herself for what was to come. The man walked into the room, muttering under his breath.

“Is everything alright?” the woman asked.

He whipped around to glare at her, pointing a finger in her face.

“Mind your own damn business,” he hissed.

They started arguing and everything became muffled again.

The panther was always there, waiting for me. We got breakfast, I helped prepare it. I was getting better at the whole hunting thing. In the quiet moments after burying the bones of fish, I found myself curious.

“Do you have a name?”

“No,” he rumbled. “I don’t care for one.” “Why not?”

The panther rolled over, stretching out his lithe frame. “It makes no difference to me.” I stared, watching his fur discolor as it rubbed back and forth against the ground, disrupting the sheen across his coat. I didn’t understand what he meant. How could anyone not want a name? After minutes of watching him lounge underneath the beams of purple light cascading from a nearby plant, I’d finally gotten it.

“Can I give you a name?”

He exhaled, a deep rumble passing through his throat before he opened his eyes. “If you must.”

Something about the way he relented made me happy. This was probably the longest conversation we’d had up until this point.

“Too much for your little brain to handle?” he teased. “No. I already have it. I was just thinking.”

“...That’s dangerous,” he muttered, easing his head back down onto his front paws.

Even for the short time I’d known him, I knew he loved to be a bit of a pain. Only when it wasn’t serious, though.

“Onyx.”

He didn't react. For a moment, I was worried he might not like it.

"Is that okay?"

He finally sat upright, shaking his fur off, sending leaves fluttering around us before turning to look at me. His expression remained unreadable. Just when I was about to say he could tell me it was terrible, he cut me off.

"It's not the worst."

We made our way through the forest, Onyx padding by my side, his large paws leaving bean-shaped prints in the moss like fireworks in his wake. Where were we going? I didn't know. Just not back where we started. Briefly, I wondered what the forest would be like if it were less colorful. Would it be scary? Is anything really scary when you have a panther at your side? Perhaps not. But the chirps and cries of forest creatures might come off as less magnificent if you take away the pulsing magenta flowers, yellow pill bugs, and blue dandelions. Despite his solitudinous disposition, his presence put me at ease.

"Do you dream?" I asked. "Sometimes."

"About what?" "Many things."

"Well, that's not helpful," I huffed.

He snorted, angling his head to look back at me. "Why the sudden interest?"

"Just curious," I mumbled.

He didn't question any further, just turned his gaze back to the non-existent path ahead and continued leading the way. I debated telling him about the dreams, but I couldn't find a way to bring it up without sounding crazy. He probably didn't want to hear about them, anyway. "Do you know how far we've come?" I asked.

"Not far enough," he grumbled.

That was all he ever told me. The days went on like that, walking, hunting, more walking, sleeping, dreaming, and repeating the process. While the forest and everything in it stayed the same, my dreams changed. They took place outside of the little beige house now. Sometimes it was in the streets or getting picked up from a large building surrounded by other people my age with backpacks on. I often stood around outside for long periods of time, just waiting while others left, accompanied by other people. Eventually, the woman

would walk up, waving to me with a smile on her face, despite the dark circles under her eyes. I always ran up and threw my arms around her, being careful not to squeeze too hard. I could still see the whites of bandages through the threads of her garnet sweater. We'd walk home in silence. I knew she was tired, so I didn't expect her to ask how my day was. I questioned whether I'd even be able to answer. For some reason, my mouth didn't like to cooperate with me when I dreamt.

Sometimes I had nightmares.

They still fought all the time. I was beginning to understand more and more of their words. The man was scolding her for not having dinner prepared by the time he got home. She told him that she had to pick me up from school and that if he had an issue with it, he could make his own dinner. He grabbed the knife she had been cutting onions with and slashed it across her cheek. I watched as crimson droplets stained the white tile before closing my eyes and turning away.

When I woke up, a shiver rattled down my spine. I moved to sit up only to notice that my hand had pressed against something other than the ground for support. Turning my head, I found my palm in contact with Onyx's flank. He was curled around me like an oversized scarf. "You were making quite the fuss in your sleep."

"Sorry," I replied, rubbing my eyes.

He didn't say anything, his eyes shifting across my face, landing on the ground. "Do you have nightmares?" I finally asked.

"Everyone has those."

He didn't seem worried when I told him about the dreams I'd been having. "They've been getting worse," I continued. "I wonder if I'll die in one."

He turned to face me with that unreadable gaze of his. "Perhaps so," he exhaled. "But will you allow every nightmare to reside with you for the rest of your existence?"

I shrugged.

It was silent for a few more minutes. I finally huffed, slumping back against Onyx. "What are yours, then?"

“Dreams?” he hummed. “Or nightmares?”

“...Both.”

He told me of dreams that I was expecting, ones that entailed him hunting as he pleased, in plains full of deer and wild hogs. Others he was able to lounge about as he pleased while rain fell from the sky above, dousing the forest in a layer of dew by the time morning came around. Very typical of Onyx, I thought.

His nightmares, on the other hand, were very different. They were plagued with destruction. The gnawing sound of chainsaws and heavy machinery shattered the peaceful nature of the forest, its vibrant colors forcefully siphoned out by unnaturally white spotlights that allowed metal beasts to bulldoze their way through as they pleased. The trees he enjoyed lounging in came crashing to the ground with loud cracks that echoed for miles, causing the ground to quake. Birds took to the sky, fleeing for their lives. Many of them didn't make it. Onyx's eyes are distant as he tells me many times he, too, didn't make it. He recalls one in which he was hunted down for the pelt on his back, forced to watch from outside his own body as he was dragged off and skinned. He shudders from his ears to the tip of his tail. I've never seen him so disturbed.

Not knowing what else to do, I turned around and wrapped my arms around him as best as I could.

“I'm sorry,” I said.

He closed his eyes, a low rumble in his throat. “There's nothing to do about it.”

For a while, I found that I couldn't remember my nightmares in their entirety. Only snippets. I saw the muddled pictures on the shelves, red and blue lights strobing across the discolored beige walls through the small window beside the door. I remember being told to go to my room and wait, to not come out. I remember the sight of blood dripping on the tile. That never went away. I heard voices that I didn't recognize. They didn't belong to the man or woman. There was a little yelling and the bang of a chair as it collided with the floor, then silence.

I woke up sweaty, my cheeks wet. At first, I thought that it had rained, but when a tear streaked down my face, I realized I was crying. I wiped the tears away, getting up and

walking away from Onyx's slumbering form into the dimly pulsing glow of the brush. I walked to the river, kneeling down by the water's edge and plunging my face in as far as I could, allowing the chill to freeze my nerves before pulling back. I wasn't cold, but I couldn't get my hands to stop shivering. The tears didn't stop either. I hid my face in my hands, trying to will the tears away, pulling my knees up to my chest.

A warm pressure against my back caused me to gasp and lift my head up. Onyx was looking back at me. He didn't say anything as he curled around me. An uneven breath rattled my lungs and he reached around me, pulling me down to the ground with him. Focusing on the weight of him pressing against my back allowed me to breathe again. My body let go of the tension I hadn't realized it'd been holding, and I buried my damp face into the warmth of Onyx's fur. He smelled of pine and eucalyptus, with an earthy undertone somewhere between grass and soil. I fell back asleep to the sound of a low purr rumbling within his chest. That night, the nightmares didn't return.

Any time I asked where we were going, he gave me the same answer.

"You'll know when you're ready." I still didn't get it.

I pondered why we still had not yet reached wherever we were meant to be and why the flashes of nightmares continued to plague my mind, despite the fact the man hadn't appeared in my dreams since that night. The forest never seemed to come to an end. Onyx was still the same as ever. He spoke of the forest as if it were alive, like a person. When I asked him why, he said that he was a guide to aid the forest in the journey for people like me.

"That doesn't make much sense," I told him.

"Exactly," he said.

His cryptic manner of speech had begun to irritate me. I got up and went to the nearby stream, sitting by the water's edge. I watched the ripples distort my reflection as crickets began to sing. I felt his gaze upon my back long into the night.

When I finally slept, I dreamt that I was sitting on the front steps of the beige house. The porch—like the rest of the place—was run down and nearly falling apart at the seams. I was staring outwards at an empty street. I didn't know what time it was, only that it was too

early for me to be awake. To my left, the woman sat down beside me, her arms held close to her body. I could tell she was debating whether or not to speak.

“Can I ask you something?” I asked instead.

She turned her head to look at me. I looked at the discolored scar that remained on her cheek after it had healed over.

“Do you hate him?”

She didn’t answer right away. “Hate is a strong word.”

“I hate him,” I huffed. “I hate everyone like him.”

She looked down for a little before unraveling her arms and pulling me into her lap. I leaned back against her, looking at our feet.

“My love,” she said. “Are you saying that because it’s true, or because of me?” I didn’t have an answer. She smiled, leaning down to kiss my cheek. I avoided her eyes. He hurt her, I had to hate him, how could I not? I know nothing else about him. “It’s okay to dislike someone’s actions. But don’t allow that to spiral into hatred for everyone you don’t know. It’s very difficult to come back from that darkness.” Her voice was soft, calmer than it had ever been when they fought. Her hand comfortingly rubbed up and down my arm.

“Think of the sun. With it comes daylight. But night must fall in order for day to come again.”

I sighed, the tension bleeding out of my body as I relaxed against her warm embrace. “What if it never comes back?” I asked, looking up at her.

She only laughed, shaking her head. “It may take longer than you’d like, perhaps with no end in sight, but as long as you keep moving despite the darkness, the light will warm you once again.”

I smiled. For the first time, I wasn’t worried, or scared.

I felt good.

I woke up to Onyx prodding my side. It was drizzling, but I hadn’t woken up in a cold sweat or with my heart beating out of my chest.

“Come,” he said.

Before I had a chance to question it, he had already turned and begun taking off. I had no choice but to get up and scramble after him. He ignored any and all questions I had, simply telling me to “come.” As we walked, the rain let up, though the air carried its musk long after, fine droplets of water coating nearly every surface in the forest. Onyx leapt over a stream we had been paralleling for some time. I followed. He led me through brush and foliage that was thicker than I’d ever seen before. No other part of the forest had been like this. It was difficult to keep track of him. If it weren’t for the swaying tip of his tail, I would have been lost.

The plants thinned, making way to a clearing full of flowers in bloom. There were no trees, just flowers of pink, blue, and yellow. I looked straight up at the sky. The stars waved back.

When I returned my gaze, Onyx was looking at me.

“What?” I asked.

“Did you dream?”

I wondered what that had to do with anything. “Always,” I replied.

“It was different,” his emerald gaze pierced through mine.

“...Yes.”

He turned his head to look further into the clearing. When I followed his gaze, I saw a house amidst the flowers. A little, run down house with beige walls. Onyx led me inside. Along the shelves, there were books and frames. They contained pictures. Pictures of me, and the woman.

“Now you understand,” Onyx said.

I went back outside and sat down on the porch, looking out over the clearing. Onyx followed, sitting on my left, his tail curling around me.

“Onyx?” I asked. “Hm?”

“Does the forest have a name?”

“No,” he grinned. “She doesn’t care for one.”

“Can I give her one?”

“If you must.”

I smiled, leaning against his side.

“She could be Paradise.”

In the distance, a golden sun rose over the horizon, turning the sky into a pool of orange and gold as its beams showered us in warmth. Onyx exhaled, a purr-like growl rumbled low in his throat.

“Endurance”

by

Selena Cordar

You are dropped off at the train station and turn around to wave goodbye to your mother. You do everything to alleviate her constant worries and assure her that you, a young female, have nothing to worry about. The train isn't as bad as it used to be and nothing weird has ever happened, you tell her. You assume this helps. You pull your dress down and walk toward the platform, eyes plastered to the pavement.

You take the train every day to class and have grown to enjoy the ride. It gives you about an hour of extra time to work on assignments left unfinished from the night before. Although it can be noisy, you are able to drown out the clanking of metal and loud conversations with music. Today, you decide to listen to the new Kendrick Lamar album that came out, Mr. Morale and The Big Steppers. You haven't heard anything off of it, so this excites you.

You hear the train get close and wait behind the yellow line until it makes a complete stop. You step inside and sit at the nearest empty seat with a table. Those are your favorite because it is easy to get work done on a flat surface rather than using your lap. You notice another person adjacent to you. You're almost positive he sees you too, but try not to pay too much attention.

Your earbuds go in your ears and you press play on this long-awaited album. 30 seconds into the first song, you already know it'll end up at the top of your spotify wrapped.

Oh, you guess he's staring at you now. You don't look directly at him because you feel that would be weird. You can't help but feel he's trying to get your attention. You decide to keep pretending he's not there. It's not worth it, you tell yourself. Plus, it's probably nothing anyway. He might just be on the phone, or looking at someone behind you.

With Kendrick on full volume, you take a book out of your bag and turn to the last page you left on. He's smirking at you now. You take the bookmark out of the book and place it on the table. You read the first line. He's looking under the table. He's trying to see under your dress.

He's trying to talk to you. You reread the first line, attempting to regain your focus. Why can't you seem to look away anymore?

Over the sound of loud rapped choruses and bass-filled melodies, you hear incoherent words coming from his direction. Through your peripheral vision, you see him mouth something to you and make a gesture with his hands. You force your eyes down, as you don't want to play by his rules and give in to this conversation. What good communication could come from him anyways?

You look up at the window to see your stop approaching. While the music is still playing, you grab your bookmark. He's noticing you're packing your stuff up. He's staring right now more than ever. You place it on the last page and stand up, pulling your dress down with fists. His eyes are widening. Are you playing into his desires? You walk down the stairs and hold onto the rail in front of the exit doors to keep your balance. You wait there until the train stops. He's smiling. What the hell are you doing wrong?

You glare up and stare into his eyes, hoping it was deadly enough to make an impact. You catch yourself before you do anything more. You don't need an escalation. He smiles with all his teeth. This fucker must like it.

The doors open and you walk onto the platform below, which makes you feel safer. You catch a last look at him through the window. His eyes are still glued to you and follow as the train starts up again. He's that sick, isn't he?

You can't help but feel dirty and tainted, like you made a mistake somewhere along the line. You're filled with regret from so many sources. Why'd you get on the train today? Why did you insist nothing wrong could happen? Did you manifest this in some twisted way? You can't help but feel like nothing but a displayed naked body.

You walk to class with your head low, hiding the shame you feel inside. You take off your earbuds. It just doesn't feel like the right time for music anymore.

“Intruder”

by Anika Lotti

Jay and Dylan had been up off and on all night with their four-month old, Katie. They had been having a difficult time getting her to sleep through the night for the past couple of weeks, which has resulted in many nights like last night. Katie fell asleep around dinner and slept soundly in her crib in the nursery for a couple of hours. About a half-hour to an hour after that Jay and Dylan got ready for bed and began to doze off themselves. They were woken a short time later by the sound of Katie’s cries from down the hallway and echoing through the baby monitor on their bedside table. Dylan and Jay took turns trying to coerce Katie to stop crying and get back to sleep. They each got her to lay down for a little while before she woke up crying again. When the sun rose early in the morning Katie was back to sleeping soundly and when she woke up for the day later she was nothing but smiles and giggles.

Jay and Dylan are each running on about four to five hours of sleep, a feat neither one has achieved since college. They aren’t quite sure what to do to get Katie to sleep through the night.

“Why don’t we ask the pediatrician if something is wrong?” Dylan asks as Jay feeds Katie over breakfast that morning.

“I don’t think we need to do that, plenty of newborns don’t sleep through the night. And my mom said she’s probably just a little colicky.” Jay assures him. Her husband is a worrier by nature. Ever since Jay got pregnant with Katie his worrying has only seemed to

increase tenfold, it's the reason why every room in the house has a permanent baby monitor in it. Katie could barely even kick inside the womb without Dylan worrying she was in some kind of pain or discomfort.

"Well we don't have to drive down there, we can just call and ask a few questions. You know? Just check in to see if there's anything we could try."

Jay looks down at her daughter in her arms.

If the phone call gives her husband some peace of mind and lets all of them get a good night's rest, then really, what's the harm?

Katie giggles and smiles up at her. A smile spreads across her own face. Katie wraps her hand around Jay's index finger and Jay bends down and places a soft kiss to her daughter's tiny knuckles. She straightens back up and turns toward her husband, who's gazing at the two with a warm smile.

"One phone call," Jay tells Dylan, her thumb sweeps back and forth across the back of Katie's hand and she hugs her closer to her chest. "Just to see if she has any tips on how to get her to sleep through the night but if the pediatrician says that she's fine then she's fine."

"Promise, one phone call." Dylan says. He kisses Jay's temple, then the top of Katie's head and walks off to make the call.

By the time Dylan gets off the phone Jay has finished feeding Katie, changed her diaper and is just eating something for breakfast herself. Dylan tells her the pediatrician agreed with Jay's mom, that Katie was probably just colicky but that she also had a few

things they could try to help with the process. One thing she said they could try was playing more active games during the day to get Katie tired enough to sleep at night. More than happy to give it a shot, Dylan is convinced they should buy some new toys for Katie to play with, preferably ones that lit up and made noise.

“But we don’t need anymore toys. The ones we have here are fine, and Katie’s only four months old, babe.”

“Well it’ll be good to have them for when she gets older and some of them might actually help wear her out. Won’t they?” Dylan asks his daughter, tickling her stomach and giving her an eskimo kiss.

Katie’s giggle at her dad quickly turns into a yawn.

“I can go and pick some up real quick,” Dylan continues, “and you can stay here with Katie and rest.” He hands Katie back to Jay, who nuzzles into her mother’s arms. “She looks about ready for a nap and you know what they say: when the baby is sleeping mom should be sleeping too.”

Too tired to fight it and really enjoying the idea of a nap, Jay agrees. “One or two toys but not a whole bunch.”

“One or two, promise. Love you.” Dylan kisses Jay and Katie.

“Love you.” Jay calls out as Dylan makes his way out of the kitchen and to the front door.

Jay can hear the car starting up as she walks Katie upstairs. Her daughter is fast asleep in her arms and stays that way as Jay makes her way into the nursery and places Katie in her crib.

If only she could sleep this well when the sun's not up.

She makes her way down the hall to her bedroom. Jay lifts up the corner of her blanket, ready to crawl into bed and then she stops.

She could hop in the shower and rinse off real quick before lying down.

Her hair feels oily and her clothes stink like she's been wearing them nonstop for a week, which she's pretty sure she has. She moves to her dresser and grabs a fresh change of clothes and underwear. She leaves her bedroom door and the door to the adjoining bathroom open so she can listen for Katie as she turns on the water, undresses and hops in the shower.

The warm water feels good on her skin and loosens up muscles she had no idea were sore. What she had intended to be a quick five minutes to rinse off the grime she hadn't even noticed accumulated on her skin is quickly becoming a longer deep cleanse.

But Katie's sleep soundly and Jay's keeping an ear out for her so what's the harm?

She washes her hair over and over again until the shampoo lathers and suds. She's just beginning to work the conditioner into her hair to get all the knots and tangles out when there's a bump that sounds from somewhere downstairs. Jay's hands freeze in her hair as she listens. Her heart pounds. The conditioner mixed with the strands of hair between her fingers feels slick. Beads of water pour out of the shower head, hit the backside of her body and splash onto the floor. She tries not to breathe too heavily. She removes her hands from her hair and lowers them down to her sides, ignoring the strands of loose hair that have gotten tangled up between her fingers. The silence in the house does little to quell her rising panic.

Maybe it was just the house settling.

Maybe Dylan's back.

She places a hand on the shower curtain as she opens her mouth to call out but stops.

And if he isn't?

Her hand tightens into a fist around the curtain.

What about Katie?

Despite the steam rising off the warmth of the water her cheeks turn cold.

She doesn't want whoever is in the house to know she knows they're in the house if it isn't Dylan, right?

She doesn't want whoever's in the house to know Katie is in the house.

Jay draws her hand back from the shower curtain. She keeps one eye on the bathroom door through the gap between the curtain and the shower wall. The sound of slamming drawers in the kitchen floats through the hallways and up the stairs.

If it is Dylan, surely he would have called out to her by now to let her know he was home, wouldn't he?

A fresh wave of dread makes its way straight to the pit of her stomach. She pulls at the strands of hair still caught between her fingers and tries to shake them free as she slips out of the shower, not bothering to rinse the rest of the conditioner from her hair. She leaves the shower running to maintain the illusion that she is oblivious to the presence downstairs. She doesn't bother toweling off, she just throws on the shirt and bottoms she had brought with her to change into.

She has to get to Katie.

Loud thuds come from downstairs, like doors slamming against the wall as they are yanked open. Jay slips into the adjoining bedroom as quietly as possible. She looks at the baby monitor on the bedside table. Katie stirs.

If she can get to her phone on her bedside table she can call for help.

Glass breaks downstairs. Through the baby monitor Jay can hear Katie begin to fuss a little.

If she can get across the upstairs landing to her daughter's bedroom she can climb out the window with her daughter in her arms and make her way down the street to wait until the cops show up.

Several thuds sound out downstairs, from the living room Jay guesses.

If she can stay quiet she can get to Katie.

Katie starts kicking her legs and shaking her hands, that are curled into tight fists.

If she and Katie can stay quiet they can both get away.

Katie coughs a little and emits a soft cry. Jay draws in a sharp breath. Glass crunches beneath heavy boots. She stops and looks towards her open bedroom doors. Whoever it is keeps bumping around downstairs. Her eyes flick to her daughter's open bedroom door down the hallway. Jay inhales and inches closer to the bed. She keeps her eyes fixed on the door. She reaches out to grab her phone. Her fingers brush the edge. Katie coughs and begins to cry. Heavy footsteps begin to make their way up the stairs. Jay scoops up her phone and dashes out her bedroom door.

“Hey!”

Jay glances towards the shout from the person on the stairs but doesn't stop running. She hears them rush up the stairs behind her. She hears what sounds like two more pairs of

footsteps running towards the bottom of the stairs as she darts into Katie's room, slamming the door shut behind her. She pushes the changing table to try and barricade the door but it barely moves an inch and her feet begin to slide on the carpet beneath her feet. She shoves her shoulder against it and pushes again, putting all of her body weight into it. Footsteps sound just on the other side of the door. More can be heard on the stairs under Katie's screams. Jay almost has the changing table backed up against the door when it opens. A hand curls around the door and Jay shoves the changing table hard. It hits the door and the person on the other door cries out in pain and pulls back their hand. They let loose a string of curses and Jay pushes the changing table so it's flush with the now closed door.

Jay goes over to the window and opens it, kicking out the screen. Beneath Katie's room is the garage, the roof slopes but there is enough space that Jay should be able to climb out onto it with Katie and have a shorter drop. There's yelling on the other side of the door, it's difficult to tell what they're saying with all of them screaming over one another, but Jay doesn't really try to decipher what they're saying either.

Jay moves over to Katie's crib. "Shh, I know. I know baby it's okay, it's okay." She coos as she lifts Katie out and into her arms. "It'll all be over soon. We'll be safe soon, I promise." She carries Katie over to the window and her hands grow sweaty when she thinks about climbing out onto the roof with her four month old and no free hands.

Maybe she should just wait in here and call the police instead of trying to climb out the window with Katie in her arms.

She glances back at the door. She cradles Katie to her chest and unlocks her phone. She's just about to dial when one of them yells, "I don't know! Some lady and her kid were still in the house! Just get this door open before she calls the cops or something!"

She clutches Katie tighter. A loud thud sounds as something heavy hits the door and it shakes in its frame. Jay turns back to the open window and throws one leg outside.

Another thud.

Jay ducks out the window, she shifts Katie to one arm and braces herself as best she can against the roof. Slowly she begins to inch her way downwards. Katie's cries are deafening against her ear and she prays that their absence of them in the room hasn't given them away. She reaches the edge of the roof and stops.

There's one last loud thud and the splintering of wood as the door is forced opened.

"Where the hell did she go?"

Jay glances up towards the open window then back towards the ground below her, still not quite sure how she's going to get her and Katie off the roof.

"Hey! She's out here!"

One of the men begins to climb out the window after her, another appears in the room behind him. Jay presses a kiss to the top of Katie's head and jumps towards their lawn next to the driveway, shielding Katie between her body and her arms as she lands. She looks back up at the window, a second man is climbing out, the first is trying to navigate his way off the roof. Jay stands and winces at the pressure it puts on her ankle. Trying not to think about it, she moves as fast as she can away from the house, hoping that she'll be able to make it to one of the neighbors or something before they reach her. She lost her phone in

the fall or maybe earlier. She isn't sure when she loosened her hold on her phone, she just wanted to make sure she had a good hold of Katie.

She just reaches the edge of the driveway when she hears the first man jump off the roof and onto the grass behind her.

No. They're so close.

Tears blur her vision but she turns around to face the man, ready to fight since she can't run.

He walks towards her.

Jay turns Katie towards her body with one arm. She extends her other arm out in front of her, wishing she had a weapon of some kind.

The man stops, his face goes pale.

Sirens wail from both ends of the street and they're growing closer. The first man that followed her out the window turns away from her and runs down the street. The one that's still on the roof jumps down and follows him but stops when he sees his friend cornered, cut off by two police cars. He tries to cut through the backyard of one of the neighboring houses but the cops stop him before he can hop the fence. Jay thought there was a third but she can't be certain. Still, the light from the police cars eases her fear and panic.

Tires screech to a halt in front of her. A hand touches her shoulder. "Ma'am, are you okay?"

Jay looks toward the voice and nods her head frantically. Her lips tremble and tears of relief flow freely down her face. She leans down and covers her daughter's face in kisses.

She can't verbalize anything just yet but the officer doesn't seem all that concerned with asking her questions to get information on what exactly happened just yet. She moves her hand up and down Jay's arm, "It's okay. One of your neighbors called in reporting some suspicious men around your house. We're here now. You're safe."

Safe. She and Katie were safe.

“A Shedding in Fall”

Aimee Campos

Your father is passed out on the living room sofa, and your mother has decided today she will do spring cleaning. It is October 3rd. You positively love this time of the year, but lately everything has felt out of place. The leaves shedding from the trees do nothing to better your mood, in fact, the mess of it all is getting on your nerves. You stand in the kitchen and listen to your mother moving around upstairs.

A car alarm goes off outside. You crack your fingers and scratch the side of your head. A new bug bite is freshly bulging out of your elbow. You swat at it, as if the bug is still there, about to bite into your skin. You imagine the bug biting into your skin with a resounding *crunch*, like an apple.

Your father snores, loudly. The time has come for him to look for another job, but your mom doesn't say anything. He has oozed open onto the living room sofa for months now. At first it was fine, fun even. You didn't get to see your father, and suddenly he was there. And he would call out hello every time you got home from school, ask you what homework you were working on, decided that he wanted to make his special grilled cheese and banana sandwiches for dinner, and so on. He clung to everyone in the family, because as your mom whispered to you while your father slept on the living room couch, all of his work friends were giving him the cold shoulder since he'd gotten laid off.

Mom was at work and Matthew was too busy enjoying senior year and the last summer before college with his friends, so your father latched onto you.

“Let’s watch a movie.” Some old western he loved and you slept through.

“Let’s have ice cream for breakfast, but don’t tell your mother.” His favorite ice cream, chocolate chip mint. You thought it was like eating toothpaste, but didn’t want to hurt his feelings.

“Here’s a ten, tell Matthew to take you for a burger.” Obviously your college-bound brother was too cool to take you, but it was just fun to have your dad at home watching over you in that sense. When school let out for the summer, your dad had been in the house for a month. You hadn’t even thought about it as much as you probably should have. You were too busy worrying about other things, like the fact that *the* one and only Jesse, your massive crush since forever, had wished you a great summer.

Summer passed by in a sweaty blur of you and your dad playing cards in the living room, eating fluorescent neon popsicles until your fingers were the color of the blue running shorts your father hadn’t changed out of since he’d ditched his suit and tie the first night he’d shown up from work. Then there was the television. Your father loved to sit on the living room sofa, the couch cushion pattern imprinting onto the back of his neck and his arms.

Your brother had left for college last month and mom had been the one who cried and waved him off, while your father sat on the sofa and decided that he was going to start

watching celebrity reality television shows instead of cooking shows. “Lucas! Lucas! Help Matthew with his things please.” You’d stood at the end of the stairs and stretched your neck to see your father lifting an arm weakly from the couch before sinking in further with a sigh. Matthew had waved off your mom and yelled goodbye to your father before slamming the door shut behind him, struggling with his suitcases but ignoring your mom’s outstretched hands.

That week your mom started half seriously coaxing your father to get off the sofa, maybe take a walk around the neighborhood, or call some of his old work connections and see if perhaps they’d heard about a new job. But your father had let her words go in one ear and exit out the other.

Now, your father exists in a placid unchanging matter. The living room is his purgatory, where he slumps down on the sofa, a popsicle or bag of chips in one hand, and his eyes glaze over while he looks at the screen. Your mother is working extra shifts at the supermarket to make ends meet. She tells you things will look up soon enough with your father, but you doubt it. At this rate, you decide that you’ll get a job now, too. It is like your father died, but he is still there because you hear his teeth grinding down potato chips, or the volume on the television climbing up. “Can you stop being such a selfish *beep* and just let me talk?”

School is another story. You tell your friends everything is fine. Laugh with them about your history teacher who reminds you of a cabbage patch doll, and gossip about Mr.

Salvador and Mrs. Griffey, two married English teachers who are probably having an illicit affair. Discover Jesse in your English class with Mr. Salvador and sit behind him so he can ask how your summer was and end up exchanging numbers for homework. This fills you with a grin-busting joy momentarily, but you think of telling Jesse about your father, or even worse, Jesse standing in your living room and seeing your father. So you keep pretending your father is at work, and complain to your friends and Jesse that he's being uber annoying about school starting up again and how you have to start thinking about colleges even if you're barely a sophomore, and how he's left pamphlets for NYU and Harvard on your bed when you get home. Go on trips with your mom to the secondhand shop to buy clothes for school and any school supplies they have, while the unpaid bills become a mountain on the kitchen countertop. Listen to your mom make plans for a big family trip once she saves up enough money. Maybe she won't even have to work long, once your father gets back on his feet, she can quit. You let her talk and hope and prefer not to think about your father literally rotting on the couch.

You notice the peeling before your mother. It's during one of your final attempts to make contact with your father, but he's asleep. The television blares on. He breathes heavily, and a curl of skin slides off the top of the sofa towards the carpet, almost translucent. November has arrived sharp and cold, and you have come and gone from school bundled in your mother's attempts at knitting. Your mother is gone by the time you arrive home from school.

You watch as another three skin peels drift towards the carpet. Your father shifts, groans like he's in pain, but doesn't wake up. You get up from the recliner and move to turn off the television, when your father stirs. It is only a moment, and his eyes flit open. He looks at you like he's seeing you for the first time, surprised. "How was school?" He blinks slowly, his eyes landing on your hand inching towards the television's power button.

You say it's fine, hand falling away from the television. Your father nods. He leans back against the couch, scratching his neck. Long white shavings begin to gather in a pile on the cushion next to him. You ask him how he is, but he's completely lost in the show playing on the television, even though it's been on for more than fifteen minutes and your father definitely has no clue what's even going on.

You go into the kitchen, see the answering machine light flicker on and off. Mom's the only one who usually checks it, but she's out so you step up and press play. *Hi Mary, it's Luisa. Give me a call back as soon as you can. When you're not tending to that deadbeat husband of yours....call me.* Your Aunt Luisa's voice cuts off abruptly and you turn towards the fridge. Usually your father only requires a sandwich or a bag of chips placed next to him on the couch every few hours. You don't know what happens to the plate or the empty bag, but figure feeding him is enough of a job. Your phone vibrates while you're looking into the fridge. A text from Jesse: *Hey, did you do the reading? I need help.* You respond and hear a laugh track from the living room. Matthew sends you a picture of the beach in the town he's going to school for and you don't respond. He's hundreds of miles away, looking at a gorgeous sunset on the beach while you're about to slap clearance sale ham between two pieces of bread for your father.

Unemployed fathers

Skin peeling

How to deal with a deadbeat dad

You delete the word deadbeat from the search engine bar.

Downstairs, you can hear your mother talking excitedly to your father.

"He says he can squeeze you in for an interview on the fourth of next month. With your experience, the job is as good as yours!"

You can't hear what your father mumbles, but finally your mother says that she's going to be picking up another round of extra shifts at the supermarket, and to please remember you are still here and your father isn't the only one living in this house.

Your father, surprisingly, used to love when it was just you and him in the house, way back when. Matthew was always hanging out with his friends, but your father liked to take you to the park with a soccer ball. Even though you couldn't block a goal to save your life. *Just get the blood flowing, that's it!* He'd buy you a soft serve afterward, from the supermarket where your mom is currently wasting her hours away for a small paycheck large enough to cover the electricity and put groceries in the fridge.

Your mother doesn't say anything to your father about the peelings. You find a wad of the gelatinous substance and small puffs of hair clogging the shower drain. You bring it up to her over breakfast. There is still shampoo in your hair, but you'd rather not step back

into the bathroom and see the gelatinous puddle glistening under the sunlight coming in through the window. You'd rather let your hair get crunchy from the shampoo, even if your scalp looks greasy and Jesse notices.

"Your father...is just going through a hard time." Your mother chugs a protein shake and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. "Now scoot, we've got a long day ahead of us." You hear a scream coming from the television in the living room. Goofy *boing* sounds. A laugh track, and then clapping.

Your brother comes home for Thanksgiving. Matthew seems to have grown a foot taller since you last saw him. He comes barging in through the front door, rolling his shoulders back and complaining about the drive here. He kisses your mother and shoves you back lightly. The television turns down momentarily, but then goes back to its normal volume. *Susan, you're putting yourself in front of everyone again. Not a good look on you.* Laugh track. You haven't been in the living room in a week.

"Is dad still...?" He asks mom, and then looks at you.

"He's still finding his place. Looking for a job." Your mother looks at the watch on her wrist. "How's school? Have a lot of friends?"

"School is cool. Come on mom, you know me, of course I do."

"Any girl friends?"

“Maybe.” Matthew looks at the ground, rubs his neck. You watch him. He’s never been one to act shy or even blush. It’s like looking at another person.

“What’s her name? No, hold that thought, I’m going to be late for work.” Mom rubs her forehead. You know she’d rather stay here and continue making small talk with Matthew about school and friends, but the Thanksgiving turkey isn’t going to pay itself. “Matthew eat something, you look malnourished. Be good, both of you. Your father is in the living room.”

Where he'll stay until the world explodes or gets hit by an asteroid, or at least until you follow in Matthew's footsteps and leave for another state for college. "Aye aye captain." Matthew yawns. Your mom slips out of the front door and Matthew walks past you towards the living room. "Hey dad." Matthew's voice rises over the television.

You follow in after him. Your father is still there and the television is still on. Matthew sits across from your father on your ratty old couch. It is now even rattier, and the whole room smells like old cheese. You notice Matthew look at your father from the corner of his eye. Your father leans back and scratches his stomach. Another shred of your father drifts down onto the carpet. Matthew clears his throat.

"How was school?" Your father reacts like he's coming out of a daze. "How's the weather up there?"

"School is good, the professors are nice and the classes aren't too hard." Your father nods, eyes not leaving the television. On the screen, two women are drinking coffee and talking, when a man barges in carrying a live lobster. Your father laughs loudly, a cloud of white coming off of him. You scratch your head and look towards the window. Matthew

continues. "My roommates are nice. One of them knows how to surf. Remember you wanted to learn? Oh, and the other day I shit myself in the middle of class and no one seemed to notice and you're not listening to me are you?" Matthew looks at your father. You swallow.

Your father brings a hand across his nose. From the tip of his nose, a small piece of old skin dangles. It shifts when he breathes in and out. Underneath the piece, shiny red skin peeks out. "You mind turning down your voice a little? The television isn't working like it used to."

Your brother retires to his room in no time. You stand up and leave your father with no explanation. Wandering down the hall towards your room, you pass the old family frames.

There's a picture of your dad teaching you to play baseball. He's holding the bat, knees bent, forehead wrinkled in determination. Your father didn't care for sports, but he wanted to teach you when the time came. "My little girl isn't going to let some boy try and one up her. She'll kick his ass in anything she wants." Your father used to let you dabble in whatever sport you wanted for a couple of weeks. But you hated sports.

You flick the frame with your fingers and walk into your room. The walls are such an ugly reddish brown color from your preteen goth phase. Your dad said he'd help you paint, but there's not much hope for that happening now.

On Thanksgiving, you are wearing your favorite dress, the red one with the short skirt and sleeves with a blue and orange pattern. Mom is fixing the gravy, and Matthew is pretending to help her cook but is sneaking bites from the mashed potatoes. “Oh your Aunt Lydia will definitely come after me for using store bought gravy this time, but I didn’t have the time to-Matthew get the door please.” You lean against the counter, hearing the television get louder in the living room.

“Matthew, wow, look at you! Mary, is that a gravy packet? And look at you Ms. Model.” You accept your Aunt Lydia’s hug, say hello to your Uncle Presley. Step aside to let your little cousin Michael come stumbling in. For two years old, he looks ridiculously tall. “And where’s...Lucas?” Uncle Presley turns towards the living room, but your mother clears her throat.

“Oh, he’s in the living room. Today’s his day off from the job hunt.” Mom rushes towards the beeping oven.

“Yeah.” Matthew rubs his nose, then hoists up your cousin Michael and raises him up towards the ceiling. The little boy laughs loudly. The television goes up.

“Hello Lucas.” Aunt Lydia calls from the kitchen.

“Lucas, how is everything?” Uncle Presley stands by Aunt Lydia. No response.

“It’s cause the television is too loud,” your mom responds lamely, “Lydia, can you take the cranberry sauce out of the fridge?”

Later, Mom rubs her hands on a dish towel. "Maybe we can eat in the living room this time. Have things go a little more casual this year."

Aunt Lydia glances at you, then looks at your mother. "Mary, I"-

Uncle Presley speaks up. "Sure thing. Matthew, give me a hand with the dinner table." You catch Aunt Lydia give your uncle a look. You hear the small grunt Uncle Presley makes, and you pull Michael towards you as your brother and uncle carry the table to the living room.

You push the recliner towards the table and grab a roll from the bread basket. You watch your family take their seats, Aunt Lydia hoisting Michael onto her lap while her eyes flicker towards your father, who turns the television down with a loud sigh. Your mom looks at you and shakes her head, so you put down the roll. You rub your finger along the hem of your dress. You feel a loose thread and pull. The hem is coming undone.

"Maybe we can all go around and say something we're thankful for." Your mother clasps her hands over her plate. Your father sighs again and leans over the table, a cloud of dust coming off of him.

"Mary, honestly." Aunt Lydia leans back against her chair, looking at your mom and her husband. Michael grabs the fork and slams it against the table. You look at Matthew, who is watching this exchange unsmiling. Your mom looks at you to begin.

You clasp your hands. You are thankful for the internet. Matthew snorts.

His turn. "Uh, I am thankful for indoor plumbing and the AC here."

Aunt Lydia. "My family."

Uncle Presley. "This wonderful meal."

Your mom. "I am thankful for my two beautiful children, this house, and having food on the table."

Your father. "This is a waste of time." He stretches forward and grabs a roll. A piece of his elbow comes off and lands in the boat of cranberry sauce. Blood drips onto the tablecloth, sounding like rain.

"Ohmygod, really?" Aunt Lydia stands up and takes a step back from the table, clutching your cousin. "Mary, really?" Her voice is high pitched. You almost want to laugh. Almost.

Uncle Presley stands up. "Now Lydia"-

"Save it." Aunt Lydia walks toward the kitchen. You look at Matthew, who is looking at the boat of cranberry sauce while holding a hand over his mouth. You pull the loose string of the hem on your dress further. There's a small hole on the skirt you failed to notice.

"No, it's ok. It's alright." Your mom stands up, pushing the table back. Your father chews slowly, grabs the remote and turns up the television again. A patch of skin on his hand trembles, flapping up when he moves to scratch his head.

Aunt Lydia and Uncle Presley stay for another ten minutes, then leave with the excuse of Michael coming down with something.

Later that night you're still wearing your favorite dress, but you're lying in bed, counting the dimples in the paint on the walls. You and your father had picked green for the walls.

Matthew is in his room next to you, on the phone. "Hey. How's your Thanksgiving going? Lame. It's my dad. He's, I don't know how to say it. So he's just like, I don't know. He's peeling. Like you peel a fucking potato. I don't know. Yeah I guess. What's underneath? Well more of him. I don't know, it's embarrassing. I don't know how my sister hasn't just ran away already." You listen in on your brother's conversation through the thin walls. His voice gets lower, so you press your ear against the wall until your temple throbs. "Yeah, I miss you too. I'll see you on Sunday." You kick your feet against the wall. Once. Twice. "What are you doing?" You don't answer. You kick your feet against the wall again. Loud *bangs*. "Stop, that's annoying." Matthew opens his bedroom door and you hear him come to yours. "Aren't you a little too old to be kicking the walls?"

He opens the door and you straighten up. You tell him that he should stop talking about his family. Like he's even been here to see the worst of it. He's only had to be here two days and he's already complaining to some stranger about it.

"Shut up, you don't know anything. What, are you going to tell me you haven't run off to tell your dumb little friends about it?" Matthew leans against the door. He sees your expression and raises his eyebrows. "Yeah? Too embarrassed about what your friends think? That's life for ya."

You tell him to get out and he salutes before shutting the door. He thinks about it for a second and stops. “He’s my dad, too. I can talk about it if I want.” You slam the door when he leaves, harsh enough the walls shake.

The next day Matthew leaves before your mother is awake, but you manage to wake up just as the front door closes.

The beginning of December consists of you staying at school with the excuse of working on final projects. In reality, you go to the library and hang out there until they're about to close. Sometimes you walk around the plaza near your school, looking to see if they're hiring.

“Come to the movies with us. Don’t be boring.” Your friends say this one day after school, but you don’t want to say that you can’t ask your mom to borrow money for a ticket because there’s no money. It’s been a particularly bad day at school. In the middle of English, Jesse tapped your shoulder and told you you had stuff on your shoulders. You brushed off what you recognized as some of your dad’s peeling, but no doubt looked like dandruff. Too embarrassed, you hadn’t even tried to make conversation with Jesse like other days. “You have a...” One of your friends plucked off something from your sweater and flicked it towards the ground, disgusted. A fingernail.

Back at home, your father’s entire body is covered in cuts and peels. You look in on him sitting in the living room one day, chin drooping over his chest while he sleeps. He

shudders, and a large chunk of his forehead breaks off and lands on the floor with a meaty *thunk*.

You ask your mother what she thinks is underneath all of him.

She blinks over the stove, still dressed in her cashier's vest. "Well, more of him I suppose."

A week before Matthew is supposed to come home, the house phone rings. You hear whispering and loud shushing before your brother comes on. He talks with a lot of pauses and stretches of rambling until he finally says what he called for. "Uh, I don't think I'm gonna come home for Christmas. Don't tell mom yet ok? I want to tell her. It's just...I can't keep seeing dad like that, you know?" You grip the phone to your ear. "Did you hear me?"

You say something along the lines of, Mom's going to hate you, and hang up the phone. It rings again but you walk away and let it keep ringing. You go up to do homework in your room. The sounds of an old western movie come drifting up from downstairs.

"We're behind on the electricity bill. And Matthew's school payments. And I'm barely making enough for the water bill and the food for this house." Your mother is speaking quietly, but you can hear every word she says. "Please get out of this slump soon, Lucas, I can't do all of this by myself. The kids need you."

"Draw your gun, you piss-ass prairie punk!" Is what the television answers back.

The next day school lets out for Christmas break. You walk to the library, but then change course towards the shopping plaza. You dig in the bottom of your backpack for the bills you've kept there. Ten dollars. From your mom, weeks ago. For lunch but you couldn't stomach it that day. You walk to the supermarket, where your mom is standing at the register, looking tired. She's busy checking someone out, so she misses you walking in. Go to the back of the store, where the ice cream station is. Order a vanilla soft serve cone, which you eat while you walk through the aisles, until you leave the store through the exit, which your mom has her back to. You lean against the brick wall of the store, wiping the cone crumbs from your hands. The cold nips at your nose, but you take off your mom's attempt at a scarf, let it bite at your neck too.

Somewhere across the parking lot, a car honks. You recognize Jesse, who sticks his hand out of the passenger side of his brother's car, the one he's told you he's going to get when his brother goes to college next year. You wave and begin to put the scarf on. The car comes closer. Jesse sticks his head out, "Need a ride?" You shake your head and say thanks, but you're waiting for your mom. He nods, and scratches his jaw. "A couple of us are going to the movies later, to see that new dumb horror movie with the aliens who look like clowns. Maybe you can come? If you want?" The genuine smile that comes over your face seems almost foreign. You agree to text later to go over the details. Jesse waves a goodbye and the car begins to move. You see his brother look at you through the rear view mirror, laughing.

You make your way home now. You almost have enough change left for a movie ticket. Maybe your mom will let you borrow an extra dollar or two. You'll definitely start looking for a job now, no excuses. You run the last few blocks to your house, your head

thudding as you reach the front door. It feels good, getting the blood pumping like that. You make a plan to start running. Take your keys out from your backpack, and step inside the house. There is something weird. You can't place it. You brush your tongue against your teeth, poking at the mealy cone residue on your molars. Figure out the strangeness. The television is off. The house is silent.

“The Transition”

Mia Aguilera

Somewhere in Purgatory

The first night he saw her, the goat-man thought he was in a dream. A flash of red brightened up a dark corner near the lonely staircase. Brown hair curled down an oval-shaped face with dark eyes staring right at the goat-man. He could only see a glimpse of her face but it was enough to make him forget about his collection of perfectly sharpened pencils. The goat man prepared to walk over and introduce himself. He stood from his desk, and walked out the opening to his cubicle, passing by the rows of other cubicles. He stopped at the sight of her getting closer to the staircase, hidden in the back corner. The woman smiled at the darkness below the staircase, then looked back at the goat-man. His automatic response was a shake of his head *No*. She looked disappointed. He tried to take a few more steps toward the woman by the staircase but he couldn't. He motioned with his hand for her to come to him but her face was now blank. He pointed back towards his cubicle and mouthed “I'll be right back.” Her face was blank as he turned back around and ran to his cubicle to find a pen and a paper. When he started running back towards the staircase, the woman was gone.

The next day, from his cubicle he waited for her in agony. He searched for that lively brown hair for many nights. He tried to pass the time. He fidgeted with his bulky hooves, he organized his desk work and put papers in separate piles. He tried to fix his sitting posture, even though his body was already molded into an intense C-shaped spine. He was productive with his time which always put him in a good mood, but still, no sign of the

woman he saw by the staircase. Time was never an issue where the goat man was, because he had nothing to wait for, until now.

People didn't usually stay in Purgatory for long. It was a pit stop for the indecisive. For the goat-man, Purgatory was already home. His life on Earth wasn't memorable. He valued work above everything else. The goat-man attended his own funeral, in spirit of course. Not many people showed up. It was reasonable, as the goat-man was an only child and came from divorced parents. He lived by himself, ate by himself. For vacations, he stayed home and slept. For holidays, he worked extra hours. He wasn't a thief or a Satanist. He worked at a normal office job for an insurance company he couldn't quite remember. He had no family and was poor for most of his life, so he wasn't a charity worker or a devoted Christian either. The goat-man hated to be judged and looked down on, which is why he never chose Heaven. Since he also didn't want to endure burning torture in Hell, he decided, when he joined the afterlife twenty years ago, that Purgatory was a nice middle ground.

Now this woman was here in Purgatory and she wanted... the goat-man? Why would she want him? Why was he being forced to walk over to the staircase? The goat-man wanted to kick himself when he realized what could have happened if he did walk over to her. They could have talked. He would've shown her his fancy pens and his stapler collection. She could have brought him back to life in some way. For the first time, he saw someone that looked real. He saw the color red on her robes. He'd forgotten entirely about the color red. It brought back memories of the red polos he wore to work, or the sight of blood on his finger when he accidentally cut it while slicing onions in his kitchen. The color of red was

different from the pale tones he saw everyday in Purgatory that one would only see in a hospital hallway.

The next night, as the goat-man waited by the stairs, the woman finally came back. Unfortunately for the goat-man, she was still by the staircase. The goat-man remained seated on his bed. They both stood in their same position, waiting for the other to make the first move. He looked back towards the staircase, which seemed to have not looked as dangerous as before. The steps were wider and thicker, more approachable. Then, there was the woman standing right next to it. The goat-man stood up again. The woman's eyes widened in encouragement.

Once again, the goat-man left his cubicle and rushed past the cubicles to the woman, until the goat-man looked closer and noticed a turning wheel that replaced her torso. When she glided past the staircase closer to him, he noticed that the wheel worked as her legs. The goat-man stopped and looked at her in wonder. The curtain of long red robes she wore dragged onto the floor. When the goat-man realized what was about to happen, he started to run. When he reached the cubicle closest to her, she vanished once again. He kicked the side of a person's cubicle with one of his hooves.

The next couple of nights, the goat-man waited in his cubicle, staring at the staircase. He searched for her everywhere in Purgatory. The goat-man walked through the maze of cubicles that led to no particular place. The residents in Purgatory were huddled in groups, quietly speaking to each other of the latest gossip that he was always excluded from. The goat-man looked down at the carpet that was spotless. There wasn't even a speck of dirt or dust. The coldness and the lack of colors was the reason why the goat-man never left his

cubicle. He hated the vastness of Purgatory. The plain white walls and tan carpets irritated the goat-man. He enjoyed spaces that felt lived in. His cubicle may have been a mess of insignificant papers and empty coffee mugs, but it reminded him of life, which his reality now greatly lacked.

The goat-man used to have a neighbor in Purgatory that eventually left to go to Hell. He once had a theory that the creation of Purgatory had not been finished yet. The neighbor was a full goat, named Sam. Sam had lots of theories pertaining to the eventual destruction of the afterlife and the nonexistence of Heaven, which the goat-man never thought much of, but his theory about Purgatory had to be true. As the goat-man wandered a long distance from the cubicles in search of the woman, he noticed how many portions of Purgatory looked like it had never been touched. These places were just tall white walls, appearing as a blank canvas that needed to be painted on with some form of life. It looked different without the rows of cubicles taking up space. The goat-man looked up towards the high ceiling, making him feel small and insignificant. He felt the urge to yell and wait to hear his echo. While walking through these spaces, the goat man felt his own existence fade the tiniest bit, as if he were a light that momentarily flickered. The memory of the woman's warm gaze and shiny wheel encouraged the goat-man to keep searching for her until he eventually made his way back to the cubicles, where other souls resided.

He didn't last very long back in his cubicle. The woman never returned to her spot near the staircase. The goat-man couldn't sit. He paced back and forth in his condensed cubicle and felt suffocated for the first time in the comfort of his living space. He felt better

when he entered those large spaces of unclaimed warehouse rooms in Purgatory that he once hated. It wasn't enough since he had still not seen the woman.

When he hadn't seen her for over a week, he started to get worried that she had already made her decision of where she was going. He eventually stopped his search for the woman and sat on the terrible brown carpet in his cubicle. Other residents of Purgatory walked by his cubicle and noticed that he stared at nothing. Although the goat-man wasn't great at hiding his general disinterest in everything, his peers in Purgatory noticed his usual polite demeanor was gone. The white blobs of pale blue souls tried to cheer him up by bringing him more mugs and even paper clips and staplers to add to his office desk.

Leonard, the cat with no eyes, entered the goat-man's cubicle and curled his furry tail around the goat-man's hooves just as he was about to search for the woman again.

"As your friendly neighbor, I thought it appropriate to check up on you. The other goats have been talking about you. They think you're looking for someone. I've heard you mumble in your sleep about a woman." Leonard waited expectantly for the goat-man to deny or confirm anything he said. When the goat-man didn't have anything to say in response, Leonard continued, "Maybe she turned into something else. You can do that, you know, if you don't like being a goat. You could be a cat, like me."

"Thanks Leonard." The goat-man tried to smile. The goat-man didn't really like cats, but Leonard was an exception.

"What if she turned into a goat?" Leonard looked hopeful. He was always eager to help.

The goat-man shuddered.

“She could have changed form. Like Eddie.”

Eddie used to live in the cubicle next to Leonard and they would come by and visit the goat-man every once in a while. Leonard and the goat-man stopped seeing Eddie after he decided he would rather turn into a rock. The goat-man was happy for Eddie and thought being a rock would be a lot more peaceful. Leonard was still bitter about Eddie’s change of form since they would no longer be able to talk like they used to. The goat-man was also surprised to see that many of his other peers around Purgatory could change form in a matter of seconds. His first day walking around Purgatory, he saw a man walking around the cubicle who instantly transformed into a puddle of water. The goat-man considered changing his own form a couple years ago, but over time he got used to the hooves. He was actually thankful for the lack of mirrors in Purgatory, as he didn’t have daily reminders of being half-goat.

The goat-man never thought about the woman changing form until Leonard, the wise cat, brought up the idea. If the woman turned herself into a goat, she would look just the same as most other people in Purgatory, and although the goat-man was ashamed to admit it, he would probably lose interest.

“Well then, maybe she transitioned.”

“Don’t say that Leonard!” The goat-man’s harsh voice echoed through the confining walls of Purgatory. A sky of blue souls and a herd of offended goats turned in the goat-man and Leonard’s direction. The goat man silently apologized.

“Why? It’s not the worst thing. I’ve been thinking of transitioning myself,” Leonard whispered, licking his paws.

“They wouldn’t allow a cat into Heaven.”

Leonard ignored this statement and went on, “What if she went below? I’ve heard the others say that’s where the staircase leads you.”

Hell would be more doable than Heaven for his case. It would be a life of suffering, but not much different than his past-life and Purgatory. There would be people there just like him who sinned and never went to church. He would probably be the most noble soul that entered Hell, which gave the goat-man a sense of pride. He would for sure be able to find her there. The only obstacle would be facing his fear of the staircase, which he couldn’t see himself doing.

Leonard and the goat-man didn’t know many people who descended the staircase. The neighbors wouldn’t even walk by it. The goat-man noticed something about people’s faces when they would descend the stairs. They would stare at the staircase for days without moving before they would eventually walk down the stairs. They would never come back. Although most souls in Purgatory guessed that below the staircase was most likely Hell, it was never officially known. The goat-man had a feeling that the only beings that had descended down the stairs were the beings that *knew* what was down the stairs waiting for them. Nobody would just walk down the stairs out of curiosity. The look on their faces was always absolute. Some walked down the steps with a smile. Others with a simple expression of acceptance.

The goat-man encountered the spiral staircase everyday. His assigned cubicle towards the back was straight across from it. The distance from it was the only obstacle. Before seeing this woman, he was able to avoid the whole vicinity of the staircase, but now each

day, the walls of Purgatory felt more constraining and everything was almost impossible to turn away from. Sam once mentioned hearing screams from the staircase. Nobody, including the goat-man, had believed him at the time. What they didn't know was that, although it wasn't screams, the goat-man did hear noises coming from the staircase at the time. He would hold his breath at night when he would hear creaking footsteps descending the stairs, one by one. Since then, he never paid attention to it, apart from noticing the souls and their faces when they descended the stairs.

After his conversation with Leonard, the goat-man stood up from the ground and walked over to the staircase. Up close, the goat-man noticed that the stairs had changed back to looking dangerous. They were much older and frail than he expected. The handrail was oddly warm. The steps were steep and intimidating. As expected, the woman was not at the steps waiting for him. The goat-man looked back at his cubicle. He wasn't quite ready to walk down the stairs yet. In fact, if the woman wasn't at the staircase, there was no point in making such a commitment yet. He supposed he could wait a little longer, in case the woman decided to show up again soon.

The next day, the goat-man resumed his work routine. He realized that his search for the woman set him way behind schedule. The goat-man didn't mind that much, since it would be a great distraction from the woman and the staircase. Today he focused on pencil sharpening. Leonard stopped by the cubicle to check on the goat man after a couple hours.

“Making good progress?”

“2, 562.”

“Keep up the good work.”

The goat-man did keep up the good work. It still didn't feel enough. The act of stapling papers and drinking from empty mugs didn't satisfy the goat-man like it usually would. He looked out towards the staircase. He liked this feeling of need. He hadn't felt it in years. He sighed as he dropped a pencil that still needed to be sharpened. The stacks of blank papers and sharpened pencils that would never be used was all the excitement the goat-man had experienced in the afterlife until now. Maybe it was time for a change.

The walk over to the staircase was thrilling until the goat-man had actually arrived at the staircase. The goat-man stood at the top of the stairs and attempted to put one hoof down the first step. A slight burning sensation shot up his leg, but not enough to stop the goat-man from taking another step.

The goat-man heard a purr from the cubicles. Leonard and the rest of the souls stared as the goat-man continued his path down the staircase. News traveled fast in Purgatory, especially if a being was going to leave Purgatory and transition. The goat-man did not turn back. If he saw Leonard up by the steps, he would have ran back to him for comfort. He couldn't do that, not when he made it this far down the staircase.

"I'll miss you. If you find a pair of eyes down there, try throwing them up the stairs for me, will you?" The goat-man closed his eyes and chuckled. "Goodbye, Leonard."

He wasn't sure when the staircase would end. When he looked down the stairs, he only saw more stairs. When the air became thick, the goat man finally saw a destination. It was a beautiful destination. It was the woman, the wheel under her long red robe. It was her. The goat-man began to run and skip many steps at a time. She stood at the end of the staircase waiting for him. Her face was so welcoming, the goat-man almost tripped from

running down the stairs. When the goat-man got closer, his vision blurred, and the red silk of her robe had turned into red flames. The blush of her face was now pale whiteness, tinted with shadows. Her warm brown eyes were now a soulless black. The goat-man stopped running and held on tight to the handrail.

“You’ve decided. Now it is too late for you to turn back, ” said an even voice. The goat-man looked behind himself, noticing the stairs were gone and he was now in a cold, dark room filled with stones on the walls. The flames prickled the skin of the goat-man.

The voice, of what could only be Satan, chuckled. “ Either you come, join me and the Wheel of Eternity, or you stay at the bottom of the staircase forever.”

“Wheel of Eternity?”

“You’ve seen her before. The tall woman. She has a fascination with you.”

“She’s here?” Even though the goat-man was talking to a pit of flames that resembled Satan, he was no longer afraid.

Satan chuckled. “Join us,” he finally said. The goat-man did.

The goat-man’s arrival in Hell was torturous, but quick. His flesh had burned off, and darkness filled up the goat-man as if it were smoke entering a body lost in a house fire. He had achieved the transition. He certainly didn’t look like a man or a goat anymore. He never was happy with his appearance, anyways. The hard part was finally over, and the formerly half-man half-goat could now be reunited with the woman in the red robe, or the Wheel of Eternity as Satan had named her.

There was a crowd of tall red figures that the goat-man had pushed through. The goat-man was pushed and spit on. The fiery souls all screamed and chanted. They were all facing something, yet it was hard to tell because of how tall the figures were compared to the goat-man. As he finished weaving through the crowd, smelling ash and metal, he found out what the souls were watching. It was a young woman put up on a stage.

“She’s our performer. She provides us with entertainment,” One of the tall red figures informed the goat-man.

“What does she entertain us with?” he asked.

“Her pain.”

The goat-man looked at the performer. She was ordinary, and appeared unburned. Torn clothes with dirt and ash covered her. She was barefoot and had cuts up and down her body. Her eyes that were looking out to the crowd revealed that she had been betrayed. There was no hope where she was. There was no other woman to know what she felt like, to stand up on that stage with her. She was up there alone and shaking.

There was no performance in her act. This woman may not have been acting at all, because what she was going through could only be described as terror and abuse. The goat-man would have never wanted to see something like this, but oddly, the more he stared at her, the more he started to chant and cheer along with the crowd of figures. He felt empowered by her tears. These evil, dark creatures.

“Where is the Wheel of Eternity?” The goat man asked a figure next to him.

The bloody red figure smiled, “You’re already with her.”

That didn’t make much sense, the goat-man thought.

“Where can I find her?”

“Within you. Within all of us” the figure answered.

The goat-man began to fear that there was no Wheel of Eternity. He thought of her enchantment, and how she had always disappeared the moment he would finally reach her. Her long red robe and her beauty couldn't have been real.

“Where is the staircase?” the goat-man asked with no feeling in a small voice.

The tall red figure next to him answered “ No more staircases down here. It happened to all of us, friend. What shall we call you?” The goat-man looked around. The other tall figures looked at him expectedly, as if physically being in Hell was normal. He searched for any pencils, or empty white rooms. Groups of people huddling in gossip with mugs in their hands. Perhaps a small animal that he could befriend, that would remind him of Leonard. He closed his eyes and felt the push and pull of bodies passing by. No more personal space or quietness.

“Call me Ron, ” said the goat-man. He didn't remember much from his life, but the name Ron seemed familiar, and he always wanted a name.

“Ron, do you still want to be part goat?”

Most of Ron's flesh was burned off from the transition. He felt mostly numb.

“If you wish to change, we'll take you to the Man of Chests.”

There was nothing else to do except to follow the tall red figures away from the crowd. He was relieved that he was leaving the performer. Watching her wasn't right. The Man of Chests was hidden under many sacks of dark, heavy fabrics. Small horns grew out of his temples. He lived in a small room with a variety of wooden chests surrounding him. The

room was cluttered with ancient writings on the walls and intriguing sculptures. Everything in Hell appeared cluttered. There were crowds of souls everywhere. It was different from Purgatory.

The Man of Chests asked Ron when he was happiest. Ron was done with the office supplies and the organization of papers and pencils. It brought him back to the endless cycle of Purgatory. Even Leonard couldn't take away the torment of confinement and mediocrity for everything. He always imagined himself as a happy child playing a musical horn. He had hoped his childhood would be better than his adult life. "I will turn you back to him then," the Man of Chests decided, somehow knowing Ron's thoughts. Ron blinked and his size decreased. He was still red and fiery like the others, but he was short. In his hand was his beloved, shiny horn.

“The Guidance Counselor of Reincarnation”

sandy hwang

The counselor's office is dim, musty, aged like books with yellowed pages. The stench of decomposition hangs in the air, of old-timers and withered women rotting away by a window. A bookshelf is filled to the brim with thick hardcovers with no titles on the spines. The fluorescent light that hangs above flickers. The leather chair the counselor sits in is tall, the back towering over his head by a foot. It is his constant companion, and the counselor and his tall chair with wheels that never move or creak are practically one being. Motivational slogans are framed on the wall behind the counselor (“To Live Is To Love”, “Death Is Not The End, But The Beginning”, “Everyone Deserves A Second Chance At Life And A Third And a”).

The condition of the counselor himself isn't much better than the room. His face is splotched and wrinkled and worn. His head is round and wide on top, and the light from the hanging lamp illuminates the curve above his forehead. From his brows, his face gets progressively thinner with a distinct pointiness to his chin. His glasses are small with circular lenses, and they are perched on top of a rather large nose with a swollen bump on its crooked tip. The counselor sniffs, and he coughs and clears his throat of gravel and phlegm. His Adam's apple trembles as if it could fall off his withered neck.

A younger man sits across from him and glances all around at the wall covered in papers like high school attendance sheets. He slouches in his chair, and he picks his nose with his thumb, scrapes off blood that's dried and absently waves his hand to shake the

blood off, but only a few miniscule flakes falls and he rubs his thumb on blood-blackened jeans instead. He feels at the crater where the back of his head used to be, touches the jagged edges of the hole in his skull, with the nubs of his middle and fourth finger.

The counselor supposes he should be grateful it isn't the whole head that's been taken off. There's the constant buzzing in the background. Low, like that speaker on the wall could suddenly boom with God's voice any moment. The counselor has long been accustomed to this sound, but he observes that the young man seems less so. The young man's leg keeps shaking erratically.

The man makes his left hand into a fist, slowly inserts it into the back of his head where his knuckles could touch some remaining gray matter. He grimaces. He leans back in his chair, droops lower to adjust his shoulders to the stiff back of the chair. His eyes are glazed over. When he speaks, his voice is a low drawl.

So like, I'm dead?

The counselor explains. The man is queued in the line for reincarnation. The management will evaluate his Overall Quality of Life. Of the weight of his goods versus the weight of his sins. Coming to a final judgment. The process is then finding a suitable host for his next life once management checks the list of children to be born down on Earth.

You're gonna sit around and evaluate me?

The counselor folds his hands together. We simply talk.

Talk.

This is a time to reflect and look back.

Fuck, hell is boring.

This isn't hell.

This ain't heaven either, if I'm here. So where's this then?

The counselor clears his throat. The Administration.

The man snorts. Is hell just going back to high school? Is God the principal?

Manners must be minded. There is no swearing in His name.

Is it gonna look bad on my personal record?

The counselor looks down at the file laying in front of him. The man's track record isn't particularly clean by any means.

Well, fuck me. Lay it on me, how bad is it?

The counselor clears his throat before reading off the file. The man had died in a motorcycle incident. The time was 4:19 PM. It was on the highway, next to a cliff's edge.

The man takes in a long breath, tilts his head back, his hand to the back of his broken skull. He exhales like he's releasing a long string of smoke.

Damn. The man says.

You can talk about how it felt. There are many people do that.

Talk about how it felt to die? Fucked up. But hey.

The counselor remains silent as he allows the man space to think.

I flew, man. I fucking flew. It was like a dream, it's like a dream right now and I dunno. I dunno. Like I was riding and suddenly something was coming at me, it was rushing at me and I could hear the crunch, that thud, but I didn't. *Feel* it, you know? Like getting stabbed in a dream, that kinda thing. And then I flew. And it was kinda fun, I saw the ocean underneath and it was like twisting and spinning like those park rides, up until my head got

fucking smashed on the concrete, like fucking. *Bam*. The man finishes with a fist to an open palm.

You were intoxicated at the time.

The man sucks in air sharply. God damn—oh, sorry. Man. But good thing I wasn't pulled over by a cop. The man grins, a good half of his teeth are gone.

You were drinking before the accident happened. Before the accident you were at a liquor store five miles away.

Fuck, how detailed is your report there?

You were driving intoxicated.

Oh yeah, and I got a snickers bar too. Wait, shit—might still have it.

The man fishes into his jean pocket. He pulls out a dark red lump, crushed, with the vague crinkle of a wrapper.

The man bites his lip, exhales like he's deflating. Fffffffuck, it got fucked up. Actually I don't even like Snickers that much.

The man holds it out. You want half?

The counselor politely declines.

The man shrugs. He tosses the candy in an arc towards the small trash bin in the corner of the room only for it to bounce off the rim and land onto the floor. Hey, do we get choices in our next lives? Can I be a lion then?

I am not in charge of deciding.

But it could happen, right?

It's not the first time someone makes a, generally unreasonable, request for what they

want to be next. Human to animal reincarnation is rarely done. Animals have no moral standard to evaluate their life by, thus their souls are generally recycled. Prey will become the predators, and vice versa. Rather than tell this to the man, the counselor merely said that Management cannot guarantee anything.

Okay, but like, hear me out. What if you make me a king lion? With the wild mane and the bitches at my call, and they give me the food, I fuck other lions, I run and chase and snack on deers and all that good shit.

Deer are not savanna animals.

The man looks at the counselor, head lightly rocking to the side and eyes blank. And your point?

The counselor decides against a sigh, it'd be too much effort than he's willing to give. You are not going to be a lion.

Killjoy.

The counselor straightened his papers.

The man cranes his head as he looks over all the small, square room.

How do you stand it in here? I feel like I'm gonna lose what's left of my brain.

The counselor's hands are still. I fail to understand the question.

Do you ever, you know, walk around? Is there like a break room where you could go grab a coffee? Go to the bathroom? Find yourself a nice ladyfriend?

The counselor stays silent. People generally don't inquire about the counselors themselves.

After a while of this silence, the man rolls his eyes. You're the one who said to talk.

We are here to discuss anything pertaining to *your* life.

You want my life story?

If that is what you wish to talk about, then it is fine. The counselor lays the man's file down and folds his hands again. Any concerns. Regrets. Hopes.

The man scoffs. He leans back, his hands buried in his jean pockets, and he looks up at the ceiling.

So, I could be gay.

The man studies the counselor's face for a reaction, but the counselor remains stoic.

Is there anything you want to talk about pertaining to that?

The man scratches at stubble on his chin. I dunno. I just wanted to try saying it. I never really did when I was living, you know? It's never something you just put out there. If you never say it, nobody will ever bother you.

The counselor traces a line on the man's record. While it does say you've had sexual intercourse with a man, you have also done so with women as well.

Nothing's kept from you bastards, huh? The man shakes his head. Look, that's. Just the kind of thing that's expected of a man, no big deal. He falls into a lull of silence before he speaks again.

He was a buddy. The man laughs a beat. That sounds like something every guy would say about their guy. Hey honey, I'm just gonna take a night out with the guys. Babe I'm not gay, I just have golf and a fuck date with a pal of mine. Hey bro, I'm dying in your arms in the middle of World War II and I just want you to kiss me goodbye because you're my best friend.

He suddenly takes his hand to the back of head, to the crater, as if he needs to check for fresh bleeding. He settles his hand down again.

Sometimes you look into a guy's eyes. And you don't know. You don't know what love actually is. And you don't know anything about if it could be right, when everybody always tells you it's wrong. You look at the guy's eyes and you feel something, but you know you can't feel anything. But they're just so clear somehow, and you want to keep looking. If it was a girl, they'd tell you it's love and you could make yourself think it is too, but when you really look at a guy, you're lost.

Maybe you kiss him one day. Nothing special made you do it, he just kinda looked at you, blank look, an I'm-remembering-you're-a-fucking-dumbass look, and you go why the hell not and you kiss him. The worst thing he could do, I dunno, probably punch you, never speak to you and shit. But you do it. And you know it feels right and that he feels it's right too and you don't know why everybody tells you to hold back. To keep it deep inside, where it tries to sleep but it keeps waking, wants to prowl, to hunt, to eat, to feast. That's how a guy is, right? A man lives to eat, hump, sleep, even on other men.

The man is silent for a beat before he continues. You don't know how to hold a guy's hand, how to really touch him, other than just reaching down to grab his dick, because somehow that's actually easier.

The man chuckles.

So you just look at him. His eyes. They're clear and afraid, like yours are, like you're standing above the sky, and you're going to fall, but you're gonna have your buddy together with you, falling too, but I freak, he freaks. One could fall faster than the other, the earth will

pull one of you down faster than the other so you just grab him by his arm, make sure he's falling with you and you will fall side by side. Equal level.

But no homo, am I right? The man's laugh is rough like sand, he punches his fist into an open palm.

We had a plan, that we'd bust out of the shithole town we were in, take whatever money we could, live free. Find a home. Find a home far from everything, deep in the forest, the mountains. Have some beer with us. We would've found our way somehow, me, him, my bike.

The man clenches and unclenches his fist. His knees bobs erratically.

The guy was always a rule-follower, he was always afraid, even when we ran away, especially when we ran away. Afraid of god's wrath. Afraid of god watching as we fucked.

The man is silent. The counselor is silent. The man leans his head forward, it tilts and bobs to the left like it could come loose from his neck, but he straightens up some.

I got sick of that shit. I was so sick of it.

We had a fight. We camped out in an abandoned apartment, you ever realize how many empty apartments there are out there? So we had a fight, and I left, I took my bike and I drove anywhere, I didn't care.

I thought I was just cooling my head. One stop at the store, just one sip, one bottle. And then I would come back, say I'm sorry, I was going to say I'm sorry.

The room hums. The air is thick and stale.

I don't know if he was waiting for me to come back, I. Fuck.

The counselor is reaching that point, where the voice is drowning away. How at some

point his vision will blur. He'll see doubles.

The man's fist clenches. Fuck, I. He was waiting. I was going to come back.

The counselor's lived for a long time without living.

His day begins with every guest that appears in this room. At some point, he doesn't hear words from his guests anymore. They go quiet, and he'll close his eyes. Rest.

And when he opens them, there is a different person.

The man speaks. I don't know where are we.

The counselor can remember every face he's seen. He remembers people who've lost their head, who couldn't speak, so they flailed aimlessly with blood trickling down their necks like they're screaming. He can remember every face, for a second, for a brief flash like someone you see in a dream.

The counselor remembers in statistics. He files away bits and pieces of the stories he hears, and he forms charts, trends, patterns. There are always the outliers in his observation of humanity, but those outliers always manage to find a place in their own pattern.

To the counselor, the man's story is only one of many similar ones. Stories of forbidden love. Of lost love.

The man speaks, his voice sounds far away. I shouldn't be here.

Sometimes the memories of the voices blur. One time the counselor was speaking to a man, who wanted to see his wife, and he blinked, and there was a woman, and she said she didn't want to have anything to do with her husband ever again.

They'll never retain their memories of their previous life. Counseling sessions are more of a slight comfort, for the soul to release its sorrows, its regrets. Voice their hopes.

But some things carry over. A love of jazz. A scar from war. A broken thread of love.

The man is growing quieter, the counselor can barely hear his voice anymore, lost among the buzzing of the speaker, the humming, the approaching announcement. He says, I can't be here. I need to go back, to--

The counselor hears the low buzzing growing louder. The speaker is humming. It crackles with static for the announcement to get through.

The man, he. What am I?

Attention, the next lives to be deported have been decided. Please proceed down the hall...

“The Gardens of Cooper House”

Jefferson Travis Croushore

The fingers of the rising sun pierced the receding gloom of the night sky, birds sang from their treetop nests and a light breeze rustled the petals of the springtime bloom. The grass stood tall glistening with morning dew, and the lady of the Cooper House, Geneva Cooper, gently spun along the garden path, humming a tune to herself, her eyelids half closed as she worked to remember the dance steps from the night before.

Her small feet moved her across the garden stones, her arms and body swaying with practiced grace, her curled hair whipping around her face while her nightgown billowed and spun with her.

The crispness of the air filled her lungs and the brisk morning chilled the sweat that clung to her form while she twirled through the garden that her mother, the former Mrs. Abigail Cooper, had cultivated. Those buds and blossoms, now painstakingly cared for by the young Geneva in her mother’s indefinite absence.

“Geneva.”

Her eyes snapped open, her arms crashing to her side, her toes spinning her towards the stony voice of her father. His disapproval was etched into his face, his eyes glowering from beneath heavy hooded eyelids, his nose red, either from the cold or from his night of drinking. His hands were behind his back, and he stood with pinpoint precision, his back board stiff, and she knew that those hands were balled into fists, the quake in his elbow and shoulder giving him away despite his dapper, pristine attire.

She dipped her head to him, “Good morning Father.” “You know what I have said about dancing.”

“Yes, Father.”

“And you continue to defy me?”

“I...” she didn’t know what to say. She thought to lie, to tell him it wouldn’t happen again, but they both knew that it would. “I didn’t think you’d be awake yet...”

“I have an early morning.” He snapped his fingers, the family butler Maxwell materializing at Mr. Cooper’s shoulder, “It appears that the lady of the house is intent on disobedience.” He turned from Geneva, “see to it Maxwell.”

“Of course sir.” Maxwell stood rigid, his face neutral as though he had been told to clean up a spilled saucer.

Geneva took a step back from the pair, “Father, please-!”

“And tear up this damnedable garden.” Mr. Cooper said over his shoulder, his scornful eyes staring past Geneva to the budding flowers behind her. “I won’t have their like here again.”

“Of course sir.”

Geneva stood in silence until her father left, and then she railed against Maxwell as he set himself to work, supervising while the gardeners tore out her peaceful retreat. She had fought and struck Maxwell several times, her eyes blurry with tears while her work - and her last reminder of her mother - was ripped out by the root. She had tried to run, to lock herself away in her room, but

Maxwell took her by the arm, his eyes sad with responsibility, "This is punishment enough... please, miss... don't make it worse."

Geneva knelt in the twilight of the setting sun, the last petals of her garden, her mother's garden in her hands, now watered by her tears and grief. She sobbed big wailing cries, her body crumpled in the dirt, cursing her father with heaving breaths, her grief burning away to futile anger. In that moment she hated her father, and Maxwell, and even the gardeners who had worked despite her pleas and appeals for them to stop, none of them knew how much this garden had meant to her, no one knew how much she had suffered to see it grow.

"Why does this one cry in the dirt and dead leaves?" A voice came to her in the graveyard of her garden, and Geneva whipped her head around to find the source of that almost condescending tone, her anger flaring, even while fear caused the hairs on the back of her neck to stand on end.

She saw no one.

"Who's there?" She demanded, rising to her feet, her hands balling into fists, crushing the last of her flower petals in her hands. She took a step towards the house, ready to run if she needed to, even while her back straightened and her chin rose in defiance. "You're trespassing here!" She declared, "I demand that you show yourself!"

"No need for hostility." The singsong voice said, "We'll come out."

Geneva's breath caught, "we?" Her eyes darted around the wreckage around her, "Who are you?"

Silence answered her, but Geneva couldn't shake the feeling that she was being watched by dozens of eyes, all loitering just beyond her perceptions.

A bead of sweat rolled down her back, and she took another step towards the house, the urge to run filling her.

And then, to Geneva's surprise and relief, a cat stepped out of the shadows of the growing night, black fur sleek and glossy, with shining amber eyes staring back at her.

"I'm so stupid." Geneva said, rallying herself for the hidden intruder, "Of course it wasn't the cat talking."

"Pumpernickel." The voice responded, and to Geneva's astonishment, the voice did in fact, come from the cat, though the creature's mouth did not move, nor did its eyes move away from hers.

"What?"

"Our name." the cat said, elegantly licking its paw, "we are Pumpernickel." The cat – Pumpernickel – sat before Geneva, "and we want to know why does the little kitten cry?"

Geneva assessed the cat, disbelief replacing her fear "How can you talk?"

Pumpernickel's ear twitched, "We learned." Pumpernickel stood up, and started to walk a slow circle around Geneva, its eyes never leaving her, "We watched, and learned, and now we speak, it wasn't so difficult for us, little kitten."

"And now you're talking to me." Geneva stood tall before this strange cat, determined to present herself as her father had always taught her, straight-backed, immovable, "Why?"

"Because the kitten cries for dead things. We wanted to know why."

The pain of her loss rippled through her, and she realized that her palm was throbbing from where some of the thorns had punctured her flesh. “This was my mother’s garden.” Pumpernickel set himself upon a small pile of leaves, his tail swishing slowly behind him, “it was my garden, and my father tore it up.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s a selfish, spiteful man.” Geneva could feel hot tears at the corner of her eyes, her anger boiling in her chest. “He’s mad at mother for leaving him, so he punishes me!” Her hands balled into fists at her side, her shoulders tightening with frustration. “He hates dancing, music, and this garden! All he does is boss me around and control me!”

“And what does the kitten want?”

“I’m not a kitten!” Pumpernickel’s tail stopped, his unblinking eyes meeting hers, “I’m Geneva Cooper! And I’m tired of being treated like a child!” She glared down at Pumpernickel, “I’m tired of being told what to do, of being ordered around, and I’m tired of being punished for things I didn’t do!” Geneva didn’t realize that she was yelling, or that she had stamped her foot in the dirt, or thrown the leaves and petals and thorns she had been holding down to the ground. She yelled, her frustration ripping from her, her tears of rage flowing. “I just want to be free!”

“Truly?” Pumpernickel sat before her, lounging no more,. “You would abandon your suffering so easily?”

“Yes.” Geneva bit, “I want to be free of this place, I want to sing, to dance, I want to be free!” “Then we shall make it so.”

Geneva turned towards Pumpernickel, “What?” His amber eyes glowed too bright in the night, and she felt something in her shift. She felt as though she were falling sideways, while her body disjointedly twisted, the world around her growing larger.

She screamed, but halfway through her voice left her, instead becoming a shrill shriek, its volume diminishing with her size. She felt follicles growing from along her body, blossoming into feathered pinions, while her face shifted, her nose and mouth elongating and melding together into a sturdy beak.

Soon she stepped out of her garments on thin spindly legs, her clothes now more akin to a tent than a gown, and she found that she stood shorter than Pumpernickel, her eyes seeing so much more than she ever had before. “What did you do?” She demanded, her voice coming out in quick chirps.

“We gave the little one what she desired.” Pumpernickel licked at his paw, “you are free now, to sing, to dance on the winds.” He tilted his head to her, “to go wherever you wish.”

Confused, Geneva looked over her new wings, and tail feathers. “You... you made me a bird?” “We thought it most fitting.”

Shouting from the house drew Geneva’s attention and instinctively she fluttered up into a tree, where she watched as Maxwell and her father came racing out into the night, calling her name, her father brandishing his cane in both hands while Maxwell rushed back into the house, returning quickly with the family hunting rifle.

She watched as their worry grew to fear, and once they found her gown it evolved to panic.

A small part of Geneva was happy to see her father's fear, "Good." She tweaked, "you should miss me."

Before long the night gave way to a new day, and Geneva wheeled through the clouds, singing her heart out. The day turned to a week, then to months, her days full of simple pleasures,. frolicking with other birds, dancing on the winds and through the clouds, her wings buffeted by the breeze as she soared and spun to her heart's content. In that time Geneva learned to appreciate a bird's diet, and she learned to sing their songs, though she never traveled too far from the Cooper House, reveling in her father's despair. Years of his control were undone in a moment, and Geneva delighted in it, at least, for a time.

Geneva landed upon the branch of an apple tree that had stood at the edge of her garden, winter's chill settling upon the estate. The Cooper House was dark, save for the light in her father's office. "Of course he's still working." She chirped to herself, her eyes watching as Maxwell took slow steps into the overgrown plot of land where her garden had once been.

The manservant, normally precise and proper, took a stumbling step into the garden, a flask clutched in his hand. He had a beard now, and his hair was unkempt, his formal attire rumpled and wrinkled. He fell to his knees in the garden, and Geneva noted the indentation in the dirt where he had set himself, realizing that this wasn't the first time Maxwell had sat out in the dirt.

Maxwell drank, and began talking to no one in particular, "he's not doing well at all... he isn't eating, barely sleeping..."

Geneva scoffed, "He should have thought about that before he tore up my garden."

Maxwell's eyes moved across the garden, "he's not himself... without you..." Maxwell's voice cracked, "we miss you so much, Miss Geneva..." tears rolled down his face, and the manservant buried his head in his arms, sobbing heavily.

"Oh..." So many emotions rushed through her, justification, guilt, pity, remorse, anger, "oh this is horrible..."

The branch jostled with a sudden weight, and Geneva turned as Pumpernickel sauntered out from the shadows, "are you enjoying your new life, little bird?"

"Oh, Pumpernickel, this isn't what I wanted..." "Isn't it?"

Geneva looked back at Maxwell, she had never seen him so broken, while a shape moved against the drapes of her father's office, "I didn't want them to get hurt."

"One cannot control others, little bird."

The silhouette of her father rummaged through his desk for a moment, before one hand fumbled with a glass. "Can't you fix this?" She asked, "You can make me normal again, can't you?"

Maxwell sobbed, and she knew her father was drinking heavily, a pair of men grieving separately for her disappearance.

Pumpernickel's tail twitched, "No."

Geneva turned from her father's shadow, his hand rising towards his head, "What do you mean? You made me this way, I demand you set it right!"

"We will not." Pumpernickel's eyes bored into hers, his face inches from the tip of her beak, "the little bird fled her life, passing her suffering on to others." A sharp sudden crack broke the silent clear night. Geneva spun to look, and she saw Maxwell running up the

stairs, shouting, while her father's shape was unmoving, small coils of smoke dissipated around his brow.

Geneva felt her heart drop from her chest, and she was numb, she didn't even realize that Pumpernickel had wrapped his paws around her. She would have fallen from the tree had it not been for him.

"And he too passes on his suffering."

Geneva turned towards Pumpernickel, his face so close to her, his amber eyes looming. "I didn't want this..." She would cry if she were able, her voice hollow in her chest, Pumpernickel's paws tight around her, "I didn't want..."

"Don't fret," Pumpernickel's mouth opened, and she saw the glint of his teeth in the moonlight.

"You're hurting me." Geneva admitted, wriggling when she felt sharp claws emerge from the paws around her, "Pumpernickel, you're hurting me!"

She looked into the face of Pumpernickel, his jaw distending, becoming massive around her with rows of teeth, and to Geneva's horror she saw dozens of hungry eyes leering from between those fangs, lining the mouth of Pumpernickel.

"As with all things, little morsel; it will pass."

“The Mortality of Immortality”

Daniel Dundas

When someone dies, everyone else expects one of two things. Either their soul is accepted into either Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory, or they just disappear. But what if we had it wrong? What if there was one more thing people needed to do before their spirits faded away? People find that death is not the last great adventure they had been told, but rather the first step towards the adventure. The next thing they need to do is accept that they have died and make the choice to surrender their soul to the afterlife, a decision one person in particular cannot make.

“Jeanine has moved on.”

Those words struck Mrs. Farly to her core. She stared wide-eyed at Alice, doing her best to comprehend what her friend had just said.

“M-moved on?”

“Yes, Gertrude. I know this must...” Mrs. Farly turned away in a huff and wafted away. “Wait, Gertrude!”

Mrs. Farly kept moving away from Alice, unwilling to listen to her finish what she had to say. But after a few moments of drifting down the neighborhood sidewalk, Alice

caught up with her. She didn't bother trying to block her path as ghosts can simply phase through each other.

"Gertrude, wait, you don't understand."

"I don't wish to talk about it."

"She needed this. Don't you understand how much pain she was in?"

"Any more pain than either of us?"

"Wait, what? What are you trying to say? That Jeanine's decision means nothing?"

Mrs. Farly turned her nose up at Alice as she picked up speed. She didn't care where she ended up, so long as she was able to shake Alice off her. She looked at the row of houses on her left and made a sharp turn to duck into one of them.

"Gertrude, stop it." Alice said in a tone that one would use to scold a child with. She tried to keep up, but when she phased inside the house, she couldn't see Mrs. Farly anywhere. She immediately went back outside as she never liked invading the privacy of other people's homes, even though no one alive would be able to see her. She looked down the street, hoping to catch a glimpse of her, but saw nothing. She knew Mrs. Farly didn't have the same sensitivities as her, and that she would have no problem spending time in someone else's house if it meant waiting her out. "Oh, Gertrude. If only you understood that Jeanine had hoped this would help you."

Mrs. Farly double-checked to see if she had lost Alice. Seeing that the coast was clear, she huffed and kept going forward, now on the outside of the neighborhood next to a bustling street.

“The nerve of her,” she muttered, thinking about Jeanine, “how does she know if she’ll even end up in Heaven? There’s no proof. It doesn’t matter that she was devout, there is still no guarantee. And now I have to deal with it.” Mrs. Farly knew that Jeanine knew even the concept of moving on bothered Mrs. Farly greatly. With her face set in a scowl and her posture rigid, she kept wafting down the street just in case Alice decided to try and catch up to her.

Eventually, she reached the highway that was just a few blocks away from her old house in the neighborhood she left Alice in. She was reminded of the church a few blocks down she used to go to when she was still alive. It was the closest church around, and she was willing to put up with the highway noises for the sake of convenience. For reasons she couldn’t quite understand, she found herself drawn to it, despite not having gone there in almost twenty years.

She wafted down the street, not caring for the people walking the same sidewalk as they phased through her, oblivious to her presence. *Why does everything have to be so loud?* She thought as she took in all the stimuli. The cars rushing past her with car engines producing rumbling sounds at different pitches, the people taking advantage of the cloudy day by walking without worrying about heating up so quickly and talking loudly just to hear each other over the cars, and she even heard someone playing a saxophone in a plaza next to her.

Oh, what did I do to deserve this? She held her hands to her ears, but that did nothing to deafen the clashing sounds.

Mrs. Farly paused as she thought about how this could be seen as a sign of her coming fate. Ghosts are not meant to linger in the world, for they are not a natural part of the world. Some skeptics and cynics have said that their new ethereal forms were part of some divine prank or even torture. For if a ghost stays too long, they will simply disappear. Someone had been talking with a friend when the friend, mid-sentence, simply vanished. It was the ten-year anniversary of the friend's death, something most others agree is the point when a choice must be made, or else it's taken out of their hands. And some people have argued that when they move on involuntarily, then their souls turn into nothing and don't go anywhere.

Mrs. Farly was fast approaching her tenth year as a ghost. She had not made her peace with God for she believed she didn't need to, and that she was just going to the church to spit in His eye, but as she moved closer and closer, she realized her reasoning was flimsy at best, and that she didn't truly know why she was going. With her nose turned up, she kept moving.

She reached the church after a couple of minutes and saw not much had changed about it. The only thing she recognized as new was the fresh coat of paint, and even that had to have been a few years old. The steeple still had an iron bell that hadn't been rung in years with the church instead using a recording of a bell placed right in front of it. The wooden

doors needed a new coat of lacquer, and the sign of the church that said “Saint Francis of Assisi Holy Catholic Church” was faded and chipped in some places. The only parts of the church that impressed Mrs. Farly at all were the stained-glass windows. She felt a longing for them she hadn’t felt in decades as she moved towards one of them and reached out to touch it, before sharply pulling her hand back, as if she would be burned if she dared touch any part of the church.

Mrs. Farly moved back to take in the view of the church. She thought it wasn’t much, but it was still the church she attended with her family. Her heart ached as she thought about her husband and children. As she gazed at the doors, she could see her husband, Frank, holding onto a squirming boy of five. Mrs. Farly nearly cried when she envisioned her son, Isaac, in his father’s grip. And when she looked down, she could see Elaine, her little baby girl who had recently turned two, fast asleep and curled up against her mother. The vision faded almost immediately after she saw her daughter, and she tried to hold onto her daughter, her hands grasping at nothing as the last traces of Elaine disappeared.

She wanted to break down and cry. She wanted to call out for her family. She then turned upwards to face the church and hardened her heart. She wanted to curse God, to drag His name through the mud. She was ready to call herself crazy for being there, but then she heard a small voice.

“Wait.” Mrs. Farly looked around a bit before she saw an elderly man wearing the robes of a priest. “Gertrude? Is that you?”

Mrs. Farly's eyes widened as she recognized the man, despite not having seen him in twenty years. "Monsignor Frost?" She whispered.

"Oh, Gertrude, it's so good to see you again." Monsignor Frost smiled. "How long has it been?"

"Oh. Uh, well, it's..." Mrs. Farly was hesitant to respond. Leaving Monsignor Frost without even saying goodbye was the only thing she regretted doing when she stopped attending Mass.

"Yes, it *has* been a long time." Monsignor Frost chuckled.

"M-Monsignor Frost, may I ask you something?"

"Certainly."

"What are you doing here?"

"Well, unless I'm mistaken, it's Sunday. And this may be a surprise, but Sundays are very important to someone like me." Monsignor Frost smiled.

Mrs. Farly frowned. "Someone like you?"

"What do you mean?"

"What do *I* mean? What do *you* mean when you say someone like you?"

"Well, I'm a priest, aren't I? I may not be the one leading the sermons anymore, but I still make a point to show up. The most recent congregation was about a half-hour ago, but there's nothing wrong with sticking around."

Mrs. Farly didn't want to follow that up with a response. If she was sure about what she thought he meant, she didn't want to hear it come from him. "Well, what I meant was why are you still here on Earth as a ghost? I haven't seen any ghostly priests, and I always thought that was because they wanted to leave to be with God as soon as possible."

"Yes, that is true. Most priests do move on right away. But then you have those like us. Not afraid to move on but know that our times haven't come just yet."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, when I died, I think it has to have been seven years now, my goodness, I was all set to go. But then I saw a lost spirit, if you'll pardon the expression." For just a second, Mrs. Farly was able to put aside her inner turmoil and give Monsignor Frost a small smile. "He was scared to go. He was afraid he would end up in Hell. I asked him why, and he said in life, he was an atheist. But now that he had to make the choice to move on, with the outcome irrefutably being either Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory, he didn't want to go as he said he knew where he would end up. I knew right there and then that I still had a purpose before I joined our Father in Heaven. I spent the next few weeks talking to that man as I tried to ease his worries. And then, one day, he asked me to take his confession. When we finished, he asked if he would still go to Hell. He had been baptized but turned his back on the Church and her teachings. I told him so long as you truly repent and ask for forgiveness, then God will receive you with open arms." Mrs. Farly wanted to scoff at that but kept quiet. "And when we were done, and he said his Hail Marys and Our Fathers, he was gone. Just like that."

“Just like that?” Mrs. Farly couldn’t keep the edge out of her voice entirely.

“Just like that. And while I may not have seen where he was taken to, I know in my heart I will see him in the kingdom of God. Him and all the others I’ve helped.”

“Oh, really?” Mrs. Farly snapped. “And let me guess, this is supposed to be you helping me? Are you trying to help me right now? Is that it?”

“Gertrude. How long have you been dead?” Monsignor Frost’s voice was as calm and even as always, but Mrs. Farly sensed a deeper, harsher meaning in those words. She almost didn’t want to say anything.

“I fail to see how that’s relevant.”

“I was worried when you stopped showing up for Mass.”

“I never asked for you to worry about me.”

“I know. But I would still like to know.” Monsignor Frost was looking straight through Mrs. Farly, and she didn’t know how to react. She had never felt this small since she died.

“It will be ten years in a week.” she said softly.

“Oh, my. I hope you understand what that means.”

“Yes, I do.”

“And you haven’t made your peace with God.” Mrs. Farly noted that Monsignor Frost didn’t say it as a question. She scowled as she thought he was patronizing her.

“Gertrude, I do not know what happens to the poor souls who wait out the clock. But I do know that when they leave, they do so unwillingly, and that they most likely hadn’t repented for their sins. Whether they simply vanish or go to Hell, either way it doesn’t seem like a good time.

“What happened that caused you to turn away from God?”

Mrs. Farly waited a moment before telling him. She wanted to try and take back control of the conversation in any way she could. “You remember my husband, Frank, right?”

“Of course. And I remember being the one to preside over his funeral.”

“And do you remember my children?” she asked more harshly.

“Yes,” he said sadly. “And I remember handling their funeral, too.”

“My entire family, my life and my joys, were ripped away from me without reason. Frank died in a freak accident at the plant, and one of the engines in the plane my children were on blew a fuse. I couldn’t even give them a proper burial since there was hardly anything to salvage!” Mrs. Farly’s body was wracked with sobs as she recounted the deaths of her family.

Monsignor Frost gave Mrs. Farly some time to compose herself, which took more than a minute to do, before asking, “Gertrude, why did you come to the church?”

This caught Mrs. Farly off guard. “What? What do you mean?”

“As I said. Why did you come here?”

“Why do you ask?”

“When I first saw your face today, before I called out to you, you looked, oh, confused.”

“I did?”

“Yes. Like you knew you had to be here,” he said gesturing to the church, “but you didn’t know why. I find that people typically come to a church when they’re feeling lost, even if they aren’t a believer. Do you remember the man I helped?”

Mrs. Farly hovered there motionless. She didn’t want to open up to anyone any more than she had already. Ever since she left the church, she had grown callous to the idea of confessing. She only talked to Monsignor Frost out of politeness. She had told him everything about the circumstances of her life and faith after the deaths of her family, and that was more than enough for her.

“Monsignor, I’m afraid you must be mistaken. I was just taking a stroll when I came upon the church and was swept up in nostalgia.”

Monsignor Frost just smiled softly at that. Mrs. Farly wanted to wipe that smile away; it irritated her and made her feel smaller than before, like a child being confronted by their parent after being caught with their hand in the cookie jar. “Did something happen today?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No.”

“I see. But now can I ask you another question?”

“I guess so.”

“Does this have to do with Jeanine Walters?”

Mrs. Farly’s eyes widened for a moment before settling back in place. She hoped the monsignor didn’t catch it. “Ah, yes. I thought that might be it.”

“How did you know?”

“Well, something you said earlier suggests you don’t like the idea of moving on, and I understand that Jeanine had been planning on doing so for a while now.”

“What? A while? For how long?”

“Not too long. For about two weeks. She came to me and told me she had been afraid to do so, but she knew she couldn’t stay. After she was ready, she came to me to hear her last confession. She did so, and then she said a few prayers, and then before I knew it, she was gone.”

“When did this happen?” Mrs. Farly’s voice cracked.

“Just yesterday. She was with a friend. I believe she said her name was Alice. I don’t recall seeing her at Mass before.”

Mrs. Farly couldn’t believe her ears. Jeanine had been a longtime friend of hers when they were alive, having met when they were still in Sunday school. “She told Alice but not me?” she muttered.

“Ah, perhaps I shouldn’t have told you that,” Monsignor Frost said. But Mrs. Farly saw the look on Monsignor Frost’s face. There was no regret or guilt anywhere to be found.

But before she could yell or curse him, she heard Alice’s voice call out to her. “Gertrude, there you are.” Mrs. Farly and Monsignor Frost turned to face Alice, who had just caught up with them.

“Hello, Mrs. Cartwright,” Monsignor Frost said.

“Hello, Monsignor,” Alice nodded.

“Alice,” said Mrs. Farly, her voice strained, “how did you know to find me here?”

“I didn’t. I’ve been looking for you, but I didn’t know where to start. After a while, I met this nice lady who said she spotted someone with your description here at the church. Poor thing, she was so young, too.”

“What are you doing here, Alice?” Mrs. Farly asked.

“I could ask you the same thing.”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“I wanted to talk to you about Jeanine.”

Mrs. Farly scoffed. “For Heaven’s sake, what makes you think I *want* to talk about that? What makes either of you think I am fine with any of this?”

“Gertrude, there’s no need to snap.” Alice said.

“Snap? Snap. How’s this for snap? I just found out my best friend gave up on existing, and that she didn’t have the nerve to tell me herself.”

“Because she knew you would react like this.” Alice said.

“Don’t interrupt me,” Mrs. Farly said pointing a finger at Alice. “And then I hear from Father Dudley Do-Right that all I need to do is tell the big man upstairs ‘I’m sorry’ and then everything will be hunky-dory.

“I tried remaining faithful after my life came crashing down. After Frank was crushed into a fine pulp, I prayed for him to find peace. After Isaac and Elaine got mangled, I prayed for them to find peace. But you know who didn’t find peace? Me. After weeks of calling out for God to show his mercy and compassion and not getting any indication of such, I was done. That was it. I wanted nothing more to do with God. Only to then find out that I *have* to put my fate in His hands whether I like it or not. I was content with just dying and getting it over with, but now I must make the choice to give myself up to God’s judgment. I must make the choice to let go of my own fate. I must make the choice to die completely.” Mrs. Farly’s voice got caught in her throat. “I just can’t do that.

“And now I find that my best friend has moved on, leaving me. Having her around was all the comfort I needed. I didn’t need to move on so long as she was here.”

Neither of them said anything for a while, knowing that Mrs. Farly needed to calm down first before any headway could be made.

“Gertrude,” Alice said softly, “Jeanine never meant to hurt you. She had hoped that by doing this, it would give you the courage to do the same. She knew she couldn’t stay

forever, and that you were staying because of her. She has her own loved ones she wanted to see again. She wanted to know peace. And she wanted that for you, too. And the reason why she didn't tell you, instead asking me to tell you in her place, was because she knew it would've been better if you had learned about her departure after the fact. If she told you she was leaving, she would have left knowing you never would have forgiven her. She couldn't leave in peace knowing you were angry with her."

Mrs. Farly turned her head away. She wanted nothing to do with Jeanine's reasons. However, she felt a stirring inside her. Something was pulling her to Alice's words.

"Gertrude," Monsignor Frost asked, "what do you want?"

"What?" Mrs. Farly asked incredulously.

"What do you want?" He repeated. "I ask this because it sounds like you know what you want, but something's keeping you from going for it."

Mrs. Farly didn't know how to react to that. Monsignor Frost and Alice just looked at her. Monsignor Frost had the same look of understanding and solemnity, and Alice had the look of pity, but also hope on her face. Mrs. Farly wanted to curl up and block out the world. The world that had begun to spin. All sounds of traffic and talking and music lowered in volume yet merged into an incoherent, muffled mess. She knew what Monsignor Frost was talking about. She knew Alice was just the messenger, and that she was right in her deductions regarding Jeanine's reasons.

Her fists were clenched, her eyes were scrunched closed, and her body was stiff as a board. She wanted to cry and shout. She could barely hear Monsignor Frost and Alice trying to get her attention. She felt like she was going to explode.

She opened her eyes and said weakly, “Help.”

“Help you with what?” Monsignor Frost asked.

“I can’t keep going on like this. Every day is a burden. Every day I go on without my family is torture. I know what I need to do, but I don’t know if it will help. I’ve already turned my back on the Church, on God. Will He really take me back if I just confess? What if there’s some part of me that doesn’t mean it? What if –”

“Gertrude,” Monsignor Frost interjected, “do you have time for a quick confession?” He stretched his hand towards the church with a smile.

“Yes,” Gertrude nearly shouted as her body was wracked with sobs. Monsignor Frost led her inside the church with Alice right behind her. They phased through the doors and Mrs. Farly saw the interior of the church for the first time in decades. The carpet was a slightly dark shade of red, the pews were all made of polished wood with no seat cushions, and the altar was rather modest with a table with a candle on either end unlit. Behind it was a golden tabernacle that housed the Eucharist, and above it was a crucifix with a representation of Jesus hanging from the nails embedded in His hands and feet. Mrs. Farly was filled with a sense of nostalgia, but she couldn’t bring herself to smile at any of it no matter how badly she wanted to as she was still on edge and couldn’t bring herself to relax just yet.

“I’ll be waiting for you in one of the pews, dear,” Alice said and wafted over to one of the pews she knew was right next to the confessional off to the side.

Mrs. Farly simply nodded at his friend as she followed Monsignor Frost into the confessional. Monsignor Frost led her through the rite as she needed help remembering what it was she needed to say before listing her sins. When they were done, Mrs. Farly laid bare everything. Her unfaithfulness, her pride, and her wrath. She needed to stop a couple of times as she was caught up in her sorrow with each sin confessed, acknowledging that her troubles were her own doing. Monsignor Frost said nothing other than what was required of him and allowed Mrs. Farly all the time she needed.

Eventually, Mrs. Farly finished. Monsignor Frost then led her through to the end of the confession, and then told her to recite an Our Father and a Hail Mary. Mrs. Farly thanked Monsignor Frost and then left. She exited the confessional to find Alice hovering right in front of her and wafted over to her. Alice said nothing as she brought her hands together for prayer.

“Alice,” Mrs. Farly whispered.

“Yes?”

“I...” Mrs. Farly hesitated, “I don’t remember all the words to the Lord’s Prayer.”

Alice smiled. “Let’s do it together.” Mrs. Farly nodded and brought her hands together, mirroring Alice. Alice started the Prayer and Mrs. Farly did her best to keep up. She stumbled over the first couple of lines, but then found it easier to match Alice. She also found herself loosening up and becoming lighter. In fact, she had felt lighter than she ever

had. As they moved on to the Hail Mary, Mrs. Farly could feel a serenity wash over her. She had never felt so calm since before her husband passed. And as they were almost done, Mrs. Farly saw for a split-second Frank holding out his hands to her. Isaac and Elaine were on either side of him, urging her to come to them.

Alice and Mrs. Farly finished at the same time. Alice turned to face Mrs. Farly with a smile, only for the smile to falter for a moment before coming back. No one was there.

“Nights Like These”

Margo Cash

I.

It was 1:15 on a Tuesday afternoon two weeks before Christmas and Caleb’s kidneys were failing.

He drove home from the doctors with his right hand clenched around the steering wheel and his left patting his thigh in time to a new Florence and the Machine song on the radio. It was drizzling on the freeway in La Cañada but he didn’t mind it. He liked that he didn’t have to worry about watering the back yard.

He parked on the street and stepped out onto the damp pavement. He grabbed his laptop from his car and walked up to the front steps of the house. He let himself dwell in the relief that he had the rest of the day off from work. His roommates Nick and Dee were gone. They were a couple – and Dee was his older sister. Nick was in a band that practiced all the time in a garage down the street and she was a first-grade teacher. He had called Dee from the doctors and told her what happened, but told her to wait to tell Nick. She was quiet on the other end for a long time. He told her Kate would be stopping by and asked them to come home late.

He’d had health problems for years but never this bad. He’d never needed medicine. Inside, he crumpled the prescription paper and tossed it onto the coffee table. He walked into the kitchen and opened the fridge. The draft of the cold air hit his legs and made him

tense. He reached for a soda first, and then grabbed one of Nick's craft beers instead. He never drank. The doctor told him not to drink. But he figured he deserved it.

He sat down on the couch and turned on the TV for background noise. He thought back to when he and his sister had first moved into the house together, when Nick wasn't yet in the picture. They made too-soft spaghetti and played scrabble on the living room floor because they couldn't even afford Ikea chairs. That was a long time ago.

Now he was thirty, single, and living with newly engaged roommates. He was also dying. He knew he would get the prescription filled then stick it in the back of his sock drawer and never swallow a single pill. He didn't believe in medication. So, there was only one choice - accept the inevitable.

II.

Kate looked beautiful when Caleb answered the door and he felt like an ass for making her drive all the way out to his house from San Bernardino. But the caring stopped at that small, personal admission. He had too much on his mind to think about their relationship status. So, the illusion continued that they were 'just-friends' and she was just naïve enough to keep trying to change his mind.

She was dressed like they were going on a date – in a black dress that dipped low in the front. He didn't know much about shoes, but hers looked expensive. Caleb grabbed his jacket, took her hand in his, and led her to his car, pretending at being a gentleman. His car was better than hers anyway—she drove a basic Honda Civic. People *knew* him in La Cañada. He couldn't be seen in it.

“Have a good day?” Kate asked as she slipped inside his Audi. Her dress rode up her thigh and he looked.

“Want Italian?” he asked, starting the car. She nodded. His lips moved to tell her what happened. He never wanted things to go this far with her. He always said they were nothing serious but they went out to dinner every week since they met. Six dates. One kiss when she was drunk in a parking lot that they never discussed.

As they pulled into the tiny parking lot of a hole-in-the-wall Italian place a few streets over from his house, Caleb blurted out, “Have you ever been sick?” Kate turned to him with that weird look she always gave him. Like she was half-afraid of him.

“I had to get my tonsils out a year ago? I was really sick then.” She shrugged and he wanted to laugh so badly, the sensation filled his chest and made him feel like nothing was wrong with any of his organs, just maybe his heart. He liked the way she could make him laugh so easily. He used to never find anything funny. She made him forget for a second.

III.

She said the gnocchi was cold and Caleb watched as she picked at it with an awkward, apologetic smile. He ordered a glass of wine, knowing it would upset her. The distrust on her face reminded him of the night they met – at a Halloween party where they were the only two not drinking. She was wearing an Alice in Wonderland costume and asked him if he was a ‘nice guy’. He said ‘no’. Then that look. She told him he had to be a nice guy. But he had never proved her right.

“You make me nervous,” he said.

“You? Caleb Thomas – nervous? A man with two first names? That can’t be true,” Kate said but her voice hinged on denial. Her best friend warned her he was a serial dater. That he had weird commitment issues. It was probably just a line.

“Yes, I am in fact capable of that emotion.”

“Then maybe I should stop coming around so you don’t have to be so nervous that you start to drink, you know how hard it is for me to stay sober,” she set her fork down, “I thought we talked about this.”

“It’s just one glass of wine. I’ve had kind of a shitty day. It won’t be a habit,” he said.

“Are you sure? Because I can have them bring you out the whole bottle,” Kate mumbled, wiping her lips with a napkin and leaving red stains on the paper. He picked up his glass, swirled the red wine around like he did it often and then took a long sip.

IV.

Kate sat down on the white couch in front of the TV when they got back from the restaurant. Caleb laid his jacket over the back of the recliner and walked into the kitchen and stared at the oven clock. 8:23. He heard Kate rustling through her purse for something to fill the silence. He heard the jingle and smack of her keys as a warning. He didn’t want her to leave yet. He twisted the dial of the oven all the way around with the tips of his fingers. It clicked it on and buzzed comfortingly. He clicked it off.

V.

Forty-five minutes later Caleb and Kate were sprawled out on opposite ends of the white couch. They stared at each other for a long while. The TV flashed colors around the dim room from the basketball game on mute. The strap of her dress fell down her shoulder. She had only kissed him. Only that, but still he wished she hadn't.

"What did you want to be when you were younger?" he asked her.

"I wanted to be the Rose Queen, in the Rose Parade," she said, "Or at least a one of the Rose Princesses...what did you want to be?"

"Older"

They fell back into silence until Caleb yawned.

"Well congratulations, Old Man, you got what you wanted" Kate said. It hurt him more than his back every morning when he woke up. It hurt him more than the thought of being alone.

VI.

Caleb cringed when Nick and Dee walked into the house with arms full of shopping bags. He knew Dee had done this on purpose, wanting to meet Kate before she would be gone, before he was too far gone to date and was pissing into a catheter in a hospital bed. Dee appraised her and motioned for Kate to follow her into the kitchen. There were the soft noises of a first conversation and soon he heard them laughing. Nick brought out a box full of bows and wrapping paper from the hall closet and sat down on the carpet.

"Sorry to interrupt your date," Nick said with a guilty half-smile as he pulled a box out of one of the bags. Caleb turned back on the volume of the TV and pretended not to

notice Kate and Dee walk back into the living room. They sat down with Nick and started to help wrap the gifts. Kate's black dress fanned out around her folded legs and he imagined her sitting on the Queen's float surrounded by flowers on New Year's Day. They all talked, but Caleb didn't hear anything. He put his feet on the coffee table.

He only had two presents to wrap this year. One for their mother. One for their father.

"I have yours at home, I'm sure I'll see you before Christmas?" the way Kate's voice raised in hopeful questioning made it hard for Caleb to look at her. Kate whispered into Nick's ear what she'd bought him. A small part of his stomach twisted at how good they looked together. Better than him and Dee.

"Caleb, your girlfriend is pretty cool, I have to say," Nick smiled, taping one of those plasticky bows on a box.

Kate pretended to fix the corner of a present with extra tape. She looked the way he felt inside. Dee shot Caleb a glance that clearly screamed "Answer her, you ass."

"We're going out of town for Christmas," he said and stared at the TV.

VII.

They stood on the front porch together. Nights like these would be the worst to remember. They held hands and their fingers didn't fit. As they stepped down the two concrete stairs the sprinklers on the front lawn went off. Kate shrieked and ran ahead of Caleb to get out into the middle of the street. He stayed in the water for a while, watching her as she sank into the grass with every step across the yard. She raised her hands up in the

air helplessly. The water reflected around her from the one working streetlamp. It made her hair glow copper and fling around her face in thick, sopped strands. He finally followed her into the street, looking at her smiling like she'd been in some romantic movie. Her eyes begged him to continue the narrative she was creating.

He helped her into her car. He walked back through the water.

“Return to Sender”

Taylor Croft

Dear Governor Collins,

We, the residents from the town of Pine Ridge, ask for the Governor’s Office to reinstate the Animal Control Services to handle our growing roadkill epidemic. We are seeking out help as there should be services provided to dispose of these animals. We urge you to assist in the removal of the deceased creatures.

Thank you for your time.

Dear Governor Collins,

We have yet to hear back from any Governmental services regarding our request for assistance in removing roadkill from our town. Despite any efforts we’ve taken to lessen the carnage, the creatures continue to end up dead in our streets. Any call we’ve placed to any organization has asked us to inquire action from your office. We ask respectfully to instate some kind of cleaning service for Pine Ridge.

Thank you for your time.

Dear Governor Collins,

The response letter you sent our Sheriff spread through the town like wildfire. Print that read, *Your complaint is noted*, stamped with your signature at the bottom. Did you not

even have time to send us a letter from yourself personally? Handling this issue would be much easier if you sent a cleaning service down to us now rather than later.

Thank you for your time.

Dear Governor Collins,

In response to our previous letters being returned to our addresses, our town has decided to send a collective one, signed by our Sheriff and stamped by our town hall representative. We urge you to please reinstate services to handle our growing roadkill problem. There have been car accidents to avoid hitting or running animals over. Arguments between friends and neighbors dumping into each others' gardens. Our efforts make no difference. They are piling up. The streets are beginning to smell. We ask respectfully to please send someone down to Pine Ridge to assess the carnage and develop a plan to clear out the roadkill.

Thank you for your time.

Dear Governor Collins,

It's been a week since we sent our group letter. I was advised to wait for your response, Governor Collins, but I insist that you reinstate a collection agency. Our town's shopping streets have become vacant. Hordes of raccoons and bunnies are clumping up the entrances. Jan threw out all her metallic spoons due to her disdain for the metallic taste in the air. She's refusing to let her son attend school. Please respond. Thank you.

Dear Governor Collins,

The Sheriff and his men began to move the carcasses to the edges of town. The stench still permeates the distance. The town hall representative finally managed to request an independent agency inspection. When the man came to assess our situation, he only needed to drive through the town before declining the job. We need your help. We believe you are the only one who can assist. *Thank you.*

Dear Governor Collins,

The children in my elementary school class cannot sit still due to their growing curiosity about the dead animals. They do not want to learn fractions. They do not want to learn about George Washington. They only sit still when we talk about science. Our chapter this month is on decomposition.

Dear Governor Collins,

Joe, our children's soccer coach, has had to cancel practices because of the lack of attendance. We are shut into our homes to avoid the stench. Street sweepers and garbage collectors have discontinued their routes and are saying you told them too. We don't know what's going on, please respond to our letters. *Thank you.*

Dear Governor Collins,

We've run tests. Committed a day of no vehicles on the streets. Roadkill still appeared. We barricaded roads to be sure no tires touched them. Days went by, but the

creatures still manifested. We glued our eyes to our windows in hopes of catching the animals, our neighbors, maybe even *you* placing the bodies in our yards. Roadkill still piled. They would appear in the moments we blinked. In the moments our children ran to us, tears swelling their eyes from the nightmares of the roadkill eating them in their sleep. *We are plagued.*

Dear Governor Collins,

I saw one of your speeches on the news the other day. You seem to be keeping up with your plans for reelection next year. I really like your campaign slogan, "*Collins, puts the people first!*" By now, we'll accept tenth or fifteenth. Respond to our letters.

Dear Governor Collins,

Enclosed inside this envelope is a petition signed by everyone in the town. Our elderly, our nurses, our fathers. Mothers inscribed their children's names underneath their own, some even their newly born babies.

Our patience is growing thin, Governor Collins. Stores are shutting early, and employees are assisting in shoveling the roadkill to the edges of town. There are several dozens by now. Splotches of blood stain our streets. The Sheriff is handing out masks in our schools. Children kick the roadkill into patterns on the sidewalks to play hopscotch. Our tire treads have caked in feathers and feet while we drive with earplugs in an attempt to ignore the endless crunching of the roadkill beneath us.

Our letters keep getting returned. *Please help us.*

Dear Governor Collins,

A thick shadow is forming in the corners of the town. There are more and more flies with each day passing. House flies. Blowflies. Yellow flies. Black flies. They scream, nuzzling themselves into our exposed ears. When we aren't swatting them out of our houses, they echo outside. The general store is handing out fly swatters to everyone who manages to make their way to their doors. Jan got into a fight with the Sheriff as to how many she could take. He said one per person. She wanted them all. We are running out of silence.

Dear Governor Collins,

I fight with my neighbor daily. Each morning I catch him kicking the rotting meat over our fence, rag glued to his face. I confronted him, but he refused to admit to it. He told me that I could not prove it, I warned him not to test me. He woke up yesterday with polka-dotted flesh on his front windows. I woke up today with a clear lawn.

Dear Governor Collins,

A small child named Maggie found one alive this morning on her walk to school. She sat in my classroom, talked to my daughter during recess. She said it was a baby raccoon, nestled in the arms of its dead mother. Its collapsed lungs rattled as it tried to expand its underdeveloped diaphragm, breathing through the blood slowly drowning it. Maggie said it wheezed. She said it was missing an eye.

Dear Governor Collins,

I invited Joe over for dinner the other night. I didn't realize how much my son missed him, how much my boy missed playing soccer. We talked the night away, reminiscing about the games the boys played in the past. Joe blinked a tear away when I showed him the old photos of the field when it was freshly cut, the grass green and crowded with running children.

Dear Governor Collins,

It's been four months now. The edges of our town are now lined completely by roadkill. Our dog population is decreasing. If they aren't roadkill themselves, they are belly up in our yards after eating the rotten meat. The wave of maggots and flies have solidified their infestation within our town. I cannot breathe without inhaling flies. Our clothes, our food, our gardens reek of the dead.

Other teachers protest standing in classes where children cannot sit without vomiting in recycle bins. Our Sheriff has maintained a calm and collected manner, but even his men are unraveling. They do not show up in the mornings to move the roadkill. The creatures are filling the streets, the alleys, even the park where no car has ever touched the grass fields. We can't take this anymore. Send someone, *please*.

Dear Governor Collins,

It's easy to think about leaving by now. Months have passed, and you are making us feel hopeless. But every time we pack our cars, we are unable to drive past the town's county

line. We are tethered to this place. We are stitched to the fabrics of our streets, of our homes. This was the park that held our family events, our children's games. This is where my daughter was born, where my boy broke his first bone. This is our home, Governor Collins. We are not leaving, and we are not stopping. Listen to us.

Dear Governor Collins,

Joe told me that he was feeling lonely. Our town had to officially cancel the rest of the soccer season because of the park's accumulating dead. I've invited him over from time to time. He cradles my daughter's stuffed animals whenever she invites him to play with her tea party set.

Dear Governor Collins,

Our tortoises are migrating.

Dear Governor Collins,

This is the sixteenth letter I have personally sent. I am building a collection of my own writings. Yellow notices stapled on the fronts of our red-stained letters boil anger inside of us. We cram them in our stationaries, in our kitchen junk drawers.

We are too tired to move the roadkill now. They stack in our gutters. They stack against our general store. They stack against our fences. They've killed the park's grass. Our stores are duct-taped closed from the stench. Our water is brimmed in maggots. We've run out of nose plugs, of Febreze, of Raid.

We can't stop the roadkill from appearing.

You can't ignore us forever.

Dear Governor Collins,

Joe is having trouble walking outside his home. He can't stand the sight. Hundreds of rotting corpses lay in our town. He thinks we should start burying them. Joe keeps telling me the animals move in the night. They scratch the sidewalks, their yellow eyes twinkle like stars too close to our streets. He told me the swelling of their bodies means they're pregnant. I told him they're dead. He asked me who.

Dear Governor Collins,

I saw Jan and her husband sorting through their garage this afternoon. They were boxing up old trinkets, storing them in the spaces above their cabinets. Things like the fly swatters she bought and the rest of their metal silverware. Her husband pulled tarps over their spare car and his lawnmower. Jan began crying when they came across an old photo of the town from decades back. I couldn't help but wonder how many letters it took her before she finally gave up.

Dear Governor Collins,

Maggie ate a roach last night. My boy saw her poking a swelling raccoon in the throat. The raccoon began to talk, the roaches crawling out in scattered zigzags. Maggie picked up the fattest one, biting off the head, wrapping it in her pink tongue, sucking it like a pacifier.

Dear Governor Collins,

Your van drove through town the other day. Your face plastered on one side, your slogan on the other. You had shiny grinning teeth and a presidential thumbs up. We all thought you were finally here to help us. Finally here to address our letters and our roadkill issues. We flew from our houses to wave at you; to show you our award-winning smiles. The children in my classroom sprawled across the windows, smacking the glass to say hello to you. We welcomed you, open arms.

Your van drove away.

There one minute, past the county line the next.

Dear Governor Collins,

Two families left the day after the van sighting. Jan and her husband, along with their two kids being one of them. They said they couldn't take another day of this madness. We told them that you were coming back and that they should stay. Jan told me we were in denial before she slammed her car door and drove her family out of town. We don't blame them for leaving, but as for the rest of us, we are standing our ground. We've renewed our efforts to move the rotting animals to the edges of town. Together, my neighbor and I removed the animals from each other's yards.

We hope you know that we plan on helping with the removal. We hope to see you and your people again soon, Governor Collins.

Dear Governor Collins,

Joe found an alligator in front of the general store this morning. It was seven feet long and too heavy for him to move. Its tail smashed from a tire, spine curved outward from the other. Its fat tongue hung out of its dislocated jaw, licking up a caracara with one leg and half a beak from the road. The gator's teeth scattered the road like jacks, eyes cloudy. Flies were swarming it when he got there.

Joe cried. He sunk to his knees, lifting its massive head into his arms. The jaw moved as if it was speaking. As if it was consoling him. It took five employees from the store to move it to the park half a mile away. We buried it that afternoon. Drank to its life. Poured one out for ours.

Dear Governor Collins,

It took us two weeks to realize you weren't coming back. The Sheriff told us to calm down. He continued to propose ways to get rid of the rot, but no one agreed with him. Our voices spoke in unison; we want them gone. We asked him if he had any word from you or your office since the van drove by. He said there was no news and that maybe it's time we start realizing we are on our own.

Whispers spread through the seated Pine Ridge residents within the town hall meeting.

We think you're the one making the roadkill appear.

Read our letters.

Dear Governor Collins,

Help.

Dear Governor Collins,

Help.

Dear Governor Collins,

Help.

Dear Governor Collins,

The flies won't leave our houses. They say it smells like their food.

Dear Governor Collins,

The Sheriff tried to leave town the other day. He said the roads were blocked by a wall. *You cemented us in.* Piled at the corners were the shoveled carcasses that line our town.

Dear Governor Collins,

Our cars can't drive on the roads anymore.

Dear Governor Collins,

Our letters keep getting returned.

Dear Governor Collins,

Why isn't anyone telling us anything?

Dear Governor Collins,

Fuck you.

Dear Governor Collins,

Fuck you.

Dear Collins,

Fuck you.

Dear Collins,

We sent you a package. It was the first thing not to come back to us. You remember it, don't you? An opossum with no teeth. We spooned out its eyes and stuffed its guts in the box beside it. We left out the tail. Figured you had enough of those.

Dear Collins,

We've removed our nose plugs. We've covered our cars in tarps. Everyone walks now, tiptoeing over the animals to not get their maggots into the soles of our shoes.

School is out of session. The children are uninterested in our clean classrooms. Instead, the children are adopting the animals. The boys down the street have stolen the

strings from our sewing kits to stitch the creatures together. They named them. Rex. Jonny. Spiked. They take them in their treehouses and play fetch with striped squishy balls. We feed our stale dog food in silver-rimmed bowls. For the animals too far gone, our girls make friendship bracelets with their bones. Maggie gave a talon necklace to my daughter. She gave her a headband of teeth.

Dear Collins,

After the wall went up, our store ran out of food quickly. Joe was the first one to propose the idea. Every morning now, we scavenge for newly deceased animals. The stomach aches go away within the week of our new diet. We thank them for their sacrifice, and we cook lunch for our families. We rotate the fresh food between houses, sometimes settling for the week-old batch. We sauté their thighs, masking the aroma in cilantro and basil as we tear at the rancid fat and feed it to our children.

The taste isn't as bad as you'd think, Collins. Like a funky hard-boiled egg.

You should try it.

Dear Collins,

We heard your van. The children piled onto each other's shoulders to look for it on the other side of the wall, but all they found was the empty road. My boy said the road unsettled him. He said they weren't meant to be so empty.

Dear Collins,

Joe is torn about the gator. He won't leave the bar without drinking a shot to it. He named it Amanda. He talks about digging her up. Prying his dirty fingernails into the caverns of her green hide. He remembers her being pregnant. He remembers her spine. He remembers her tongue. Joe weeps.

Dear Collins,

Our Sheriff is exhausted. He has lost weight due to his inability to eat our new town diet. His wife said he vomits daily from the stench. I asked her what smells so bad. She told me she did not think he could handle this anymore. I told her what we should do.

Dear Collins,

This morning I found my boy sword fighting with raccoon spines. His friend carried a wishbone slingshot, catapulting gallbladders and chunks of liver at Maggie. She only smiled. She glued squirrel teeth over her own. They clicked methodically as she snapped her mouth at the flying meat. She thinks it'll help her chew. I think the opossum teeth would have been better.

Dear Collins,

Your van circles around us daily now. We can hear the engine, artificially living just beyond our eyes. Is it here to read our letters? Is it here to help us? If you're in it, you should know that your silence is deafening. We do not accept your silence. Tell your van to watch out.

We are the plague.

Dear Collins,

We dry out the hides, making blankets for our babies and belts with their skins. Joe offers Amanda's hide for boots, but we tell him to leave her alone. My boy got bit by Maggie's squirrel teeth. She filed them to point, sinking them into his cranium in hopes that she could test how his brain tasted. She claimed rabbit brains are the best, but she wanted to see if that was true. I found a tortoise shell that wasn't cracked. I made a helmet for him.

Dear Collins,

Joe and I found the Sheriff at the wall today. When he pulled him away, I watched as the Sheriff screamed. He lunged at the wall, scraping at it until his nails ripped up from the tips of his fingers. He shouted for you, Collins. He screeched and scratched until his fresh blood was painting the wall in streaks.

Dear Collins,

You've shut off our electricity. We use opossum eyes to walk through the night now, pathways lit up by the iron platelets flowing in the streets. When we lose our children, they rattle their bone bracelets, hoot, and holler like their pets leashed in their treehouses. Sometimes they out voice the crickets burrowed in the trees. Sometimes they out voice the flies in the windowpane.

Dear Collins,

I visited the school. It'd been months now since I'd walked into my old classroom. Dirt from my hands smudged the dusty drawings my students made long ago. The uncapped scented markers dried out, smelling like stale felt instead of green apples and licorice. I smiled at Maggie's last macaroni art. An outline of a baby raccoon, the noodles pale and brittle.

Dear Collins,

The Sheriff ends his days screaming. He swats at the flies so hard he slaps himself bruised. He runs in the night—naked—kicking at the animals that barricade his path. The Sheriff repeats your name a lot, asking for you to respond to his radio. How long have you been talking with him? How long has he been listening to you?

Dear Collins,

Joe went missing today. We got worried, but I knew where he had gone. I went to the park and found him lying on the mound sprouting dandelions. He had two empty bottles of gin lying beside him. Dirt lined his jagged fingernails, and loud snores rumbled from his deep sleep. When I nudged him awake, he mumbled Amanda's name. I told him to leave her be. He said no one should be left alone.

Dear Collins,

The animals dance at night. Shrivell up with faces like the statues of Pompeii. Their souls jive around us, very much alive. My daughter sits for tea with a family of flattened rats. My boy carries on his shoulders the soul of the tortoise helmet. Maggie sings to the baby raccoon. Joe lays beside Amanda, wishing for her to be tangible between his fingertips. Someone to scrape with his fingernails. I lay outside with him at night, watching the souls dance in the sky. They play with our children.

They watch over us.

They read our letters.

Dear Collins,

Our Sheriff died. I found him on the road. Pregnant. Joe wanted to bury him with the gator. Maggie wanted to eat him. He didn't smell like the others. His eyes were clouding, thighs emaciated. Vomit stained the collar of his faded shirt. His gray skin and cold neck smelled of his cologne. The maggots like his cologne. The flies live in his tongue.

Dear Collins,

The van left us a long while ago. No one has heard it since the Sheriff stopped screaming. We still write our letters. If not to you, Collins, then to our animals. We send them in the night now. We built ramps of animal bodies to the tops of the cemented walls and crawl up them, hands and knees, our teeth clamped on the sealed envelopes. We throw them like frisbees. The wind takes them far away.

My daughter made a bracelet. Knotted string from the animals our boys stitched, she threaded together yellow claws and canine teeth she found scattered in the park. She'd been working on it all month, she said. She made it for *you*, she said.

Dear Collins,

Your reelection is coming soon, isn't it? It'd be a great treat if you visited our town. Like the dedicated supporters we are, we'll decorate the town hall. We'll stream rabbit feet from the ceiling. Joe will make his best jerky, tell you his best soccer stories. I'll even cook you up some raccoon meat.

I do hope you'd enjoy.

Collins,

I'm beginning to believe you don't exist.

It's like talking to the wall.

You should come and visit.

We urge you.

160 degrees cooks human meat.

Maggie looked it up.

We did not bury the Sheriff.

You should come and visit.

Collins,

A pink envelope. That's what my daughter insisted we use. She dropped the bracelet inside, sealed it with saliva. She climbed up to the top of the wall. She tossed it into the wind. She waits there for you. She waits with Maggie, with my boy, with our creatures.

Collins,

The animals give us a stairway. Our toes sink into their skins as we climb the mountain beside the wall. Maggie and my boy sit on top, throwing bodies over.

Collins,

Help.

Collins,

Help.

Help,

Collins.

Collins,

We climb. Rotten hides strapped to our backs. Rot in our teeth and decay in our stomachs. We climb. We climb to the edges, saddle the wall, looking at each other with our opossum eyes. Maggie bares her squirrel teeth. Joe cradles a rat. My children laugh as they

swing their bare feet over the cement. My boy latches his helmet in place. My daughter rattles her talon necklace. We climb. Over the wall. We climb.

excerpt from novella “Everywhere From Here to There”

by Joseph Reyes

The sound of a door slamming open broke through what would have been silence. In came a pair of mud-stained brown boots, followed by well-worn jeans, and lastly a dusty leather coat whose wearer hastily slammed the door closed again. The old man let out a deep sigh as he collapsed onto the red, cushioned seat nestled in the corner, groping blindly behind him until he managed to grasp the handle on the window pane and slide it open, the chill, crisp breeze stirring his lank yellowing hair. There was a metallic jangle, a papery crumple, and a plastic crackle as he frantically fumbled with the contents of his coat pocket until he brought out a strange paper stick. In his other hand he held a metal square from which issued a flame. He lit the paper stick and put it in his mouth, releasing a puff of smoke and staring blearily up at the ceiling, for what would span weeks or hours. A routine, a broken record on loop.

There were some days that found this scene quiet, other than the chirping of birds and the swaying of trees. Some days would be full of great, pained coughing; his frail arm struggled to even move, much less bring the relief the paper stick provided. But the hours of night were much more sporadic.

Some nights, the old man would look upon an image framed next to the doll, a great shadow concealing his expression as he soon turned away, or his eyes going alight with rage and his teeth bared for all to see. Those nights, he would then bring in a case of liquor

bottles, their wicked stench covering the room like a blanket over a child. The old man cared not, however, drinking each bottle empty as a mosquito drains blood.

There was even a time where he even threw an empty bottle in delirium, barely missing the doll's head as it shattered against the wall. His face was flushed red with anger as he screamed, "You wanna go live on your own, then you can pack your shit and get out! Go on, get out! Scram!"

But then there were some nights, under the spell of those same bottles, that he would instead huddle to himself in that red sofa and mourn, his face flustered red and soaked in tears from his eyes, saying to someone or himself, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to," over and over. Sometimes his weeping would be soft, and sometimes his wails would echo throughout the house. Yet his sounds were heard by no one; only blank air where there had once been a presence.

Things took a sudden change, one eventful night, as the old man took the doll from its place on the shelf and hurried to his room with it. The door opened and the jarring shift in scenery was apparent: empty bottles of liquor were strewn across the room, softly illuminated by the faint incandescent light of a lamp next to his bed. Cards and papers of varying purposes alike littered both the walls and the floors, spread like confetti.

The old man paced back and forth before his bed with the doll in hand before he eventually set it upon a drawer, resting its body against a desk lamp. As the doll rested upon its new place, the old man took his lay upon the bed, a loud creak and crack resounding through the room as he did so. The wood that made its frame had lost most of its gloss,

splinters beginning to form. The old man was silent, eyes fixed to the ceiling; this solemnness pervaded for a while.

But then the old man turned towards the doll with a sorrowful yet furious expression. Murmurs were spoken under a quiet breath as a single tear began to fall; past regrets were clouding his thoughts and eyes. The sounds he made slowly grew in intensity, his eyes still staring deep into the doll's own. And then, within an instant, his gaze and composure broke like glass. His quiet murmurs turned into ramblings mixed with apologies. His words formed no coherence, only letting out an occasional "why" and "didn't mean". His hands clawed the bedsheets, his body spasming and writhing as if pain toiled throughout. The noises he made grew louder, more chaotic and incoherent, until they finally culminated into a clear sentence.

"Jamie, please... I'm sorry! I'm sorry...!" The words clawed their way out of his mouth. They were the last words he spoke that night, the rest being nothing but sobbing and pained cries permeating under the moonlight. Pain emanated from his expression hour after hour until, suddenly, he no longer could. The emotions that fueled his episode seemed to have simply left, and what was left was a body upon that bed, neither sleeping nor awake. Eyes open but a consciousness not there. A body breathing but moving no more than that. The doll's eyes remained fixed upon the scene, the moonlight reflected in its eyes. The tension in the room went silent, as if raging waters became still.

And by the next morning, the old man stopped moving.

“Late, Late, Late”

Christine Martins

1.

I arrive three minutes before noon.

I'm two minutes late. If I hurry, I might not be late at all.

I pick up a basket as I walk in. The security guard watches me. I rush past him, careful not to stare or stumble. Mother wouldn't want me to stumble.

Mother would be disappointed.

I reach into my pocket to grab my phone. The screen is cracked and my stomach is warm.

I'm still late.

I find the list my mother sent me.

Whole wheat bagels

Butter

Milk

Cereal (pick)

Muffins (pick)

I walk around selecting Mother's favorite brand of butter and bagels. I pick some random box of cereal and a handful of chocolate chip muffins.

I stop at the milk.

I put the basket down. There are at least seven different types of milk. Brands and colors that blind me. I grab my phone again.

Late, late, late.

I find the list my mother sent me. It didn't say 'pick' for the milk, which means she probably has a favorite brand. I stare at my phone.

The screen is cracked and my stomach is hot.

I look around, seeking comfort in my loneliness. I can feel eyes staring at me. Piercing through my skin. Licking my bones.

Sweat drips from my lips like melting wax.

Mother would be disappointed.

I stare at the options in front of me.

There is one with a red label, which my mother would never get. She hates red.

There is another one with a yellow label, but it's almond milk and she hates vegans.

I'm still late.

You need to make a decision, Mother's Voice hisses in my head.

I watch my fingertips turn to ashes.

You have to pick one, Mother's Voice says.

Which one, I ask.

Just get one. Mother's Voice echoes.

My head feels crowded. Behind me, a line begins to form. There are people waiting to grab some milk for their starving babies.

I'm starving them.

Pick, Mother's Voice says.

Instead, I count the number of bottles. Thirty-two.

I'm afraid there won't be enough milk for everyone, I say. There is a spark behind my ribs and flames erupt from the pores on my chest. They dance to my beating heart.

The people behind me are not scared of the fire. They look bored.

They want milk.

What if the store runs out of milk, I say.

There are ashes on my throat.

That's not your problem, Mother's Voice says. *Just pick one!*

Which one, I ask again. Behind me, a young mother with seven daughters yawns and the girls climb her back to eat the lice from her head.

There are ashes clotting my veins. I can't feel my pulse.

2.

I arrive three minutes before noon.

I'm two minutes late. If I hurry, I might not be late at all.

I sit with my back against the wall. The professor walks in right after I open my notebook. He looks bored.

He pulls out a piece of paper. Let's start with the group presentations, he says.

My head burns.

I take a deep breath.

A boy from my group looks at me with curious eyes and I choke on ashes.

The professor calls us to the front. I practice my part by saying it under my breath.

I'm still late.

I try not to stumble, but my foot gets stuck to the chair and I trip. Mother doesn't like when I stumble.

Mother would be disappointed.

There are sixteen pairs of eyes looking at me. I smell the smoke coming from my hair.

The first person to talk has the loveliest voice I've ever heard. It sounds like honey dripping on my warm skin. I watch the people in front of me.

Someone else starts talking and the professor smiles. He knows this student.

I smell burning flesh.

I watch as multiple chunks of my hair begin to fall off from the heat.

The boy next to me is sweating. I'm standing too close to him.

No one notices my burning scalp.

Maybe they don't care, Mother's Voice whispers.

I can do this, I say. I take a deep breath.

I try to focus on what my group is talking about.

I ran my hands through the bald spots on the back of my head. It burns my fingers.

The boy starts talking. His voice is soft and gentle.

I'm on fire.

Late, late, late.

In the corner of the room, I watch a girl drawing on her arm with a pencil.

You're next, Mother's Voice says.

The girl buries the pencil on her skin. The lead dives into her veins, searching for her pulse. She keeps drawing. Her heartbeat gives life to a stick monster and blood stains her shirt. She keeps drawing.

The professor doesn't notice.

Maybe he doesn't care, Mother's Voice whispers.

The flames grow so bright I'm blinded.

My tongue is suddenly heavy. I try to move it, but it only crushes my teeth.

There is smoke everywhere. The professor is coughing.

When it's my turn to speak, ashes fall out of my mouth.

3.

I arrive three minutes before noon.

I'm two minutes late. If I hurry, I might not be late at all.

I'm not alone in the waiting room. There is a husband with three mistresses sitting on his lap. There is a young priest playing with a younger boy's sword. There is a young woman staring at the mirror, patiently waiting for her hair to grow grey.

I sit by the window.

The dentist was late. The receptionist said he was on his way.

I hear snores coming from his office.

I think about the assignment due tonight.

I'm still late. Late, late, late.

The husband with the three mistresses sitting on his lap checks his watch. He runs his hands through one of their legs and they all smile. Their teeth are perfect.

They don't need a dentist, Mother's Voice hisses in my mind.

My palms are sweaty.

Outside, the sun begins to set.

The young priest holds the younger boy's sword in his hands. He moves it side to side, smiling. The boy cries. Their teeth are perfect.

They don't need a dentist, Mother's Voice hisses in my mind.

I bury my nails in my thighs and lava escapes my skin, leaking through my pores. It covers my legs and fills me with warmth.

My lips begin to melt.

You do need a dentist, Mother's Voice says.

I'm still late.

The young woman staring at the mirror notices a wrinkle next to her left eye. She moves forward and the wrinkles multiply. She gasps and screams, her nose touching the mirror as her face falls off. She falls on her knees, her fingers desperately trying to stick the pile of dust to her bare bones. Her teeth are perfect.

They don't need a dentist, Mother's Voice hisses in my mind.

Do I need a dentist, I ask.

My tongue is made of fire.

Outside, I can see the full moon.

I run my tongue through my teeth and they taste like charcoal. I cough.

My lips are melting.

You do need a dentist, Mother's Voice says.

Late, late, late.

I grab my phone from my purse and begin to type an apologetic email to my professor. I'm running out of time, I can't finish the assignment.

Why are you always making excuses, Mother's Voice asks.

I stare at my phone. The screen is cracked and my stomach is burning.

Should I word it differently, I ask.

The blood in my veins begins to boil.

Outside, the sun is rising.

The receptionist says the dentist will be here soon.

The husband with three mistresses sitting on his lap finds another mistress hiding behind his tie. The young priest playing with the younger boy's toys pulls out a sword of his own from his back pocket. The young girl staring at the mirror is covered in dust as she continues to stare at her growing grey hair.

I sit by the window. I hear snores coming from his office.

Late, late, late.

You should knock on the door, Mother's Voice says.

I should leave, I reply.

Mother is disappointed.

We both know I won't do either.

4.

I arrive three minutes before noon.

I'm two minutes late. If I hurry, I might not be late at all.

The mall is crowded. There are children running around parents that look like corpses, with sunken eyes and raw meat stuck in between their teeth. Their skin is rotting and I see roaches on their hair.

I try not to stare or stumble. Mother wouldn't want me to stumble.

Mother would be disappointed.

I keep my head down as I walk into a store. It's Mother's birthday and I should get her something nice.

You should leave, you can't afford something nice, Mother's Voice whispers.

One of the corpse parents walks into the store. She has twelve sons and they don't have names. She stares at a soft pink dress as the starving boys tear her clothes apart to feed. They bite her flesh and lick her bones until there is nothing left. She doesn't flinch.

I'm still late.

I stop by the jewelry. There are earrings and necklaces spread out. I run my fingers through them and a blaze travels down my spine. I can feel eyes staring at me. Starving boys craving my bones.

I search for something grand. Something that would never disappoint Mother.

A young man appears in front of me and smiles. I think he is cute and my cheeks immediately begin to melt.

Can I help you with anything, he asks. I try to take deep breaths, but ashes fill my lungs. He doesn't seem to notice.

Maybe he doesn't care, Mother's Voice hisses in my mind.

My head feels crowded.

The twelve sons stand behind me, their starving mouths smiling. The corpse mother is trying on the soft pink dress and her rotten skin stains it.

The man is talking again. He shows me dozens, hundreds, thousands of options and his voice blinds me. I can feel the fire running through my veins, igniting my blood.

My heart beats faster than normal.

I try to say something, but my mouth is filled with magma.

The twelve sons' bellies roar behind me, their starving stomachs calling for my burning flesh. The corpse mother stares at a bright yellow dress.

Late, late, late.

The man is talking again. He points to dozens, hundreds, thousands of price tags and the zeroes make me dizzy. The back of my neck is melting.

My heart beats faster than fast.

You should leave, you can't afford something nice, Mother's Voice says.

I want to run away, but I'm afraid I might stumble. Mother wouldn't want me to stumble.

Mother would be disappointed.

I notice a discrete pair of earrings. They are something no one would ever see but me. Something that would definitely disappoint Mother. The man reaches for them at the same time I pick it up. Our hands touch and my entire skin ignites.

He pulls his hand back, with large blisters on his fingertips.

I'm on fire.

My heartbeat is so fast it might punch a hole through my ribcage.

I'm still late.

I desperately want to say something, apologize, but I'm drowning in ashes. My face melts and drips onto my chest, burning holes on my shirt.

The man doesn't notice. He stares at his fingers instead.

Maybe he doesn't care, Mother's Voice hisses in my mind.

Late, late, late.

Mother will be disappointed.

I told you, Mother's Voice says.

She did.

5.

I arrive three minutes before noon.

I'm two minutes late. If I hurry, I might not be late at all.

Mother is making dinner when I walk in. She pretends not to notice, but she fails.

You're late, she says. I'm sorry.

Why are you always making excuses, Mother's Voice asks.

I sit down as she slithers around the kitchen.

I can't stay long, I say. Mother stares at me long enough for the rice to burn.

Are you not going to help, she asks eventually. Outside, a storm is coming.

I nod. Mother would be mad if I said no.

She's already mad, Mother's Voice whispers.

I know.

I'm still late. Late, late, late.

My fingers are dusty, ruined by the boiling blood that runs through my veins. I lick the ashes so Mother won't see them. She doesn't like when I ruin her carpet with ashes.

When I stand up, I'm careful not to stumble. Mother doesn't like when I stumble either.

Mother would be disappointed.

Outside, lightning strikes a tree and sets it on fire.

I do what Mother tells me to do. I don't ask questions. Mother hates questions.

She hates you too, Mother's Voice says.

Does she, I ask.

Why can't you stay, Mother asks.

I'm late, I reply.

You're always late, she hisses.

Late, late, late.

Mother is right.

She is always right, Mother's Voice whispers.

Outside, the fire spreads to my backyard.

I start cutting tomatoes. She showed me how she wants them, but I'm not doing a good job. She asked for perfect cubes and I'm barely making them rectangular. She will be upset.

Sweat drips from my lips like melting wax.

I cough, and ashes cover the tomatoes in front of me like sprinkles on a cupcake.

Mother is disappointed.

I'm still late.

She's coming, Mother's Voice tells me. I turn around and Mother sees the ruined tomatoes. She is not pleased.

Get that ash out of my house, she hisses at me.

I'm sorry. I stumble out of the kitchen as she washes the tomatoes. Did you just stumble, Mother asks.

I didn't, I say.

You stumbled, Mother's Voice says.

Did I?

Outside, the fire licks the walls that surround me.

Lava leaks from the pores on the back of my neck. It flows to my beating heart, covering my body with heat. The carpet is melting.

Inside, the fire spreads around the room.

Look what you've done, Mother yells.

I'm sorry. My melting skin joins the melting walls around me.

Why are you always making excuses, Mother's Voice asks.

The flames lick my bones. I stand in a pile of dust and burnt flesh.

Look what you've done, Mother whispers.

