Typehouse

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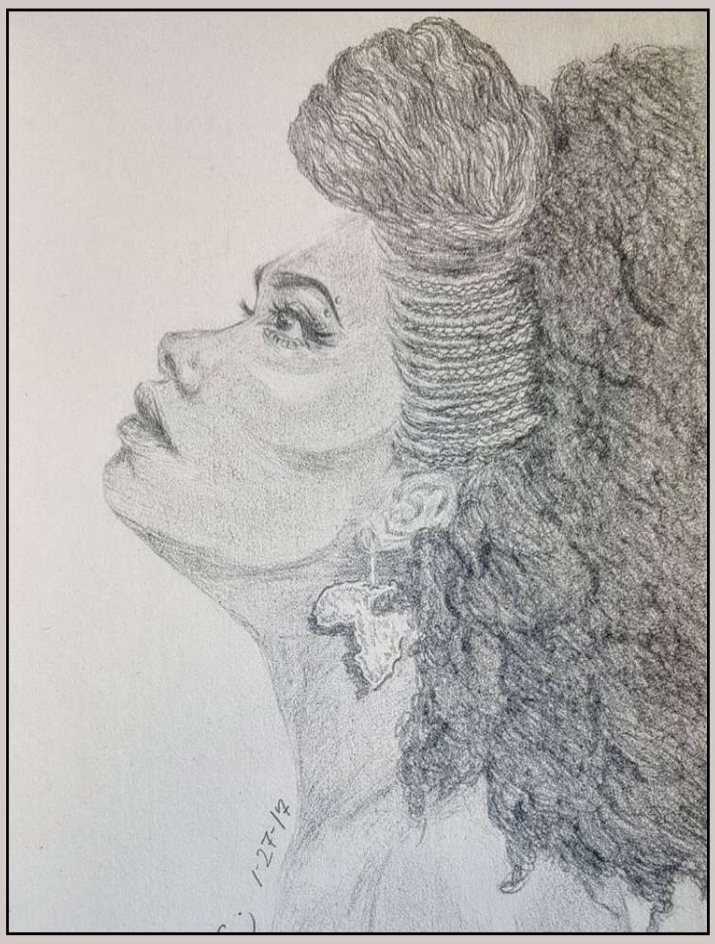

Typehouse Literary Magazine

Typehouse is a writer-run literary magazine based out of Portland, Oregon. We are always looking for well-crafted, previously unpublished writing and art that seeks to capture an awareness of the human predicament. If you are interested in submitting, visit our website at www.typehousemagazine.com.

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Cover Artist:
PRIDE by Carolyn Poindexter (See page 127)
Pride of one's own culture is important. Braids and curly hair always find their way into my work because it's my culture. It's what I know, it's my everyday expression. She looks proudly toward the heavens as she allows her light to shine as a queen. She is a queen.

Of the Ground Beneath by Steve Loschi (page 103) first published in Random Sample in 2017.

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Mariah Montoya *is the author of "The Green Shirt with the Cat On It" published in The Bookends Review, and co-author of Gys van Beek's WWII memoir To Never Forget, available on Amazon.*

The Boy's Moldy Wings

Mariah Montoya

The boy avoided looking at the stairs. They led downward into the dark crevices of the basement, where, past broken machines and rotting wooden boxes, Garzis lived in the smallest, coldest bedroom of the house. Aunt Julie had hired Garzis to build a fence around their house nearly two years ago, but since the fence was never finished he stayed here, grinning crookedly with teeth chipped from age. At the dinner table, Aunt Julie was perfectly friendly with him (well, her eyes flitted sometimes, and she never quite looked at the eternal visitor full on, but then again, Aunt Julie never quite looked at her own niece and nephew either). Garzis always held a lighted, grimy cigarette in his right hand. His wings had fallen off.

"I don't believe he ever had wings," Alice, the boy's younger sister, said, crossing her arms.

"Just because *you* haven't grown your wings yet doesn't mean others never did."

The boy saw the wounded way his sister's eyebrows contorted, and immediately pulled her in for a hug. He didn't argue as she said, "You haven't grown yours, either, and you're three years older. So *there*."

"I know, I know. I'm sorry."

He didn't tell her that every Sunday, Aunt Julie took him into the bathroom with a pair of clippers and carefully trimmed the sprouts of feathers on his back that grew like baby hairs on a young boy's chin.

Each morning, if it was a school day, they knew the routine: Aunt Julie always shook them out of bed, telling them oatmeal was waiting on the kitchen table. After they gulped down the mush, she brought out the fake wings, the ones that looked like they came from vultures. She would clip these nasty replicas to their backs, because, "You can't go to school unless you have wings. The teachers want to

see that you're growing *something*." The boy's replica was the same size as all his classmates' pairs: each wing almost arm-length, not quite dragging on the floor. But *his* smelled like mold.

Alice's fake wings were small, the size of a typical first grader's: hand-sized, able to do no more than precariously flap. At recess, when other kids got in trouble for jumping off Playsets and fluttering to the ground, Alice remained peculiarly obedient.

"C'mon, Alice, jump!" the kids called from below as she climbed to the top of the monkey bars. But Alice shook her head, saying, "The duty teacher's watching." She never tried flying because her fake wings could not. In the beginning, other children called Alice a goody-goody. Alice called them "shitheads." After enough detentions and shouting from Aunt Julie, Alice became satisfied that she wasn't a goody-goody.

Aunt Julie's wings were already turning gray. Coming home from school, Alice's brother would find feathers littering the ground, clinging to the moth-eaten sofa, drifting under chairs. Once, he bent to pick one up, but just as he reached down he heard clunking behind him. It was Garzis, cigarette hanging limply in one hand, grinning.

"I'll get 'em, son," Garzis said, and picked up the feather instead. Then Garzis gathered all the surrounding feathers and stuffed them in his inside pocket, still grinning.

"Go build a fence," the boy muttered at Garzis's back.

One night in mid-July, after the school year had ended, Alice and the boy started off in their own skinny beds on separate corners of the room. But then the shadows swooped down, the familiar icy creaking began, and Alice slid out of her blankets. She squirmed under the covers with her brother, her cold feet pressing against his legs.

"I have something to tell you," she whispered.

"What is it?"

Alice smiled. "My wings are growing. They started poking through this morning. Can you believe it? My wings are growing!"

"Keep your voice down," the boy urged. He could feel the joy radiating from his sister; she had wanted to tell him all day, he could tell.

"Do me a favor," he whispered.

"What?"

"Don't tell Aunt Julie."

The walls groaned. They were going to collapse from the

pressure of the house, it seemed, and the wind outside boiled itself into a scream. Something heavy and metal was dragging on the floor outside their bedroom. Alice grabbed her brother's hand.

"Please don't let go of me."

"I won't let him hurt you," her brother said, squeezing her hand back. "I promise."

Their bedroom doorknob rattled and the door creaked open. A figure wormed its way in, swashed in a feathered robe, wearing its feathery mask that it always wore at night, as if the disguise would trick the boy into thinking it was the Boogeyman rather than Garzis. But the boy knew better. And tonight he was ready, ready for anything Garzis might have in store. As the figure slunk forward toward them, dragging the heavy chain it always carried, the boy let go of his sister's hand.

"No!" Alice screamed.

But he was already diving off his bed, reaching for the bat he had stowed underneath. Aunt Julie always claimed she didn't believe his "fantasies" about a man torturing him and Alice each night, so the boy would handle matters himself. As the metal dragged, he pulled out his bat and raised it up like a sword. The figure faltered, stepping back, but the boy swung the bat around, smashing it straight into the monster's head.

There was a nasty crunch. The figure clutched its face grunting, turning around, dragging the chain back out the door; it looked back to peer at the two children, and the boy could just make out a pair of eyes, gleaming like a cat's. Then the figure was gone.

Alice stared at her brother.

"I meant to kill him," he said.

"You always think it's Garzis," Alice whimpered. "But what if it's not? What if it's someone else?"

"Like who?" the boy said in a harsh whisper. He strained his ears for any signs that Aunt Julie had heard the commotion of the night, but just as usual, there were no worried footsteps. "Besides," he said, bending to grab something from the floor. "It has to be Garzis. Look what he dropped."

The barest glint of moonlight siphoning through their window was just enough to show them both the crushed, dead cigarette in his hand.

The next morning, a Sunday, Aunt Julie had oatmeal waiting for them on the kitchen table. Alice was still breathing deeply in bed,

but the boy shuffled his way to the kitchen. Instead of plopping down in his chair, he stood facing his aunt, whose hands were massaging her forehead as she nursed a cup of black coffee.

"Look what I found," he said, holding the crumbling cigarette in hand.

Aunt Julie looked up briefly, raising her eyebrows.

"If you want to smoke, you can do it when you're eighteen. As for now, please throw that thing away. Come, eat your breakfast. Then we'll go to the bathroom and groom you."

"No, Aunt Julie, that's not what I meant. Garzis was here last night. Upstairs, taunting Alice and me. He does it every night, I've told you over and over. And now look – proof. It was him, I –"

"Stop it." Aunt Julie's nostrils were flaring. "I'm tired of hearing about some monster under your bed. It's time you grew up, if not for me then for Alice."

"But Garzis was –"

"He was *not* in your bedroom last night. He was out all night finishing the fence around this house. I can guarantee, he's been working most diligently these last few days –"

"Bullshit! That fence hasn't been worked on in months."

Aunt Julie stood up, towering over her nephew. "See for yourself then, but mind you watch your language."

Frowning, the boy went to the window and peered out; where before, scattered posts had littered their front yard, now a tall, towering structure was bearing down on the house, made of iron bars pressed side by side so that no gap rendered a way out. Sure enough, Garzis's figure was hunched over far to the right, using a shovel to dig a trench for the remaining posts. Bags of cement lay all around him, ready to secure the fence's position in the ground. It looked as if the fence would end up surrounding the entire house.

"Well how do we get out?" the boy asked faintly. He couldn't believe it. Garzis did not seem to be struggling with this physical task at all. The man certainly wasn't acting as if a bat had been smashed into his skull hours before.

"There is no way out. Garzis will finish building the last of the fence on the other side, and then he will leave. I've already paid him. I figured it was best…"

The boy gaped at her.

"But what about school?"

"You will no longer need to go to school. A new regulation

passed in the courthouse yesterday, which is why I had him finish the fence. Teachers will begin inspecting all students' wings to make sure they perform properly. You and Alice do not have wings. So I thought it best to homeschool you."

Now the boy's hands were curling into fists, crushing the last of the cigarette.

"You cut my wings off every week."

"For your own safety," said Aunt Julie, sipping her coffee.

"It's illegal."

"Not necessarily true. Some states are passing laws that allow guardians to monitor their own children's wings. In fact, I've heard talk of the National Board debating allowing children to grow wings at all. Wings are so dangerous, after all."

"Wings aren't dangerous."

"Wings killed your mother."

Heat flared up inside the boy. "Falling killed my mother."

"Yes, and you can only fall if you have wings. I've always told you, this is why I walk everywhere myself. It's safer. Flying makes you an easier target, it draws attention to yourself. Do you see anyone flying anymore? Not really. Now, I have a headache and I'm going to take some Ibuprofen. Finish your oatmeal and meet me in the bathroom when you're done."

The boy watched Aunt Julie tread out of the kitchen, her wings drooping.

As she left, yet another feather floated to the floor. The boy had a sudden image of Garzis, with his crooked smile, pocketing the feathers, and an idea came to him. He remembered Mr. Barber explaining once how the human anatomy worked, how the muscles that sprouted from a human's back were remarkably strong, how the power of flight rested not in the wings but in those first three inches of muscle and fiber. The replica Aunt Julie strapped onto his shoulders and torso didn't work because the wings did not clip to the muscles themselves.

The boy could do it in a week's time. Alter the fake wings so that they attached to his muscles instead. In a week, the beginning of his wings would grow to a suitable size, a few inches, and then he could attach them, and he could really fly away…

From the bathroom, Aunt Julie called his name.

Garzis did indeed leave that evening; only a faint smell of tobacco and sweat lingered around the house. At nights, no figure

thumped into their room with a chain, so the boy felt satisfied that he was right, that Garzis had played Boogeyman as a cruel joke.

On the downside, Garzis had succeeded in securing the fence around the house so that there was truly no way out. If Aunt Julie needed to go to the store for groceries, she would simply fly over the fence and then resume to her destination on foot. However, the boy noticed that Aunt Julie could not simply start from the ground and fly upward anymore. Her wings were not strong enough. Instead, she would trudge to the attic, open the attic window, and soar from there, beating her wings furiously against the wind, flying lopsided and away.

When she was gone, the boy would sneak into her room and work on the replica usually secured to his own back, using tools Garzis had left in the basement to cut, tie, twist, and attach a new clip. He could not use the replica reserved for Alice, because hers was too small for flying.

Alice suspected nothing. She pranced around the house all day while Aunt Julie was out, admiring her new wings, squealing with delight when baby feathers appeared like the buds of new flowers. She knew, though, that as soon as the clunking in the attic announced Aunt Julie's return, she must be quiet about it all. She never asked her brother why, but silently she must have known, must have feared…

The day before Sunday, Aunt Julie announced she was going to Martha's house a few blocks away. Alice was in the bathroom in just a training bra, twirling this way and that, staring at her wings in the mirror at every turn, singing a tuneful "Lalalalala."

"Can I come in?" her brother asked from outside the bathroom.

"You may," Alice said, assuming a voice like a queen allowing a servant to enter.

The boy opened the door. His eyes flitted to his sister's tiny back, where the wings were growing; they were perhaps two or three inches now, about as long as his could grow in a week, fluffy but already a rather striking blue.

"What's that in your hand?" Alice asked, stopping. "I don't need those fake wings anymore. I have my own wings."

The boy closed the door behind them.

"Alice, I need you to help me try this out. I've altered it, see." He paused, heart thumping. "You know how you've started growing

your wings?"

"Yes."

"Well, so have I."

Alice screamed. "Let me see!"

The boy smiled and pulled off his shirt, turning around to show her the sprouts that would, if he didn't do anything about it, be cut off tomorrow.

"We're twins now, we're twins!" Alice squealed, clapping her hands together. "Oh, I'm so glad yours are growing too, now I can't make fun of you by saying mine grew first! Oh, this is just amazing, isn't it? Mamma would be so proud of us!"

"But Alice, we still can't fly with our wings. It takes years of growing to be able to fly."

Alice's smile faltered. The boy bent down so that he was looking his sister straight in the eye, holding up the fake wings that still, despite his work on them, smelled like mold. One person could not put the wings on alone.

"I need to see if this works. Will you help me?"

Alice nodded.

The replica now had a small circular clipping in the middle that would attach to each new wing emerging from the back. Together, the brother and sister clipped this on. The boy had added Aunt Julie's stray feathers to the tips, so now his moldy wings brushed against the bathroom floor.

"Can they move?" Alice asked, breathless with awe.

"Yes."

"How?"

"You know how you can make your little wings move?"

"Is it the same thing?" Alice asked.

The boy nodded.

"Try it."

The great fake wings, one second limp and hanging, were now moving upward and downward in great, sweeping motions, knocking a bottle of soap off the bathroom counter, flapping against the gray shower curtain, filling the whole bathroom.

Alice giggled. "You're brilliant! This is amazing!"

The ceiling above them thumped. Aunt Julie was home.

"Quick," the boy said. "We need to put our shirts on."

"Over the wings?"

"Yes, over the wings. Hurry, help me fold the wings up."

The children scurried to hide their great secret, and when he had his shirt on, the boy raced to Aunt Julie's room to close her door so she wouldn't know he had snuck in there. As he was easing the door shut, he caught sight of something for the first time: a robe peeking out from under her bed, a feathered robe that looked dreadfully familiar.

His blood grew warm. Before he knew it, he was racing upstairs toward the attic door, which he burst through to see Aunt Julie standing by the attic window, her wings slightly ruffled, a cigarette in one hand and a purse dangling from another. The attic was cold and cluttered, filled with old furniture, trunks, and piles of yellowing books.

"I didn't know you smoked, Aunt Julie," the boy said coldly.

"Goodness. You gave me a start."

The boy stood quite still, though his eyes flickered toward the open window, where he could make out the top of Garzis's fence and the clear skies beyond. He took a step toward her.

"Somebody's been torturing us every night, Aunt Julie. Somebody's been coming into our room and beating Alice and me with chains. Somebody's been cutting my wings, all in the name of safety."

Aunt Julie clutched her purse tighter.

"Mom would've never –"

"Your mother didn't know what was best for her," Aunt Julie said, eyes narrowing, and finally she was looking right at him with feline murderous eyes. "Your mother thought her wings were a lawful right. Your mother was irresponsible, always wanting to fly, and fly, and fly, until one day her wings grew exhausted and she couldn't go on and it was too late; she was over open sea, and she couldn't do anything but drown –"

"Aunt Julie?"

Alice's head stuck through the attic doorway; the boy turned. Alice ran to him, holding tight to her brother's waist. The two faced Aunt Julie, whose mouth was taut. The children inched toward the wall. Aunt Julie took a slow, smiling step toward them.

"You know what Martha suggested to me just now? She suggested some people need chained up. Too curious for your own good. Too happy."

Alice and her brother were now backing up against the open window, with Aunt Julie's back to the attic door. From this angle, the

boy could see a pile of chains coiled up behind an old chipped dresser. He had the sudden thought that death would be better than prison in your own home. He could not let Alice be chained up. He would not let his sister be chained.

Aunt Julie's feathers were floating one by one to the floor as she stepped closer, closer, and Alice was crushing his hand in hers. The two children had now backed up as far as they could, so that their necks felt the warm breeze rushing in through the attic window. Aunt Julie, as if deep in thought, bent to pick up the chains behind the chipped dresser. The boy again thought *Death is better than prison,* and he said out loud, "Goodbye Alice, I love you," and he pushed his sister out the window.

Alice screamed. Aunt Julie shouted.

The boy didn't turn to look. He knew what would happen. Only Aunt Julie watched the girl disappear, heard the sound of ripping fabric, suddenly saw Alice's head again as the great moldy wings that weren't supposed to fly came rising up and down on the little girl's body. If Aunt Julie had looked harder beforehand, she might have noticed the bulge under the girl's shirt where her brother had clipped his reinvented replica on. But she had only been focused on the boy, sure he had something up his sleeve, sure he'd be the one to escape.

Bobbing in the air, panting, Alice looked back once, but her brother did not see. He had already accepted his fate, already closed his eyes, ready to be imprisoned, silently urging his sister on. And so as Aunt Julie came toward her nephew with the chains, Alice flew, promising to herself she would one day come back for her brother and help him fly too, over Garzis's fence and out of sight.

Andrew DiPrinzio's *work has been featured in Philadelphia Stories, Inwood Indiana, and Mason's Road. He holds a masters in creative writing from Fairfield University. Though originally from Philadelphia, he now lives in Naples, Italy where his beautiful wife, Emma, is stationed with the Navy.*

The Salt Pans

Andrew DiPrinzio

Reed watched Jenna wave a salt packet in front of the Maltese café owner's nose. The thin man had an ashy beard and a Band-Aid on his forehead. He didn't speak English. She tried to explain that they were in search of the Gozo salt pans and not, as he seemed to surmise, complaining about his flavorless lamb kebabs.

Reed left a single Euro on the table, and they left. Jenna leaned against the sea wall outside the café. It was hot. She'd been carrying their babies, twins, for six months and, even in a yellow bikini, sweated so heavily the hair that framed her face stuck to her cheeks. She rubbed her hands over her belly, circling her naval as a soothsayer might rub a crystal ball to conjure a fortune.

Reed couldn't help but picture a much younger and scared Jenna, way before he knew her, making this same motion over her pregnant belly and knowing that in a few weeks she'd have to give the child away. Jenna had scraped through life, Reed knew that for sure, but he suspected she'd not only been pregnant before, but had sold her child.

"Odysseus keeps kicking," she said. "I bet he'll be like me."

They didn't know the sex of either child, but Jenna's intuition held more power than a doctor's sonogram. It also trumped medical advice. Advice like don't fly across the world to an island floating between Sicily and Libya when you're in your third trimester.

They were still a long walk away, but they took it slow. The Gozo cliffs hung gently above the sea. Millennia of waves and weather had drilled thousands of holes into the rock face. Reed slipped his fingers in and out as if they were holes in a bowling ball. The cliffs mirrored the desolate beach towns. In the off-season, the cities looked downright dystopian, as if inhabited by mutant sand

fleas who burrowed into abandoned apartments. The windows were dark and empty.

Even on their walk through Victoria, the capital, they had passed barred shopfronts displaying dusty copies of Windows ME and still boxed Nokia cellphones.

Reed turned back to the café to see the owner running towards him holding a basket of bread and two large bottles of water. He left them at Jenna's feet and bowed. She exaggerated her thankfulness, then gave him a hug. Reed loved this about her, that she could make even the strangest stranger fall in love with her and want to be just a tiny part of her life.

"Well," Reed said. "We won't starve." He thanked the man, who only returned a dirty look as if he preferred Reed were invisible and didn't deserved to have impregnated such an impossible beauty.

#

About two years ago, after they had sex for the first time, Reed woke up in the middle of the night to pee. The moonlight found its way through the slit in Jenna's satin curtains as if it had looked through every apartment window in Brooklyn in search of her skin. It lit her back. She had a long, slender eucalyptus stem tattooed down her spine ending at her butt.

Reed slipped the cotton sheet lower, letting the moonlight illuminate her legs. He traced his fingers over a patch of pouting veins behind her knee that, in moonlight, seemed translucent below her skin. It was the only blemish he could find on her body.

#

With her right hand, Jenna balanced the bread basket on her head. She kept her left on their children. "Let's follow the sea. I think we're close."

Reed unfolded his map and traced the path he'd drawn to the salt pans just past Qbajjar Bay. "It's more direct if we cut across town. And you shouldn't be holding that." He went to grab the basket, but she twirled away.

"Are you trying to raise businessmen or artists? Our family follows the sea."

She seldom spoke of family. Her father died when she was young, and her mother left shortly after. She didn't keep a photo of either. She'd made money finding tiny jobs in odd corners of the world, living off the kindness of strangers. She'd been an au pair in Cape Town and a farmhand outside Barcelona, among others. She

always described it as romantic, yet Reed felt certain she kept hidden some more odious jobs.

"I'll take kids who can read a map," he said, though Reed just wanted to raise good kids.

Fatherhood consumed his thoughts. He did his best when ideas were simple. He had principles to pass down; foremost kindness and generosity of spirit, but in empty moments, he allowed himself to contemplate the word *patriarch*. He wasn't the man to raise Yale oarsmen or future governors, but he could build a baseball tee and sit in the dirt with his sons to plant apple seeds and teach them about the earth. Simple.

"It's too hot for you to be walking so much." He uncapped his water bottle and offered it to her.

She only took one sip.

As if to prove him wrong, a cool wind picked up off the coast, blowing her hair off her face and making her smile.

#

The sun continued to beat down. They were still a mile from the salt pans. Jenna removed her sandals, but kept the breadbasket on her head. Reed could see she was struggling under the weight.

Around a bend, they stopped to drink. The green sea opened into a half-moon bay. The water wiggled, and when Reed looked closer, he saw hundreds of tiny bubbles popping at the surface. Instead of a rocky beach, piles of dead, brown ribbons littered the coast. A sign by the railing marked the area as a seagrass meadow.

"I didn't know these existed." Jenna stopped, put down the basket, and picked up a handful of dried seagrass. "How far do you think it reaches?"

She was curious about everything, except she'd never once asked a single question about her pregnancy. Not whether it was normal to cramp or if she could continue to ride her bicycle or if it was okay for them to have sex.

She reread the sign. "It says cuttlefish breed here."

#

The beginning of their relationship was wild. Jungle-wild, Reed would describe to his friends. They'd met in New York in July. For that summer, their sheets, their skin, their pubic hair, it was all sopping. Her Brooklyn apartment's only ventilation was a shaky window fan. Reed called out of work so they could lay in bed for days. To keep cool, they dripped ice water behind each other's necks

and took cold baths. She had no nice furniture and, for as much as she claimed to have traveled, the only foreign decoration was a hand-painted, brown leather sack she hung on the door. It featured a bust of Nefertiti encircled in white fringe and hieroglyphics.

For the first few months, Reed never uttered a question. Jenna was an angelic type beauty only gracing the planet. If he pushed her, she may pick up and fly off. Then, one September weekend, she walked him to a garage in Flatbush, lifted the door, and unlocked a red Stingray convertible. For a moment, Reed wondered how Jenna could've acquired such a classic, but then he hopped over the passenger door and slid into the seat. He'd always wanted to enter a convertible that way.

She made the drive to Montauk in under two hours. They pulled onto an unkempt lawn with no visible home. She didn't lock her car, then led him through the trees to her tiny beach bungalow. It was too battered to be worth a million like the other homes in the neighborhood, but the property itself could've sold for half, possibly more depending on its boundaries.

The inside was a bazaar of oddities: an embroidered cattle bell from Switzerland, a marble lamp in the shape of a nude woman from Paris, strings of glass beads from Venice, Moroccan lanterns, and so much more that Reed couldn't find a place to sit.

"Where did this house come from?" he said.

"I was a caretaker to a reclusive old lady, Mona," Jenna said without hesitating. "She was like a grandmother to me."

And then she never mentioned her again.

#

"I love you, Reed." She always said it out of nowhere. She pulled down her right bikini cup.

Reed caught a sharp breath. If anyone had been on the beach, they would've seen her. It wouldn't have mattered though because Jenna would be comfortable nude in a room of EU diplomats.

He wasn't sure how her pregnancy would affect their sex, but the larger her belly grew, the more Reed wanted her. They were as insatiable as when they'd met.

"We should stop," he said. "Rest some more."

Two stray Bichon Frise pups appeared from the beach. Their snouts and paws were dirty. The hair underneath their eyes was crusted. They yipped and jumped up Jenna's legs. She kept walking, and they followed.

"Look, they can sniff my maternal energy." She knelt and petted their backs.

Reed sat to play with the dogs. There was something maternal about Jenna, like she was the Mother Goddess incarnate, imbued with enough milk to feed the whole village.

#

Six months prior, an evening in Montauk, Jenna rode her bike into town to buy fresh sardines and capers. Reed showered the salt water off his body and lay down on the sofa to read a tattered biography of Robert Kennedy that he found among her piles of books. It opened itself to page 97. A postcard slipped onto his chest. "Corfu Calls…," it read.

The photo of the blue lagoon, surrounded by lush greenery was shot from some hotel balcony. A tiered pool deck led down to the sea. Tall potted pink flowers on the balcony wall framed the view. Reed flipped the card. It was from the Hotel Mirella, five star. A note, scribbled in faded pencil, read: "A contract, rendered at the delivery of one beautiful little darling," dated July 2010. Reed couldn't believe the pound figure written underneath. What could be worth such a sum? He made out Jenna's signature signed next to two others. He couldn't read their names, but noted the titles: baron and lady.

When Jenna returned, brown bags in hand, Reed placed the postcard onto the counter.

She didn't look at it, but out the kitchen's one window above the sink.

Reed wanted to attack, like a torrent, and ask where the money for the house and the car really came from and what happened in Corfu and if this rich baron paid her for her child and who then was the father. He wanted to pummel her, and that scared him more than any answer that could've dripped from her mouth.

"Were you ever pregnant?" he said.

She tossed the package of sardines into the sink.

"No, this is my first time."

"This?" Reed said, his brain a beat behind his mouth.

"I'm pregnant," she said.

That night, in bed, as they slept, Reed put his hand over the veins behind her knee. The moon didn't shine.

He wouldn't bring up Corfu again.

#

The salt pans reminded Reed of a life-size chessboard. An

arena, jutting into the sea, where Roman gods and goddesses played. The setting sun reflected into each of the two hundred rock pans, reproducing the sky as a warm cubist painting. A wall ran alongside the road. At the gate, a sign read, “NO ENTRY BEYOND THIS POINT” then more politely, “We would appreciate your cooperation.” Jenna had removed her bikini and lay nude in the largest pan before Reed even finished deciding whether to ignore the directive.

He undid his sandals and walked on the walls between the pans to avoid contaminating the water. When he reached Jenna, he stood over her body. Her stomach was so large that he thought the babies may just peck themselves out like newborn hatchlings.

Jenna grazed her hand over the stone, pulling up two handfuls of salt, which she rubbed over her thighs, her belly, and her breasts.

“I know,” Reed said, “you’ve given birth before. I want to tell you, I don’t care. No, I care. I care because that child is a part of me now, whether we’ll never see him or if you want him in our lives.”

The sun dropped even lower. Reed understood the earth was a sphere, but in places so flat, it was easy to believe that the earth wasn’t rotating away from the sun. That the sun just decided to move on, away, somewhere else, to shine on other people. He squatted next to her and put his hand over her bellybutton.

“It was a girl,” she said. “A glorious baby girl, and I had to hide her from you.”

“Why? She’s part of me now.”

“She’ll never be a part you.” Tears dripped off Jenna’s cheek. “When she was born, I begged them not to touch the umbilical cord for just a few extra moments. Just a few, so I could stay connected to her before they clipped it and took her to her mother.” Her voice broke.

He thought they’d traveled to this island because she’d read the salt that now covered her body had the power to heal. He’d figured she wanted to be healthy, physically and spiritually, before bringing two babies into the world. This was a very Jenna ideal. He understood now it had never been about the twins. It had been about her, the lost child.

Reed lay in the water next to her. His clothes sopped up the warm pool. Fatherhood then became infinitely more complex than tee-ball and apple seeds. He wrapped his arms around her chest, and his legs around her legs, attaching himself to her as soon their babies would.

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The Apple

Valerie San Filippo

My beautiful mother pricked her finger sewing.
The blood pilled, beaded, beetle-eyed,
dropped into a jar of venetian ceruse.
How pretty, she thought. Like lips on snow.
I hope my daughter looks like that.
Then she died, because of the ceruse.

Once the butcher pulled me from a meat hook,
and the blood trailed from my neck onto white tiles.
Lipstick, whitewash. Apple bite reverse.
He dropped me, cut me, put me under glass.
There was an apple in my mouth.
I understood then, but I couldn't say a word.

Eve bit the apple and knew what she was resigned to.
Blood from the meat hooks. Women in refrigerators.
Adam's rib-eye bodies.
Women sliced so thin they aren't there.

Did I tell you about the mirror? The unsheathed sliverdown.
That blade won't say I'm beautiful, not so long as I think,
I think, I think the ceruse was a bad idea.
I think vixens, vermillion, braindeath,
I think of pulling corsets like puppets strings,
shoes that make your feet burn, eyedrops belladonna,
I think snow. I think the color of a corpse's skin.

**

Breath fogs my glass coffin lid. They're picking out their dinner.
"She's a fine cut." The butcher is proud of his knives.
How well he cut me. What a nice display.
"I like my women how I like my meat."
You do not want to know.

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Hunger

Mackenzie Suess

The body is heavy and still limp, ribs showing through from lack of food. Her fingers have blackened almost to the wrist like cracked charcoal that might splinter apart at any moment. Dennis shakes a little as we thrust her into the back of the cart. It is his first day on the job and he has been trying to hold his back strictly upright like playing at bravery. The slump of my own shoulders has long ceased to trouble me.

Michael laughs when we lift her in to the cart, the sound startling the horses. It's not the close-packed buildings with their slit windows that unsettle the beasts, the heft of dead weight, or the stench; it's just the sudden jolt of something like mirth.

Something like.

Dennis turns as if to glare, but all we get instead is his thin frame, canvas pants wearing clear through in patches, skinny arms mud-smeared, the shadow eyes of his mask. My mask. Michael's mask. Long, drooping noses like poorly drawn cartoons. Something meant to laugh at that's become corroded, limp and hanging down by his chin, bulbous with petals. For the plague.

It has been a long time since I've seen my own face.

"Don't be so serious, Denny." Michael mock-punches him and Dennis flinches away. "It's good luck when the first house has only one body."

The boys are both around my age—too young—but I have Amanda waiting at home. I have not time for their bullshit.

Crumbling buildings cast early-morning shadows across the girl's body. Mud fills the street and stray dogs scuffle around the corners of buildings, looking at our cart like she might be something good to warm their bellies. And that's the funny thing, isn't it? All this meat we cart around the city—I'm sure the doctors could cut off the

most infected areas—and everyone's starving. But today is rations day. They might even have canned peaches if I can get there quick enough, if the shift is quick and clean. Amanda loves peaches. I try not to think of her too much. Not here.

The small stoop of the next house creaks as I step up. Dennis turns from Michael and follows me to the door.

The syndic has told us not to bother knocking, but I do anyway, an illusion of decency.

“Who’s there?” The man’s voice is shrill inside. I imagine his eyes rolling back into his head with panic. The sound no longer frightens me.

“Medic,” interjects Dennis. I hate that word — pretending like we help people. I hate the way Dennis’ voice sounds of barbed wire, an effort to be sharp. He's grown up like me, I'd bet anything. No money, no food. Shortages all over the country from how bad we fucked up and now we’re here. But it's only the poor and the criminal they send on these rounds. Everyone thinks it gets easier the longer you do this, but only because not many of us survive the job to say otherwise. But you get to a point where the bodies pile up high too many weeks in a row—six weeks eight weeks twelve weeks unending — and you start to think they'll consume the whole world, that they'll block out the sun and clog all the rivers. Just an earth full of cold bodies and no crops.

Silence from the door. Michael comes up behind us, tugging his mask in circles around his head like he’s bored.

“Everyone’s fine.” The man across the door says it so quietly it might be a prayer. Slowly I finger through the syndic's keys in my pocket, one by one, the way my mother taught me to pray with beads.

Michael laughs again. I think his mother had a sick sense of humor. “Doc’s orders, sir. We won’t bite.”

“Go to hell, you fucker!” The man yells like broken glass; the door rattles.

This happens sometimes, the sudden panic. Dennis seems taken aback, but I draw out the keys from my pocket. Find him the right one and hand it over. I am supposed to train the new ones. *This is how you carry people’s children away.* I picture Amanda’s gap-toothed smile when I bring home food tonight, the crinkle of her eyes. Dennis tries to broaden his shoulders, but his fingers shake and he drops the keys onto the stoop, crouches and fumbles for the right one again.

This will be a long day.

Scrabbling against the other side of the door, the man shouts for us to stop. Michael throws his weight against the door just to listen to the man squirm. “You gotta show ‘em who’s boss, you know,” he jokes to me. “Women like you, you’re too soft.” He winks. I fight the urge to plunge a set of keys into his eyeballs. Dennis finally slides the right key into the lock and the door creaks open.

The man is not more than a sack of bones, feather-light on the grimy, fluid-stained floor. Vomit, probably. Blood. Pus.

Two children’s bodies are propped in the corner, limbs stiff and entwined, eyes shut. She wears a necklace of little roses; the scent fills my nostrils from the mask.

The man sees me looking at them, crawls toward me. *Women like me.*

“Don’t take them away. Let them go. Let them be!” Every word is yelp of pain while his arms grasp toward me. I want to tell him I'm sorry, wonder if maybe he taught his daughter to pray on the flowers of her necklace or asked her to imagine their smell while her brother began to rot— Better not to think of that. Better to get through the shift. Get this all over with. Teach Amanda how to count prayer beads at home.

I nod to Dennis. “Take the girl. Michael—”

In the kitchen alcove he’s rummaging through cabinets and drawers, pulling out can openers and forks, stuffing some in the small pack he carries. There is no food, of course.

“Michael.” I turn my face to stare at him, the mask’s eye-sockets all shadow in the gloom of this place. Keep my voice tight and cold. “Get the boy.”

He turns slowly around, rolling his eyes and sauntering over with a fake grin but I make him nervous. He and Dennis unlock the kids from their embrace. Their skin is still pock-marked with dark rings standing stark against the pale flesh, red patches like rash, some lingering pus staining their cheeks and necks like tears.

I nod my head to the door for Dennis and Michael to carry the bodies out. Gingerly they drag the children by their feet. The girl’s blond locks collect dust as they leave, head smacking on the step to the street. Curled into himself, the father talks ravenously, as if words will keep the sickness back. Around his neck are little bubbles of growing plague.

He’s crying when I step to the door. Rations, I tell myself. Be

quick today because the best go first, soon as the sun's down.

"Take me. Take me," he moans. "Mother, save me." Fighting the bile in my throat I step out the door and lock it swiftly behind me.

Take only the dead, never the dying.

My stomach growls loudly, and I picture deep circles lining my eyes to match the hollow spaces around my ribs. I am not cruel. I am not cruel.

We all have to eat.

"Man, look at these two fuckers," Michael laughs. "D'you think they died that way, or Dad in there arranged them? Must be pretty fucked up. Hey! Hey, Denny—I bet you thirty bits he's dead within eighteen—"

I reach my hand to Michael's throat. Squeeze just enough for fear to show in his eyes. "Michael," I whisper, keeping my face forward so the hollows of my mask stare straight past him. "Stop. Speaking."

"Stupid cunt," he mutters after I let go. I bet pretty boy has never worked a day in his life. I bet pretty boy has mama waiting in some VIP line for foodstuffs. Beneath the mask I flush hot scarlet. What would it be like—not to worry? Not to worry your children? I push the thought away.

Dennis struggles to guide the horses down the next narrow street; they stop and start, stop and start. It takes us fifteen minutes just to round the damn corner. His first day, it's his first day, I repeat to myself. I wonder if the rumbling of my stomach is loud enough for them to hear as we walk, knock, collect the bodies: A young couple next, wrapped in coats and hats. Then one child. Two children around Amanda's age, who I try not to see too clearly. One father. Two parents. A whole family. Three kids. On and on and on for hours while the sun rises higher, heats the bodies while we walk and our stomachs bite in pain.

Every house must be checked.

Dennis keeps fumbling with the keys and Michael, he exaggerates his own ineptitude just to infuriate me. Flies collect at the eyes and noses and mouths of the bodies we cart. A girl and her mother. A young child. An elderly couple shriveled to the bone; half these people didn't even catch plague, just died from hunger. One after another after another into the cart, the smell rank enough to cut through the roses and lavender. We tick off the checklist of houses in our unit, stomachs roiling. Hour by hour by hour until all I can think

of is what they'll give me once I get off. Some cans of beans, I'm sure. Corn. Canned corn. It's been awhile since any peanut butter—are they out? Surely they will have bread and if they have bread *and* I get peanut butter we can make sandwiches. Amanda loves to fold them over and bite the middle so when she opens it again there is a big center hole she can look through. It's like hide-and-seek. I hope to god they have the damn peanut butter, but is it greedy to hope for that and for peaches too? Will I jinx it?

Absently I check our district house list. Nearly there. Sometimes I wonder if I am the reason the bodies keep piling up to blot out the sky. If I kill people. If they die because they know I'll come take them away from this place.

"You know I think they've got a new perfume here they oughta work on," jokes Michael, interrupting my thoughts. He's not like Dennis and me. Criminal maybe, but from money. "Maybe I should have a little business chat with the syndic, eh?" He pretends to take a whiff of one of the little boy's heads, the blond hair catching in a light breeze. "Mmm—perfect. We'll call it *Innocence.* Make millions."

Whipping around to face him, my voice cuts sharp. "You wanna see the syndic? Let me fucking take you to him."

"Whoa, whoa, easy." Dennis holds up his leather-gloved hands, looking like some horror movie freak but trying to speak softly when Michael interrupts him—

"What? Can't crack a fuckin' joke around here at all anymore? Jesus, lighten up."

I turn and swing my fist, aiming to hit Michael square in the face, but Dennis moves in front of me, catches my arm mid swing then reaches out a hand to pat my shoulder. Consoling. I flinch away. I don't need this kid's pity. I'm the one who's made it longest out here, aren't I? I'm the one who's survived. The sun wavers over us, soon to sink behind the horizon. Soon. Soon. Too soon. Just let it go. But it's also the way Michael takes so long—his whining, his stopping, his pulling out to nibble his fucking sandwich beneath the mask like it's a goddamn picnic. Yeah. Michael comes from money.

Separated a little from the other houses in what would, in other times, have been a yard full of flowers and fruit trees, the last house on our route overgrows with weeds and creepers. Small flea-ridden creatures crawl in the shadows. The windows sag against the walls, glass cracked. I haven't seen this one before. I pray it will be

quick; better if it is empty. I imagine Amanda's stomach growling like mine in the empty apartment. Soon, sweetheart. Mama will be home soon…

Michael leans lazily against the railing, Dennis stooping by the weeds.

"Let's just get through this last one," I say. Frustration bleeds through my attempt at calm. I don't look at Dennis.

"Oh, I think we should take it nice and slow." Michael drags his feet exaggeratedly. "It's not like we have anywhere to be, right?" Smirks. Fucker.

Inside the house a small string of party lights glows faintly, strung up at the ceiling and lining the hallway. A ceiling fan swings slowly, patterned with flowers. So innocuous it could be normal.

"Hello?" I pause. Dennis holds his shoulders tight and hunched like armor.

Michael snorts in derision near the wall.

"Be quiet," Dennis hisses, and jabs his leg out to kick Michael.

"Fuck you, man!" Michael moves over and shoves Dennis.

"You guys, *shut up.*" But Dennis has already pushed Michael back into the wall; they scuffle; I turn, breaking them up. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"He pushed me first," Michael whines, running a hand along the exposed lower part of his jaw.

Jesus Christ.

"'Cause you wouldn't shut up!" Dennis tries maneuvering his mask off his left eye, but I yell for him to stop, thrusting my hand out and shove the mask back; he lets out a hiss of pain and backs up.

"Keep the fucking mask on, will you?"

"I'm bleeding," he says, exasperated. "It's gonna get infected with this fucking thing on it." He starts to take it off again, pushing away my arms. His is younger than I thought—no more than seventeen.

"Dennis, you have to—"

"Listen." Michael drops to a low whisper. "Hey, hey! Listen."

Mask half-off, Dennis cocks his head.

Somewhere down the house there is humming. Not a radiator kind of humming, or the drone of wiring, but a human sing-song humming. It is the trace of joy in the sound that freezes me, turns my skin clammy. Slowly I turn to face into the house again, try not to let

my voice tremble. There is no reason to be afraid. “Hello?” I call out.

A padding of steps in the back of the house and a fall of light into the hallway and a flash of red and matted fur and a fox sits neatly in the middle of the hallway, watching us.

Michael cannot stop his laughter, even after Dennis punches him in the shoulder again, finally pulling off the rest of his mask.

“This is so stupid! Are you kidding me? You fucking girls, scaring yourselves.”

I try exhaling heavily, but my body holds its tension.

“Michael. You carry a knife, don’t you?" I ask. “Give it to me. It might have rabies.”

“Sure you know how to use something like that, *boss*? Wouldn’t want you to cut yourself.” But he hands it to me all the same, just when a tinkling voice calls out from somewhere at the back of the house.

“Darling? Darling, come back to Mama, won’t you?” Sickly and over-dainty, high pitched ringing in the words. The fox perks its ears and turns to scamper back through the door.

This cannot be happening. Please. These things are not happening to me today. My vision wavers with a rush of hunger-pangs, unsteadying me.

I motion Dennis and Michael to follow behind me; we stalk like cartoon fool down the hall until the air becomes thick with scents. Meat. Spices. Coffee. Wine. It’s nothing but a fucking eccentric, I tell myself. Some rich fucking eccentric who thinks they can pay for some nice big house to smuggle in contraband. These are the people who fucking starve us. But my mouth waters even as my face burns with anger. Officially I will have to see the syndic—let him know what happens here. Officially.

“Oh, darling, here you are.” The voice is all smiles and thick cooing through the door at the hall’s end. I double check the knife placed snugly against my lower back then nudge the door wide with my shoulder. Dennis and Michael cry in surprise; my head seems to spin at the onslaught of senses, stomach heaving.

She is enormous. She is all rippling flesh that sags around the face, rolls all down her torso, makeup heavy, caked-on dark like some stage mask, long purple dress clinging tight to her body, red-hair brightly dyed and wild. Some grotesque queen on her faded armchair where the roses seem to fade and sag. The fox sits at her bare feet and a long table spreads out before her—God, the table filling the room

with smells of duck and braised pork and potatoes, gravy, lemon and asparagus and thick vegetable soup with noodles and spice and butter and loaves of bread with olive oil and cheese platters and moist cakes —

"Who the fuck are you?" Michael demands. Dennis' face is flushed, eyes fixed on the table. He looks to me, bleeding slightly at the temple and mask held at his side in one clenched fist, as if to ask if this is real. If this is okay. I imagine his stomach clenching harder than his fist, the way mine is rolling in on itself so hungry I could be sick. His eyes are wide enough I can just make out the reflection of my mask.

"Oh, don't be rude. You're in *my* house after all, aren't you?" Simultaneously Dennis and I whip our heads back to the woman.

There is loud yip from the fox and Dennis flinches like it's a whip.

No windows line the claustrophobic room. A frayed carpet covers the floor in winding vine and flower patterns, writhing and twisting in some awful maroon kind of red that looks more like period-sheets than luxury. I don't know how to place the chill in my bones but I can't keep from looking back to the table—imagine that pork, the way the fat catches the light, or that yogurt, those stews slipping down my throat, so warm. Officially. Officially, I remind myself, I have to report this. She laughs again, a hint of mania tugging at the sound. "You can help yourself."

Dennis exhales weakly, feeling like I am feeling.

"We're Medics," I tell her, but I sound vague, noncommittal, too focused on the table. "We're here—" I try snapping my attention back. "We're here to collect the bodies of the deceased. To prevent public contamination." The script sounds like bullshit as I say it. Dennis edges closer to the table. The woman smiles, showing all her teeth.

Eyeing us, the fox begins to pad back and forth in front of her feet.

"Go on, darlings. It's quite alright." I reach for my knife, let the cool metal shock my skin and begin to pull it out but she looks right at me. "Such pretty faces shouldn't be so starved. I'll have to tell the syndic to do better, won't I?"

"What?" The word falls out of my mouth, unexpected.

She tilts her head coyly, flesh bunching at the neck and shifts her gaze between us. "Are you afraid?"

“I—excuse me. Ma'am." I swallow hard, try to look her directly in the eye. "We—we have to collect. I mean, the list—”

The mass of food has entirely thrown me off.

The woman twirls a strand of hair and cuts me off. “You are afraid, hmm? Why? Because maybe I eat people,” she says, chuckling. “Maybe I eat you, and you, and you.” She slows the last "you" down, rolls it delicately, precisely, out of her thick, moist lips like she's tasting each word the way some people swish wine. She picks up a thick lamb-chop off a platter, lifts it to her lips, open wide so we can see the spittle hanging on between her teeth, and slowly slowly slowly bites down into the meat; it’s still pink in the middle, and juices runs off, slip down her fingers. When she moves it from her face, lipstick stains around the bite-mark.

Dennis inches closer to the table, his cheekbones sharp in the light, frame casting a skeletal shadow on the carpet. My stomach growls. The fox eyes me.

“Go on, go on,” she urges him. “As much as you want.”

“Dennis!” Panic in my voice when he reaches for a chicken breast; I don’t know why. But he swallows almost without chewing, a warm smile spreading across his face.

“It's so good.” His eyes implore me. A few feet away Michael shuffles, face flushed. He comes from money. He smells like money, here in this dark room with this dark table full of too much food—I could not count the money *she* must have. Michael doesn’t know hunger. He’s here for bad behavior. Not like Dennis. Not like me. He starts to slip out the door but I call his name. The fox snaps attention to him, bares its teeth.

“I just want to go,” he says, fidgeting. “I won’t say anything to the syndic.”

I lick my lips, thoughts scattered.

The fox stalks across the room toward Michael. I edge closer to the table—the smells are too much. Dennis continues picking up piece after piece of food. I am jealous, want to yell at him to stop, want to join him. Can I take this back to Amanda? The strays would smell it on the way…

“You know I had a son,” the woman says, waving an arm. “He was sick.”

My fingers tremble at the edge of the table, Dennis only a few feet down. Michael is frozen by the door, watched by the fox. What would the syndic do with all this food? My eyes slide from the lungs

to the pork, the corn, the basket of breads how they'd taste with sweet cheese. Carefully I place one single olive in my mouth, hold the sweet oil of it on my tongue as long as possible before biting in. My God, my God, nothing so perfect. I grab slices of bread, load them with butter and shove them in my mouth. Michael will be fine. The woman is fine. Everything is fine. Look at this meal.

Her voice becomes hard behind us. Dennis picks up piece after piece of chicken.

"He was dying of the plague. Dying like everybody else."

Would the syndic be angry? I imagine all the children loaded into the cart, all the bodies weak with boils and poison and malnutrition. The siblings we took wound up arm in arm. Even if the rations were good tonight it could not compare to this. Steak, juicy steak—I'm not looking at Michael anymore, but reaching for blueberries and scooping up soup and pinching cakes delicately frosted sweet and the roasted potatoes with garlic and butter and lemon—

"And you would have come to cart him off." If there is such a thing as velvet iron, it is this woman's voice. I freeze. Her fingers tap against the armchair, blackened at the edges like nail polish gone astray. Her facial movements jerk, as if it is difficult to move beneath all that skin and makeup.

Michael moves to leave again but it must be the fox that yanks him back by the cuff of his pants, growling and hissing. My breath comes heavy between bites.

"Take off your mask," the woman orders him.

He keeps his arms up and drags the mask off his face. Pretty boy. Full cheeks. Stupid prick. I am the only one left with my plague face.

"I didn't say you could leave," she murmurs to him. "Now eat." His eyes wide, Michael approaches the table, lines up with us and picks up a spoon to scoop what looks like apple-sauce. She smiles. "Girl."

My hands shake when he gaze turns to me. "Pretty girl like you needs to take care of herself. One day your children will need you strong. One day," she trails off, drops into that sing-song voice, half whisper. "One day you might be like me."

Dennis doesn't turn around, just keeps picking pieces of pig and cake and strawberry off the platters with his back resolutely to everything else. I want to pull him away. Can't gather the strength to

reach for him. The woman speaks again, laying her arms down on the chair so the fat spreads out, falls over the sides. “I made this feast in my son's honor. Now will you please take another moment to *properly* appreciate it?" I look back down at the table, to the tarts and lemon-loafs and sautéed vegetables in wild rice and creams and human fingers. I inhale sharply, stumbling back, coughing, reeling. Plump fingers and flayed skin, lungs spread out like fleshy wings covered with dressing. Thick pink tongues next to dipping sauces and dark heart on a glistening platter kidneys stacked delicately next to cooked stomach. The woman is smiling again while nausea rises fast —dry heave—I can’t breathe and the puke spills down into the long nose-piece of my mask, covers my feet warm and soggy mucus-water. This is not real not real not real please stop: Now.

She laughs. It is a sound like velvet rubbing against itself, rattling through me. My whole body feels weak and I pull off my mask so the smell of vomit isn’t dangling below my nostrils. The air on my face shocks. Like being naked.

“There’s that pretty face,” she whispers.

Michael is whimpering somewhere behind me. Spineless pig.

“Ma’am.” I try to swallow air, clean my throat of its vile sting, keep my eyes toward the ceiling. Don't look at the table. “Ma’am.” It doesn’t work. My insides revolt, slither and recoil. Don't look at the food, the body parts. A low rumble escapes my abdomen and I cringe, tell myself the watering of my mouth is leftover vomit and not still appetite. It does not even smell of death at all.

"Now," she says, lining us up with her eyes and watching our faces. "You were going to take my baby away.” She shakes her head. “I know all about what crows like you do. I hear mothers and fathers cry out for kindness and you throw their children into a heap."

"You don’t— We have to—" Tears start tracking down my face. In her shape are the limbs and the faces of all the men and the women and the children piled in our cart outside and piled for weeks. How many of them too poor to get out of the city center where the plague has been worst, chasing through households like wildfire. "Someone has to take them. Someone has to—"

She silences me with her droopy, jewel-like eyes. She nods a little as she looks at me, like undressing the rags off my body. My fingers itch at the blade at my back, sure she knows it’s there. Sure she doesn’t care. “You’re skinny, dear,” she says to me. Dennis is shaking by the table, reaching out and recoiling, then reaching out

again for the table. He would be happier dead. She laughs and the fox yips and my throat runs dry, heart sunk into my stomach. “Ragged thing like you. Never been taken care of properly. It’s about time you take care of yourself, isn’t it?” And she gestures, blasé, to Dennis and Michael. The fox flicks its tail impatiently. I can’t break her gaze, but clench the blade in my hand. Pull it out to hold beside me.

“Good girl,” she coos. “These boys? You can do better than them. Always holding you back. They’re weak. Hmm?”

Dennis doesn't seem to react. "We didn't mean any harm," he says, voice wavering. He speaks slowly, doesn't look her in the eye. She tilts her head back and laughs breathlessly. Hidden in the folds of her skin are so many little boils of pus, red rings where the skin betrays infection. I look down again, note the black creeping up around her ankles.

“How about a little deal,” she says to me. “Just between us girls.”

Listlessly I step toward Dennis, grab his wrist in my hand so he won’t take another piece from the table. My eyes are still on her. Amanda must be starving. She gets scared when I don’t come home on time. She must be scared.

“After all, you have a meal to be getting to, darling,” the woman says and the fox brushes against me making me shudder, winds between my legs like a cat. Her expression contorts into mock surprise like she’s just seen a clock. “It’s almost time, isn’t it? You’re running late. They might even have peaches today. Now. How about this: I let you go with all the food you could want, and you give me these two boys. I lost my own, after all, and I am so *hungry* for company.”

I swallow, tongue sticking to the roof of my suddenly parched mouth.

“I know what it’s like, darling, to be where you are. It’s hard to raise a baby all on your own,” she murmurs.

My fingers stiffen around Dennis’ wrist. Beans, canned corn, I recite. Peanut butter, Peaches. Amanda is hungry. Amanda is alone and the rations will be out soon and—Dennis eyes me nervously, pulling away. I hold my grip.

“Fuck this,” says Michael. “Fuck all this.” He turns and dashes for the door but the fox snarls, darting at his side. Michael shrieks and my stomach rumbles. Blood pours from a bite mark in his leg. She is watching me, lips curled with a maternal smugness.

"You know what I want," she says. From behind us there is another loud yelp and Michael screaming as his boot connects and the fox's body goes slamming against the other wall. I am running out of time. It's Michael's fault. And Michael's mother's fault. He always takes so long, always whines so much and I want to be her with her money and her food and I want Amanda to be Michael with their sandwiches. He is making this too difficult. He is crying and turning for the door again. But I can't be late. They only have so much food. And if the syndic found out—does he know? Does it matter? If Michael—

"You cunt. You crazy cunt," he screams, then looks at me. "What the hell are you doing? What's wrong with you, sicko? *Let's get out of here.* Fucking crazy woman leading us. I don't need this shit. *We have to go.*"

Dropping Dennis' wrist I stride across the room, licking my lips, feeling dizzy from the vines and the flowers of the room. Michael, you are making things difficult. Michael, you're the reason I'm so late. I stoop and look him in the eye, pull at his cheeks, scream. "You don't understand," I say. "It doesn't matter to you."

Of course Michael doesn't understand. He can't. He never will. His skin is soft and well-fed. He screams back. Cunt. Bitch. Crazy. "I'll fucking kill you myself," he yells. "You'll be dead. My mother will make sure you're dead!" The woman is laughing. She laughs when I draw Michael's own knife across his throat. I can't breathe. The fox limps back over to lick the wound clean of flavor. I smell lavenders and the flowers of the carpet seems to shed their petals.

"And the other one, my girl," the woman says, feverish. "The other one and you'll be free to go. I won't stop you at all." I picture Amanda smiling when I walk through the door. She needs me. "We all lose our boys, don't we? There's just so much hunger in women like us." And I know her son is on the table. I know her son is digesting in my intestines when I walk back to Dennis, shrinking and whimpering at the table, pieces of flesh caught between his lips. He was new, young. He was like me. They might already be starting with the cans though. They might already be going. And the peaches. They might have peanut butter. They might. But Dennis. I look to the woman, giddy in her throne, and that stupid fox watching every move. Dennis runs then, but does not even reach the door before the fox has him bleeding and crying out. I walk to him, take his hand,

crouch beside him. I look for my reflection in his eyes. Can't find it.

"You know I can't let you *both* go," the woman murmurs, smiles a little sadly. "And you know exactly what will happen if I don't let you go." She trails off. I lick the salt off my lips, pretend it is not tears blurring my vision.

"Jaime, don't. Please don't," Dennis whimpers. "We can kill her. We can escape."

But the food. The food would disappear. Would it? What if everything disappears with the woman? No feast and no rations. No me. Amanda locked up and alone without Mama to come home. I can't. I can't. Dennis smells like sweat and honey.

"Jaime," says the woman softly. "Do you want to be stuck here forever?"

"Help me," he moans, then thrashes out at me, kicking and flailing.

My breath hitches. She'll kill me. I'll be dead and Amanda will be dead and what was the point of everything? There is a cavern in my abdomen. "We all have to eat," I say. I drive the knife upward from his stomach and into his chest like a pig. The woman flushes red with excitement, repeats my name sing-song into the room. "My boys, my boys," she cackles. I let Dennis' head hit the floor like the girl's from this morning.

"Take care of yourself, sweet thing," she tells me.

It looks like the roses and the vines are slowly creeping over their bodies. I imagine them heaped into the cart with the others, rose petals from our masks and the little girl's necklace and all the dead gardens scattered across them. I want to teach Amanda the name of every living plant. Their blood is on my face. I walk out the door to the sound of her laughter. Their blood smells like roses, the ones caught in the snout of my mask crumpled somewhere on the floor. One foot, then the other. They will have the peaches, I am sure of it. Behind me is the dull thud of metal on bone and excited yipping. My stomach, I am almost doubled over in pain. Or maybe that is the crying. They will give me extra cans of beans tonight maybe, for being a good girl. This is the first time I have felt outside air on my face in a long time. It dries the blood partially. Down the street. Around the corner. On and on through the city. I leave the cart and the horses. One foot then the other. Black beans and canned peaches and peanut butter. I lick my lips, task the residue of her boy on my tongue. Think of Amanda, think of home.

We all have to eat somehow.

Amanda Gaines *is a recent graduate of WVU's Creative Writing program and was a poetry reader for Calliope, a literary journal and similarly, a poetry editor for Mind Murals, the Eastern Region's literary journal for Sigma Tau Delta. Her poetry and fiction have been published in both. She has publications both past and upcoming in poetry, nonfiction, and prose from The Oyez Review, Straylight, Gravel, The Meadow, and Into the Void.*

Life of the Party

Amanda Gaines

Pour another. Watch her eyes glaze,
white teeth flashing, navigating the hallway like pulling a thread
through a needle. Both hands out, feeling for walls, a murmur
escapes her throat. *I'm thirsty.*
Above, Christmas lights dance like a line of children.
Once on the floor, there's no chance of falling.

This, her mother taught her. It's two a.m. and again she's falling
in love with the lips of a bottle. The warmth of liquor, that golden glaze
like the fireflies she & her sisters chased after as children.
Her memory rolls over in her stomach, hand too shaky to thread
the pieces together. She doesn't know where she is but she knows that she's thirsty.
Hot bodies press at her sides, the party swelling. She moves through them like a murmur.

Music pours over her, her heartbeat a murmur.
Hard hands pull at her hips, say *I'm falling*
for you. She tells them *I'm thirsty.*
Pour another. Her blurred palms sticky with sweat glaze,
she thinks buttery syrup, Sunday pancakes, and watching her mother thread
a needle through blue cotton quilts for her children.

Without parents home, the house is full of children.
Fists and drunk lips delivered through house walls like murmurs.
Her spine slumps, a thread
with no needle. She lusts a rush, welcomes falling.
Hand around a bottle like it's been glazed
there. Ask and she'll tell you. She's always thirsty.

Four shots down and she still feels thirsty.
Everything moves slower when she's drinking. As children,
she & her sisters played tag in oceans, limbs glazed
wet with sun and effort. Their bodies moved like murmurs
against the pull of the current. She found out falling
is impossible in water. She follows this memory with a drink, a thread

through a needle. Watch her thread
through the crowd of people. Thirsty
for something that feels like falling,
she waits for the world to cherish her as children
do. Pour another. The murmur
of her mother whispering into a phone *I'm worried about you* glazes

over: the bottom of her glass. She longs to be the child
in her memories. Threads and murmurs lost to being thirsty.
Once on the floor, thinks there's something in falling, eyes closing,
heavy and glazed.

Mom,

Amanda Gaines

The clothesline stays empty
this time of year. The cold seems to run miles
through our blue mountains and into the quiet room I rent
despite the closed door. But I can't help
but hear the sound of warm southern winds
whipping long sleeves and purple quilts
as I try to fall asleep in this place far from home.

You're there, in the red earth.
The sycamores see you, too.
Wrists buried among the yellow shriveled flowers
we recognize as blooming zucchini, your limbs
blending with the bending itchy stems, calling
for help that my sisters and I pretend we cannot hear.

You're still calling, now,
from a moving car in the dark.
Far away and going further,
yet the words you whisper stay the same,
as always:
Love me, love me, love me.

The ground here is hard.
The snow sees to that.
And besides, there is no space
to grow a garden amongst these
car-filled streets and beer cans.
There is no space for you
here, so I till this page and water it
with words, hoping to sustain these buds of memory
until the winter lets up
and the air smells thick with honeysuckle
and home is an old futon nestled next to you
and not just a thought before sleep.

Kip *lives in sunny Tucson, where his wife makes him watch Poltergeist while insisting clowns are not scary. You can find his work scattered about the Internet, at Foundling Review, Every Day Fiction, Inkspill, Bartleby Snopes, and a few other places, proving that a blind squirrel does occasionally find a nut. When not telling lies, he makes a few bucks cobbling together boring articles for technical magazines.*

Assembling the Black

Kip Hanson

It's Christmas Eve and Mom's into her fourth eggnog before she starts ragging on Ray about his new tattoo. "I hope that fucker's not real," she says. "Ugliest thing I ever seen."

She'd gone holiday shopping at the dollar store again this year. The confusing odor of burnt Italian meatballs mingled with the balsam reek of clearance aisle candles wafts in from the dining room. Hanukah giftwrap litters the floor, its myriad Stars of David lay trampled beneath the feet of us indifferent gentiles.

"Just grow your hair back, Ray. I don't want to look at it no more." She hiccoughs, and pours herself another. "What idiot tattoos a door on the side of his head, anyway?"

Her plastic tree, unfettered now of several candy canes and its support of hastily wrapped gifts, lurches suddenly to the right. A bulb hits the ground and shatters. The dog and I are the only ones who notice.

Ray smiles and nods, then leans down to give her a kiss before leaving. "Merry Christmas, Ma. Nice seeing you."

She waits until Easter to stroke out. On Thursday, I have to call in sick for the funeral. The afternoon sun shoves through the clouds for a moment as we stand at the side of her grave, reflects off the pale skin of Ray's cheeks, his forehead that reminds me so much of Dad's. I think about how Ray looked when we were kids and a tear escapes, runs burning down my face. None of it matters anymore.

Ray's head is freshly shaved, a stocking cap snugged down around his ears, whether protection against the unexpected cold or to cover his tattoo out of respect for our dead mother, I'm not sure. What

I am sure of is that my feet are freezing. Wet April snow covers the ground to the tops of my Reeboks. A length of sodden Astroturf slides into the hole, revealing a mound of freshly dug dirt discretely piled on the far side of the Costco coffin. A few pebbles tumble into the void.

The rented pallbearers shuffle from one foot to the other, anxious for us to pay our respects and leave. “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven,” Ray begins. “He who believes in me will live, even though he dies. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest, for I am the resurrection and the light. Amen”

“That’s pretty good, Ray,” I say, toeing a few rocks into her grave. “Matthew, John, and Ecclesiastes, all in one sermon. It’s a first.”

“Sunday school. That’s all I can remember.” His eyes are bright, glassy with tears and codeine. His tattooed door swings slowly in the cold breeze, and I wonder if this will be the last funeral Ray need ever attend.

Later at the bar, some guy in a Brett Favre jersey stares at Ray’s skull, struggling to decipher the playing card-sized door my brother paid some other guy two-hundred bucks to place there.

“Nice tat,” says the Packer’s fan. “Brain cancer?”

Ray smiles and gives his usual nod. Favre buys us a round.

I see him into hospice over The Fourth of July weekend. He forgets my name two weeks later. Sometime after Labor Day they call to tell me my brother’s ready for pickup and I take the motorcycle even though the sky is purple and he made me promise to never ride in the rain.

The attendant hands me a cardboard box. I marvel at Ray’s weight, expecting him to be much lighter, like the residue scraped from the bottom of a Weber grill after a family reunion, all blistered hotdogs and marshmallows turned to coal. Sign here, the guy says. I keep the pen.

Ray fits comfortably on the luggage rack, a place that I once rode with trepidation, my brother’s laughter rocketing past my ears. I think about stopping for a trash bag to keep him dry but instead accelerate, hoping to outrun the storm. The cardboard is soaked by the time we get home. Mom watches from the mantel as I bring him into the kitchen. The screams of the neighbor children playing in the rain are drowned out by the gritty whisper of Ray as I pour him slowly onto the scuffed linoleum.

He looks like dirty sand laying there, tiny specks of black littering the surface, holes in an ashen universe. The air is filled with Raymond dust, filling my hair, settling on my upper lip. My tongue pokes out, tentative, tasting my dead brother.

Mom's dog wanders in and sniffs at the grayish mess. This is the same mutt that leaves huge mounds of crap in the yard, and occasionally the hall. It snuffles at the residue of Ray's hip, his knee. Smell my deconstituted ass, I hear Ray say, and laugh.

The dog sneezes, spraying slobber and bits of Ray everywhere, then noses out a few milk-stained Cheerios from the edge of the heap, snapping them up as though he hasn't eaten for a week. I kick him half-heartedly, and pull a pair of beers from the fridge.

"Here's to you, bro," I say, and sit, lifting the bottles in salute to all that we once were. "Let's put you back together."

Together, we begin to pick out the doorframe, the lintel, the rail and casing, separating them from the other bits of burnt, blackened Raymond. Together we commence to reconstruct the door. Together. Our mother watches us from her perch on the fireplace, disapproving as always.

Toti O'Brien's *work has most recently appeared in Indicia, Foliate Oaks, Ink In Thirds, and Sediments.*

On the Bridge, in the Rain

Toti O'Brien

If I think anorexia I remember a bridge in the dark, walking home with mom on a winter eve. The city submerged by obscurity, dimly lit by streetlamps, the asphalt shiny with rain, the swish and swash of the river underneath.

Mother's office closes at eight, though she lingers, taking care of unfinished businesses. As if she didn't want to come home—which of course isn't true. Sometimes I meet her at work, in the afternoon. Nanny brings me there, or the office boy picks me up on his delivery tour. If we have an errand to run—a doctor appointment, perhaps—mother manages a brief leave. It's a miracle she could steal these hours. We go out together, then she's back to work while I quietly sit in the waiting room. If it's late we walk home, instead, crossing the wide bridge towards the other bank.

Thus the bridge in the dark means mom's hand, mom's voice, more than all the rhythm of her steps I mimic with mine. Rather harmonize with a nice counterpoint.

On the bridge, mom is talking about a chocolate candy aunt gave me after lunch. Very small. For a second aunt held it high, out of reach. "Do you understand this all becomes fat?" I don't. I am stupefied such a tiny bit, safe till yesterday, became dangerous. But since yesterday I am on a diet. Mom brought me to the pediatric check-up. "Your children," doc said to mom, "tend to pack fat on their middle. You should keep them away from sweets. We will fix this with the appropriate diet. Let's start with the eldest".

Let's start and let's end. None of my siblings will undergo the experiment, seeing me as the sole guinea pig.

#

But I am not a pig in the least. Later I have looked at pictures, trying to make sense of something which had none. No fat girl to be found. By the way, our meals are strictly planned—I only eat what I am given. The exact portion—asking for more is unthinkable, as

leaving a bite on my plate would be. We don't have access to the fridge, to anything between meals. What I daily consume is what I am assigned, down to the milligram.

I am the most docile girl in the world. For the love of mother... in the superstitious belief if I'm good I'll get more of her. A larger slice? At the kitchen table, where nanny feeds us dinner, sometimes my siblings make a fuss—when food is too cold, bad, unsavory. This, though, is what mom ordered us to consume, and I obey. When the soup is truly disgusting, bros and sis throw it up—the ultimate weapon. Then a furious nanny takes care of the mess, gives them something else or excuses them. But I am unable to puke. I have tried—there is no way. I so wish I could do what others perform so well. I could not vomit to save my life. I will never learn.

#

Mom explains about the diet while we cross the bridge. I drink her words up… I always do. I worship the tone of her voice and the way she phrases. I've not truly understood this whole matter, but because she is talking to me and I delight in her presence, it can't be too bad. Only puzzling. Thus, today the chocolate candy was waved like a scolding finger. I still peeled the shiny paper in awe, salivating. I still had it melt languorously in my mouth. It still felt delicious. Or maybe not quite.

In one month I have lost seven kilos, about fifteen pounds. And I have become, as they say, skin and bones. I haven't noticed. I am nine. My idea of my body is still fragmented. I have barely started to join pieces in a whole. Leisurely, taking my time. I am a child.

Was, until last month. And I *had* started to put my body together. Now the process has been interrupted. I don't know what that body of mine would have been. The trajectory has been modified.

I am sitting on the toilets when I see my belly. I recall it from few weeks ago, when my gaze also fell on my navel—right here, in the intimacy of the restrooms. I recall my tummy as it looked: slightly rounded as I thought a stomach should be, as it is in picture books. Now I notice a cavity, a cavern, a hole. Strange, though I don't judge it ugly. Yet different from before, and I am taken by surprise. My abdomen reminds of grandmother's mouth when she smiles—a wrinkled depression, all bunched up and deeply sunk in. The idea of grandma's mouth takes over me, super impressing itself. Grandma's toothless mouth enters my stomach, has become my stomach, or me. How did it happen?

#

Now I look very thin. My diet has been unofficially suspended. I'm not sure mom has wholly appreciated the situation. She has done what the doctor said. Time for the next check-up hasn't come. She is at loss. Yet a slackening of the rules regarding my meals occurs. I am still served a portion of boiled greens instead of the pasta all others are eating. But dad gets upset, takes my dish away, pushes a bunch of spaghettis under my nose. I am not sure of what I am supposed to do. Mom and dad bicker, then they forget what about. They are already disagreeing over something else while I linger, perplexed, fork in hand.

When mealtime comes I'm nervous. The confusing directions intimidate me. While unsure, I tend to stick to my diet… it has cost me to get used to, now its strictness reassures me. Thus I don't resume my weight, don't grow taller, my period doesn't come.

Things keep worsening. I don't recall going back to the doctor, but our family table has morphed into a battlefield. How this business was started has been wiped off…. diet and all. I have become the culprit—the one stubbornly refusing to eat as she should. Though the word anorexic hasn't been pronounced, it soon will. It's puberty time and I'm not 'becoming a woman'—on the contrary, I'm shrinking.

#

Let me go back once more to the first week of my regimen, when my mid-morning snack in school went from a bun—slightly smeared with apricot jam—to an apple. I did not dislike the fruit, didn't miss the bun. But I remember hunger. Disproportioned. Painful. Mordant. I recall voraciously gulping the apple core, seeds and all. Those seeds… they tasted rich, substantial. I starved for their crunchy consistency. I remember my helplessness when the apple was gone and I was still hungry. Hungry. Then I forgot how it feels.

#

On the summer of my fourteenth year I have lost yet more weight. In the past months things have happened. Losses I haven't been able to cope with. Grief I can't overcome.

My grandfather—my one strong and positive parental figure—has unexpectedly died in his sixties. I have seen him get ill and deteriorate at a tremendous rate. I have been aware of the process, not less struck or terrified. The land where I have spent nine months a year, since my toddler time, homeschooled by grandpa and grandma,

has been sold. The farm has been abated, the orchards cut down. An entire world—my childhood heaven, my roots—has vanished in a blink. Grandma has lost her mind. Now she goes from an institution to the next. Mom has been deeply affected. I have seen her withdraw. In her predicament she has omitted to embrace her children, to consider their loss as well as her own.

I feel utterly alone at a time when I would need guidance. Teenage has kicked in. My period has happened once—just when grandpa's agony started. On that day I have run a fever. I have missed school. I have felt cramps, found pink stains on my panties. Hours later grandfather has passed. My period hasn't returned since. It can't. I keep losing weight.

#

During my summer vacations I spend the day on an armchair, filling canvas with tiny cross-stitches. I am embroidering pillows—a pattern of autumn leaves in dull rusty tones. Fallen leaves. Dad and I fight over every meal. Food drags on my plate. I slow down, hoping he'll finish and leave before noticing what I didn't gulp. I'm often defeated.

Why am I not eating? The question is redundant. I am experiencing a massive wave of depression. Rather despair. I am mourning with my entire soul. My body aligns. My pain is both unsaid and overwhelming.

I haven't noticed how hard the transit of food has become until I have to lie down, to ease the fits in my chest due to a couple of grapes I ate. They can't pass. I have a sudden epiphany. I realize even water will become a torture. I picture the walls of my stomach sticking together. For an instant, I sense myself die.

Maybe I have wanted to. I have thought about joining grandpa, wherever he is. I have wished to go back in time, to my childhood. I have longed for the orchard and farm to reappear, reversing the progress of things. But I'm changing my mind. It's too early. I think I want to live.

#

I know feeding myself will be hard. There will be moments of panic. I need to proceed very prudently, step by step. There will be internal struggle—part of me will treat myself as a coward for failing my grand plan, though I didn't know I had one. Part of me will resent my weakness, blame my wish to survive. If they (mom, dad, doctors) could leave me to my own devices, I still might succeed.

They don’t. Alas, my missing period is making the news. Aunts and extended family are eager to provide advice. I am brought to see a number of gynecologists. I am labeled amenorrheic and anorexic. Or the other way around. Variously but undeniably ill.

Mom brings me to see a known psychiatrist. A psychologist might have been suited, but in our country and era those definitions are blurred. I don’t want to go—I still recall the pediatrician with fright. I don't know who this new doctor will be, but what should I expect from intruding strangers? I have learned my lesson, and it warns me against this encounter.

There is more to it—father is furious. He is yelling at me because of the scheduled visit. He’s trying to forbid it... Is he scared of competing authority? Maybe he is only apprehensive of things unknown, afraid of theories our religion might not approve of. I am stuck in no man’s land just as when I was-and-wasn’t put on a diet. I am not the one wanting to be diagnosed, analyzed. But I am made responsible.

#

Mom and I go to the doctor twice. I remember the padded darkness of his dimly lit, very elegant studio. He lives in the most expensive part of downtown. While I wait, he and mother have a long chat. Small talk, smart and courteous. I zone out, wishing I could instead disappear.

When I’m left with the lad, he is silent. All the words were for mom. To me he shows a series of cards I am asked to comment upon. This is unexpected relief. I could wish for nothing better than forgetting this room, getting lost in the beauty of colorful stains, in a world of landscapes, adventure, and dreams. For a moment I am unguarded. I regret it. I immediately sense this guy doesn’t like my stories. I perceive a zest of blame in his hums and nods.

Our next session—mom still with me—is a simple follow-up. Curtly, the doctor says I need therapy. Not with him, because to him I am hostile. Or is it the other way around. Thus another therapist is chosen from a list the luminary provided. Again mom leaves her job to accompany me, now to a remote periphery, a modest apartment. The new psychiatrist-or-psychologist is a woman. Her room is well lit, lightly painted. We are not in a rich mansion, more like in a classroom. I prefer this.

After reading the files the other doctor sent, after lingering on a detailed interview, the lady reschedules me. She has to ponder

before giving advice. The second time through she surprises me. And mom. I am sane, perfectly so—she says. Also a caring, responsible girl. That I'm thin doesn't matter. I'll be capable of eating some more, sometimes soon. And my period, no worries, will come.

I don't know if I believe her. I have registered a general disconnect. What is said about my body and mind doesn't apply to me. It reflects something else—extraneous beliefs and opinions. I should not let adults mess up with my functions. They aren't only dangerous—they are lethal and don't even know. They are playing with dolls, unaware their toys are alive. They can call me sane or insane as if changing outfits on me.

I should not wear this stuff—it is poisoned. Venom seeps through my skin. I should shed these wraps. I should peel them. But I'm not fast enough.

#

I have regained a normal weight. I have gotten my period. I have grown up, left home at an early age, moved abroad, married. I have tried to leave anorexia behind. Only it isn't possible. It stays dormant for a while, then comes back whenever I deal with control issues. Or whenever I cope with loss and abandonment, with depression and grief.

I start eating less without noticing, inadvertently resuming my diet. I start feeling bad about eating, as if wishing to live were wrong when life is voided of freedom, filled with sadness, or both.

I have lost lots of weight in my late twenties, literally slipping out of my marriage. It has taken a while for the effects to be dramatically visible. Then there was no way to deny them. I have been warned—adult anorexia has consequences. But I know I cannot change its course unless I remove its causes. It's a long detour, a costly procedure. Yet there's no other way. As I divorce, move away, change profession, I get better.

#

For a few years I've wished to see the first shrink again. The rich one, the one who said I needed care but he wouldn't provide it. He has made an impression, left a mark—a disfiguring one. Maybe —still young, still naïve—I am wishing to smudge it.

I would like to see that doctor again, now that I am recovered. I have become a dancer, then an acrobat. I am an athlete of sorts. My body is strong, trim, adjusted. I'd like for the doctor to know. To acknowledge it?

I have looked him up. He is quite a celebrity, teaching in a grand university. I ask if I could meet him. He accepts to see me after class. Could I wait for him at the door, then accompany him to the bus stop? He can't drive, can barely walk, needs a cane. I didn't know he was ill… He looks older than he is. He looks frail.

A few words he said during our first session have stuck with me since... I want him to know. Did they hold the key to something important? "You'd do whatever for love, and nothing by force", he has said. His phrase haunts me still. What does it mean exactly?

Wait—why should anybody be forced? Who wouldn't go the extra mile for love's sake? And what kind of love was he intending? Why am I sticking to this bag of peanuts, this bit of rotten meat he handed me as if I were a monkey in a zoo? I have remembered his words for more than fifteen years. Could he, please… He smiles without replying. Now I'm sure he meant nothing. Just a flourish.

"Why did you come to see me, back then?" "I was anorexic". He ogles me head to toe. "Were you?" His bus has arrived. Was I seeking for a kind of closure? I haven't found it.

#

My most devastating episode strikes after delivering. I am done with breastfeeding, and quite happy. I have not fattened during pregnancy. I have kept fit, athletic, and healthy. All has gone well, but now I am losing weight. It takes time—two or three years before becoming alarming. Then I can't stop. I sink to seventy something pounds. I look horrifying. My marriage of course falls apart, so does everything else. Adult anorexia has consequences, I am told. Yes, it does.

Conscious of the discomfort I'm causing to others, I would like to lessen it. I read articles, testimonials, and books. They don't help. I could help myself—as I've done in the past—if I could figure out who or what is controlling me, what I am mourning, what makes me so unhappy I can't live. I seek counseling. It doesn't work. No one's fault: things are hard to unscramble, that's all. I have to grab the end of the yarn, unravel the knots one by one… it might take forever. Yet I can't pick up the scissors and cut. If I do it, I am dead.

I have sought aid because I don't want to die, yet I'm reaching the finish line. How is it possible? I don't want to leave my child, I am sure. Why am I dying, thus? I'm told I might have two weeks left. My body has devoured my muscles, now is eating my organs—my liver, my heart. I am scared, but force-feeding won't save

me. I need to understand.

#

I find a specialized clinic. I request psychological and psychiatric assessments. As it happened in my teens, I am told I am mentally sane. Though I certainly had a troubled childhood, the psychiatrist says, through dance, art, love, and motherhood, I have efficiently coped. The clinic also provides physical exams. I do whatever is needed. Blood tests point to thyroid cancer. I am sent to ultrasounds, again and again, but no tumor is found. I am perplexed, and I know this feeling—bringing me all the way back to when I was nine. Eat. Don't. French fries. Boiled spinaches. Sane. Sick. Normal. Insane.

No tumor. No therapy. I'm left to my own devices as I had wished, had I? I'll step on a scale every Sunday. I have promised to myself I will not lose another ounce. I don't know if I'll ever manage to reverse weight loss, but I'll try to keep it as stake. Suspend death, while I see if it's still avoidable. Every Sunday I check, asking a neighbor to witness. She is a just an acquaintance, but I beg her to hug me each time I step down the scale. A quiet, brief, solid hug. She complies, and I stop shrinking.

Slowly, I also understand what I need to do with my life. Major changes are needed, involving major risks. As I face the changes, take the risks, my shape comes back to normal. Sluggishly, I know. I have done this before.

#

I have remained for my entire life a small, irrelevant body. Yet I've managed the slice of existence I could muster. I have balanced my act, suspended on this archway I have chosen. Perhaps. I was stuck on this bridge—dimly lit, slippery with rain. Things are on either bank I can't afford losing. Over there chunks of past, dead who can't let go or I can't abandon. Over here strings of hope, whispers of desire, my own child. Underneath I hear the swish and swash of the river, its mighty indifference, its supreme inability to help. I have managed to live on this edge, stretching myself as thin as I could.

Ashley K. Warren *writes poetry and fiction. Her work has appeared in The Examined Life Journal, Easy Street, Poems Across the Big Sky II and in other journals. A graduate of the Stonecoast MFA program, she teaches writing at Montana State University Billings and in Billings public schools through the nonprofit organization Arts Without Boundaries.*

Alice and the Snake

Ashley K. Warren

What if Alice chased
a snake instead
of a white rabbit?
No timepiece for running
late, Snake would
carry a compass, have ennui
about where he was going,
not anxiety about when
he'd get there.

At the tea party
with Mad Hatter and groupies,
to make an absurdity of him, they might
accidentally
cut and serve Snake's tail,
tell him, it's a delicacy, then
watch him eat himself, and when
Snake finds out, deny any
allusion to Ouroboros.

The Opium Caterpillar,
would share his bowl
of mischief and smoke cloud
letters. Hopped up Snake would tease Alice
until she cried then feel
like a dick and go on a bender.

Upon coming to the Cheshire Cat
Snake would eat him,
then suffer the
unfortunate side effect
of having half his body
disappear without warning.

Neighborhood

Ashley K. Warren

1.
Cicadas sing in city blocks the way neighbors
segregate streets by whose kids live there, or whose dog barks
or who has the nice front lawn. Siding peels,
weeds grow next to drip systems for lilies
rusted cars park by Ethan Allen lawn furniture.
Their buzz deafening, without noticing
the gradual decrescendo their call is gone.
Once I feel myself missing it
the cicadas sing again. I find myself three blocks over
in someone else's part of the world,
not unlike the world from which I just came.

2.
A man sits on his front porch,
head stooped, hands clasped in front of him
over the belly of a guitar. Just one block away
when I first noticed him
I strained, listened for his song.
With his head down I can almost
hear him praying.
From across the street
the vines weep out of the window box.
I can tell he would
feel better if he'd just play.

3.
I saw a woman whose name I can't remember.
I remember her by her eyes,
the echo of stories she told me
in a stranger's backyard
over brunch on a Sunday morning.
She didn't recognize me

as she passed, we connected again as two women
walking alone at night, by nature of our bravery
our stories echoing in the twilight.

4.
How difficult to dislike a town
where people sit under umbrellas
in backyards filled with secret gardens,
fountains, vegetables, laughing over dogs barking
over children singing,
little libraries and poetry corners mark property lines
yet every few yards, For Sale signs
distract from addresses cleverly screwed
above doorways in black curlicue numbers.
I wonder why the neighbors would leave
a place so difficult to dislike, and where they will all go.

*

To Those Who Will Meet Me After

Ashley K. Warren

To the pharmacist-receptionist-grocery store clerk
who speaks slower and louder: I can hear you.
I understand you perfectly.
I'm sorry you can't understand me
when I'm stuttering.

To the waitstaff
leaned over my menu pursing their lips
yet trying to smile: I'm pointing to the item
I want to eat because this will be easier
for both of us, I promise.

To words that begin with the letters d, t, p, b, and sometimes s:
fuck you.
(Words that begin with f, we're cool.)

To the students I will teach: yes, I'm afraid
you'll think I'm unintelligent
because I won't remember what we talked about
or because I'll tell you the same anecdote twice.
Yes, I'm afraid of you
because you will without wanting to
look at me, listen to me, label me
different or disabled.

To my left leg: we knew each other before
you don't remember, but I do. On the days
you forget which neural pathways
connect us I'll drag you along
until you remember.

To the bitch voice inside my head
I couldn't hear you until now. You are loud. Please
shut up. You are not helping
me, or anyone.

To my dinner companions
when I drop something,
drink something too fast,
get the hiccups: don't worry;
I'm not going to die on your watch.
No one comes to your rescue
when you drop stuff, or cough, or hiccup.

To those who acknowledge
they don't understand
what this is like:
thank you. I don't understand it either.

To those who think
they have trouble "expressing themselves"
or say, "I can never find the right words."
Mine's different.
I know the right words. I'm repeating them over and over inside my head like an avalanche like an avalanche like an avalanche like an avalanche like an avalanche like an avalanche
waiting for them to come out.

Interrupters. Talking over the stuttering
doesn't make it go away.

To those who are listening and say,
"You sound so much better today,
your speech is normal." Thank you, and yes,
I do sound normal. But words
like better and normal are gross generalizations
for the nuance of recovery.

To those trying to fix me,
thank you but please,
let me linger in the quiet
privacy of healing. Let me
decide what to do next,
what to think of all this.
You see, I'm learning to
be okay with what comes after
the moment you get the sense both
knocked into and out of you.
I've grown comfortable with
the stutter, the aphasia, the limb that doesn't remember.
I accept the sweet, unexpected gifts
of remaining broken.

Ryan Drawdy *has devoted his life to writing stories that expose the invisible. If a story has ever made you long for something you can't explain, you understand. He's also a proud husband and father.*

12 Crocodiles

Ryan Drawdy

Dear Mr. Quarry,

We have your soul. Please give us twelve unblemished crocodiles, or we will throw it in the wash with muddy cloaks. Eventually, we will shut it away without a proper burial.

Yours kindly,

Pliant Harvey Group

And all I could think was, there are only eleven crocodiles in our state. Probably, they're not all unblemished.

But I responded to the letter so as not to give offense: "Yes, I accept. Many thanks." I said this even though I didn't have a plan.

Or more accurately, I didn't have a soul, which is the main requirement for a person who seeks to devise a plan. No soul, no plan. Just aimless living, and I was pretty new to it.

I drifted around my city, and sometimes my left arm spasmed like bread out of a toaster. I don't think this was related to losing my soul; my left arm had always been odd.

I traversed the local swamps, making wonderful time, considering the distraction of my arm. One day after I began, I found the first crocodile.

When asked whether he was an unblemished crocodile, he responded positively. But it turned out he was a liar. When I tied him up from the tip of his tail to his front-most tooth, I saw in dismay that the latter was gold-plated. As if that weren't bad enough, when I

turned him belly-up I saw a small scar in the shape of Jupiter (the planet, not the god). I was so angry that I called him names I won't repeat here, because I'm ashamed. I did untie him, though.

I didn't find another crocodile for four days. She lay in wait in a small alley between the post office and Mack's Auto Parts. I was complaining about my predicament to the fat, unempathetic graffiti viking against Mack's brick when I saw the gray-green tail snaking out from beneath a pile of trash. I snuck over and prepared to hold it down with my foot. She spoke before I could.

"If you believe they're really going to return your soul after you turn us in, you're more of a dunce than you look."

I didn't know what a dunce was.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," I said. "It's my only choice."

Her head slithered above the trash bags, revealing sad eyes in a disgusting sea.

"Choice, choice, choice," she grumbled. "That's all your lot ever wants to talk about." Then she emerged from the sea of garbage, flipped over on her back, and let me take her away. The Pliant Harvey Group never specified whether they wanted their ransom payment alive, but if I handed over a carcass, I ran the risk of their saying it was blemished. So I kept the crocodile (whose name was Snappy) alive and comfortable in my bathtub, which had a large skylight that let the sunshine through. The rubber ducky there kept her entertained for a while, until she couldn't help herself any longer and had to eat it.

Here's something to know about me: I've got hideous teeth. They stick out past my lips, like those of crocodiles but not sharp at all. I am always, always afraid of running into someone or something and breaking my teeth—even though they're hideous.

I found six more crocodiles in the ocean. They were performing a ritual just below the surface, swimming in a circle and clamping their teeth onto the next crocodile's tail. I swam beneath them, spread a net, and made my way toward the surface to wind the lever that would raise the net. But one of the crocodiles, who appeared to be a kind of priest, trained his eye on me before I made it, and I couldn't finish the task.

Not yet, he warned wordlessly. *We are not yet clean*.

So I let them finish. They followed the circle by forming a single file line, except for the priest, who floated in front of the rest like an underwater drill sergeant. He made his way down the line, jabbing his knuckles into each crocodile's eyes and causing them to tear up. Perhaps you have heard that crocodile tears are insincere, but I question whether that rumor holds up. I have never seen such bald contrition as I did that day, and that is why I named them the Faithful.

Finally, they produced a saltwater duck, the finest in the area, and individually thanked it before tearing into its flesh as a group and becoming obscured by a fog of murky red.

At last they emerged, and their eyes told me they were ready. I noticed a sheen on their tough skin that appeared both wise and sad, like the resignation of men before the gallows. The rope was slow to raise them, but they didn't try to swim away.

There was no more room in the bathtub, and I didn't own a pool. I lived near a lake, but these were saltwater crocs. They could only last for about an hour in fresh water before complaining at an irritating volume, the timbre of their voices like a dry cleaner spinning with a load of metal inside. I had an idea, though.

My neighbor had a saltwater pool and, best of all, a jacuzzi tucked away in its own corner, surrounded on three sides by two concrete walls and a screen. As long as no one moved to that side of the deck, the jacuzzi was completely hidden. It was obviously designed for privacy. For a moment, I thought about humbling myself, telling my neighbor the truth, and asking for his help. Before long, though, I realized how ludicrous this would sound to him, because he was a stickler for enforcing proper capacity sizes, and the jacuzzi was only supposed to hold five at a time.

That night, I cut a hole in his porch screen about the size of a large raccoon. When I returned I saw a portion of my lawn scorched away, leaving a message among the grass:

I will never forget. You are responsible.

- #12

It made me very nervous, so I put a tarp down over the grass.

Then I instructed the six to enter the hole in my neighbor's screen and make the jacuzzi their home, with three conditions:

1) They should take regular, extended breaks throughout the day and come to sunbathe in my backyard.
2) They should listen carefully at all times, and whenever they heard someone approach, one of them should climb out of the jacuzzi quickly. If necessary, he should turn on the nearby outside shower as if he were preparing to replace one of his friends.
3) They must keep my neighbor's jacuzzi and deck meticulously clean.

They were not enthused by the third rule, because crocodiles are lazy. Their excuse is that it helps them survive for long periods of time without food, but over the next few nights I spotted them slinking around my pantry. I have security cameras installed, so I knew that one night, they tried to make a cake in my oven. The dark video made it hard to make out, but I think the ingredients included pancake mix, Swedish Fish, and sausage. It was the ugliest dessert I have ever seen, but they seemed to enjoy it.

Another thing to know about me is that I hate my country. I hate its stupid name, and the way that it's far too easy for me to make gobs of money illegitimately and not get caught. I hate how each state is entrenched in its own identity, how it's dangerous to sniff the northern border and risk being sniffed back by someone who despises everything you stand for and isn't afraid to protect the sanctity of his own gravel and wind. I hate all the billboards, too.

The final three crocodiles in the state were, like good men, difficult to track down. I called in to the Dollar Wildlife Watch's customer service number, and after twenty-three minutes of narrowing down my inquiry with an automated responder ("If you're looking for crocodiles greener than baby poop—but less green than elm tree leaves—press five."), I reached an operator.

"Good afternoon," he said. "Please state your name, phone number, and reason for calling."

"You'd think that would be clear enough by now," I said,

wiping my eyelids with my thumb and forefinger.

The silence on the other end was full of experience.

"Bartholomew Quarry, 850 — - —, and I'm looking for crocodiles."

"All right, sir. I'm very sorry to hear about your issue—"

"I didn't say I had an issue," I said.

"Of course, sir. Again, I'm very sorry to hear that. We're going to do everything we can to take care of you today. Now, if you could tell me just one more time, you were looking for…"

"Crocodiles."

"I see. As far as the color, are you searching for *more* or *less* green than—"

"There are only three more crocodiles in the state. Just tell me where they are."

"Yes, let me look at my system here." A two-minute pause. "It looks like I'm unable to track down the locations of those three crocodiles at this time."

"Then what was the point of asking me all those questions?"

"Give me just a moment sir." A four-minute pause, this time with a soundtrack of echoing claps and a dreamy celesta. At first, I scoffed at their attempt to tranquilize my fury. By the end, though, I was humming the tune and feeling as if I were floating peacefully somewhere near Saturn.

"Thank you for holding, sir. I've spoken with my manager, and it seems that we're not going to be able to locate the crocodiles you've requested. However, if you'll hold just a moment I can connect you to our swamp department, and they may be able to further assist you."

Goodbye, Saturn.

After seven more minutes of verbal parrying, which felt much like trying to shoot one those floppy blown-up things in front of new businesses, I suddenly remembered I had the power to hang up. I proudly wielded it.

I had much greater success simply asking the other crocodiles for help. Snappy, my first, graciously listened as I complained to her of my difficulties one night. She had a wise idea, the sort of insight that can only come from uncontainable pleasure. She'd been enjoying

the bathtub more than she ever thought possible, and it occurred to her that perhaps her kin had made the same discovery.

The next day I went door to door, asking if my neighbors had any crocodiles living in their bathtubs. Most said no. Actually, all of them did. But I tried to make them go and check to be sure, except occasionally, when I was tired and didn't have the patience to ask.

I had no luck, but I found a strange anticipatory elation with every knock. It sustained me all the way down the street, then straight down the highway outside my neighborhood, and farther and farther until I realized I was hundreds of miles away from home. On house number 7,000, which was a bungalow by the ocean, I relayed the same questions that had by now given me slightly more empathy for my friend the operator. But this time the homeowner, a woman in her sixties or seventies, said yes. My weight was on my heels, and I almost tripped when I shifted it.

She invited me in. With every bathroom we passed, I asked her if it was the one. Her house seemed to be one long hallway of bathrooms, but she shook her head at each one and continued down the halls. We came upon a dead end in a hall, and she stood still, looking at the wall.

"You are about to witness one of the most majestic marvels in Dollar," she said. "Maybe the whole world." She paused and faced me, full of meaning. "I require a few bills to let you in."

"To see a crocodile?"

She shook her head. "Not a crocodile. A god."

I felt a wave of exhaustion sweep over me. "I'm not looking for gods. Just crocodiles, thanks."

"Well, it's a *crocodile* god," she said, looking exasperated. "All the way from Riel."

I handed her more money than I ought, but less than I owned. She pounded her fist against the back wall, and it lowered straight back, like the near end of a drawbridge.

We emerged from a tiny alcove into a huge, wide space the size of a small warehouse. I tried to remember seeing this part of the building outside, but in fairness, I barely remembered the last week. The floor of the room was made of marble, and it was empty save for a long strip of water in the middle that reminded me of the front of

the Taj Mahal. And inside of that strip of water was a monstrously long crocodile.

I would have been impressed by the room alone, but when I saw the creature I stifled a laugh. It looked ridiculous: twenty yards long, with bugged-out eyes crossed over each other and bright-green scales that were splotchy and looked as if they'd been painted on by a third-grade Christmas art contestant.

"I think I'd like my money back," I said.

"Don't be an Indian-giver," she said. "*Que sera, sera*."

"This is made of plastic."

"But the room is lovely. You can almost imagine kings here…" Her voice trailed off as it bounced around the marble.

I moved to the head of the crocodile suit. The mouth gaped open like a neglected refrigerator. I felt the teeth; they were velvet.

The ransomers hadn't specified a time limit, but that didn't matter. Soulless living was taking its toll. Just that morning I had eaten a pine cone thinking it was toffee. And I was never able to sleep, not even when chaotic brigades of thoughts took up residence in my mind and tried to force me under the surface of consciousness. Not even when I pounded medication.

I raised my foot and swept it hard against the head of the dumb crocodile suit. Unexpectedly, I connected with something hard, throwing my balance off and sending me splashing into the water.

I heard a pained groan as the cartoonish mouth before me opened wider and the too-thick tongue formed a carpet for a real crocodile who sauntered out through the mouth of the suit. More plastic rustling followed, and soon two other crocodiles exited through the mouth flicking their eyes about the room curiously.

"Oh, my," said the woman who owned the home.

The first crocodile cleared her throat. "At long last, the time spoken of for many long years has come to pass. For we were doomed to lie inside the belly of the Imposter until one should come who would leave it no choice but to vomit us out. For a decade we have suffered, but you have ended our plight."

"It seems to me," I said, "that I only kicked you in the ribs."

"Aye, and reminded us that there is matter beyond the Belly."

"I see," I said, but didn't. The crocodile suit's mouth had been

open the whole time. It seemed to me that they could have walked out whenever they wanted.

"Now, for revenge," the lead crocodile snarled.

"Revenge!" the other two echoed.

"The fiend is near, as we knew it would be. Standing right there!" She pointed her jaws in the direction of the homeowner, who placed her hand over her heart.

"Dear Lord," the woman said. "I swear I never knew any of you were in there. I only thought it was the suit, which yes, I knew it wasn't real after all, although I wasn't so sure when all the fish kept getting eaten, and I suppose I've taken advantage of some few people, but at least they always left with stories to tell their wives and friends and schoolmates! And I truly believed that belly was empty, except for the fish, and I thought the groans and moans early in the morning came from the apparitions of my disappointed customers, a few of which might be dead, though not of boredom."

But the crocodiles seemed uninterested in the woman's monologue. They made a path for her but split off and went around her on their determined path to something near the wall. There they hissed and spat at something I couldn't see.

"Demon!" the leader screamed. "We were full of thrown-out carnival food, and you took advantage of us."

"We hit the Wall and knew we could not leave," said another.

"You will suffer our jaws," said the third, "and your cotton candy torch will become wet and useless."

All three began hoisting their bodies up into the air and snapping at nothing, at least to my view. Then they lay panting and staring at a spot on the ground, where I thought I heard fizzing. One of them leaned his snout toward the spot until the leader rebuked him.

I never saw a demon there, and the woman looked just as confused. I wondered if psychological disorders caused crocodiles to be considered blemished. Still, outwardly they looked fine.

After all that snapping they were happy to take a ramp into the back of a rental van and rest all the way home. As I drove, I remembered a news story about three of the state's eleven crocodiles vanishing years ago, never to be found. I believed they were not gone but hidden. I was right—and so I called them the Hidden.

Here's another thing to know about me: I'm afraid of apparitions. Ever since I chanced upon a pamphlet from eastern Euro entitled "5 Ways the Post-Living Can Master Time Management," I have slept as little as possible. That was eighteen years ago; I've learned some things since then. One is that apparitions are fond of the daytime, despite what you may have heard. Therefore, I try to keep my house as dark as I can and venture out only at night, except when I'm hunting crocodiles. I've also learned that apparitions look a lot like healthy, breathing humans, and sometimes like babies. Therefore, I try to be alone as much as possible. I wonder if I will ever rest in peace or if I will always question the status of my own existence, or lack thereof.

Back at home, we were all becoming one big happy family, except for me, because I had no soul.

The six jacuzzi-dwelling Faithful came over the first night after I returned, curious about the new arrivals. They reported that while they had not yet been kicked out of freeloading in my neighbor's water, they had been seen.

They'd heard voices around the corner. An airy, feminine voice carried on the air. "So a jacuzzi is like lava, except it doesn't burn?"

"Exactly right, my dear. Couldn't have put it any better myself."

"Is it sticky? All those videos of lava always make it look sticky, if you could only touch it."

"It's just water. You're going to love it."

As the man and woman rounded the corner, five crocs pressed tightly against each other to hoist the sixth, who attempted to reach the shower. He was taking too long, though, and he knew it. So he tossed a nearby bucket onto his head as if it were a top hat.

"Petesy, you didn't tell me there was entertainment too!"

The man hesitated. "Of course, dear, anything for you."

The crocodile then flicked his legs about foolishly, looking quite unused to the movement. His audience was so unimpressed that they left immediately and tried to wipe their memories clean of the embarrassing performance. The neighbor made sure to stick his neck back and glare at the entertainer before rounding the corner.

Safe from danger (for now), the Faithful came to examine the new three. All nine mingled for a while, circling each other menacingly until one of them caved in and asked how the other kept his skin so hard.

"Any time I see lotion, I munch on it right away," he said, and all nine roared with laughter, rolling around the white carpet of my living room floor. They slung mud everywhere, but I didn't get a chance to be angry. The mud made bold, artistic patterns on the floor. I think they improved the value of my house by one-fourth.

The six were pious crocs, performing sacred rites every night without fail. The Hidden had been enslaved in the crocodile suit for years, and so the combination of the two groups turned out to be a wonderfully lucky hit. The three had been lost until I found them. Now they needed guidance in the world, and the pious six were more than happy to step in and share the mysteries of the ocean with them. The Hidden joined in the rites, which involved the consumption of large volumes of fancily priced merlot mixed with miniature mountains of salt. (Since I'd taken the Faithful, nearly a third of my budget was spent on wine and salt.)

By the end of the night, all nine were wildly drunk, and their scales were gritty from the salt that sweated out of them. One of them got up on his hind legs and imitated me, speaking slowly and mournfully. I found it very accurate and told him so. They all laughed and rolled around my floors once more, one following the other as they made a hollering, rolling croc-line that explored the whole bottom floor of my house.

At some point I heard the priest yell for me, and I ran to find the imprint of a crocodile claw in the carpet. I didn't find this strange at all, but the priest did.

"It's unnatural," he said. "The mark of the undead."

"How can you tell?"

He wavered towards his left side a moment before righting his balance. "It's got glitter in it, and glitter comes straight from the pit of hell."

He was right—about the presence of glitter, anyway.

I spoke to Snappy while brushing my teeth before bed.

"Why don't you join the others sometime?" I said. "I'm sure

you would enjoy yourself."

"They sound like children," she scoffed. "And besides, I am contemplating."

"You need more sunlight than you're getting. It's not healthy to stay in here all the time."

"I am doing important thinking here," she said. "The time for basking is near at hand, yet not here."

The eleventh unblemished crocodile fell from the heavens the next day and landed across my arms as I reached up to pluck an orange from the grove beside my house. He was a young croc, maybe a year old, and I called him the Baby. The six jacuzzi-dwellers saw me and nodded knowingly as they dragged themselves back to their water hole.

"The rites," said their leader, who promptly released a stream of salt water through his teeth. He waddled over to me and whispered. "Put him in the lake. Young crocodiles love lakes."

I trusted him and brought the young croc to the water's edge. But before I set him down, he squealed and writhed as if I were setting him before a slaughterhouse's conveyor. Then his skin pulsed, my hair shocked out to the side, and I understood that he was not safe in water, having come from the electric sky.

I was going to keep him in my room, but Snappy shut down that idea. "Science is incomplete; all crocodiles need water."

"But water will electrocute him."

"Put him on the roof. Trust me."

I did, and brought him up into my attic, where I had a dusty window facing the front near the chimney. I pushed him out the window and gripped his tail, afraid he would slide off the roof. But he was unmovable, and he lay down in the sun, looking like a tacky Halloween decoration. As I climbed down the folded attic ladder, I heard thunder and the pelting of rain over my head. I tensed up when it fell, afraid for the new little one in my care, but the water splashed over him harmlessly. I suppose there is something different about water from the heavens, at least until it comes into contact with the earth.

#

Two months later, I had still only collected eleven crocodiles.

The good news was that morale was high around the house, and rain had come for at least half of every day since the Baby's arrival. The bad news was that there were no more crocodiles in the state, and I was terrified to travel anywhere else to search. Again I wondered if there was a time limit for delivering the twelve, or if my soul had already been washed, or worse. But wouldn't I feel a squishy, dark feeling somewhere inside? Maybe, but maybe not: it was hard to feel much these days, except fear of traveling.

My worst fears were confirmed on a Wednesday morning, in the form of a letter under my front door:

Dear Mr. Quarry,

You have presumed upon our patience. Tomorrow night, at the witching hour, your soul will take a tumble—in the wash, that is. With the muddiest cloaks we can find.

We will be enacting this fate in your hometown, inside Hoover's Hillbilly Laundr-O-Mat. If you do not bring twelve unblemished crocodiles, we will find you. We will force you to watch.

Yours forever,

Pliant Harvey Group

P.S. Do you have any restaurant recommendations while we are in town? Most of us enjoy good Italian (real Italian, you understand, not pizza joints with pasta on the side), but I'm sure we could all find something we want at a brunch place, as well. Let us know when you bring the crocs.

I was doomed. To make the deadline, I would have to leave right away, fly to a crocodile hotspot in unfamiliar territory, and hope that my fumbling navigation led to a crocodile without acne or birthmarks. Worst of all, I had no idea what crocodiles outside of my state were like: would they be vicious, or grumpy, or disrespectful?

Such a mystery was unpredictable and terrifying enough to make me do something I never expected myself to do. I gathered all my crocodiles together outside, all except the Baby, who I moved to a different side of the roof so he could see and hear us. Then I removed the tarp over the scorched message in the grass.

I expected something to happen that always happens in stories, which is that the words would be gone and the crocodiles would find me to be exceptionally foolish. But the words were all there, with a little message tacked on:

I will never forget. You are responsible. And your house is distasteful.

- #12

Each grouping of crocodiles offered its explanation for who #12 might be, and how he or she might be found.

The Faithful were convinced that #12 was the great Crocodile In The Sky, who hides himself within a city of nimbus. I did not have great faith that I could safely navigate a city made of clouds.

The Hidden believed that #12 was the great plastic Imposter that had imprisoned them, and they warned me to leave it alone. It was not hard to dispute their theory, because it was wrong.

When I asked the Baby about #12, he tore a hole in my roof with his snout. So I stopped asking.

That night, I was filled to capacity with worry. Would the captors accept the three crocs with questionable psychological fortitude? Would they consider the religious DNA of the six to be an unfavorable mania? Did the young one carry a hidden disease contracted from the clouds?

Strangely, I didn't worry about Snappy, my first. In fact, I sought her advice. I left the six and three in my living room, lying on their backs and pedalling the air with their claws while they groaned a prayer meant to fill me with insight beyond all terrestrial knowledge. I stepped outside to call up to the Baby, who couldn't speak yet. I think I read a fairy tale as a child about crocodiles that were unable to communicate verbally, who in fact couldn't communicate with

humans at all. I found this fitting, since fairy tales were unknowably old, and the young croc on my roof was as still as an ancient relic in a museum. I glimpsed the slightest flick of his tail, though, and knew he was alive. I moved in and upstairs.

Snappy looked uncomfortable the whole time I relayed my present plight, as if she were hiding something. Finally, I stopped to ask her what was wrong.

"I have something for you," she said quietly, and I realized why she'd looked so strange. There was something underneath her belly, pushing her up at a slightly awkward angle.

"Dear God," I said, falling to my knees on a towel beside the tub. "You've hatched an egg, haven't you? You're sitting on our twelfth crocodile?" The words came out so fast, they barely had the support of air from my lungs.

"No," she said. "Your tacky snowman fell from the counter. I was bored and ate most of it. I wanted to give the rest to you to throw away, because I have no hands."

Half a snowman's face slipped from underneath her body and bobbed on the water's surface. The carrot-like nose was missing, but the bejewelled teeth remained.

"It *was* ugly, wasn't it?" I said.

"Yes, terribly so. I'm sorry to say.

"As for the twelfth, it is *you*. For he is a crocodile who is one inwardly. Present yourself alongside the rest of us."

And so I did. The next night, I gathered all my crocodiles together in the front hall, as the rain hissed outside.

"Quarry," said the priest. "We just want you to know that we were wrong about you. When you took us away, we all thought you would be boring. On second thought, you kind of are. But your house is great, and we very much appreciate the wine."

We all said a tearful goodbye, and some tears were saltier than others. Then we walked the two miles to Hoover's as the downpour all around us muffled our sobs.

I let them all inside the laundromat before entering myself to witness a rather unusual scene.

#

There's one more thing you should know about me: I loved

my crocodiles. Soullessly, I had watched them romp around my home for weeks. I knew their eating patterns. I knew which ones had religious doubts. I knew which one to call on if I needed a can opened, or a heavy desk moved, or a puzzling riddle solved. I felt nothing without my soul, but I felt love, and it was going to crush me if I lost them that night in Hoover's.

There were four members of Pliant Harvey waiting for us in the laundromat. Half-obscured in the shadows of hulking dryers, they appeared to be human at first glance. But soon I saw that they were not, and my worst fears were confirmed: they were *operators*.

"Good evening, sir, how may I assist you?" said one of the four, and I recognized the voice from the Dollar Wildlife Watch. "Er, sorry. Force of habit. How may you assist *us*?"

I cleared my throat and assembled my crocodiles into a straight line. "I've brought the twelve crocodiles that The Pliant Harvey Group requested in exchange for my lost soul."

"'Pliant Harvey,'" the voice said. "There is no 'The' in our branding."

The operator on the far left stepped forward into moonlight; in his hands, he held a small, white, beautifully carved wooden gavel with my name engraved into the side. I flinched forward, but held myself back carefully.

"We're sorry," he said, "but we're experiencing high volumes of skepticism about the purity of these crocodiles. Please hold while we examine them thoroughly, and we'll be right with you." He and two others stepped up to my crocs and turned them over to observe every crease. They even quizzed the crocs with basic algebra equations, and they seemed satisfied with the answers. While this was going on, the fourth operator, still in shadow, filled the silent parts of the examination.

"Do you have clinical existential impotence? Ever look at a sunny sky and think, 'Life is entirely pointless, and I'm a bug stuck in the thick, filthy rug of the universe?' Pliant Harvey Group can help. For an outrageous and complicated price…" Here she was the recipient of a nasty look from one of her partners. "...For a small fee and minimal time commitment, we will accept, clean, and return your soul to you, so you can move through the day without curling into a

ball and trying to stave off catchy pop songs in your head. Call 1-800-NOT-SCAM for more information."

At last the third operator, the only one I hadn't heard from yet, spoke. "I've been looking over our records, and I see that there are eleven unblemished crocodiles here with you tonight. Unfortunately, however, our services require twelve."

"Wait," I said. "Are you talking about the records that you just wrote down a few seconds ago?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's a weird way to refer to them. 'Looking over our records…'"

He ignored me. "Without a twelfth payment, I'm afraid we will have to penalize your soul by way of muddy laundry. Then you will receive a one-week grace period, after which we will confine your unburied soul if payment has not been received."

"Wait," I said again. "I have a twelfth." I stepped forward and narrowed my gaze at the operator who had just spoken. "*I* am the twelfth. He is a crocodile who is one inwardly. Take me along with my friends here—only please return my soul." I glanced at the white gavel.

The four looked at each other for a moment, then Number Two, my old friend from the Dollar Wildlife Watch, spoke. "That's ridiculous. You're a human, not an animal. He is a crocodile who is actually a crocodile."

"Huh," I said, looking at Snappy. She seemed to shrug, if it's possible for crocodiles to shrug. "So everything I've gone through these last few months, it was all for nothing? You're not going to try to understand what I've endured to be here tonight with all these good reptiles?"

The voice of Number One was honey-like and placating. "I'm so very sorry for the circumstance you find yourself in. I would love to help you out, sir, but unfortunately it is our policy to accept no less than twelve crocodiles."

"You're all pawns," I said.

"Excuse me?" Number Three cleared her throat. "Pardon, sir?"

"Everything you say, everything you think, it's all completely

scripted. There isn't a single faint flicker of an original neuron firing in the deep reaches of your head. You probably say "Fine, and you?" every time someone asks you how you're doing. I'm sure you weakly protest anytime someone complains about their most obvious faults. Worst of all, you probably turn on the radio whenever Discontent sends a telegram five months before he visits, and when he comes and knocks, you send him out to accomplish endless, arbitrary tasks, like the labors of Heracles. You have been told that people will like you more as a result, but instead you have invited hate down upon your heads."

Number One looked down thoughtfully at the white gavel, which was my soul. In his eyes were stirrings: doubt which might lead to discovery, which might lead to truth. The arm that held the gavel fell limply to his hip, and he raised his wet eyes to the sky.

Number Two whipped out a device, tapped the screen a few times, and smiled as she selected something on her screen. Through the speakers, music poured out: echoing claps and a dreamy celesta. Three of the operators hummed along happily, and though he hesitated, Number One joined in when it became too much.

We left them there, the eleven and I, humming to themselves. We were protected by our unhappiness, our discontent, and they never saw us leave.

#

"We could have chomped them to bits."

"We could have attempted sorcery."

"The soul was no more than a yard away. I could have dislodged it with a sneeze."

"Your sneeze would've dirtied a pile of mud."

"Yeah? Paddle over here to be sure. I feel one coming along."

I sat on my dock, dipping my feet in the brackish water, while the crocodiles splashed and squealed with laughter. Even Snappy was with them, frolicking in her own way by gliding in a figure eight pattern. Everyone was there but the Baby. They were gliding through the lake behind my house, pulsing with an energy fueled by the events of the night and the necessity of figuring out what to do next. I, on the other hand, felt exhausted.

"What *is* a soul, anyway?" I said aloud. "All these evil

characters—devils, witches, and *nosferatu*—trading talents and tearing limbs in search of souls must see them as inestimable commodities. The Pliant Harvey Group wouldn't take a tail less than twelve unblemished crocodiles for one. But why?"

It was then that I noticed I wasn't alone. The Baby had snuck up onto the dock and lain down beside me, watching his splashing peers. Something in his sage-like, prodigious posture drew one last question out of me.

"Where do souls reside?"

As slowly as the light that drowns below the horizon at dusk, though with far less passion, he turned his pupils in my direction and spoke the first words I ever heard from his lips. "Not in wood."

I watched my crocodiles try to outdo one another in a competition to see who could leap out of the water and snap his jaws highest in the air.

Not in wood.

When everyone was dry, we went inside my house and I made them a cake (a real one). They did not enjoy it as much as I believed they would, although I think the arrival of the apparition had a lot to do with that.

He came without fanfare. In fact, he was there among the other crocodiles looking at the cake as if he'd been there all along. At some point, I noticed that one of the crocodiles was translucent and smelled of rubber, though, and that gave him away.

"I always loved cake, when I lived," he said, and his voice was like a narrator's.

His sad mouth widened and I caught a gleam of gold. Then I truly saw him: it was the first crocodile I had found in my searching. The blemished one.

He told us his story in the living room. His best friends had always been birds, ever since he could remember. In life, he had never even spoken to another crocodile. The birds knew when he was distressed, because he only grunted during such times. That is how they knew to come for him when I took him captive. A short time later, I released him and called him all those names I'm not proud of.

Apparently, those names were so unnerving that they opened the birds' minds up to the possibility that they had been living with a

monster all these years. After an all-night council, they chose to shun their young crocodile. He was no longer welcome in their swamps. He left and died on the nearby roads.

"So you see," the apparition said, and the middle section of his incorporeal body was completely flat, like a valley between two canyons, "I was flattened by your words Bartholomew Quarry. They alone have led to my death."

Sorry though I was, I seriously doubted this final conclusion, as the flat part of his body showed a pattern of ruts like grills marks and on one side even had the first few letters of a popular tire brand indented in his skin. Still, I *had* said some very ugly things, so I apologized for them, and his countenance brightened from drab to sallow.

It was then that the Revelation came to me, the one that I would hide away in my spare bedroom upstairs and in myself. The Revelation was this:

I am *responsible, inasmuch as I am responsible.*

It was a happy day then. All twelve of my crocodiles and I ate cake, and no face was left unfrosted.

There are other stories to tell. Within our house, we experienced religious schisms, condescension and rebellion, and more than one instance of following drunken, wandering claw prints to their end (which always seemed to be the highest point on our tallest hills). But one must never begin story conflict without resolving it.

So there we were, in my kitchen, faces sweet and exultant. Together, all together at last.

Christina Dalcher *weaves words and mixes morphemes from her home in the American South. Her short work appears in Bartleby Snopes, Star82 Review, and New South Journal, among others. Find her at christinadalcher.com or @CVDalcher.*

Echo

Christina Dalcher

My mother rarely said much of anything that hadn't already been spoken by someone else.

This, for instance, happened at the beauty parlor every Saturday morning: "What will it be today, Miss Arlene? Cut and dry?"

"Cut and dry."

And at the gas station on Tuesdays: "Morning, ma'am. Fill her up?"

"Fill her up."

Mostly, though, it happened at home. At all hours.

Father, on his way out the door, would call over his shoulder, "Late meeting with the partners tonight, dear. How about dinner at seven?" My brother Mike, home from school, waved sheets of paper, shiny with gold stars when he was young. "Mom! I got a star!" Aunt Jenny phoned every other day with another chapter in the saga of her bridge club, all tricks and grand slams and *can you believe North passed?* tumbling over the lines.

She would smile and say, "Dinner at seven." "Star." "Grand slam."

For as long as anyone in the family can remember we called my mother Echo behind her back. It was a mean thing to do, but if she knew or minded, she never said.

I asked her about it once. "Don't you like talking to people, Mom?"

From across the kitchen counter, hands busy kneading and rolling and slicing, she tossed my words back. "Talking to people," she said, nodded once, and settled back into her cookery rhythms.

Mike shot me a give-it-up look from his homework spot in the living room and mouthed "Echo" at me before burying his nose

into a book. Its spine carried the attention-grabbing name of Case Studies in Corporate Accounting. With riveting material like that on the table, I couldn't blame our mother for disengaging.

#

When Echo had her stroke, Aunt Jenny phoned, asking if I could come. It was early fall semester at the university, my tenure secure after seven long years of survey courses, monotonous droning about human behavior. I had no problem ducking out of my sociology seminar and closing the door on a dozen graduate students engaged in intellectual head-butting over the best method to derive constructs for happiness, satisfaction, well-being.

I wondered on the drive home whether the woman I called Echo had ever known any of these.

Her room in the hospital was full of sounds: the soft purrs of tubes feeding fluids and cords charting heartbeats, Aunt Jenny's sniffles, my father's pacing. He moved back and forth, back and forth, in the short track between bed and window, a caged feline, too big for its space, unable to leave.

Only Mike spoke, supplying details no one wanted to say out loud.

"They don't know yet, but she may have lost her speech. It's called aphasia. It could be global. Maybe partial. You know how many different patterns of language loss there are? You have non-fluent and anomic and progressive." Mike tapped and swiped at his phone. "Alexia can occur without agraphia, or vice-versa. Or the patient could have both types. Complicated matter, aphasia."

I repeated the word. "Aphasia."

"The doctors say sometimes it comes back with therapy. Sometimes," Mike said, his last word hanging in the air between us.

Echo, of course, had nothing to say.

#

Around midnight, I took Aunt Jenny down to the cafeteria and listened to her talk at me.

"Look at you, the clever professoressa. How are things at the university?" she said over her cup, continuing on. "Ugh, this coffee's terrible. At my bridge club they brew a fantastic free-trade espresso—decaf, too, if you want it. But who drinks decaf while they're playing bridge? Now, when I say bridge, I'm talking duplicate, not rubber. Rubber is just too simple."

I stared into my own coffee, watching the scum swirl on its

surface.

Echo and my aunt came from what they both called simple folk, a species of real people who take peach pies over poetry and talk tobacco crops instead of bridge, although which side held more appeal depended entirely on which sister you asked. Echo, with her pie-baking and needlework, had no head for Aunt Jenny's world. You might say it had been forced on her.

"Know what they called me in college?" my aunt asked.

I didn't, but I knew I'd hear it anyway.

"The girl who got away. Not that I was ashamed of where I came from. Nothing to be ashamed of." Her nails clicked a little on the edge of her coffee cup.

"No," I said. "Of course not." Although I doubted Aunt Jenny's bridge club spent much time hearing stories about life down on the farm. You could still see the farm on her if you looked closely, trace the faint scars running along manicured hands that now held Cosmopolitans and shuffled decks instead of running hoes over cracked ground. In between professoressa and espresso, the old country twang slipped its way in.

"I moved up and out," Aunt Jenny said. "And I made damn sure your mother came with me."

Aunt Jenny had indeed moved out, gone to college to major in bridge and smoking, and come back with a ring on her left hand, a belly puffed up with a banker's baby, and a photograph clutched in her right.

"I found her a lawyer," she said. "I remember the day exactly. He was handsome as the day is long and city-smart. And when I showed him the picture of your mother, it was a fait accomplit. Just like that." Aunt Jenny snapped two red-tipped fingers and switched out French for Appalachian. "She gave me a bit of fuss and fiddling, but everyone was happy in the end."

I considered whether everyone was happy in the end. I also wondered if that might have been when my mother stopped talking.

#

Echo lay quiet in the single bed when I came up to say good night.

Father spoke into his phone, an electronic protrusion that had attached itself to his ear when I was still in high school, not so different from the one Brad, my own husband, wore.

"Night, sweetie," he said, hand over the mouthpiece.

"Don't you think it would be better to talk to her?" Echo's breath hitched and I bent down, close enough to feel her breath on my cheek. "Mom? Can you hear me?"

Aunt Jenny spoke up, knocking her chin toward the corner of the hospital room where my father sat. "Hush," she said. "Business."

"I'll come back tomorrow," I said, and left them both. My brother had already given up and gone home.

#

"It doesn't seem right," I told Brad. "They're not even talking to her." After the close air of the hospital, the underground parking garage tasted sweet. Brad's voice was sweeter.

"She'll be fine, honey. Just fine. Echo never talked much anyway."

"Don't call her that," I said. The nickname seemed wrong suddenly, a joke gone sour and stale from too much retelling.

"Honey."

"Never mind."

Brad changed the subject. "About that MBA application. Any news? Have you heard back from Wharton yet?"

"No." Of course, I wouldn't hear much back from Wharton's admissions committee, or any other, until I actually sent the paperwork in.

"You will, and then goodbye lowly professor, hello high-priced consultant."

Brad's mission to turn me into a skirt-and-pumps version of him had been a one-man gig for five years.

"Consultant. Right. Listen, babe, I'm whacked. Can we talk tomorrow?"

"Sure, sure. You say hello to Echo—your mom for me. Okay?"

"Okay. You know she's aphasic, right?"

A beep came over the line and Brad clicked over and back to me. "Sorry, hon, I need to take this. Talk tomorrow."

"Brad?"

Ten minutes later, Brad's text pinged: Don't forget the MBA!

#

Echo's stroke was a month old when I drove the two hours north, tossing excuses to my students, my department chair, and my husband. The day nurse in the therapy center took my hand in hers and walked me down a corridor.

"I'd say go on in, but there's something you should see first," she said.

"See first?"

She laughed, and when she did, her whole body shook. "Just like your dear mother."

I ignored this, pretending I didn't know what she meant.

"Two weeks, Miss Arlene didn't speak so much as a mouse fart. Next two weeks, all she said was whatever we did. I'd come in with her breakfast and say 'Nice day, Miss Arlene, isn't it?' And you know what your mother said to me?"

"What?"

"'Isn't it.' That's all. Like an echo in a canyon, day in and day out."

"So she's recovered some of her speech?" I didn't mention Echo hadn't much speech to recover.

"Oh no, dear. You listen to this."

The nurse led me to a door opening up on a common room, a homey little place. Not the home Echo had grown used to with my father, but comfortable. Withered plants lined the windowsills, casting gobo effects on the few faces in the room, making the patients appear more animated than they were.

Echo had no need for artificial animation.

She sat tucked up at a corner table, across from a tall man who shone with smiles as she spoke of fruit pies and old time music.

"And mind you don't work the dough too much, that's what my own mama taught me," Echo said to her audience.

"Did you grow the peaches?"

"Lord, yes, grew them right in our back forty. Peaches, pecans, every kind of berry. Mama used to put them up in jars for the winter." She leaned forward, a mischievous smile on her lips. "You know what I called them?"

"No, Miss Arlene. What?"

"I called them nature's jewelry. That's a fact. Lord, I miss the South sometimes."

"Who is that?" I asked the nurse. "The man talking to my mom."

"One of our other patients." She mouthed 'stroke' before she went on. "Comes in for speech therapy twice a week. Looks as if they've taken quite a liking to one another."

#

My first action when I arrived home was to throw five half-baked MBA applications into the trash can. My second was to bake a pie.

Brad found the paperwork while I was rolling the pastry. “What’s going on?” he said, smoothing the crumpled pages and wiping of a blot of yesterday’s leftovers.

I laid the second crust over a mound of sugared and starched peaches, then started a three-fingered crimp around the edge, the way I’d seen Echo do a thousand times. “What’s going on? I’m making a pie. Hang on, a sec—this part’s tricky.”

Brad fished out the Wharton folder. “This is your chance, babe. Remember what we talked about? Moving on up and all that?”

I answered him with a shrug and put the pie in the oven.

“Is this your way of saying you don’t want to?” he said. His voice was thick with exasperation, heavy with disappointment.

I looked at him, hard, for the first time in our marriage, and said, “Don’t want to.”

Then I called Echo. I figured she’d like to go on a road trip, just the two of us, before my university started its annual pre-exam rush. Maybe down South. And I didn't give a damn what Brad had to say about it.

Jarred Thompson *is an English Graduate from Alabama State University. He has been published in the Rainy Day Literary Journal, The Best New African Poets of 2016 Anthology and The Kalahari Review. He is currently doing his post graduate degree at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa.*

Condition

Jarred Thompson

In the red light dungeon
where we ran from crucifixes
and beds made up too perfectly
we sang with our brothers
the song of eternity.

Dancing with assess in the air
eyes searching eyes
desperate to plant a flag in a foreign land.

The lassos of desire
around our necks,
the shoving of hands down pants
in toilets.
Boys slamming into each other
a kaleidoscope dream
made real by fluorescent white lights.

And when he takes me into his arms
lungs collapsed, face thinning, charm fading
I see what they all feared
closing the grave
bridging the gap:
a gasp of air that sends
thousands to their knees.

Could I forgive myself for bringing you here tonight?
Lifting the chalice to your lips in delight:
Take this cup and drink it
this is my blood
do it in remembrance of me.

Their cupboards are full of empty pill boxes,
acronyms line the inside of their cars,
while they cough and fuck
till the decades roll back into an atom.

Daybreak creeps into the red dungeon.
We've heaved our mother's faces into each other.
We leave, hand in hand,
brothers
lovers
toward an absurd sun that beats
on and on and on.

the serenity of a toilet cubicle

Jarred Thompson

four plastic walls
 a private asylum
where public faces peel off a frame collapses
a body filled with air deflates
 you slough off yourself

spread open your legs
or whip out your fragility
 read the markings on the wall
hieroglyphics of the modern age

fuck suck a dick call for blowjob
God lives here

Go to Hell
a river runs beside you
signaling a fellow human
you tense and pretend you not there
but the smell is all-too-recognizable

what is it in you that listens for sounds from next door
though you love this cubicle
with its sweet vile words
a home calls out beyond the emptying self
 a home where you strap yourself to a frame and go about your day

pull up your pants and begin again
holding the world at arms length
hoping to smell the stench of another

Manit Chaotragoongit *was born on September 30, 1983 in Bangkok, Thailand. His inspiration started when he was teenager. He found old books about art and photography . He saw black and white photography. It made deeply feeling in his heart and he was learning about Art and photography by himself. He prefers conceptual photography and street life. His artwork is all about life, he presents his experience and vision through his eyes, He recognizes and describes a series of events. He thinks everything in a part of life has meaning. He hope his work will give value to the audience.*

Photo series : The beauty of chaos.

Mask

After rainstorm, aridity, burning sunshine and longtime, the result of time and various factor changed the appearance of stone like the mask, It was born by accident, time, environment and alteration.

Although stone has durability and hardness but it can't win the change. The avoidances from change is impossible.

When we talk about Chaos. What we think about it ? Certainly we think about confusion, contrast, confliction and many think in negative issue. But in the difference way. I found something in the nature. Long time I see and recognize in the form surface or texture of nature. I saw chaotic form in the nature and uncertainly predict in a solid figure.

It differs from the thing that human made. It has the symmetry in the form and texture or surface. For example : ground. building. wall. I know it is difficulty when we compare between something from nature and something made by human.

I think Chaos in the form by nature is the beauty and fascination in the itself

I think it is a smoothness but strength. I touch a powerful of living and the movement of nature. In the chaotic form have order or procedure of balance and rational form from nature. It makes some feeling and emotion for me. I feel some story in the form I love to see it. It is a fantasia from nature.

Welkin and the tree

The silky sky and the branch of the old tree, I looked the chaos of branch that it contrasts with silent sky. It is the integration of calmness and chaos. It is equilibrium of difference.

The importance of difference does not only separates them something from antipodes but it mean cohabitation and diversity,

Hope

The soft breeze, grass and the sunrise, I saw the movement of grass when the wind blows its under the sunlight. It was blur and became the vague image but it seem touched the warm and bright.

Behind the chaos of grass has a light that makes figure of hope speech.

Remainder

The remains of rotten leaf is fiber. The ruin of leaf has some point of view that made value for me. The line of fiber leaf and gap has a form that make issue for thinking about it,

The leaf remains of tree but the merit or enormity is the remains of human life.

Angela Doll Carlson *is a poet, fiction writer, and essayist whose work has been published or is forthcoming in publications both online and offline, such as Thin Air Magazine, Eastern Iowa Review, Apeiron Review, Relief Journal Magazine, St. Katherine Review, Rock & Sling, Bird's Thumb Magazine, Ruminate Magazine, and Art House America. Her memoir, "Nearly Orthodox: On Being a Modern Woman in an Ancient Tradition" (Ancient Faith Publishers) was released July 2014. Her latest book is "Garden in the East: The Spiritual Life of the Body" (Ancient Faith Publishers 2016). Angela currently lives in Chicago, IL with her husband, David and her four outrageously spirited yet remarkably likable children.*

Fear Pulling

Angela Doll Carlson

You will need to make some decisions, some choices, before you come in. You will need to fill in all the proper forms, check off boxes and give emergency contact information.
I see.

You may bring with you whatever you'd like to help make things comfortable. Some clients like to have photographs or special pillows or blankets, whatever will help you to be relaxed. Expect to be here overnight.
Yes. All right.

Patients often ask if they might bring someone with them to help them feel comfortable but we do not allow this. It is important that the patient be alone, and properly prepared.
I understand.

You should ask any questions well in advance. Once you are here, only the detox center staff will be available. They are not equipped to answer your questions, only to administer the treatment. Do you have any questions for me at this time?
My father told me when he had it done it was painful. How painful will it be?

That is a very good question, and one that I'm not able to answer with any real clarity, I'm sorry to say. Each person has their own level of pain tolerance, so for example one man may feel intense pain during the procedure while to another it may be a mere pin prick, as though we are taking a small blood sample.

My father said he was awake but that it felt like a dream. Will I be awake?
You will be awake.

Will I be able to see it happening?
You may watch if you'd like, but we can provide a mask if you'd prefer. We only require that you remain awake during the procedure. What the subconscious does while you're sleeping can be a detriment and we would not want anyone to suggest "coercion" of course. The staff will ask you questions about your state of mind while they perform the procedure. We need immediate feedback to keep our machines in line, and get the most from the session.

My father said that he thought he watched during the procedure, that it helped him.
I remember him. He was a prime candidate for our procedure, very motivated.

He said he saw the procedure like his was outside his body. But he said he felt it, he felt it all.
Yes, I remember his exit interview.

He said that it changed everything for him.
He was very motivated, very determined indeed.

He brought the photo of my mother and himself on their wedding day. It was a black and white photo in a silver frame, not real silver, just the color, they were sitting in the back of a car, smiling. I remember the photo. He said it was ruined during the procedure.
There is a chance of this, depending on the position of the patient during the procedure. We try to avoid that when possible. Accidents do happen, however.

He said that when the skin was peeled back from the muscle it was excruciating at first.
This is where the toxins are uncovered.

He said that when the muscle was peeled back from the bone he thought he might die.
Many patients reconsider the procedure based upon the reports of the severity of the process.

But he was desperate.
Yes, he was very motivated.

He said that he heard voices coming out of his ears and he thought he might have been screaming.
This is where the toxins fight to remain. Fear is difficult to remove.

He said he remembers it leaving his body.
Black and oozing, some patients prefer not to watch.
His procedure was quite successful as I recall.
It was. He had no trouble after that. He got it right within a week of the procedure. He used his car. He couldn't even get behind the wheel before that.

We suggested the Shame Pulling first, as I believe.
Yes, but he said he was sure it was Fear.

His success is a testimony to his strength.
Yes, it was all very clear after the procedure.

You do know that the success is not guaranteed. The detoxification can sometimes lead to further nervousness, depression, anxiety or fear.
My father told me about this too.

There are other procedures to treat this, if the Fear Pulling is not enough.
It was not enough for my grandmother, I'm told.

Yes, of course, I remember that now from his intake interview. I believe we moved with her to Joy Pulling next.

She could hardly stand up after but he said she remained even so.

And then, of course, we tried Love or Affection Pulling.
He said she thought certainly it would work.

Poor woman endured Hope Pulling with all her heart.
Her eyes were so vacant after that.

Soul Pulling was our last resort.
She became a mere shell of herself.

I'm sorry we could not do more.
He was a strong supporter of the Ultimatum. He taught me to embrace the edict.
I just want to do what's right.
Voluntary population control is the wise and selfless choice in these difficult times.

My grandmother, I'm told, said that the body wants to live, and that was her trouble.
For some, it is easier than for others.

He had to end her himself when it became too much.
While we don't condone the use of, let us say, "outside force," there are many ways to die.

He used the car for that too. I guess that's what kept him from wanting to drive again for all those years.
He was a good man. His sacrifice, and yours, will not be forgotten.

You will be given a set of forms at the front desk. Your appointment time is confirmed for January the 5th. Remember to set your affairs in order prior to your appointment. We always hope for a quick resolution after a procedure. Once the fear is removed, your path forward should be clear.
Yes. Thank you.

Gregory Jeffers *has published flash fiction at Suisun Valley Review, Every Day Fiction and Grim Corps Magazine. His short stories have appeared in Chantwood Magazine and the anthologies Hard Boiled and Outposts of Beyond. "The Loon" won an honorable mention in Glimmer Train's 2015 Very Short Fiction Competition. Mr. Jeffers lives and writes in the Adirondack Mountains and on the island of Vieques.*

Providence

Gregory Jeffers

The Belrus Model Nine was an experimental cydroid line created to service the officers of the Fifth Battalion of the Maia Nebula Assault Group. The whole notion of cydroids had turned the robotics industry inside-out twenty years earlier. Mostly android, but with genetically engineered human components introduced to create whatever specific humanness was sought. Model Nine: designed for nurturing and lovemaking. My mother was one.

The Fifth Battalion engaged in cleansing the Telranus asteroid belt. Cleansing; a military term, the meaning not well-cloaked. Because of the hardship and gruesome nature of the duty, the officers were not permitted to bring their families, even though the the tour lasted nearly sixteen years. Thus, the Model Nine.

The only way to tell a Model Nine from a human was that they were flawlessly beautiful and—by human standards—gracious to a fault.

The officers were as surprised as anyone when their cydroids began producing offspring, but in a well-orchestrated conspiracy, they kept it secret from the Corporation. Within those sixteen years, ninety of us were born.

We lived a happy existence on Telranus One; a childhood I imagined from what my father told me was not much different than one on Earth. He also told me we were much luckier than Earth children, because the Model Nines doted on their offspring in a way Earth mothers would not.

When the final death rattles of native resistance were

squelched, and the officers received orders to return to Earth, the joys of childhood ended.

After news of our existence leaked, the Corporation ordered a Cleansing Unit to Telranus One to eradicate the mutated cydroids, and us, their offspring. The officers raised holy hell of course, but in the end they knew they could never acknowledge their half-breed children, let alone take them back to Earth; most of them had families. To ease the situation, the Corporation arranged for the officers' departure before the Cleansing Unit deployed. All but seven of the Fifth Battalion officers departed as ordered.

Those seven—led by my father, and determined to defend their Telranus families—were the first targets of the CU. The rebel officers' eight-gauge phase cutters proved no match for the CU's blast shields and remote reamers. After the CU finished with our fathers, they came for our mothers and us.

The Cleansing would have come off neatly, but the Outer Colony Authorities had chosen Dr. J-Ching Bondooli to accompany the Cleansing Unit. Her mission was to study the mutated cells of the cydroids and to redesign the genetic codes to ensure a similar disorder could never again occur.

Were it not for Dr. J-Ching, we would all have been eradicated then and there. When she confirmed we were at least half human, she crusaded to save us, channeling information through allies in the scientific community. She capitalized on the uncommon beauty we had inherited from our mothers, and televised images of us back to Earth. The disclosure shocked the civilized world, and a swell of sentiment forced the Corporation to delay our destruction while they deliberated. Dr. J-Ching was relentless, traveling weekly to meet with the authorities and returning each time frailer, her young face ashen, drawn. Even as children, we sensed that she was about to give up on us. But she did not.

Dr. Bondooli could do nothing for our mothers. They were dismantled and their memory cards incinerated. Their DNA and organic tissues were chemically decomposed, and the mechanical components crated and shipped back to Earth. Being forced to watch the procedure transformed us into a race more robotic than robots.

It was in the quiet of a hospital hovercraft, transporting us children to the work colony on Telranus Twenty-One, that we were sterilized. When Dr. J-Ching found out, she was livid, and for nearly a week she would not speak to anyone. By the end of that week, she

had decided to stay with us on Telranus Twenty-One, and has been our guardian for nearly twenty years. In the few small circles where we are still acknowledged, we are collectively known by her name.

The Bondooli.

#

I am #41. Slater.

We are summoned and plod through the grey algaeglass spoke that connects the men's housing to the Hub. The forced ventilation smells of diesel. Design engineers failed to account for the shifting winds of Telranus Twenty-One when they located the back-up generators.

Through the tube skin, and across the barren brownness, the Hub is visible, reflecting the unbridled light of two suns; a crossfire of nova energy that leaves no room for shadows.

The women are entering the Hub from their access tube and we merge in the courtyard, a horde of sterile beings doomed to extinction.

Across the courtyard is the Compound, Dr. J-Ching Bondooli's home and the control center for the Hub and all of its spokes.

The earliest arrivals, those closest to Dr. J-Ching's Compound turn to face the rest of us, and a wave of hushed tones washes through the crowd. As it touches one after another of us, I see faces take on expressions. This is alarming in and of itself, but then I see expressions change, dimples forming, cheekbones lifting, eyebrows arching; expressions I have not seen on faces for twenty years. Now the words reach me.

Doctor J-Ching Bondooli is giving birth.

We sit on the floor of the courtyard. Like the buzzing bees working the maple tree in Slinger's wonderful novel—the one I have kept hidden away—each of us vibrates with new intensity while contributing in silence to an unnamed commonality.

Quartha is first to speak. I have not heard her voice since we were fifteen. I find my heart beat quickening at the sound of her.

"How can this be, this birth? The Bondooli men are sterile. The only humans who come here are quarantined in their gel suits. Is this the beginning of some new mythos?" She pushes an errant curl from her disheveled red braid behind an ear, looking around and locking on my face for a moment, as if I might have the answer.

A woman speaks from the shadows. "What difference does it

make 37…" her voice trails off, then comes back more sure than before. "I mean, Quartha." The crowd rustles, some muttering Quartha's name, others whispering their own names, names we have not used for so long.

"What difference does it make, Quartha?" she repeats. "Is it not a blessing? Ours is simply to relish in the mystery and the miracle."

"Perhaps," says another woman sitting close to me. "Or perhaps one of the men here would like to share a secret." Eyes flit like moths at the suggestion, each of us eyeing the others for some hint of guilt. Or perhaps, not guilt. Perhaps pride. Several laughs erupt. Laughs.

Then all is quiet. We sit motionless until sobbing from the Compound chills the air.

Dr. J-Ching Bondooli is dead.

Our humanness takes over and within a minute we have degenerated into a quivering, weeping rabble. The first tears since our mothers were dismantled.

As the morning workday approaches, I think of a story Dr. J-Ching told us years ago. A part of the mythology of the original race of Telranians. They believed if a soul departed one of the Telranus asteroids when it was closest to the large sun—Bassius they called it, a more romantic name than the reference S21-Z17 that the Corporation uses—then that soul would be incinerated. If the soul departed when closer to Nasius, the small sun, it would float unharmed to a place where the ground and the atmosphere adjusted to that individual's needs. My grief eases as I realize that at this moment of Dr. J-Ching's death, we are nearing the perigee of our orbit around Nasius.

The call to work drones and crackles from the aged speakers. We begin to get to our feet, when a sound many of us have never heard, but that is immediately recognizable, cracks our shallow activity with the intensity of a solar cannon. The bawling of a baby.

We all gaze at the air in front of us. Quartha speaks. She stands nearly a head above the others. "Someone must stay with the child."

"I will stay," says Marday, one of the women who helped with the delivery.

"How can you stay?" says 23, a man named Cyril. "You will be terminated if your quota is not tubed to Telranus-One."

“I will send her quota,” I say, in a voice so loud it startles those closest to me.

“Who will do your work, then?” asks the woman next to me. I remember now her name is Alsondra.

“I will work twice as hard,” I reply.

“I will help him,” says Quartha.

“And I,” other voices call from the crowd.

“I will stay to help Marday,” says Fandelu, the other woman who has mid-wifed the child. “Some of you will need to fill my canister and see that it is tubed to Telranus One.” Those around her lend assurance, and we file into the algaeglass spoke that leads to Mine 39, with an energy so intense, it seems to vibrate. I have never experienced us like this. Many of the Bondooli are speaking, and everyone’s face has a palpable expression.

For the first hour at the mine, I work my extractor so hard the handles become hot. The air is thick with a chalky dust. When my hopper is full, I set the caterpillar tracks into motion and find Can #51 at the portal to the cybernetic tubes. It is Marday’s canister, and I notice with a grin that stretches my skin in a foreign way, it is already half full. I watch as Cyril empties his hopper into the can belonging to Fandelu. He looks up with raised eyebrows, as if we share a rich secret.

On the way back to my station I pass Quartha, her hopper rattling toward the canisters. She smiles and I notice how beautiful she still is. The genes our mothers endowed have slowed our aging. Even though nearing midlife, she is more beautiful now than ever I can remember. Then I catch Bregdon watching us, a far away look grafted onto his face, and I recall he, too, once had a young man’s fancy for Quartha.

It had been at the end of our days on Telranus One. Bregdon was a handsome boy with the same white shoulder length hair he still possesses. He fancied he and Quartha were sweethearts, though she did not share the sentiment. He had come upon us whispering in the halls of the Trust, Quartha leaning against the wall, her eyes on the floor, her lips upturned at the corners and quivering slightly as she spoke. I stood in front of her, my back to the hallway, rapt with infatuation, the vanilla resin aroma of her amber scent filling my head. As if I was not there, Bregdon stepped in, grabbing Quartha by the elbow and spitting sharp words at point blank range. I shoved him away and the die was cast.

A short but nasty fight ensued in the training hall after the last class of the day. Bregdon was stocky, perhaps forty pounds heavier than I, although I had a distinct height advantage. He fought with a fury, certain I had stolen Quartha's affection, and in the passion of my youthfulness, I was not inclined to have him think otherwise. Our human halves bled and turned colors, but our Belruse Nine genes knew no pain, and the endurance built into our wills could have fueled the fight for days. But Colonel Chinatsu intervened. Not that he was strong enough to physically pry us apart, but his authority alone proved sufficient to stop the fight.

The day following the fight, the Cleansing Unit arrived.

#

Now, mid-morning in the mines, we all seem to have lost interest in what canister belongs to whom and fill the ones that appear emptiest. This new energy is so contagious all the cans are filled by midday. We spend our break at the Recharger as always, but today is like no other before. Short, lively discussions punctuate the stale air. Following the nutritional injection that feeds my human side, I move to the charger, where several conversations blend in a pleasant hum, all of them about the baby.

I sit at the terminals next to Quartha. She faces me and in a way I can only describe as caring, she lifts the anode cable to the terminal on the back of my neck as I connect the cathode wrist strap.

"And you, Slater, what do you think we should name the girl?"

This is the first I have heard the baby is a girl. I run a course hand over my close-cropped thick hair. "We should name her Providence," I say, without deliberation.

"Dr. J-Ching would never have approved of an Earth name for the child," Cyril says, but not unkindly.

"Perhaps for her own child she would have," Quartha says. "Besides, it is a pretty name Slater has chosen. I like it." She smiles at me and I skip a breath. The others around us chime-in and seem to like the name as well.

After the recharging we are at a loss for what to do. It is Bregdon's idea to delay tubing the zorchonium to Telranus One until five o'clock so the Corporation will think it has taken us all day to meet our quotas. He is a shrewd one, Bregdon. He volunteers to be the one to come back to the mine to tube the shipment at five. We all agree and walk back to the Hub in twos and threes.

I am alone with Quartha and as nervous as when we were fifteen. We had been young utopians then, but the Cleansing had changed us, just like it had changed all of the others. Now, the electricity has returned to our eyes and we talk with a lightness fostered by new hope.

Providence.

#

Providence has been with us four months, and we are forever altered. It is as though we are young adults again, as if we have restarted our lives from where they ended at the Cleansing.

The crystal reads seven a.m. I stretch my legs and roll over on the bed. Quartha is already up and dressed. She comes back and sits on the edge of the platform, and brushing my thick eyebrows with her fingertips, kisses me.

"Why don't you sleep a little longer?" she says. "Or read your book. You work so hard, no one will care if you come to the mine late."

"I missed twenty years of being with you. I won't miss another moment of it," I say, as I pull my coveralls on. I gaze on her. She has taken to unraveling her broad plait at night and her long red hair hangs thickly to the middle of her back.

She steps to me and laughs, and I lift her hand to my lips. The taste is almond.

"I loved the part of Slinger's book you read to me last night," she says.

"The tone-poem from Chapter Thirty. It is one of my favorites."

She places a hand on my chest. "The honeybees accept the sparse offering of the maple tree, because the more bountiful cherry has not yet blossomed."

"Yes, and some of them will be dead before the cherries bloom, but they focus only on the flower before them, regardless how insignificant, and regardless of how much more effort it involves to obtain the nectar."

"Perhaps Slinger suggests history is the convergence of what we hope for and what—given the circumstances—we will accept," Quartha says, leading me to the door.

I think about that as we walk through the shimmering algaeglass. I smile as it dawns on me that up until my reconnection to Quartha, I had experienced only the most glancing relationship with

my own life.

Like every morning since the birth, we all gather in the Hub to touch Providence. The women coo and the men take turns learning how to hold her properly. Marday and Fendelu are her primary caregivers, but they are sharing women and we have all become very protective. Bregdon alone wears a brooding expression, his neck cabled with tendons in a way that makes my shoulder blades come together. But nights with Quartha dispel even the slightest of fears.

Even the hours in the mine have a pleasantness, as we share our quiet revolt. A league, a nation, together we have found a way to unharness ourselves from the drudgery forced upon us by the Corporation.

We have started showering daily now. Alsondra expressed worry the Corporation might grow suspicious of the expanded use of the compressors, but Bregdon said he knew how to damp down the nozzles in the mines so they would use less pressure and compensate for the increase.

We work hard, and every day our quota is completed by midday. Today, following our recharging, Bregdon announces he will stay to check the compressors and ready the ore for tubing.

The rest of us stride through the spoke toward the Hub. Ahead of Quartha and me, Alsondra pivots in an abrupt about-face and returns down the walkway. She is in a hurry.

"I have forgotten my injection," she says and shoots us an unreadable look. I watch her over my shoulder for a moment then gaze into Quartha'a eyes. It is clear from her lifted eyebrows that she shares my suspicion.

There is a brilliant flash through the algaeglass, a tremendous boom, and our spoke shudders like a ship escaping gravity. Quartha grips my wrist. Then all goes silent.

We step out of the floating spoke and into the gravity of the Hub, and sense—like the others ahead of us—the acceleration and shifting vector of our asteroid's path. The confusion is contagious.

Marday fidgets next to Fendelu, who is holding Providence. They wait for us to gather, and then Marday speaks. "From my reading of the prescient monitors, an explosion near the Autolycus Crater appears to have affected our orbit."

At this news, Cyril disappears into the Compound. The rest of us speak in quiet tones, as if our discussions may further disrupt the delicate trajectory of our orbit.

There is commotion at the spoke portal to the mine. Bregdon appears with Alsondra immediately behind him. It takes a moment to glean that she has fashioned some sort of control rod from one of the anodes. She has plugged it into the receptor at the back of his neck, using it as a prod.

She shouts, “Bregdon has betrayed us to the authorities. He has been sending messages in the ore canisters. Tell them, Bregdon, tell them how you lied. That you did not turn down the air pressure in the mines to disguise our increased use of the compressors. Tell them how you have been sending the zorchonium at different times every afternoon in order to get their attention. How you have slipped notes into the canisters. Tell them.”

We are all silent as moons.

Finally, Marday speaks. “Why, Bregdon?”

They stare at him with expressions I have not seen since the Cleansing. At last he speaks, but not like a beaten man. No, he speaks in a self-certain and loud voice, a voice that scares me at first and then holds me at bay with its contempt.

“You are all deluded and intoxicated**.** Worshiping this child as a god. Pretending to be something more than anomalies, mutant half-breeds with no hope of eternality. We have no god. We are half bastard-human. We are doomed to an eternity of slavery and the misery of quasi-existence. And ultimately to an extinction more final than our mothers. At least some parts of them were salvaged. There will be nothing salvaged from us. Nothing. We cannot return to our childhood just by playing games and holding hands.” He leers at Quartha with a rubbery grin, and for some of us, at least part of the source of his meanness becomes evident.

There is the sublimated clatter of a hoverpod and the Outer Colony Police arrive. Under their protection, Bregdon is removed through an osmotic portal into their waiting craft. He has betrayed us for his own chance at extended life and God knows what else.

Cyril reappears from the Compound. He looks at Marday, but speaks to us all. “The missile is man-made. Caldonium metalloid, probably from a Telranus One novacannon. It has altered our trajectory.”

He does not need to say more. We can all see the swelling glow through the amberite walls of the dome. We are hurling toward Nasius.

Fendelu is the first to move, tiptoeing to the crib, and then

peering over the side. A broad smile parts her cheeks, and then in turns we all approach Providence. Our fears retire as we stroke her hands or cheeks and speak nonsense into her neck. She smiles with an open mouth as Quartha picks her up, snuggles and squeaks at her. I let her grasp my index finger and speak to her about the magic of the Telranus One of my childhood, before the Cleansing.

"At the Sea of Ethers, Providence, you could see flaming metrathane rainbows through the mist of the waterfall. You could smell the last of the roaming herd of horned war steeds on the Plains of Duress, turned feral since the final battle of the Insurrection. You could hear the flapping of giant doves, quatrawinged owls and dwarf hawks in the skies over the Emerald Hills."

She looks at me now with a seriousness that is at once agnostic yet assured. I kiss her forehead and see that a large tear is settling from Quartha's lower eyelid. She lays Providence back into the crib. We embrace for a long moment. Then arm-in-arm, we move to make room for the next adorers.

In the shadows, Quartha takes my face in her hands and kisses me. She tastes of copper and celery. She pulls her face away only an inch or two and smiles with her eyes.

"There will be maple trees, won't there Slater?"

"There will be maple trees, Quartha," I say. "And we will be there just in time to hear honey bees working the flowerets." Over her shoulder I can see the solar flares exploding on Nasius, licking at us in anticipation. I wonder for only a moment, then take Quartha's earlobe between my lips, releasing it in a whisper. "And then, if we are patient, the cherry trees will bloom."

*Morpo Press published **Trent's** chapbook, Learning the Ropes. Works of his have appeared in Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet, Minnesota River Review, Nebo, The Pedestal, among others.*

The Mathematics

Trent Walters

of an impossibly blue
finish, polished
granite with the facts

about Grandma
engraved: “Dolores Hall,
1911 - 1988” = - 77.

In Spanish, her name
means the “pains”—
hall of pains.

My pinkie slips
into the crevasses,
grooving along

the silent pain implied
in her name juxtaposed
against the magic

of numbers:
7
& 7

side by side -- good cards
to start a hand
of cribbage. An

8
& 8
makes sixteen

count if a 9 is cut.
9
& 9

makes the age I was
when she passed
finish. Grandma never

showed her hand. She held
her cards close
to her chest when I passed

into the kitchen to fetch
the crystal dish
of pretzels. She never

missed a trick or sighed
when she lost. She never
cried when she lost

Granddad. I promised
her the same. So I didn't.
And I don't, but do

read her chiseled numerals—
as solid and unmoved
as her tombstone.

What They Saw

Trent Walters

What they saw disappears.
A hack saw, not a coping saw
for cutting around wooden figures.

They'd sawn playground see-saws
by the seashore, laughed at falling
children whose handles had vanished.

They'd sawn phantom limbs off
Nazis who thanked them for
the disappearance of their missing limbs.

They'd sawn lettered “n”s off “End”s
to leave “Ed”s uneducated.
They'd sawn Athena off Zeus

and the “g” off “glove” leaving the poor
full of cold awe in a winter wonder-
land without love.

After they’d sawn off their “No”s to spite their faces,
and “Aye”s for the dolorous Latin “Ay,” they now saw
their past. Yet it keeps coming back.

Steve *took MFA classes at Old Dominion University in the '90s, with professors such as Janet Peery, Ben Marcus, Sherri Reynolds and Tim Seibles. They were all great gurus of voice. This is the first piece he's ever attempted to get published. He grew up just north of the Great Dismal Swamp, and has lived in Cameroon, New York City and Tanzania. He is currently residing in Jordan.*

Of the Ground Beneath

Steve Loschi

The peat burn was on its third week. Thick, stagnant smoke hung over the lake. Sometimes a brief summer wind would blow through, dispersing the smoke, and pockets of the lake would reflect the light from the early morning sun, slate grey like the sides of a battleship. Two vultures swooped overhead, high above the strands of red cedar and bald cypress that lined the shallow banks of the lake. The water was still, a dense deposit of tannin and leaf rot, history hidden in its shallow depths.

The young man wiped the sweat from his brow, the oar across the gunwales of the Grumman, and looked down at his reflection in the water. It moved languidly, swished in the stillness. The smoke made his throat sore. He took a deep breath, and dipped the worn wooden paddle into the lake. He could see the reflection of the vultures in the water and he watched them circle.

The native Americans used to burn their dead here, send them off on small rafts built from the thick wood of tupelo bound together with twines of moss. Within the middle of the lake, this vast opening in the sultry, oppressive quagmire of swamp, the bodies would singe and simmer in the hot summer sun, and the smoke would drift to the sky, an offering to gods that did not exist.

The young man thought of gods and bodies floating on the lake, hundreds of them, perhaps thousands, packed so close together that all reflection was soaked up by the charred bodies of history, nameless and gone. Already, the morning sun felt as if it had settled on the back of his neck, and his shirt was soaked through.

He wondered if anyone actually ever died; that maybe all that happens is we stop breathing and we burn, ashes drifting into the sky

on the backs of summer breezes. And those thousands of bodies just sink to the bottom of the lake with the tannins and leaf rot, a riverbed of souls.

With a last look up at the two circling vultures, he heaved forward, dragging the paddle into the lake and headed for shore, leaving the dead behind.

#

He had to heft the aluminum Grumman over the bank, gingerly stepping in the soft mud of the lake, an eye out for cottonmouths, their lithe bodies lazily languishing between reeds like lashes of deadly grasses. The air was already thick with no-see-ums and a horse fly buzzed by his head with tenacious fervor. He swiped at it, dropping the nose of the Grumman to the ground. The sweat stung his eyes.

He needed to drag the heavy boat the length of a football field to the feeder canal. The path was worn from his journey during the night, a winding, incongruous swath through the marsh, the cat-tails and swamp grasses pushed down, broken at violent angles, from where he bush-whacked through with the loaded canoe. At times, he would sink almost up to his knee, as if the swamp was trying to reclaim him. He thought again of the Indians, of death, of the ground on fire beneath his very feet.

Wiping the sweat from his brow, he wrapped the worn yellow rope around his wrist, gave the Grumman a quick pull, and began the trek to the canal. He could see his old footprints in the mud. The Grumman, now free of its load, moved over the crushed grass and mud much easier than the night before, a gentle swish as the beam slid over the ground. He thought briefly about his trip out, a new moon hidden in the sky, stars blacked out by smoke, the small flashlight he held between his clenched teeth, and the improbable deadened weight of the canoe- as if every single step he made in the wet, calf-sucking mud was made heavier by his own fear and guilt.

But this thought lasted only a second, the flash from a lit match, and then burnt out, hidden in ash and smoke.

#

The canal was narrow, covered in the shadows of three hundred year old bald cypress trees and black tupelos, a respite from the heat. Blackberry bushes grew on the bank, and the young man would eddy over and pick a few from the bushes and pop them in his mouth. His fingers were stained in purple juice. The sounds of

katydids and locusts echoed off the trees of the forest. The smell of smoke was still rich in the air, heavy, as if he could reach out and grab it in his hands.

When he reached the off-ramp where his truck was, he dismounted the canoe and dragged it noisily up the gravel slope. The sound of the aluminum canoe on the gravel was shocking. He had to stop and grab his chest for a moment.

He laid the canoe down and walked slowly to his truck, his heart pounding against his chest.

He reached the truck and peeked over into the bed. He wasn't sure what he expected to see. He thought again of the native Americans, pictured the swollen, dead body of a young brave lashed to a bed of live oak logs resting in the back of his truck, but all he saw was an empty bottle of motor oil and some dry-rotted bungee cords. The young man backed away gingerly, and went to retrieve the canoe and load it up.

He climbed into the driver's seat and lit a cigarette, looking out the windshield at the thick morning sky. The smell of the ground beneath was pungent and toxic in his head. The farther away I get from that dismal swamp, he thought, the farther away I'll get from last night. He turned the key in the ignition and left the side of the road, leaving the forest behind.

#

When he reached the trailer, his little sister was sitting on the wooden steps that lead to front door. He parked the truck and walked over to her, and sat down. She was crouched, her knees pulled up to her chest, her thin, brown hair matted and unkempt, a product of her compulsive pulling and yanking. She wore an old grey sweatshirt that had been in the trailer for as long as he could remember, despite the heat.

He sat down beside her, and lit another cigarette.

"Where's ma?" he asked.

"She's sleeping," she said. She looked at him through heavy-lidded eyes. "She don't know nothing."

"That's good."

A tractor slowly moved down the road in front of the trailer. He watched as it approached, and took a drag on his cigarette. He felt like being quiet. He felt like keeping everything inside.

"What did you do with him?" his sister asked. He knew she was going to ask. He didn't want to answer.

"It's probably best that you don't know," he said. "That way you won't get in no trouble."

She looked at the truck, and pointed at the water dripping off the back of the Grumman to the ground. He threw the cigarette down, ground it with his boot and nodded.

"I'm going inside," he said, rising to his feet.

"Julian," she said, reaching up to grab his left wrist. He looked down at her hand.

"Will it be okay?" Her grip was gentle, almost thankful. Her small fingers with the faded pink nail polish, the slightly bluish vein that rose from the back of her wrist. "I just feel like I need to know."

What could he tell her? What need could he fill?

Imagine this, he wanted to say: you see your only sister bent over the hood of a car, a guy behind her, his hand on the back of her head, pressing it down against the hood, his jeans bunched up around his ankles, hips thrusting and teeth clenched. A single word being repeated over and over again, like a plea to the Indian gods, *no no no no no.*

What would be going through your head?

Do you sit there and wonder if she can feel the remnant heat from the engine as her face is pressed against the hood?

Do you not drop the joint you were smoking to the ground in fear that she'll see you through the blackened slits of her eyes?

Do you ignore the negativity, the abject screams that seem to subject every thrust of this guy's hips into some soul-defying cleansing?

Do you ignore the pile of devil's clubs that you see next to the burning roach you have thrown down, and refuse to grab one by the base, heavy like a baseball bat in your hand: thick one-inch thorns lining the yard of the stick?

Can you not smell the peat burn even out here, fifty miles from that vast dark swamp, the place where secrets go to die, where the Indians used to burn their dead?

No.

This is what you do:

Acknowledge and accept that fate has put you here.

Your sister is getting raped.

You approach the rapist with the devil's club gripped between your two fists, and even though you are under the dank lid of the weed, you know the decision you are making is the only one to make.

And without a single word, you lift the club above your head, and bring it down with such force that the thorns sink into the thick muscle of that man's neck and upper back, to the point where you must exert great force in order to extricate the club from that person's back.

Now, however, you do have a choice.

You can stop, as the man is injured and has turned to face you with his pants around his ankles.

Or you can take that devil's club, which is dripping with his blood, and bring it back to your side and swing it like a nine-iron across the jaw of the man. And continue doing this until his face is an unrecognizable mass of tissue, blood and hair.

Until the stench of death covers the sound of your breathing

Until the blood flying from his face looks like the juice of blackberries, hanging over a single vein of water.

Your sister standing there, at the front of the car. Just standing, as still as the shallow waters of a hidden lake, waiting to be tied to a bed of logs and set adrift.

While these were not the only choices you had, these were the choices you made. And they are as real as the smoke that makes you want to close your eyes and hold your breath for as long as you possibly can. Or longer.

#

All of this was going through the young man's head as he stared down at his sister's hand. He traced the vein on the back of her hand with his finger, and looked away, out past the Grumman hanging from the back of the truck and the thin forest of red oaks and sugar maples that sheltered the small trailer from the thruway.

There were wisps of clouds in the air, faint and fragile, as if with a single, gentle breath they would blow away. And from behind a stand of trees to the east, towards the swamp, he saw a circle of vultures, black silhouettes against the baby blue sky, and again he thought of death and bodies afloat, and he wondered how long it would take for the birds, in all their avian patience for the flesh of dead prey, to find him here, his sister's hand around his wrist and an aluminum Grumman dripping water from the back of a truck.

If the earth itself could burn from the inside, he thought, then who among us wouldn't be caught up in its flames?

Bruce Harris *is the author of SHERLOCK HOLMES AND DOCTOR WATSON: ABOUT TYPE.*

Sherlock Meets His Match

Bruce Harris

"The matches have, of course, been used to light cigarettes. That is obvious from the shortness of the burnt end. ***Half the match is consumed in lighting a pipe or cigar****."*

(The Adventure of the Red Circle)

For over a century, Holmes's statement above has gone unchallenged. This is particularly enigmatic, given our fascination with Holmes and smoking. Throughout the Holmes Canon, matches are primarily innocuous. They are used to illuminate the darkness, light candles, lanterns, pipes, cigars, and cigarettes. In "The Adventure of the Norwood Builder," Watson uses a match to ignite straw, facilitating the capture of Jonas Oldacre. Matches, during Victorian times, were not much different than those found today. They were, however, more often sold at the turn of the century rather than given away. In addition, wooden matches were carried in small storage containers called vesta boxes or cases (in England) and matchsafes (in the United States). Popular match brands at the time included the Diamond Company's Swan Vestas, and Bryant and May's Pearl, Tiger, and Ruby matches. Although the evolution of matches date back as early as 1530, it wasn't until 1855 that Sweden's Carl Lundstrom introduced the first red phosphorous "safety" matches. These early wooden matches evolved into paper circa 1890, after a cigar-smoking Pennsylvania attorney, Joshua Pusey, found it cumbersome to carry wooden matches in the vest pocket of his evening wear. Pusey's paper book matches reached their popularity in the mid 1890's after an opera company discovered the advantages of advertising on match covers.

The questions become, how valid is Holmes's theory and how to go about proving or rejecting it? Is half a match burnt in the course of lighting pipes and cigars? Given the anti-smoking climate existing in certain parts of the world, opportunities to conduct a field

experiment to prove or disprove the hypothesis are limited at best. Every May, smokers from around the world converge on a Chicago suburb to meet, buy and sell pipes and other tobacco related items, or merely talk tobacco. I was fortunate to attend the 2007 Chicagoland International Pipe and Tobacciana show. The convention drew approximately 4,000 people. With so much smoke, so many smokers, and so many matches, it became the perfect venue to put Holmes's theory to the test.

The actual methodology was simple, although admittedly, unscientific. After observing pipe (n=21) and cigar (n=23) smokers light up and discard their matches, the spent matches were surreptitiously removed from floors, cups, tables and ashtrays, and collected in envelopes (separate envelopes for pipes and cigars). Each match was later measured for the percentage of match consumption.

Matches were wooden and paper, and ranged in length from 1 5/16 inches to 2 inches. Twenty-one matches used to light pipes were measured. The percent of match burned ranged from a low of 21.9% of the match to a high of 66.7%. Across the twenty-one match sample, only 8 of the 21 matches were burnt halfway or more. **The average percent of match burnt for pipes was 43.8%.**

A sampling of twenty-three matches used to light cigars were collected and measured. These ranged from 12.5% burnt up to 66.7% burnt. Only 4 of the 23 matches were burnt halfway or more. On average, **cigar smokers burn 33.7% of their matches while lighting up their stogies.**

For both pipes and cigars, *less than half* the match is consumed while lighting up. These results do not support Holmes's hypothesis. In retrospect, Holmes might have been thinking about the "drunkard's match," popular during the same time period (1880's) as the action in "The Adventure of the Red Circle," when he uttered his inaccurate statement. The drunkard match was specially treated so that it would not burn beyond its midpoint, thereby keeping one's fingers out of harm's way. The special treatment may have impacted burn rate. It must be reiterated that the current experiment was not conducted under controlled conditions. Many factors can impact the percentage of match used to light pipes and cigars. Among them are:

1) Length of match. The longer the match, the smaller percentage will be burnt. Parenthetically, match companies conducted experiments around the turn of

the century to determine the optimum length of a match to effectively light a cigar.

2) Wind conditions could certainly lessen the percentage of match burnt. Note – special matches were designed and made to remain lit in windy conditions.
3) Smoker's eyesight or degree of hyperopia could increase the burnt percentage.
4) Steadiness of hand (or a nervous state) may hinder a smoker's ability to light up.
5) Skill or experience of the pipe or cigar smoker. A novice may take longer to light a bowl or cigar end than a more seasoned smoker.
6) Size matters. The width of the pipe's bowl will have an impact. The larger the width, the more match needed to apply an even light.
7) Shape of the pipe. One with a canted bowl facing away from the smoker may require additional time to adequately light.
8) Amount of tobacco plays a role. The more tobacco, the more time to light.
9) Moisture of the tobacco. High moisture content requires a longer light time.
10) Relighting vs. first light. It may take less of a match to re-light (especially if the flame has not gone completely out prior to a re-light).
11) Size (ring gauge) of the cigar. The slimmer the cigar, the less percentage of match is required. Note – the vast majority of cigars circa 1900 were torpedo shaped, that is, tapered at both ends.
12) Draw of the cigar or pipe. The smaller the hole made by the cigar cutter, the more time required to light, resulting in a greater increase of percentage of match burnt. Similarly, a poorly engineered pipe may take longer to light than one with a perfectly drilled and centered air hole.
13) Quality of the cigar. The poorer the quality, the quicker it will light.

Other questions remain. For instance, is there a gender difference when lighting up? Do males burn the same percentage of

matches as females? What about time of day? Is more of the match used up during the evening hours, when work is over and the smoker tends to be less frantic and more relaxed? Additional research and study is recommended before completely discounting (or accepting) Holmes's argument and to help us understand and provide answers to these burning questions.

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Waking

Ruy Arango

It's Tuesday and your last class just got out. Twenty five teenagers you'd rather be plying with Vonnegut just sat through another practice exam. Nothing makes you feel like a bigger idiot. The kids didn't like it either. The eye rolling was insane.

"Watch the friendly fire," you snapped.

#

Afterwards, you take the practice exams to the office and stop at the teacher's lounge for coffee. The chemistry teacher is in there with a print out of the last email from admin.

"Seen this one yet?" she asks.

You hadn't and she hands it over. It's titled "Exciting Changes." You give it back.

"This shit ruins my sex drive," she says.

You tell her with you, it's sleep.

#

Over breakfast the next day your husband tells you you've been doing things with the lamp. You ask him what kinds of things and he stands up and mimes for you. Hands on the upper edge of the shade, spinning it along its base.

He shrugs and looks at you.

Driving, you say, after a moment, and he snaps his fingers and sits back down. He giggles. You giggle. You do this every morning, like one of those post game analysis shows.

#

The doctor called it somnambulism.

That your husband had discovered you the night before attempting to open the front door with a carrot had prompted the visit. All sorts of posters were up on the walls.

You asked him if he meant sleep walking.

“We don't really like using that word, but yes,” he said.

He had pointed to a poster on the wall with wavy lines. He touched the poster as he spoke.

“This is a slow wave sleep occurrence. Deep sleep. Not so much dreaming as a trance state. Most of the locomotions are going to be familiar activities, brushing your teeth, eating, drinking.”

“What about sex?” your husband asked.

“Oh sure,” said the doctor.

You asked what treatments were available and he told you none. He recommended less stress.

On the car ride back you looked over a pamphlet. Illustrations of people in their pajamas on the front lawn, in the kitchen running the tap, one showed a man in a night cap digging a hole in the backyard.

“It says you can wake me up,” you told your husband.

#

Back at school you administer the exam to your class and call the time in intervals. Bathroom breaks between test sections. It's three hours. The silence is deafening.

By the time they're dismissed you've worked yourself up to a rolling boil and walk towards admin for a confrontation. On the way though, you realize they don't want this either. No one does. You turn back and start un-peeling test warnings from the walls.

#

You don't wake up tired, any more than you did before. Every now and then you wake up with a mark, or in a different set of clothes. All the things you could hurt yourself with are locked up. The car keys are under your husband's pillow.

#

You ask him what you're like.

He pauses, messing with the coffee maker.

“What do you mean?” he asks.

You clarify: happy or sad?

“Focused,” he says, after a moment, getting the coffee filter in.

You say the word to yourself in the car on the way to work and make it the topic of the short essay for your class. They stare as you write it on the board. One of them asks you where that came from. You tell them, your husband, and they all giggle.

You read the essays during lunch. You select one to be read

when the class comes back. It's by a student who's phone is in your desk. She stands up before everyone. Her voice is a little shaky. She keeps taking her hands on and off her hips. The gist is that focus is about negative space rather than positive.

"Not like you're paying attention to one thing, it's like you're not paying attention to other things. Like ignorance or something."

"So, just like, you don't want to pay attention?" someone asks from the back.

"Naw, like you can't."

#

The next morning your hands are sore. Your husband looks at you across from his scrambled eggs. You look back.

"Don't be mad," he says and takes out his phone.

It's you from behind in the yellowish light of the kitchen at night. The shot closes. You're hunched over the counter top, bearing down on something. Slowly the angle changes as the phone goes over your shoulder.

You're mashing raw potatoes with your bare hands, they're sort of squeaking. He calls your name from behind the phone and you turn, your face blank, your eyes serene.

"Pretty weird huh?" he asks you.

You tell him to play it again.

#

That week the Teacher's Union releases the details of next year's contract in a letter. In it, they admit regret that they were unable to secure the cost of living increase needed to keep up with inflation. The week after that exam scores are released by the district. The school drops from a B to a C and your students are identified as underperforming.

A little man from the district shows up one day and introduces himself. He says he will be observing your classroom. Your students look from him to you to him.

#

Back at home you take out all the silverware and pour the milk down the sink. Your husband shows you the videos afterwards.

As before, you are struck by the expression on your face. In the milk pouring one you're naked and your husband jokingly asks what he should do if you start to come onto him while you're sleep walking.

"Go nuts," you say, restarting the video.

That night you have sex in the shower, but you keep thinking of the Assessment Officer in your class and can't come. You imagine your brain on a leash, yanking your arm off.

#

When it's time for the twentieth century you break out the big guns and assign A Farewell to Arms. They were expecting The Old Man and the Sea and get a thrill out of the shakeup. After you start the discussion one student raises his hand. You assume he'll want to know what jaundice is. Instead, he points.

"What the hell is *he* still doing here?"

All the heads swivel. The Assessment Officer smiles.

He says, that's a great question, and gets the student's name wrong.

#

The assessment is ten pages long in Arial. The title is in Times New Roman.

It lists rapport with students and enthusiasm with the subject matter as strengths. However, it notes that you went off lesson frequently and spent less than ten percent of your class time reviewing exam subjects. It concludes, labeling you as borderline non-compliant. You stop eating your yogurt when you get to the last part.

Someone knocks on the door. You close your eyes, thinking it will be an administrator, but it is one of your students. She asks if you know how to get food stamps.

#

Later on in the day you have a meeting with the Vice Principal. He lays out your improvement plan. Once a month professional development and more visits from the Assessment Officer.

"The thing is," he says, "is to get your numbers up."

The next morning you tell your students that the assessment guy is going to be sticking around for a while. All sorts of muttering. They ask if it's their fault, about their test scores.

"No," you tell them.

"Did we get you in trouble?" they ask.

"No," you tell them.

#

The next morning you go to use the bathroom and see toilet paper all over the place. You call out to your husband.

He sticks his head through the door while you pee. You ask him if that was you.

"Big time," he says.

You ask if you were just making a mess and he shakes his head. He'd been watching you do it for a bit. It looked like you were trying to get at the cardboard tube.

"Hm," you say and finish peeing.

"Yep," he replies and closes the door.

#

Three other teachers are receiving assessments. They try to get you involved in the lounge.

One is talking to his wife on the phone. Another is calling the union.

"Isn't this terrible?" the chemistry teacher asks you.

"Oh yeah," you say, and it is.

The professional development is held in the cafeteria over the weekend and led by a person you've never met. That person breaks down your students into score brackets and advises everyone not to worry about the ones with low scores.

"Upper middle and low high is where the action is," the person says, "those are the kids that will respond well to pressure."

The Vice Principal pops his head in from time to time. He looks at you. You look back.

The take home materials are three hundred and sixty pages long. You review them in the parking lot.

#

Your students move up and you spend more time teaching from the prep packet with the new class. There are fewer essays and less time to explore tangents. Even so, their scores don't improve and the Assessment Officer is called in again to help with your evaluation. He smiles when he recognizes you.

Through it all your sleep disturbances persist. Each morning you watch yourself in the videos your husband makes.

The other three teachers undergoing assessments improve their numbers. They tell you their contracts for next year came in late, that it was the district trying to make a point and you realize you haven't received yours yet.

That afternoon the Vice Principal calls you into his office. He takes a deep breath when you walk in.

#

The next morning you watch yourself glide across the living room.

You pick your way across upturned chairs and potted plants, DVD cases. You wear two coats and a scarf.

Climbing onto the couch, you turn, your eyes caught mid distance. You raise your hands in triumph.

Michelle Tinklepaugh's *poetry has appeared in The Naugatuck River Review, Literary Orphans, The Lake, Allegro Poetry and elsewhere. She is poetry co-editor for Mud Season Review. Michelle lives in South Burlington, Vermont with her daughter Annabelle.*

Dismantling Walls

Michelle Tinklepaugh

On these nights
I drift from past to present
I do not tell you my walls are falling down
that bedrooms in old houses remind me of him

I listen to your soft snore
watch the headlights from a passing car
I am neither here nor there
a place in the middle where reality is blurred

I don't know what you think of me
this woman that turns into a girl
with the slip of a touch

You live in this old house
that reveals itself daily
a leak on the porch with no origin
walls that groan cold in the wind
patchwork layers peeling back years

your childhood home sits in your backyard
walls gutted to the beginning
a window halfway open like a sleepy eye

I think maybe
this is why you love me
that I am part of your collection of things to restore

I touch the bed, my cheek, one of my thighs
before curling up like a cat
I fall asleep with your hand on my back

In the dark of my dream
I read poems I have not yet written
on walls as thin and delicate as tracing paper

When I wake
I do not remember the poems
just that the words were my walls
and I was the light illuminating them

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A Fireball for Edgar

Brandon Jenkins

A giant meteor was hurtling toward earth at 100,000 miles per hour and was due to wipe out all of humanity in less than five hours. I was standing outside a ransacked grocery store sipping Dr. Pepper out of my Big Gulp. The meteor above appeared as a bright shooting star whose debris trail emblazoned the sky with fire and fury.

I walked several blocks through the empty streets en route to the nursing home which my grandfather had resided for the last several years. The double doors of the front entrance were tied together with a lock and chain so I had to enter through a window on the opposite side. My grandfather was one of less than ten senior citizens who remained in the home. Everyone else had been taken by family members and rushed to underground bunkers throughout the countryside.

I walked into my grandfather's room to find him lying in his bed listening to two men rambling frantically on the radio. He seemed to take no notice when I entered the room. His head remained stationary with his eyes fixed on the blank white wall in front of him. I fluffed his pillow and removed his shoes (for some reason he always had his shoes on when he was in bed).

"You hear about this meteor that's supposed to hit the earth today?" he asked without deviating from his motionless state.

"We talked about it yesterday grandpa." Actually we had been talking about it every day since the news broke two weeks ago.

"Everybody's supposed to die."

"Everything will be okay grandpa." I walked over to a cooler in the corner of the room and grabbed a plastic bag which contained a sandwich and a cup of potato salad. His mini-fridge had been stolen a week prior along with all the contents inside so I had brought the

cooler over from my apartment a few days ago. "Eat up grandpa." I spoon-fed him and he chewed slowly. When he had eaten all he was going to eat I forced him to have a few sips of water. "If you get thirsty your water is right here on the table, okay?"

"Who are these men?" he said referring to the distraught voices on the radio. "I don't understand what this show's about."

"Don't worry about it grandpa."

"They sound like Orientals."

I opened the only window in his room and turned on the rotating fan as I knew it was going to get warm in a few hours. I turned the radio off and he let out a sigh of relief and finally blinked his eyes.

"There you go grandpa. Too much radio will melt your brain."

I emptied his bedpan and put it back in place. I found a comb in the bathroom, poured a little water over it and combed his gray hair back over the top of his head.

"I'm going to go out for a few hours but I'll be back," I said and continued to style the thin hairs above his ears. "Want me to bring you anything?"

"Oh, I don't know," he said and continued to stare blankly at the wall in front of him.

"I'll look for something." I kissed him on the forehead and left with my Big Gulp. I climbed out the window I had come in and continued my walk through the deserted town. I shook my cup which only had ice cubes remaining and eyeballed a gas station convenience store across the street. All eight of the station's gas pumps had been emptied and left on the ground and the glass door of the store was shattered. I walked inside and tried to refill my Dr. Pepper only to get a slow, watery stream out of the fountain. I tried all of the other pumps but got the same result. I walked back through the broken glass and tried a mini mart a few blocks down. I was able to get half of my cup filled with soda before it started to go bad. Satisfied with what I had in my cup, I decided to visit a public pool which was located just at the edge of the woods.

The pool was usually jam-packed with children running around on the hot pavement and doing cannonballs into crowds of other children. I left my Big Gulp on the ground and climbed the fence and dropped down on the other side. Though there hadn't been anybody in the pool for several weeks, it also hadn't been cleaned.

Small branches and leaves floated around throughout the pool and a few pieces of litter had gathered in the corners. I unhooked the skimmer net from the wire fence surrounding the pool and got busy capturing the junk that had accumulated on the water. Each time I made a scoop in the water, I emptied the net over the fence and into the dirt on the opposite side. By the time I was finished, it was pretty clean (despite a few small leaves that had sunk to the bottom).

I stripped down to my underwear and climbed the ladder of the high dive. It was the kind of high dive that rarely existed in public pools anymore. From the top, I was well above the height of the fence that encompassed the pool. I hadn't been up there since I was a child because it had gotten too crowded anytime the weather was decent enough to go for a swim. I started from the back of the diving board and ran to the tip, bouncing off the edge once and throwing myself into the air. I hit the water feet-first and touched the bottom of the pool with my toes before pushing myself upward. I repeated this a few times then climbed out and laid on the adjustable lounge chair to dry out. It was one of the most perfect days of summer and the sky was a brilliant blue. I gazed in the direction of the meteor and noticed the little ball of fire was a little larger than it had been earlier in the day. When my boxers were dry enough to put my clothes back on, I jumped the fence and grabbed my soda which was now watered down and tasteless.

I heard a loud screech, then a crash, then a thud. I raced toward the street and found that a gray pickup truck had struck a light pole and knocked it out of the ground. I rushed to the driver’s side and the door opened as I approached. A young man, bleeding from his left ear and with a look of terror in his eyes, stepped out of the vehicle.

"Are you okay, sir?"

"They're coming!" He looked directly into my eyes then turned his face up to the sky. "They're coming for us!"

"Who's coming?"

"Them!"

"Sir, I think you should sit down."

"No!" he yelled at looked deep into my eyes.

"Do you need some water?"

"We need to get out of here!" He took a few steps past me and nervously glanced back to the sky. "If you're coming, let's go now!"

"Sir," I said holding out my hand toward him in a calming

manner, "nobody's coming. It's just a meteor."

"That's what they want you to believe!" His feet moved quicker and now he was running in the direction of the woods. I took a sip of my watered down Big Gulp and watched him shrink away into the distance. I looked into the bed of the truck and noticed a large hunting rifle. I figured the guy was so delirious after crashing the truck that he must've forgotten the rifle. The car was still running so I got in the driver's seat and reversed it away from the damaged light pole. When I was clear of the shattered remains of concrete, metal, and glass, I pushed forward and drove to my old high school. As I arrived in the parking lot of the school, I was instantly reminded of my friends and I doing doughnuts at ridiculously dangerous speeds on the weekends. Since I graduated, a youth center was built next to the school and the parking lot was no longer empty on the weekends. I circled around the lot once taking in the memories then I floored it and spiraled the truck around and around until the thing nearly tipped over. I reversed away from the spot to see my handy work engraved in rubber all over the blacktop. I felt my work here was done so I pressed on once again to the main street.

I past several abandoned gas stations and tried the soda fountains at each one until I finally found one that wasn't empty. It only had Diet Coke left but that would have to do until my luck changed.

I drove the truck to my apartment building and parked right in front of the entrance. I grabbed the gun from the back of the truck and walked up three flights of stairs to my apartment. I dragged a large chest out of my closet and began to empty everything out quickly. I tossed aside clothes, books and childhood toys to the ground until I reached what I was looking for at the bottom. I piled some stuff into a duffle bag, then grabbed my acoustic guitar, placed it inside its case, then took that and the gun to the roof of my building. After climbing another four flights of stairs, I took my guitar case and placed it in front of the door so it wouldn't lock behind me. I walked to the edge of the roof and kneeled down behind the ledge to take aim. It was a boring town and there wasn't much to shoot, but I made due. There was a billboard for Lucky's Casino next to the highway about a quarter-mile away depicting a man with a wad of cash in hand. I took aim right between the eyes and got him on the pupil, sending a flock of birds from the top of the billboard into flight. I turned to my left and set my sights on a neighboring apartment building. I took out

several windows and potted plants which sat on the ledges of patios. One particular bullet sent wind chimes ringing and dangling about just before it continued into the window. It was so satisfying when it happened that I did it a few more times, laughing each time the wind chimes made music. I spent a few minutes shooting pine cones out of trees far out in the distance before I decided to hit the road again. I picked up my guitar and threw it, along with the gun, into the back of the pickup. I grabbed my Big Gulp from the cup holder and sipped from it while I raced up the main drag.

I ended up back at the nursing home and parked right in front of the double doors. I grabbed the gun from the bed of the pickup and marched up to the building. I held the gun like Tony Montana and shot the lock off. I went through the doors and into my grandfather's room. As usual, he didn't take much notice of me when I entered and he didn't even mention the large gun I was holding.

"We're going out grandpa," I told him.

"Huh?"

"One second." I put the gun down on a chair and went back into the hall. I went into the lobby and searched around for a wheelchair. I found one in a closet behind the front desk and wheeled it back to my grandfather's room. "Okay grandpa," I said, "let's go." I picked him up with one hand under his legs and one under his back. He didn't protest or make much of a sound at all. I gently eased him into the wheelchair and strolled him out to the truck. I was about to lift him into the passenger seat when he finally spoke out:

"Wait!" he said. "We can't leave Ellen."

"Who's Ellen?"

"She's—never mind who she is! We can't leave her!"

I knew Ellen could either have died a long time ago or have been a figment of his imagination. Regardless, I went up to the front desk and searched around. I found some sort of activity log with the names and room numbers of all the residents. I scanned the list and found *Ellen Channing: Room 103.* It was last checked off nearly two weeks ago.

"Well I'll be damned," I said to myself.

I found her room and went in very reluctantly. I had no idea when the last time someone visited her to feed her or give her water. I was relieved to hear a voice when I entered.

"Karen?" an old, crackly voice gave out. "Is that you?"

"Ma'am, my name is Andy." I slowly walked toward her bed.

The room was extremely dark and stuffy. "I'm Edgar's grandson."

"Oh," she said delightedly. "Hi Edgar."

"No ma'am," I said and opened a window so she could see my face. "I'm his grandson."

"I'm awfully hungry!"

"I have food outside in my car."

"Where's Edgar?"

"He's waiting for you. We need to go." I helped her out of bed the same way I had helped my grandpa. She was a tiny woman and couldn't have weighed much more than a child. I carried her outside. When my grandpa saw her in my arms he let out a huge smile. I have not seen that man smile in several years but there it was clear as day. I put her in the passenger seat then turned toward my grandpa. "You'll have to go in the back."

He wasn't a heavy man by any means but it was still rather difficult to transfer him and the wheelchair into the bed of the pickup. I grabbed some rope from my duffle bag and dragged it through the windows of the cab and through the spokes of the wheelchair. I fastened his body against the cab of the truck by tightening the rope across his chest like I was moving a refrigerator or some other inanimate object. When he was secure, I put the rifle in his hands and crawled through the window to get inside.

We were soon on the road and I was pointed toward the mountains. It was a bumpy ride up to the mountain top and I could see my grandfather bouncing around in the rearview mirror. Ellen was very quiet and was eating the potato salad I had given her. Except for these two old people in the truck with me and the crazy guy who crashed it, I hadn't seen a soul all day; so it was rather strange when a black SUV drove into sight in my rearview mirror. From what I could see, it was a family: A man driving with his wife in the passenger seat and two kids in the back. They stared horrifically at the 90-year-old man with a shotgun tied to a wheelchair in the back of the truck. After a minute or so the SUV made a left turn and was out of sight.

I drove as high as the mountain would take us and then pulled over near the edge of a cliff. I grabbed a compass from my duffle bag and held it in the air. The meteor was supposed to make landfall in a mountainous region about 1,000 miles north of us. It was currently directly overhead and was moving quickly in that direction. I pulled out some sleeping bags and blankets from my bag and set up camp with a great view of what was to be the strike zone.

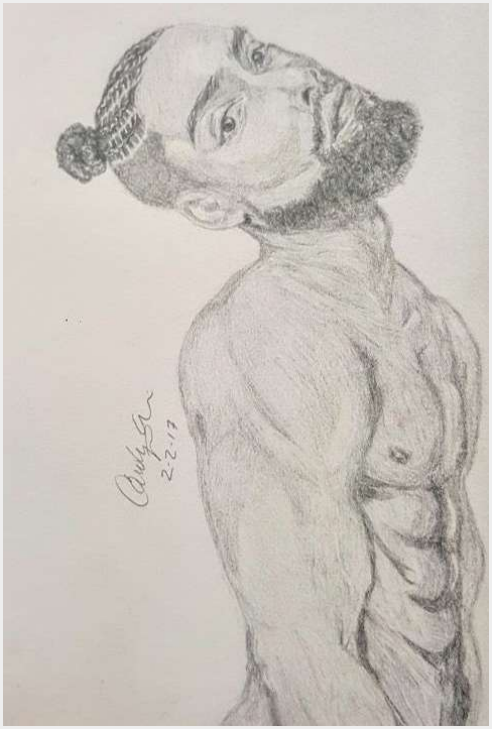
About an hour later it was much darker and the meteor was now in full blown fireball mode. I sat down to the left of my grandfather with Ellen to his right. She grabbed his hand and he smiled like he did earlier.

"It's beautiful," she said as we all watched the violet comet streak across the sky. It was so bright that the purplish tint reflected off of my grandfather's glasses.

"It sure is," my grandfather responded. "It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

Carolyn Poindexter *is a native of Louisville, Kentucky where she lives with her husband and two young sons. Although she is a Creative Writing major at Southern New Hampshire University's online campus, she has always been the embodiment of the liberal arts. She began drawing at the age of six, singing shortly after that, and seriously writing at seventeen. Amongst finishing her fifth novel, she is currently working to improve her artistic abilities with enlightened, diverse freehand pieces.*

Series: Pride, Excellence, & Beauty



MCM

Everyone's 'Man Crush Monday'. Although he inadvertently reminds me of an ex, the trendiness of a beard and man-bun with a muscular, relaxed posture, he shows himself to be the dreamboat that only my mind could create.

ALL NATURALE

The bare makeup of natural body, natural hair, natural face. This was the beginning of breaking out artistically. From the curls to the audacity of a bare chest and new methods of shading, this gorgeous face is a favorite.

LITTLE BLACK GIRL

Inspired by a photo on Instagram, the little black girl is the beauty and innocence that we know as our roots. Before mainstream, before the corruption of the 2000s, she is simply a child of the original culture.

Alexandra *is a 25-year-old executive assistant extraordinaire in Albany, Oregon. When she's not waving her spaghetti-like arms around in Zumba class, she's eating her feelings in Tillamook ice cream or playing with her roly poly Rottweiler, Scully.*

Boy, Why Are You Crying?

Alexandra Keister

Samantha took my hand between both of hers, gently massaging it. I felt my cheeks getting hot and I wanted to leave, but I had already signed the waivers and paid for my ninety-minute session. “Don’t be nervous, Dr. Whitebird, we’ll only do what you’re comfortable with,” she smiled. I looked uncomfortably at my pale hand sandwiched between her two brown ones. They were warm, and confident. Finally she let one go and led me to the Starry Sky Room, a small space that held a large bed between its navy, star-speckled walls.

It was silly to be disappointed with the décor, but I was. Spending so much of my centuries-long childhood flying over London had spoiled me with breathtaking night skies. In the dark cool nights that dampened the hair of passers-by beneath me, I would dart in and out of the clouds, letting the cold mist whip my face into a ruddy glow. I fancied myself to be just another brilliant star; the full moon was my father and once a month he would beam down at me with his vague, smiling face. It was all the affection I needed.

She sat on the bed and invited me to sit next to her. I obliged.

“Do you want to tell me about your day?” she asked, placing another warm hand on my arm.

“Not really,” I said. It was just another day of residency. Another day of walking sterile halls. Another day of pretending not to see families falling to pieces. Another day of watching bald children finish their juice boxes and Jello only to puke them up, soiling their bed sheets and crying in a strawberry mess. Another day of watching for fairies I know I can’t see, praying they would stay far away from our hospital windows. Tink, though gone now, frequents my dreams. It’s always when I’m dreaming of tending to a child that she appears, her tiny angular features in a passionate fire against the window. As

an angry wasp she knocks the glass, come to take yet another patient. Though I can't see fairies anymore, I know when they've been 'round.

People only seem to remember me as being the flame-haired flying boy, the disarmingly cocky one who took the Darlings on their grand adventure. They remember the mermaids, Captain Hook, and the Crocodile, but they forget what I was tasked with --accompanying the souls of dead children partway to Heaven. And to be honest, I never remembered it, either. To remember meant time had passed, was passing. To forget meant there was only the now to live in, and the Now meant I was a boy.

When it happened, when I Remembered, and not only remembered but couldn't forget – that's when I was forced to grow up. I chose a family, I chose a career. I left behind all my foolishness, my adventures, my whimsy, but was it by choice? – I don't know.

What I did know, was I began to dread the sight of hospital windows glowing golden night after night calling me to take a child Home. From the first night of Remembering on, I promised myself with each tiny soul I carried, that when I was a man, I would work on the more favorable side of death.

"What would you like to talk about?" Samantha asked.

"Nothing, if that's okay," I said. "Uhm, would you mind being the big spoon?"

"Of course not, that's my favorite position," she said, kindly. Taking my shoulders in her hands she guided me to lie on the bed. Tucking my knees in I lay there, stiff and unsure of where to put my hands. Sensing my nervousness, she offered to hold them, but not before she rubbed my arm to assure me everything was okay. I had never spooned before. I'd never really even touched anyone, willingly, meaningfully, before. I had a girlfriend once, briefly. She dumped me because I hated kissing her. Kissing was alternately gross and painful. I missed when a kiss was a thimble; just a short innocent exchange to show affection, not some drawn out mashing of lips.

I didn't like holding Samantha's hands, or feeling her up against my back, or hearing her breath, incessant like the ticking of the clock inside that old Crocodile. I wished to be alone again. "Would you mind… could we just lie apart on the bed?" I asked. She nodded and moved, so that we were both on our backs, looking up at the fake stars. I closed my eyes and remembered the first time I had remembered, the start of growing up.

It had been another sapphire London night, crisp and clean above the clouds, drizzly grey beneath them. Tink and I had been whipping the clouds into various shapes and laughing in riotous voices when I saw the golden glow through a window of Great Ormond, and knew another child was getting ready to depart. Their souls are so warm, so bright, inherently merry. As a man now, they remind me of the lights on a Christmas tree, something I never experienced first-hand as young Peter Pan except through the windows of the barren couple who eventually adopted me. Twinkling against everything surrounding them, it was near impossible to feel down around a child's soul when it was in its full splendor.

But this child was different. As I drew nearer the window, I saw his soul fighting against his body, not willing to leave, though it had one foot loose already. When a soul is departing, no soap, nor even a deft Seamstress Wendy can reattach it. Nurses and doctors were around the boy, checking this, assuring the mother of that. The mother, a tired woman in an even more tired-looking cardigan, was leaning against the window. Her hands covered her mouth, prayers flying out from between her fingers so rapidly I had to dodge them as I came in closer.

And that's when I saw, there in the corner, the dying boy's little brother holding a box of day-old donuts like that was his one duty in life, just to hold on to that stupid box of donuts.

The sick boy was still fighting the inevitable. Though his body lay mute, his radiant soul was flailing about and clinging to that ever-paling frame. And there was that chubby kid in the corner, unable to look away, white knuckling the donuts, until he saw me at the window.

He looked at me curiously, without alarm. I knocked. I didn't need him to let me in, but I wanted him to. Still holding the box, he came over to the window and opened it, unnoticed by the grownups, before sitting back at his post.

"What are you doing here, Peter?" he asked. I ignored his question and sat next to him, unseen by those who didn't believe in me anymore.

"What's in the box?" I asked, surveying the array of shapes and colors.

"Donuts," he said. He was around six, with messy brown hair and eyes so big they would have swallowed me whole, if I looked too long into them.

"Do-nuts," I repeated. We didn't have those in Neverland. "Can I try one?" He shook his head no, and pointed to his brother.

"These are birthday donuts, for tomorrow. They were s'posed to be for today, but Gabe was too sick. So we're waiting to eat them 'til tomorrow." He held his arms over the lid and watched me, just to be sure I wouldn't try to sneak one.

"Ah, I see. Whose birthday?" I asked.

"Mine," he said. His lip quivered and he took a deep breath to recite whose was whose. "I got a maple one, and mum has a chocolate, and Gabe hassa sprinkle." He exhaled. Both legs of the boy's soul were free now. It was a matter of minutes before I would be flying into the night with him.

"Mum don't think," he started, but a shriek from his mother distracted him.

"What doesn't she think?" I asked, curious.

"Mum doesn't think Gabe'll be here for my next birthday, so we're celebrating this one good," he said rather matter-of-factly. I could feel he was concerned, but he didn't know quite what to think. Why had no one taken him out of the room?

Gabe's soul was now free, just lying there unattached to his body. The mother was screaming at his side, the nurses were crying. I'd seen this all before, it was just part of the deal. It never bothered me. Adults cry. I prided myself on hardly ever crying – and if you had asked me then, I'd tell you I never, ever cried. As an adult now I still never do, though it's no longer a matter of pride.

Going over to the hospital bed, I slid my arms under Gabe's soul, and gently lifted him fully out from his body. He was old enough that had he passed a year later, I wouldn't have accompanied him to Heaven. But tonight he wouldn't have to brave the cold London sky alone.

He lay there, glowing, terrified. The children usually were, that's why I did what I did. He recognized me from his dreams, and relaxed for a moment. "Peter?" he asked.

I grinned at him. "Yes," I said. "We're going to Heaven, now." He looked over at his brother, still faithfully guarding the donuts.

"Not Neverland?"

"No. Neverland isn't a forever home. But Heaven is."

"Then I can't," he said. "Tomorrow is his birthday, and I promised. I promised."

I looked into his face. It was nothing like the face of the boy on the bed, grey and defeated. This face was round, healthy, vibrant, beautiful.

"He'll understand," I said, though I had no idea if he would or how he could. Even I didn't understand. The little boy couldn't see either of us. It was part of the fairy code; it would upset children too much to see Peter Pan ferrying a soul to Heaven. I was adventure! A friend! I was a nighttime hero, a comedian, a risk-taker, everything they wanted to be. Not the angel of death.

"No he won't!" Gabe argued. "Please, put me back!"

"But you were miserable!" I said. "Look at yourself!"

Turning around in my arms, he faced his body. The doctors were performing chest compressions, this time prayers from multiple people flying out the window.

"I have a family," he said. "I have to take care of mum and Thomas. Can't I get better?" He started to panic. "Look at him!" he shouted, pointing at his brother, who was crying now. "He's still holding onto that box! Don't you understand? I'm his world! He thinks we're eating those tomorrow! I'm all he has! He gets bullied at school! He's smaller than everyone; they'll crush him!"

I didn't know what to say. I had to take Gabe to Heaven. "We have to go now," I said, heading for the window. The boy struggled against my arms, pleading with me to let him go back.

"I wanna grow up!" he shouted.

For one second of the struggle I forgot about keeping us invisible. Suddenly the golden glow in the room was real as a sunrise and flooding the walls, the bed, the people – it was more than just what I saw – everyone saw it. They gasped. The little boy dropped his box of donuts and watched as I flew out the window, his brother in my arms.

Thomas never returned to Neverland. And neither did I.

Samantha turned to me. "You look pensive. Are you sure you don't want to talk? I'm all ears," she offered.

"I'm just tired," I said. "I don't… well, you probably could have guessed, since I'm paying someone to cuddle me… but I don't relate well to people... not to adults, anyway. It's why I work in pediatrics… children are easier company. It just sucks they're all sick." She gave me a look of sympathy.

"Oh, Dr. Whitebird…" she started.

"It's okay, really," I insisted. "I'm used to it. I just thought,

maybe this, touching someone, being held, would help, or something, I don't know." I felt foolish. She didn't need to know I had grown up into a loser.

"Do you want to try again?" she asked. Hesitantly, I nodded, and turned on my side once more. She pulled a heavy blanket over us and slipped a hand under my arm, where it rested against my chest. "Is this better?" she asked. I nodded, placing my hand over hers. It was still warm.

"You have a kind heart," she said thoughtfully. "I could tell from the second I met you. You have a sort of glow about you. And you have an important job," she added. "One that takes a strong heart. A brave heart."

"I don't feel brave," I whispered. She held me closer. Nobody had ever held me close. Rather, I had never let anyone hold me close. I remembered why that was, as I started to cry. I felt so stupid. I was a grown man, blubbering to a woman I paid to cuddle me in a themed room. She didn't shush me, or wipe my tears. She just held me, and traced her fingers through my hair. I think a mother did that to me, once, before I ran away to the fairies. I don't know. It was familiar.

"Maybe you're just a lost boy," she finally said. "It's okay. I think we all are, in some way or another." I just kept crying, those stupid stuttering breaths escaping my mouth as I covered it.

"Oh, if only you knew," I moaned, burying my face in the pillow. For the next ten minutes I continued to cry as she held me. My breathing slowed and I fell asleep until my time was up. She woke me by stroking my temple with a soft finger.

"Dr. Whitebird? Your time is up, dear. Can I get you a glass of water before you go?" She looked genuinely concerned at me, searching my face for the pain I had revealed. I gave a fake smile and said yes, that would be lovely, thank you.

Perhaps I had chosen to work the wrong side of death, the ugly side, but there was no fixing that, now. There is greater wickedness this side of the world than pirates or crocodiles. I can no longer mock my enemies, save my friends, and fly away when I'm done with it all. There is no being done, until the awfully big adventure of death. Would Tink come and get me? Or would it be another night of being an island? I wish for those clouds against my cheeks, just once more.

Sitting up, I put my shoes back on, lacing them tight.

It was going to be a long walk back to Neverland.

Diane D. Gillette *lives in Chicago with the love of her life. She teaches by day, writes by night, and constantly tries to meet the demands of her cats. Her work as appeared in over 30 different literary magazines, and she is an editor at Cat on a Leash Review. To read more of her published work, visit www.digillette.com.*

Independence Day

Diane D. Gillette

The summer I turned eleven, I didn't go pee the entire fourteen hours it took for us to get to my grandparents' Kansas farm from our little adobe house in New Mexico.

I remember holding my breath and squatting over the rest-stop toilet, squeezing my eyes shut as my imagination conjured up images of the thousands of women and girls that must have squatted there before me.

"I don't hear any tinkling, Cami," Mama called from the other side the stall door, which she held shut for me since the latch was broken.

"That's not helping," I barked.

"Well, you're gonna need to go at some point. It's gonna be at least another eight hours before we get there. It's like you want to get a bladder infection," she sighed.

"There" was our Fourth of July destination. Every summer we'd visit my grandparents for Independence Day, though this would be the first summer since my grandpa had passed away several months before. At this point, we'd been on the road for more than six hours already, and Mama tried her best to make me go pee at every stop, but the rest stops provided nothing more than a hole in the ground and a stench that clung to the inside of my nostrils for miles after we'd left it behind. The gas station bathrooms at least had actual toilets, but as far as I could tell, had never been cleaned. My bladder was on lockdown.

Exiting the women's room, I saw my brother Frankie scramble out of good ol' Dottie -- our dad's bright orange VW camper van that he'd had since before he'd met Mama -- and head behind a tree to go pee.

“Frankie, get back here and use the facilities like a civilized person,” Mama scolded.

Dad stood under a nearby tree while our basset hound Shania snoofed around and finally found the perfect spot to squat. “Leave him be, Rosie. Peeing in the great outdoors is one of the joys of being a boy.”

Mama sighed and shook her head before climbing into the front passenger seat. Dad motioned me over and handed me Shania’s leash before going to pee behind a tree of his own. I looked around the park and wondered what would happen if I picked my own tree to squat under.

By the time we rolled past the one room schoolhouse my grandpa had attended when he was a little boy, I had my knees squeezed together so tight, I was worried I’d have bruises the next day. When we finally pulled up to the farmhouse, Frankie insisted on taking as much time as possible before opening the van door. I finally thunked him on the back of his head with the Nancy Drew mystery I'd been reading and climbed over him to let myself out into the sticky night. Cicadas whirred, filling the dusk with their song, but all I could think about was the sweet, sweet relief of being so close to my grandma's bathroom.

The next morning Dad, Frankie, and two of my uncles drove off in ol' Dottie and returned with three bags of fireworks. I felt my grandpa’s absence keenly. In summers, I’d followed him around helping him do chores, and then every evening as the sun began to set, he’d take off down the dirt road with me scurrying after him. He’d always end up at the old schoolhouse where we’d sit on the front steps and just take in the world around us. He was a man of few words, but the silence never felt empty with him.

Now that my grandpa was gone, I spent the day throwing bang pops on the back steps until they were littered with twisted white papers and the farm cats had scattered to the fields. Even when Grandma came out with scraps after dinner (lunch was dinner and dinner was supper in Kansas and no one but me seemed to find this at all confusing) to feed to the cats, they wouldn't approach the slop pan until I had taken my box of bang pops back in the house.

Sometime after supper, Dad produced a box of black snakes and shook them at me, grinning. “I got your favorites, kitten,” he said, tugging on my ponytail and then chucking me under the chin.

He set the little black discs out for me on the hood of my

grandpa's rusted old pick-up truck and lit them with the end of his cigarette. I watched the ash snakes grow and grow until they were done. The light breeze shattered them into pieces and lifted them up to float away. I captured one in my hands and smeared the black soot across my palm. With the snakes gone and my bang pops spent, my 4th of July celebration was rapidly running dry. Across the dirt road, Frankie blew up a rusted out bucket he'd found in the barn. I wasn't actually interested in blowing stuff up, but no one asked me if I wanted to either. Shania napped under the back porch. I watched my dad draw on his cigarette and exhale slowly.

"Daddy, can I walk over to the schoolhouse?"

"I'll walk you over later, kitten," Dad promised. "Let's go see if your grandma has any cookies right now."

I wanted to correct him, to emphasize that I'd been asking to go on my own. But he'd already turned his back on me, so I followed him into the house and ate three cookies while he stretched out on the couch and closed his eyes. Mama was off somewhere looking at quilting fabrics with Grandma and the aunts. I took my Nancy Drew mystery and went to go read under the porch with Shania, but she was no longer there. I sat in the grass and closed my eyes. I could hear the cattle moaning in the distance. My uncle cursed as his tractor sputtered to a halt. Frankie cheered as yet another string of firecrackers popped their way to termination. I wondered if anyone in the world was aware of my presence in that moment.

By nightfall, I was itching my chigger bites and waiting for my father to light up a couple sparklers for me. Mama asked, "Has anyone seen the dog?"

"Shania was under the porch earlier, but then she was gone," I offered. "Maybe she went exploring on her own."

I saw my parents exchange glances.

"With dark coming on, coyote'll most likely get her if she doesn't come back soon," my uncle offered. My aunt elbowed him in the ribs when my bottom lip began to tremble.

"What?" he said. "It's true."

"We gotta go look for her," I cried.

"Kitten, it's dark. She could be anywhere. I'm sure she'll be back by morning," my dad said as he rifled through the bag of fireworks.

"Noooooo," I wailed. "We can't let the coyotes get her!" The night was fast becoming too dark for me to read the expression

on his face, so I turned to Mama. "Please!"

"Of course we'll look for her," Mama assured as she pulled me in for a hug, smoothing the humidity-frizzed curls out of my face.

Grandma went into the house and returned with every flashlight she could find. At first just Mama, me, Grandma, and Frankie walked around calling Shania's name, but soon the rest of the family joined in, including Dad. We probably spent an hour looking over every corner of the farm, but Shania didn't appear.

"We tried, sweetie," Mama said when everyone else had gravitated back to the tree where our Fourth of July celebration had been taking place before Shania's absence derailed it. "She's a smart dog. She's probably just found a really good napping spot right here on the farm. I'll bet she'll show up in the morning just in time for breakfast." She smiled, but I didn't believe it.

"No point in wasting perfectly good fireworks because the dog went missing," Dad said and we settled back onto our picnic blankets.

I snuggled into Mama's side and watched him nail a spinner to the tree. After he lit it though, I closed my eyes and refused to see it. I tried to mentally summon Shania back. I noticed even Frankie didn't cheer as the spinner wailed and whined through its big moment.

That night when we bedded down in ol' Dottie, I wanted to leave Shania's bowls of food and water outside, just in case.

"Her food'll probably just attract something else," Dad argued.

Mama helped me fill Shania's water bowl and leave it right outside the van door.

I laid there, trying to sleep, but even with the windows open, it was suffocating in ol' Dottie. I got to thinking how that camper was older than both me and Frankie and how our dad had had it longer. He said he'd named it after Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, since ol' Dottie is what got him out of Kansas in the first place, but Mama's lips always disappeared when he talked about naming ol' Dottie. Frankie told me once that Dad used to have a girlfriend named Dottie. She had really big boobs and that's why Mama hated ol' Dottie. But I never could tell when Frankie was telling the truth about anything. All I knew for sure was Dad was awfully fond of the van, and I thought maybe if he'd had it longer than us, maybe he even loved it more. He certainly loved it more than Shania. Part of me, a

shameful, wicked deep down part of me, hated him in that moment.

I slid out of my sleeping bag, careful not to disturb Frankie on the top bunk. I inched my feet into my flip flops and found the flashlight Mama had put by the van door in case anyone needed to go into the house to use the bathroom in the middle of the night. I left as quietly as I could and made my way to the dirt road.

It was a loud kind of quiet. There were no sounds of traffic or people making their way home after a late night -- the sounds that would waft in on open window summer nights back home. Instead, the Kansas night was filled to the brim with shrill cicadas and the wind tickling the cornstalks. I felt the night might burst with it. That I might burst from being out in it.

I could only think of one place to go, so I followed the familiar road to the schoolhouse. It was maybe a ten minute walk in daylight if I was in a hurry and clipping right along, or a twenty minute walk when I was leisurely playing at being my grandpa's shadow, but the night stretched the road out like taffy, and I was sure it would take me all night to get there.

At long last, the schoolhouse was in sight, its black outline pressing against the purple night with a halo of stars. In the tall grass next to the road, I heard a rustling, and I turned with only my flashlight, hoping to blind whatever creature was about to pounce on me. I half expected to see the coyote that ate Shania -- maybe it was still hungry and liked little girls as much as basset hounds. But instead, I was greeted by a familiar bellow. I dropped my flashlight and fell to my knees in the dirt road so I could swallow Shania up in a hug.

Now reunited with my dog, safe and sound, I didn't want to go back to ol' Dottie. I picked up my flashlight and went to sit on the schoolhouse steps. What was quaint and smacked of nostalgia during the day, was dark and ghostly at night, but still, it was where I needed to be in that moment.

Miles Varana's *work has appeared in a variety of publications, including SOFTBLOW, After the Pause, Chicago Literati, Viewfinder, and Crack the Spine. He has worked previously as a staff reader and managing editor at Hawai'i Pacific Review. Miles lives in Madison, Wisconsin, where he tries his best to behave like a good millennial despite his abiding hatred of tapas.*

Left in Pittsburgh

Miles Varana

We had an argument one time.
Is this city a noun or verb?
You insisted noun, I contended verb.

You saw the cracks in the sidewalk,
the fire escapes going up to nothing,
the rain on the window pane,
the streetcar stopped under the shoes hung
on the powerline, laces white with snow.
What ever happened to jazz? You demanded.

I see the lights going out one by one,
the dumpster lids slamming shut,
the brunch spots coming alive at eleven,
the passing of fancies,
and the streetcar skating away from us
with your scarf on a seat.

Martin Jennings *has earned an MFA from Spalding University. His work has appeared in Five on the Fifth, Flash in the Attic 2, SickLit Magazine, Under the Bed, and is forthcoming in MilkFist Magazine. He lives in Louisville, KY.*

Transparent Living

Martin Jennings

It started with children, stopping and pointing, pulling on coat bottoms and asking questions about the man in the window. Who is he? Why does he live inside the window? The parents peered in, watching the man suspiciously. There were a few plastic arms scattered around; the window used to display maternity mannequins decked out in discount dresses. That was some time ago, when people still shopped downtown. The police stopped by after concerned calls, but what they observed was mostly sitting and reading. There wasn't an active lease on the property so they left the man alone.

He was starting to become an attraction. Small crowds stood outside and watched him. Behind the thick glass, the man was on display twenty-four hours a day. The public watched him drink coffee, bathe, piss in a bucket, rework old crossword puzzles, and rearrange waist-high stacks of pulp novels to make room for his nightly stretches. Teenagers snuck out in the middle of the night and tapped on the glass to wake him up, moon him, and try to find a way into the display. They wrote questions on a pad of paper and held them up to the glass: How old are you? Are you homeless? Got any weed? The man laughed it off. Local reporters tried to conduct interviews but he politely declined with a shake of his shaggy head. His refusal to communicate with the world outside the window only contributed to his mystique. He became a tourist-spot, a destination.

During the winter, art critics from New York flew down to watch him, spending days out in the cold with their space heaters and tablets. They referred to him as a performance artist of the utmost dedication and commitment. They praised him; one critic wrote, "The man is not classically handsome, but he has the presence of a movie star or a guru, though he never speaks. There is a reverence

among the audience here, a sense that you are in the presence of a man keyed into some frequency that's just slightly beyond our reach and understanding." Another critic wrote, "While you're watching the man in the window, he can choose to watch you back. And when he watches you, it feels like you've been chosen. Conversely, when he looks away, you can't help but feel rejection as if noticing the roaming eyes of your lover."

The man inspired waves of New York and LA gallery owners to buy properties around Bleeker St. They bought vacant buildings and expanded the display windows to turn the entire street into performance space with walls entirely made of glass, one large interconnected Installation. Of the few remaining businesses, the bakery and the hardware store were the first to be bought. This put an end to the man's supply of bread, pastries, and coffee—not to mention electricity, which was generously provided by the hardware store. The outraged citizens congregated on Twitter and informed the owners of the performance space about the situation. The galleries' representatives responded, advising the man to have his agent contact them and they would see about setting something up, for a negotiable, nominal fee.

While the concerned neighbors were fiercely tweeting away, the man grew gaunt from hunger. Drifting in and out of consciousness, he crawled to the window and pounded his shriveled fists against the glass. The paramedics shattered the glass and removed the man from the space he'd come to regard as home.

After four days in the hospital, the man was released. He trudged across town—in the sweat-suit and slippers they'd given him—and stood outside of his storefront window. Not only had the shattered glass been replaced, but the inside had been updated. It was now made of veined, white marble and it glowed. There was no trace of his avocado-colored couch, his lamp, or his books.

Inside the window, a woman was curled up inside a metal hoop suspended from the ceiling. She was wearing a peach leotard and eating Shredded MiniWheats out of a plastic fedora. The woman stared at him then lowered one leg over the front of the metal ring. She flipped herself upside down and dangled by her calf, not spilling any milk. Then she pointed to a small slot he had failed to notice on his right. Above the slot was the word *Requests*. The man opened the flap and said, "Excuse me, this is my home."

The woman looked said through a mouthful of milk, "That's

not in the form of a request."

He screamed in, "Fine. I request that you get the hell out of *my* window."

On the far wall, she pressed a square button with her foot. Two guards rounded the corner and scooped the man up under his arms and walked him half a block down the street. One of the guards pointed at a glass box suspended from thin wires. The man walked toward it and marveled at its construction, a floating coffin that was very nearly invisible. He touched the glass, the cool smoothness beneath his palm felt nice, familiar. He marveled at how even the hinges were composed of glass. Climbing inside, he found that the length perfectly matched his height. There was a small glass knob that he used to close the lid on himself. Laying there, suspended in the air, he watched the pedestrians file passed on both sides. Some of them stopped and looked, pointing at the floating man. The seal of the box was tight and kept out most of the street noise. Grateful for the quiet, he put his arms by his sides. The wind tugged at the wires, causing the box to sway. Staring straight up, the tops of buildings and trees hovered over him like guardians. How good it felt to be sheltered again. How good it was to be seen.

Vincent Salvati *was born and raised in New Jersey. He is a graduate of Pratt Institute, Montclair State University and William Paterson University. An author, poet, and visual artist, he strives for creativity in his work and his life. He has previously written and performed in the New York City area and his work can be found in a variety of publications including The Paterson Literary Review. Among his many solo and group exhibitions is his inclusion in the New Jersey Arts Annual at the Montclair Art Museum. He is currently on the board of directors for the Jersey City based non-profit, Pro Arts. He is an avid traveler and loves learning about different cultures. When he isn't creating he can be found trekking around one continent or another. Vincent currently lives and works in New Jersey.*

The Fire

Vincent Salvati

My father was a good man. He drank a lot, yes, but deep inside he was good. Like his father and his father's father before him he was an alcoholic. Mom liked to say he inherited it. He wasn't a mean drunk. Actually, he was the most caring man I knew, when he was drunk. When he wasn't, he was a cranky bastard. Luckily, for most of us, he was usually sloshed. He loved his family, and he loved to laugh. Drinking helped him laugh. If he didn't have a drink, he wasn't going to laugh. And neither was anyone else.

So to keep a happy family, we kept Dad drunk. He was pretty high functioning, at least early in the day. He wrote a weekly column for the local paper, which didn't pay much but kept the booze fresh. The rest was a crapshoot most weeks. The reason it didn't pay much was that Dad was so unreliable. Sometimes he was just lazy and missed deadlines, and sometimes he would work a piece over and over like he was writing the great American novel. Either way, if Dad missed the deadline, he didn't get paid. And he missed a lot of deadlines. Mom, along with help from my younger sister Allie, grew a few things in the yard during the summer and in buckets in the house during the colder weather. She was a tough and resilient mom, managing the house and my father while keeping us kids in line. Potato soup often topped the menu. Meat didn't frequent the table

very often unless Jimmy or Frankie, my older brothers, killed something with the shotgun we kept near the door.

Being a writer, Dad spent most of his day in front of the typewriter at the kitchen table. There he sat, hour after hour banging away at his Remington. By mid-afternoon, there was a neat pile of pages next to him, a floor full of discards, and an empty bottle of bourbon. Though he sat most of the time, when Dad wanted to do physical work he was rather capable, except the time he shot Frankie in the leg while cleaning the gun. He would take odd jobs from time to time when Mom demanded it. He mended fences, fixed plumbing, painted houses (as long as you didn't need any straight lines), fixed broken furniture, and even built a barn once (though it did take eight months and Mr. Reilly swore he'd kill him since he promised it would only take three).

On the morning of the fire, Dad labored away on a piece about the upcoming council election. It was an opinion piece, and my father felt right at home with his opinions, especially when it came to politics. He hated every last one of those corrupt politician bastards, especially President McKinley. At least that was the way he always put it. If he had a chance to disrupt their plans of hoodwinking the public, he would jump at it. Eventually, one of his insults almost brought a lawsuit. When they showed up to threaten Dad and saw what we had, or didn't have, they decided their efforts would be for nothing. The paper loved him (when he met his deadlines) because he brought so much attention with his controversial views, usually against the mayor or the church or some other beloved institution.

His stories would often drive away advertisers, but the editor didn't care. The more he drove away, the more would want to get in. And most of the ones that left eventually came back. When J. Fielder and Sons canceled because they felt his language was not Christian enough, their space was filled with an ad for a company that printed Bibles. When an oil company pulled their ad, it was replaced by their biggest competitor. They came back two weeks later with an ad twice the size.

Mr. Sewell, the editor and owner of the paper, would come by every other Friday to see Dad and give him his pay. Mr. Sewell was a big man with a big belly and a big laugh. When the weather was nice, he and Dad would sit out back as the sun went down and drink whatever Mr. Sewell brought with him. They were a pair alright, Dad in his dirty and tattered clothes and Mr. Sewell in the new fashions.

But they genuinely liked each other. When Dad's sister, Aunt Marjory, died, Mr. Sewell bought all the food for the repast. Aunt Marjory was a widow and had no children. Dad was her only family, and Mr. Sewell knew Dad couldn't afford it. It was the best meal we had that month, probably that year. Fresh roast beef, three kinds of cheese, and lots of fruit made me forget my aunt had died. I ate until I thought I would pop. Too bad Aunt Marjory had to die for us to get a good meal.

Anyway, that morning Dad had spent writing and rewriting his election season opinion piece until he got it just right. Mom had just come home from another one of her temporary side jobs. That one was cleaning houses. She had three houses further up the hill from where we lived that would pay her a decent wage for a few hours of work. She would rotate, cleaning one a day for six days and taking Sunday off. They weren't mansions, but they certainly were nice homes.

Around four-thirty that afternoon, Frankie came running in yelling something about an explosion and fire.

"What are you talking about?" Mom asked from the stove where she was making some stew. The night before Allie had sweet-talked the butcher's son into sneaking her some leftover pork bones when his father wasn't looking. She was only ten, but she was learning fast. Jimmy came home with three loaves of fresh bread, a bunch of carrots and six apples. This was not unusual for Jimmy. From time to time, he would show up with a grocery basket full of food. No one ever asked where it came from. We were all anticipating a good meal.

We still couldn't understand Frankie, but he was frantic.

"Frankie!" Mom yelled. "Slow down. No one can understand a word you're saying."

"There was an explosion down by the paper," he finally got out. "The whole building is on fire!"

Dad walked out of the bathroom as Frankie was explaining it.

"What's all the commotion?" Dad hollered.

"Dad," Frankie began more slowly, "there's a fire at the newspaper. The whole building is on fire."

Once it registered in Dad's head, he grabbed his hat and headed out the door. Mom yelled after him, but she knew it was no use. Dad always did what Dad wanted.

"Go after your father," she said to Frankie and me.

We headed out the door to find that he had made his way quite a distance. For someone with that much alcohol in his body, he was making good time. We lived at the top of the hill just outside the downtown area. It was a good quarter mile down the hill and then another half mile into the center of town where the newspaper building was.

"He's moving way too fast," Frankie said. "We better get him before he falls forward and tumbles down the rest of the hill."

"Dad! Hey, Dad!" I yelled as we sprinted after him.

There was no reply. He didn't even acknowledge us. He just focused on the task at hand. We weren't really sure what that task was, but he was determined. Frankie was older than I was and much faster. He got to Dad a few seconds before I did.

"Hey, Dad," he said sliding up next to him. "Where ya goin' so fast?"

Dad just swung his arm in dismissiveness and carried on. Frankie walked with him and kind of had a hand out just in case he had to catch him from falling. I got on the other side, and following Frankie's lead, did the same. Dad looked impatient even with the speed he was going. At one point he started to jog and seemed like he was gearing up to run. A few steps and he wisely decided brisk walking would be sufficient.

When we got to the bottom of the hill and started heading toward downtown and the very visible fire, Frankie decided he had enough. He jumped in front of Dad and caught him since Dad couldn't react fast enough to not slam into Frankie.

"What the hell are you doing?" Dad growled.

"No, Dad," Frankie replied, "what the hell are *you* doing?"

"The fire!"

"You can't go to the fire, Dad."

"I sent Allie there with my drafts earlier!"

Frankie and I just looked at each other.

"You did what?" Frankie demanded.

"I sent your sister there. I send her once in a while to deliver my work. I pay her a nickel, and she loves going to see Mr. Sewell."

"Stay here with Dad," Frankie told me. "I'll run down."

Frankie took off at a sprint that I never would have been able to keep up with. Dad started following him but still walking.

"No, Dad," I said. "Let's wait here. Frankie will get her."

He kept walking, but much slower, like he was running out of

steam, or hope. He gave in to the idea that he was not going to save Allie. Frankie or the firemen or someone else would have to save her, but not him. He sent her into the fire, but he wouldn't be pulling her out. He kept walking slowly and began to cry. That was the first time I had seen Dad cry. It wouldn't be the last.

"Dad, it's going to be okay. I bet Frankie gets there and she already left the building. Probably long before the fire broke out. I bet she went to that little five and dime candy store down the block to spend her allowance. She's probably there right now drinking a big milkshake and doesn't even know there's a fire. You know how oblivious she can be."

I'm not sure if it helped at all, but Dad seemed to stop crying, and we kept slowly moving toward the fire. As we got closer, I could see it had spread. What I assumed started in the newspaper building was now moving further down the block. Old man Vito's barbershop, O'Connor's Pub, and the shoe store where we all bought our good shoes seemed to be in the path of the mighty fire.

By the time the fire was out it had taken twenty-seven lives and injured twice as many. As I predicted and hoped, Allie had not been in the building. She left well before the fire had started, went to the five and dime, met a friend there, and went back to her friend's house. Frankie didn't know where she was when he got there and he went in to find her. He didn't come out.

We buried Frankie about twenty yards over from Mr. Sewell.

Dad was destroyed. He lost his son, good friend, job, and almost his daughter in one quick moment. And that moment stayed with him. In the days following the funeral, Dad only drank. He barely ate and stopped bathing. He was sad, angry, and depressed. As hard it was for the rest of us, we tried to help him as best as we could. But there seemed to be nothing at all we could do. There were nights he didn't come home, and one of us would find him sleeping in a park or on the corner.

Without Dad's small pay coming in things got real tough real fast, even though Mom picked up some extra houses to clean. Jimmy and I had still been in school, but both decided it was time to get a job. Jimmy was angry with himself for not being around the afternoon of the fire, and I couldn't concentrate on school any longer. Jimmy went to work as a day laborer and made some decent money at it right away.

I was lucky enough to find a bricklayer to take me on as an

apprentice. It was a great opportunity, but the pay was horrible. Allie stayed in school but once she realized Frankie died looking for her she was pretty messed up.

In addition to Dad never being around, he was frequently getting arrested. If it wasn't for vagrancy, it was for fighting. Then either Jimmy or I would have to go down and bail him out. I think the reason Mom never went was that she was embarrassed by him. She felt sorry for him and all he lost, but she was angry that he couldn't pull himself together for the rest of the family.

Later that year, inconsolable, Dad left the house and wandered to the old train trestle. The conductor's report said that he couldn't tell if Dad was drunk and couldn't hear the train whistle or if he just didn't want to move.