# Typehouse

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# Typehouse
LITERARY MAGAZINE

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# Typehouse Literary Magazine

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*Typehouse is a writer-run literary magazine based out of Portland, Oregon. We are always looking for well-crafted, previously unpublished writing and artwork that seeks to capture an awareness of the human condition. To learn more about us, visit our website at www.typehousemagazine.com.*

Cover Artwork*:* ***The Old Shop*** *by Lia Mageira (See TOC 2)*

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***Lia Mageira*** *(she/her) is a Greek travel photographer and writer based in Athens. Holding a degree from the University of West Attica, she focuses especially on history and culture. Her work has appeared in Spectaculum Magazine, Edge of Humanity Magazine, Tagree, Private Photo Review, Sunlight Press, Star 82 Review, Press Pause Press, Street Photography Magazine, and in travel websites and magazines. She was a nominee for the Best of the Net Awards 2021-2022 for her art.*

**The Old Shop**

*The colours in the Mediterranean countries are very intense for at least nine months in a year. This is a challenge for a photographer. Living in Greece I am fascinated by the sunlight. In this project, I tried to capture the colours of Greece.*

***Karen Boissonneault-Gauthier*** *is an Indigenous writer and photographer. Most recently she's been a cover artist for Synkronicity, Dyst, The Pine Cone Review, Doubleback Review, Arachne Press, Pretty Owl Poetry, Wild Musette, Existere Journal, Vine Leaves Literary Journal, Gigantic Sequins, Ottawa Arts Journal, and more. When she's not walking Kiowa, her Siberian Husky, she's designing with Art of Where. See www.kcbgphoto.com to find out more.*

**Citrus Dreams**

*Sometimes when I layer the images I shoot, the finished piece becomes what I refer to as a 'happy accident' because it will have a childlike whimsy and an unexpected display of the ordinary. In Citrus Dreams, a hint of psychedelic movement mixed with strong primary colours completes this refreshing look. Still, I cannot decide whether the fruit is fermenting or floating. Dreams rarely make sense, but our memory of them swim in our consciousness like citrus fruit in our cocktail.*

***Dawn Miller*** *(she/her) writes from Prince Edward County on the shores of Lake Ontario in Canada. Her short fiction has appeared in Jellyfish Review, The Main Review, and Loud Coffee Press Literary Magazine, among others. She is working on her debut novel. Learn more at www.dawnmillerwriter.com.*

# Mother's Wishes

## Dawn Miller

My sister and I position the urn on the middle shelf of the living room wall unit so that we'll see it every day. We wind layers of clear tape around the lid in case the urn tips over, scattering Mother across the newly laid Berber rug. When we pass the marble container, painted wisteria climbing up one side, we murmur, "We love you, Mother," as she'd instructed us, and touch the pink and white blooms with our fingertips.

Weeks pass, and we shove other items on the shelf that is supposed to be for Mother and Mother alone. Things like a box full of orphan keys, as we know we'll find the matching locks the moment we throw them away; a Hummel figurine, the child's mouth rounded, a dark crack splitting the porcelain face, but we can't throw it out—it's Mother's favourite!; and a stack of CDs— Pavarotti, Tchaikovsky, and Fine Young Cannibals (but then we extract the Cannibals disc from between Pavarotti and Pachelbel as that was never Mother's taste).

When the shelf is full and we need space for more precious tchotchkes like a plaster Eiffel Tower from the Louvre or the Jigglypuff doll we recently purchased in Japan, we release the heavy marble vessel from its faux-oak columbarium and bury it beneath the purple-leaf sand cherry tree in the back yard.

My sister crosses her arms. "I'm not sure about this. She doesn't like the dark."

"But she loved the drama of the purple-red leaves. And the pink flowers in spring are gorgeous," I say as I scoop mounds of earth onto the smooth marble and pat the ground.

Inside the house where we've lived for almost fifty years, we fill the space where the urn used to stand with battery-powered candles and paper rolls half-filled with pennies we really should throw away. Our inheritance was generous.

The following day, the ground at the base of the tree has roiled and heaved, revealing deep cracks in the silt and clay from the record-breaking heat, the sand cherry tilted like a picture askew on the wall. We press the lawn

with our matching black patent leather shoes, stamping around the trunk like some ritual fire dance.

Under a pale grey moon, we shine flashlights around the tree, examine how the thin roots shoot upward, gnarled fingers poking between blades of grass. We touch the lacy twists spit through with wet earth and slippery grubs and wonder if we'll need to call an arborist.

The next morning, our mother sits, fanning herself, in her favourite purple dress, long-sleeved and frilly collar, on the teak bench in the shade of the sand cherry. Soft heaps of freshly disturbed earth circle her Birkenstocks, the wrinkles on her face and hands caked with damp soil ripe with petrichor and spring. A wreath of tiny pink blooms weaves through her wisps of silver hair that never took a curl, no matter how hard she tried.

We stammer and fuss, ask her what she needs—tea? Something to eat? A warm bath? But she shakes her head, the tangled web of roots in her hair dropping loose clumps of dirt onto her lap with each turn of her chin.

She walks around the yard, and we wring our hands, worrying what the neighbors will think of her muddy root-hat and soil-laced fingers. She demands a cigarette and parks herself on the front porch in the shade, dried mud forming a ring around the chair as she rocks and rocks. She chain-smokes until we run out of cigarettes, and my sister drives to the store in our Tesla to buy a carton while I watch Mother from the shadows, wondering how we're going to explain this to the aunts and uncles.

In the evening, Mother wanders from the living room to the bedrooms, traipsing a thick line of silt across the carpet as she roams, pausing to sit on a bed and in the new La-Z-Boy, depositing crumbled mounds of clay on the bedspread and butter-soft leather seat. We follow her up and down the stairs but all I can think of is how much vacuuming we'll have to do from now on, the trail of muck never-ending as if she's made of earth.

We stand over the hole beneath the sand cherry at midnight while Mother clomps around the house flicking cigarette ash and soil into cupboards and drawers and inside the fridge.

"I think we've upset Mother," my sister says as I leave a message at the spa to reschedule our upcoming facials.

I press the cell phone to my chest. "I have an idea."

We search the base of the slanted tree, the ground cool and damp as we grope past earthworms and crickets. Our fingers knock the marble lid, and we heave the container out, Mother's ashes silent as a stone inside the wisteria urn while she stomps and stomps and stomps from room to room muttering *ingrates* and *moochers*.

By three in the morning, the scrubbed urn sits perched on the dusted middle shelf of the wall unit, the lid freshly secured. My sister and I fall asleep on the futon on the front porch, heads resting against one another, arms

interlaced, as Mother sits and smokes, leaving long streaks of dirt under the rockers.

When we wake at dawn, a pile of cigarette butts lies strewn around the empty rocking chair, and we look at each other with relief. We follow trails of soil to the backyard and use shovels to fill the hole, tamping down the softened ground with the backs of the blades.

We find another spot for the orphaned keys, stacks of CDs, and smiling Jigglypuff. We caress the marble urn with our fingertips, kiss each faded bloom.

***Toti O'Brien*** *is the Italian Accordionist with the Irish Last Name. Born in Rome and living in Los Angeles, she is an artist, musician and dancer. She is the author of Other Maidens (BlazeVOX, 2020), An Alphabet of Birds (Moonrise Press, 2020), In Her Terms (Cholla Needles Press, 2021), Pages of a Broken Diary (Psky's Porch, 2022) and Alter Alter (Elyssar Press, 2022).*

# M'IJA

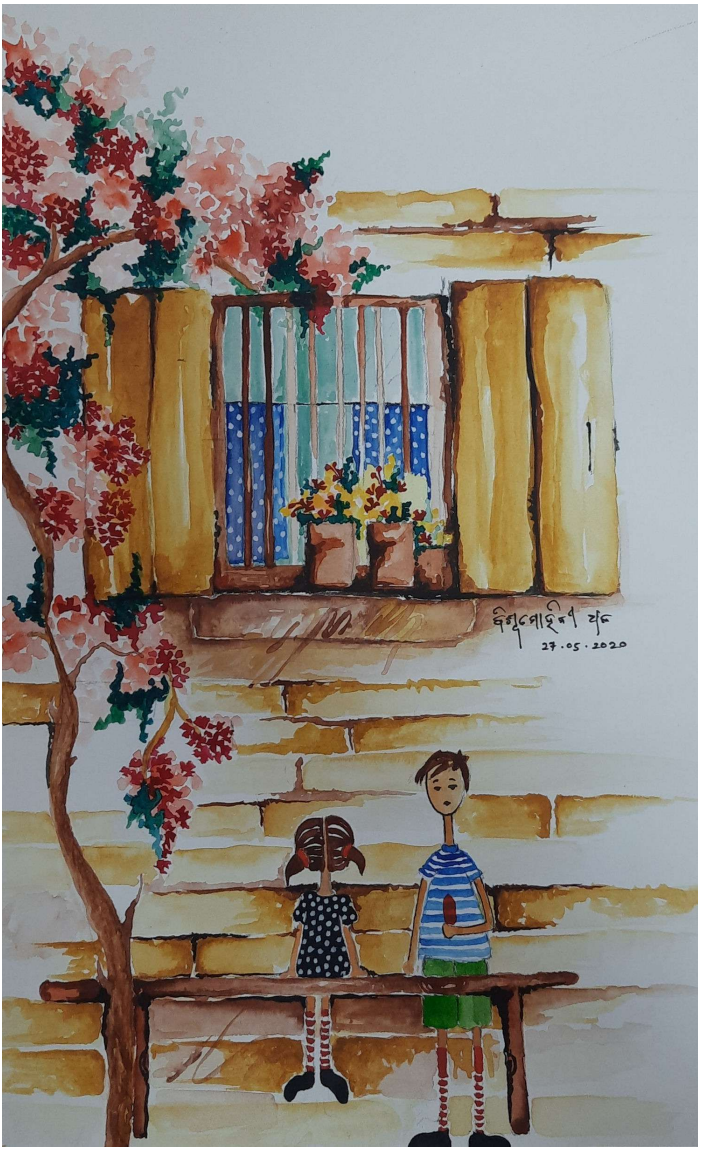
## Toti O'Brien

Daughter of collateral
damage, squeezed,
askew, ill-positioned
in the uterine channel.
Since, oblique in your
progress, always
favoring the far edge
of sofas and benches
from which you rippled
down, staining
your meager limbs
with rainbow patches.
Hair longer on one
side after impromptu
scissoring of an unruly
tangle. Hair raining
on your cheek,
impeding your sight.
Girl appeared then
vanished before
your third birthday,
only leaving the striped
aftermath of your
cotton smock, found
years later under
the sink, morphed
into one of those light,
soft rags fit for dusting
corners.

***Biswamohini Dhal*** *is a fashion designer from Odisha, India. She is a National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) alumna and winner of Best Design Collection 2018 at NIFT Bhubaneswar, Odisha. Biswamohini does graphic art, watercolour art, doodling, soft pastel art. and pencil art in addition to her work in fashion design. Her art has appeared in Chestnut Review, The Madison Review and New Reader Magazine. She tweets at @BiswamohiniDhal.*

**Room on a Summer Day**

*I painted Room on a Summer Day on one of those taxing lockdown evenings in 2020 when this was one of the only views I had*




**Popsicle Tree**

*Popsicle Tree is about the rustic childhood summers my brother and I spent in our village before we went to different cities for our studies and work. It has been years since we have spent vacations together, and those carefree summers are some of the best days I remember from when life was simpler.*

***L.R.*** *(she/her) writes from Jonesborough, TN where she lives with her family and many animals, including her service dog. She has recently been published with JMWW, Flash Glass, and Little Patuxent Review. She is an MFA in Writing candidate at the Vermont College of Fine Art*

# Curls

## L. R.

1.

The heat burns through me. I wind the silk of my hair around the curling rod, wrapping it from the scalp to the ends, around and around until my hand feels too hot even through the protective glove. Pulling the rod down, the curl tumbles with a bounce to settle against my breast. I touch the arching strands, and I imagine your hand there instead of mine, delicately fingering the curl, parting the strands, experimenting with the texture and the weight. When I lift the next section, the tickling tingle of my hair parting shoots down, making my skin rise in little bumps until I shiver in longing. I am grounded by the heat of the rod in my hand, the hint of pain preventing me from flying too close to the sun.

2.

In Asheville, I part another woman's curls. I use one finger and then two, bending my fingers until she arches from the black sheets and sighs, a primal release of air that suggests a giving even as her muscles clench harder, at once begging me to move and begging me to stay. She watches me, but she doesn't see me, despite wanting to. Her legs shake when she tumbles over the edge, and I feel the hot consuming wetness of her. I put one finger in my mouth and then two. The taste of her is bitter on my tongue.

3.

In Pigeon Forge, I curl into myself on the bed, a deep, dull ache inside me. My legs and between are wet with coconut oil and duty, and I could have left, but I didn't. I watch his reflection in the steamed-up mirror as he picks up his phone and, forgetting me, he lets his smile betray him. He is gentle in his affection, by his own longing that isn't found inside this cabin, and he relaxes into this stolen moment where he is happy. Despite the sharp diamond on my finger that turns and cuts, I am the voyeur. The other in this bed we made.

4.

In St. Petersburg, under the curling waves, green seaweed clings between my toes. He tries to hold me steady as the current calls for me to leave, his arm a shadow across my stomach to where his fingers cling to my waist. There are children playing on the beach when he fills my mouth with his tongue and I feel his desire pressed against me. I tell him yes. Here. Under the murky water. I could be anyone with anyone but right now I am his. I can't stifle my cry when I step on a rock and my blood flows with a salty sting into the bay.

5.

In Plant City, I tease wet circles around another woman's hard peaks with the flat of my tongue as he waits in the other room. Another man watches from her feet, his hand under the white cloth of her modesty, as he holds my gaze, captivated. He wants me as she does. All I have to do is say yes. All I have to do is stay. I curl my hand around her neck and kiss her flushed skin and taste the beer on her lips. His mouth tastes the same. Then I leave and return to the living room where he languidly waits on the couch. He who bartered for my loyalty yet somehow stole something more.

6.

In Fredericton, I drag the blade of the scissors along the red and green ribbon until the polyester curls in pretty, bouncing frivolity. I run my fingers along the edge of the small box, each crease carefully made so the snow on the paper lines up, an uninterrupted blizzard contained only by the claustrophobic ribbon so tightly bound the box dents from the pressure. I glance at my silent phone. He is late. He is with someone else, this preexisting condition he sprung on me. I should have been first but I am second, for the first time but not for the last. I watch the snow fall out my dorm window, landing on naked limbs as gentle as a lover's touch, and I wait for him even though he will not come.

7.

It is a heart shaped madness curling inside my belly. My cheeks turn a gradually darkening shade of crimson with each strike. It is your hand controlling the crop even as the leather is heated by my own hand. I count the strikes, then restart, again and again, because the numbers blur until there is only pain and longing. You aren't there to watch, but you see me. I want you to see me. I should cover my scarred-up burn wounds. Resist surrender. Instead, I arch. I open. Wings bursting forth and flying towards the sun.

***Preeti Talwai*** *(she/her) writes from the California coast, where she is also a researcher at Google. Her work has been published in Right Hand Pointing, Bop Dead City, Unbroken, One-Sentence Poems, and India Currents, among others. She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and her fiction has been acquired by the Rare Book Collection at UC Berkeley.*

# Self-portrait at Eight

## Preeti Talwai

I don't say that my stomach is hurting. Not now, not just before we are about to drive the two hours to Berkeley. They'll lecture me the whole way there if they think I'm trying to find an excuse to stay home. I want to be a good kid. I hold the seat belt away from me so it doesn't dig into my belly. They slap my hand, tell me to stop holding the belt like that, stop leaning forward like that, you'll get killed if there's an accident. I don't want to die yet. I let it go and watch it wring my fat rolls like a boa constrictor, making me suck my organs in until the pain retreats. I follow the rules. I pinch my eyes shut and dig my nails into my palms, sweat pooling in my fist. They think gas station bathrooms are revolting, so I don't ask to stop. I watch for the speed limit sign with the obscene graffiti. We are getting closer. Then the inexplicable sign "Ocean City, MD - 3073 miles." I wonder if Ocean City has an ocean. I think about floating in the open sea, weightless, sensationless. We hit the glitch in the Lata Mangeshkar cassette tape and it squeaks like squabbling sewer rats. We are here. I slump against the wall in the corner of Sari Palace, shriveled as the money plant in our living room. They tell the storekeeper I am being dramatic. I yank the pain around inside myself like a Slinky. I feel it yo-yo between my ribs and my appendix. They order for me at Bombay Restaurant, tell me to eat. I swallow the nausea. I swallow the biryani. I am a good kid. I don't say my stomach is hurting. Not now, not just before we are about to drive back home.

# Apologies I've Received from my Chronic Illness

I’m sorry for giving you mixed signals, being so hot-and-cold all those years. I really should have made up my mind about us, but I hope you believe now that I’m here to stay. I’m sorry that I picked a fight before your high school friend’s wedding and made you miss it. But if it’s any consolation, she got divorced, so you probably have another chance. I’m sorry for showing up when you were on a date with what's-his-name, when we were technically on a break. I guess I never realized I was the jealous type until I saw you enjoying yourself without me. I’m sorry I keep butting into things that aren’t my business and making them about me. I’m sorry if I came off as controlling when I didn’t want you to go to India with your family. You know how I tend to overreact and flare up sometimes. I’m sorry that anything I do seems to cause you pain. I just hate seeing you this way. I’m sorry that every time you try to break up with me, I make promises I can’t keep. But I just feel like we’re cosmically connected, like I can’t exist without you. I hope you feel the same. I mean, do you even know who you are without me, don’t you need me too.

# In Sickness and in Health

I love you for suggesting we skip the Napa trip, the one with the non-refundable AirBnB. For Googling "hikes with restrooms running water" and for waiting outside them in movie theaters and malls and parks and hospitals. You let me take up more than half the chaise while we aimlessly browse Netflix trailers. And when we settle on something to watch, your hand moves automatically to the one spot on my left hip and you don't complain even if it's the fifth time today that I've asked you to press down a little harder. You try not to care when you see Whatsapp photos from a ski retreat you could have been on. You cut zucchini for dinner, even though that's my job. We go shopping for Gatorade and juice before my colonoscopy, and you still make the clear broth even though I barely drink any. We spend hours scouring clinical studies and statistics in Japanese research papers for something that can fix me. I love that you let me be sick. I like that you don't make me feel like a sick person. I love you for all the times you've rerouted to a gas station bathroom for me. All the times you've rerouted your life for me.

# Today is a Sweet Orange

Waking up is peeling an orange and sucking the nectar, checking if it is sweet or tart. Tart days are writhing under the duvet, sucking on ginger and turmeric, not-making-dinner guilt hanging above me like a guillotine. But today is a sweet orange, succulent pulp on my tongue and citrus fireworks down my throat. Today I am ravenous. Juice dribbling down my neck and misting the air, leaving sticky spots to discover later. I am outdoors, treads on trails, unchained from bathrooms and beds. When the orange trees awaken each winter, they invite me into their waxy foliage and whisper-white blooms, to harvest more days, more mysteries. They show me how I can grow leaves again. How sometimes so many blossoms must fall to let the others bear fruit again.

***Lorin Lee Cary*** *taught history at a university in Ohio and now creates his own cause and effect relationships, such as in The Custer Conspiracy, a humorous historical novel set in the present,and California Dreaming, a metafiction novella. Stories are in Torrid Literature, Impspired, and Corvus Review among others. His photos have appeared in Typehouse, Carolina Muse Literary & Arts Magazine, Constellations: A Journal of Poetry and Fiction, and Wrongdoing.*

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*I've taken photos for years, having been exposed to the magic of darkroom work as a young teen at a YMCA class. Over the years I've used different cameras and love being able to tune images in a computer.*


**Venice Market**

*Taken early morning in October 2006 after a rain. I loved the lines and shapes and textures. I've come back to this image numerous times over the years.*

*I like to be out and about early in the morning, always on the lookout for interesting scenes. As Yogi Berra once said "You can observe a lot by just watching." These two photos testify to that truth.*

**No Stopping**

*Before dawn at the train station in San Luis Obispo, CA in January 2017. I was getting ready to head to LA for my nephew's birthday, and took a number of pictures. The motion of the train in this image captured the setting for me.*

***Elizabeth*** *(she/her) is a second year PhD student studying fiction in the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi. Previous publication credits include Blackberry Winter, Windmill, and Apricity Magazine, among others. She was a finalist in the Hamline Garland Award for the Short Story from Beloit Fiction Journal in 2021.*

# Don't the Magic Come From God

## Elizabeth Trueblood

I got to admit, he did a mighty fine job. The Preacher, I mean. Getting all this done, getting folks—folks and us—right where he wanted them. I could kick myself, I guess. For not seeing the signs. For not hearing the whispers. For not realizing that our horse didn't run off two days ago, dammit, but was taken while we slept. Probably killed. Can't tell Margot that, though. She'd be so upset.

I reckon I could curse, too. Curse the Preacher. Curse Pa for moving us out here, to this patch of land where nothing ever grows and you can't get down the mountain without a horse, not with any kind of speed, anyway. I could curse the rattlers and burrows and coyotes and cougars and all the other things that are dangerous in the dark, and I could curse the people too. The ones who claimed to love her. The ones who would not help us.

But I don't have time for none of that. Nine times out of ten, Pa always said, throwing blame around is a way to get out of dealing with your problems. He was right. He was right about a lot of things.

So we're not going to kick, and we're not going to curse. But I got to decide what we *are* going to do, because the sun is setting closer to the mountain, though the glow on the horizon isn't from that. We have maybe an hour before they arrive.

"Gem?" Margot's voice is small behind me.

"Hm?"

"What . . . what're we gonna do?"

We'd come up with two plans. One: to run, to risk the dark and everything in it and try to make it back East, to the land of our Ma where no one knew us and we didn't know anyone. That was before they took the horse.

The other: to stay. We thought the Joneses and the Lisles and the Andersens and the Delgados and the others, the ranchers, would help us. Well. We know how that turned out.

I've been thinking on it all day. Plan number three. And I think it's the one we're going to have to do. I haven't told Margot plan three, but when I turn around and look at her I feel like she knows. She says she can't hear what

I'm thinking, but I'm not always sure I believe her. I go into the house and pull Pa's shotgun from the gun case, the one piece of furniture we'd brought with from the East. "A man's got to protect what's his, and he can't do it if his weapons ain't protected too," he'd said, when Margot noticed that pulling the travois with the gun case on it was making the horse tired. In the end I guess I'm glad he brought it, because it made sure the shotgun was always oiled up nice and shiny and not caked with dust like everything and everyone else out here.

I pull out the gun and the boxes of shells down from the shelf—there were thirty, I'd counted before. Enough for fifteen shots. I don't know if I can kill fifteen people, but I reckon I got to try. I ain't no man, but I'm going to protect what's mine.

I go out on the porch and sit in the rocker Pa built, loading the shotgun in my lap. I can feel Margot watching me from the doorway. She comes out and sits at my feet without a word; not like her. I should tell her to go inside, off the nice porch and past the cabinets and potbelly stove and twin feather beds and indoor plumbing, yes sir, that her tricks had paid for, and into the cellar our Pa had dug with his own two hands when we came here, first thing that went in before he built our house around it. She should go down there and be real quiet and maybe, when they get here, they'll think I sent her away. Maybe. But I don't reckon she'd go if I told her to, now, and honestly I like her company. And we got a little time.

After a minute she's making her tricks: a horse made of mirrors, a rainbow snake, bears made of stars balancing on red balls, daisies with petals that flash pink, orange, and yellow. I've seen her make these tricks bigger than our house, before, in her play yard around back, to thunderous applause from ranchers and city folk, grown-ups and kids alike. Now they're little, just for us. Maybe even just for her, I don't know. It don't matter much. Even if she were to make something terrifying, and she can make terrifying things—an army of men with no faces, or a dragon the size of a mountain made of iron and fire that she saw in a dream once—nothing she makes is real. Just tricks, just for fun. Little miracles, Pa used to call them. Little miracles just for us.

The mirror horse gallops up my leg and onto the shotgun. It rears and shakes its mane at me.

'Course, Pa saying her miracles were "just for us" didn't stop Margot from showing off to little ones. Children younger than she was, tots who somehow talked their folks into letting them walk across the desert from their ranches, some as far as two miles, to play with Margot McKay and her "pretty pictures." Pa didn't much care about them. It's little ones, after all; they tell stories all the time that ain't true. Didn't matter if they knew. Pretty sure the parents thought the whole thing was horseshit anyway, at first, until one of the older children came along and brought back the exact same stories. Rainbow butterflies. Lizards made of diamonds. Lions that glittered like raw gold when

they ran through the sky. I don't know where Margot comes up with these things. She says her dreams, but I have a hard time wrapping my head around even that. I don't dream much. You get too dog-tired working to dream, that's what Pa always said. And when I do, it's nothing much; the desert. Brown. The mountains, maybe a little purple in the distance, but usually brownish-grey. Scrub under my boots, brown on greenish-brown. A lot of brown, I guess. But sometimes I'll dream sunsets too—that dark blue-black fading into greenish blue fading somehow into orange and yellow and red. There's stars too, little pinprick stars. I dream in desert colors. Margot never has. She dreams, I guess, in everything but. So I suppose I don't blame folks for being interested. It was more than her just being able to make things appear out of thin air. It's the colors she made them appear in.

The horse gallops across the barrel of the shotgun and down my other leg, to rejoin the tricks on the floor. By the time he gets back down there, he's made of fire.

This is how I like to remember things: me and Margot and little tricks on the floor, and Pa watching too sometimes, if he wasn't busy. When Margot was real little all she made were colors, sparkles—they floated around her like clouds, all day, all the time. They turned dark and moved quicker when she was angry or annoyed, and it was a long time before Pa would let her off the homestead. But even once she'd learned to control her tricks better, Pa said we couldn't talk about her miracles, her magic to anyone else. Guess I understand why, now.

The first grown-ups who came out to see what their children were making such a fuss over were the Joneses. Their homestead's only half a mile from ours, so their littlest boys, Gav and Charlie, the ones too small to ride yet, were over here a lot. Still, when I saw them following their boys down the game path between our two places I didn't like it. Kids is one thing, Pa always told me, on those quiet nights we had together after Margot had gone to sleep. Grown-ups is another. You got to be careful with grown-ups, 'cause you never know what they're going to do.

"Hello, Miss Gemma," Mrs. Jones said, real proper, hitting that "s" on "Miss" crisp and separating my name into two full syllables, "Gem-mah." She was from the east. Guess that's why she talked all fancy. I wonder if Ma talked fancy too. I don't remember. Pa never talked about her.

"Mornin', Miz Jones," I said. Pa said learning to talk nice was a waste of time; said as long as folks could understand you, the less time it took you to talk the better. Mr. Jones got this, 'cause he just nodded at me.

"Mighty dry this season." I reckon it's been mighty dry every goddamn season since Pa moved us out here, but I know that's just what folks say to each other out here when they ain't got nothing else to say. Mr. Jones said it respectful, anyway, so I didn't mind.

"Mighty dry," I agreed.

"We're sorry we haven't come by with the boys before this," Mrs. Jones said, "things did get busy at our place. We ought to have come and pay our respects."

Lots of people talked at me like that the first few times I went into town after Pa died—paying respects. Pa always thought that was silly, and I guess I do too. Paying respects? What for? Guy's already dead. Pretty sure he don't give a damn about respects. That's why we didn't have a funeral for Pa. Just burned him on the bonfire like the dog and mules and everything else that died out here. Ground's too hard and dry for gravedigging anyway. Ain't no point.

I wonder what the Preacher's planning to do with us. I reckon he'd like to re-create the Crucifixion, but even for him that'd be a little much. Probably he'll just burn us, like we did Pa. Well, burn me. I'm still hoping they won't find Margot.

"We didn't mind," I said.

"I'm glad to hear it," she said. "At any rate, we wanted to stop by and thank you for putting up with Gav and Charlie these last couple weeks. Having them out from underfoot has really helped us get our planting done."

I waved my hand. "Don't mention it. I think Margot likes the company."

"Yes, I think the boys enjoy Margot's company too. The stories they come back with, my word!"

I was stacking wood and didn't look up from it, but I could feel Mrs. Jones's eyes on me. It was that thing that people do sometimes, I think, where they'll say something, and they already kind of know what they want you to say back, and you're stuck trying to figure out exactly what that is so you don't piss them off.

I think Mrs. Jones wanted me to tell her that her boys were making it all up, the butterflies and the lizards and the lions and the snakes, but Pa always said the ugliest thing in the world you can be is a damn liar, beaten out only by murderers, rapers, and folks who kicked their dogs. I didn't want to be any of those things, and I didn't want to be a liar either. "Yup. Gav and Charlie like the pink snakes Margot makes. She says the boys sing songs and she makes the snakes dance. They make a real game of it. It's nice."

The Joneses were quiet for a long time, long enough to make me look up. Mrs. Jones's eyebrows were up.

"Would you mind if we went back and took a look?" Mr. Jones asked. I couldn't tell if he believed me or not. Letting them go would clear it up easily enough, but I wasn't sure it was a good idea. Margot'd be all for it—she loved the more the merrier—but if Pa'd been here, I don't know that he'd like it. Not letting them see wasn't the same as telling a lie, I guess. But in the end I figured, what harm could it do? It's only two grown-ups.

"Sure," I said, and they went back and Margot showed them all of it. The butterflies, the lizards, the lions, the snakes. I went back and watched too for a while, but then I got back to stacking wood. Wasn't like I hadn't seen it before.

But Mr. and Mrs. Jones? They'd never seen anything like it, what Margot could do. They came back oohing and aahing, just like their boys, and they went home that afternoon smiling, just like their boys. I thought Pa might've been wrong, at least a little bit; I *had* known how the Joneses were gonna react to Margot, I just hadn't *known* I knew it. They went away happy, like the children always did. Margot makes people happy.

Margot sends up a daisy next, to float, petals flashing, in front of my face, twirling faster and faster 'til it's this pinkish whorl that I know will vanish if I touch it. I almost do, but Margot doesn't like it when I do that. Break the illusion, and she pouts. I guess I get that. Why would you want someone to ruin something you made, after all? It was one of the few rules of her show: Be polite. Pay up front. Don't touch the illusions, please. That second one was more my rule than hers, but I think Pa would've appreciated it, given the circumstances.

When we get to heaven—I hope that's where we're going, anyway—I'm going to give Pa a piece of my mind about this godforsaken piece of land he claimed as his homestead. Rough, rocky, too high on the mountain to have any good soil or damn water for planting, but this was where he put us, so this is where we stayed. I've already worked out what I'm going to say: "The land was trash, Pa, so we did what we had to do." I've been saying this, over and over in my head, practicing for when we get there. When I get there, at least. I reckon I have to defend myself, because if Pa really is looking down on us, he's not going to be happy with me when we get up there. But the land *is* trash, Pa. We did what we had to do.

"Gemma?" Margot's little face is turned up towards mine while the tricks still dance in front of her.

"Yeah?"

"Do you . . . do you think we could try talking to them? Maybe just one more time, just to see?"

Our Pa had nicknames for us: Sarkie and Opp. "Sarkie," that was mine, short for "sarcasm." "Opp," Margot's, stood for "optimistic." I don't think sarcasm's going to be any more helpful than optimism, though, at least not right now.

"No, I don't think so, Margot. I don't think they'll listen."

"Oh. Okay." She's quiet for a moment. "The children might listen, though. Like Clay. And Arthur and Gav and Charlie. Don't you think?"

"I don't think it'll make much of a difference."

"Oh."

The sun gets closer to the mountain.

The first townsfolk didn't come 'til after the last of the ranchers had their look. There was something orderly about that which I appreciated, and I know Pa would've too.

When they came up in their coach I didn't recognize them—not the driver, the horses, none of it. Lord, they were bouncing all to hell on the road—skinny little wet-weasel wheels weren't suited to the terrain out here. Better to just ride, Pa said, and tow a travois if you absolutely have to. I still agree with him on that. When they got down out of the coach I still didn't know who I was looking at, but they came walking up to the house like we were all the best of goddamn friends. They had two children with them—a little boy and a little girl. I wondered which of the ranch wives had gone into town and told.

"Good morning," the man said. I don't think he knew he was supposed to comment on how dry it was. "You must be Miss Gemma McKay?"

"Who's askin'?" I'd heard Pa say that only once, to a drifter who came through looking for water. I don't know how he'd gotten Pa's name, but he had it. Pa never liked people what knew him and he didn't know them. Neither do I.

The man's smile faltered. "I'm . . . I'm Mr. Howder, Mr. Alex Howder. This is my wife Vanessa and our children, Caleb and Cecilia." The children and wife waved at me, no shyness at all.

"Hm. What're you doin' here?" I asked. Mr. Howder cleared his throat.

"Uh—well, that is, we—we heard through the grapevine that you liked to put on a—oh, yes, sorry dear. That your *sister* puts on a little magic show here in the afternoons, and we were wondering if we might attend?"

Christ above, was *that* what the ranch wives were telling folks? That Margot was magic? it seemed ridiculous, but maybe it wasn't. I'd just never really thought about it that way. Margot as magic. To me, she just *was*.

But Mr. Alex Howder offered me a whole silver dollar to let him and his family see Margot do her "magic." And after that, it was city folks all the time. Men in top hats with their wives and children in starch and pinafores offering me silver dollars in exchange for watching Margot do what she'd always done. And since I couldn't get so much as a weed to grow out of this damn ground I took them, the silver dollars, and the dimes and nickels and pennies, too, though never from the children, who always got in for free.

"It never bothered me, you know," Margot says. "Doing trick shows. I loved them. They made people happy."

"I know," I say. "You've told me that before."

Margot wiggles her fingers, and the animals and flowers vanish and are replaced with a dancing woman in a bright orange dress, with blue-and-white hair that flows like water. "I just wanted to make people happy," Margot

says, and both she and the little woman look up at me with sad, searching looks.

"I know," I tell them, "and you did. You made lots of people real happy." I think I'm trying to convince both of us that that's enough. The dancing woman twirls and her skirt flares out. There's a loud crack in the distance, and Margot's head snaps up, looking towards the mountain, towards the not-sunset glow. The gunshot's a surprise, but the glow getting closer isn't. I can almost make out individual torches.

"Little miracles," that's what Pa always called Margot's tricks. For the most part, folks seemed to agree. I'm not sure how much the grown-ups really thought was real. After Margot's shows, when I wasn't fending off questions about our indoor plumbing from various wives and mothers, I was faced with "How-does-she-do-its?" from the husbands and sons. I never lied—"Yes, the toilet really is inside the house, and there's a pump that flushes the waste away down the mountain," and "I don't know how she does it. We reckon it's a gift from God." The ones who asked never seemed satisfied with that answer, but it was the truth. She just *is.*

"Course, looking at the predicament we're in now, maybe I should've lied a little more.

"Gem?" The dancing woman is gone, replaced by a chicken made of calico and turquoise. It jingles when it walks and pecks the ground with a bright silver beak.

"Hm?" I say.

"How much longer? 'Til they get here?"

I look at the growing glow. It's closer; when the wind changes directions and comes from the west, I can hear shouts, but I can't tell what they're saying. I can smell smoke. "It'll be a while yet. But you'll have to go inside soon."

"Inside?" Her voice is sharp; maybe she can't read minds after all. "Why inside?"

I take a deep breath. "Because when they get here, you're going to go down in the cellar and hide. 'Til it's—'til it's over."

"'Til *what's* over, Gem?"

"You know what."

She doesn't like that answer. "Gem, I don't *want* to hide! I want to stay with you, I want—"

"You'll do as I say, Margot. Understand?"

"But *I don't want*—"

"And I don't care. Do you understand?"

She's quiet, which is a sure sign she's not happy with me. But she's stopped arguing with me for a change, which I have to admit is nice, in spite of the circumstances. "Can I sit with you 'til then?" Margot asks. She's not happy with plan three, I can tell. But she's making peace with it. I hope she

finishes making peace before they get here. I don't want to drag her down kicking and screaming, but I will. I'll hogtie and gag her if I have to. I nod to her question, and she climbs into the rocking chair with me, the jingle-chicken still pecking at my feet. I set the butt of the shotgun on the floor and hold it beside me like a staff while she fidgets on my lap. God, this was a lot easier to do when she was smaller! At ten years old, all knees and elbows, I'm surprised she can fold herself up small enough to fit on my lap at all. But she manages it and tucks her blonde head under my chin, blue eyes turned out to the horizon and the glow. She's quiet for a long time, and the sun gets lower. She really will have to go inside soon.

"What changed?" She asks. I'm not sure if she's actually talking to me or not. But if she is, I don't think I have a good answer for her.

There's always been two major differences between Margot and me: our hair (mine red and bushy, hers sleek and blonde) and our ability to get folks to like us. Margot's got her tricks, which I'm sure helps, but she also *gets* people—gets them to like her in a way I never have. Maybe it goes back to that sarcasm versus optimism thing again, who knows. But it sure helped when we were first doing her shows. There was a handful of folks, real religious—Pa would've called them "Bible-thumpers"—who thought . . . I don't want to say they thought she was a demon, exactly, but they were real leery of her at first. Until she talked to them. Just talked, smiled at them, made a golden starfish for their children. "Well, really," I heard one say, "how can it be blasphemy? She's just so *kind*."

Shame her charms didn't work on everyone. In the end, I guess, they didn't really work on anyone.

Margot'd been doing her shows for almost a year—long enough to get us indoor plumbing, new feather beds, and we were just about to get the potbelly stove—when the Preacher first came.

I knew there was a church in town, but we'd never gone. Pa said he didn't put much stock in religion, but he was a big believer in faith. "Faith's when you love God and you thank Him for what you've got," he said. "Religion's when other folks are telling you you're not thankful enough. And we ain't got time for that." Pa might've worked on Sundays, but we said grace at every meal, and prayers before sleep. And we were grateful. Once Margot's shows took off, I thanked Him every night. For the magic. 'Cause we believed —I still believe—that it came from God.

The Preacher had other ideas. I reckon he got suspicious when the Bible-thumpers quit thumping so hard; 'cause he came, and he paid his way and Margot says he watched, all proper and rigid in his black shirt with the little white thing stuck in his collar, and when the show was done he came and had questions, questions the fathers and sons never asked.

"Who is the child's mother?"

I didn't like the way he said that. "The child." She had a name, goddammit, and a good one too. "Her Ma's the same as mine," I said.

"And can you? Do what she does?"

"No." I don't reckon magic would've done me much good, anyway. I don't see enough colors in my dreams.

"Where did your mother come from?"

"The east."

"Where in the east?"

"I don't know." And even if I had, I wouldn't've told him. Another reason Pa never took us to church was because he didn't like being talked down to. "Jesus never talked down to nobody, and that Preacher ain't Jesus. So who told him he could talk down to me?"

"The child's power. Where does it come from?"

I'd never thought of it that way, either. Magic's one thing, but power? I don't know. I don't reckon "power" is the right word to describe it. They're just tricks. "We reckon it's a gift from God."

Lord, what I'd give to never have said that. To have told him "I don't know" one more time. Maybe, then, he wouldn't have done what he did. Preached fire and brimstone and false prophets and witchcraft, whipped the city folk into a frenzy. Maybe then we wouldn't have torches on the way.

There's another crack that shatters the darkness—reminds me of a trick of Margot's, where chunks of mirror bright as the sun fly out in all directions. Sort of scary, but sort of not, too. Margot curls in closer to me. I stroke her braid with the hand not holding the shotgun. I wonder if I'll actually make it to fifteen shots, even, never mind fifteen people.

"Sing a song?" Margot asks without looking at me. I don't much feel like singing. "Please?"

There she goes again, almost reading my mind. Maybe I should just chalk it up to us being sisters. "What do you want to hear?" I ask.

She thinks. "That song about God and the river that Pa used to sing to us?" She says.

"I only remember one verse."

"That's okay. I don't mind."

Alright then. "We'll go down to the river, and worship by Your side, we'll go down to the river, oh Lord. We'll stand in the water and worship 'neath Your eye, we won't feel no sorrow no more." My voice comes out dry and thin, cracking where it's never cracked before, but I can't fix it. The sun's touching the top of the mountain. When I stop singing there's hoofbeats. I can hear shouting no matter the wind.

"Again? Please?" Margot says softly. I start the verse over. Light pools in front of us, but not light like the rays from the sun or glimmers of torches, but lines of light, strands of light, that bend and shimmer and stretch into a small, sliver-gold river, suspended in the air in front of us. The strands

move again and suddenly they're us, me and Margot, exactly as we're sitting now, but brought to life in silky, unreal light.

All she's ever wanted was to make pretty things.

"It's time to go inside, Margot," I whisper. She tenses in my lap, and the light-versions of us burn brighter. "I mean it. Come on."

"You really think hiding's going to work?" she asks as she slides off my lap.

What the hell am I supposed to say to that? "No, but I hope so?" That's the whole truth.

"I don't think we have a whole lot of other options."

"I guess you're right." We're in the house; I open up the cellar hatch for her. She hesitates. "Are you sure I can't help?"

"You're not much good with a shotgun."

"No, I know. I mean—what I mean is I could say yes. To the Preacher. 'Cause then—"

"Absolutely not."

"But if I did, then—"

"Margot Olivia, you listen to me." I get down on my knees so I can look her right in the face. "Under *no circumstances* are you to give yourself up to that Preacher, you hear me? *No circumstances*. You got it?" I hold her face and make her look at me, so she can see my "I ain't kidding" look. She nods. "You are to stay down here, you understand? You stay here, and you stay quiet. No matter what happens, no matter—no matter what you might hear, you stay put and stay quiet 'til its over, you hear me?"

"Give us the false prophet! Bring us the little witch! Repent, and be spared in the eyes of the Lord your God! Forsake the demon spawn!"

He tried to appeal to me, that's the funny part. Three days ago. Hell's bells, he was different from when he first came to the show. Still in starched black, still with a white collar, but on the back of a black horse, fist raised, screaming. I ain't never heard a grown man scream before. Margot, at least, had the good sense to stay in the house. He'd come with a handful of men from town. Wanting to scare me, I reckon. Or get me to scream back. But I didn't. Pa said carrying on was a waste of time.

"Get off my property," I said.

"Forsake the demon spawn! Save your soul!"

He sure liked that name for Margot—"demon spawn." But I still don't get it. What was he hoping to get me to do? If she's demon spawn, don't that make me demon spawn too?

I got tired of his yelling, so I fired the shotgun at his feet. We used to have thirty-two shells. I reckon I should've aimed for his fool head. Would've saved me a lot of trouble. But Pa said murdering was wrong. And I reckon that still would've been a murder.

But now? Now I reckon I can take fifteen shots. And at least hit fifteen people, even if I don't' kill them. I don't want to murder. But I will if I have to.

"*Do you hear me*, Margot?" I repeat.

"I hear you," she mumbles.

"And—and if they find you, then you give them hell. Make them drag you out kicking and screaming and you don't give in. Not to them."

She looks up at me, and even though her eyes are slick with tears, there's a set to her slender shoulders I haven't seen before. "I won't," she says.

"You promise?"

"I promise."

"Alright then." I pull her in for a hug and she clings to me, so tight I'm sure I'll have to pry her off me to get her in the cellar, and when I open my eyes there's a black cloud swirling around us, dark and full like when she was little. "Okay," I whisper. "Go, now." Without any prying, believe it or not, she lets me go. She goes down the ladder with the cloud still hovering around her, though a little more see-through now.

She vanishes into the dark of the cellar with a sniffle, and I close the door over her. "I love you," I whisper. Maybe if she *can* hear my thoughts, she'll hear it. I latch the cellar door and drag the rug over it, moving one of our beds to stand on the corner of the door too. Hidden, but not so heavy that Margot won't be able to push her way out. Maybe. I hope.

Demon spawn. I'll show him demon spawn. I check that the shotgun is loaded, then head back onto the porch. I don't sit down. The sun has set. They are almost here.

***Lisa Alletson's*** *writing is strongly influenced by the cultural, geographic and political experiences of growing up in Africa, Europe and North America. Her writing is forthcoming or published in Crab Creek Review, New Ohio Review, Moist Poetry Journal, Sky Island Journal, among others.*

# The children I did not have

## Lisa Alletson

crowd my kitchen table.

Some are stick figures—
  open oval mouths,
  circle-eyes traced around a dime
  staring at a bowl of fake apples.

Others, caricatures—
bone-white smiles and six-foot trophies

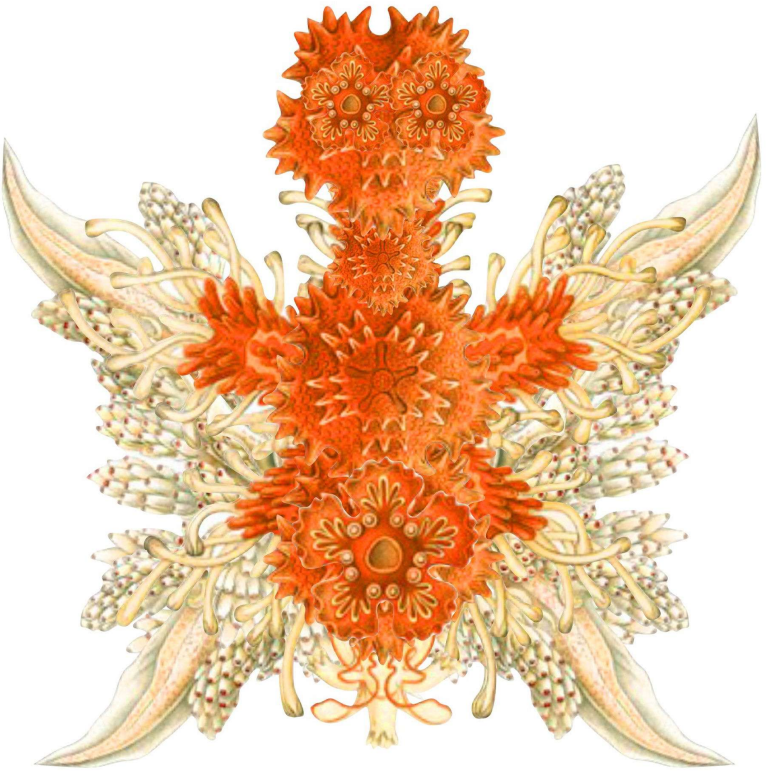
pink hearts
pulsating
through
rice-paper
skin.

A boy with dirty nails in a grass-stained jersey holds out a soccer ball:
I will never play.

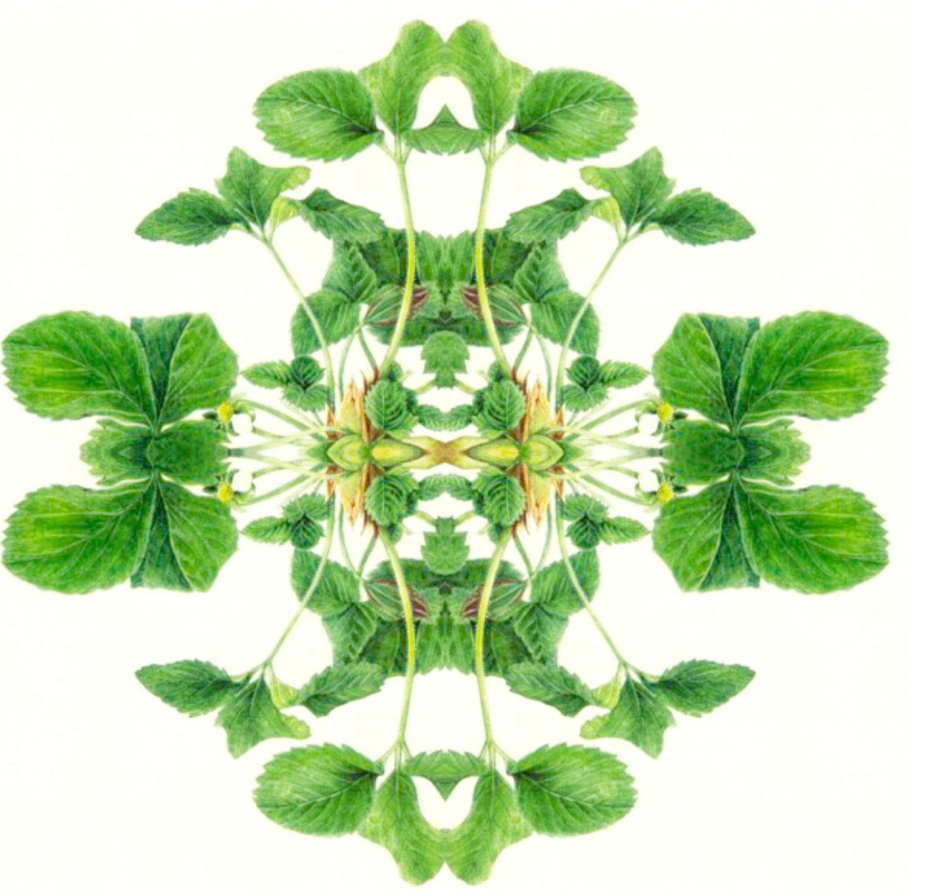
Some of the children are already dead.

In another house somewhere,
a fleshed-in girl
with freckles like mine
waits for me to come home.

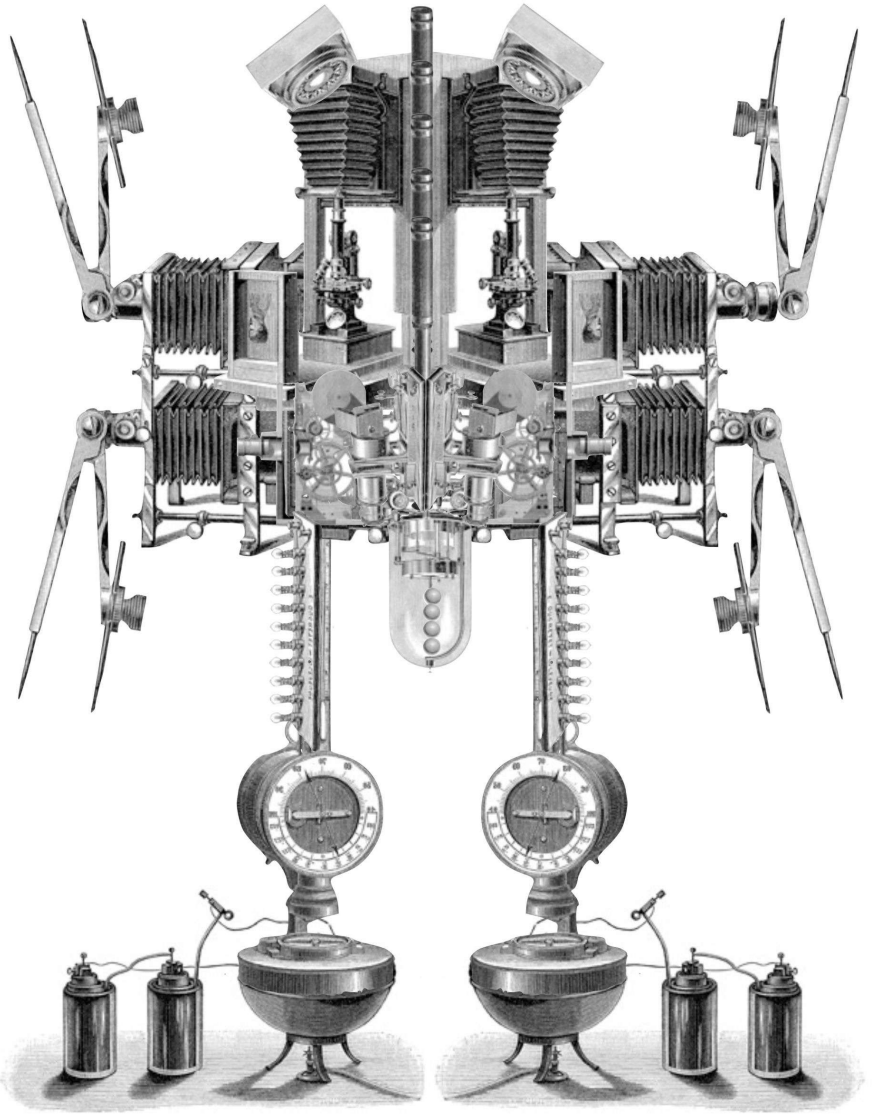
***Bill Wolak*** *has just published his eighteenth book of poetry entitled All the Wind's Unfinished Kisses with Ekstasis Editions. His collages and photographs have appeared as cover art for such magazines as Phoebe, Harbinger Asylum, Baldhip Magazine, Barfly Poetry Magazine, Ragazine, Cardinal Sins, Pithead Chapel, The Wire's Dream, Thirteen Ways Magazine, Phantom Kangaroo, Rathalla Review, Free Lit Magazine, Typehouse Literary Magazine, and Flare Magazine.*



**Inevitable Whispers**



**The Smile Steeped in Daylight**



**The Hidden Hypotenuse**

***Deborah Paige*** *(she/her) teaches community college in Southern California. She writes CNF and dabbles in fiction and poetry while mostly ignoring the solid writing advice she doles out to her students. Find her on Twitter @mspaigefullcoll.*

# Health Guides A-Z: Uncommon Topics: Leaving the Fold Syndrome

Deborah Paige

**What is Leaving the Fold Syndrome?** Upon extricating herself from an authoritarian religious system (or "Fold"), a woman may experience myriad symptoms, likely involving intellectual, social, emotional, and/or psychological domains. Symptoms, intensity, and duration vary, and often correlate to the length of a woman's tenure with and sheep-like allegiance to the Fold. Symptoms may interfere with sleep, relationships, waking hours, psychological stability and well-being, and acclimation to the real world outside of her church.

**Warning Signs of LTFS:**

- Nagging doubts that all the "right" answers may be found in the Bible or her pastor's office.
- Asking "what about?" questions (which are often met by defensiveness or hubristic certitude, indicating that the matter is settled).
- Often precipitated by a series of events or one significant event that will no longer be mitigated by platitudes or Bible verses. For example, being asked if she is exhibiting "a quiet and gentle spirit" in the face of emotional abuse could plant a seed of skepticism or might even serve as the final straw. Either way, the recipient of said remark suspects that Jesus, unless he was a complete asshole, would not endorse such bullshit.

**What Are Some Symptoms of LTFS?**

- Questioning/rejecting advice or counsel that, for years, one may have heeded unchallenged.
- Cognitive dissonance, the result of being told one thing and seeing or experiencing another. Such instances may be as blatant as her pastor asking, "Is that what *really* happened? That's not the story I was told."
- Fear about the future and one's ability to make her own decisions. Having been conditioned to believe women are untrustworthy, and that their spirituality is evidenced by submitting their will to others (almost always people with a penis), a woman may lack confidence in her own judgment and therefore second-guess her hunches.
- Anger-volatility, expressed on a 1-10 scale in which 1 = "brooding," 5 = "extravagant use of the word 'goddamn,'" and 10 = "murderous, blinding rage." Until a woman can identify (and avoid or address) her religious-trauma triggers, her anger may rapidly escalate, with little conscious provocation.

**Prognosis:** In addition to the possible need for therapy and pharmaceutical intervention, a woman leaving the Fold needs trustworthy support systems that will champion her emancipation. These may be virtual and/or in-person, providing space for her to process, question, curse, confess, kvetch, celebrate, and ugly-cry. Rehabilitation exists on a spectrum from full recovery with minimal impairment—expressed by an unquenchable, guilt-free passion for life—to lifelong emotional and/or psychological debilitation, even hastening death.

**Call Your Doctor About LTFS If:** You experience PTSD, or if your depression and/or anxiety lasts longer than a couple of weeks. Do not call your former pastor, however, as he is likely to suggest that these symptoms are the consequences of spiritual rebellion and would subside if only you'd return to the Fold.

**Can I Prevent LTFS?**

Though there are no tests or vaccines to prevent LTFS, there are a number of things a woman can do to reduce her likelihood of joining the Fold:

(1) Get a college education at a non-religious institution.

(2) Avoid churches that insist:
- People are inherently depraved/wicked/wretched;
- Women are daughters of Eve: curious, hungry for power and beauty, always grasping for that which has been roped-off;
- Women are responsible for the "fall of mankind," and therefore cannot be trusted with authority or to make their own decisions;
- A spiritual apocalypse is imminent, but there are particular actions one can take to emerge unscathed;
- People are beyond redemption but for the mediation of a higher power—likely male, likely invisible—who can barely stand the sight of humanity.

(3) Avoid churches where pastors say things like:
- "You should be ashamed of yourself."
- "Can you provide a list of changes you'd like to see in his behavior? Then, after a few weeks, when he's made those changes, you can let him return home."
- "Why are you seeing a therapist who is not sanctioned by our church?"

**What Are Some Treatments/Antidotes for LTFS?**

- Radical excision of church-related events and people on a case-by-case basis. A few folks may remain by your side no matter what, but some of your (former) best pals may try to sabotage your liberation, even orchestrating surprise interventions in which they attempt to "rescue" you. You do not need such people in your new life;
- If you did not previously get a non-religious college education and if it is feasible, get one now. At the very least, visit or observe online a non-religious group, meeting, or book club made up of people who respect varying perspectives rather than categorizing them as "right," "wrong," "good," or "evil";
- Interrogate everything. Avoid people and systems that become defensive or threatened by your questions or that profess having a monopoly on Truth;

- Seek support from those who have had similar experiences. Read books and watch films about people who made escapes and lived to tell about it. Watch *The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*. Let yourself cry when Kimmy climbs out of the bunker, into the sunlight;
- Shred or burn decades' worth of journals in which you recounted your numerous sins and shortcomings before God and man;
- Discard—unread—letters or emails from former parishioners and friends in which they express concern for your eternal soul and provide assurances that they are praying for you. Similarly, do not respond to calls, texts, or posts from such people. Better still, unfollow, mute, or block them;
- Acknowledge and address the inherent shame you may have about your body and/or your sexuality. Learn about body positivity and become familiar with the wonders of your unstifled, multi-faceted physicality;
- Meditate on Mary Oliver's poems. Consider Oliver's assertion that, "You do not have to be good." Reflect on the courage it has taken you to "save the only life you could save." Start fresh journals in which you respond to these propositions, and enumerate the various ways in which you are making admirable choices;
- Develop relationships with people whom, in the past, you might have avoided because they were "unsaved," "heathen," or "living in defiance to God." Come to respect them as actual human beings rather than "goats" who are destined for Hell;
- If you learned from a young age that you exist only in relation to another person, it may take the rest of your life to learn how to answer the question, "What do you want?" Listen for and trust the still, small whisper stirring inside you. That's your personal agency. Her voice will grow stronger the more you heed it;
- Do not compare your progress to that of others. The trauma that was inflicted upon you, and your body's response to it, is unique to you. While some women make relatively rapid, lucid recoveries, penning their memoirs or divulging their stories to Oprah, they are anomalous. Most often, women with LTFS attempt to make sense of their experiences for the rest of their lives. This is "normal," and to be expected.

**LTFS Side Effects May Include:** Loneliness, helplessness, anxiety, depression, fear, rumination, grief, rage, guilt, regret, self-loathing, loss of trust; flashbacks and other trauma responses; cringing and being triggered by self-righteousness, even when it is non-religious and good-intentioned. Exhilaration, tranquility, empowerment, culture shock, belly laughs, shattered paradigms, expanded critical thinking skills, decreased Rapture- and Hell-related paranoia; glorious, unthinkable possibilities in a world that is much grander than one has been led to believe.

**Contraindications:** If a woman does not have a high tolerance for pain and for constructing a new life out of meager building materials, some or most of these treatments may appear daunting, even implausible. In such case, she may consider the implications of returning to the Fold, like a prodigal daughter in search of paternal exoneration. However, having sampled personal autonomy, a woman may find that a fatted calf is a paltry substitute for her one wild and precious life.

***Zaynab Bobi,*** *(she/her) Frontier I, is a Nigerian poet, digital artist, and photographer from Bobi. She is a member of Hilltop Creative Art Abuja branch, Poetry Club Udus, Frontier Collective, and a Medical Laboratory Science student of Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto. Her artworks and photographs are published and forthcoming in Blue Marble Review, Barren Magazine, Isele Magazine, Typehouse, Night Coffee Lit, Wrongdoing Magazine, Rulerless Lit, Harbour Review, B'K Magazine, Olney Magazine, All My Relations, Salamander Ink, Anti-Heroin Chi, Acropolis Journal, and more. She tweets @ZainabBobi.*

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**Kitso**

*Kitso, which is hair braiding in English, is one of the many ways a female child bonds with her mother because it requires contact between the child and the mother. If a woman who braids hair gives birth to a female child, people will say, "zata sha kitso" meaning her daughter's hair will always be braided beautifully. The way the mother carefully and gently braids her child's hair is fascinating.*

***Monica Mills*** *is a Jamaican-American essayist and poet. She is from Maplewood, New Jersey and has a degree in political science and English from Rutgers University. Monica's recent work appears or is forthcoming in publications such as West Trade Review, FEED, Claw & Blossom, Amethyst Review, and Eunoia Review among others. She enjoys rainy days and ginger tea.*

# driving while black

## Monica Mills

when I am pulled over I will brace
myself through melanin and imagine
the sidewalk outside. I will envision its
years soaking up sunlight and all the
passersby unthankful for concrete's
steady embrace of their gravity. when I am
pulled over I will show that my hands
are almost empty. holding only the histories
palms can tell with grooves that run from
pinky to thumb and lifetimes in between.
head line reads my nature. mind altimeter.
heart line studies loves I do not have but
yearn to meet and keep in better worlds.
fate line exists energies of after.
ambitions. improvements. yet, palmistry
is for people who live and fate is not a
friendly face for those who knew my
sisters and brothers prostrate on pavement
before. when I am pulled over I will raise
my hands high as Atlas of the interstate.
I will speak in tongues as patron saint of
winking blinkers and seatbelts fastened to
survival. when I am pulled over I will pretend
a politeness that shames Pope Francis into
wishing he learned to curse. when I am pulled
over I will own my black body into terror's cold
consolation. I will read my eulogy as a road sign.
I will pray that the cop hates clichés.

# it's Sunday in November at the laundromat across from Popeyes

and washing machines stand at the ready. single file.
a platoon at war with grit and wine stains. each whirling
box uniformed in other forms of tragedy.

this one wears a post-it note 'out of order. do not use'
that one has no door. glass punched in. too wounded.
too open. for an honest clean. some wear stories crusted
between dried detergent. soap scum. fabric softener.

others are musted inside. rank with remnants of trinkets
fallen from pockets. histories drowned in a tumbling
thrash. mask. penny. leaf. outdated coupon speckled with
bleach. all twisted against the funk of forgotten clothes.

but it's Sunday in November at the laundromat across
from Popeyes and there are sisters here. brothers. aunties.
some adorned in Sunday best. some slouched in *damnnn the*
*weekend went quick* kind of sorrow. everyone searches for
shapes against the driers steady thrum. blood stains.
love stains. tossing sent of lemon and singed lint.

a boy. maybe seven. skin brown as mine. climbs into washer
sixteen just to see if he can fit inside. and he can! an older man
gifts washer thirty-eight all he has to spare. a flat hat stained gray on
one side. a bright bleach-soaked shirt.-a few aged anecdotes.
jokes with punchlines faded from wear left forgotten in a
torn coat pocket.

what more can be lost for an extra quarter? when every rag
within his wash becomes a worn workweek recollection of
wishing to be clean. of rides home as each stoplight endures
a long. empty. life. before finally breaking bad. going green.
giving in. only to relapse red the next minute or two.

but it’s Sunday in November at the laundromat across from Popeyes and there is foam on the floor. fat. and slick against white checkered tile. another day. gone. meticulously folded to tune of old school R&B booming from speakers in the back. my clothes are clean. and warm. and pressed. the world outside widens in wait to dirty them again.

***Emily Hansen*** *(she/her) was raised in the frigid-yet-beautiful state of Minnesota where she spent most of the winter hibernating and rewriting the endings to her favorite stories. Her passion for words led her to a degree in English from the University of North Dakota, and her passion for learning found her graduating summa cum laude from George Mason University with a graduate degree in Early Childhood Education. Emily now lives in Colorado with her husband and two young daughters. When she isn't teaching or screaming at large bugs, she can be found reading, hiking, or taking long baths with the door locked.*

# Expansion

## Emily Hansen

Two hours before evening shift, they told me Benji died.

I didn't ask questions. I didn't have to. In a world where people dropped dead as often as raindrops fell in a storm, there was no reason to. One of my bunkmates delivered the news as I pulled on my boots for that night's shift. I told him "thanks" and left it at that; there was nothing else to be said.

I hadn't been on guard duty long—only a handful of months—but Benji was all I'd known. Every night we sat together outside the gate, the weight of our rifles heavy on our laps as the chilly night air nipped at whatever skin was left exposed.

He hadn't been that old. His hair had begun to gray and the lines around his eyes carried more stories than most, but given that state of the world, he was practically ancient. A relic from a time when death wasn't a daily worry and people actually enjoyed getting to know one another.

Now, nobody bothered. It only served to make things harder when death inevitably found them, and it always did.

Always.

But Benji was different. The gravity of loss hadn't bent his shoulders forward like it had for everyone else. Hadn't glued his eyes to his mud-stained boots. Hadn't stitched his lips shut with the fear he'd reveal too much and someone might get attached.

No, Benji loved people. He loved them as much as he loved to talk. It was the best and worst part of being assigned guard duty with him—he never shut up. He filled the silence of each endless night, never caring if I responded. Half the time, it seemed he was talking to himself instead of me.

"Once we're out of this mess," he'd start, adjusting the rifle across his threadbare jeans, "I think I'd like to travel. Never did get to see much of the world before everything went to crap. Mel, bless her, she tried, but I was

always too busy. Too much work to do. Too many things to fix around the house. Too many days spent pissin' over piddly little things that don't even matter now." His smile had been sad, worn thin around the edges. "Ain't it funny how that happens? You work your whole life to save up for trips you never take because you're always too busy workin'."

All I could do was shrug, my only concept of life from before existing in hushed words and whispered stories that nobody bothered to share anymore. Nobody except Benji.

He'd licked his lips and smiled, breath curling out in front of him like smoke from a fired gun. "I s'pose you wouldn't know, would you? Don't worry, kid, your time'll come. You'll see that all this ain't as bad as you think. Life'll start again. It always does."

But Benji was wrong. Life had given up a long time ago.

#

Walking through the compound that night was harder than I thought it would be. Empty gazes unglued from their shoes and followed me as I slouched towards the western gate. Ignoring them, I raised my chin and adjusted my rifle, then waited for the guard to let me out, eyes straight ahead.

Focus. One mistake and I'd just be another raindrop.

"You good?" the guard asked.

"Yeah." I shrugged. "Fine. It happens, right?"

"Yeah. Right." He jutted his chin towards the opened gate—an ugly thing that had been slapped together using misshapen pieces of rusted metal—and towards the chairs that hid in the reeds just beyond. "Benji's replacement is already out there. Good luck."

His words caught me somewhere behind the stomach.

I straightened my shoulders and nodded, then muttered a quick "thanks." Of course Benji would have been replaced. They wouldn't leave me out there alone. Not for the overnight watch.

My feet carried me across the mud to the place where two plastic chairs had been positioned at the water's edge. Here the reeds were tall enough to obscure a sitting body, but low enough that we still had a clear view of the surrounding area. Though the water was shallow, it was expansive, giving us ample time to assess any incoming threats.

On instinct I approached with caution. Benji's rifle lay across the arms of an empty chair, its beat-up leather strap dangling over the side. At the sight of it, something dark and feral started to chew at the deeper parts of my gut, dredging up memories I didn't want to remember.

I slung the gun from my back and waited. The horizon was a pale shade of lavender, the kind that only painted the sky at the very edges of winter. It offered enough light to see a fair distance, but was too dark to make out details. I scanned the horizon, the smell of pine and decaying leaves thick on the evening's breeze.

"Didn't they teach you not to point your piece at anyone?"

I spun, startled by a girl with midnight-colored hair standing in the reeds. She looked young, possibly my age, her face lacking that lifeless, hard-eyed stare of those who had lived too long.

"Jesus!" I shouted. "I nearly shot you!" Then, remembering my training, I raised the rifle and pointed it at her chest. "Identify yourself!"

"Relax. If I was the enemy, do you think I'd just walk right up and introduce myself?" She folded her arms across her petite frame and smiled. "Say 'hello' to your new guard partner. We are guards, right? They didn't really make that clear . . ."

I blinked, unsure of what to do. I knew I probably wouldn't shoot her, but I couldn't seem to lower my arms, either.

She raised an eyebrow. "Anyway, I'm Emma. I think I've seen you around. Jake, right?" She leaned down and grabbed Benji's rifle, then sat, leaning back as though this wasn't the first time she'd done this.

"It's Jenks," I said. "Drop the weapon."

A long braid swung behind her back as she glanced over her shoulder. "What? You think just because I'm a girl I can't be out here with you? This is *my* post, too." Her gaze flitted to the gun in my hands, still aimed at her. "And the only person I see who needs to drop the weapon is you, Jenks. Why the hostility?" She patted the seat next to her. "Put it down and sit, otherwise it's going to be a looong night."

Something about the way she spoke, confident and forceful, compelled me to do what she said. Maybe she really was Benji's replacement. She *did* have his gun, anyway.

I did as she said and sat, then Emma turned to face me.

"Is your name really Jenks?"

"Yes."

"Is it short for something, like Jenkinson? I've never heard that name before."

"No."

She tilted her head to the side and studied me. "Hm. Okay." She set the rifle against the side of her chair and settled back, focused on the dark sky overhead. I watched her longer than I cared to admit; traced the gentle slope of her nose to the peaks and valleys of her lips. Who was she? I'd never seen her in the compound before, not that that meant much. I kept to myself, and most survivors didn't stick around long enough to get to know, anyway.

"What do you think it means?" she asked after a few minutes. I looked away, glad it was too dark for her to see my cheeks flush crimson.

"What do I think what means?" In my peripheral vision, I saw her raise an arm and point toward the sky.

"Sagittarius."

I had no idea what she was talking about, so I didn't answer. The silence stretched between us, but it wasn't the same silence that had lived between Benji and me. That silence, though short-lived, was always comfortable. I could sit in it for hours without noticing the space between us, but this . . . This silence rubbed against me like a bunch of prickly burs stuck to the inside of my shirt.

When I couldn't take it anymore, I turned to her. "What is sage . . . saji . . . whatever you said?"

Though her gaze stayed skyward, her lips pulled back into a wide smile. "Sagittarius. It's a constellation, a cluster of stars that form a shape or figure of some sort. My grandma used to talk about them all the time. At night, she'd point them out to me as she held my hand and we'd traced their paths together like an old dot-to-dot page." She chuckled. "Remember those?" She didn't wait for an answer, "I don't really, either, but that's what my grandma'd say. She never explained what they meant. Why people named them, you know? What do they mean? What's their purpose? I've always wondered. Haven't you?"

The sudden barrage of questions sent a flash of annoyance through me. "Things don't always have a purpose. Sometimes they just are."

Emma sat up straight and faced me, elbows resting on the arms of her plastic chair. "Come on. You don't really believe that, do you?"

My mouth opened, then closed. Did I believe that? I wasn't sure I knew, or cared. Not dying was all that mattered these days. What did I care if things had a purpose or not?

Again, Emma didn't wait for my response. "Do you think this place has a purpose?"

"This swamp?"

She bobbed her head at the makeshift walls behind us. "The compound."

"Of course," I blurted. Was she serious?

"And?"

"It protects us. Keeps us alive."

"Oh, really?"

For some reason, when she said that, my stomach did a flip-flop. I shifted in my seat, bracing for a follow-up.

"Where are you from?" she asked instead.

"What?"

The corner of Emma's mouth twitched. "You heard me. Where are you from?"

What kind of game was this? "Here."

She rolled her eyes and leaned back, one leg pulled into her chest like we were two old friends, rather than two strangers who had just met. "Nobody

is *from* here, Jenks. Nobody except the unlucky littles who were born after everything went to hell."

I didn't respond. What kinds of questions were these?

"So?" she pried. "Where are you from?"

I sucked cool air between my teeth. "Don't know. Don't remember."

Now, her questions were *really* starting to annoy me.

"Nothing. Nothing at all?" Emma turned her gaze back to the stars. "I used to live in a big city by the mountains. Denver, I think it was called. I don't remember much, either, but my grandma said it was beautiful. We were only supposed to visit for a week. Who knew a week would turn into a lifetime?"

"Right," was all I said. The weight of her silence made me feel like I should say something more—maybe ask her a question, too—but I didn't. It's not something we did anymore.

It's not something *I* did anymore.

I chewed the inside of my cheek, settling into the quiet that was still expanding between us. Maybe now I could finally focus on what I was sent out here to do.

"Do you think you'll ever go back? To wherever it is you're from?"

The coppery taste of blood filled my mouth as I bit down. Would the questions ever stop?

"No."

"That's fair. A lot of those places are long gone, anyway." She paused. "Do you think you'll ever go anywhere?"

Anger flashed up my spine and settled like a halo above my head, bright and hot against my scalp.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

Next to me, I heard her inhale, ready to pelt me with another question, and I exploded.

"Enough! No more talking. No more questions. Get your gun and point it that way. In an hour we'll switch, that way our eyes won't go funny from looking at the same stuff all night. We do this 'til sunrise, and then we go back. Understood?" The outline of her face nodded into the darkness. "Good."

I readied my gun and turned away from her, the silver swirls of my breath curling out in ragged bursts. Heat simmered beneath the surface of my skin, my cheeks bright with anger. What had I done to deserve this? Was this some kind of cruel joke? Had they known Benji liked to talk and wanted to see how miserable they could truly make me?

I hadn't minded Benji's talks; they had taught me things. Things he liked. Things he didn't. Things I knew I'd never get to experience, like love and family and travel. Things we couldn't escape, like our dwindling food

stores and the survivors who had stopped showing up. Benji knew how to talk just like he knew how to let me listen, and in those rare moments of silence, he knew how to let it expand so that I could think about what he'd said, turning it over in my mind until I was ready for the next topic.

But Emma wasn't Benji. Her questions were relentless, a riptide of words constantly threatening to drag me under, and I'd take prickly-bur silence over that any day.

To my surprise, Emma managed to keep her mouth shut the rest of the night. We watched the tree-line across the water and switched once an hour, never sharing more than a nod of acknowledgment between us.

When the sun began to rise and we stood from our chairs, bodies stiff and aching, my mind felt more alert than it ever had. Our worn boots crunched over a fresh layer of frost as we walked back to the gate, and I thought about the questions that had formed in the silence of that night. Who was she? Where had she come from? When had she come to live here? Why did she want this post? Where was her family? Her grandma? Did she even have a family anymore? The questions rattled around, unchecked, bouncing off the walls of my skull like stones in a tin can.

#

The next two days sped past in a blur. Sleep in the bunkhouse, exercise in the yard, quick shower of freezing swamp water followed by a bowl of boiled root vegetables and a can of expired fruit. The nights were getting colder, bringing with them a deep chill that worked its way beneath the folds of my patchwork clothes and settled somewhere low, hovering just above my bones.

At post, Emma didn't ask any more questions. She didn't speak at all except a terse "hello" followed by a cold "goodbye" at the beginning and end of each shift, and even though the silence was uncomfortable, I knew it was better than the alternative. I'd made a mistake with Benji and I didn't plan to make again. Getting to know him had done nothing except leave a gaping hole in my gut.

I owed Emma nothing except the same thing I owed everyone else—indifference—so why did the questions I couldn't ask scratch against the inside of my skin like a cat in heat? Why did I care if she wanted to get to know me? Who was she? And what had she meant by asking if this place had a purpose?

Of all the questions, that one bothered me the most. Had she just been trying to get a reaction? Or had there been something else there, something I couldn't see?

On the fourth night with Emma, I decided to break the silence.

"Why do you watch the stars?" I asked. It wasn't the question I'd loaded in my mind, but for whatever reason, it was the one that tumbled out.

Emma kept her back to me. “Because,” she said, “they never change.” Her words were clipped, her tone cold and disinterested.

“Oh.” I leaned away, embarrassment filling the cracks of me. It was clear she didn’t want to talk anymore and I couldn’t blame her for that. I wasn’t really sure I wanted to talk, either.

Silence swelled, frigid and stiff, and I wondered idly if I shouldn’t have yelled at her that first night. Maybe I should have just kept my mouth shut; let her words evaporate into the wind. Maybe—

“They’re untouchable,” Emma said without turning.

Adrenaline thrummed through my body, my muscles a plucked guitar string.

“The stars,” she continued, “they sit up there, millions of miles away, completely oblivious to what’s happening on this puny, stupid planet. Whatever happens here—whatever hell we’re going through—it’ll never touch them. They’ll still be there, twinkling in the darkness, happy just to be alive.”

I frowned. It wasn’t the answer I’d expected. I didn’t know much about stars; education in the compound was limited. In the beginning they’d made a decent attempt at opening a school for the kids, but the more people died, the less people cared. By the time I was old enough to sit out here with a rifle between my hands, I was lucky to have learned to read at all. I read every book I could get my hands on—twice—and what I couldn’t learn from books, I learned from Benji.

Emma tilted her chin towards me. “Are you happy to be alive, Jenks?”

I ignored the question. We weren’t going to go there. Not yet. We needed to start with something smaller. “How long have you been here?” I asked. “At this encampment, I mean.”

She rotated her shoulders to face me. “Two years. I think.”

“Two *years*?” And I’d never seen her once?

“Give or take.”

“Where were you before that?”

She held up her hands. “Woah. You got your question, now it’s my turn. You said you don’t remember anything from before here, but I still want to know . . . What are your earliest memories? I mean, you must have some. Everyone does.”

I bit the inside of my cheek. Was I actually going to do this? Even Benji hadn’t been able to pry the answers out of me and he’d had months of trying. Emma and I had only known each other for four days.

Despite everything inside me screaming that this was a bad idea, I began to speak.

I told her about the day my sister, Alicia, and I arrived at the camp, dirty and starving and alone. I told her about a bitter woman who’d cleaned us

up and reluctantly taken us in. I told her how that lasted a few years until she died, too, and we were left stranded. I told her about how Alicia left the compound with some older kids one day and I never saw her again.

Finally, I told her of Benji. Told her how he'd been the closest thing to family that I'd ever known. How he taught me about what the world was like before. How he'd tried to convince me the world would be like that again.

Her dark eyes shone in the silvery moonlight, captivated by my every word. Unimpeded, they cascaded from my lips and spilled into the space between us, rushing to fill the cracks.

When I finished, I noticed she was smirking. "I suppose you'll want to know the same stuff about me, hm?"

I did—badly—but I didn't want her to know that so I shrugged, feigning indifference.

Emma barely noticed. She spoke about her life—not her earliest memories, just a few of her favorite ones—and I listened, absorbing it all with rapt curiosity. She had two sisters, both dead, and a brother who was missing. Their parents sent them to visit their grandma for a week the summer everything turned to shit. Emma was six when it happened, which made her a year older than me. Like most people, they stayed in the safety of their grandma's house as long as they could, but eventually were driven out by the same thing that forced everyone to move.

After that, they spent a few years wandering from survivor camp to survivor camp looking for their parents. One of them turned out to be a labor camp where they'd been forced to work until they physically couldn't anymore. Emma's expression darkened as she described the place, her voice hardening as she told me how she and her brother escaped, but her sisters never left.

"Wow," I breathed when she finished. My chest hurt, as though I'd been holding my breath the entire time.

She fiddled with the fraying ends of her braid. "Yep."

"I'm . . . sorry." I knew the word wasn't enough. It felt frail, like a bird tasked with carrying a boulder through a storm. "Why didn't you leave sooner?"

Emma threw her head back and laughed. The sound tore across the open water and rippled against my skin. Her eyes found mine and narrowed. "Why haven't you?"

"What? Leave here?" I nearly snorted. "Why would I?"

With a shrug, she went back to fidgeting with her hair. "I guess, back then, I felt the same. Until one day I didn't anymore. So I left." She dropped her braid, gaze back on the sky. "Eventually, I'll leave here, too. We all will, Jenks."

The weight of what she said pinned me down as silence expanded between us again. Only this time, it wasn't uncomfortable; it was necessary. It

needed time to expand so that we could fully appreciate what the other had said.

So that we could forget what the other would never, ever say.

Emma stopped the expansion and began to ask more questions. How did I spend my time inside the compound's walls? Why had I wanted to watch the outer gates? Had I ever used my gun? Did I ever learn what had happened to my sister? What was my favorite story of Benji's?

But it wasn't just her that asked. I played the game, too. What had her house been like? Her bedroom? Her belongings? What did she miss the most? Did she had any friends? What were they like? She answered each with marked enthusiasm, never slowing down or shying away.

By the time the sun began to rise, I felt raw, my mind an open wound, freshly excoriated from hours of unrelenting prying. When I got back to my bunk, I collapsed onto my cot and slept in my clothes.

Each day as I waited to start the next shift, I'd replay the answers in my head, thinking about how each had been phrased and what I could have said differently. I'd think about Emma's face and the way her brows would wrinkle at the center when she wasn't sure what to say. I'd think about her laugh and how it echoed over the water, signaling to whatever was hiding inside the tree-line that we were there. That we were alive. And each night I'd create a new list as I drifted off to sleep, the muscles in my face aching with the unfamiliar stretch of a smile.

#

Three weeks after our game began, I finally asked Emma the one question I'd been wanting to ask since our very first shift together.

"Do you remember your first night out here?"

Emma raised a brow and laced her fingers. The rifle no longer sat across her lap; instead, she shoved it under her chair where it stayed until sunrise, forgotten.

"You mean the night you screamed at me to stop asking you questions?"

Heat pooled in the front of my cheeks. "Um, yeah. That night. Anyway, you asked me if I thought this place had a purpose." I paused, gauging her reaction. "Why did you ask me that?"

"I wanted to know what you'd say."

"That's all? Because you wanted to know what I'd say?"

"Yes. Because I wanted to know what you'd say. You get some pretty interesting answers when you ask a question like that on a first date."

Something hard formed at the base of my throat, making it difficult to swallow. *Date?* Did she think that's what this was—that we were *dating?* Even though I didn't remember much from before, I knew what dating was. I'd read about it in a few books and Benji had talked about it when he spoke

of his wife, Melanie, but I knew it was something I couldn't even hope to experience. When all that mattered was not dying, who had time for dating?

Emma's mouth curled into a cruel smile. "You should see the look on your face!" She slapped my knee and rocked back on the legs of her chair. "You're too serious, Jenks. Not everything needs to be gloom and doom, you know. You gotta lighten up or you'll never make it out alive."

The place where she'd touched my leg tingled, and I fought to ignore it.

"I'm serious, Emma. Why'd you ask me that?"

Her smile faltered. "I asked you because it's an important question to ask. Haven't you ever wondered?"

I frowned. "Wondered what?"

She threw her arms open. "Anything! Everything! Haven't you ever *wondered?*"

"I don't—"

"What's the purpose of the compound, Jenks? Why does it exist? Why do any of them exist?" The dark sky was overcast and had been threatening to rain for hours, but Emma looked up anyway. "Why did they find shapes in the stars? Why did they give them names? Why did my brother leave me at the base of a tree and never come back? Why do we sit here, night after night, pointing guns at trees that nothing ever comes out of?"

"Because—"

Emma cut me off. "No! No, Jenks. Don't you get it? It doesn't matter what the answer is, it matters that you ask the question. It matters that you *wonder.*" Her face was serious—more serious than I'd ever seen it—her eyes cutting into mine like shards of broken ice.

We sat in our silence and let it expand as her words settled beneath the surface. I turned them over and over in my head until they started to lose meaning. Until I couldn't take it anymore.

"When will you leave?" I practically vomited the question into her lap. I didn't want to ask it, but I felt like I had to. Like she'd finally given me permission to ask.

Like she'd been begging me to ask.

She sniffed. "When I'm ready."

"Will you be ready soon?"

When her eyes found mine, I was surprised to see tears there.

"Yes."

#

At dusk the next day, I trotted to the western gate, my mind running through a fresh list of questions. Emma had said I was too serious, so this time I would ask her something different. Something fun. Something about the future, like what she might like to do when this was all over. Like what we could do together, if she wanted to.

"Hey," the guard said after he opened the gate. I blinked, so lost in my own head I'd forgotten where I was for a moment. "Sorry, man," he said.

"Sorry for what?"

"Your partner. You know, the, uh, girl."

As his eyes drifted towards the open gate, the world tilted beneath me. "What about her?"

Don't say it.

"She's gone."

He said it like a question, as though I should have already known. The rifle slipped from my fingers and he caught it, handing it back to me with a confused look on his face. The inside of my skin felt numb, while the outside felt as though it had just been set over an open fire.

Gone.

The word was like a boot to the gut. I knew what it really meant. It didn't mean "gone" like she'd wandered past the tree-line and found herself lost in the wild. It didn't mean "gone" like she'd left on a supply run and would be back in a few days. It meant she was *gone*, like she was never coming back.

Emma was dead.

That word—a word that had followed me everywhere for the last decade of my life—now, somehow, didn't make sense. Dead. *Dead.* Emma was dead. It couldn't be true. I'd spoken to her yesterday. She'd been healthy. She'd been happy. She'd been the furthest thing I'd ever known from dead.

This all felt so familiar, and yet so completely foreign. Here I was, same guard, same place, delivering the same news, but this… this wasn't the same. Emma wasn't Benji, and I wasn't the same Jenks.

I opened my mouth and forced the word out. "How?"

"The same way everyone goes."

Moving felt impossible, so I started small. I bobbed my head in a small nod, then moved one foot forward, then the other. My throat wouldn't work, so I stopped trying to swallow—stopped trying to breathe—and focused only on moving. When I finally reached our chairs, a twenty-something guy with black hair and a thick, unkempt beard nodded at me from his chair. I stared at the rifle in his hands.

Emma's rifle.

"Hmph," he grunted as I sat next to him.

"Hey." How was I supposed to do this? "Name's Jenks."

I felt my lips move. I heard the words come out, but I had no idea how I made it happen. My mind felt far away, my thoughts detached from my body.

Emma can't be dead. She can't be.

She is.

"Brandon," he replied in a low voice. "So I watch the north and we switch in an hour, right?"

"Sure. Right."

I raised the rifle to my cheek and used the scope to scan the tree-line. Was this what it had been like for Benji before I showed up? Had he gone through body after body, none lasting more than a few weeks before the next would show up? How many times had he shared his stories? How many people had heard his words? How many questions had he asked?

How many times had he been ignored?

I shifted to face Brandon, then nodded across the water. "What do you think is out there?"

He frowned. "Are you stupid or something?"

I laughed. It was hollow. Empty.

Gone.

"I mean it. Not just beyond the trees or the scout lines, but really *out* there."

"Does it matter? If anything moves, point and shoot. Got it?" His eyes were the color of mud.

"You've never wondered? Not even a little bit?"

But Brandon didn't answer. He was done talking. Before Emma, I probably would have been the same. Hell, I *was* the same. When I met her, I thought I was being punished for something. Now, the thought couldn't be more ridiculous.

A raindrop landed on my cheek, a pinprick of cold against the quiet burn of my skin. As I sat, the deep chill of early winter began to seep through my boots, and I thought about what she'd said the last time we spoke: *it matters that you ask the question.*

I set my rifle on the ground and stood.

*Why haven't you?*

The question rattled around my head, urging my body to move. I scanned the swamp, its glassy surface disturbed by the rain, until I found the spot where they'd placed wooden planks a few inches beneath the water creating an invisible bridge to the tree-line.

"Hey! What are you doing?" Brandon called after me as I stepped on a submerged plank. "Did you see something?"

He jumped up and followed me to the water's edge, rifle swinging wildly from side-to-side as he scanned the area.

"No. I didn't see anything." Maybe that was the problem. Maybe that had always been the problem. I never saw anything, and I never would if I continued to sit in that chair night after night, eyes always focused on the wrong things.

I turned my head skyward, freezing rain pattering against my face, and I thought about the constellation Sagittarius.

My eyes burned. Why hadn't I asked her to point it out to me?

"Wh—where you going?" Brandon yelled as I took another step. I didn't answer. I didn't have to. He would go back to the compound and tell everyone I'd wandered into the woods. That I was as good as dead. They'd all murmur "that's too bad" as they searched their memories for my face, wondering if we'd ever met. To them, I'd become nothing more than another raindrop in a storm. An answer to a question that nobody would ask. But the answer didn't matter.

The answer never mattered.

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***Lisa Amico Kristel*** *(she/her) is a recovering computer programmer and composition instructor and a former restaurant owner. She co-founded and hosts the #YeahYouWrite Reading Series in New York City. While she searches for a home for her novel-with-recipes, The Art of Conversation, she writes creative non-fiction and strange fiction and learns to play the viola. Her work can be found in LampLight, Remington Review, and others, and is forthcoming in The Fabulist. Lisa lives in Oyster Bay, NY with her husband and a dog that isn't really theirs.*

# Telling Time

## Lisa Amico Kristel

Each day the sky above the strip of beach called Ditch Plains in Montauk offers a new prize that depends on the shape of the clouds, the strength of the wind, and the angle of the sun. This early fall morning, clouds stretched in horizontal gray wisps, backlit pink by the rising sun. Oblivious to the scenery, my dog, Chusco, raced along the water's edge looking over his shoulder like a wide receiver. I released the ball from the purple plastic thrower, and he timed his leap perfectly. He trotted back to me, waiting for a repeat, but I had other plans.

My parents, who were with us again that fall weekend, would be awake.

I jogged the third of a mile to the house and released Chusco's leash at the end of the driveway. He sprinted to the porch. By the time I caught up, he'd tucked his head beneath my eighty-eight-year-old father's vein-gnarled hand for his obligatory morning scratch.

"Coffee's ready," my father said, putting his crossword puzzle aside.

"Let's have it on the beach. I'll drive there."

"Mommy can't walk on sand."

"Steven and I will help her." It would have been easy. At eighty-five, my mother had dipped well below her original five feet. I imagined her bundled in a blanket, chair planted at the base of the dunes, her head tilted toward the eastern light.

"I'll bring chairs. Wait until you see how much Chusco loves it."

"Maybe tomorrow," my father said—his usual deflection. The truth was, he would need help too, though he'd never admit it.

"Okay, tomorrow," I said. But the next day I kicked off my flip-flops where my parents' chairs should have been and stood toeing the soft sand alone. *Next time*. There would always be another tomorrow, another weekend.

They'd keep arriving as surely as the waves crashed upon the beach at Ditch Plains.

#

I should have insisted that my parents come with me that day. Then, they might have managed the short strip of sand that led to the ocean. But by late October, it was too late. Even with our help they'd struggle for traction on the unstable beach, battered by Super Storm Sandy's rage, and they, by age.

Sandy left vast patches of Ditch stripped of sand. Stone-studded hardpan, purplish-black, stretched west. Old construction debris lurked in the surf and poked its rusty edges from the cliffs. The years had already raked the cliffs into ragged verticals; tens of feet had been lost since we'd first come to Montauk.

Time had left its impressions on my parents as well. My mother's chronic conditions had sent her health spiraling downward. From morning until bedtime, my father sat with her. They watched talk shows and "Jeopardy," or sang the old songs together, like "Ramona" and "Blue Moon." They often shared my father's favorite back and forth:

"What's my name?" he'd ask.

"Joe Shmoe," she'd respond. "And mine?"

He'd grin and say, "Silly Millie."

I understood that this banter was less an expression of their playful relationship than a sign of my mother's devotion, as she indulged my father's gradual retreat into childlike behavior.

When they were both fully functioning adults, my mother had dinner on the table by five, after the living room rug was vacuumed. She placed a hot cup of sugared espresso from the *maganetta* before him once dinner was done. My father began to cook breakfast and help with the laundry only when my mother grew weak. For an Italian man born in the nineteen-twenties, that was a huge step.

Now, when she dozed off, he sat and looked at her. Was it love, fear, confusion? The only certainty was that his inactivity had rendered both his body and mind less than balanced.

#

My brother and sister and I stepped in to help whenever we could. Since they both had full-time jobs and I'd retired from teaching, I took on the role of chauffeur. I managed both my parents' and my households while ferrying them from medical specialist to testing center and back again. At least twice a week, we criss-crossed Long Island and Manhattan in a race to stay ahead of their slide into old age.

As usual, an early winter Tuesday found me in Stop & Shop, Oyster Bay. I stood in the aisle lined with jars and cans of tomatoes, tomato sauce, tomato paste, rows and rows of colorful labels curving in and out of their adjacent shadows. In my hand was a medium-sized can of . . . something. I'd

forgotten my glasses. The red blob in the center of the white label was certainly a tomato, but in what form? I squinted. Nothing but a blur. I searched for someone, a younger someone, to tell me what the label said. I caught a man's eye but whipped back around. He might offer to find what I needed, but what had I come to buy?

I checked my bag, my jeans' pockets—right, left, front, back. No list. At least I had my phone.

"Steven, is my shopping list there?" I asked my husband, hoping my voice wouldn't betray my growing panic.

As I listened to the sound of his footsteps moving through our house, I remembered my father standing at his kitchen counter just a few days ago. He'd fumbled with the can of tuna he wanted to make for lunch, unable to latch it onto the electric opener. "This damn thing never works right," he said when I came over to help.

"I got it," Steven said finally. "On the toaster oven. Want me to read it to you?"

"Yeah, but . . ." I closed my eyes for a moment. "I'm scared." Bad start when speaking to an alarmist. He probably thought there was a hostage situation brewing at the Stop & Shop.

"What's wrong?"

"I've forgotten so many things today." I drew a hand over my damp eyes. "I keep . . . forgetting."

"That's all? It's okay, don't . . . Hey, are you crying?"

"No," I said, proving myself a liar by succumbing to my tears. I listed all my missteps that morning: First, my mother's morning call. Ten-thirty a.m., everyday—I'd missed it. Next, I had trouble locating my car keys before I left for the store. Then the glasses. Now the list.

"C'mon, Lis, I can't think of words half the time. We're getting old."

"That's what I'm afraid of." Steven knew how often I searched the web to see if dementia ran in families. Before the disease was named, my paternal grandmother succumbed to what we eventually understood was Alzheimer's. That or ordinary dementia had begun to plague my father. Google might not agree, but I saw a trend.

"You have a lot to keep track of lately. Besides, I seem to remember you being like this in your twenties."

"Very funny," I said, but had to laugh. I've always been somewhat absent-minded—just like my mother. And her intellect was otherwise intact.

#

I faced my father's dementia with a sense of humor. The alternative—mourning each new mental mishap, every misplaced memory—would have been too much to bear. At times, the laughter came easily.

Once I'd mentioned I ought to buy them some more parmesan cheese for their pasta.

"What do you mean we need more cheese?" he asked. "We just bought cheese yesterday. A big block! I think that repairman stole the cheese."

On another evening, he had trouble cutting the steak on his plate—clearly a case of supermarket foul play. "I chose the good steaks, and these are tough," he said. "The woman behind us in line must have switched her cheap steaks for my quality ones."

I might have asked a rational person how the woman had gotten her hands on the steaks after the cashier rang them up. Not to mention that I was there, a witness to the truth. But I knew no amount of reasoning or proof would disabuse him of his conviction. As his doctor explained, you could talk a person out of dementia-driven delusions as easily as you could persuade a diabetic to lower their blood sugar without insulin.

Diabetes was one of my mother's many health issues—all indisputable. To the beat of a pacemaker, her heart pumped blood through a stent and only one of her own valves, the other three having been replaced during two surgeries, the first more than thirty years earlier, when she was fifty-two. My age that coming February. Over the years, she'd suffered episodes of congestive heart failure, some that required hospitalization, and a terrifying internal bleed. Seeing her, one wouldn't have guessed. Petite and trim in crisp blouses and one or another of the blue-toned cardigans she favored, she carried herself with energy and still craved her favorite forbidden food: salty hot dogs steamed in a pot of saltier sauerkraut. If I let her cheat, she'd easily put away three in a sitting. Steven and I called her the Bionic Woman, but even robots wear out eventually.

Yet none of this had weakened my mother's spirit. When given the option to sit on her walker and take a ride, she always responded as emphatically as her breath allowed, "I want to walk." And if anyone asked how she was, she always answered, "I feel much better today." My mother still beamed with bright eyes, a wry sense of humor, and a sharp mind.

Awareness, however, carried its own pain. My father's condition distressed her, and she regretted missing her garden club gatherings and her inability to cook dinner or keep house. "I never thought you'd have to do this for me," she'd said the first time I helped her in the bathroom. My response, something about being happy to care for her as she'd cared for me when I was a child, hung between us like a rain-heavy cloud.

Still, once winter was behind us, I channeled her optimism and decided to bring my parents to Montauk for a long weekend. My brother and sister thought the plan was risky. My father could be difficult, and my mother's health continued its steady decline.

In January, my sister found her still in bed at noon, her cheeks unpinked. She had to lean in close to hear my mother say, "I think I'm dying."

This second intestinal bleed sent her to the hospital for the necessary but dangerous protocol: To slow the bleeding, the blood thinners that kept her

mechanical heart valves free of clots had to be stopped. Both the blood loss and a clot could be deadly. Days passed, filled with transfusions, the constant monitoring of her heart, and my own electric fear. Like picking up static from a carpeted floor, it snapped into me the moment I stepped into her room. Her cardiologist and nurses managed the balancing act with aplomb, but even they seemed relieved when she was released, once again flushed with vitality.

Only a few weeks later, my father called. "Mommy won't talk." When my brother and I arrived, she opened her eyes but didn't seem to register our presence. She walked, but only if we stood her up and led her. We rushed to the emergency room where testing found nothing overtly wrong. A few hours later, she returned to us, alert and rather astonished that we were at the hospital. The staff looked just as surprised. Though her symptoms didn't quite fit, we accepted their diagnosis of a "possible" transient ischemic attack or TIA and took her home. I suppose they had to tell us something.

I wasn't surprised that my siblings objected to bringing my parents out to Montauk.

"What if that happens again?" my sister asked. "Southampton Hospital is so far from Montauk. So far from *us*." My brother agreed.

I reminded them that her cardiologist suggested we avoid the ER if we encountered another of these episodes. We might never know their true cause, she explained, and the elderly often fare worse after a hospital visit. "Care for her as you would on any day," she told us. "Crush her meds into soft foods and feed them to her. If her breathing is labored, add extra diuretics, and keep her upright."

It sounded simple: *Perform steps A, B, and C, and wait for the situation to resolve itself*. I latched on to medicine's logic and refused to remember the fear that lurked behind it.

All of this was a lot to carry, but I was determined to pack it up and bring it out east to make my parents happy. When in Montauk, they spent unfettered time in the fresh sea air, shared meals and drives to the lighthouse with us, and sat on our porch swing each morning, watching for rabbits and deer.

Banishing any lingering doubts, I told my siblings, "Mom can have a bad day anywhere. It may as well be in a place she and Dad love." I thought back to the past several months, the hours spent with my parents and their various doctors. Hours in waiting rooms. It was a stretch to remember the days when my father walked for miles, when my parents danced in the living room, giddy after a night out with their friends. When they were young, when I was too. Perhaps Montauk would create new memories. I needed this weekend as much as I imagined my parents did. "Besides," I added, "Mommy's been doing really well lately."

And so, one sunny spring Thursday, I took a detour west to pick up my parents on the way out to Montauk. Steven would join us after work. We'd

left early enough that the Southern State Parkway didn't yet resemble a parking lot, which would have doubled the three hours it normally took to drive to the eastern-most point of Long Island.

Unaware of the bad day that awaited us, I zipped along the parkway. Amy Winehouse crooned from the speakers. My mother liked her 40s vibe.

Keeping his gaze on the car in front of us, my father spoke. "I have to say, Lisa, you have made a quite wrong decision. You don't do that very often, but you did today." His expression bore no recognition that his word choice was a bit off.

"What do you mean, Dad?"

"You made me go all the way back inside to get this jacket, and I haven't needed it at all."

"Dad, we've only been driving for twenty minutes." The sing-song, toddler-pleasing lilt in my voice saddened me, but it was necessary. "We're going to be out in Montauk for four days. You may get chilly during one of them."

From the back seat my mother said, "You're always cold, Joe," her voice faint but feisty.

Mostly deaf and therefore unaware of her remark, my father continued with his point. "I had to unlock both doors. Then when I left, I had to lock both doors again."

He'd insisted on going inside himself, and I'd relented to avoid one of his angry outbursts, a symptom of his dementia. Like balm on a burn, agreeability cooled his moods.

"Both doors. That makes sense."

"Well of course it does." My mother again.

"And I haven't worn this jacket in years."

No point in reminding him that he wore this navy zippered one every day, which was why it always hung on the hook by the door.

"It was a bad decision, Lisa."

"I'm sorry, Dad."

"What?"

"I'm—"

"She says she's sorry." My mother's voice cracked with the effort to be heard.

"Who's that talking?" My father turned to look at me, his brow creased with concern. Outside his window, the trees and shrubs lining the parkway flashed by, a blur of spring's new greenery.

"That's Mom."

"What's she saying?"

"She said that I said that I'm sorry." I enunciated each phrase with a tip of my head.

"Why are you sorry?"

"About the jacket."

"I don't even remember this jacket. You made a very incorrect decision."

"I know, Dad. You're right."

Our weekend had begun.

#

As I hauled bags of groceries into the house, my parents sat on the porch swing, Chusco at their feet. My father had wheeled their small suitcase inside, but I'd persuaded him to let me do the rest.

"Sit with Mom," I said. "You don't want her to be alone." I played to his need to protect her. Hallelujah, it worked. Helping me unpack the food might have incited a reprise of the steak incident, or worse, one of his more aggressive bouts of suspicious paranoia. His anger wasn't pleasant for anyone, but it overwhelmed my mother.

#

A few years before, when unbeknownst to any of us my father's dementia had begun to bloom, my parents discovered that my grandfather's gold watch had gone missing. My mother suspected it got lost during their move from their house into a much smaller apartment. My father decided the neighbor who kept their keys while they spent a month in Florida had stolen it. Knowing he couldn't directly accuse them without proof, he took to releasing his rage at my mother. Whoever visited was treated to the same furious telling of the story. I remember watching him scream at her, as if she'd stolen the watch. Reasoning with my father angered him more. I wished I could flip a switch to stop him, or simply spirit my mother out of their apartment. Instead, I stood between them in a vain attempt to shield her. We both waited, quiet and tense, for his tirade to end. The change in my father frightened me, but mostly I feared for my mother, who visibly quaked beneath the onslaught of his words.

The gerontologist my mother and I brought my father to said that all he needed was more stimulation to slow the onset of dementia. But after several months of escalating anger, I begged her to prescribe him calming medication.

"It's killing my mother," I said, letting the tears flow. The doctor relented.

#

When Steven arrived, I took Chusco for a quick walk and found the beach renewed. Another beachgoer told me that a few weeks earlier, the town had dumped four thousand cubic yards of sand along the Ditch Plains shoreline, covering its wounds. It was a relief to feel fine grains yield beneath my bare feet once again, to walk by the cliffs without risking tetanus. That was about the same time my mother seemed to rally, looking stronger and sleeping less. Bringing my parents was the right decision.

While I prepped zucchini and marinated steaks, my parents sat on the porch, shucking corn, filling the big pot at their feet with husks. Steven manned the grill. The four of us sat around our farm table for dinner. It was delicious; even my mother had seconds. After, my father performed his rendition of "A Fine Romance," the song he traditionally sang just as loudly in restaurants. When my sister was a young teen, it mortified her, but my mother loved his exuberance.

"Do you want to watch CSI?" It was my mother's favorite show.

"Not if there's a Yankee game on," my Bronx-bred father said.

We all settled on the couch, my parents pressed together in one corner, sharing the ottoman. I'm not sure how the Yankees fared because my parents, well-fed and sleepy from the drive, soon dozed. I nudged my father, and he trundled off to the bathroom while I helped my mother get ready for bed. I tucked the covers around her slight shoulders, and my father climbed in next to her. When I kissed her good night, we both laughed—he was already snoring.

Steven and I had almost finished watching *Moonstruck* when I heard my mother cry out from behind their bedroom door.

I hurried in to find her sleeping but restless. Her legs kicked with spasms as she tried to get out of bed. I squeezed in to lie beside her, as I did when I was a little girl, frightened by a dream. Not that I was able to calm her—I was merely a barrier to her escape. My father slept on her other side, unaware of his safe-keeping role. When she awoke the next morning, she just stared, her blue eyes wide and milky.

Outside, the birds chirped their morning songs, and the empty porch swing creaked.

"Good morning, Mom. It's Lisa. Can you say good morning?"

Silence. She looked very small sitting up in the family room, supported by the nest of thick pillows I'd arranged around her.

"Millie," my father asked, "what's my name?"

She didn't turn toward his voice, as if she were alone in an empty house, gazing beyond its walls at something only she could see.

He touched her cheek, then let his hand drop.

Resting his arm on my shoulders, Steven tucked me in close. "Do you need some fresh air? I'll stay with them."

But the only place I would have felt close to comfortable that day was right there with my mother.

Veins pulsed an unforgiving pattern across her temples as she pulled shallow breaths from the air. We could only guess why she was in a semi-conscious state but knew that her chronic congestive heart failure caused her other symptoms. Even with all its mechanical supports, at times her heart struggled to beat under the weight of excess fluids. Blood pressure rose, veins swelled, breath labored.

Like pouring sand over a scarred beach, I spread some remedies around and hoped they'd stick. I gathered more pillows. Along with her other medications, I crushed extra diuretics into applesauce and slipped spoonfuls between her yielding lips. Her swallow was a reflex. I watched, and I watched over my father, too, who remained by her side, one hand on hers, the other absently stroking Chusco's ears.

My typical mad rush stalled in our house that day. Words fell away. Every action required pushing through a dense fog. The wind whined through the eaves, and I wondered when it would rain.

At dusk, Steven helped me get my mother ready for bed. When I laid her down, her eyes closed like an old-fashioned baby doll's. She hadn't spoken a word all day.

My father shuffled into their room, placed his hearing aid on the nightstand, and climbed under the covers. Rolling onto his side, he drifted into sleep.

Steven and I didn't speak. We'd already exhausted the only topics of the day: What my mother's doctor had instructed. Wondering what was happening to her and what thoughts ran through my father's mind.

As I had each previous hour, at three a.m. I stood outside my parents' bedroom door and imagined what I would do if I found my mother lying still and cold. It was as impossible as finding the ocean at my doorstep, the beach and the road and all the houses that lay between us obliterated. Fear immobilized me. Again, with my heart singing high and fast, I forced myself to step inside, to get close enough to see the slight rise and fall of her chest. To know she was still with me.

I waited out the remaining dark sitting rigid at the edge of the bed. My father snored, at peace, the mass of his shoulders making my mother look even tinier than she was.

#

In the morning she awoke, as she would on an ordinary day. I got her teeth brushed, and she wheeled herself into the kitchen. "I want to walk," she'd said, of course. It was a good day. I didn't question why.

Steven helped my mother into a chair and kissed the top of her head. He watched my father spoon scrambled eggs onto a plate and slide it in front of my mother, and then he sat beside me.

Thirty-two hours after that first scare, my mother struggled to keep up as my father sang "Down by the Old Mill Stream" in his usual joyful baritone. She'd catch the last word or two from each line.

I often joke that farsightedness is nature's gift to long-married couples: it keeps us young in each other's eyes by blurring our wrinkles smooth. In truth, my father's dementia offered the same sort of blessing. Nature helped him lower the bar. It allowed him to believe that almost singing meant my mother was fine. Walking and dressing herself, let alone gardening

and cooking, were no longer necessary for him to think she was back to normal. All he needed was a smile and a fresh pair of pajamas.

The previous day had washed away my we-can-have-a-bad-day-anywhere bravado. We packed up, cutting the trip short. It was cold that morning, and my father was already zipped into his jacket and in the car before I'd settled my mother in the back seat.

"Hurry and get Chusco." He pointed to a pair of deer lying among the trees with their legs folded beneath them, as they do when it's going to storm.

"Don't worry, Dad. He's in Steven's car. They're going to follow us."

"I don't know what you said, but you'd better get that dog into the car."

I promised I would. As I buckled her seat belt, my mother shrugged and raised her eyebrows.

"Your father," she said, and I believed she was back.

At their apartment that afternoon, my father sat with the paper in deep concentration, his erasable pen hovering over the jumble word game. He no longer attempted the crossword.

I led my mother to her place beside him.

"Well, we had a couple of nice days in Montauk," I said.

Tilting her head, she gave me a pressed-lip smile.

"Yes. Good." She gazed about the room. "Did you bring any friends out there?"

#

During the next week, my brother and sister and I scheduled caretakers to stay with our parents overnight. We would all take turns covering their unsupervised hours, depending on our schedules. I was packing up what I needed for a day at their apartment when Steven walked in.

"I have a surprise for you," he said, dangling a plastic tortoiseshell chain in the air between us. "For your reading glasses."

"Terrific."

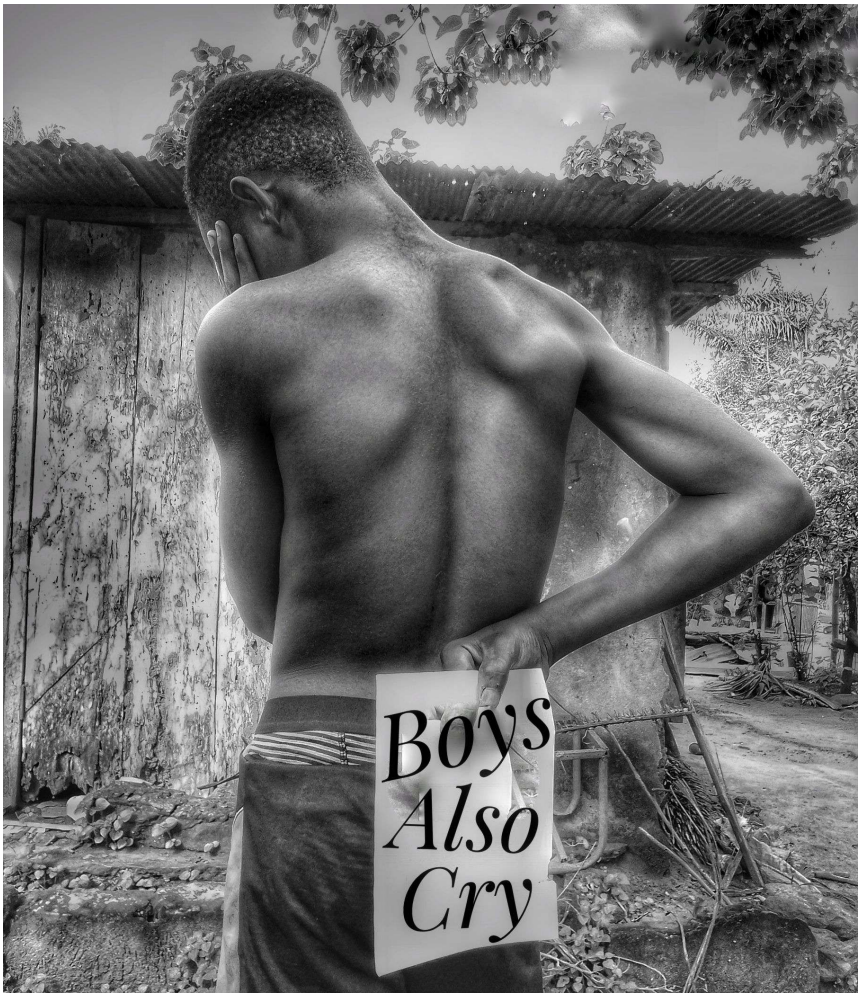
"Got your keys? Shopping list?"

I patted my bag. "Got 'em, thanks." A wee knot tightened in my gut. As I drove, every bump in the road rattled the chain around my neck.

#

The next weekend, when I walked Chusco to Ditch for his seaside romp, I found that the previous night's rain had washed away the town's new sand. The waves broke and rushed out through deep fissures in the damaged shoreline. Chusco ran off to explore, but I stood, letting the wind tangle my hair and cover me with a fine mist. I couldn't follow, could only breathe in and out and taste the salt in the air. All around me, the raw earth lay bruised and vulnerable in the stark morning light, the stones beneath my feet telling time.

***Philip Chijioke Abonyi*** *(he/him) is a writer and photographer who studied in Federal Polytechnic Oko, Anambra State Nigeria. He was shortlisted for the Eriata Oribhabor Poetry Prize in 2018. His works have appeared and are forthcoming in African Writer Magazine, Agape Review, Even Magazine, Better Than Starbucks Journal, Praxis Magazine, Kalahari Review, The Rainbow Magazine, and elsewhere.*




**Boys are not drums**

*This reflects disagreement with the belief that boys are drums; they don't feel pain and so they don't cry.*

***Kasimma's*** *stories and poems appear on Guernica, LitHub, Writer's Digest, Meet Cute, Native Skin, The Puritan, Kikwetu, Afreecan Read, and in many other journals and anthologies. She is the author of All Shades of Iberibe and a Nikky Finney Fellow. She's been awarded writers' residencies and workshops across Africa, Asia, and Europe. Kasimma has enjoyed, very thankfully, the privilege of learning under the voices of Wole Soyinka, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Lola Shoneyin, and others. You can read more about her and her works on https://kasimma.com/read-online. Kasimma is from Igboland—obodo ndị dike.*

# Grief is a Rock

## Kasimma

Grief is a rock. One can neither chew nor swallow it. One can only carry and, God healing, along the way, drop it. I mean, come to think of it, like really, really, who wants to come and be carrying a rock up and down?

I find that this rock is constantly sitting on my shoulder, and, of course, freaking weighing me down. Because of its weight, I drag myself through the hospital hallway, through the oceans trudging past, faces swollen, some eyes red, feet slapping the hell out of the poor ground. There are more airs than oceans here. We, the airs, only acknowledge each other with a nod and go on our way.

An ocean with braided, long, black hair sits on the bench. Her intertwined fingers bear the weight of her head. Her eyes, leaking colourless, odourless, salty fluid, are stuck to the door labelled THEATRE. I go through the door and, you know, take a look. A muscular ocean is lying on the slab, arms spread out like the crucified Jesus. A team of oceans, dressed in green scrubs, surround him, opening or closing or washing some space in his head. I leave. I sit on the bench beside the crying ocean. She hugs herself as though she's cold. I wonder if she sees me. I wish I can say sorry to the crying ocean and tell her that at least her ocean has other oceans fighting to save his life. In my case, I arrived dead—well not dead, dead, but brain-dead, which is equal to death, right?

It sounds like a church bell. "We're set to pull the plugs. Do you want to say goodbye?"

I shut my eyes tight. I appear there. She's still there. The idiot. No, idiots are cool. The… the…hmmm…the frog who literally put this rock on my shoulder. She's there, wiping crocodile tears, and talking on the phone with… well, crocodile.

"I can't," crocodile says, her voice shaky.

"He will be gone in a few hours. Say your goodbyes," frog insisted.

(Please I am not capitalizing any frog's name. Colonizers, kindly avoid me).

frog covers her face and bawls. I stand there. Next thing, frog is positioning her phone to my face—not this one, the one asleep, no, brain-dead on the bed. crocodile covers her mouth, shuts her eyes.

"Musa," she says, shakes like a car entering a pothole, wipes her eyes. "Please, forgive me. I love you. I did not lie. I cannot live with myself. I might just die." She sniffs and recycles snot on her cheeks. "When you go, go well. It is well with you. Please forgive me."

Something in me gives. My heart used to beat for crocodile, but now, I need life-support machine to keep the heart beating.

frog grabs my palm and squeezes. "Broda mi, I did not intend for this to happen. I swear I was going to let her go because she makes you so happy. Please, forgive me. If you can still remember anything, think of our childhood, not this."

Of course, I can remember. I'm only brain-dead. Mere mortals! I remember. Everything! Growing up with frog. Looking out for her in school. My whole life has been with frog. She is the one that introduced me to crocodile. And I fell in love: my mistake.

My legs wobble—not the brain-dead ones! The rock grows heavier and I sink to the ground. I am back to where I eavesdropped on them.

*My love, this is the last.*

*No, it can't be.*

*It has to be. You make him so happy. You're getting married tomorrow. I will not ruin my brother's marriage because of my own love interest.*

*So you're really going to America?*

*Yes. Distance is needed.*

*And it's America where you will easily find another lesbian that you decided to go.*

*It's hard for me. But he is my brother. And you love him. This whole cover-up arrangement was a mistake. I shouldn't have introduced you to him. But, be that as it may, he is my brother, and I love him. We have to end it.*

crocodile and frog are crying. frog places her head on my chest—yes, please, the brain-dead one. I sink further into the ground. Stupid rock! Did she give this rock to me or did I find it and place it on my shoulder myself? I rake myself from the ground.

I'm grieving my own death. Grieving a lover who hurt me. Grieving a sister who betrayed me. Why didn't I walk away after eavesdropping? If I did, I might not have seen them naked, cuddling, confirming my fears. I might not have jumped into the car, into the road, into a truck.

But frog is sorry. I can see it in her heart—look, I'm not like you; I see these things. I see the rock in her chest. It's even bigger than mine. I want to take it away. I cannot allow her carry this rock forever. I reach into her chest. I slide my hands into her beating heart, carefully avoiding her veins and arteries. I try to lift the rock. I cannot. And I know why. Her rock is as big as Zuma—do you know Zuma rock: well, ask Google.

It will be better for frog to die than to live with that Zuma in her heart. But why can't I save her? I start to cry. I shake. I fall on the ground. I shake/cry until I feel light. I raise my shoulder. It's light. My rock is gone. I jump. I feel light. I look at frog—no, not frog. Her name is Zainab. Her head is no longer on my chest. Her eyes are wide-opened. I follow her gaze.

Colourless, odourless, salty liquid leaks from my eyes—yes, the brain-dead ones.

***Sera Gamble*** *(she/her) is an award-winning writer whose work has appeared in Tinderbox, Washington Square, Suitcase, The Wall Street Journal, and in various anthologies. She also writes film and television. Sera is a first-generation American living in Los Angeles, where she likes to grab coffee across the street from the lot where they filmed The Wizard Of Oz, because they erected a permanent rainbow above the sound stage.*

# In the 3rd year of the zombie apocalypse

## Sera Gamble

In the 3rd year of the zombie apocalypse
we started wearing their teeth as jewels.
This one's held on around my neck
for so many important moments
of running for my life.
I've always been good
with knots. Made amulets
to get us all prom dates.
It was a dance. Everyone went.
We danced with our mouths so close
we breathed each other's cinnamon air.
We were electric
with worry about all the wrong things,
love, college, our thighs, blowjobs,
our parents finding the dent in the car.
Yes, we had cars,
we had parents.

See the chip in this incisor?
It's from when he bit
a cherry pit in a cocktail
at an Outback Steakhouse.
He freaked out
when I hit puberty
and stopped giving me hugs
and glared when I came downstairs
in that dress,

but he taught me knots,
and we all know
that kind of thing saves your life.

***Jim Ross*** *jumped into creative pursuits in 2015 after a rewarding career in public health research. With a graduate degree from Howard University, in seven years he's published nonfiction, fiction, poetry, photography, hybrid, and plays in 175 journals on five continents. Photo publications include Bombay Gin, Burningword, Camas, Columbia Journal, Memoryhouse, Saw Palm, Stonecoast, and UU World. Jim's text-based photo-essays include Barren, DASH, Friends Journal, Kestrel, Ilanot Review, Litro, New World Writing, and Sweet. He'll soon publish his fifth photo essay using old postcards. He's recently written and acted in a one act play and contributed to a documentary limited series broadcast internationally. Jim and his wife—parents of two health professionals and grandparents of five little ones—split time between city and mountains.*

**Rained Upon Rose 1**

*A rose is a rose is a rose." Add raindrops and magic happens. Yet, as rains are coming down, I see few photographers descending on rose gardens. At most, they wait until the rains have ended, and then show up.*

**Rained Upon Rose 2**

**Rained Upon Rose 3**

*I watched one photographer trying to capture the rain pooling in a single drooping petal. She shot that pooling petal from every angle. I didn't crowd her execution of a clear plan. The next day, I returned during a shower when no one else was in sight and observed the same petal producing a tiny waterfall. Tulips make alluring photo subjects too but their season is brief and when tulips peak the crowds descend.*

*The rose season, however, lasts more than half the year and adding raindrops to the natural aging roses go through gives roses more ways to play in the rain. Deliberately photographing rained-upon flowers, especially roses, shouldn't be a tightly-held secret.*

**Rained Upon Rose 4**

***Kelly Sargent*** *is HOH and the author of the forthcoming books, Lilacs & Teacups (2022) and Seeing Voices: Poetry in Motion (2022), a finalist in the Cordella Press poetry chapbook contest. A poem recently recognized in the international Golden Haiku contest is also on display in Washington, D.C. She is an editor for two literary journals, and reviews for an organization supporting sexual violence survivors' artistic expression. She has also written for SIGNews, a national newspaper for the Deaf. Visit her at www.kellysargent.com.*

# 122 Minutes

## Kelly Sargent

One hundred twenty-two minutes
on the witness stand
— the stenographer had been painfully precise in her effort.

and the bailiff, just as dutiful in handing me
the plastic bottle of Poland Springs water
when my voice broke the words into pieces.

*Where did he touch you?*

I massaged my throat for two seconds
to force the words back together.

I rubbed the sand-colored stone tucked in my pocket
that Susan had gifted me at our session
before the Day had arrived.

I knew that it had once been jagged —
dislodged from a cliff perhaps —
and a swift current had shaped it.
*... for this day,* I had imagined.

The public defender boomed a stern command.
I heard one word and no other: *describe*
and I froze in an icy current
as memories like waves crashed over me.

I swallowed water, salty and frigid
that stung the visceral wound between my legs.

There was:
the *who,*
the *what*
the *where,*
the *when,*
the *how,*
but he never asked the *why,*

because only the one
in the gray swivel chair behind the oak table,
called *Dad*,
knew the answer.

# Bottles in the Courtroom

Seventy-three minutes in,
I used the word *repressed* under cross-examination.

*How does a fifteen-year-old girl know that word*
*and how to use it correctly?*

*I took Child Psychology last semester,* I answered.
Mrs. Clark had been surprised that I knew
PTSD stands for "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder."

I have since wondered if any one of the jury members
also knew the word *repressed* as intimately as I,

and knew the words I was to say that day before I said them
because she, too, knew them,
and felt *one* catch in the memory
of her own fifteen-year-old throat: *Dad.*

I have wondered if she, too, clutched a bottle of Poland Springs water as she sat there
to wash the word down,

and then dropped it in the blue bin on the way out

to be recycled.

# To Be Seen

I have wondered if any one of the jurors
ever saw me again…
at the Shaw's on the corner
or in the Target at the mall
or by the ticket counter at Nickelodeon
waiting to see *Titanic* for the fourth time.

each would have known me —
my face, my name,
my voice that had been put back together.

They knew the secret about my father
that I had kept from my friends,
my teachers, my mother, and even my sister,
and had seen my favorite rose dress I had worn
that I threw away in my foster mother's trash can that evening
along with every other piece of clothing I had worn that Day
because I thought them *dirty.*

I have never seen a one.
I never even saw the foreman, the only one to speak.
I only heard her voice,
clear and calm when she declared: *Guilty.*

I remember wanting to turn to look at her
for just a moment.

Instead,
I rose,
and walked out of the courtroom,
my empty water bottle in hand,

and never looked back.

***Myna Chang's*** *(she/her) work has been selected for Flash Fiction America (Norton), Best Small Fictions, Fractured Lit, X-R-A-Y Lit Mag, and The Citron Review, among others. She has won the Lascaux Prize in Creative Nonfiction and the New Millennium Award in Flash Fiction. Read more at MynaChang.com or @MynaChang.*

# Temporal Aspects of Human Physiology, Contemplated in the Aftermath of a Dragon Attack

Myna Chang

I don't expect to die on this two-lane farm road, but a dragon intrudes, swerves breakneck across the center line. Empty-eyed, its grille-metal fangs speed toward me—and I know. It will happen in seconds, maybe less, start to finish. Only a heartbeat of time.

- *A normal resting heart rate ranges from 60 to 100 beats per minute. During acute stress response, pulse and blood pressure increase.*

My heart cheats, squeezes an extra pulse—one more beat to hold the image of my son, feel his soft little-boy breath, hear my husband's goofy laugh. Home safe, they will go on without me, and I'll miss it all, all the rest of their time.

- The human brain can process thoughts in less than 13 milliseconds, faster than you can blink your eyes. Severe stress can trigger quickening of thought and attentional focus.

The dragon hurtles toward me, and I want to close my eyes, to see my son—oh, there he is, grown now, tall, smiling; my husband, sitting quietly alone, hair greyed to white. He recognizes me in this liminal beat, holds out his hand, and I ache to reach forward, to touch him—but the dragon is so close, so big it steals my vision and I scream at the interruption, bare my own teeth, stiffen my eggshell body around memories and possibility—and then

the dragon's thundercrash stuns me, glass scales scrape my skin, a razor-edged wing cracks, and my time stops—

Stops.

Then.

I taste smoke.

Time begins to turn again. Slowly at first. Senses clash, a throb of acrid powder, red polka-dots that ring like a smothered tin bell. I breathe, relearn how to measure input that isn't dragonroar. The dots resolve into blood, unfamiliar heat on my arms, too hot. Did the dragon spit fire? *It wasn't a dragon, darlin'. How many fingers am I holding up?* I don't care about fingers, I want to know if the dragon is dead, I want to know how the world can fracture in less time than it takes a heart to beat, an eye to blink. *Shh, hon, drink this.*

The chill of the water surprises me.

- *Stress hormones cascading through a human body can cause involuntary muscle tremors. Uncontrolled shaking may subside 20-60 minutes after the threat has passed; however, bodies may uphold the stress reaction for an extended time.*

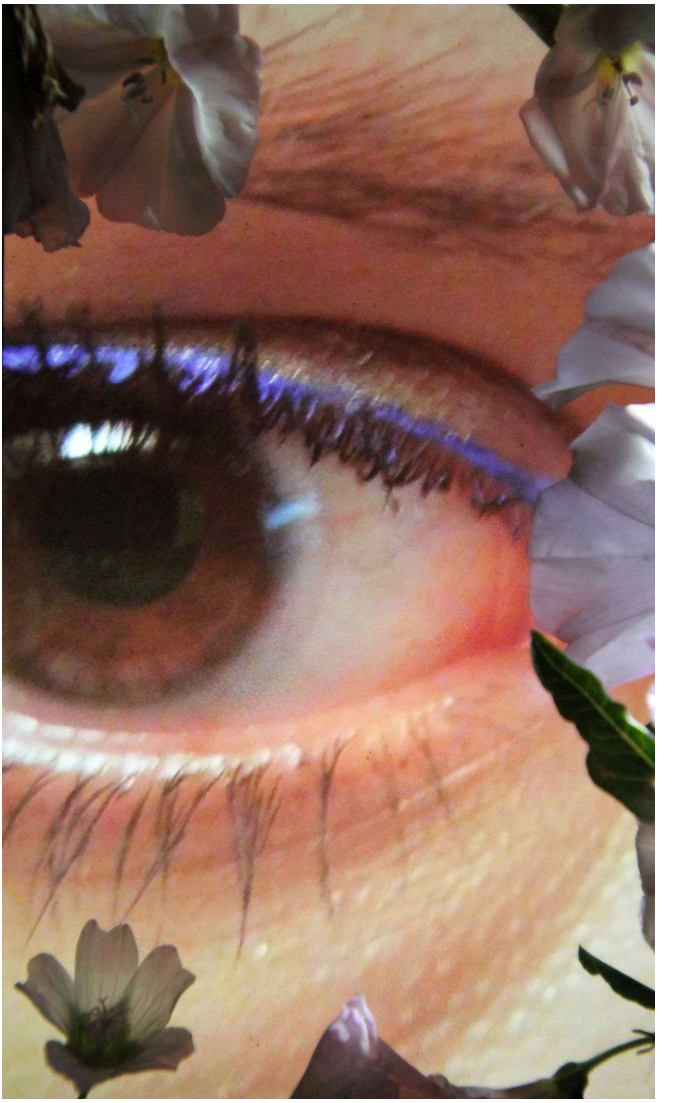
A swath of shattered-glass scales and disembodied tires leads to the dragon's carcass, belly up, a hundred feet beyond the ditch. The undercarriage is blackened, naked axles jutting like claws. My hands twitch, sloshing water, and the bottle skitters away. The EMT nods, tells me I'm burning hormones and fear. Sitting in the ditch between blacktop and wheat stubble, I understand that I was wrong—I didn't die. I survived, in the space of milliseconds. My tremors intensify.

The EMT says the shaking will stop, given time. The phrase reverberates. If I could peek through that time, ahead months and years, I'd see anxiety that may never completely burn away. I'd find that studying physiological trivia might help me understand things like *fight or flight*, or *acute stress response*, but it won't cleanse the stink of airbag smoke from my memory, or stop me from cursing that other driver. Though time and luck were with me on that country road, in the future, I'll know they could turn against me in a blink, and my skin will prickle dragonbreath hot with each passing car.

***Jury S. Judge*** *(she/her) is an internationally published artist, writer, poet, and cartoonist. Her Astronomy Comedy cartoons were published in Lowell Observatory's publication, The Lowell Observer. She was interviewed on the television news program, NAZ Today for her work as a cartoonist. Her artwork has been widely featured in over one hundred and thirty literary magazines, including the covers of, Blue Mesa Review, 3 Elements Review, Glass Mountain, and Levitate. She graduated Magna Cum Laude with a BFA from the University of Houston-Clear Lake in 2014. In addition to art and photography, her passions include hiking and traveling to exciting, new destinations. Visit her Instagram account @jurysjudge.*

**Citrine and Garnets**

*A warm, fiery explosion of yellow and orange hues. The flower petals gleam like a gem under the brilliant light. It is a floral expression of my love of color.*



**Being Surveilled is Nether Safe Nor Benevolent**

*A commentary on the willingness of some individuals to exchange their personal freedoms for the illusion of safety. It explores the use of manipulation through exploiting fear by those who deploy the guise of benevolence in order to gain control, whether it is the large scale of a nation's population, or the small scale an individual abuser in a domestic violence relationship.*

*NYT bestselling author **Alethea Kontis** is a princess, a storm chaser, and a geek. Author of over 20 books and 40 short stories, Alethea has received the Scribe Award, the Garden State Teen Book Award, and won the Gelett Burgess Children's Book Award twice! She has also been twice nominated for both the Andre Norton Nebula and the Dragon Award. When not writing or storm chasing, Alethea narrates stories for multiple award-winning online magazines and contributes regular YA book reviews to NPR. Born in Vermont, Alethea currently resides on the Space Coast of Florida with her teddy bear, Charlie.*

# One Hell of a Week

## Alethea Kontis

On Friday night the trees caught fire
All up and down the western bank
On Saturday the ships at sea
All turned to chunks of rock and sank
On Sunday morn the skies turned rust
And rained down scads of autumn leaves
On Monday we had cloud-sized cats
That poured white kittens from the eaves
On Tuesday we had thought we'd won
Till rivers iced beneath the sun
And everything with fur and bills
Ran for the forest or the hills
And earth it quaked, and wind blew dirt
And even shallow breathing hurt
But Wednesday came and all at once
The earth and air and seas were still
No voice dared break the silence then
We lived and smiled and breathed our fill

So here we are, it’s Thursday now
And all the stores and banks are shut
And I’m all out of bandages
And have a blasted paper cut

***E. C. Bogosian*** *(she/her) is a native of Southern California, who grew up with a deep love for all types of fantastic storytelling, which in turn inspired her to become a storyteller herself. After achieving a degree in Creative Writing, she channels that passion both into hobbies such as tabletop roleplaying games, and her professional goal of becoming a bestselling author. In her spare time, she gardens, bakes, and practices both yoga and krav maga.*

# The Paint and the Pine

## E. C. Bogosian

Gnats dance in the afternoon sunlight as Crow braids straw between her fingers, staring out at the dusty pens and stables of the Lone Pine Ranch. In the near pen, a wrangler lunges a rangy chestnut pony, its ragged mane flapping against its neck as it canters in circles. Crow doesn't think about anything, just moves her fingers over each other, plait over plait, to the rhythm of the chestnut's hooves. Rolls a toothpick between her teeth, tasting wood.

Crow doesn't have a last name. Her first name isn't the one she was born with, either. The other cowboys at Lone Pine gave it to her when she couldn't remember her name. A reference to her heavy black hair, maybe, or a jab at indigenous ancestry visible in her dark eyes and round copper face.

"Crow!" Ben Lomond strides over, legs long in her pale jeans. The sun shines from behind her, turning her flyaway brown hair into a halo. Crow squints up at her from her seat on a haybale, chewing the toothpick. "Hey, there you are. Boss is looking for you."

"What for?"

"Wants you to ride in the rodeo in Carson next week. Apparently there's a real wildcat of a bronc that's going to be up for rough riding and the betting pool is in the thousands. He thinks you can do it."

Frowning, Crow considers. "Do I have a choice?"

"You always have a choice—"

"You know what I mean."

Sighing, Ben lowers her lanky frame to the haybale beside her. "Boss is real set on it."

Crow grunts and bites her toothpick. "S'what I figured."

In the pen, the wrangler *whoas*, and the chestnut trots to a halt, snorting and blowing, ears pricked forward. "If anyone here can do it, it's you," says Ben quietly. The bright sunlight turns her gray eyes to crystal, the lines around them creasing as she watches the horse in the pen. "What do you think about the red?"

"That one?" Crow points at the chestnut, and Ben nods. "I didn't work her myself. Looks like she's got stamina." Pause. "Probably too flighty to be a good cowpony."

"Yeah, that's what I thought," sighs Ben, stretching her legs out in front of her. "Think we can get forty, forty-five for her maybe."

"Maybe." Braiding more straw, Crow turns over the plans for Carson in her mind. "What's the bronc I'm supposed to ride?"

"Not sure, just know it's some half-wild terror. The bookies are making a lot of noise about its dam being a Spanish warhorse and its sire Satan himself." Ben rolls her eyes. "You know, bookie talk."

"Yeah." Trepidation coils in Crow's stomach, but she ignores it. "Well. When are we shipping out?"

"Thursday or Friday, Boss hasn't decided yet. Rodeo kicks off Friday night, you'll ride Saturday."

The braided straw shreds between Crow's fingers, pieces scattering on the dust between her boots. "Yeah."

#

"Hey," says Boss, as Crow pushes open the door to his office. "Come in."

Crow enters slowly. Despite all three windows being open, the room is still hot and stuffy. The blond planks of the walls smell of pine from baking in the sun. Boss sits at his desk, sweat shining on his forehead as he scratches figures on a piece of paper with a lead pencil. "So I hear Ben already told you about the Carson rodeo."

"Yeah."

Folding his hands, Boss scrutinizes her. He is not a handsome man, his skin too weathered, his nose too crooked, his eyes too shrewd, but he is a reliable one. "You gonna go?"

Hunching her shoulders in a shrug, Crow says, "Maybe."

"Why not? You're the only one at this ranch who has a chance of staying on that thing."

Is it a memory or her imagination, the feeling of one moment being on a speeding horse's back, and then in the air, and then the ground rushing to meet her face? Crow stays silent, her hands shoved in her pockets.

"Gotta be honest, Crow, I don't get it. You drag your heels about riding even when it's your job, but the second we put you on a pony you're the best damn bronc rider I have. Why?"

Crow unsticks her throat, her nails digging into her palms. "'Cause the other option is ending up in the dirt."

"Uh-huh." Boss keeps his keen gaze fixed on her. A fly lands on his pencil, rubs its hands, and skips down the lead. The toes of Crow's boots are scuffed and pale with dust. "How much time do you still owe me?"

"Seven months, three weeks, and a day," Crow answers immediately.

"How about this?" says Boss. "You go, you ride that horse the full eight seconds, and you win the bets I put on you. I'll consider your debt to me paid."

Standing frozen, Crow shivers like a horse with flies on its skin. "That a deal?"

"Yeah, it's a deal." Boss holds out one callused hand across the desk. "Don't let me down here, Crow."

Crow takes his hand. His grip is firm, his rough skin catching on hers. "You'd have better odds if you gambled on me falling off," she says.

"Less risk, less reward." Shrugging, Boss lets her go, brushing away the fly that circles his head. "Wouldn't you say?

She thinks about the dusty pens of the Lone Pine, and horses stamping and blowing and chewing on the bit, and about green plains that stretch away as far as the eye can see. "I don't know."

#

The train chugs and rattles through the night on its way to Carson. In the darkness of a stock car, Crow sits against the wooden siding, her head bobbing back and forth with the motion of the train. The car stinks of the cattle and horses stabled in it; on this side of the partition, other cowboys lie snoring in the straw. But Crow sits awake, her arms on her knees and her wrists dangling.

Before a year ago her memory is as black as the night visible through the gaps in the car siding. *Concussion*, the doctor visiting the Lone Pine said. *You mean you really don't remember who you are?*

Back then, Crow rubbed her fingers over the scratchy wool of her blanket. They had to shave her hair short to treat her cracked skull. *No*, she said.

*Well, neither does anyone else here, since you were dragged in with a boot hooked through your horse's stirrup and a hoofprint in your head*, said the doctor. *Maybe someday it'll come back to you.*

Boss was gracious enough to let her work at the Lone Pine after that. Well, maybe gracious isn't the right word. The doctor visit and Crow's medicine cost him hundreds. She owed him, even after he sold her horse. The contract she signed when she was still so shaky from fever she could barely hold the pen gives him the right to pursue her across state borders if she breaches it.

Now and then Crow thinks about breaking into the locked drawer in Boss's desk where he keeps the contract, stealing it, and fleeing to another city. The Boss she sees sometimes who speaks softly to a spooked horse and visits his injured workers and once stayed up all night with a birthing mare would let her go, she thinks. But the other Boss, the one who looks over every ledger with an eagle eye and who sets his jaw grimly whenever Crow tries to

back out of a ride and who doggedly hunted down a man who sold him a lame horse—that one, she thinks, would come after her.

She doesn't even know where she would go, anyway. All Crow knows is that every time she looks at a horse she feels sick, and every time she sits on one all she can think of is the thud of her head hitting the ground, and she still owes Boss seven more months on the ranch.

A cowboy stirs and grunts in his sleep, and Crow glances at him. Spring is still cold in these parts, and the cowboys sleep nested in straw to insulate from the chill wind slipping through the siding. Some huddle together for additional warmth. But Crow sits apart and lets the goosebumps on her arms rise.

#

Crow wanders through the midnight stables of the Carson rodeo, past stalls like dark doorways where horses stamp and whicker. It's too early in the year for the whine of mosquitos to disturb the night, and the lanterns hung on barn corners create pockets of oily illumination.

In the farthest row of stalls, only one is occupied. Crow knows this by the steady, dull pounding of a bored horse striking its hoof against the stall door.

Slowly, she walks up. In the cave of the stall, disembodied features gleam. A long black muzzle with a splash of white. Two glittering eyes.

"Taking a look for yourself?" A stable hand lounges against a hay bale, his eyes fixed on Crow. "There he is. Son of the Devil himself." He sounds bored. Crow guesses he was posted to watch the horse, to guard against potential saboteurs.

Arms folded over her chest, Crow watches. The horse snorts and stomps an emphatic hoof. "Do you believe that?"

The stable hand sighs, grinding his heel into the dirt. "I think he's mean enough to be a devil, sure."

The horse throws its head back and whinnies, a shrill battle cry. A couple other horses answer nervously. Never met a bronc I couldn't ride, Crow tells herself. And there's no such thing as the Devil. But her stomach curls uneasily.

"You ridin' tomorrow?" asks the stable hand.

The horse's eyes glitter, and it grinds its teeth. "Yeah," says Crow.

"What?"

Crow points into the darkness of the stall.

The stable hand lets out a long, slow whistle. "Damn. You got a death wish, little lady?"

"No."

From under his battered hat, the stable hand looks Crow over again, his eyes cataloguing her chest and hips. Crow stiffens, face heating. At the Lone Pine, the cowboys consider Crow and Ben as one of them, rather than

Woman; Woman is reserved for the beautiful creatures with curled hair and soft hands and sweeping skirts Crow admires from afar on her occasional forays into town. She folds her arms, ignoring his gaze.

With a sudden squeal, the horse half-rears and strikes its front hooves into the stall door, and the stable hand jumps. Again, the other horses call back anxiously, and the horse snorts, tossing its head. Sighing, the stable hand slumps back against the hay bales and pulls his hat lower down his head. "Couldn't pay me to ride that, is all I'm saying."

Crow shoves her hands in her pockets and hooks her thumbs in her belt, her stomach sinking again. Bored, the horse turns away, and the rhythmic pounding begins again, echoing dully in the night.

#

Crow dresses herself carefully. Clean blue jeans, clean canvas shirt. Belt with a wide silver buckle. Sturdy boots, the only pair she owns. Brushes the tangles out of her mop of hair and cleans between her teeth.

She considers her hair, running her fingers through it, and parts it down the middle. Squinting at herself in the mirror, she attempts plaiting her hair into double braids. But her hair is too short and choppy and the result is sad, and she shakes her hair out, disgruntled. Not sure why she wanted those braids in the first place.

Ben appears in the cabin doorway, white hat on her head and sage-green shirt buttoned up. "Ready?"

Lead weighs down Crow's stomach. "Yeah."

They walk together to the arena, through the back entrance, and into the chaos of shouting and whinnying and pounding hooves. Threading through milling people and animals, they come to the chutes. Spectators filling the rows of seats cheer as a bronc hops and twists out of the chute and into the dirt arena, a cowboy desperately clinging to its back.

No different from any other bronc, Crow tells herself. You've ridden a hundred and survived and you'll ride a hundred more.

A horse screams furiously. Crow whips around as the black-and-white horse is dragged up toward the chutes, two ropes attached to its halter, two stable hands on each rope. Its dinner plate-sized hooves dig into the ground as it screams again, tossing its head. Foamy sweat stains its particolored hide underneath the leather saddle, and its red-rimmed eyes roll.

Hands in her pockets, Ben sucks in a breath between her teeth. "Eight seconds, Crow," she mutters. "That's all you need. Eight seconds."

Crow sets her spine like steel. "I know."

Somehow the hands wrestle the horse into a chute, where it becomes dangerously still, nostrils quivering and eyes wide. Crow likes this even less.

"Go on." Ben claps a hand on Crow's shoulder, urging her forward. "You got this."

The heavy dread only increases as Crow walks forward, the crowd roaring distant in anticipation. All her focus is on the massive pinto horse standing between the wooden poles, its glittering gaze fixed on her.

Striding close, she climbs up the side of the chute and before the horse has a chance to shy away, swings over and onto the saddle. The pinto squeals under her and shunts to the left, but the chute is so narrow it only has room to press her leg against the side.

The announcer shouts Crow's name, his voice reverberating exuberantly. Taking a deep breath, Crow knots her fingers in the braided cotton reins, clutches the saddle horn, and squeezes her thighs tight.

The chute opens.

The pinto throws itself out like a tornado made horseflesh, twisting in the air and landing bone-jarringly hard. Crow grips like grim death as the blood pulses in her ears, her teeth clicking together with the impact—

*One*.

The horse bucks so violently that Crow's head nearly snaps into its neck before it crashes to earth and her torso is thrown backwards. She grunts and hangs on, trying to find a rhythm to the up-and-down, letting her body move with the horse instead of against it.

*Two.*

The pinto twists and writhes under her, its hide growing dark and slick with sweat, and Crow grits her teeth against the burn of chafed fingers and seizing muscles.

*Three.*

With a sudden jerk the horse spins and halts, nearly unseating Crow.

*Four.*

Before she can recover herself, the horse slams its side into the arena wall, twisting her ankle under its weight. Sudden pain shoots through Crow's foot, and she gasps.

*Five.*

The pinto bucks, twisting desperately midair. Crow tries to hold tight with her legs but the stabbing pain in her ankle makes her dizzy, and her sweaty grip slips.

*Six.*

Underneath her, the horse snaps sharply, and Crow loses her connection, sailing through the air.

*Seven—*

The ground speeds up toward Crow, and everything goes black.

#

The rough wooden slates of the bunk above Crow have graffiti carved into them—names and profanity and the odd encouraging phrase. Lying flat on her back, she lets out a slow exhale, careful not to strain her bruised ribs. Her head and ankle throb, undaunted by whiskey. The fingers on her left hand

are so sore and stiff she can barely move them. Tiny dust motes swirl in the sunbeam coming through the window; all the other bunks in the cabin are empty.

With a creak, the door opens. Wincing, Crow props herself up on her elbow, pulling the rough woolen blanket higher up over her chest. Ben enters slowly, a telegram in her hands, lit from behind by the bright sun. "How're you feeling?" she asks.

"All right," Crow monotones.

"Got a response from Boss," Ben says, her face creased apologetically. "Turnout from last night was so good, the rodeo's offering him double for you to ride again tonight. Same horse. Boss says if you're not up to it, he understands." She sits down on the side of the bed. "But he won't count it as you holding up your end of the bargain."

Crow stares at the little rectangle of yellow paper in Ben's hand. The dull pounding of her heart aches in her cracked rib, and her stomach worms up into her throat. "Okay."

"You don't have to, you know," says Ben. "You really don't."

"Maybe I do—"

"Crow, that horse could cripple you. It could *kill* you."

The thud of her head striking the ground. The thud of hooves on dirt. The horizon stretching away into endless grassy green plains. "I can't go back to the ranch," says Crow slowly.

"Yes, you can—"

"And do what? Keep reliving the worst thing I can remember?"

"*Crow,*" says Ben, and puts a hand on her knee.

Stifling a groan, Crow sits up, wrapping one arm around her chest. The bruises on her ribs mottle red and purple against her brown skin. "I'm doing it," Crow says. "Give me my shirt."

#

Her ankle taped up tight to the point of numbness, Crow limps into the arena at Ben's side, a wooden crutch under her arm and her head buzzing with whiskey and morphine. Other cowboys and stable hands eye her with interest: the native woman crazy enough to sit on the devil horse. "You sure about this?" mutters Ben.

"Yeah." Crow comes to a stop and leans against the wooden wall, gingerly testing her weight. Better to stand than go through the painful process of sitting down and getting up again, especially in front of watchful eyes.

In the chute, a cowboy mounts a sturdy bay. The gate opens and the bay corkscrews out to the enthusiastic shouts of the announcer. In five seconds, the cowboy on its back tumbles off, rolling in the dirt. Sighing, Ben brushes dust off her hat and settles it on her head, leaning back against the wall beside Crow.

A shrill whinny cuts through the noise, and prickles rise on Crow's skin. The pinto is led in, and is Crow imagining it or does it look even more vicious? It rears as the stable hands pull it into the chute, mane tossing like flames.

Setting aside the crutch, Crow limps forward. Shouts and bellows and whinnies combine to a roar in her ears. Pain flares up her ankle as she climbs the rails of the chute, but she ignores it. The horse snorts and runs up against the gate, hemmed in by metal. Crow swallows hard, sweat slick on her cold hands, and swings into the saddle.

The horse quivers under her, hide warm. It bobs its head and the reins drag through Crow's stiff fingers, catching on her skin. Her heartbeat pounds in her ears, *thud, thud, thud,* the sound of her head meeting the ground. For a split second, Crow closes her eyes, sweat rolling down the back of her neck, and breathes in.

With a squeal of metal, the chute opens.

Crow holds on with every muscle in her body as the horse tears out of the gate, its heels high and head down. The second it hits the ground her ribs jolt so painfully tears spring to her eyes and she gasps, pitching forward. She tries to find her center but it hurts too much, and her body jerks like a rag doll, and in the brief moment before her numb legs lose contact with the side of the horse she thinks, *No.*

She hits the ground and the wind flies out of her lungs and she rolls, tumbling to a halt on her back, gasping. White noise fills her ears and her throbbing ribs and ankle dominate her body.

"Crow!" yells Ben from miles away, vaulting over the arena fence. Crow groans and rolls over, blinking tears out of her eyes. Snorting, the black-and-white horse bucks again and sets off at a tear around the arena, kicking up dust behind it.

A dozen knives stab her sides and leg as Crow staggers to her feet with a cry of pain, gaze fixed on that horse. "Crow!" shouts Ben again, sprinting up to her. "What are you doing—"

"I'm not going back," gasps Crow, pushing past Ben, who grabs for her arm. But Crow yanks free, limping towards the horse. It tosses its head and gallops away from her, as two rodeo hands start climbing into the arena to catch it. "Stop!" Crow yells at them hoarsely, and they freeze, unsure of this change in the natural order. "This is my job."

"Are you insane? Get back here," hisses Ben. High above them, the announcer is beside himself with excitement, narrating the events in the arena. "Crow—"

The horse blows past again, tail waving like a flag. Just like lunging a pony back at the Lone Pine, thinks Crow, turning and tracking its movement. When the horse shows signs of slowing, she lunges toward it and makes a sharp sound between her teeth, and the pinto picks up its pace again.

"What are you doing?" mutters Ben, standing in the center of the arena with Crow, who ignores her. She focuses on the horse, always facing it, using voice and threatening body language to keep it running whenever it starts to slow down. With its narrow chest and flashy coat, this horse was bred for style, not stamina, and soon its savage bucks die away, sweat dappling its coat as it settles into a labored canter, head lowered.

Still keeping abreast of the horse, Crow limps alongside it as it slows into a trot, and then a walk, and then stops completely, sides heaving with its heavy breaths. When it sees Crow approach, it rears its head up and flattens its ears back but isn't fast enough to escape her grabbing the reins. It drags her back a few paces before Crow manages to dig her heels in, ignoring the splintered pain in her foot, and yanks its head back down to her. "Listen to me," pants Crow, low and firm, her forehead almost touching its muzzle. "Every time you throw me off, I will get back up again. You are not holding me down."

The horse jerks its head back, nostrils flared and eyes rolling fearfully. It stinks of sweat, foam crusting the corners of its mouth. Half-healed sores mark its side where spurs were dug in too viciously, too much. "Oh, you poor thing," murmurs Crow, with a sudden stab of pity.

"Hey." Ben walks up beside her, gaze fixed warily on the horse. "We need to clear the arena—"

"Eight seconds, right?"

Ben blinks, confused. "What?"

"That's all I have to do. Stay on eight seconds, win the bets, and I'm free." Crow levels a flat look at Ben.

"Yes, it was—it is." Ben tilts her head, brow furrowed. "What—"

"Give me a boost."

"Crow—"

"I said, *give me a boost*." Crow slides a hand over the horse's shoulder, passing to its left side. It shivers, ears swiveling in her direction.

Watching the horse like a hawk, Ben kneels beside Crow, linking her hands together for Crow to step on. Crow places her boot in the little nest and gets her other foot in the stirrup, swinging her leg over and into the saddle, a hiss of pain escaping her as her rib shrieks. The horse hops halfheartedly under her, but Crow gathers the reins up tight, her heart pounding like a war drum. Pressing her knees into its sides, she urges the horse into a walk. And though it tosses its head and paws at the ground, it obeys.

The crowd cheers, the announcer yelling, but Crow barely hears it past the roaring in her ears and the sound of her own breath. She does a half-circle around the arena, counting in her head. *One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight.*

She turns back in towards Ben, who watches in disbelief. Stopping a few paces away, Crow dismounts, carefully landing on her uninjured foot.

Then on impulse she unhooks the horse's halter and throws it into the dust at Ben's feet. "Tell that to Boss," Crow manages, her heart hammering wildly, her head swimming so that all she can focus on is Ben, Ben who looks at Crow like she's never seen her before, Ben who for the first time in Crow's memory has tears glinting in her pale eyes. "I'm done."

#

"Where will you go?" asks Ben, helping Crow cross the stables back toward the sleeping quarters. Crow's ankle and ribs hurt worse than ever, and she leans heavily on the crutch and Ben's arm.

"I don't know." The night air is cool and dry, and a cowboy leads a horse quietly past, its long tail swishing. "To bed, for now."

They reach the bunkhouse, and there are two people waiting there, a man and woman waiting in the circle of lamplight. They have round faces like Crow, and copper skin like Crow, and black eyes like Crow. The woman wears her hair in two long braids. A shiver of familiarity runs down Crow's spine. "Kahée, biilápaachee," says the woman softly, and Crow understands. *Hello, friend.*

Her lungs have no air. "Are you really my friend?" Crow manages to ask.

"I hope so," says the woman, and she smiles. "We saw you ride yesterday. We heard your story. We would like to talk more with you."

"I have a friend, who has a friend, who is missing someone," says the man. He speaks slowly and carefully, each word with its own weight. "Come speak with us. We're staying in town for a little while."

"Or even if that's not you, come with us," offers the woman, and her smile is like the rising sun peeking over the horizon. "Find your home."

Crow trembles. Rolling green hills and an endless blue sky fill her mind's eye. She swallows hard, and nods. "Yes," she says. "Okay."

The man nods once, satisfied. Crow turns back to Ben, who has her hands in her pockets and a wistful smile on her face. "I'll miss you," says Ben, and laughs a little at herself.

Starlight glints on her hair, her legs long and lean, and Crow has the sudden impulse to yank Ben's hands out of her pockets just so she can see them again. "Come find me," says Crow. "I'll have a new name."

Ruefully, Ben says, "That'll make it harder."

A sudden laugh bubbles out of Crow. "Less risk, less reward," she says. "I'll see you."

"Yeah."

The man and woman glance at each other. "You will come with us, right?" says the woman. "Tomorrow?"

"Yes." Crow turns back to them and smiles, her crutch and her foot solidly on the ground, and the stars shining brightly above. "I'll come."

***Joshua Effiong**, (he/him) Frontier VI, is a writer and digital artist from the Örö people of Nigeria. His works have appeared or are forthcoming in The Kalahari Review, Rough Cut Press, Madrigal Press, Titled House, The Indianapolis Review, Chestnut Review, and more. He is the author of the poetry chapbook Autopsy of Things Left Unnamed (2020). Find him on Instagram @josh.effiong and Twitter @JoshEffiong.*

**Vulnerability**

*This artwork seeks to portray the positivity of being vulnerable. I created it to show that we can release ourselves, and with this comes happiness. Here, the child is oblivious to all of life's encumbrances and expresses this in the smile plastered on her face.*

**Meditation**

*With the picture of our family devotion in my head, this piece shows how I have been groomed by my parent religiously. And I've held onto these beliefs wholeheartedly. Many times when I'm in a fix all I have to do is meditate on the words of the Holy Book.*

**The Boy Who Hawks The Sun**

*What does it mean to be a light to others if you don't illuminate yourself. This art seeks to represent the class of persons who seek seconded happiness, I mean they are happy when they make people happy. While this might not be detrimental, it is expedient to be able to be a light to ourselves and to others also.*

***Gabriella M. Belfiglio*** *(she/they) lives in Brooklyn, NY with her partner, five cats, and child. She teaches self-defense, conflict resolution, karate, and tai chi to people of all ages throughout the five boroughs. Gabriella won second place in the W.B. Yeats Poetry Contest, and her work has been published in many anthologies and journals including Radius, The Centrifugal Eye, The Potomac Review, and Lambda Literary Review. Her website is www.gabriellabelfiglio.info.*

# Busted

## Gabriella M. Belfiglio

There's some things
that whisky cannot fix

I like to tip it slow
out of the bottle  drink it fast

out of the glass
Before the spinning starts

it's like time suspends gravity
your beloved ghosts

orbit around you
and you can see

straight into god
Yet grief always claws her way back

She's the one
who holds your hand

She reminds you
how heavy your head

balanced precariously
on your thin neck  really is

Go ahead  try again
pour another glass

# Toast

Just thinking about you I begin to simmer.
Next to me,
the frost-covered window mists up.
It melts the January snow
poised on the fire escape;
a steady drip smacks the steps below.

Just thinking about you I crumble like the fall of the Berlin wall.

I fumble like Eli Manning
grappling for the ball at his own four-yard line.

The hint of you stepping out
of the shower starts my toes wiggling,
no matter if I'm standing on the subway platform, waiting.
I sashay across the pee-stained tiles—
wink at the graffitied map,
waltz up to the overflowing trashcan—
take a spin.

Just thinking about you I swim faster than Michael Phelps
every stroke stretching me across the wide-open sea.

You are more beautiful
than the salmon sunrise over the rubble coast
of the Samaná peninsula.

More delicious than chocolate lava cake drizzled with caramel.

Just thinking about you
makes me happier than Easter morning,
my basket brimming
with squishy yellow chicks.

Just thinking about you coming home is like receiving
a package in the mail.
I want to rip you open
faster than a spoiled kid on Christmas morning.

Just thinking about you I pop
from the toaster,
the perfect crispy singe,
for you to
grab, butter, and bite.

***A. J. Jacono*** *(he/him) is a queer Manhattan native who has been writing ever since he could hold a pen. His work has previously appeared or is forthcoming in Southeast Review, Lunch Ticket, Cleaver Magazine, Maudlin House, Gone Lawn, and Expat Press, among many other journals. He is also the recipient of the 2019 Herbert Lee Connelly Prize and is the founder of The Spotlong Review, an online literary and arts journal. If you would like to learn more about A, J., you can visit his website www.ajjacono.com.*

# Jump

## A. J. Jacono

When I look back on that afternoon on the roof, the first thing I remember is the bright-yellow vomit stain on Vlad's shirt collar.

"Migraine," he said when I asked about it.

"What does a migraine have to do with that?"

"Bad one this morning," he snorted, picking at the spot until one of its edges flaked off. "Bad enough to make me throw up, at least. Most of the time they just make me feel like I'm going to die—you know that. Don't worry, though. Not like I can't take it."

There was no reason to ask why he hadn't cleaned himself. It was a Thursday, and his mother washed the family's clothes on Sundays, so even if he'd soiled his pants, she wouldn't have caved. He also generally liked grime; a few weeks before, he'd rushed down the hall and into my apartment wearing a sweater covered in toothpaste and orange juice. My mother had stopped peeling her hardboiled egg to ask what the hell had happened to him, and he'd grinned and said, "My daily shower, Mrs. Gerwich—good morning to you, too."

Grubby and oafish as Vlad could be, he was my only friend, and he convinced me, time and time again, to sneak onto our condo's roof, even though I've always disliked heights. The roof itself was about a hundred meters long and wide, rusty pipes curling out of the flooring like giant, prehistoric hookworms, and its guardrails were low enough that you could lean over the edge and ogle the six-story fall to the ground. Only the maintenance team had access, but they didn't lock the entrance door because the super's son liked to host parties up there after dark. The team had grown tired of picking up his and his friends' trash and so began to leave the stray bottles and half-torched cigarettes to rot in the sun, unaware that a pair of doltish fourteen-year-olds would drink and smoke just about anything for a post-Call of Duty marathon fix.

"Think this one's still good?" Vlad asked, sniffing a can of beer that had either dried paint or blood on it. "Don't really give a shit about the taste, but still."

He passed it to me. I put my nose to the opening. It smelled like moss.

"It's fungal," I said.

He obviously wasn't deterred since he took back the can and swigged. His face pinched and twisted; he held a hand over his mouth until the nausea subsided, then smiled widely, as though he'd done something heroic.

"Terrible," he said. "Just fucking awful." He spat on the ground and gave me the can again. "Come on. You now. No bitch sips, okay?"

In fairness, it was a tamer demand. A month before, we had been at the community park down the block, hurling clumps of dirt and playground woodchips at each other, when he unbuckled his jeans and asked me to piss on the kiddie slide with him. I didn't want to, but at that bewildered age of fourteen, I ached to prove, especially to him, that I deserved mutual masculine respect. It was after sunset, so there were no children or parents around, but there were a few familiar faces—classmates of ours—smoking a cigarette on a nearby bench, and they watched us. One of them, a sixteen-year-old alcoholic named Dante McGill, poured out a bit of his flask on the ground in some strange tribute to our bravery.

Now, I clasped the rancid beer can. "You know," I said, "it's your fault if I die."

"Well, you can't blame me if I die, too. What's that called, again? A Hispanic standoff? No, no, wait—mutiny assured destruction. Yeah, that's it."

He had a point, and in a way, it might've been fun to die doing something dubious with him. So I put my mouth to the opening. He put a hand under the butt of the can, tapped it upward until the beer flowed freely, said, "That's it, that's it." When I was done, I hacked until my lungs ached.

"Dante Gerwich," he chanted. "Dante Gerwich."

"Fuck you."

"Whoa, there, sweetums. Buy me dinner first."

He leaned down and grabbed another beer—a half-empty glass bottle—then shuffled to the nearest section of guardrail and hurled it off the roof. It flipped and twirled and exploded on the pavement. A middle-aged woman, who had been well within the blast radius, squealed.

"Dude," I said. "Did you just hit her?"

"I don't know," he said, squinting down. The woman grunted, swore, and called for help until a concerned-looking elderly man waddled over to clean off her legs and shorts, which we could see, even at our distance, were specked with bits of glimmering glass. After a minute, the man wished her well, apologized that he had to leave, and walked away, at which point the woman looked up and spotted us. Vlad and I ducked away from the guardrail.

Vlad laughed, but his voice quavered. “Oh, my God. Did you see that, Dante? Did you see that? Holy shit, she saw us. She *knows* it was us.”

The woman was yelling again—why the fuck had we done that, and did we know that we could’ve killed her, and she was going to call the cops, and where were our parents, because by God if she wasn’t going to sue the shit out of them. The whole time, Vlad cackled, his huge yellow teeth chattering, while I, for some reason, wondered what our mothers were doing below us. They probably didn’t know what had happened, although that seemed impossible, partly because it wasn’t a quiet situation but also because its intensity was so immediate that the whole world had to be listening. I wondered, too, about our fathers, though they were likely, as with every night, watching golf or basketball in their respective living rooms, scratching their balding heads and sucking down their highballs and ignoring their wives, so separate from their sons’ existences that the strangers on the street were better company to us.

“Do you think she’ll really do all that?” Vlad asked me.

“Really do what?”

“Call the cops. Sue us.”

He suddenly looked serious. He had almost been sent to a juvenile detention center for breaking Randall Tulcher’s jaw (Randall had called Vlad’s mother a kitchen-dweller because she packed all of his lunches), and his father had been out of a job for six months after a coworker accused him of “inappropriate conduct,” so his family had come to subsist on food stamps, unemployment checks, and weekly dives at the local Goodwill. I could say nothing about the woman’s intentions and knew little about litigation, but to comfort him I said, “I don’t think so.”

He nodded as if I’d said something infinitely wise. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re right. She’s lying. She’s a stupid fucking bitch liar.”

He said it with such brazen determination that I was sure he would toss another bottle, but instead he grabbed two more bottles of beer—the freshest-looking of the bunch—squeezed through one of the gaps in the guardrail, and dangled his feet over the edge.

“What’re you doing?” I asked, but the woman was shouting again, so he didn’t hear.

“You were the one who did that?” she cried. “What are you, twelve?”

“What’re you?” he asked. “Eighty?”

“Oh, so funny. I’m dying laughing over here. Hey, wipe that smirk off your fucking face. You ever did that in front of your parents, I’m sure they’d beat you. No, no, wait—sorry for assuming they care enough to smack some sense into your ugly little ass.”

“You’ve got a dirty mouth,” he protested. “It’s not very ladylike.”

“Better that than to get plastered on a roof like a limp-dicked little thug. You know, your parents should’ve been a little more careful before they

fucked you into existence. We've got enough white trash like you in this city making—"

Another bottle spinning through the air, and then it smashed on the sidewalk behind the woman, sending foamy slop into the street. She yelped again; Vlad held the second bottle over his head, threatening. There was a momentary impasse, she grinding her teeth and he readying phlegm in his throat, before she scurried away and disappeared around the corner down the street.

He should have gloated. Every victory to him, no matter how minor, was a token of pride; whereas most people experience discomfort in social improprieties, Vlad found solace in the awkward. I think, even now, that the only thing he could truly call his own was his propensity for nonsense, and because it belonged to him, it inspired in him an infectious confidence; if he was having so much fun being disobedient, why wouldn't other people? This might explain why I was so drawn to him, and why, before we met, I did nothing riskier than masturbate into old socks and amble around the neighborhood late at night, secretly hoping, in my video-game-inspired lust for action, to witness a shooting.

I was surprised, then, when he started to cry. I'd never seen him sad, much less somber enough to shed a tear, so I didn't know what to say. Still, I joined him on the ledge and, for the first time, hung my feet over the drop. My innards lurched, but my mother, also acrophobic, had imparted on me the placating wisdom to hold your breath and pinch your palms when you're high enough off the ground to fall to your death, so I followed her advice.

"That fucking bitch," Vlad said, clawing at his eyes. "That ugly fucking whore."

Recently, I'd noticed that when women angered him (particularly his mother, whom he was convinced had been cheating on his father), he would call them sluts, skanks, repugnant whores. It didn't matter if it was true; if he believed the woman deplorable, she deserved to be degraded. For all I admired about him, this unnerved me. I was still a virgin but didn't care about who was having sex with whom, and also couldn't fathom calling my own mother—who loved me enough to tolerate my hormonal outbursts and tend, however reluctantly, to my post-adventure wounds—a sexual deviant. Then again, maybe my uneasiness meant that I was a pussy, and I needed to flex my jaw and be a man.

"That was out of line of her," he continued, rubbing his temples; he seemed to be having another migraine. "Way out of line."

"Look, dude," I spoke softly, "she was just angry. It doesn't matter."

He looked at me sidelong, eyes bloodshot and inflamed. I'd once seen my father cry after a nasty argument with my mother, and it had been unsettling, like seeing an otherwise expressionless statue suddenly frown, but Vlad looked like a sulky child.

"Of course you can say that," he said.

"What?"

He shook his head. "You don't get it."

"What're you talking about?"

He looked at the bottle in his hands, drank some more, then went back to massaging his head. "I'm going to tell you something, and you'd better not blab about it to anyone else. Got it? If you do, I swear to God, I'll break your fucking neck. I'll murder you in your sleep."

It wasn't the first time he'd threatened to kill me, but he didn't laugh after saying it now. So, I told him, "All right."

He took another pull. "My parents don't want me," he coughed.

I didn't know how to respond to that.

"That woman was right. They—they weren't careful. My mom got pregnant. My dad, he told her to abort me. She almost did, but she bitched out at the last second. Then they were going to put me up for adoption after I was born, but my mom bitched out again because she got attached and convinced herself they could make things work. But apparently they couldn't, because we live in a shitty apartment in a shitty city in the shittiest part of the country, and they're unhappy and always tell me I make their lives harder. And I have to . . . I have to listen to that."

Either because of disgust or the migraine, he shivered like he'd swallowed a cup of ice. I wanted to reassure him—tell him that maybe his parents' way of expressing their love was through humiliation—but my knowledge was superficial; to me, his mother was the stay-at-home wife with the caustic humor and the fifty-mason-jar bottlecap collection, and his father was the jobless breadwinner with the explosive temper and the high-school class band on his ring finger.

It took me a while to say, "Fuck them. I'm happy you're here."

He cocked his head like he'd misheard. I had never said anything so kind to him, had avoided outward affection because I was afraid he'd think me weak for caring. I worried he would pull back, say that I was a pansy for making him feel wanted and important, but he turned away to hide his smile.

"Really?" he said.

"Do you think I'd hang out with you if I wasn't?"

He shrugged, wiped his eyes with his shirtsleeve. Then he opened his mouth as if to say something profound, but instead, he gestured past me to where the guardrail ended and gave way to one of the roof's corners. Just beyond that edge was an open-air gap of ten or so feet separating our building from the one adjacent.

"What do you say we jump that?" he asked.

All of these years later, it's still unclear to me why I didn't refuse. Even as a fourteen-year-old thrill addict, I had the sickening feeling that something would go wrong, but I also knew that his wasn't an earnest request

—it was a demand at worst, a rhetorical question at best, and a statement of intention at its core. If I were to be overly analytical, I'd say that his excitement overrode my rationality, that my fear of being a coward outweighed my aversion to heights, but the cause doesn't matter, because as he shuffled over, I followed. It wasn't until I stood at the brink, considered the sixty-foot plummet to the dank alley below, and realized that the steadiness of our feet was the flimsy barrier between death and jubilation, that I started to hyperventilate.

"Jesus Christ," I said. "Vlad, this is—this is insane."

"Yeah," he said, grinning, his migraine apparently gone. "That's why we're going to do it."

"Vlad, we—there's no way."

"Hey." He grabbed my arm, gave it a squeeze. "It's going to be fine. Here, watch me, watch me jump. I'll go first and make it quick—won't even think about it. And when I get to the other side, I'll guide you, I'll tell you exactly what to do. Just trust me. You trust me, right?"

He let go of my arm and eyed the leap again. And for the rest of my life, I'll never forget how happy he looked, how his skin glittered in the sun, how his hair flared translucent, and his vomit stain glowed so yellow that it almost blended into the daylight. He backed a few steps, took a series of deep breaths, and broke into a run. Then he pushed off his front leg and rose in midair, flapping his arms like a fledgling. For all I knew, he might have been flying.

He didn't make a sound as he fell. It was as if the world's noise had been sucked away by some enormous cosmic vacuum. I did hear the thump, though—it was short and dense. Down there, his body was contorted to a degree I had never seen and have never seen since. For a moment, I thought he was moving, a final revelatory jig to reassure me that he felt no pain and to prepare me for everything that would come after him, but the coroner said he died on impact.

#

At first, his parents didn't blame me. They trained their ire on Gary Kostović, our mild-mannered Serbian landlord. The guardrails, they and their lawyer maintained, were outdated and structurally compromised, and according to city regulations should have been higher and extended all the way around the roof's perimeter; the least Gary could do in light of his criminal negligence was to compensate the deceased's family.

"You know, it's really scummy of them to file that suit," my mother confided in me two months after the fall. "That low-life father of his—that gropey creep—he's trying to score a quick couple bucks because it's his fault they don't have any money. You'd think the fact that they're broke would make them have a little more sympathy, but I guess not."

Until then, my mother had hardly mentioned the incident and avoided bringing up the legal battle, which I was grateful for. It had become impossible to sleep more than two hours a night—I couldn't stop picturing Vlad's broken, mangled body—and she knew of my unease; every night, she'd lean in my doorway and watch me toss restlessly about the sheets. She wouldn't say anything, and neither would I, but there was a certain comfort in having her nearby like an emotional sentinel.

Around the same time, my father began to flee to the Irish pub two blocks away. I'll never truly know if this had something to do with me, but when I came down from the roof and told them what had happened, he studied me from my head to my shoes and grimaced, as if he sensed that I was hiding something. Instead of confronting me directly, he began to ignore me at dinner and leer at me from across the living room, then finally resorted to disappearing for hours at a time, only returning in the early morning when the condo was dark and silent.

One afternoon, while my mother and I watched the news, I asked her if my father believed I'd pushed Vlad off the roof—if he thought that I was a murderer. My mother bit her bottom lip, traced the lines on her palm with a finger, and whispered in response, "Your father is a suspicious man. He always has been. Don't take it personally."

But how could I not? He had never quite been defensive of me, but he almost always supported my actions. When I'd gotten into an angry scuffle with a boy named Calvin Garofalo and been suspended from school for two days, my father didn't hesitate to stand with me; he agreed that Calvin had instigated the fight and said that I'd been a real man to raise my fists when I could easily have run away like a coward. What was different about this situation? Was it that the outcome was far more serious, or was it something else altogether?

I never found an answer, but I did realize that my father's suspicion didn't grow in isolation. Come the court date, the judge ruled in Gary's Kostović's favor (he could afford a much fancier lawyer than Vlad's parents), and that same night, while I played Grand Theft Auto in the living room, I heard a wail beyond the front door. Out there, Vlad's mother was crumpled on the ground, her hair ruffled and her skirt torn at the hem, and his father looked pale and haggard, as though he'd spent the last week in and out of a blood bank. The next day, my mother, out of obligatory kindness, baked the two a pecan pie, which they accepted, though at the end of the week, a greasy twenty-something knocked on our door to serve my mother a packet of legal papers, which she read at the kitchen table, alternating between drinking a steaming mug of coffee and biting her nails to nubs.

The following months are murky. There was something uncanny about being the young central figure in a very adult legal disaster, and something doubly nightmarish about dragging my family into such an

avoidable mess. Had I only been firmer that day. Had I only told Vlad that I was terrified, that beyond all of the showboating he was, too, that the fact we hadn't yet died didn't mean that we were somehow exempt from the risk. Thinking that way, it was hard not to feel as if his death had been my fault, though with distance and years of counseling, it has become clear that our youth was the culprit. We didn't know that punishment doesn't discriminate, that it is just as fair to the old as it is to the young and, in its impartiality, is its own unique brand of unfair.

But to Vlad's parents, age was not an excuse. They had no proof that I'd pushed him off the roof—forensics had dusted his clothing for fingerprints and found none other than his own—but they still had their theories: Dante, the uncontrollable little rascal, the repulsive troublemaker who'd forced Vlad to drink and make the jump, the ugly, foul-mouthed brat who they'd always known, deep in the marrow of their bones, was eating away their son's sensibility.

These days, when I describe that dreadful year, people assume that Vlad's parents won the lawsuit; if not, I probably wouldn't be so bitter. But what very few know, and what I'm too reluctant to explain, is that one night, my mother told me that she didn't know who to believe anymore, that she wanted to put her faith in me, but I was a kid and mistakes happen, and anyway she had heard and seen me and Vlad acting stupid many times before, so please just admit it, Dante, for her own peace of mind, and although it was a lie I said that I did tell him to jump, because if even my own mother had become suspicious, then maybe I shouldn't trust myself.

I also don't mention that after the second lawsuit failed, I had my first migraine, and my mother brought me to a doctor, who said that it seemed to be an isolated incident, probably a result of anxiety and trauma, but that evaluation turned out to be false, because the migraines didn't relent, and they happened too closely to Vlad's death not to link them to him. In my estimation, which I still somewhat believe, I absorbed part of him when he died—that soul drifting up from the alleyway and seeping into my pores—but hadn't gotten any good part, just the head pains.

I don't say, either, that I still dream about him—not about what happened, but about the boy himself, the crazed fourteen-year-old who drank putrid beer and played video games until midnight with me and told me again and again that, if I didn't embarrass myself with him, I couldn't rightfully call myself his companion. And I don't say that sometimes, when I stare up at my bedroom ceiling, I see him, the crooked nose and the animal eyes and the vomit stain on his shirt collar, grinning and drooling and cackling, running and weeping and punching and saying, without ever opening his mouth to say it, that I meant something to him, and that because I meant something to him he must have meant something to me, too, and wasn't that reciprocity so beautiful, so perfect, so completely felt? I don't care to admit, either, that

somewhere, stuck in an eternal moment long since expired, he is still teetering on that ledge, his legs skinny and trembling, his face red and feral with delight, and he is telling me to jump, jump, jump.


**Wheel in Sepia Tone**

*Capital Wheel at National Harbor, Temple Hills, MD, where my daughter took me for my birthday. There are forty-two gondolas that are climate controlled, air conditioning or heat depending on the season. The ambiance of all the lights scenery and company made it very special. I took this photo right before we got on the wheel.*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