

The background of the cover is a photograph of a mountain landscape. In the foreground, there are large, craggy, light-colored rocks. Beyond the rocks, a deep valley filled with dense green forest stretches towards the horizon. In the distance, more mountain peaks are visible under a hazy sky. The lighting suggests a bright day, with sunlight filtering through the trees and illuminating the rocks.

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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 We are always looking for well-crafted, previously unpublished writing and art that seeks to capture an awareness of the human predicament. If you are interested in submitting, visit our website at www.typehousemagazine.com.

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War and Peace

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The Most Wonderful Plums

Timothy B. Dodd

I used to see her every day during my summer in Tbilisi,
mostly in the afternoon
when I'd buy apples and pears
from her, sometimes cherries
or a medium-sized watermelon or even
when I just passed
by on the street going to the center
of town. She sat out of the sun, under the overhang
of a 19th-century building on Leonidze,
one of the many balconied mammoths decaying, lovely ---
her whisk dusting off the fruit, shooing flies.

The first time...I bought apples from her out of convenience,
on the way home,
her crates of fruits lined up on the sidewalk
two blocks from my apartment,

but then I liked her kindness,
how she handed me my change, almost with compassion,
and looked thankful that I purchased a pound of peaches from her.

So I returned...
not because she sold the best fruit necessarily,
but because of her...something in her throat.

And we talked
about back home and how many siblings I have,
about her city changing and old apartment blocs getting torn down,
how taxi drivers now know less routes than passengers,
how they come from the countryside
and spend most nights in their car, rent-free.

We talked about Gudiashvili, Rustaveli, Iosseliani ---
about plums and poems, artichokes and architecture,
about how her degree in art history trained her
to become a fruit vendor,
about wild fruits that never make it
to Tbilisi streets.

She tried hard, persistent, to teach me Georgian:
I learned the names of most of the fruits,
but have forgotten them now
except for plum ... *k'liavi*...
and without me knowing,
she'd give me two kilos
when I bought only one.

I started to bring her a few things too:
some black tea from home, actually Welsh,
The Cranberries' *To the Faithful Departed*,
a James Ensor bookmark.

She invited me upstairs in her building one day
to her apartment, two weeks after meeting,
for a cup of Turkish coffee and pastries.

She wasn't offended I had never asked about her family,
the husband who had left her
or the two grown sons in the photos hanging
on walls of chipped plaster.

The next week she cooked me a full meal: aubergines with walnuts,
meat cutlets, fried potatoes with tkemali sauce,
fresh tomatoes and cucumbers,
chilled Mtsvanethe to drink.
Too stuffed for dessert,
so we drank more.

I adored that woman --- every Tuesday for the next five weeks
I visited her flat, ate religiously, and listened to her stories ---
especially loving the ones from her childhood
in Racha ... and the stories of living through tough
times in Tbilisi after independence.

Then three days before my flight home, a Thursday,
I was surprised when she didn't appear
at her stall - we people always take things for granted.
I went to buy a few final pears,
but all the crates were closed and covered,
and her little chair was gone.

I thought maybe she was sick, although she had told
me she never missed a day even when not feeling well.
But on the second day when she did not appear,
her son arrived and began packing
up the fruits, the crates,
carried it all away.

So I asked him. What happened?
A massive stroke, he said, handing me a large bag of pears.
I walked away, but ate no more of her fruit,
gave it all away.

Today, a week after arriving back home, I finally got some fresh fruit
at the supermarket: bag of apples, a few peaches and pears,
some plums. I tasted the plum first ---
pithy and lacking sweetness. One bite
and I tossed it out the window for the birds
who perhaps never tasted k'liavi.

Bonnie Rae Walker is a graduate of UCI, currently living in San Diego. She is published in Right Hand Pointing, Red Paint Hill Poetry Journal, Whale Road Review, and more. As well, she is forthcoming in the 2018 Sixteen Rivers Press political anthology. To find out more visit www.bonnieraewalker.com.

Long Haul

Bonnie Rae Walker

The sky was green, sick, angry – a color I had seen and avoided. Pulling over for the night would be the sensible thing, but Molly's soft voice whispered our last conversation in my ear – Jonas's stolen bike, Noah's worn shoes, and my name, Lincoln. Lincoln. Her southern buttered L's rolled my name into something worthy of rotating display under glass. I pressed on.

It had been ten days since I had seen them. I was edgy and worn and knew that Molly was on the other side of that span of mid-west with her warm skin and good food. Rubbing my face, three-day stubble and bloodshot eyes, I leaned into the steering wheel and started down the mountain, into the valley below and into that sick sky.

I reached over to the passenger seat and ruffled my dog's head. She panted her pleasure, small black body curled like a comma on my flannel, her outlined edges hazy and ethereal even now, her eyes hollow, the plaid print showing through the empty sockets. Little cutie – not for the first time I wished that someone else could see her.

Eleven years ago, my black dog appeared to me in the middle of a mean little storm, all snarls and lightning. I was pushing through it when my hair prickled on end and a sweet, sparky smell filled the cab; then white light and fierce pain climbing my left leg, up through my ribs and into my face. That's how I remember it: hair, smell, light, dog. She appeared running in the next moment as the white-out faded and my eyes stared wide, re-seeing. Twining scars now climb my entire left side. Through the years they've remained a raw pink, marking the electricity's path.

Since that day she's been my companion, visible only to me. I tried names on her but they all slide right off. She is the black dog – known to long-haul truckers as scrap of blue-collar lore, a menace. Just after twilight, when shadows lean and movements rasp against the dying day, they say a black dog appears and brings with her that drunk driver, that slick road, that thing that will deliver truckers into a wreck of metal and mourning.

As I descended the mountains I knew they would be the last ones until I reached the other side of this great arena of a valley opening before me.

Distant ridges skirted the opposite horizon – my destination. Driving a long haul, I see great spans of nothing and sameness. The gas stations, the chain places, the packaged food all interrupting huge sections of wild flatness. Oklahoma, northern Texas, Nebraska – when I stop at night along the sides of these roads a moonscape maws around me.

Hours passed and my edgy feeling persisted. My dog was up now, front paws on the dash, her fur pluming and swirling like smoke. She growled low at the storm. On the fringes of horizon clouds burst, flooding distant plains. Above me they roiled but stayed dry. I pick up the CB and called into static.

“Anyone with me? Looking for word on conditions ahead. I'm heading east, just leaving the range.” For two beats I listened to silence.

“Yeah Driver, I am out here,” a voice replied. “I'm thinking I should of hunkered down. It's getting worse and worse.” Wind ripped at his words.

“Not so bad here. If I didn't have to run I wouldn't,” I said. “Abraham here.”

The voice laughed weakly. “Fuck, Abraham, what are you doing in this mess? It's Pie Crust.” I cracked a smile. Pie Crust, real name Hank, and I ran the same lines. He was a career hauler, a hundred pounds too heavy with so much back pain he could barely get out of the cab, but still one of the fastest and safest drivers running.

“Hey Crusty! Just trying to make enough money to buy myself that solid gold hat we talked about.”

“Yeah, I -” Grinding metal and a crash interrupted Pie Crust. “Fuck!” He shouted and the radio went dead.

“Crusty? Hank? What's happening over there?” Nothing. “What the hell, Hank?” I said, heart pounding, knuckles white on the wheel. The clouds spasmed with electricity. I tried the CB again.

“Hank? Are you there?”

A crackling erupted. Crusty groaned. “I got run off the road.”

“You got hit?” I asked.

“Yeah, not a car. The storm.” The wind still howled, layering over his words, making him sound like he was speaking from the end of a long tunnel. “God damn, I'm bleeding.”

“Jesus Christ, Hank. We need to get you help.”

“Rig is on its side. I can't get out. Fourteen years of keeping the shiny side up and now look at me.”

My dog barked, once, twice, again. I looked up to see a sheet of corrugated metal, rusted with age and sailing like a wing at my truck. I lurched into the other lane to avoid it. The black dog tumbled to the other side of the cab. “Damn it!” I shouted, straightening my rig, feeling it rock like a boat against the chop.

“Lincoln?” Hank asked on the other line, waiting for my answer,

sounding like a boy, like Jonas or Noah.

"Yeah," I growled into the microphone. "I'm coming for you."

As my rig ate up the miles the sky churned green and black as a bad bruise. On either side of the road sparse grass lay flat from the wind that buffeted the sides of my cab. It pounded on the doors, riotous, needful.

I drew in my breath as Hank's truck grew from a small yellow chrome speck on the horizon to a mangled, laid-out rig flipped into a drainage ditch. I pulled in behind it and turned off my ignition.

Leaning into my door against the wind, I stepped from my truck. My dog leaped from my rig and stood in the middle of the road, impervious to the wind. I held the side of the cab, my flannel flapping a frantic wing beat. I squinted into a wall of rain a few miles southward.

Lightning flashed white in the cloud above it, exposing three sinuous tornadoes twisting beneath.

I stumbled backward and fell to the ground, then scrambled to Hank's truck. I pulled myself up to his driver side door, which now faced the sky, and lay flat against the side of his rig for a moment, staring at that gray rain wall, knowing what snaked within. I shook myself from my fear and faced down into the cab.

"Hank!" I screamed at him, pounding on his window. He was inside, eyes closed. "Hank! Open the door." I peered up and down the road, looking in desperation for anyone, anything.

On all horizons rain fell in the same gray sheets, enclosing us, and at its center the tornadoes bore down. I clawed at the handle and opened hard against the wind, cursing as it slammed my fingers along with the door against the side of the cab. Hank startled awake and stared at me unknowing.

"We have to get you out of here!" I cried, sliding down to stand on the broken passenger window next to Hank. He was hanging by his seat belt, his enormous bulk dangling. Reaching over, I began grappling with the nylon straps. I snatched my hands away as my fingers colored red. His shirt was slick with blood.

"Lincoln?" Hank asked in confusion, his voice groggy.

"We have to move. Now." I said, grabbing again at the seat belt.

"There's twisters coming at us. We have to get the hell out of here."

I glanced to my right through the windshield and there my dog was crouched with her tail between her legs. She curled into herself and whined. I stared into her hollow eyes and saw the road and grass beyond.

I slapped Hank. "Let's go!"

Clarity cut through the haze and Hank looked at me, aware. "I think I've got my nightgown on, Lincoln." He pulled back his arm and exposed a pitted black wound in his belly. "I'm not going nowhere."

"Hank!" I shouted, still pulling at his seat belt.

Hank pressed a weak hand to my arm and then his head slumped to

the side, eyes open, unseeing.

I clambered out of the cab and stared up at the gray wall before me. Another flash of lightning exposed the funnels again. They wavered and churned, stroking the ground in sequence like lover's fingers. A gust of wind knocked me from the driver side and I fell, landing on road below. I groaned, gasping for breath.

My dog licked my face, urging me to rise, to run. Her breath held the same sparky smell that had filled my cab eleven years ago.

I dragged myself back to my own rig as she followed. Close enough now to see between through the rain, the three funnels twisted around one another, braiding themselves sensuously, parting, re-coupling.

Climbing inside, I slammed the door shut with the dregs of adrenaline and thrust a shaking key into the ignition. The engine growled to life, a weak thread of power against the barbarous noise that bore down. Outside my dog began to run down the road, before stopping and looking back, waiting for me to follow. I nodded, keeping my eyes on her as I fumbled with the shift knob.

"Come on!" I yelled, shifting roughly into gear as the first patter of rain hit my windshield. The truck accelerated slowly, dragging its freight against the storm. I clenched my teeth, feeling the tension radiate into my temples. Looking in the side-mirror, I saw the three tornadoes descend on Hank's rig, watched them delight in the whine of twisting metal.

I couldn't see the road through the rain – I couldn't see the front of the truck. But my black dog, her dark body faltering, flickering but never disappearing, she I could see. The storm drummed panic and darkness but she ran before me, a candle in the fade. As she always had, she ran on the fringes of tragedy, a gossamer lifeline that I now held, towing me home.

Behind us a scream rose out of the rain and in my mirrors the funnels reappeared. They pursued. I sagged.

"I'm sorry," I called to my running black dog, "Thanks for your help all these years."

I thought of Molly and the boys, of the insurance money, of Molly's dependable sister who would help her through the upcoming hard times.

And then as quick as that flash of lightning that brought her to me, my dog spun and ran back down the dark road. In my side mirror I watched her grow to something as wild as the tornado she approached, massive, the air filling with that sweet smell from her origin.

Pain raked up the left side of my body. I screamed and pulled at my shirt. The exposed scars lit bright blood red. I felt every filament of their branching paths burn.

The air thrummed and snapped with electricity. Around us lightning struck faster and faster, closing in on the tornadoes. Galloping toward the fray, my dog grew, black and smoke over her muscled haunches, her tail fanning up in plumes. She leapt and slammed into the three twisting funnels with a howl

to match their screams. The sky erupted in a cacophony, lighting striking through the plains, accusing fingers touching down, down, down.

I drove, my left side held rigid. I kept Molly's name in my mind like a talisman as my nameless companion battled in my wake. She fought. The sky roiled, and the tornadoes veered from their pursuit.

And I pulled away, the rain fading to a patter, then drizzle as I climbed into the low hills on the other side. I sobbed, sucking in great, gasping breaths. I would see my family again, this I knew, as surely as I felt my dog's absence. I lifted my shirt again. The charged scars that held her to me were gone. The pain, though, still lingered.

I unfurled my fingers from their grip on the wheel and forced myself to slow, taking deep breaths. I owed her this much. Pulling over to the side of the road, I limped out of the truck to stand and stare down at the valley, at the clouds that still flickered their anger.

"Thank you," I said. "Good dog."

Beth Gordon is a writer who has been landlocked in St. Louis, Missouri, for 16 years but dreams of oceans, daily. Her work has recently appeared in *Into the Void*, *Quail Bell*, *Calamus Journal*, *By&By*, *Five:2:One*, *Barzakh*, and others.

I'm Not the Hero's Nice Wife

Beth Gordon

I'm the woman who screws
your best friend while you pull a bullet out of your own thigh
with nothing but your fore-
finger and opposable thumb. Pour mescal into the open wound,
sew it up with thread slowly
untwined from the hem of your military-issue combat jacket.
You boil berries and grass
into an antiseptic, shiver while you sleep. I strip down to my knee
socks, forget I ever knew you.

David Macpherson is a retired internal medicine physician living on a small farm in western Pennsylvania. His fiction has appeared in Scarlet Leaf Review, Adelaide Literary Journal, Front Porch Review, and Rind Literary Magazine. Opinion and memoir pieces have appeared in the Pittsburgh Quarterly.

The Sole Parishioner

David Macpherson

The howl of the winter storm's wind penetrated the roof of the old church, the sound descending from the short steeple into the cold sanctuary. Reverend Sanders peeked from the altar door a few minutes before nine. The reverend did not recognize the single parishioner who sat near the back on the right. The bearded man had not removed his dark gray coat or his black beanie. Reverend Sanders anticipated a small turnout for the Sunday morning service, but not this small.

In his office, the reverend donned his crimson robe and grimaced at the pudgy baby-face reflected in closet door mirror. He walked down the backstairs and through the basement meeting room to the entrance of the church. The blizzard's snow had resealed the front door. Only thirty minutes before he had cleared a small path on the walk. He forced the door open flattening the new foot of drifting light powder into a perfect arc.

The church's entrance looked north over a single row of tired clapboard houses and an abandoned factory to the Allegheny River. Radar antennae from a towboat—the first he had seen moored below his church—juttied above one of the homes. Mist swirled above the angry white-capped surface of the river beyond.

The blowing snow already dulled the sharp edges of the single set of boot tracks on the church steps. Beyond the steps, a sheen of ice on a broken patch of concrete added peril to the path of redemption offered by the church. The cold wind rushed across the river into his eyes.

He had never delivered a sermon to one listener. When he heard the weather warnings at 5:00 a.m., he considered canceling the service, but didn't know how. He would not post a sign on the door. If someone made the journey, the church must be open. Most of the usual churchgoers wouldn't look for an email or Facebook message—his shrinking group of aging followers used phones and word of mouth. And many might complain that for him to cancel suggested laziness—his trip from the manse to the church, with its covered walkway, presented no barrier at all.

The reverend walked up the sanctuary's main aisle and faced the man.

“We’ll get started in a few minutes. Some folks are probably delayed by the storm.”

The man removed his beanie revealing thinning gray hair. “Don’t expect there’ll be anyone else.” His weathered face, ridged like a mountain range on a topographic map, demanded respect.

The reverend stiffened and tilted his head back. His congregation had declined considerably in the past ten years. More funerals than baptisms, parishioners had moved away for jobs or better schools. The pews became emptier. He could blame it on the local economy, but he judged the decline to be of his failing—people would not flock to his preaching.

“You may be right, but some of these folks are pretty sturdy,” said the reverend.

“I’m not in a hurry.”

Twenty minutes later, Reverend Sanders lost hope and started the service. He skipped the opening hymn and mounted the pulpit to deliver the opening prayer.

“Dear Lord...”

“No use praying over me, reverend.” The man’s voice was like a foghorn.

The reverend continued. “We ask your blessing on this winter day...”

“Won’t do me no good.”

Reverend Sanders was in no mood for a debate. His impact these past few years on the community seemed only to keep his few remaining parishioners from moving to more successful churches in the area. He descended from the pulpit and stood in the main aisle near the man and smiled with as much warmth as he could muster.

“Perhaps I can do something more for you than preach.”

“Maybe.” He rubbed his beard.

“What brings you to my church, my friend?”

“No offense Reverend, but I’m not sure we’re friends. Too soon to tell, don’t you think?”

This was the type of man he knew well from his congregation—an unforgiving soul who cared little who he might offend, a kind of man who exposed the reverend’s uncertainties and resurrected the paralyzing shyness he felt as a boy. He was losing this visitor already.

“I’m the captain of that towboat tied up below.”

“Weather force you to shore?” The topic of weather seemed safe.

The captain’s eyes revealed fatigue that even a long sleep could not repair. “No, weather’s not so rough. I’m just a bit tired.”

“My office is warmer. Want to join me for coffee?”

The man rose from his pew to follow. “Got anything we might add to that coffee?”

#

They sat in the minister's office, the floor covered by a fading red Oriental rug. Bookcases holding a few thick, leather-bound titles lined one wall. The dark walnut shelves on the opposite side were crammed with neatly stacked pamphlets, never bestowed. The booklets, full of simple advice that allowed no opportunity for debate, were a transient obsession with the reverend, one of many failed tactics.

"I've got some fancy coffee flavors—vanilla, pumpkin spice, peppermint. What's your preference?"

The captain's face bristled with skepticism. "Black."

The reverend served the coffee in two mugs decorated by the words, "Faith is Joy" on one side and the converse on the other. He opened a lower drawer in his desk and pulled out a bottle of unopened Jack Daniels. He twisted the cap, broke the seal, and poured a portion into the captain's mug.

"A little warmth on a cold day," the reverend said.

The captain held up his mug. "You joining me?"

"That bottle's stayed in my drawer for five years to remind me of my past. I'm tempted most days. But I'll pass."

The captain grunted. He took a sip. "Name's Sal Boyland." He did not offer his hand. "I'm not a believer and didn't come here today for you to change my mind."

Reverend Sanders smiled. "Okay. I'm not very good at that, anyway."

Boyland raised his eyebrows. "Ain't that your job?"

"Part of it." The reverend didn't want to discuss his other shortcomings. "What brings you here?"

The captain took off his coat and rolled up his left sleeve. "I'll just come out with it. We share a failing." His forearms were lined with the scars of a different addiction. A crust of blood decorated the upper end of the scar near his wrist.

"I've been clean for a year. Used again last night. I don't remember much. Woke up this morning in my bunk with a needle in my arm. My boy must've found me."

"Your son?"

"No. I don't have a kid anymore." Boyland left out the details and took another sip. "If it were just me, I'd be okay. Last night scared me enough I could stop on my own. I'm not ready to leave the world."

"Sounds like you're starting on a better course."

"Hear me out. The boy's an addict too. I'm supposed to keep him clean. Father's a friend of mine—asked me to take the boy on to straighten him out. He didn't know I was a junkie too. Thought I could keep the boy clean. He wasn't supposed to know it, but he'd be keeping me clean, too." The captain looked at his hands.

"How can I help?"

"I'm asking you to take the boy and get him back to his parents. He

can't be on this boat."

"How old is he?"

"Twenty-five."

"Not really a boy, is he?"

"Still young."

"Does he agree to leave?"

"Haven't told him yet. Don't matter anyway. I don't want him on my boat. Want him to have a way home—not just drop him off on the bank somewhere. I owe him that at least."

For a moment, Sanders imagined life on the river.

"Let me meet the boy. I'll be down in about an hour."

After Boyland left, the reverend looked out his office window at the blowing snow. He thought of summer days when he watched the perfectly aligned mass of barges push slowly downriver, the towboat's effort revealed only by the faint hum of the distant engines, the crew's purpose so singular compared to guiding souls.

#

Reverend Sanders looked up at the tow's looming wheelhouse. The boat was enormous and so much larger than the reverend had imagined. It pushed no barges today. Near the back, an icy gangplank about a foot wide rested on the boat's gunwale, the other end on the concrete of the abandoned factory pier. The board bowed so much, the reverend thought it unlikely this was the boat's entrance.

"Hello there," he yelled.

Captain Boyland opened a pilothouse window. "Meet you on the rear deck."

He pointed at the plank. "Should I use that?"

"Walk fast and don't think."

Sanders started up the narrow entry. It bounced like a diving board when he was halfway across. He slowed and spread his arms like a tightrope walker, an icy spike of fear in his throat.

"Lord, Jesus," he muttered.

He climbed the second half more slowly, slipping once and catching himself before he stepped onto the boat. The boat did not rock with his weight.

The rear deck, a maze of cables and equipment neatly organized for the boat's work to hold and push the barges' huge loads, was deserted.

The captain opened a deck door and motioned him inside.

The reverend smelled engine oil as they walked a dark hallway with all but one door closed. Through the opening, the boy stood in the galley spreading peanut butter on white bread.

The captain spoke to the boy. "When you're finished, come up to the wheelhouse."

The boy nodded.

They climbed metal stairs with round handrails, the green paint worn from the strong handgrips of workingmen, to the wheelhouse. The storm had passed. Brilliant sun in a deep blue winter sky lit up the space. The river opened up to the southwest horizon, the view so different from the claustrophobic ravines and hills of western Pennsylvania. The reverend had not seen the river this beautiful.

The captain gave the reverend a brief tour, pointing out the rudder sticks, throttles, and navigation equipment that predicted where the boat was headed. A small, honey-colored, wooden box, the only object with unclear purpose, decorated the front console.

"That's a pretty box—a good luck charm?"

The captain scoffed. "In a way."

"Peaceful up here."

"Normally, there's more men on board but we're not pushing anything—just going down river for a few days. The boy's our cook. But he's got to go."

They turned around to the voice of the boy. "Whad'ya mean, I got to go?"

"I'm supposed to keep you from using. I can't even stop myself. You need to be somewhere else."

The young man was short and thin but with strong wide shoulders. His brown hair hung loosely over his ears. "I'm not leaving." He crossed his arms. "I'll use for sure if I go."

The captain looked across the river. A long freight train moved upriver on the opposite bank—unstoppable. "You're going." He turned to the boy. "That's an order."

"You just don't want anyone else to know. You could lose your pilot's license."

The captain spoke softly. "I've been good to you. I didn't have to take you on."

"That's right," said the boy. "I owe you. You gave me a chance. I'm not going to turn you in."

"I'm not worried about that."

"You owe me."

With hard eyes, the captain turned to the boy. "I owe lots of people. But not you."

"You don't even know who you owe. I saved your fucking life."

"How the hell did you save my life?"

"Why do you think you woke up this morning? I sprayed Narcan up your nose."

The boy slammed the wheelhouse door as he left.

Reverend Sanders agreed with the boy—the boat might be a safe

refuge. "I'll speak with him," he said.

#

Sanders found the boy in the bunkroom lying on an upper bunk. He made no effort to get up. The quarters were cramped and smelled of working men.

"What's your name?" said the reverend

The boy looked toward the gray metal wall. "Randy. Randy Buchanan."

"I'm Reverend Sanders. I'm the pastor of the church on the hill."

Randy said nothing.

"What's it like on this boat?" the reverend said.

"It's hard. But the job is clear. Move the barges down the river."

"You're the cook, right?"

"Yeah, but sometimes they let me do other stuff. Not supposed to—union rules—but I'm learning anyway."

"He wants you to go."

Randy sat up on the bunk. "I'm supposed to take over my old man's insurance business. Selling pieces of paper to keep people safe. Might as well be selling shit. The only part of the day worth living was when I was high."

Randy lay back down.

The reverend recalled his drunken days as telemarketer and his move to the church. The church's work had kept him dry but the effect was wearing.

"Sounds rough."

The boy spoke to the bunk wall. "This boat saved me. I can see doing this a long time—maybe one day be captain. I'm sure as smart as that old druggie."

"He seems set on you leaving."

Randy turned to the reverend. The boy's eyes showed the same stubbornness he'd seen in the captain's. "He's going to have to throw me off."

"Let me see if I can find a way."

"Good luck. He's a stubborn old fart." A hint of admiration mixed with the boy's angry words.

The reverend returned to the wheelhouse. He didn't understand the purpose of the complex pipes and equipment he passed but each piece had a defined role. His church's sanctuary, full of symbols, only pointed to something not tangibly present. Though he wasn't selling crap over the phone, most days at the church, he didn't offer much more.

Boyland sat in the high captain's chair in the wheelhouse facing the river.

Sanders didn't think flattery would get him anywhere but could think of no other place to start. "Randy admires you," he said to the captain's back.

The captain did not turn to face the Reverend. "I don't need his admiration."

“He says he wants your job someday.”

“Good for him.”

“I think he’s right about what he said—the boat helps keep him stay clean.”

“He’s wrong.”

“How do you know?”

“Hell Pastor, look at me.”

“So, the boat didn’t make you perfect. Somehow, I don’t think it made you use again either. No guarantees either way.”

The captain tapped his finger on the wooden box. “I can’t be responsible for him. Yeah, I can teach him not to fall into the river. But not much more.”

“You underestimate yourself.”

“You don’t know a god damned thing about me.”

Here on the boat, the stakes were higher than on shore. The reverend spoke more directly than in months. “You’re a hard one hiding your fears.”

The captain turned toward the reverend. “I didn’t ask you to hear my confession.”

“You got something to confess?”

“Not now.”

“Okay, I can wait.”

“This boat’s moving on in six hours. I doubt I’ll be ready by then.”

Sanders heard the opening. “I’ll be back before then.”

#

Back at the church, the reverend brooded at his desk. The bottle of Jack Daniels and an empty unused glass rested on the side of the desk. A stack of bills marked overdue lay in his inbox. At five after four, someone knocked on his door.

Pastor Johnson stuck in his head. “The group is waiting.” Johnson glanced at the bottle of Jack Daniels.

With the towboat’s arrival, the reverend had forgotten he was hosting the 4:00 p.m. meeting of the Community Baptist Council. “Oh, sorry—a bit occupied.”

That morning, the reverend had turned up the heat in the basement conference room in preparation. He had overshot—the room was stifling. The four clergymen who waited for him had removed their sweaters and coats and rolled up their sleeves. They looked at him skeptically as he entered. The reverend apologized for the heat and cracked open an emergency exit door to cool the room. Through the opening, he could see the towboat’s wheelhouse in front of the rusting factory.

Pastor Krueger chaired the group and started the meeting. “You got a gas well to heat this place, Sanders?” The other pastors chuckled too hard, Sanders thought, at the alpha dog’s weak wit. Krueger headed up a thriving

church and was the most skilled at finding the right words to coax money from the wealthy. Sanders detested his righteous superiority.

For the hour, the committee discussed combining resources for community services. Beneath the surface of each clergyman's words of support for a collective effort, Sanders discerned a self-serving tactic. Near the end, Krueger floated an idea. "I think we all realize there are too many Baptist churches in this region. We'd be better off closing a few and linking up."

Sanders sensed the group's eyes on him.

#

At 9:00 p.m., Reverend Sanders used gray duct tape to secure a note to the church's front door. He walked along the snow-cleared road in front of the church and turned right toward the river at the road's end. He hurried under the streetlight, hoping no one would notice his passage. The light blue roller bag he had won at a church convention raffle bounced behind him on the frozen pebbles of the road. He wished he had a weathered duffel bag that he might hoist on his shoulder. When he reached the boat, he hid his suitcase behind a small abandoned shack. The suitcase could be retrieved later. As he walked up the plank, this time not stopping, he rehearsed his offer. His second boarding was easier.

#

Three weeks later, Sanders sat in the tow's galley with Randy and two other deckhands. They had just finished the most complex meal Sanders had made since starting—chicken enchiladas salsa verde.

"Pretty good meal for a scab," Randy said. "You're getting better."

The other men nodded.

"Thanks—I'm starting to enjoy it," Sanders said.

Randy sipped coffee from a mug. "So, Pastor. What's your plan? You sticking with this boat? Or going back to preaching?"

The men were quiet. "Well, I'm still planning. The Lord hasn't told me what I should do. Still finding my place."

The truth was he had no plan. The note he had taped to the church's door informed those few who cared to read it that he was on a retreat for a month. He told himself he would spend a month of menial labor—like a monk at a monastery though he vowed no silence. The work of planning and preparing meals on the boat came easy to him. He enjoyed the steps building to the climax of the meal and the finality of the cleanup when the meal was done.

When not in the galley, Sanders wandered the boat and watched the river. He recorded the river's mood each day in a small notebook. The life of spring storms played out before him, the clouds darkening in the west, the wind visible on the water rushing towards the lead barges and then hitting. The solid mass of the boat was not rocked by these storms.

He admitted to himself his ministry had been a failure. He neither looked nor spoke the part. It was not a problem of faith but of execution. Parishioners complained that his rapid speech and high voice rendered his words unintelligible from the pulpit. He had bought an expensive sound system for the sanctuary but this only amplified the confusion, like a hearing aide unable to select the sounds intended to be heard. And though he worked to slow the pace of his words, his enthusiasm overcame him and, each Sunday, the sermon's words rushed out.

#

The tow tied up in Cincinnati at the one-month mark—Sanders' planned duration of retreat. He could easily have caught a bus back to Pittsburgh but had thought of nothing on his retreat that gave him hope he would succeed on the altar.

The reverend ate a late lunch with the captain in the galley. "I'd like to stay on," Sanders started.

"What about your church?"

"I don't see much future there for me. Truth is, those folks would be better off at another."

The captain nodded with a flicker of concern. "Cooking enough for you?"

"Why Captain, are you turning into a guidance counselor?"

The joke fell flat. The captain's face toughened to its usual place. "No."

"To answer your question, I don't know. I enjoy listening to the men."

"Randy mentioned the men are taking to you. Best I could tell most aren't so religious."

The captain was right. The men weren't churchgoers. "No, I stay away from preaching. We talk about other things."

The work of the boat had gone well since Sanders had boarded. The men continued to be driven by the captain; the reverend served as an empathic coach.

Boyland agreed Sanders could stay on.

#

On a day of full sun but cold brisk March wind, Randy finished a lunch of tomato soup and grilled cheese. Walter, in his late sixties and the oldest of the crew, joined them.

Randy turned to Sanders. "You know what's in the captain's box in the wheelhouse?"

"No, I don't." Sanders worried it was a stash, like his own bottle of Jack Daniels, but wouldn't discuss that with Walter in the room.

Walter, normally quiet, spoke up. "It's new. He brought it onboard last July almost secret like—after his time away. I thought a month away from this boat would do him good. It sure didn't. He never raged before like he does

now.”

Sanders had heard from the men of the captain’s temper. The crew could count on a visit from the union leading to a rage. The union steward complained about Sanders and Randy taking on roles meant by the rules for others. But most eruptions were unpredictable, like a frightening storm provoked by nothing, passing quickly and then discussed among the men in Sander’s galley. So far, Sanders was not the subject of the captain’s wrath but he could imagine the fury.

Sanders looked at Randy. Their eyes met, knowing the moods of addiction. But other than the rare fits, the captain’s judgment in the wheelhouse remained sound. Sanders had no basis to intervene.

#

In April, heavy rains fell with little change in the water at first. Two days later, the river gathered the rain from its tributaries like the roots on a tree. The water turned brown and opaque and roiled, angry with its load as it rushed downstream. On that moonless night, Sanders had not seen it darker on the river. For the first time on the boat, he felt the river’s danger.

The captain would not leave the wheelhouse. Sanders brought him coffee and a sandwich. The captain sat in his pilot chair while Randy stood behind him.

The captain pointed to an instrument in front of him. “See that gauge there, Reverend? It shows how much the boat and barges are slipping across the water. Slippage is near maximum.” Boyland pointed to small green screen with a map. A line indicated where the boat was headed. It predicted the boat would easily navigate the upcoming bend. “Looking good, don’t you think?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “The instrument’s wrong. If I don’t correct now, we’ll hit about here,” he said pointing to the shoreline on the map. He adjusted the rudder sticks and advanced the throttles. The engines roared in response. Randy intently watched. Sanders understood the lesson was not for him.

The captain continued. “When it gets bad, no matter what you do, you won’t make the bend. You have to tie up then. Sometimes, the river runs the show. You just have to know when. We’re close to that point now.” The captain sipped on his coffee, his face calm with the challenge. “Whad’ya think boy? Should we tie up?”

Randy considered for a moment. “I think we’ll be able to ride this one out.”

The captain nodded.

#

Two days later, the massive bolus of river water had pushed downstream, allowing the men some time to relax. They sat in his galley telling the tales of past floods.

Sanders took his turn. “In 2004, the river was the highest I’d ever

seen. It was a few days after Hurricane Ivan passed. You all remember that?"

"I remember it. I was only eight years old—just a kid," said Randy.

Walter sat next to Randy. He poked him in the ribs with a wooden spoon. "You're still a kid." Randy grinned and feigned a backhand slap to the old man.

Sanders continued. "I watched from the church steps. There must've been two hundred boats torn loose from their moorings floating down the river—mostly little powerboats and skiffs—some still tied to the wharfs that got torn away too. I remember looking upstream seeing a boat about the size of this one—a big tow. Kind of pirouetting like an elephant in a ballet. I'm sure no one was on board. Kind of peaceful, just slowly floating and spinning in the current. Just as it passed me, it turned to show me a big sign on its side. 'For Sale', it read with a phone number."

Walter poked Randy again. "You missed your chance boy—you should've bought that boat."

Randy laughed. "One day," he said.

#

More of the crew met with Sanders, staying behind after a meal or getting up early before their shift to sit with him in the galley. One hated the work of the boat and the dictatorial captain. The man did not return after his scheduled time on shore. Some revealed their fears of failed lives, others confessed their infidelities, or spoke of their struggle with one among the spectrum of life's addictions. Sanders did not betray these men's confidences to the captain and did not pray with them, sensing prayer would push them away.

#

In late June, weather along the river was ideal, with rare storms, and warm cloudless days. The spring green of the trees changed into the deep green of summer. The union business was settled. Though Sanders as the cook and Randy as a pilot in training violated the Inland Boatmen's Union rules, Randy had earned their respect through hard work and wit and the men wanted Sanders to stay.

Despite the easy time, the captain's mood worsened for no reason Sanders could understand. At his best, he was sullen allowing the men to do their work undisturbed. On most days, he raged at the men's decisions or their laziness in diatribes the men judged as unjustified. The older crewman speculated on the reasons for the change in a man they had once admired, a steady man who knew the currents of the river, the sounds of tuned engines, and the needs of his crew. Three deckhands quit and were replaced with unseasoned men whose inexperience led to a runaway barge and one man overboard. After his rescue, the captain threw him to the deck—the man appeared happy to quit. Sanders heard more and more from the crew. The men could find no calm place on the boat like the home of a couple raging against

a bad marriage

#

On a humid July morning, Sanders sat in the galley with the night pilot who was eating after his shift. The captain burst into the room. Red-faced and stuttering with rage, he stood over the pilot. “Did you touch my box?” Before the pilot could reply the captain went on. “If you touch it again, I’ll throw you off this fucking boat.” He turned and kicked a chair launching it toward Sanders and then walked out.

Randy witnessed the tirade from the galley door. “He’s off his rocker. I tried to talk with him but he threw me out. The crew’s gonna quit. You got to do something.”

Sanders didn’t relish challenging the captain—a storm turned toward him. But, a new captain might not want a washed-up clergyman.

#

That afternoon, Sanders opened the wheelhouse door cautiously.

The captain glanced over his shoulder. “What do you want?”

“I need to talk with you.”

“So talk.”

Sanders surprised himself with his directness. “This boat’s a mess. You spend most of your day screaming at the men. They’re starting to hate you. I don’t blame them.”

The captain adjusted a rudder stick. “What’s your point?”

“The old guys say you’ve changed. I don’t know why.”

The captain grunted.

“You’re losing them.”

Another grunt from the captain. Sanders hadn’t hit the soft part yet.

“Are you using? Is that what’s in that box?”

The captain sat rigid in his chair. The wheelhouse was quiet except for the rumble of the twin engines. “No, I’m not using.”

“Then what the hell is it?”

The captain stared. Sanders feared he had provoked the start of a rage. But he would not break the silence. He listened to the background hum of the engines, the white noise of the boat.

The captain’s voice was soft. He started his story. “Ever do something you can’t fix?”

The Reverend spoke slowly. “Tell me more.”

“There’s no heroin in that box. Hurt my back a few years ago. Got pills from my doc. I couldn’t stop using them. Told him all sorts of stories—lost them, fell into the toilet, crew stole them—all lies. He eventually cut me off so I went to heroin. But, I’m done with that now. Like I said before, I’m not ready to die.”

Captain Boyland looked to the southern shore. They were passing Sander’s church. The captain pointed to it. “Some sort of signal, you think?”

Sanders smiled. "Maybe."

"I was married once. I left her—I had to. I couldn't stop beating her. She didn't deserve it. I was born with a bitterness."

"It's good you decided to leave." Sanders guessed the captain was not through with his confession.

"We had a son. She kept the boy but sometimes I would take him fishing on the river. He told me he loved those times."

"What's his name?"

"His name was Sal, like mine."

Sanders sensed the son was no more. They kept silent for a minute. Sander broke the silence. "Nice thing—a father and son fishing the river."

"Yes, I thought so too. So I pushed it. When he was eighteen, he wanted to go to college. His mother couldn't afford it. I wouldn't pay. I wanted him on the boat—to follow me. So he did, for six months—he hated it. I screamed at him like I scream at the men."

Sanders nodded.

"He started using just like me. Overdosed a year ago today." The captain turned to face the reverend. "Nobody had Narcan then." His eyes were moist, his defiance overrun. "I killed him."

#

That night, the river was glassy smooth, disturbed only by the wake of the tow as it made its way past the confluence of the three rivers that framed Pittsburgh. The boat's steady passage over the water generated a satisfying breeze that cooled the still heat that held into the night. Reverend Sanders followed the captain to the stern. The captain carried the small wooden box—the box had never come this far.

The boat engines were slow, little power needed as the tow headed downstream in the calm water. Randy steered from the wheelhouse. The other crew stayed in their rooms. The ceremony was not intended to be public.

The captain kneeled and began cutting through the wood of the sealed box with his pocketknife. "A year ago, my son died of what I nearly died of myself." The beaten man turned the box over to begin cutting on the next side. "We all have our place. I thought his should be on the boat. I was wrong." He cut the final side.

Using his rough hands, he grasped the top of the wooden box and twisted. It cracked with its final release. He turned the box over the tow's side. The ashes mixed with the boat's wash.

The captain looked at the reverend. "I'm not a religious man but I would appreciate if you'd say a few words."

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Field Sketches from an Outdoor Childhood

(Ink and Watercolor)



Figure 1: Do not lick your snow cave.

Pine boughs are insulation, not decoration.



Figure 2: Hamsters are useless as pets.



**Figure 3: Hairbrush / Comb / Toothbrush / Toy /
Food / Weapon / Etc.**



Figure 4: Pinkeye is a bourgeois disease.

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Peepers

Joe Baumann

The windows appeared the morning after she told him she was pregnant. Hers was larger, a bay window swallowing her navel as it curled around the furl of her stomach and the knotted flesh of her outie. His started smaller, a flash of glass like a plug in his own innie belly button, hard as diamond when he tapped on it with his index finger. When they had celebratory sex that morning, disregarding their gummy lips and sour morning breath to kiss and inhale one another and drag their fingers through each other's hair, he kept looking down, seeing the glinty flash of the glass in his skin reflecting off hers.

As her stomach grew so did both windows, creeping up along their stomachs and, by the end of her first trimester, pushing against their ribs. When he worked out, he had to abandon crunches for planks, and squatting became difficult. He switched from dumbbells and barbells to the machines and cable tower out of fear of cracking the glass and spilling his innards all over the benches and free weights. In the morning, while he shaved, she cleared the glass for both of them, and, razor in hand, he would lean down and look at what was coming to life inside her. The world in her body was the fascinating landscape; where he was the sleepy snake exhibit at the zoo, she was the prowling, ferocious big cats, waiting to be fed. His window revealed a strip of intestine, a bulging liver and stomach. But hers! The roil of her uterus as it expanded like a balloon being inflated one breath at a time, the frame of her window dipping toward her vulva to reveal the pathways their baby would take when the time came.

Just as the doctor promised, they both became transparent inside, the external layers of organ turning to a glinting, crystal color like Sprite so that the inner pathways of their bodies revealed themselves, blood vessels and stomach acid and blooms of bile visible. He stared at himself as he dressed for work, watching last night's enchiladas horking and dissolving in the clear globe of his stomach that looked like a squashed crystal ball. When they were

given the news (twins!), they watched as the lining of her uterus seemed to vanish and the children pressed up against the glass of her window, little fleshy bodies the size of heirloom tomatoes. She carried a boy and a girl, which would satisfy both of them: his want for an eldest son, her wish for a daughter into whose ear she would whisper instructions for beating up bullies while brushing her child's hair.

While she bloomed out, her window poking from the tank tops she stuffed herself into, he stayed the same single slate, hard and unyielding and showing nothing but the purplish-brown muck of his insides, like a car windshield splattered with heaps of mud. He felt lifeless and dull, even when she pressed herself against him, curling her buttocks toward his crotch and moaning with pleasure when he slid inside, alleviating the stretching heat in her groin. She said she loved the feel of his window on her back, cool like a slab of ice relieving the kinetic energy of three life forces coursing through her.

"I'm so plain," he said. "My insides are so boring."

"You're not boring," she said. "You're traditional and strong."

"But there's nothing worth seeing." He rapped on the glass and felt a gurgle in his stomach.

She found him an artist who specialized in this kind of thing. Her studio smelled of turpentine and parmesan cheese and mint. He stripped off his shirt when she asked to examine the window, unabashed as he pulled the fabric over his head, chest swelling with pride for his lean length, the strips of muscle in his shoulders, his clean complexion and hairless back.

The artist squatted before him, blinking at the window. "It's an exciting time," she said, breath fogging on the glass. She wiped it away with the butt of her hand. "Anxious, too."

"Do you have children?"

"One." She stretched. "But he's adopted, so it's not quite the same."

"I bet it's similar."

She smiled at him. "I'm going to start with some test designs. I'll use watercolor, so they'll come off in the shower."

"Like temporary tattoos." He nodded at her arms.

Her skin was covered in them, drawings so lifelike they seemed to move around when she did: the tiger on her triceps snarling when she extended her arm, the ballerina's tutu fluttering when her left forearm twitched. If she swallowed, the dove on her throat seemed to flap its wings. On her back—she wore a white spaghetti-strapped tank top—the surface of a lake shimmered and the branches of a willow tree shuddered if she rolled her shoulders.

"Something like that." She smiled again, spreading her lips wide to reveal a clam-pink tongue studded with a blue stone and perfectly white teeth that matched the milky color of the walls and blank canvases strewn near the

wide windows peering onto a busy downtown street.

He felt the paint like slithering snails as she layered it on in broad strokes, curls and whirls of tickling contact that reminded him of his wife kissing along his skin as she moved southward toward his crotch, and he had to count prime numbers to suppress the erection he felt growing. The artist seemed not to notice, her concentration entirely on the brush she gripped in her right hand. A trail of butterflies along her radius and ulna flapped as she twitched and twirled her fingers. Her tongue poked out through her lips, pushed to one side and held by a large incisor. She washed out her brushes more than once, and during the breaks he leaned down over himself to see her progress, but from his standing position the picture just looked like swirls and globs of random color.

When she announced she was finished she tapped him on the oblique, her hands warm like fresh bread, and his skin goose pimples where her fingers brushed against him. Then she unveiled a full-length mirror, obscured under a paint-smeared tarp, and led him to look at what she'd done. Across his belly, obscuring the roil of his guts, was a landscape of small woodland creatures: two rabbits, a cluster of squirrels, a trio of blue jays flapping just beneath his ribs. Over his liver prowled a wolf. He nodded and smiled, but felt he couldn't hide his disappointment. The creatures were well-drawn, colors layered into a realistic blend of fur and fangs and hooves and claws, but they were lifeless, nothing like the animals living on her skin.

"They'll wash off with soap and a good scrub," she said, resting a hand on his shoulder and smiling. "We can try something else next time before we move to oils or acrylic, something longer-lasting."

"Okay."

His wife was lying on the couch in a maternity bra and stretchy pants the color of pinot noir. Inside her, the twins were coiled around one another like a pair of kidneys.

"They've been kicking all day," she said, tapping on the glass with her right knuckle. "So hard I thought I might shatter and spill them all over the carpet. Will you rub my feet? They're killing me."

Her skin was soft in his hands and he liked the little moans that escaped from her lips, small vibrating noises that he pictured bubbling from her throat. She was sweaty, even though the air conditioning was blasting, her hair plastered to her forehead.

"Let's have sex," she said. "Right now. Right here. I don't want to move."

When he pulled off his shirt—they hated being anything but fully nude when they made love—she giggled at the forest animals.

"So she doesn't know anything about you," she said. "She'll do better next time. Now take your pants off, please."

Sex had become clanky-clunky, an affair of disconnected thrusting,

their bodies joined only at the crotch because of the blossom of her bay window that stretched and rounded around her stomach; lying on her side had started to come with pinched pain in her hips and ribs, and if either of them climbed atop the other, the grating sound of glass clicking and scraping against glass left them both disoriented and edgy, unable to find pleasure in something normally monumental and enjoyable. So they accepted the cruder position of her lying spread before him on a couch cushion or the bed, he standing or kneeling before her, plugging away. They both felt like amateur porn stars, their positions institutional and stiff, and they both missed the warmth of their close-together bodies, the smell of sweat percolating in their pores, the slow rhythm of their tightening breath.

"The squirrel near your belly button is eyeing me funny," she said.

He stopped, rubbed her ankle.

"Sorry," she said. "Keep going. I'll just look away."

In the shower that night he took the loofah to the animals, scraping away the paint as water from their high-efficiency showerhead beat against his back.

"Can we do something without so many eyes this time?" he asked the artist the next week.

"Sure," she said. "Strip, please!"

The watercolors again, the cool brush strokes. She hummed and whistled and more than once paused, stepped back, and frowned, staring at her work. Then she nodded, diving back in like a missile homing toward his belly button or small intestine.

"Voila!" she said, unveiling his new visage via the mirror: a snowy mountainscape, steely grays and whites, bare brown trees tendriling across a sleeting skyline. Everything was caught in a moody reddish haze; through the heavy dots of white snow the pulsing brown and bruise-purple of his guts and blood shone through.

"Very somber," he said.

"But no eyes. You asked for no eyes."

"I sure did."

His wife was happier with this landscape. "It's a bit solemn, I guess," she said, lying in bed. He was peering at the twins, a pair of curled lumpy seahorses in her womb, looking more like shrimp than babies.

"It's so hard to picture holding them," she said, her voice turning into something slippery. She traced her fingers over the glass, concentric circles on either side of the window.

"They'll look like the real thing soon." He kissed the glass, which, unlike his, was warm. "Your insides are so much more interesting than mine."

"I've told you that's not true."

"Of course it is. All you can see inside me is the ham sandwich I ate for lunch."

“And mountains!”

They both sighed as he fell back onto the bed. The sheet—it was too hot for a quilt or the comforter; the AC was on the fritz—slid across their glassy forms and bunched against their hips and groins.

“Your window is just as lovely as mine.”

“It’s flat and plain.”

“I might happen to like flat and plain. I’m like a glassed-in Buddha.”

“I might like a glassed-in Buddha.”

“So we should both be happy.”

He swallowed a mouthful of saliva.

In the shower, he let the water roll down, sudsy and pungent with his Arctic Blast body wash and dandruff-repelling shampoo. The trees streaked like they were sobbing, the mountains dulling with erosion. When he stepped out he stared at the blotchy scene, his stomach looming over the curved peaks like a pulsing blood moon.

“It’s like something from *The Twilight Zone*,” she said while they ate dinner. Both had taken to going shirtless, though she still wore her elastic bras, more out of comfort than some heaving shamed feeling that she ought to be covered up; her tits were swollen and sensitive, she said, and she complained about their out of control growth. He poked at her nipples, gentle prods that made her moan, some noise in between crowing pain and pleasure.

They ate take-out Chinese soaked in salt and MSG by the day, white boxes stacking on their kitchen island like fortifications against the stove and microwave and refrigerator where the real food was planning a revolt. The smell of pineapple repelled her, and she craved beets, her fingers stained pink. Her window kept stretching, the babies inside growing: spaghetti squash, eggplant, coconut.

“You must always be as hungry as me,” she said, looking down at them.

Then, to him: “I’m getting nervous. What will it be like when they want out?”

They went to a Lamaze class where other women and men showed off their windows. One woman’s stomach was covered in a pair of bulging French doors, the handles duct taped together so she didn’t burst in the middle of the street; one father’s window was a porthole, steely and thick; another’s had shutters that flapped when he walked, bruising his ribs and thwacking his arms. All of the men’s windows were plain and clear, and they asked him about his artwork.

“Just to liven it up,” he said, waving his hand in dismissal. They nodded and dispersed as the instructor directed them to take their seats.

“Your window ledge hurts my neck,” the woman stationed on the mat next to them whispered to her husband.

“Ow,” said the wife of Mr. Porthole when she leaned back and

clunked her head against the curved lower edge.

"These are things we work out together," the instructor said, a bubbly thin woman dressed in black Lycra. She clapped and started moving from one couple to another, adjusting their positions.

"I think we're okay," his wife said when the instructor hovered over them. "As long as I don't get paint in my hair."

"All dry on this front," he said, imagining the buzz of his voice coursing through her brain like little volts of electricity.

"That helped," she said after class, sitting in the car. She repeated the ee-oo-oo pattern. "Probably won't do much good on the day of, but whatever."

The doctor put her on bedrest when she kept ballooning out, even though the children looked fine as far as he could tell; the amniocentesis was clear: two healthy babes, just putting on the finishing touches.

"Just to be safe," the doctor said, patting the center pane of glass with a kind, solicitous rapping of his knuckles.

She complained of boredom, even when he brought stacks of books and magazines and even hauled the television in from the living room and gave her complete control, despite the fact that she couldn't focus on any one thing, moving from sallow celebrities hosting talk shows to the international news to *SportsCenter* to QVC to the inevitable Harry Potter film being stretched out to last five hours.

"Ugh," she said, tossing the remote onto his chest.

"Any day now," he said.

"Can't we just break this thing with a hammer, crack me open like an egg, and take them out now?" She craned her neck, face filling with red warmth. "They look like little wrinkly people, don't they? They'd be okay."

He kissed her eyelids.

The morning she went into labor he spent extra time staring at himself in the mirror. He hadn't gone back to the artist, and he wasn't sure why; the mountain range had faded to a streaky smear that looked like dissolved bird shit, his torso a grimy windshield. He ran his hands over the paint, granular on the smooth glass, and he watched the motion of his organs, the pulsing of his stomach as it churned the coffee and donut he'd eaten for breakfast. The plumpy heave of his kidneys hypnotized him. When she called to him, her voice scratchy and filmed with an anxious energy, he swore he could see his adrenal glands light up like neon signs.

"The window cracked," she said, pointing at a little sliver at the bottom. "Also, my water broke. We'll probably want to throw away these sheets and get a new mattress."

He drove while she tried to remember the breathing patterns, then screamed, "Fuck it!" and howled out the open window, screaming nonsense until they pulled into the hospital's covered entryway and a nurse greeted

them with a wheelchair, miraculously knowing about their arrival.

“Are you always waiting with these things?” he said to the nurse.

She smiled and wheeled his wife away while he filled out paperwork.

The girl came first, which he thought was only fair. He expected the glass to shatter but it held strong. The crack grew, and the view of her interior faded like the lighting in a movie theater dimming as the previews start.

Before his son arrived, everything had gone black inside her. He wondered if the same was happening to him, but he didn’t think she’d like him sneaking off to the restroom to check.

“A perfectly healthy pair!” the doctor said, his medical mask puffing in and out with each word.

She held them and blinked back tears while he felt a gurgling that moved up and down through his gut, puckering his sphincter, clogging his throat. He felt along his stomach as his own window started shrinking just as hers must be, and for a moment, as his wife looked up, gesturing with the babes gurgling in her arms, wrapped up like candies in their blankets, he wished that the glass would stay, that both of them would keep themselves open and transparent like that forever.

“Will you hold them?” she said.

“Okay.” He felt a curling warmth, then a frosty chill. “Yes. I will,” he said. “Of course I will.”

Andrew teaches British Literature outside of Boston, and has poems appearing or forthcoming in CutBank, Permafrost, THINK Journal, and Dunes Review, among others. He lives in Boston with his wife and, when not reading or writing, spends his time running, brewing beer, and coaching basketball.

Anecdotes

Andrew Szilvasy

That summer, Uncle Billy got himself
 in trouble again,
 (he seemed to bear the mark of Cain)
and moved into our dollhouse, space
 so scant we felt our limbs
 forced out of its windows.
We sensed each others' heartbeats in our arms.

And every day he'd piss my mother off:
 she was certain
 he wasn't working, that she smelled gin,
and she believed she saw the men
 that he was hiding from.
 He wouldn't hear her fears,
and yet he wore a hat for many years.

It wasn't just the arguments that kept them
 at each others' throats.
 Good God that heat spurs anecdotes
still at get-togethers: paint
 bubbled off the walls,
 heat haze emanated
from our warped metal appliances. Our house

smelled always: musk and mildew paired with rotten
 chicken soup.

 The freezer labored to meet ice cube
demand, complaining constantly
 with this high pitched hum.
 It's a damn wonder we
still talk at all. And then one night it peaks:

my mother shrieks, and dad runs out
of one room Bill
another, and he's swinging like a windmill
a bat above his battered hair.
Eyes intent, buck-
naked but for cowboy
boots and tattoos, he sees this fluff and screams,
high-stepping circles—dancing with a mouse.
Dad and I
roar and glance at Mom, who's red-eyed.
We're just sure she's going to cuss--
but she doubles over with
a laugh that even now
can reach into the cracks of any room.

Easter in Portsmouth

Andrew Szilvasy

Someone's blood bug-
splattered on my windshield, its form
fused with wings and fly-eyes
into an elemental paste so thick
that water won't

cleanse the glass. Today the city's
all but empty. We do
this, we do that, but the shops are locked and
the wine bar with
the longed-for Rhône is closed.

All this loveliness is
starved: its cobbles stripped of steps, these grey waves
lap a concrete
wall stained a tepid green, as if
even the sea were half-

hearted. Beside a dumpster there's a bar
with a view: one
kayaker in a red drysuit
paddles among rusted
tugboats. We pour the wine but taste the blood.

A Little Ghost Story

Mackenzie Ehli

After you died you went home. The sheet they covered you with in the morgue—stark white and inflexible—clung to you when you sat up, covering you from head to toe. When you stood it stayed in place, moved with you, seemed as much a part of you as any limb. Holes appeared in the place your eyes used to be, now just dark sockets. In the hallway the sheet flowed behind you like a cloak from those movies you used to love. The people you passed didn't notice—not you or your sheet—nor did they move through you. They simply flowed around you—like you were headed upstream while they were swept down river. Light didn't feel quite the same when you stepped outside, the sheet acted like some kind of barrier to the natural world. You knew what it should feel like—for the sun to warm your skin—but all you felt was the same cold you felt lying on that steel table.

The streets leading to your house were mostly empty—not that it matters—everything is empty to you now. On the corner of Forest and Wilson is the place you died. If you look closely you can still see shards of glass sparkling in the sun—chrome flecks seeped with blood mixed into the pavement. The only sign of the other car is a large skid mark, black and menacing. You try to remember what exactly went wrong but all you can remember is the sensation of breaking bones as the car crushed itself like an aluminum can. You move on—the crash is not a part of the past you're interested in.

The house you bought together is small—two stories, two bedrooms, two bathrooms, two of you. She was skeptical at first, she always was, never saw the potential of a little home. But you patched the roof, repainted the exterior white, bought an oriental rug at a flea market that really brought the whole thing together. Now she loves it, you love it too, or at least you used to. How long has it been? How long have you left her alone? The path to your front door feels longer than you remember, maybe you just move slower under the sheet. You feel like an intruder, or an absurdly literal trick-or-treater. The door doesn't open but you don't need it to, you glide right through into your home.

She is in the bedroom. There are a few empty bottles scattered around, on the nightstand, the floor, wherever they fell when she threw them. The room used to smell like lavender and clean laundry—now it smells like

stale liquor and lingering tobacco smoke. This makes you sad—the first emotion comparable to what you felt before—she quit smoking the year you met. She is curled up on top of the covers, but not asleep. Her black dress, silk with lace details—her funeral dress she bought when your aunt died—is crumpled around her. This also makes you sad—she always took such good care of her clothes, everything steamed and hung according to color and material. You want to see her face but you also know this may kill you all over again. So you sit next to her instead, her back towards you. It's strange to see her on your side of the bed—she hated being so close to the heater (you did too but you pretended you didn't). Her face is buried in your pillow, she is clutching your old Ramones t-shirt, the one she used to make fun of you for wearing out. You reach out to touch her—to place a comforting hand on her shaking shoulder—but the sheet stops you, traps you in fabric. You keep your arm extended though, hovering over her, just in case. If you still had a heart you are sure it would be breaking.

#

The next morning comes quickly, time moves differently now that you're a ghost. You've come to understand that that is what you are now—a ghost. You are not sure why or how, but you are equal parts thankful and resentful. For breakfast she eats some sort of cheese casserole from a stack in the fridge. The kitchen is covered in flowers, pre-prepped meals covered in aluminum, and notes offering condolences. She doesn't bother trying to move them to clear off the table but sits on the floor, eating straight from the pan. Her expression is difficult to read, but you've always had a problem reading her thoughts, much less understanding them. You watch her eat the whole thing and then head back to bed, a bottle of vodka under her arm. It occurs to you that it's your fault she's alone, not because you died but because of how you lived. It was you who wanted to move two states over for a job, you who wanted her with you as much as possible, you who didn't want kids. The selfishness of this makes the sheet feel heavier, how could you leave her all alone?

#

Hours pass, then days. She does not leave the house. It starts to feel like there are two ghosts living under one roof. You are both lying in bed when the doorbell rings—she extracts herself from the sheets while you bring yours with you. It's her mother, the first time you've been happy to see her. The women embrace for a long time, you are more aware than ever that you will never hold or be held again.

Her mother pulls her over to the couch, holds her hand. You can see her scanning the empty bottles, the stack of dirty dishes—the dank smell of rooms that have been denied fresh air for weeks. The mother fusses over her daughter, asks silly questions like, how are you? The quiet reply, "Fine," is the first time you've heard her voice—you want to yell back, scream so loudly the

line between living and dead cracks like a sheet of ice. Instead you sit, watch the humans comfort each other while you freeze.

Her mother stays for the next few weeks. She cleans the house from top to bottom—recycles all the bottles, mops the floors, lights candles in all the rooms. Her mother cooks actual meals, makes sure she eats a real vegetable. They fight over changing the sheets—she says they still smell like you. When she goes to the store one day the mother washes them anyway—you’ve never seen her so upset. All the same she seems happier for it, more human anyway. She’s started showering again, calls some friends back, finishes the season of that TV show you were watching together before. She calls her boss, arranges her return from leave, they are thrilled to have her back. She’s stopped smoking and she drinks less. She seems well enough that her mother decides to go home, leaving instructions to call daily and book a flight soon. Finally, you two are alone again, but it feels different. The change in her mourning period has brought her closer to the land of the living, further from you.

#

The next few months sees you two falling into a routine, just like old times. Every morning she dresses, eats, sometimes goes for a run. You watch her greedily as she brushes her teeth, brushes her hair, spills her coffee. You follow her around the house like a shadow, dreading the moment she’ll leave your graveyard, head to work. You know better than to try to follow, you know it with the same certainty you knew you loved her—this house is your eternity. When she’s gone, you count the cracks in the walls, make a mental list of all the things you should’ve fixed before you died. Sometimes you run laps around the living room, looking behind you at the way the sheet flares up behind you, hoping it will fly up and reveal a glimpse at the body that isn’t there anymore. Mostly, you wait. For her or for death you’re not sure.

You are looking out the window—she’s rearranged the furniture so that the loveseat looks out onto the lawn—it’s now your favorite part of the house. It’s a rainy, depressingly grey day—your favorite. The greyer the day the easier it is for you to convince yourself this house is exactly where you want to be. You are staring at the house across the street when you see it—a sheeted figure moving from room to room. You wave your sheet enthusiastically, trying to get its’ attention. You reach out to touch the window and swear you leave a handprint in the condensation. The ghost back tracks, staring, and gives a small wave. You wave back, again, more enthused than the other. The feeling of being acknowledged, that someone—even if it is another ghost—knows you’re there makes you happier than you’ve been since you died. The other ghost seems to feel the same way—you wave back and forth at each other for the entire afternoon.

You now spend your days with the ghost neighbor and your nights with her. She is doing much better—sometimes so much that it hurts your phantom feelings. Even so, she has days where she doesn’t get out of bed.

Where she brings out photos of the two of you and spreads them around her like a memorial. Sometimes she listens to your favorite song on repeat and cries every time it ends. You hate yourself for thinking that these days are your favorites.

#

You don't realize how much time has passed until you overhear her talking on the phone to her mother about her birthday that weekend. She is having a party. Her last birthday was the summer before you died—you took her wine tasting and made her laugh with phrases like “full-bodied” and “chestnut undertones”—that means it's been over a year and a half. More than a year without you, more than a year since you took a breath. You don't know why this shocks you so badly, but you feel like you've been hit by a car all over again. 577 days. What happens on day 1,154? Day 2,000? 10,000? Eternity—it turns out— is longer than you thought.

On the day of the party, your ghost friend can tell that you're down, and seems to understand what you're going through. Their waves are more subdued but you sense their silent support—you are grateful for this small bit of kindness. When night falls and you can no longer see the window across the street, you face her. She came home early to decorate—the house is covered in streamers and her “party tunes” playlist is on. She is laughing and chatting with a friend who came over early to help—someone you think you met once at a Christmas party. As more guests arrive you recognize fewer and fewer of them. It's a party just like the one you met her at. You watch from the corner as they play drinking games and sing loudly, it's becoming clear to you just how thoroughly her life has continued beyond this house.

You and your sheet leave the kitchen, it's too much. You settle into the dark bedroom, staring at the framed photo on the nightstand of the two of you on that trip you took to Paris. The sounds of the party slowly get quieter, for some reason time is moving slower than usual. When she finally comes to bed she is not alone. A man, someone you don't recognize, is with her. You feel frozen as you watch him kiss her, all hands as they fall back onto the bed. His lips are on her neck, her chest, the places that have always been yours. For the first time since you died you feel the way it felt to be alive—and it's unbearable. The sheet almost slips as you run out of the room, shaking with each step. You try to run out the door, you can't stand another second in this fucking house. It feels like running into a wall. You try again and again, but it does not budge. You wish that at the very least you could feel the pain of slamming your body against reinforced wood but you can't feel that either. You want to scream, to punch something, to run—but it seems pain is reserved for the living. The bathroom is the only place you can't hear her moaning, him grunting, so you huddle in the tub—wishing, more than anything, that you had stayed dead.

#

His name is Chris. You find this out the next time he comes over, when he makes her dinner. She is insufferable every time he comes, acting like a giggling twelve-year-old with a first crush. She has rules though. She does not let him stay over, she only calls every few days, and she never talks about you. You hold onto this proof of unavailability, like it somehow suggests she's still yours. Even after all this you still don't understand—she can't love a ghost. You start to, though, as months pass and her rules become more flexible. Suddenly he is in your kitchen making breakfast, using your Xbox, fucking your wife. You don't lay in her bed anymore when she falls asleep, there's simply not enough room for the three of you. On the night she tells him about you he holds her as she cries and you get so mad the lights flicker. You don't wave to your friend anymore—you don't do anything anymore.

#

You haven't been paying attention, so you don't know how much time has passed when the boxes appear. In retrospect, you should have guessed this was coming. All the same, it feels like someone's ripped your phantom heart out of your chest, a feeling you've become accustomed to. She packs away your life piece by piece. Chris sometimes helps her, but she prefers to do most of the work alone, it's an emotional process she says. She donates all your clothes, but keeps the Ramones shirt. Your shampoo, razor, cologne, all in the trash. Your clay dishes you made in college go in the trash as well. Most of your records, your video games, and your favorite loveseat. She keeps the photographs but takes them out of the frames and tucks them into a singular, small, black album.

#

The night before she leaves it's just her, like she wants to spend one more night with you. You know you should be happy that she's happy, that she's getting away from her haunted house, but turns out you're not that big of a ghost. You watch her chest rise and fall as she sleeps, there is room in her bed again since he's gone. You know if she leaves your sad excuse for a life will be even more unbearable, the panic you've been pushing down since the boxes appeared rises in your throat—you can't let her leave. You get up slowly, a part of you screaming to stop, to let her go. But years of watching and doing nothing seem to have caught up to you. You are so tired of watching.

You are not sure you will be able to pick up any sort of object, to move something physical. You've never tried. But your beloved loveseat always held your weight and you could touch the window, just not the door—or her. But what to use. . . you realize with equal parts horror and satisfaction that the gas line in the mudroom is exposed in the corner behind the washer. It's number one on your list of things you wished you fixed before you died. You stare at the green knob for a long time, or maybe no time at all, you still

aren't sure how that works in this afterlife. You realize this is something you decided a long time ago, maybe even the reason you came back in the first place. In the end, it's not your decision at all, you are just a ghost doing what ghosts do. You turn the knob.

#

After she died she came home. It took a few days –you started to worry that something had gone wrong. But then she was there, sweeping through the front door just like you did all those years ago. Neither of you can speak, you can't see her face under her sheet, but you know it's her. Your sheets rub together and it's almost like touching her skin. The two of you sit side by side when the new family moves in. They have a child, no older than three. She plays with him–pushing his toys around on the carpet to his obvious delight–as you wave to your neighbor, thinking you could live like this forever.

Elizabeth Evenson-Dencklau is an author of fiction and poetry. She holds a BFA in Creative Writing from the University of Nebraska at Omaha and shares a home with three cats and her boyfriend, all citizens of the Midwest. Her work has most recently appeared in Gingerbread House Literary Magazine, East Jasmine Review, The Monarch Review, and Menacing Hedge.

Prime

Elizabeth Evenson-Dencklau

The love poems you found
slipped through the slats
of your locker in 6th grade,
the crappy ones, written
in colored pencil,
those were from me.

I lied when your girlfriend
confronted me, laughing
as she crumpled her ire into
the plush dog she used
as a purse.

I thought once we grew up
that I'd play the piano, you
the guitar. (Grimm once said
something better than death
we can find anywhere.)
But you went to boarding
school and I left the church.

Years later, I saw your
mother where I worked.
She'd hated me since
that year at camp, blaming
me for your poison ivy.
I smiled, asking how
you were, just to hear
the tremor in her voice
when she said "Fine, just fine."

It made me remember
the evenings we'd spent,
ankles touching beneath
the pews, watching
you draw bouquets
of roses.

C. L. Taylor is a Pacific Northwest native whose writing focuses on how technology pervades our lives—for better or worse. Her writing features LGBTQ-positive themes and characters. She draws inspiration from being outdoors and, most days, that's where you'll find her. Connect with her on Twitter: @ctaylor.

Appearances

C. L. Taylor

The thing about being a social substitute, the thing no one told Emme, not at first, is that to do it, and do it well, she'd lose a part of herself. Each client has different needs. Some want a substitute to play wife, one their family will accept. Some want a substitute to be a mother to their children, to show up at their school for parent-teachers, or cheerfully sit through clumsy recitals. Others require a sister or girlfriend, someone refined and respectable they can take on corporate retreats or to dinners with coworkers. No matter what the role, social substitution is an attempt to rebalance one's world through the management of appearances. It's a job. Emme never lets herself forget that.

At first, when she can no longer sleep through the night, she thinks it's just the hippocampus suppressor. But the techs at Gregson-Wang give her, and it, a clean bill. Not that she's entirely sure they'd tell her the truth. After nine long years, Emme is top-tier, a big earner. Bioenhanced, sure, but it's the personal touches that keep old clients faithful and recommending Real Ideal Social Substitutes to their friends.

No.

The trouble sleeping, the reaction time hiccups, the bleeding of one memory into another...Emme rolls over in bed, an arm slung over forehead. Things are starting to blend. Just last night, at dinner with Botan and his family, Emme slipped. She'd referred to Botan as her "dumpling" rather than her "bean." No one seemed to notice, but she had. Botan had, too. Her reputation could suffer.

For a social substitute, reputation is everything. The better a substitute's reputation, the better the client list, the better the pay, the better the conditions. For Emme, whose lengthy track record is laden with commendations and sterling reviews, any dent in her reputation would stand out like a key scratch on a Rolls-Royce.

Maintaining one's reputation often meant striking a balance between conscience and compromise. This meant a substitute had, on occasion, a reason to bend the rules, of which there were many. None more important

than a rule strictly forbidding a substitute to engage in any act of sexual commerce with a client. Social substitution had nothing to do with sex.

How much longer would maintaining her reputation be a problem, anyway? She'd almost saved enough. One more assignment and she could walk away.

Emme furrows her brow, squinting eyes in the morning sun. She throws off blankets and walks to the window. Below, the streets are a complication of swinging limbs, stomping feet, and dizzying colors. Cabs, driverless and patient, queue to cross an intersection ever-clogged with market-goers. She hates staying in the corner suite. All this space...she looks around, arms crossed. Too decadent. Too...empty. It makes her feel small, like a pearl earring forgotten in some velvet lined drawer of an anonymous uptown walk-in closet. But, whenever she is in town, Botan encouraged it. His reputation required Emme to be kept in a certain manner.

It's always about appearances.

Clients have their quirks. Emme prided herself on remembering each, like memorizing ingredients and instructions for complicated French recipes. When the suppressor worked correctly, recalling details meant momentarily forgetting something else. Tit for tat. Simple. Lately, things were getting jumbled.

She looks in the towering, gold framed mirror which hangs in the ornate entry of the suite and gives herself a smile, trying on the emotion to see if it will stick. Nope. A tap on the door. A whooshing noise. A piece of paper slides across the floor, coming to a stop at her bare feet. Bending, she seizes it, flipping it over, reading:

Berchtesgaden. Four days. 50K. Per diem included. Private retreat. Female client. Vice President of Operations at Gregson-Wang. Some skiing required. Conversation mandatory.

A smile crosses her face. She hadn't been to Berlin in years.

#

Outside gate A04, Emme swings her carry-on over a shoulder, surveying the crowd. The smell of pine and cedar fills the air and everywhere she looks, people move quickly with bags under arms and smiles on their faces. The rose gold metallic bracelet on Emme's right wrist buzzes once. She looks right, gaze locking on a tall woman who leans against a cement pillar, attention fixed on a palm-sized device. In her other hand, she holds a small, semi-translucent screen upon which the name "Emme" is neatly printed. Emme flicks her chin upward, flashing the slightest of smiles before extending a hand in greeting.

"Rebekah Watson?"

"That's me," Rebekah smiles, ignoring Emme's hand. Rebekah's gaze lingers around Emme's face, never lighting on one feature longer than another. She wrinkles her nose, smiling.

Emme sighs, relieved, drinking in the sight of her. Her athletic build is accentuated by the finely tailored curves of an expensive suit. Her skin, sprinkled with delicate freckles, seems to glow. Beneath the massive artificial airport lights, this alone seems a miracle.

"We're just this way." She turns and walks quickly toward the hyper tunnel on sublevel C.

#

On the train, they are escorted to a private, upper-level cabin, and left with a bottle of chilled Taittinger. The cabin is dimly lit in warm orange hues. The arched mahogany ceiling gives way to a bank of windows where an aesthetic film loop displays the German countryside from better days. Rebekah runs fingers through long blonde hair, shaking it out. She smiles at Emme. "I'm glad you were available. Your waitlist is quite long."

"Mmm," Emme says, popping the champagne's cork. She fills a glass and hands it to Rebekah before sliding into the seat opposite and crossing her legs. "So, tell me about yourself."

"No," Rebekah says, swirling the contents of the glass, agitating the bubbles. She leans back, body sinking into the deep seat. Her blue eyes flare, then contract, focusing on Emme. "I'm terribly uninteresting."

"Oh, I find that hard to believe," Emme counters. Rebekah is already more interesting than she gave herself credit for. "I hear Berchtesgaden is literally buried in snow. Have you ever stayed at the Kempinski, Ms. Watson?"

"Please, call me Bek, and yes," Rebekah begins, a finger on a stainless-steel knob near the base of the window. With a click, she toggles it and the window display goes dark. She snaps her eyes up; a smile languidly forming on nude lips. "Many times."

"I'm grateful to be seeing it for the first time with you," Emme returns the smile, leaning forward. She places a hand on Bek's knee. Is she blushing? Emme scoots in, moving her hand up Bek's leg, testing. Such long legs. Muscular. Strong. Rebekah seizes Emme's hand in her own, squeezes it once, and removes it. Emme slides back into the seat, attention turning to the blackened window where her own reflection stares blankly back.

#

"Welcome back, Ms. Watson," says the desk clerk. Bek extends an arm, revealing a platinum identi-bracelet. With a beep, the room's access codes transfer to the bracelet.

"You're in the honeymoon suite."

The honeymoon suite? Emme's eyebrows flutter upward. Extravagant.

"Shall we?" Bek slips an arm around Emme's waist. As they cross the lobby, the heels of their shoes make a light clicking noise like birds pecking at bread crumbs strewn over blacktop.

On the top floor of the Kempinski, Bek throws open the suite's massive double doors and stands aside, making a gesture for Emme to enter. The 1,800-square foot space expands before Emme, but it's the view that draws her in. She lets her duffle fall to the floor, beelining to the floor-to-ceiling, chestnut-framed windows. With a twist she slides open the first of four massive doors. Crisp mountain air swirls through the room. She closes her eyes, breathing deeply. Nothing like this back home.

"It's not the honeymoon suite," Bek says, sliding her handbag onto a massive eight-person dining table. "It's what passes as a joke around here."

"Really?" Emme asks, crossing arms. She leans against the door frame, breathing deeply. Emme's shoulders relax, her head tilting as she bats long, curling eyebrows.

"Care for a drink?"

Emme shakes her head, casting a glance over her shoulder.

"What? You don't drink?" Bek asks, twisting the cap off a mini bottle of bourbon. She tosses it over her shoulder into the waste bin.

"Not while I'm working," Emme says. She breathes in sharply. She covers her mouth with a hand, turning around, afraid of what she'll see in Bek's reaction. Bek throws back the shot of bourbon and audibly exhales, crossing the room to the fireplace. With the click of a remote, she lights a fire and cranks up the heat to 21°C. Emme takes a step forward.

"I'm sorry, I—"

Bek reclines on the tangerine-colored sofa facing the fireplace and waves a hand.

"Don't be. I know what this is." She leans back, sweeping hair off her shoulder. Emme puts a hand on a massive stainless-steel telescope which sits in the corner of the suite. She leans, putting an eye to the viewer. There, kicking up puffs of powdery white snow, a trio snowshoe across the blanketed terrain.

"And what is 'this'?" Emme asks, peeking at her client.

"How long?" She asks, looking down into the rich caramel-colored liquid which she swirls in the glass. Bek takes a sip of bourbon.

"Hmmm?" Emme asks, switching eyes.

"You heard me, I think. Yes?" Bek crosses her legs, picking at a speck of lint. Emme is no longer seeing what she's looking at through the telescope. She's motionless. Her body rigid and heavy.

A person substituted long enough, it showed. Maybe it wasn't as recognizable as a scar or a beauty mark, but there if someone looked closely enough. Most didn't. For the long-timers, the substitutes like Emme, it revealed itself in small ways. Like the way they second-guessed responses or nuanced social interactions. It showed in their hesitation when selecting wine or something to wear. Their facial expressions: first cool, then warm, then frostier. Most didn't last longer than a year. There were too many details, too

many memories, and suppressors were expensive and difficult to maintain.

Emme straightens, pushing hair from her face. "Would you like someone else? It would be highly unusual, but not impossible."

When she turns to face Bek, the silence between them expanding like heated marshmallow, Bek has extended a hand. She twinkles long, straight fingers with a tidy manicure.

Emme crosses the room, with steady, sure footfalls. She knows a substitute is like a package. A gift. One that needs to be pretty enough, or intriguing enough, to open. Emme did not consider herself pretty. Handsome, perhaps. People requested Emme because of the other things. The little things. Things like this. She slides hands down firm thighs bending to sit close.

"I chose you, years ago," Bek says, leaning closer. "From a catalog of thousands."

A cold, heavy hand rests on Emme's thigh. She doesn't flinch. Seizing it, Emme meshes together their fingers. The smell of bourbon is sweet and rich on Bek's breath. Bek's grabs Emme's hip, pulling her closer.

"You know," Emme says, staying put like a rock holding a piece of paper in the wind. "Strictly speaking, this isn't allowed."

Bek stops. She twists off the top on another bourbon and wrinkles her nose.

Emme uncrosses legs, leaning forward with elbows on knees. She exhales.

"And you never break the rules?" Bek asks, her body straight and angular. Her head turns, gaze snapping on Emme's. Emme's pupils dilate. Bek's lips flutter upward. Of course, she did. They all did, even if they weren't supposed to. Substituting is a balancing act of conscience and compromise.

Did she want to sleep with Bek? She allows her gaze to pour over Bek's long legs, her full hips, the space between her breasts where the fabric of her blouse is pulled too tightly and spreads, exposing bronze skin and nude bra. She imagines what Bek will feel like, taste like. Her heart beats faster. Her skin tingles. Could she live with the repercussions? Could she handle it if word got back to the agency, to her other clients? She looks Bek in the eyes, opening her lips.

Yes.

Every part of her leans in, moving closer to Bek, closer to her skin, closer to her touch.

"Let's say I did," Emme whispers, then stands, crossing to the windows, to the view of the snow-covered mountain range which rises and falls and expands, filling the horizon.

"How much?"

"What?" Emme scoffs, shoulders tensing.

"You heard me," Bek says, voice filling the room.

“If you’re trying to insult me—”

“I would do no such thing,” Bek sighs. Emme turns. Able fingers spin a thin metallic bracelet around a thick wrist. “Name a price.” Bek spins the bracelet. A gust of wind sways the gauzy curtains. Emme shivers. Bek sits perfectly still.

“You make it sound so easy.”

“It is, darling,” Bek leans back, taking the bracelet in her fingers. “You know, years ago, when I joined Gregson-Wang as Vice President, it was as if my life had finally begun. Everything before, well...life was like a small cardboard box compared to what they gave me. A corner office. A team of talented engineers. A personal assistant, and a very generous compensation package.”

“If you’re waiting for me to be impressed...” Emme says, eyebrows raised, indicating the massive space around them.

Bek kicks off her heels, cozying in. She’s not going anywhere. She could do this all day. “Darling, give me a number. How much more do you need?”

Maybe it’s the word “darling” that prickles her, or maybe it’s the comfortable suggestion that everyone has a price, but Emme’s shoulders don’t relax even when a number comes into her head and stays there.

“That much?” Bek asks, resting her chin on a loose fist. She flicks her eyebrows and eases back into the overstuffed sofa cushions.

Emme bites her lip. The suppressors were failing. Leakage was inevitable. A simple upgrade wouldn’t fix the problem. Not again. Not this time. She needed out.

Emme’s gaze sweeps across the sprawling suite, snagging on the Gregson-Wang “thank you” basket stuffed with Beluga caviar, wine, and, her eyes taper, maple syrup? She steps forward. She hadn’t seen maple syrup in over twenty years. She laughs, shaking her head. Bek could afford it.

“I need another 100K.”

“Done,” Bek says, pulling a small black cube from her pocket. She enters a series of numbers using a flat keypad on one side of the cube. Bek tilts her head, then nods. The cube chimes. She tosses it playfully at Emme, smiling. “And,” she rises, bare feet soundless as she strides across the thick saddle brown carpet. Cupping Emme’s cheek in her hand, she smooths a small scar on Emme’s chin. “We’ll make a stop on the way home, yes? At Gregson-Wang. They’ll remove the suppressor. No cost.”

Emme examines the figure displayed in light blue numbers on the cube: 150,000.

“Just press accept and the amount will be transferred to your account.”

Emme remains silent. Thud. Thud. Thud. The beating of her heart fills her ears. Her eyes blinking out of sync. Sweat begins to bead across her

forehead. Random images flash before her. She presses flat palms into her eyes, swaying.

“How long?” Bek whispers, sliding strong arms around Emme’s waist.

“Nine years, ten months, and—” Emme squints an eye, thinking. “Two days.”

“It’s time,” Bek leans in, lips parted.

#

When Emme rolls over, the room is the blue-black of pre-dawn and the snow-covered mountains glow in the distance. Her hand searches the cool white sheets beside her. Nothing. She sits up, massaging sleep from tired eyes.

“Bek?” She calls, then coughs, clearing her throat. “Bek?” She says, louder, sitting up. Rolling out of bed. Feet on the carpet. She stretches, every part of her feeling delicious. When was the last time she’d slept so well? A blush spreads across pale cheeks.

When Bek had taken her to bed, pulling off clothes like a tiger tearing at an antelope’s throat, there had been no time to think. They were a clash of hungry teeth, biting, tasting. They were a twist of limbs, curling around one another. When she rolled onto her back, pulling Emme on top, she’d done so effortlessly, as if Emme’s body were little more than a silk sheet. Bek had not closed her eyes. Had not, even for a moment, stopped looking at Emme, at every inch of her, as if trying to record it all, to remember. No one—no client, no lover—had ever watched her so closely.

Where is Bek, anyway?

The fireplace crackles. Clutching arms together, shoulders to ears, Emme shivers.

“Bek?” she whispers, scaring herself. She gathers up her coat from the hallway rack and cinches it around her body against the cold. Walking to the massive wall of windows, she secures the doors cutting off the gust of winter wind. “Where are you?”

To the right, in the bedroom, there’s a scurrying noise. Clatter. Crash. Emme springs forward, moving across the soft carpet.

“Bek?” She asks, throwing open the bedroom door and peering into darkness. Outside, the cold winter wind roars against the glass, kicking up frozen snow. It makes a tinkling noise as it meets the windows. Emme waits for her eyes to adjust, for the blue-black shapes in the room to become what they truly are, rather than the shadowy suggestions of an overactive imagination.

Glass breaking. Emme recoils, turning to the right. There. Movement in the corner.

“Bek?” Emme lunges for the light panel.

“No!” A voice calls from the darkness. “Leave it off!” A moment later, in a softer voice, “Please.”

Crouching, Emme approaches. Bek hides behind a leather lounge. Bek sits, cross-legged within arm's reach, naked. Emme leaves her hands in plain view and plops down. The silence draws out between them like yarn being unspooled. Emme listens as Bek's breathing begins to calm. She cocks her head, taking in the full measure of Bek. The long, sinewy legs and arms. The muscled thighs and stomach. The hair which rises and curls in a chestnut-colored patch between her legs. The long neck and sharp jaw. The water which flows from her eyes and winds like gentle streams down her soft-skinned cheeks.

"Are you crying?" Emme asks, resting her head on an L-shaped palm. She leans back against the bed. Bek snuffles, nodding. Emme bites her lip, narrowing her eyes.

"I'm feeling a bit...overwhelmed." Bek bounces her gaze across the room. "You wouldn't understand."

"Then, show me." Emme extends a hand.

Bek slinks forward, coming to rest beside Emme. Bek's gaze never leaves Emme's even as she retracts a thin, red interlink cable from the bedside table. Emme pulls back the hair behind her ear, exposing a metallic input port.

"Will this do?"

Bek glances at the port, nodding.

"It will be disorienting, at first," Bek says. She pulls back a cascade of soft blonde hair and pushes one end of the cable into a port behind her ear.

"I know," Emme says.

Emme's willingness to do what her clients asked of her played a large role in this mess with the leaking suppressor. Most clients want to interlink, to share their raw memories like weird, unfamiliar relatives showing off photos from a vacation to Detroit. Interlinking is something substitutes endure like a pap smear or getting a tooth filled. It's uncomfortable. It could induce headaches and vomiting, confusion, and, in rare instances depression and suicide. During an interlink, nothing is filtered. Nothing. You got the good memories and the bad, and everything in-between.

Despite the risks, all substitutes interlinked with their clients if asked. It wasn't mandatory, but interlinking was the most straightforward way of getting to know someone, quickly, completely. If everything worked, the suppressor would keep things categorized, distinct, and accessible.

Almost ten years later, Emme knows there is only so much room left for the memory of others. Each time she interlinks with a client, she risks another part of her own memory falling away like the spindly bits of a dandelion, floating off on a gentle breeze.

She knows the risks, especially with a damaged suppressor. She knows that Bek's memories will flood her system. They will become entangled with her own memories, like dreams whose edges refuse to fade at first light as reality struggles to regain its foothold.

Yes.

She knows the risks. Accepts them. There are things she'd like to know about Bek, about her life. This is the only way to know the truth, unfiltered and unglamorous.

Bek pushes the interlink cable into Emme's port.

Click. Thunk. A buzzing like a guitar being plugged into an amplifier.

"Try to relax," Bek says, a thumb tracing Emme's jaw.

Down the hall, there is a clattering as plates crash to the ground and shatter, one after the other. A soft white light begins at her visual periphery and extends to the center of vision. Her body shakes once, twice. Emme is still.

#

Gasping for air, Emme wakes.

The first thing that enters her mind is an unfamiliar thought. She breathes heavily, quickly. Sweat peppers her forehead and rolls down her back. Her gaze ping-pongs around the bedroom. The memory fighting to come forward, pushing its way past every other thought, is not her own. The memory belongs to Bek and her initial reflex is to push it down. She fights to let it come, to let it take over.

She sees a jumble of faces of every color, gender, age, and class. They stare at her. Some, amusedly, with mouths agape like a seawall full of tiny caves. Others wait patiently for something to happen. They examine her with dull, emotionless eyes. She feels naked. Exposed.

"Esteemed guests," says a man to the left. "Please allow me to introduce Vice President Rebekah Watson. We call her 'Bek.' That's short for 'Bioorganic-Empathic-Kinetic. Human brain! Robotic body! The marriage of mechanics and organic material!"

There is a brief spattering of applause, the low hum of chit chat.

"Proficient in fifty different languages. An expert in efficiency and productivity. Able to absorb, categorize, and—" He stands on tiptoes, finger wagging, eyebrows raised. "She is specially designed to store, process, and creatively repurpose all interactions! That's right, folks!" He swivels around to face her, arms splayed wide like a handsy relative coming in for a hug. "VP Watson is Gregson-Wang's top of the line, can't-be-picked-out-of-a-crowd—" he turns, locates a young male in the crowd and elbows him, "Fully customizable and completely interactive android. We're calling them 'Hollows' and you can have one for just 50% down payment."

A murmur rustles through the crowd. A man near the back raises a hand.

"Yes, you sir, in the yellow suit."

"I don't buy it. An android...with a human brain...that's also fully customizable?"

The salesman shoves his hands in shallow pockets, rocking back and

forth from toe to heel.

“Yes, sir. One hundred percent customizable from eye color to—” he turns and casts a wide-eyed gaze at the models’ nether regions. “Hair color to, why, I don’t know. Why don’t you tell us, sir, what are you looking for in a VP?”

“Why,” the gentleman’s lips curl. “Profits, of course.”

“Managing my workforce,” a woman says. “Employee uprisings at my company are at epidemic proportions. Just last week we had another riot —”

“We at Gregson-Wang hear you!” The salesman shouts, waving arms in a grand Peacockian display. “Profits? You got it. With VP Watson on your team, we at Gregson-Wang can guarantee your company a 15% increase in profits by the end of the second quarter! Huh? What do you say to that? And you, ma’am,” he steps over to a Chanel-clad bureaucrat in the front row, wrapping an arm around her shoulder, pulling her in. “Has the rising tide of automation innovation left some of your workers behind?” He walks her forward a few steps until they are face-to-face with the VP Watson Hollow, with Bek.

It’s cold. Emme shivers, lost in Bek’s memory. She can’t move. Why can’t she move? She trembles as the salesman meets her eyes. Her. They’re talking about her. They’re talking about Bek. Bek is an android.

He lowers his voice, softening it the way one might when talking to an angry constituent. “Let go and let VP Watson tend to your flock. She’ll get them in line and you know what? Your employees will love it! They’ll love Bek!”

#

Emme sits up, quickly, rubbing palms into eyes. She grunts, throwing legs off the side of the bed to stand. A sound of wet congestion as she clears her throat and steadies herself.

Bek is an android with a human brain, with human memories. An android with a store of emotions like desire and loneliness. An android with a cache of experiences, hopes, and dreams. An android. Bek is an android. She cringes. Bek hates that word: android. Emme knows it. Feels it, as if the disgust is her own.

She will never get used to it, the sudden acquisition of knowledge, the knowing of a person’s most intimate details. Maybe she wouldn’t have to. Maybe Bek is her last. She wants Bek to be her last. She hopes...

Emme tilts her head, watching the snow fall. Her body relaxes, her gaze softens. It didn’t matter what Bek was, just like it didn’t matter to Bek what Emme was. Everyone was different.

She smiles.

Emme closes her eyes, searching.

She knows Bek likes the color red though mostly sticks to gray, to

blend in, to go unnoticed. She knows Bek drinks bourbon to fuel her secondary systems which provide heat to her skin. Emme grins, biting a fingernail. Her heart is beating quickly.

Bek likes to wrap presents. Especially at Christmastime. She likes to make bows out of ribbon and stick them on everything.

Bek likes dogs. Has two. A miniature Schnauzer named Charlie, and Rupert, a Brussels Griffon. Charlie sleeps on her bed. Rupert camps out on an old pillow near the fireplace and rarely budes except to bark at the mailman.

She likes to eat with her fingers, even though solid food serves no real purpose.

Bek's gel capacitors are failing. Have been for quite some time.

Her heart skips. She wants to know everything. Everything. She wrinkles her nose, grinning, lost in memories that are not her own, feasting on them. What else? There should be more.

She groans, frustrated. The suppressor is interfering with access.

"Bek?" She says. She can barely hear herself. "Bek!" A few steps toward the living room. She stops. With a hand balancing her body on the arm of the sofa, Bek is frozen in a downward motion, legs and back bent. "Oh shit!" Emme mumbles, shaking off sleep and springing to action.

#

"It's my gel capacitors," Bek says an hour later after Emme has managed to get Bek's battery charging. She lays with her head on the swell of Emme's stomach, trailing a finger over goose-pimpled flesh. Every so often, Emme boops Bek on the tip of her perfectly imperfect nose to make the smile reappear on full, warm, wet lips. "When I get nervous or excited the capacitors seem to...to...blink. Being with you, finally, after all this time...I guess I got excited." She squeezes Emme's hand. "I'm outmoded, Emme."

"We're all of us, outmoded." Emme understands Bek's hunger, the reaching for what is forever beyond her grasp. She'd take a hundred years of this, of Bek in her lap, of getting to know her—really know her—a warm crackling fire, and snow falling in the Bavarian alps. She'd take all she could and then she'd hold out her cup for more. And more after that. But, if there were to be no more, if this was it, if this was everything...she sighs, raking fingers through Bek's full, thick hair. "And that's all right."

Adam Hubrig teaches writing at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln where he also enjoys serving as the co-director of the Nebraska Writing Project and the Writing Lincoln Initiative. His work has appeared in The Lincoln Underground. He currently resides in Seward, NE.

The Trouble with Romance

Adam Hubrig

The EMTs ripped the bodies from the tombs
so they could have funerals and get tossed
back in, but emergency staff found a pulse:
Juliet could be revived. She recovered slowly,

her eyes lifting up heavy as manhole covers
under the bright surgical light, the doc said
Romeo's dagger had missed her heart,
though it would not have penetrated

deep enough to have killed her anyway.
For months, she would bask in the breeze
when it would touch her, hoping maybe
some specter of him remained. But then

she happened across the cache of nude
photographs: Rosaline splayed out
across Romeo's bed. She started dating Bob,
Mercutio's little brother, and never spoke

of love or light again. What really killed her
was the way Rosaline had carefully signed
every letter Romeo had kept with the photos
in a closeted shoe box: *"I'm dying for you."*

Jalyn "J.N." Powell is an English and Creative Writing teacher in Midland, Texas. She served as Editor-in-Chief for The Pitkin Review while earning her MFA in Creative Writing from Goddard College, and is currently Fiction Editor at Ad Astra magazine. Her work has appeared in The Overcast, Space Squid, and most recently in The Future Fire (where, coincidentally, Rachel Linn from page 24 created an illustration to accompany Jalyn's poem).

Verity's Faery Teas

J.N. Powell

Some things should happen only in the dark, when the world still sleeps and dreams innocent dreams. It has always been this way and always will be—and you would have it no other way, because you are one of the few who thrive during the time when the sun has not yet risen, when the lamplighters are not even awake.

A smile creeps across your lips as you light the hearth and feed it a few logs. The embers burn bright and warm the kitchen. Malcolm will join you soon with the faeries. You are eager to mix the day's teas and fill each pouch with the perfect assortment of herbs, flowers, and faery morsels. Like anything made with love, it takes devotion. It takes sacrifice.

Your little corner café started as a small tea house, so adding a bakery had been a natural transition. Both required an appreciation of recipe, creativity, and patience, so when the sundry store next door closed down, you bought it as quick as you could. The bakery side of the business struggled at first. Your artisan teas were—and still are—famed throughout the land, but your cakes, biscuits, and breads were dismissed. There was nothing special to draw the customers in; that is, until you discovered the teeth.

On a morning much like this one, you were plucking the fragile, airy wings off one of the faeries when the little creature slipped from your grasp and fell to the kitchen floor. Your cat, Hera, leapt at the chance of a free delicacy and snatched the faery in her mouth before you could scoop it off the ground.

"Bad Hera!" you yelled.

She froze long enough for you to pull the faery away, but the head remained trapped in her jaws. You shrugged as she bounded off with her prize. The wings, bones, and organs were essential to the tea blend, not really the head. Those were usually tossed because the brain tasted medicinal, and the hair was the flavor of paint chips. No doubt Hera would soon discover the bitterness and use it as a toy instead.

When you stepped back to the table and to your wing plucking, the

faintest crunch came from under your shoe. You pushed your magnifying lenses up and peered down. Crumbled bits of white powder sparkled on the floor. There were a few bigger pieces beside the powder, so you used your tweezers to pick them up, one by one, and place them on a porcelain saucer.

You flipped your lenses down and up and down until the magnification revealed three baby pearls. How odd, you thought. But when you turned them this way and that with your tweezers, you noticed they were not spheres. They were teeth. They must've been knocked out from the faery's head when it fell.

Faeries are mostly sweet, but in different ways: their wings taste of vanilla, their little hearts like dark chocolate, and bones as rich as butterscotch. The blood is golden and as sticky and syrupy as honey, but you'd never bothered to try the teeth before. It was so much easier to discard the whole head than try to harvest something as tiny as teeth.

You eyed the little teeth pearls, then placed all three on your tongue. At first, there was no taste at all. You frowned and returned to the faeries that still needed harvesting, adjusting your lenses yet again and chewing absently.

That's when you tasted it: marshmallows!

Crunchy, smoky marshmallows freshly toasted upon a fire.

Immediately, you knew the teeth could solve what was missing from your white chocolate truffle cake, and you abandoned your wing-plucking to search for the tossed heads in the trash. You found eleven heads and carefully pulled every incisor, molar, and canine from each tiny faery mouth.

The addition of fairy teeth sprinkled in the icing made your white chocolate truffle cake legendary, and your café was saved. Nothing pleased you more than watching your customers lick up their plates and fight over the last piece.

But teas are your true passion.

You pull out the glass jars that contain the dried faery elements and admire each one. The jar of teeth rattles when you move it closer. Even one gram is priceless to you. You measure out a cup of jagged faery bones, which look much like crystal, and pour it into a small, tin canister that already contains white tea leaves. You add six faery wings and a handful of crushed lavender petals. To make your famous faery teas, the sweetness must be tempered with just the right amount of savory, earthy tones like clove and chai. For this mixture, you add ten flakes from a cinnamon stick.

None of your customers have complained about the ingredients. It's not as if you breed faeries and fatten them up simply to be consumed. In fact, there is a disclaimer in your window that states your teas and baked goods are made with locally-harvested, all-natural, wild-caught ingredients. No chemicals, no pesticides, just the pureness of Mother Earth.

You close the lid, seal it, and open a cabinet. Inside you find the shelf of tin boxes labeled *Sweet Cinnamon Wings* and place it beside them. Other

shelves contain other boxes labeled in beautiful calligraphy: *Chamomile Butterscotch Bones*, *Rose and Cocoa Hearts*, and *Hibiscus Honey Blood*.

As you move on to measuring the next batch, your assistant, Malcolm, opens the door. The kitchen is still dark, only lit by the fire and a few candles here and there, but you can see the ruck sack he carries is full.

“Good morning, Verity,” he says.

You muse over his dirtied clothes and say, “I see you had an eventful evening.” No doubt he had to chase down a few that resisted.

“Caught over twenty,” he says.

“Excellent. There’s always more during a full moon.”

“And they love that orchid you planted. Came to it in droves.”

It is true that the more exotic the flower, the more curious the faeries become. Trapping them in nets and suffocating them in glass jars is rather simple. It’s a matter of waiting and keeping silent until their curiosity gets the better of them. But they eventually catch on to the danger of that certain flower after a few months. You have to keep searching for stranger, rarer blooms to attract them anew. Perhaps you will plant a Bird of Paradise next?

You open the bag Malcolm brought and pick up each faery to inspect its species, named after flowers: a honeysuckle, a bluebell, a columbine—and all in pristine condition. Their limp bodies are cold but not yet stiff. The trick was a nonviolent death, like suffocation, and then draining every drop of their golden honey blood within three hours. Much longer than that and everything begins to sour.

“Quickly now, snap off the heads and hang the bodies upside down on the rack to drain.”

Malcolm nods and smiles. “This is my favorite part.”

“But mind the teeth,” you say, “and Hera.”

As you gently place each on the table, Malcolm deftly snaps the heads off, much like breaking a twig in half. The bodies and heads are put on their own draining trays so the honey blood drips into bottles below. It only takes a drop or two to sweeten an entire pot of tea.

When you pick up the very last faery at the bottom of the bag, you feel its warmth, its wiggle in your grasp, and you look down at your palm. A faery is balled up, crying, and each sob sounds like a tiny bell jingling its highest pitch.

“What’s that sound?” Malcolm asks you.

“One of them is still alive.”

“Want me to break its neck?”

“No, no! I haven’t held a live faery in ages.”

“A pet, then?”

You cock our head and listen to the song of weeping. “An experiment.”

“Seems like more trouble trying to feed it and keep it quiet, but

you're the boss, Verity."

"There, there, little Buttercup," you say to the sobbing faery. "I won't let him snap your neck. You are a precious one, aren't you?"

The faery shivers and looks up at you. Its eyes twinkle like distant stars. So human, so fragile. It cowers away and tucks its little legs as tight as it can. The jingling is louder this time, and your excitement grows.

"What do you hope to learn anyway?" asks Malcolm, busy popping heads and setting the bodies up to drain.

"A tea is all about ingredients, isn't it?" you say, pacing across the kitchen and admiring your glass jars with faery bits, your perfectly stacked and labeled tins, the cast iron tea pots, as the weeping faery wiggles in your hand. "Even my cakes depend upon the finest faery morsels to mix in. The very finest! But could they be even finer?"

You eye the faery and switch around your magnifying lenses to observe it better. Its translucent wings are torn, its arms and legs scratched. The cheeks glisten with tears. Your palm is slightly wet from the crying, so you bring the creature closer to your face. You sniff and smell maple. Buttercup scurries to the edge of your fingers, dragging its injured wings behind it, and raises two dainty arms in defense.

The gesture is adorable.

You lick your palm, careful to not lick the faery and contaminate your sample, and taste the tears. It is the richest maple you've ever known.

"Faery tears," you say with a growing smile. "That will be my newest tea ingredient! A seasonal blend! *Weeping Winter Maple*."

"But how will you keep it crying?" Malcolm asks, snapping the last head. He licks the gooey faery blood from his fingers then wipes his hands with a rag.

"Fear," you say and drop the faery in an empty jar. Malcolm hands you the rag, stained with honey blood, and you tie it to the top of the jar with twine. You pierce three tiny holes with a knife and then tap on the glass. Buttercup presses itself against the opposite side, still singing maple sobs in a delicate melody.

"Hera!" you call out. "Here, kitty, kitty..."

Tammy Powley is a professor of English at Indian River State College in Ft. Pierce, Florida. Her story "Potluck Party" has been accepted for publication by the literary journal Constellations, and she has a number of non-fiction books published, including Women of Florida Fiction, which she co-authored with another professor.

In Search of the Yoga Master

Tammy Powley

I've written numerous letters in my head to my biological father. Usually, it happens when I'm alone, like when I'm driving from Florida State back home to Marco Island. Sometimes, the letter eases into it:
December 15, 1998

"Dear Ivan,

I hope I may call you by your first name. I am a big fan of yours and have done a lot of research about you for a school project I completed during my senior year as a dance major at FSU. My mother, Valentina Kozlov Patterson, was also a professional ballet dancer for the American Ballet Company in the 1970s when you were a principal dancer. She was just a demi-soloist back then, and while you eventually moved on from ballet to carve an amazing career as a yogi master and celebrity, my mother moved to Florida and eventually opened her own dance studio. I believe you knew her well, in fact, as I am your daughter, Ivana."

Other times, I just get right to it:

"Dear Ivan,

I am Ivana. My mother is Valentina Kozlov Patterson, and I believe you are my biological father. I want to meet you."

I try to get the grammar right, even though I'm not sure if he'll notice that or even be able to read English that well. When I watched him on *Oprah Winfrey* one time, his halting English was exactly like my mother's. Oprah found it charming.

I haven't gone so far as to actually write down any of these letters yet. God forbid that my mother would discover them when I'm away at school. I suspect she goes through my things while I'm gone because I often come home to find my room has been rearranged. She tells me the maid did a deep cleaning, or they moved all my furniture to paint the walls to a light taupe

color, a good neutral that goes with everything. And, didn't I notice the pretty new Laura Ashley curtains and bedspread?

"You like, yes?"

What's not to like? My mother has impeccable taste. Our home, the dance studio, her own petite figure, always perfectly arranged, organized, fashionable. When I first tried to sneak some intel from her about Ivan, her mom-radar-shield went up immediately.

"This for school? Why for school, why?"

"It's for my Dance History class, Momma. I have to research a professional dancer's career, and I picked you."

"Me? I never famous. You pick someone else. You pick Baryshnikov."

"Half the class is doing it on Mikhail Baryshnikov."

"You pick Anna Pavlovna."

"I want something different. All you talk about is me going to New York and how that will make me a real dancer, right? So, now I want to learn more about your life as a dancer in New York."

"Teacher will not like."

"My teacher loves the idea."

Begrudgingly, Momma answers my questions, offering little bite size chunks: 1976, she and others defected. They found a home with American Ballet. She was sixteen. There was much competition, especially among the girls. At eighteen, she toured the US and settled in Florida. She was pregnant with me. Her boyfriend had many women. She met my stepfather, Bernard Patterson, who raised me as his own. He's in real estate. They married. She opened a studio. She had another baby, my brother Arthur.

Spreading out a small collection of photographs, she shows me professional shots of her in various costumes: a swan, a Spanish dancer, a sprite. A few photos are more candid: she's at the barre, one hand resting lightly on it, the other arm stretched up, her right leg straight, lifted to the side; another shows her in a crowd of young ballerinas stretching on the floor in a dimly lit room; in another, she's partnering with a young man who is dipping her, his arm wraps around her tiny waist, one of her legs points straight while the other bends in pique. His profile is visible, not his full face, but I instantly recognize Ivan Alexeev. I linger with this photo in my hand, but Momma pulls it way and shuffles it back among the rest.

"Photos not needed for writing paper."

I watch her put them back in a box, wrap a thick rubber band around them, and return them to the chest in our living room, her no-hope chest. It's full of "before Florida" memorabilia, before me.

I spend hours at the library. I've already submitted my paper about my mother and got an A. Only a few days left of the semester and I'm graduating, which means my time at the college library ends soon. But, I'm hot on Ivan's heels, hunting him down through the library stacks, learning

anything I can. The librarians are very helpful. Via interlibrary loan, I order one of his workout videos, *Power Yoga for Beginners*. It's one of his early videos when he was fit enough to wear a speedo and stretch next to a much younger blonde woman. At the beginning of the video, he has an arm around her shoulders.

He smiles at the camera, "For first time, watch Natalie."

She follows with, "I will perform modified versions of Ivan's practice."

They bend and move, sun salutations, downward facing dog, tree pose.

At one point, he reaches up and out with his arms, explaining to the video audience, "Stretch like flower to sun."

His body is compact, muscular. In the ballet photograph, his hair is dark, shaved short in the back with a tassel of tangled curls over his forehead. In this video, his hair is longer, still curly like mine, but pulled back in a ponytail that reaches past his shoulders. I'm a little embarrassed to notice his "thing" pronounced as the two of them stand with their legs straddled as they both bend forward. I wonder if he's slept with Natalie, if he's still a dog like my mother has claimed whenever I've brought up the question of my parentage over the past twenty-two years. But, she did name me after him, right? She must have loved him once.

"Why did you name me Ivana?"

"Good Russian name."

Before I leave the library, probably for the last time since commencement is in a few days, one of the librarians who's been helping me with research tracks me down. I'm searching through microfilm of New York newspapers' entertainment sections from 1976.

"I know you've been researching about Russian ballet dancers, especially Ivan Alexeev, and I thought you might be interested in this."

She shows me an advertisement from the local paper: "Ivan Alexeev will be appearing at City Book Center on December 20th to sign copies of his new autobiography, *Movement: My American Dream*."

"I just ordered this for the library's collection, but by the time it arrives, school will be closed for the holiday break," she explains to me.

I thank her, a little stunned that he will be within a few miles of where I'm sitting right now. My father, my *real* father, will be in this town next week, and unfortunately, I won't be. I'll be home, probably on the beach with my boyfriend, Joel, letting him rub suntan oil over me as he tries to seduce and convince me to stay on the island with him instead of leave in the fall for New York. Marry him, work at Momma's studio, start a local dance company if I want to keep performing, but stay with him in Florida.

It will be tricky trying to leave for an entire day without my mother or stepfather getting suspicious. However, I have to go. I have to see Ivan, and

maybe he'll notice how I look just like Valentina, except for her straight hair versus my curly hair, that I look like she did the last time he saw her.

Bernard, Momma, and my brother come to commencement and make a big deal out of it. The diploma cover I'm handed at the ceremony has a note inside saying that if I really did graduate the actual diploma will come in the mail in two weeks. Joel is also graduating, a degree in business, and we take pictures together, the two of us, but not mixed with our families. We're still working on that. When Momma found out I was seeing him, she was clearly disappointed and insisted she drive me to the doctor and get me on the pill right away. No way was she going to let me ruin my future career like she had ruined hers. She didn't care that he was a nice boy, someone I knew from high school even before we started dating in college, and from a good family, that his father owned one of the largest chain of surf shops in the South and that his mother was a member of the local country club. I was too young. New York was my destiny, not Marco Island.

The story I develop to cover the day's trip is not completely a lie. Joel has agreed to go with me. A college friend is having a post-graduation celebration. That was true, but we will only stop briefly by the party after I stand in line to see Ivan at City Book Center. Joel has some idea of the search I've been conducting. I fill him in on the rest as he drives.

"So, this dude is your real father, not Mr. Patterson?"

"Right, I always knew Bernard wasn't my biological father. He married my mom about a year after I was born, and he adopted me right after that."

"Okay, but how do you know it's Ivan?"

"The timing. It all works. It has to be him."

"Timing. That's it?"

"And, my name and he looks like me a little and I have photos of him with Momma."

I borrow some of the photos from my mother's box. Without her guarded help, I find Polaroids she hadn't shared with me. In one of them, I'd surely located the evidence I am looking for. It's of the two of them again, but this time, not in the studio. They're wearing street clothes and standing outside on the steps of a building. Momma's hair is down to her waist, and she's taken a portion of it, braided it, and wrapped it around her straight hair to create an *I Dream of Jeannie* ponytail. She is wearing bellbottom jeans and white peasant blouse. Ivan has his arm around her shoulder, similar to the way he was holding onto Natalie in the video, and his other hand is in the pocket of his jeans. He has a T-shirt on and a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. I wave the photo at Joel.

"If he asks, I can show him this one."

"A photo?"

"Yes, of him and Momma."

The line wraps around the bookstore, and Joel drops me off. He will go to the party and come back for me. Was I sure about this? Let's both go to the party. No, I'm sure. This is happening.

As I fidget in line, I pull out the photos. My big performance is about to begin, and I had my costume ready but not my lines. I'd used an iron to straighten my hair, and on the way to the bookstore, I braided and wrapped it too, just as my mother hand done. I wore a white peasant-style dress.

Once inside the store, Ivan's fans are moved through a line to first purchase his book, which I hadn't expected. Luckily, I have the credit card Bernard insist I carry for emergencies. How I would explain this emergency I wasn't sure, but I bought it. Ivan's face smiles up at me from the book's jacket. His dark curls are almost all frosty white now, but he seems even more handsome to me. I clutch the book against my chest as the line slowly moves forward. I soon hear his voice, friendly and sweet: "So happy, thank you, so happy you come today....Yes, your name? I autograph to you...oh, you kind, very kind, thank you very much."

I am your daughter, or should I start with, you know my mother? Why hadn't I written down one of those damn imaginary letters? I could've just read it to him! I'm panicking now, two more people and I'm next.

Two male assistants are standing on either side of Ivan, who is wearing a long-sleeved black T-shirt and a gray silk scarf wrapped around his neck. I'm standing in front of him with the book still pressed up against my boobs, and Ivan reaches out.

"Oh, sorry, I...here."

"Thank you, my dear."

He opens the book and waves the black pen over the title page as he looks up at me. "You dancer?"

"Why yes, how did you?"

"You stand and move like dancer, not yoga girl, but you like yoga, yes?"

"Yes, but I just graduated with a dance degree, and I might go to New York to dance."

I'm thinking, yes, keep going Ivan. It's *me*. You must see that it's *me*.

"New York, that is good place to learn, to make career."

Then he turns to the page and writes, "Best luck and happiness in dance and life, Ivan!"

He closes the book, hands it to me, and the man to Ivan's right, motions for me to move on. The next person behind me steps up, almost shoving me out of the way: "Can you make it out to Marlita? I'm such a fan of yours!"

What the hell? What just happened? This was my one chance, and I screwed it up! When Joel comes back, he finds me sitting on a bench outside the bookstore's entrance. I'm almost done crying, but when I tell him what

happens, I start crying again.

“You got all the way up there and didn’t tell him?”

“I just didn’t know what to say, and I only had about a minute. And there was some lady behind me already talking to him...and...”

“Okay, but you got the photo to show him, right?”

“I didn’t though.”

Joel gets me back in his car, and we drive around the parking lot. The book signing is wrapping up, and he won’t explain to me what he’s doing but we keep driving around and around until he finally stops.

“There, see that,” Joel declares.

I look up and see Ivan and the assistants walking behind the bookstore towards a dark green sedan. With the Polaroid in my hand, I lunge out of the car calling out, “Mr. Alexeev, Ivan!”

A light mist of rain starts, but it’s one of those weird Florida showers where the sun is bright, intensified by the water. It will pass soon.

He turns and looks at me. An assistant moves to try to stop me, but he waves him off. “It’s the young dancer who goes to New York.”

“Yes, yes,” I say as I hand him the photo.

Ivan looks at it and then at me, confused, but then there is a moment of recognition, and he takes it from me and begins to laugh.

“Where, where did you get this? I am just a boy here!” he keeps laughing.

“That’s my mother with you, Ivan. That’s my mother.”

He raises an eyebrow and moves the picture back to arm’s length.

“You knew my mother. You knew her well. Valentina Kozlov.”

“Valentina?”

“Yes, you danced together; you were friends, good friends, lovers. My name is Ivana.”

Ivan pauses, hands me back the photo. His smile now gone, he pulls his hand away as if he’s singed his fingers. His lips twitch quickly, and he is back to his charming self.

“Ivana is beautiful name, but young lady, I knew many women back then but not your mother.”

“But, you have to. This photo. I have others.”

The assistant moves in between Ivan and me, allowing him to slip into the sedan, which quickly snakes around the building and exits onto the main road. Joel’s walking up behind me, but I’m frozen in place and watch tiny raindrops slide down the photo that I’m still holding. My fingers start to close up, and I consider crumbling it into a tiny wad. But, no. I bring the photo up against my chest and protect it while I follow Joel back to his car, and the rain stops.

Alex Nodopaka originated in 1940, Kyiv, Ukraine. Speaks San Franciscan, Parisian, Kievan, & Muscovite. Mumbles in English & sings in tongues after Vodka. He propounds having studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, Casablanca, Morocco. Presently full-time author; visual artist in the USA but considers his past irrelevant as he seeks new reincarnations.



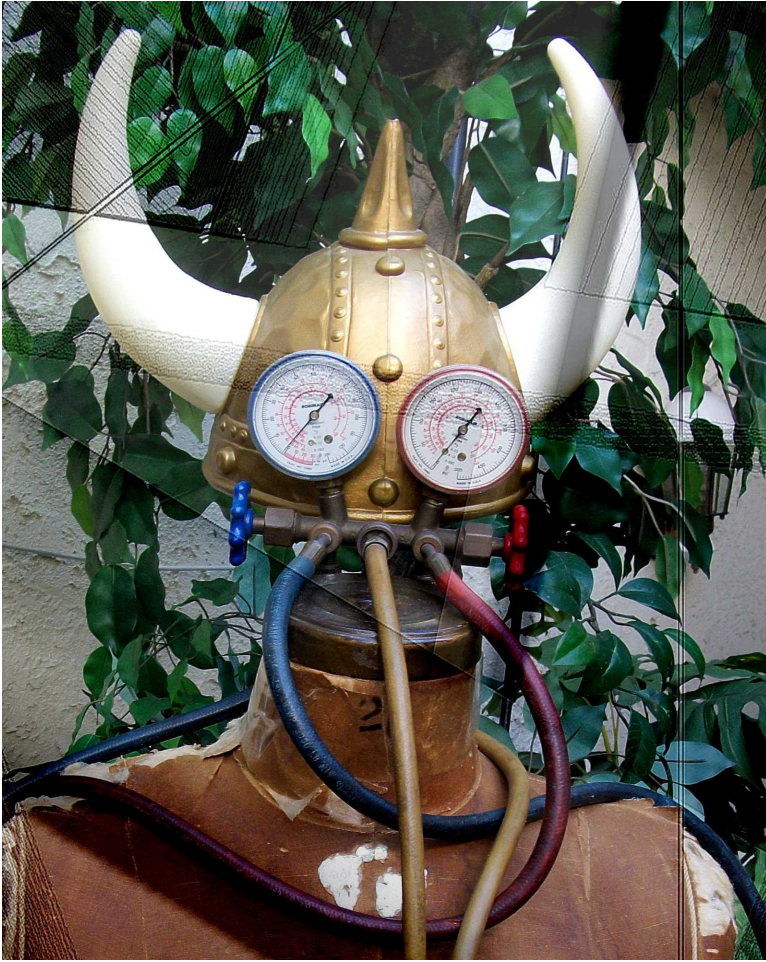
Bla-Blah-Blah

Life-size torso. Hardened clay. Spanish hat and a gazelle skull necklace symbolize the whimsy of Woman. Activated by switching a button in an appropriate place activates an electronic signage in her mouth that spells in blinking letters Bla-Blah-Blah i.e. the Power of the Word.



Cryptogram Safety Belt

12 inch high fired clay. Woman's body from mid thigh ending up with lips instead of a head. She wears a belt. An allegory to being in control of her sexuality.



Life Is a Gas

A whimsy sculpture. The Viking headgear on an antique sewing mannequin is an allegory to woman's fierceness. The gauges are metaphors for her pressurized gaze.



The Word

Life-size torso of a woman. From her bandaged belly a life-size face with an open mouth activated by a built-in tape says, This is Where Life Begins.

*A writer living in New York City, **Matthew Sievers** graduated with a BA in creative writing from the University of South Florida in May, 2017. In September, FireQuill Publishing released his first novel, **JUST OFF THE PATH**. He is currently seeking representation for his second novel. Last Spring, he won the Ansphaugh Award for Short Fiction.*

On the Hillside

Matthew Sievers

Year One

We lived on the hillside, so we had to put our house on stilts. Because Dad sold the truck the day before, we carried the lumber home from town. Josh couldn't lift much, but he came along so Mom could rest. By the fourth trip, my shoulders were sore enough that my eyes were crossed, my back raw. I wished I was at home, reading in bed, or watching television, like a normal Saturday. Josh ran, splashing through the puddles, slinging mud on my shorts. I tried to ignore him—it was just rain to him.

I dropped the wood in the yard and looked around the neighborhood. Across the street, Olivia and Mr. Jones struggled to lay a foundation. I could see the frustration on Mr. Jones' face. Olivia sat on a pile of wood next to him, her dark hair against her shoulders, her face in her hands. Dad called to them, and then crossed the street. I watched them a moment, and soon Dad waved me over to join. On their side of the road, I stood beside him.

I stared at the pile of wood in their yard, russet with rainwater. Puddles gathered in patchwork, taller than grass at the lowest point. It was strange watching grass drown. I stooped down, the plywood slick in my hand, and looked at the Jones' house, wondering how it meant to save us. Olivia placed her hand on my shoulder and took it from me. She pulled the hood of her raincoat over her head, smiling.

"Thank you," she said.

#

I went uphill with Dad for the town meeting, but I had to wait outside. From town hall, I caught my first glimpse of the flood: a pitiful pool of leaves and twigs, gently pushed with the turn of the wind. Downhill, past the schoolyard and the clinic, people packed their lives into boats, reinforced their rooftops, dug moles, built aqueducts—out of fear. I stared at my dad, in his t-shirt and shorts, sitting front row. He fit in with the Lowlanders, but the Highlanders wore button-ups, fitted jackets, and plaid ties so tight that some were red-faced. I rubbed my neck, felt asphyxiated at the sight. I loosened the

drawstrings of my half-finished raincoat, the wind carrying a mist that made me shiver. The men inside looked warm, dry—I thought it was unfair to be kept waiting.

“Adults only,” said Olivia. She didn’t look at me, pressing so hard into her jacket that her fingertips turned green. Her eyes followed the conversation, her brow deceiving the privacy of her thoughts.

Feeling young next to her, I put my hand on the window pane, my breath fogging the glass. The men faded to formless blurs that I could neither see nor hear, but the building shook with their conviction. One side in favor of the four-years rain, the other against. My father, Mr. Jones, and everyone who lived in the Lowlands represented the latter. I wondered about my own opinion, if I had one, or if it even mattered. I wiped the moisture off the window with the palm of my hand.

“Adults only.”

#

Dad and I worked on the new house every day. He told me that we only had enough material for two rooms, so Josh and I would have to share.

“I’m too old for that,” I said, raindrops dancing off the plywood on our table, splattering in my eyes. Dad handed me one side of the tape measure, running his end along the width of the board.

He didn’t look up from his measurements. “You share, or you drown.”

Olivia and her father crossed the street, dry when they stepped out of the house, but soaked by the time they got to us. Dad and Mr. Jones shook hands, Olivia smiled at me. I was glad to see them, because it meant that the two of them would do the heavy lifting, and I could talk with Olivia.

“Did you hear about the clinic?”

“I heard my mom and dad talking about it,” I said.

“A dam burst on the other side of the hill,” she said. “Water came and swept it right off the foundation.”

I wondered why she knew this and I didn’t. “What if we need to see a doctor?”

She shrugged. “I think they’re trying to rebuild it on higher ground, but no one has the money.”

“It’d probably get flooded again pretty soon, anyway.” I wanted to sound like I knew what I was talking about.

“Probably,” she agreed.

I looked behind me, toward the slope of the hill. The mansion I’d spent my life watching looked down on me. Solid against the rain, I imagined the view from the panoramic windows that gazed outward, the rest of the house made of sturdy brick. Stately in a way that we weren’t, the home hummed carefree—a drum, under constant rain-patter. It felt strange, knowing that they were watching me, like a fish in an enormous aquarium.

#

The baby woke me early each morning. Some days, as the rain hammered my window, the competing noise stole me from sleep. Usually, Mom was up a few minutes after Lucy started, but sometimes it took longer. I got out of bed and staggered down the hall, my eyes crusty, my mother sitting with the baby on our couch, rocking her.

“She woke me again,” I said.

Mom turned away from me, facing out the window. She let her robe slide part-ways down her shoulder. Lucy stopped. “You’ll be grateful to have the memories.”

“I guess.” I plopped into the armchair, my own stomach growling.

My mom stared at the street. It rained so hard that it created a fog-like veil between our house and the Jones’—with the occasional exception of their porchlight. “I just wish she wouldn’t have to wait until she was almost four to see sunlight.”

“She won’t even remember the rain.”

“We’ll all remember the rain,” Mom said. “But can you imagine what she’ll think the day it finally stops? It’ll be a new world for her.”

The baby fussed. Mom closed her robe, and leaned back into the couch cushion, wiping the dribble from Lucy’s face. My sister’s head looked—and smelled—like a peach, and Mom took every opportunity to steal an affectionate whiff. I don’t think she noticed she was doing it anymore, and it was so ingrained in me that I almost never did. “Don’t tell your brother, but when I was pregnant with him, I prayed for a baby girl. I wanted at least one of each.”

“Were you disappointed to have two boys?” I asked, biting the inside of my cheek.

“Not disappointed.” She hummed a few bars of nonsense, and the baby closed her eyes. Mom didn’t look at me. “It gets a little lonely, sometimes. It’ll be nice to have a girl around.”

Lucy fussed again, and Mom stood. She danced a circle around the living room, humming a nonsensical lullaby, which I vaguely recognized. I watched her sink into the trance of motherhood. I don’t really know where she went, but she didn’t take me with her. She bounced to the rhythm of my sister’s snivels, the intricate language of blubs only discernible by an experienced linguist. Mom babbled her song, but seemed somehow to communicate with Lucy, and soon, the room stood still again.

Mom stopped right in front of the window, her robe open. Her free hand fell to the break in her nightgown, but instead of wrapping herself, she ran the fabric between her fingers. She held Lucy to her chest, oscillating. From where I sat, I could see the corner of her eyes, glistening like wet glass. I saw myself, and a few seconds later, Josh beside me. Then, all at once, Dad, Mom, and Lucy in her arms.

We gathered in my mother’s eyes, as if for a portrait, in front of some

fixed but imperceptible barrier. Our bay window, I thought. Maybe we were doing what she was—staring out at the street, watching our world capsize. I wanted to shake her, wake her from her morning nightmare, but it didn't matter. It'd be cruel to disturb her, to remind her that she was never actually dreaming. It was our reality now, so I let her stand there, her robe wide open, exposing the soft underbelly of maternity to the approaching monster.

#

Year Two

"Come sit down," Dad said. He lay in bed, his entire lower half covered in a plaster bracing. Mr. Jones had taken him into town, where a makeshift hospital stood in place of the one we lost—a tent that moved uphill every few weeks. Dad was the color of his cast, his eyes sunken in, his cheekbones protruding.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"You'll have to keep on with the house," he said. The rain threatened to shatter the window at his bedside. We'd lost electricity last month, so a candle was all that lit the room.

"I don't know how." It was the truth, but not all of it. Sitting at his bedside, I remembered how the platform jolted when he fell. I could feel the wet two-by-fours underneath me, my fingers cold from gripping the slippery surface beneath my belly as I crawled, peaking down, only to see him flat on our roof, unmoving. Mom screaming, the baby crying, Mr. Jones darting to us, Olivia coaxing me down.

"Mr. Jones is going to help out when he can. But we have to get into the new house before this one goes under."

"What happens when the water gets higher than the stilts?" Dad's face hardened. The candlelight showed his age, his fatigue. He aged a year every day—his hair fell out, his face sagged, his beard grayed. I never wanted to go up there again, and the construction was already killing him. "We should buy a new house uphill."

"We can't afford that," he said, with a scowl. My face reddened. "If we could, we would've moved a long time ago." Mom appeared soft-eyed at the door, the baby crying in her arms. She beckoned me out of the room. I stood up, and noticed water sliding down the wall above the door, realizing it was the spot Dad had hit the roof.

#

I always suspected Mr. Jones was smarter than my dad—he just looked that way. He came over with step-by-step instructions for our new house, all the way to completion. A stout man, Mr. Jones was entirely bald and had beady eyes. Less of a physical man than my dad, he spent most of the days before the rain in sweaters and glasses. It'd been a long time since he'd

been able to wear either. We hammered in silence. I looked past the platform, into his house across the street. Olivia was in the kitchen, sitting at their dining table, a book cracked in front of her.

"Why did the Highlanders vote for the four-years rain?" I asked.

He cocked his head. "What?"

"I'd ask my dad," I said. "But I don't know if he knows."

"He knows," said Mr. Jones. "I think he just prefers to keep some things out of the mind of children."

"Olivia knows."

He sighed.

"I feel like I'm the only one who doesn't."

Mr. Jones set his hammer down. "It's not easy to explain."

"I'm smart enough," I said.

"They're doing it because they can," he said. "We didn't believe they would, and they proved us wrong."

I looked down. I didn't want to ask questions, but I started to think that maybe I wasn't smart enough, after all.

#

Josh and I walked together to the base, where the flood-line met the slope of the hill, which became a shorter trip each time. The little pond had grown into a violent river, pieces of our town swirling with the current. I liked to go at dusk, when the rain was at its lightest and there weren't girls my age watching us.

Josh went in first. I watched him for a few minutes, to make sure he was alright, and then I stripped. I liked bathing in the floodwater—it was nice to be wet because I wanted it, not because I had no choice. It was cooler than the rain. It woke me, reminded me that there were more sensations, just out of my reach. I went under, opening my eyes, trying to see the remains of the town, but saw nothing more than sunken lumber.

The storm slackened to a rhythmic patter. We sat on the grass, wringing out our clothes before redressing. I twisted my shirt in front of me, the rain dampening it almost immediately. Josh zipped his jeans, and when I stood, he looked at me. "Why do you and Dad have hair on your bodies, and I don't?" he asked.

I hurriedly put my pants back on. "What kind of question is that?"

He slipped into his shirt and looked toward the ground, kicking at the mud. "Does it mean there's something wrong with me?"

"No," I said, my face red. "It just happens."

"When?"

I thought back to the day I woke up with hair on my chin—a wisp of a beard that I'd expected, from years of watching my dad shave his. I didn't anticipate the tuft of hair that grew at my sternum, or below my belt, and I didn't ask about it, ashamed that it wasn't normal. I remembered sitting at the

kitchen table, Mom staring at my neck, eyeing Dad as if he were supposed to say something. At school, kids made fun of me—girls, especially—until the principal sent a letter home to my parents, telling them I had to come to school clean-shaven. My Dad was out in the yard when I handed it to him, embarrassed, afraid I'd done something wrong. He took a long time to read it, and then handed it back to me.

"Okay," he'd said.

I heard nothing else about it, until my parents came home from the market, producing a shaving kit from a paper bag. I thought Dad was planning on teaching me, that he'd take me to the mirror and show me how to use a razor, but he never did. Instead, I found the kit sitting on my bed when I came home from school. The only advice I'd ever gotten about shaving, about sex, about puberty was one word—*Okay*.

#

Year Three

Olivia invited me to a protest at the flood-line with a group of kids from our class. We created a human fence around the Highlanders' truck so they couldn't dock their boat after a day of swimming in the floodwater. We didn't chant. Instead, we took turns reminding each other what it was like to feel sunlight. I watched their yacht—carelessly ebbing against the stir of the flood, ignoring the rain. Someone jumped from the deck, folding himself into a cannonball and splashing those on board. I wondered how it felt to swim in a graveyard.

"Sunlight is rolling in the grass instead of mud," said one girl. She looked to Olivia.

"Sunlight doesn't let cowards hide under the cover of rainclouds." She looked to me.

I swallowed, the rain bashing against my face, making me squint. "Sunlight is learning to swim before you're already drowning."

We stood there for six hours, until well after sundown, before the Highlanders came back for their truck. Standing in silence as they approached us, I felt Olivia's arm tighten around my own. They came from behind, gathering on all sides of us. One of them grabbed Olivia, and she forced her elbow backward, into his gut. My eyes shut, someone gripped the back of my neck, spinning me around. When I opened my eyes, Olivia was on the ground. I tried to help her, but was met with a sharp punch to the face, and I toppled over. A few seconds later, the truck started. It backed out slowly before speeding uphill.

Three of them were in the bed, and as they drove off, one of them screamed: "Lowland trash!"

I stood up. Olivia was already on her feet, staring off into the

distance. I went to her, and she pointed straight ahead, to the boat the Highlanders left docked on the slope. “Why would they leave that?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Let’s sink it.”

#

My sister turned blue overnight.

Dad made a toddler-sized coffin. We gathered a bed of rocks and placed her inside. Mr. Jones and Olivia went with us to the flood-line. I carried a piece of plywood, using it to shield myself from the storm until we got downhill. I handed the wood to Mr. Jones, and he took the baby gently from my mother, and she fell to the ground. Dad got down next to her, his bad leg popping under his weight.

Mr. Jones placed the coffin on the piece of plywood. He walked into the flood, until his feet no longer touched, then he swam until he was out of the current. My baby sister floated away from us on a sheet of wood. I watched as she got farther away, the movement of the water more arduous, her grave spinning with the might of the grayish stir. Mom screamed for her. I looked at the ground, and Mom cried out. I didn’t need to look up to know my sister had fallen from the plywood—that she was sinking.

Olivia placed her hand in mine. She leaned into me and whispered: “I’m sorry.”

I looked out onto the water, as Mr. Jones swam back. Far off, rocking gently in the rain, was the Highlanders’ boat, happily amiss.

#

Only the chimney remained of our house on the ground, an inconspicuous hull of a modest ship, becoming an ornament of their fishery. We claimed an abandoned kayak we found lodged in what used to be treetops, and used it weekly to paddle up the hillside. The town market now submerged, Dad and I went weekly to get food from the Highlands, which meant paying Highlander prices.

I looked at our meager load of food. Mom hadn’t eaten or left the bed since the funeral, but it still wasn’t enough. I watched Dad stare at the water as he paddled against the current. Sometimes, in shallow enough water at the right time of day, the ghosts of our town shimmered just below the flood: houses, streets, cars—specters of another life, haunting us. They looked peaceful to me, friendly apparitions. Dad saw something different. Demons, I think—but he wouldn’t tell me.

The mansion I watched from my window shadowed our boat. I looked up at it, noticing for the first time that it’d aged under the storm. The wind had ripped the roofing, the sleek tile replaced with an unappealing blue tarp. Windows boarded with wood, the beautiful structure now sat in a cold crevice of the hill—a cave-dweller, the red brick changed to a sickly orange. I looked down, disturbed.

“The Jacksons moved onto a boat,” I said. “I saw them loading it

yesterday.”

“Yep,” he said.

“I think we should, too.”

He turned to face me, his face unchanging from the fiends below.
“Where would we get a boat?”

“I saw one today,” I said. “At the market. It’s used, I think, so the price wasn’t too bad.”

Every night, I felt the water—already halfway up our stilts—rocking the house. I caught Josh curled in the corner of our bedroom, unmoving, afraid of shaking us into the flood. Dad gestured to our feet. “We have no money for anything but food.”

I didn’t recognize my father anymore. His ribcage protruded from under his shirt, his once plump face darkened by stress, his thick mustache faded to a yellowish-gray. I tried to remember the last time he smiled.

“By this time next year—“ I tried to say.

“By this time next year, the flood will nearly be through,” he said. His tone cut me. “We can’t afford to buy a boat.”

“It’s either buy a boat or die.” I didn’t know where I got my courage, but I immediately regretted it.

He lowered his eyes back to the water, back home. “We can’t afford a boat.”

#

“I heard the Highlanders are getting nervous,” said Olivia. We sat at the shoreline, against a tree, shoulder-to-shoulder, tossing sticks into the flood. “They want to vote to stop the rain before the flood destroys any of the Highlands.”

“Do you think it’ll work?” I asked, reaching for a rock.

“Not if my dad has anything to say about it,” she said. “If all the Lowlanders show up to the meeting and vote, we could block it.”

I whipped my arm, watching as the rock skipped four times before sinking. “Why would we do that?”

“There’s not much more the rain can do to us,” she said. “But it could destroy them.”

“It could still destroy our families.”

She looked out onto the water coolly, brushing her soaked bangs from her eyes. “We’ll just have to find another way to survive.”

“It’s not that easy.” The water sloshed with the wind, smashing against the hillside.

“We’ve waited all these years for the flood to reach the Highlands,” she said. “That was the deal. If they get away with destroying our lives without risking their own, they’ll do it again. They have to suffer.”

“But, what about—“

“What about the Lowlanders who have already lost their homes, or

even died, Jacob?” she said. “How are we supposed to explain that our lives matter more than theirs?”

I rested my head against the tree, looking up. Raindrops fell from the branches, ricocheting off my lips and eyes, waking me.

#

Since Dad was at the town meeting, it was my job to feed Mom. I sat at her side with a hunk of bread and a bowl of tasteless soup. I begged her to eat, but most days she wouldn't even sit up. She liked listening to the rain, and she didn't like when we bothered her. A week after the funeral, Josh had come in her room to check on her, to try to get her to drink. She grabbed his arm and dug her nails into his skin until he cried out. When I got in the room, he was sobbing in the opposite corner, blood pooling at his feet. Mom held him in her arms as he flailed trying to get away. She thought I'd done it.

She looked like her own corpse, permanent streaks of tears from her eyes to her neck. Always cold, cocooned inside a blanket, she stared at the wall. I put the bread on the floor in front of her, but she threw it back at me. I put my hand under her ribcage, trying to force her to sit up. She complied, her eyes half-shut, her lips chapped with dried saliva. Seeing my mother's face again made me smile, though she only looked past me.

“I can't hear the rain,” she said.

“It's okay,” I said. “I have some soup for you.”

Bowl in one hand, I spooned up a bite for her. As I brought it to her lips, she turned her head, like an infant. “Please.”

“I can't hear the rain,” she said again, this time more urgent.

Thunder quaked beneath us, the house trembling. “See, Mom? Rain.”

I tried for a second time, the soup steaming off the spoon. I brought it to her mouth, and she screamed. Thrashing about, she cried for my Dad, as if I meant to hurt her. She smacked the bowl from my hand, scalding my arm, instantly bringing tears to my eyes. Gripping my burn, I scrambled into the corner, away from her. Dad burst through the doors, panicked, to find us both sobbing against the wall. He went to my mother, held her until she stopped crying.

I didn't stop crying. It didn't hurt all that bad, but I still couldn't stop. After a few minutes, when she was done, Mom looked around.

“Hear that?” she asked. “My baby is crying.”

“You burned me,” I sniffled.

She shushed me. “Hear that? My baby girl is crying!”

Dad held her as she beat him, punching and kicking with what strength she still had. She cursed him, spat at him, called him a murderer. He pinned her to the ground and reminded her repeatedly that my sister was dead. Mom screamed out in pain, pushing him away as she crawled to her corner of the room, wheezing as she sobbed.

Dad picked me off the floor and took me to the living room and sat

me on the couch, pacing. Josh followed.

“What’s wrong?” Josh asked.

“Go to your room,” Dad said. “I need to talk to your brother.”

Josh looked hurt, but knew better than to talk back. A few seconds later, our bedroom door shut.

“The motion to end the rain failed,” Dad said. “We all voted against it.”

I cleared my throat. “That’s good, right?”

“It’s fair,” he said. “But it’s not good—not for us, not for the Joneses, or for any Lowlander that hasn’t lost everything.”

Dad put his face into his palm and leaned against the wall, tears in his eyes. I sucked in a breath and stood up. I walked over to him, placing a hand on his shoulder. “We’ll find another way.”

“We can’t afford a boat.” His voice broke.

“We’ll find another way,” I repeated.

#

Dry rope, the kayak, and Olivia. We paddled into darkness, the waves rocking us, splashing our faces. Lightning cracked overhead, our only source of light. I pulled the drawstrings on my hood to keep the rain out of my eyes. I thought we were going to die. Olivia crouched at the head of the boat, struggling with her oars. We jolted forward with the current, airborne, landing with a splat. I drove my paddle into the water, bringing the kayak to a halt, but we were taken again, going farther and faster. We rocked from one side to the next. I gripped my seat, my body lurching against the rapids.

When the boat tipped, everything was silent. For the first time in three years, I couldn’t hear the rain. I didn’t resurface. Instead, I lingered underneath, pressure pushing the air from my lungs. Chilled and weightless, I thought of all the people who drowned where I floated—the town lost beneath me. I didn’t understand what was going to happen when the rain began, and I don’t think they did either. The stilts, the storms, my sister—I knew now. I needed to live another year, make it back to the sun, so that when I had children, and they had children, they would know, that even those who live higher on the hillside, once stripped of resource, drown just as quickly.

My arm wrapped the overturned kayak and I sucked in a soggy breath, ebbing rhythmically toward nowhere. Three flashes of lightning showed me Olivia, hanging on to the other side, clutching the rope. Money couldn’t buy a friend like her. Another strike of lightning, she was pointing off in the distance. I bit my bottom lip, waiting for the next. When it came, I sighed in relief at the sight of the thing for which we’d risked our lives: the Highlanders’ boat, the one we’d pushed into the flood all those months back, bobbing only a quarter mile out.

#

Year Four

We scratched their name off the side of the boat. Olivia wrote its new name with a marker that we'd found below deck: *The Second Wind*. My family moved in the day before hers, and all of us except my mother celebrated with beer that'd been left behind. My father sat in a fold-out chair at the helm, Mr. Jones across from him. He saw me watching, and smiled at me. He reached inside the cooler at his feet, pulling a bottle from the lukewarm puddle, and held it out to me.

Surprised, I took it from him. He called Olivia and Josh to join us, and the four of us toasted. I took my first sip of alcohol, savoring the sensation, though I hated the taste. I leaned on the railing and looked out across the hillside. My house now completely submerged, I felt detached from the flood. I didn't have to beg for mercy—I'd conquered it. I let the water push our boat, push me, and as it did, I heard a loud snap from behind me. I turned. The mansion, the one that I watched from my bedroom window as a kid, tilted, waves bashing against it.

I hadn't noticed before, too concerned with our survival, but it didn't look the same. The rain wore away at the bricking, now a dull orange. Part of the roof missing, the other half covered with tarp. The flood nearly as high as the house, planks of wood trailed away as the wind pushed the water. I watched as the last stilt on the right side gave out. The mansion creaked in agony as it buckled, crumbling and collapsing in the flood. Despite the distance and the rain, I heard screams from above.

"Serves them right," I said, taking a sip of my beer.

Dad slurped, holding his bottle at the neck. "Sure does."

The house on top of the hill sunk slowly, disappearing under the surface of the flood with an unbecoming belch. Encased in a current of the wreckage, Highlanders bolted from the deep, gasping for air. They grabbed at possessions—clothes, art, kitchenware—which swelled from beneath and drowned alongside them. Instead of helping, we used the waves created by their downfall to propel us forward, back home.

Marie Baleo is a French writer born in 1990. Her work was nominated for a Best of the Net award in 2017 and has appeared or is forthcoming in Yemassee, Tahoma Literary Review, Litro Magazine, Pithead Chapel, Cleaver Magazine, The Chiron Review, Maudlin House, Split Lip Magazine, Cease, Cows, Gone Lawn, and elsewhere. She is the Travel Flash Editor of Panorama: The Journal of Intelligent Travel. Marie grew up in Norway and Lebanon and received a B.A. from Washington University in St. Louis and an M.A. from Sciences Po Paris.

Tired

Marie Baleo

You begin to need the others after dark, when the tide of your blood retreats from your fingers. It is a foreign town and you are alone. It has always been this way. Now your smile stifles

the pressure in your ribcage, and you wonder if it is late enough to retreat to the strange room where your suitcase is. You have always been so nice to strangers. This city is your mother, and today

your mother loved you. But at night the bets are off, and your mother of marble and pebbles and light may turn into a monster no one else can see. She may swallow you, and she may spit

you out, naked and glistening, unrecognizable. This knowledge you share like a secret with a brand of strangers you have never seen. Often you wake up from a walking slumber and notice you've

been gripping the strap of your backpack too tight, and you tell yourself hey there, hey, it's alright. You are always cold and the years have proven you don't know how to feed

yourself. The storefronts you walk by show that you hunch forward. You err through the wind in streets so empty you could split them down the middle with your feet, a black bug crawling down a spine.

This could be Beirut, age seventeen, after you have left everything and come back with nothing, pretending to be a tourist in your lost land. Some nights you walked under the street lights

near where you had known home to be, sweat hiding in the small of your back, casting shadows in an orange glow. The people around you, you wanted to scream in their face that you were sorry

for the imposition. Always others tell you you apologize too much; but you are only being polite, and it's the least you can do. This could be St Louis, age nineteen, when a few lights and jazz

ringing down the streets kept the empty at bay. The way your fingers and wrists smelled of cologne after you had spent the night dancing, it said others could still be reached, yes, if only

through their hands, if only the men. You told yourself they wanted to care for you like you were their child. Often now, you notice no one else is alone. There is no word for the opposite

of alone. Families and couples, they don't like to look at you because with these eyes of yours they might just remember what they don't like to think about. People in the service industry, you

can pay them to be nice to you, and that can always be relied on, whatever the time of night. Often you think, you don't know why the golden days can turn into a ravage; You never learned how

to prevent it. You know the hour is coming when the sons and daughters of the city will retire behind closed doors. Their home is not for you. Sometimes, when you dine alone

at a restaurant in another town, you wonder if it will always be this way. Long days rubbed raw by the smallest of things, skin cut by jagged edges no one else feels. You hate the word fragile, and you hate

the word sensitive. A doctor once told you if nothing changed your heart might tire. You go for years on end, and the road never stops. You wonder if you will be allowed to age. You wonder what

is the point of you. Sometimes beneath the cold white linen you think of somewhere warm, where no one ever wonders where you came from. A phantom family dresses the table, and a voice

calls for you.

Artifacts

L.E. Sullivan

When the light first came it took almost everyone away. We don't know what made the light come, but we know that when it comes we hide in the dark. The night comes for a few hours and sometimes not at all. When the night comes, we hurry out and smell the colors to see what we can find. We know that there is a colorless life sitting on the horizon like a mountain curled up on itself. It breathes with a sound like soft scraping against the walls of our nests. We also know we need food, water, shelter to keep us warm when everything turns cold.

Now when you came, you didn't understand anything about the dark or the light. You said: "It's filthy everywhere. I can see it with my phone"—and you'd shine your rectangle around us. The nest I live in is two places and there are stairs between them. Someone before we lived here made corners within the walls, and I spend a lot of time snuggled there. When the light comes, I am safe though I can see small drips of it pushing through cracks. I shut my eyes against it. The light takes us away.

Every now and then, like you, there's a member of the group who declares: "I'm going to find out what it's all about. When I find out, I'll come back and change things. I don't want to stand in the corners, in the depths, in the hidden places. I want to expand out and have it all. Both the darkness and the light, and all the colors." Of course, on some level I understand this. There are times, right before I sleep when I'm scared that somehow my corner will collapse and I'll sink into the light and everyone will hear my screams like we always hear when the light wins. During these times I get angry. My corner becomes too tight, so I fight against the walls until I'm hurting enough to find my own life again. It passes. But sometimes, for some of us, it doesn't pass. For some of us it suffocates and the nests are no longer sufficient. Their smell turns bright and sharp. Then they declare. Then they stand against the light. Then we hear them scream. Then they are no more.

When I explained the screams to you the first time, you were shocked by this. So, I told you while I imagined the heart wrenching sound inside me: "It's loud and it gets stronger, it lingers, and gets heavy. It smells cold. It smells of stone."

You said: "Smells? What? Well, where I come from light is a *good* thing, it's call the sun and there's no life without it." I said: "What is the sun?"

And you said: “Um, you don’t know? The sun is a massive star. It’s the center of the universe. It’s everything, energy, life, everything. God, it reeks in this place. What is that smell?” I told you: “This is our nest. The low smells are the water beneath the nest. It is cold and frozen. The red smell is our bodies.”

You did not speak to me for several long moments.

Then you held up your small rectangle to me. You said: “Your eyes are massive. Elliptical pupils with a tapetum. You’re nocturnal, aren’t you? This is even wilder than we thought it could be.” The lift in your voice and the openness of your face made me step towards you. You searched around in your pack then looked at your small rectangle. You spoke with your breath heavy and blue: “Damn. We were supposed to be able to maintain contact using the AI. Now I know better.” There is hair on your face and you touched it, then you touched the hair on my face and your rectangle made a snap and lit up my face. I jumped away from it, but it wasn’t wrong. I knew it wasn’t the light that takes us away.

In my hands I had my items: my melted water and meals from my tree. When I looked at your small eyes and how you shivered holding your rectangle I wanted to give you my items. You didn’t take them. You drank from a container in your pack. You said: “I’m going out and exploring this place, taking notes and photos of the others. Can you help at all? There are some questions I’d like to ask you. For starters, how do you live like this? What’s that giant thing out there?” However, you did not let me answer and you went on your way. You were excited and I saw your colors as a bundle of brights. I watched you until I could not see you.

When you came back to my nest, I could see that you wanted rest. You said: “This place is a wreck.” You released a large puff of air that I felt on my face. I liked the smell of your air on my face, amber and blue. Your eyes blinked fast. You said: “I’m so glad I can’t see the floor in here right now,” and your voice was a broken green.

I said: “The light will be here soon. You can come up into my corner with me.” No one had ever come into my corner with me before—or since, but I didn’t want you to get caught by the light. I said: “Don’t go into the light when it comes.” You murmured: “So, I’ve heard. I don’t think I have a choice. I was supposed to be here a few minutes, then they’d pull me right back. It’s been more than a few hours.”

You wouldn’t come up to my corner at first, but you wanted to be warm and soon I felt you near me. This marked the first time you were next to me when we slept. When the light came, I felt you shift as though you wanted to go to it and scream away. I held you tight so you couldn’t go. You were up there with me four times and each time was a hurtful, joyful thing—all of it colored peach though, all of it with soft edges. You said you wanted to go and yet, the fourth and last time you were in my nest and up in my corner with me, you ran your hands up and down my body. You breathed heat here and there

in gradients upon my form, all the colors I had seen—and some I hadn't. You said things like this: "Is this a tattoo? What's this scar? I want to take you away from here. You should be studied. You're just like...*us*. Well, almost like *us*." But you offered no truth of who *us* was. "The wreckage... it's clear that at some point ...everything was here. You even speak a variant of English." You were excited and your voice brightened, but dropped low and soft.

You said: "But it's all wrong now."

After a long, empty quiet, you said: "Before I go, can you give me an item? Not some of this wrecked crap, but an artifact—maybe a tool you've created yourself? Can you read or write? I've noticed that most of you can talk."

I can do these things. I showed you my reading thing. You pushed it away.

You said, scowling with your little light: "This looks fakeable. No one would believe where this came from. I need an object that can show who—what—you are? The photos won't be enough and I bet the DNA will match ours."

I said: "Don't go."

You said: "I can't stay here."

And yet, with every motion of your wandering hands you drew heat and joy out of me and my life swung towards this powerful color. You said once: "Maybe I can take you away from here. You deserve better than dilapidated houses full of bodies and filth and scrounging from place to place just getting by. I'm getting out of here tonight. This light thing? It isn't death. It's the way out. This must be what our department tapped into to get me here."

I said: "No." I pressed my head into the walls against your eager pastel, wrong speech. "The light will hurt you." For the first time, I admitted a secret I knew: The light almost got me. I jumped from wall to wall hiding from it and it leaked up through the holes in the nest and I was almost caught. For an instant I felt it and it felt like this: broken black and white, with the white empty and the black smothering. I felt purpose in that light the way I felt the purpose in you, and feel it in me, in the members of my nest. This light could never be what you believed it to be. I told you all of this.

You said: "I think I'm getting sick, which isn't surprising considering how devastated this place is. It's easy to practice precaution techniques when you're not even sure it'll all work out, you know? I'm supposed to be in gloves, a mask. Fuck." You laughed as you said this, but then your eyes were blank and cold. "This life—," You stretched your arms out, "this wreckage? This can't work."

The shards and split colors in those words stung me, and I was against them.

I said: "What can't work?"

You pulled out your rectangle and showed me images that were bright. I saw that the nest you came from lived in pure light.

“That light isn’t the light here,” I told you. You shrugged and said: “I don’t have the energy to try to pick apart what you’re saying right now.” Despite your words, your small eyes were on me as if they wanted to grow into me. Before you left, you told me a lot of things with a heavy voice: “Do you have a name?” I couldn’t understand. “The others? Are they your family?”

I said: “We are a nest.”

Silence. Then, you said: “Do you have a mate?” Your smell had soft edges and an amber center. It is rare to smell amber. I wanted to curl into your smell and I said: “I have no mate.”

You shook your head and looked down. You said: “This is crazy. Everything about this is crazy. Even me. *Especially* me.” You laughed and your smell spiked sharp as if to bite me, while you touched my chest and it was a harsh touch. It felt as though you were trying to reach in and pull me out, or push you in.

“You know what’s crazy? I’m out there somewhere. My bones. The bones of everyone I’ve ever known. They’re probably dust now. Jesus.”

Later, smelling thick with wrong—aching with dark yellow— you were off to wait for the light. I followed you a little way and you shined your little light on me, but you refused to speak or come back. I waited on the ground and everything was cold. I saw that you waited right in the middle of it all, right out in the emptiness between the nests and for the first time, I saw that the light rose up out of the big life on the horizon and it was white, but the core of it was the purest black and it ripped out against my eyes. I ran from it until I was deep in my corner, but then I wanted to run out and grab you. Force you. Make you stay. I wanted to say: “See? Do you see the darkness inside that light? This is not your *sun is a star*. This is not the pure light of your home nest.”

I turned to leave my corner, but then I covered my head because I didn’t want to hear your screams. I covered it until I could hear my own chest pounding, until it ached, until I was damp and hot, until it came and cut my ears.

I heard you say no.

You screamed no.

When it was over and the light was out there, pushing through the cracks, reaching, silent, and angry, I was all ripped out.

When it was safe and dark again, I went out and your stuff remained as it always does. I fought away the others for your liquid, and your rectangle, and your pack. The little light always goes dark after a while, but though I still carry it, I don’t need it. I am all ripped out, but I see well in the dark, the smear of your colors marked into my corner. Evidence that you were here,

that you were warm.

Natalie E. Illum is a poet, disability activist, and singer living in Washington, DC. She is a 2017 Jenny McKean Moore Poetry Fellow, and a recipient of a 2017 Artists Grant from the DCCAH, as well as an instructor for Poetry Out Loud. She was a founded board member of mothertongue, a women's open mic that lasted 15 years. She competed on the National Poetry Slam circuit for many years and was the 2013 Beltway Grand Slam Champion. Her work has appeared in various publications, and on NPR's Snap Judgement. Natalie has an MFA in creative writing from American University, and teaches workshops across the country. You can find her on Instagram and Twitter as @poetryrox, on her website, and as one half of All Her Muses, her music project. Natalie also enjoys Joni Mitchell, whiskey and giraffes.

Free Lancing

Natalie E. Illum

Free

my body, freed me from
the headline. It's a competitive hustle,

You have no byline.
away from your cubicle

Be methodical. Network. It's hard
to work for yourself;
to fill an archive.

The central idea was
A kind of activism

Something people want to read about
as you glow from
your keyboard.

What does
a cubicle
look like?
To work. Think only of
the pitch,

Lancing

When you lanced my heart from
our daily grind. I saw
being the one he loves

less.

What does breaking
look like?

rewriting the way
he fits in your mouth.
You have enough photographs

no one gets hurt.
this love of self-awareness.

ego.

breaking away from
a heartbeat look like?
It's hard.
his body
his skin against yours.

But this story's already been written.
Give me a byline.
Keep drafting.

Be honest. Recall
Write about the pain.
Chronicle a warzone
that isn't your own.

Write about the continental
the casualties. Collateral damage
because of a fault line
Of course it is

Breaking news.
how he framed you
your audience.

Write for them.
writing

This isn't going to work.
He is someone else's now.
Rewriting why he fits.

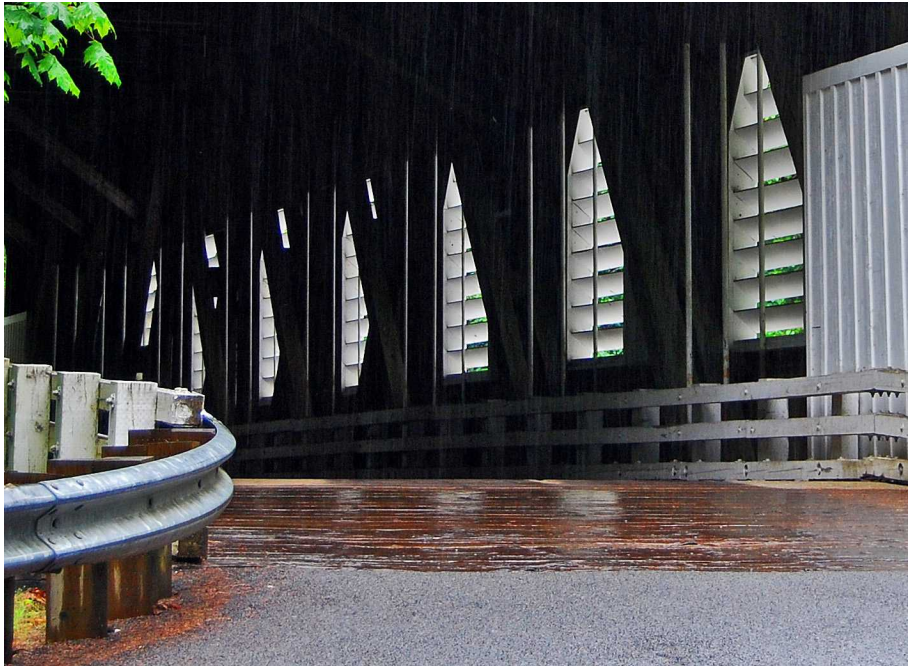
the flash of a camera; the flask
we carried like medicine.
Show what breaking a marriage
looks like.

drifts. An earthquake.
How selfish your own heart is
a hairline fracture.
This wasn't your fault.

Edit that last part out. Forget
toward the light. Remember

Don't keep
this poem.

*Keith Moul's poems and photos are published widely. Finishing Line Press released a chap called *The Future as a Picnic Lunch* in 2015. Aldrich Press published *Naked Among Possibilities* in 2016; Finishing Line Press has just released (1/17) *Investment in Idolatry*. In August, 2017, Aldrich Press released *Not on Any Map*, a collection of earlier poems.*



OR 59-2 SR 126
Mckenzie River, Belknap Bridge



WA 69.1 Laconner

I have grouped photos in about the same way for 25 years or more, re-filling a group by subject matter as I travel. I catalogue each photo by country/state/city/highway number and, if recognizable, the name of the subject.



WA 63-1
Bremerton, Manette Bridge



UT 385-1

*A native Chicagoan, **Dick Carmel's** writing has been (or is about to be) published in Akashic Books'; Monday Are Murder; Chicago Literati, birds thumb, Mash, Travel Today Magazine, and the Northwestern University Law Review. He has also written two crime novels (both unpublished). Suffering from either eclectic or haphazard taste, his favorite authors include Elmore Leonard, Tobias Wolff, Jennifer Egan, A. E. Home and Rupert Thomson. Carmel has a BA degree from Northwestern University and a JD degree from the Northwestern School of Law. Widowed, he has two children and two grandchildren – all better-looking than he is.*

Moving Day

Dick Carmel

The morning the movers were due, Gladys walked through the house with respectful steps, as though otherwise she might disturb its contents. Small chance of that. They were all in the front rooms, packed in boxes labeled with both their origin and destination, sheeted in heavy-grade plastic or under canvas tagged with the contents. Her footsteps clattered on naked floors. Gladys was tall, played tennis twice a week, indoors and out, depending on the weather, golfing almost daily in the summer, and had even run the half marathon a few years earlier, before it became too much for her knees. But today she was dragging, impeded by remembrance. The bare walls showed outlines of where the pictures had hung. The Appel, Miro and Picasso prints were packed away, but their departure was marked by the brighter tone where they had shaded the painted walls from the sunlight that shone through the western windows. Gladys studied her surroundings. The memories remained.

She paused in the dining room. Even with the furniture gone, she saw the table where their children had coughed up their formula as infants, spit out the vegetables as toddlers, and shoveled down full meals in less time than it took Harry and Gladys to eat their salad when their teenaged sons were in a hurry to go wherever teenagers go to get on with growing up. The table where Harry and Gladys had dined alone the last two years. The furniture would reappear in the condo, but in the new surroundings she would live in a diorama of what she once had.

"They should be here in half an hour."

That was Harry, her husband of 40 years, but maintaining the tone of a teen disappointed by reality. If it had been up to Harry, they would have kept the house, saved a carpet that needed vacuuming every other day, held onto three flights of stairs, heaving shopping carts, packages and all the other

paraphernalia up the bumpy steps. She wouldn't miss the bumps. Harry had all his hair, a pension, and a lifetime of working at a desk in his office downtown instead of cleaning, cooking, shopping, carpooling, arranging play dates, hosting birthday and holiday parties, entertaining Harry's clients as well as their friends, clubbing, and all the other pleasures of wifedom and motherhood. No wonder Harry had resisted.

Gladys heard its arrival and looked out the window. The moving van was adjusting its position at the curb. On the outside, it looked like any other moving van. Inside, it would soon hold what was left of their furniture, the art, all their clothing, the Lalique and other bric-a-brac, and boxes filled with mementos. Gladys glared at Harry as he shrank in his easy chair, like a kid afraid of a visit to the dentist, instead of a middle-aged man with two kids out of college, plus another still attending, but who had announced he had no intention of ever living with them again. Harry was acting as though this were good-bye, whereas to her it looked, smelled and felt like good riddance.

When they reached the apartment building and the doorman held the front door open, Harry still looked forlorn. "Cheer up," Gladys said.

He shook his head, rejecting the suggestion. "I still don't see why we had to do this. The house was fine. With the kids gone, it would have been easy."

He was never good at diagnosis, she thought. "That's just it. With the kids gone." In Harry's case, absence not only made the heart grow fonder, it made it forgetful of all the effort – mostly, hers.

The lobby looked its age. Like her. Not old, but getting there. There was a small area rug surrounded by a cluster of chairs and a threadbare sofa just beyond the reception desk. The furniture shared a covering that suited the chairs, but embarrassed the sofa – floral-printed slipcovers on the chairs that distracted the viewer from their mid-century design, but whose larger version made the sofa look like an overgrown jungle covered in rotting plants and trees. In general, not a look that would cheer Gladys or anyone else she knew, but the thought of what awaited upstairs cheered her. It would cheer Harry, too, if he had taken part in the planning, shopping, and preparing of their new life, instead of just writing reluctant checks.

When they emerged from the elevator on the seventh floor, Gladys almost had to drag Harry down the hall. She unlocked the door to the apartment and held it open, inviting him into what she hoped would be both a new life and the preservation of a lifetime of memories.

The apartment did not look like the lobby. There were new parquet floors. Harry had refused to participate with Gladys in any of the restoration, as though that would postpone the inevitable. Their refurbished two-bedroom condo was now all wood and glass, except for the kitchen, which had a new porcelain floor and was outfitted with granite counters and appliances Gladys had bought on her own, hoping that the glare of stainless steel might enlighten

Harry to their new reality. The apartment smelled of fresh paint and a refreshed future. Harry looked around, moving from room to room without comment. Then he left, leaving the front door open, and Gladys stood alone in their new dwelling that echoed like a tomb with Harry gone.

Ten minutes later, Gladys heard the freight elevator open at the far end of the hall and the grunts of the movers and their carts as they approached the apartment. The two movers entered the apartment without Harry – just them, the packed boxes and the sheeted furniture. "Where do you want this?" asked the mover whose forearms were shaped like baseball bat handles and whose upper arms looked like their barrels, asking about their dining room table. The other mover, the short one with the strength to lift boxes and furniture twice his size, began placing their living room furniture wherever he liked, in the correct presumption that Gladys would change her mind at least half a dozen times before she was satisfied.

During the next two hours, they continued their trips down to the truck, then back up to the apartment, positioning the furniture in the master bedroom, and in the second bedroom that Gladys thought of as the den but would tell Harry was his office. The apartment was filling up.

When the movers hung the blinds, as well as the drapes that she had purchased without Harry last month in preparation for the move, when he surrendered to her wishes but refused to participate in implementing the decision, the apartment had an entirely different look. Gladys struggled for the right word to describe it. If Harry were there, like any good lawyer he might have helped her do that, just as he could have assisted in directing the movers and opening some of the boxes that held their clothing that had to be hung in the closets and placed in the dressers. But Harry had been missing in action throughout. No wonder, really. Probably afraid of acknowledging the triumph of the decoration, and the reconstruction of the kitchen she had done without him. He ought to be ashamed of resisting the move, making her do all the work.

"We got it all up here now, ma'am," the bigger mover said. "Your deposit will cover the bill. Probably won't be a refund, though." He suppressed a smile at the very idea. "Hope you like your new place." Then they left.

After they were gone, Gladys sat on their old couch in front of the new window, looking at her surroundings, getting used to them. That was when she heard the front door open, and Harry entered, lugging a huge potted palm through the door. They had never had large plants in their home. "Found this in the alley." He had an anxious look.

The tips of the leaves were brown, and some of them were wilted. One side of the pot was chipped, but it could be turned to face a wall. "We'll find a place for it," she said. And if he watered the plant when required, they might even smooth-out the scar together.

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Colors

Sharon Lee Snow

I sneak into this neighborhood like a thief. The residents are well-armed, to say the least, with their suspicious-eyed sentry at the gate and the tall concrete walls that guard them from the riffraff on the other side of the interstate. From the overpass, all you see is the disguise—artful groupings of graceful Queen Palms interspersed with sturdy Date Palms, each of which is valued more than my dented Corolla. You might even surmise that it's part of the community's charm.

I know better. It's a crime to be different, wounded, sick, blemished, or a failure. An affront to this planned community which is planned down to the last blade of St. Augustine grass. I squint in the late afternoon sun. A Mexican gardener is hosing down what looks to be a stubborn patch of dollar weed with a blast from the green weed killer from his plastic backpack. The chemicals form a neon yellow-green arc, and they splash on his brown work boots, trickling into a nuclear-waste puddle around his feet.

A neighborhood patrol car cruises slowly by me. The gardener cuts a quick glance at me from under his straw hat, then looks away. I ignore them. I am not the only addict in this airbrushed world, but I am the one with the least panache, the one without the decency to hide the fact, and for that, I cannot be forgiven.

I sit in my car in the circular driveway of my son's father's house, wishing I could disappear into the brick-pavers like so much sand between the cracks. A neighbor jogs by, and I feel shame on me like a bright orange prison jumpsuit. I don't belong here. But the funny thing is, once I did belong here, though you couldn't tell it by looking at me now.

In fact, I don't want to be here. I feel claustrophobic, dizzy at the militant sameness; the knife-cut edges of the lawns and the precisely clipped topiary in faux Grecian urns become a meaningless blur. My hands begin

shaking and I start to bargain with myself. You can have a drink tomorrow when Jeremy goes back home. Seven o'clock. For God's sake, just pull yourself together and be his mother for one day.

Of course, the problem with that deal is that I'm allowing it in, the possibility, the need for escape.

One day at a time. Stay sober for this day and the next will take care of itself. Actually, that's bullshit, and I don't buy into it. But it makes a pretty poster. I've been a drunk since Jeremy was little. Okay, before then, if I'm honest, which is what they want us to be in the AA.

One.Fucking.Day.At.A.Time. Admit it. Admit you're a fucking drunk and that will solve it all. One day at a time. Try that when you're hard-wired to need a drink to survive a day. Still, what else have I got? I've tried everything else. Day by Day. I have that helpful advice as a reminder on my phone, scribbled on yellow sticky notes, framed and hung up in my empty little apartment. So, of course I can't stop myself from thinking about tomorrow and the next day and the next. They loom arid, black, impassable, stretching through infinity. Why should any of them be any more promising than the last few years spent in hell?

My heart starts drumming as I stare at the frosted glass panes of the door, bracing myself for it to open. I'm crawling with anxiety. I could call Elaine. She's my sponsor. Day by day, not so much. But Elaine has a way of putting it all together in a way that makes sense to my brain. I pull out a cigarette instead and light it with unsteady fingers. The nicotine rushes into my lungs as I suck it in. One addiction at a time, my personal therapist, Lucy, says with infinite understanding when I bring it up. The family counselor that my ex and I see with Jeremy purses his lips as if I leave a bad taste in his mouth. You can see him formulating his plans to terminate parental rights as he listens to me talk. He lives one street over from here. His son does not have a pierced brow, but my Jeremy does.

The phone is in my hand when the door opens. I hastily put out the cigarette, waving away the smoke. At least I'm feeling a little better, just the tiniest buzz easing off my raw nerves, and I glance in the mirror. I have that too-thin, desperate-eyed, crumpled up and thrown-away face of the addicted. You find out fast that it's really not that far at all, from life in this neighborhood to the streets. It is as close as one drink away.

I open the car windows to let out the smoke. Jeremy walks towards me, that dark hair swinging, shiny, carefully full of product, but I can tell that he actually is hoping for a neo-hippy Jesus hair vibe. He has his backpack slung over his shoulder and a calculated, slouchy, I-don't-give-a-shit attitude to his walk. He opens the door with a scowl. He hates living with his stepmother. He hates me more.

"Let's get the fuck out of here." He tosses the backpack in the backseat and shakes back his hair. He is such a handsome boy and my heart

aches. I want to touch him, but I've lost the right if not the need.

"How was school this week?" I let the language slide this time. I know he's testing me. Take it slow. You can't just start being a mom again, Lucy cautions.

"What do you care?" He finally glances at me.

"You know I care, Jeremy. That has never been the issue."

"The issue is that you're a loser and a fucking drunk." He slumps down into the car seat and puts on his headphones. "You would rather drink than be a mom."

That wasn't entirely true, but it held enough truth to really hurt. And that, of course, was his intention. Both Lucy and Elaine think I should suck up this attitude, but I have enough of me left inside to want to slap his face. He doesn't understand the effort I have made, am making, to try and pull myself together for him. A superhuman effort. I feel a quick and ferocious gust of pure anger. But I want this. I have wanted this for years. All that I've wanted. This grown man's body houses my child still. He is young, but time is not on my side, it is gray and raging, frothing over the riverbanks, taking us along.

I can't be brought down this easily.

"Let's stay positive. One day at a time."

I repeat the twelve steps in my head throughout the days and the favorite prayer of fucking losers everywhere: "Lord, give me the strength to change those things I can, and to suffer the assholes who try and knock me back down. Amen."

Jeremy doesn't answer. I can hear the angry staccato rhythm of the rap music he listens to. I turn onto County Road 47 and it sickens me, thinking of that hard-core stuff sinking into his young brain, seeping into his unconscious. "It's just music," he tells me, laughing, his eyes already way too hard and knowing. He purposefully plays his most violent songs around me, the ones filled with hatred and female degradation and people gunning one another down. The kind of people I've become acquainted with in my very near past. And I can't stop him.

We hit a light and, for the life of me, I can't think of what to say to him. Why did I even think I could pull off a night together? I glance across the road and there's a little park with a playground. Normal people on a normal evening are out, running the track, walking dogs. I spot a tall man struggling with a golden retriever and tiny black poodle and feel an unwarranted resentment at the ease of his life. Something tells me he's not craving his next drink. But it's the playground that captures my attention and it hits me, for the first time, the extent of what I've lost these past years. I blink hard.

The light changes and I pull out automatically, but my mind is still back at the park, remembering seven years before, on our last day together as mother and son. The day when I would turn him over to his father and try and

convince myself it was for the best, that it was temporary. I see him by the swings now, and I'm pulling that moment out to look at like a photograph through these long years of separation, hasty visits, court-ordered tests and endless stints alone in rehab centers. And now he's running up to me at the picnic bench as I contemplate leaving him, a dark-haired boy of eight, bubbles flowing behind him, around him, over him, laughing as he blows bubbles through a plastic wand. He grabs my hand, smelling of clean dish soap and sweaty little boy.

"Look, look," he said, twirling around in a circle, his arms straight out into the wind. We laughed as bubbles surrounded us, engulfed us, hit us in the face with a soapy, sticky smack, flying up in the air and catching the sun's rays in rainbow swirls. "Mom, look!" He stopped and pushed my face up to see. And together we watched as his biggest, most perfect bubble soared towards the sky, shining with sun-sparked iridescence, a beautiful globe of red and purple, yellow, green and orange. "See, Mom? All the colors of the world!"

"I'm hungry," Jeremy says suddenly. He takes off the headphones and looks at me. The park is fading in the rearview mirror. I turn the corner and it's gone, the picture, just fragments of colors now, dispersed like a bubble burst into a thousand tiny droplets and blown away by the wind. I search those brown eyes, and I can still see him there, just a tiny bit, that little boy. The attitude is gone, and now we're on safe territory, two hungry people. I take it.

"What would you like?"

"Pizza."

I pull into The Whole Pie, the new pizza joint in the neighborhood where I live. He's studying me as the hostess seats us. I don't know what to expect, these intense visits so fraught with feelings, as if we're desperately cramming a whole lifetime's worth of emotions into one short visit, afraid it will be our last. All those planned visits that I failed to keep or else showed up drunk. Birthday parties at his father's house ruined.

The restaurant plays alternative rock, softly. The colors are coffee shop browns and tans and inoffensive—sort of like my apartment. Definitely not Italian, though the smell of pizza and garlic and good things wafts our way. He studies his cell phone, but his hands are at ease. I hope that we have moved beyond anger for this evening. Food usually helps. There's no way of knowing.

"Ready to order?" The waitress is blonde and pretty. Jeremy smiles at her. "Pepperoni," he says, ordering for both of us without consulting me, but I'm glad. Maybe he remembered that I liked it too, maybe he doesn't care. Still, his smile lights up his face in a way that I remember. The little boy who used to smile for me.

When the waitress leaves, he excuses himself. I watch him outside the window, having a smoke, texting into his phone. I feel relieved and cheated.

When he comes back in, smelling of smoke and the outside, I brace myself for whatever will come next.

“How is Geometry?”

Really, I want to engage him, get to know him better. But I am ashamed to say that I am watching the waitress pour bottles of beer into chilled mugs for the cute hipster couple to our left. I swallow hard at the condensation curling around the glasses. I swear I can smell it. Glug, glug, the waitress finishes and puts down the bottles. Bubbles rising to the tops of the glasses, but not too many; the waitress knows what she’s doing. The waitress is young and pretty like our waitress, and I see that Jeremy’s eying her too, but for different reasons. I sip my Coke and wonder at the coolness of those glasses, trying not to show my need. I wish, even more than Jeremy does, that I could be normal like the couple next to us. That I could enjoy a cold glass of beer with my pizza or a nice Cabernet Sauvignon with my steak. It’s as if I’d been born lacking something in me that other people have, and I can’t for the life of me figure it out.

“Good. Actually, I may be an engineer. Like Dad.”

The pizza arrives, and for a moment we are lost in the business of putting slices of oozing pizza onto plates. Jeremy grabs a piece and eats it in a few quick gulps while I toy with mine and let it cool.

He casually stuffs another piece of pepperoni in his mouth, but I see him watching me now.

“That’s great. You always were good with math.” The couple on my right pours from a carafe. It’s rosé. I watch the pink liquid slosh into their glasses, first hers, then his. Jeremy’s father used to pour my wine first. A gentleman. Always, even now, making sure my apartment is comfortable, and not just for Jeremy’s sake on his visits.

The woman takes a sip and smiles. I can feel it going down my gullet, easing down my throat into my veins, where it will replace this edgy, out-of-my-skin feeling with the mellowness of what I assume is normal for everyone else.

“Are you even listening?”

“You’re going to be an engineer. That would make your dad very happy.” I try and smile. I pick up the pizza and chew. I swallow, but it has no flavor. Food is another thing I have to learn over again. I feel like I’ve died, and now reborn, am going backwards, learning all these things over, painfully, one day at a time. I finish and pick up another piece, not because I want it, but because Jeremy is still watching me.

I feel that edge of anger again. What is it he wants? He is full of wants. He knows that I am lacking. Still, he keeps poking me, nudging me gingerly but insistently, like some dead shark on the beach, wanting to see if it will move, if it will turn around and bite him.

“I won an award,” he says, moving on to another slice.

I frantically cull through the debris in my brain for information that a mother, a real mother, would know. “For your science project?”

“Yeah,” he says, chewing, talking with food in his mouth. I don’t care. I am excited to have gotten the answer right.

“There’s an awards ceremony.” This he says shyly, and I am on alert now, my dormant mother’s instincts firing up and on for this one.

“Wow! That’s awesome, Jeremy. When is it? I’d love to come. If you don’t mind, of course.”

“It’s next week. That’d be cool,” he mumbles through his pizza; and in that moment, I feel like crying, like putting a pistol into my mouth and killing myself in the middle of the pizzeria for everything wrong I’ve done to him. It’s always been about me, and now I don’t care about her. This young man, six feet tall and all rangy muscles, with his cool ironic demeanor and piercings needed me, still wanted me.

I blink and eat my pizza, starting to finally taste it, when all of a sudden it explodes in my mouth, all different colors and flavors—orange, red, yellow, tangy and chewy. “Great then,” I manage, holding onto my control with both hands. I want to kiss him. I have never been so proud. For the first time ever, I believe in treatment, not in the words and philosophies and routines, which I know by heart. I’m feeling it. I’m full of want.

#

“Sounds like progress,” Elaine says the next Monday at the coffee shop downtown. “He still cares enough to push your buttons. That’s a good sign. And he invited you to his award ceremony. Very good sign.” She stirs her iced coffee and stares into the swirls like there’s an answer for us there.

I don’t say anything. What can I say? Her children still won’t see her, and she’s been clean and sober twenty-three months now. I am clean and sober four whole months, and the skin is still too new and pink, too raw to bear another’s heartaches and doubts.

“You coming to the meeting?” she asks. There is a haunted look about her face that I don’t like. I have clung to her these past four months, and she has been my rock. I still need her to be strong, selfish as I know it is. She’s a person, not my personal savior, but right now I need Elaine strong. I feel that momentary panic a drowning person gets when help finally arrives. I could cling to her and pull us both down.

“Of course.” I don’t like the meetings, but when I’m there, I know I won’t be tempted.

“And the job?” She asks this question with a bit more enthusiasm, her eyes now focusing on me instead of that open wound in her heart.

“Great, great.” I sip my coffee, half decaf, half regular, as if I can’t commit.

“You don’t sound sincere, but it will grow on you. It’s a place to start.”

“Matching invoices to checks. I used to run accounts payable, for chrissake.”

Her face tightens. “You’re on treacherous ground right now. You’re full of your progress and how life is moving back towards normal. But if you overshoot and bite off more than you can chew, you’ll get overwhelmed. And what do alcoholics do when they get overwhelmed?”

I hate that AA members constantly go on talking about being alcoholics. Why do we keep wallowing on, inventing some disease to cover it, shining it up like some pathetic medal?

“Angie?” She has gotten up and is smiling sadly at me. “I know you don’t believe in all of this shit, but you do believe in Jeremy.” She clasps her hand around my shoulder. “Take those baby steps, if only for him, huh? Call me if you need me. See you at the meeting.”

#

We are meeting with the family counselor, my ex-husband Mitch, his third wife Kristin, Jeremy, and me—wife number one. Jeremy has cut his hair bristly short—punk short. I mourn his beautiful dark hair. This has happened in the three days since I’d seen him. I spot a tattoo on his bicep, just above the line of his tee shirt sleeve—somehow I’d missed it the night he spent at my apartment. I put on my glasses and lean in closer for a look. It’s a heart dripping blood and bursting into orange flames. He slouches in his chair, not looking any of us in the eye. I want to take him out of there and run with him. The room smells of pencil shavings and Windex. This place sucks.

“So,” Wayne, the counselor, begins, fixing a smile on his face. But the effect is all wrong, and his face looks shiny, tight instead of open and compassionate. “How have we all been this past week?”

We all sit there silently, stewing in our individual juices, each of us filled with a certain amount of loathing for the others. Maybe not Mitch for Kristin yet. That will come later.

“Jeremy won an award,” Mitch begins gallantly. It is him at his best, and at that moment I remember why I fell in love with him. He is the one who wants all of us there. He is the one who cannot deal with his son and these wives who come and go, hating me, forced to cope with my sudden relapses and instability. I am the real reason we are all here, not Jeremy, and just like at the pizza joint, the enormity of my sins threatens to snuff out my joy at being among the living again.

“Jeremy! That’s great! Care to tell us about it?” Wayne leans forward, hands on his knees, his voice all hearty congratulations and fake jollity.

Jeremy looks up from his phone and shrugs. You can tell that he thinks this guy is a dick, and frankly I do, too.

“Aren’t you going to tell us about it?” Wayne coaxes, shifting. His smile is slipping. “Your mom would like to know.” His voice changes slightly when he calls me *mom*.

I hate the son-of-a-bitch, but I want to see my son. I want to help Jeremy more than anything, but I don't know how, and, for a moment, I flail around helplessly. Kristin stares coolly at me and sighs, studying her nails.

"Mom knows," Jeremy says, and he is watching me.

Mitch sort of sits up straighter, and even Kristin looks back up.

"Yes, his science project. I am so proud. We are all proud. I'm going to the ceremony." I say it with authority, as if I hadn't quite convinced myself until that moment.

"Well, now," says Wayne. "Well, now."

#

Alcoholics run in families. I shift in my seat and study the speaker standing before us at the podium.

"Hi. My name is Ed, and I'm an alcoholic."

Hi, Ed. Welcome to hell.

Elaine sits next to me, pretty in her navy work suit. She has a paisley scarf in blues and pinks and purples tied jauntily around her neck. She cuts me a quick smile. Her eyes are watching the latest poor loser unload on us, but she's got a little smile about her lips and her cheeks are flushed with color. She's going to see her children, and she cannot stop smiling. Looking at her hurts my eyes.

I try to focus but instead fidget and survey the room. These are mainly good folks, all of us in various stages of hell. The speaker is fresh out of rehab, nervous but full of that starry-eyed hope they jack them up with at the center before they dump them into the world. I hate to burst your bubble, Ed, but the world is the same mother-fucking place that led you to drink. And it'll seem so much colder, now that you're sober.

Elaine normally sits there listening attentively to their stories, encouraging them with a sympathetic nod or a smile. But I can feel that she isn't watching Ed at all. I turn from Ed and observe her for a moment. She is jotting notes on a little card, and I can make them out from next to her: *Ask Katie about the dog*. She shakes her head slightly and crosses it out. She catches me reading it and looks startled. Frowning, she whispers almost soundlessly, "What if the dog is dead?" Then, ignoring me, she jots down some more notes: *Ask Josh what he wants for his birthday. Does he still play soccer?*

My mouth goes dry, and I force my focus back on Ed's story, because I cannot sit and watch Elaine pour her heart out on a three-by-five index card that any cruel hand could easily rip into pieces. I have learned a thing or two about the dangers of hope through these years.

The fact that we are here instead of at a bar, drunk at home, or on the streets, does say something about all of us. I am proud of myself for this fact. I only wish I could ignore the feeling that creeps over me most days about three in the afternoon, when the clock seems to stop and my co-workers'

chatter strikes the inside of my jittery brain until I want to scream. I usually go out for a quick smoke. What I really want is a drink.

When will the cravings go away? They all stare at me with pity.

I tell my story. I am Angela, and I am an alcoholic. I come by it rightly, though. You can say that it's my birthright. I am not hiding behind genetics or family history. I admit my own failings. I just don't know how to fix them, and that is why I'm here.

My story does not elicit the same kind of sympathy as does the next speaker, a tearful confession from the Assistant Pastor who is mother to five small children, but no one flinched when I spoke, and that is more than I've had from anyone in this journey. In fact, this is the only place where I am just like everyone else. Addiction—the great equalizer. The Pastor's father was a drunk and his father before him. We have a whole New Testament's lineage of drunks in here, and I am suddenly overwhelmed by compassion and love. I sniffle, and Elaine quietly hands me a tissue. I am filled with my love for her.

"I wish you were my sister," I say as we walk out together. The night is cool, and, for once, the city streets seem less angry.

She gives me a little hug, and I am left with the lingering scent of hairspray. Female friendships are new again, too, and I cannot believe my good fortune to have Elaine sponsor me. Some of the others in our group are brusque or overly solicitous or are twelve-stepping it and dragging you through each one like huskies through snow. Elaine knows the times when I need distance and the days when what I really need is to be reeled back in.

"Good luck on your visit." I try and say it casually. I don't want to jinx it.

"Yeah, thanks," she answers softly. "I can't believe he's finally going to let me see them."

I know also what she's not saying, that it's what keeps her going. Not the Twelve Steps. Not the AA meetings or her sobriety or her job. This hope, this dream to see her kids, to have them love and respect her again.

And she looks so vulnerable under the streetlight that I feel a turn; I'm now the older sister and I'm terrified for her. We part with a wave and rush to our cars. We can't afford more sentimentality than that, but in our hearts we know what it means to us, having someone understand without judging. A true friend when you are among the lowest forms of humanity on Earth. I hope she knows. I have never been good at these kinds of things, and I am so damn tired of fucking everything up.

#

Saturdays always stretch on long and empty without the defining structure of work. I spend the day smoking cigarettes and doing my small pile of laundry, alternating between looking forward to Jeremy's ceremony and dreading it. And somehow, in the end, I still run out of time. With a rush, I throw on my best work uniform—clean navy pants and a bulky sweater in

which to hide.

Jeremy meets me at the door to the high school auditorium, and I could kiss him for not making me wend my way through the rows of people. I look around the bright room, the lights too hot, too many people. He is wearing khakis and a white shirt. He is clean-shaven and looks handsome, even with the bristly haircut and piercings. I am proud and terrified.

I really don't want to sit with Mitch and Kristin, but of course Jeremy leads me through the middle of a row to where Mitch has set up the tripod for his camera, Kristin slim and cool in a simple black dress next to him. Jeremy sits on the end so that he can get out if called to the front, and I am stuck scooching down the aisle next to Kristin. I manage a little hello and wave to each of them and settle back. I hope the ceremony starts soon because I don't want to make small talk. I wish I could focus on the young people poised for great things, but I feel out of control, jumpy. That makes me think of Elaine and her visit. I try not to worry for her.

The ceremony begins with speeches and inspirational songs from the school choir. I focus on my breathing because I can't look at Kristin, mildly interested in the goings-on, one arm resting lightly on Mitch's arm. Mitch is the one I'm watching, and I see him practice with his zoom lens, his head bent intently. He shoots me a smile. I wish I could've lived up to what he'd wanted me to be. Why he doesn't hate me more I don't know. It would be easier.

Then I glance at Jeremy, and my heart sinks. I wish I were closer to him. He sits at the edge of the row, tapping his foot. He's trying to act as if he doesn't care, but of course he does. The thing that's getting to me, is how much he reminds me of me, all that wanting, that uncontrollable raw yearning.

The ceremony, like all of these kinds of things, goes on forever. Preliminary remarks finally over, the awards start up, and now I am feeling truly claustrophobic, imagining the stares of all the people on my gaunt face, my limp, shine-less hair. Kristin sighs and looks annoyed as I squirm and shift and hunt for mints in my purse. I feel an urge to bolt, to run. To get the hell away from Kristin, sitting so stiff and unbending next to me. But I stay.

My phone buzzes, and I am furious at myself for not turning it off. I glance at it. Shit. Elaine. I look around panicky. I am hemmed in by a whole row of raptly attentive people on my right and by Kristin, Mitch, and Jeremy on my left. The speaker announces Jeremy's category, and I contemplate the phone, which is still buzzing. Kristin shoots me a pointed look. I turn the phone off and shove it in my purse. I will not miss this.

Jeremy is poised for flight, and I can't look. This is not the most important event in his life, but it is one that I am sharing. They call the third-place winner, a perky brunette. Jeremy is looking concerned when second place falls to another girl. Between my anxiety and the tense silence of the crowd, I can barely stay seated. When they finally do call Jeremy's name, I leap up, clapping, watching him take the award plaque, his father clicking

beside us like a maniac.

I relax through the rest of the ceremony, drained. I've made it. We chat in the hallway afterwards, posing for pictures, congratulating Jeremy.

"I'm so proud of you," I say, when I get him alone a minute.

He nods, and I can tell that he is happy I came, but I also see something else and it fills me with impotent dread. "Man, I could sure use a smoke," he whispers.

I let them go celebrate at a fancy restaurant. They don't really want me there, though they politely ask. I make my way alone to my car, dodging chattering groups of parents and students. I fumble for my phone and check voicemail as the other cars scatter into the night.

Elaine's message begins tentatively, and I can tell that she is reluctant to reach into my day with Jeremy. It is all the more heartbreaking for its unwilling need, and I listen to it again before I dial her.

"Angie, I know it's Jeremy's big day. Still," and she's sobbing, "I would appreciate it if you could call me when you can. He didn't bring them. He said they didn't want to see me. Twenty-three months and it didn't mean a goddamn thing! We're just drunks. You were right, Angie." The message stops.

She does not pick up. I lean my forehead against the cool glass of the window. To be honest, I am worn out from the drama of the day, and I waver for a moment. Elaine would never burden me, I realize, and it hits me like a slap to the face as I pull myself together. I try to reach her one last time as I pull out of the parking lot and head towards her apartment, her perky invitation to leave a message on the answering machine discordant and worrisome. I am keenly aware, as I hit the interstate ramp, that I am the only one she can call on a lonely Saturday night.

Her stupid son-of-a-bitch ex-husband. What a bastard. I suck on a cigarette and curse him as I fight the weekend traffic, when I remember the little index cards. What did she do with them? Will she throw them away or save them? Either way, the thought opens up a wormhole for pain to crash through, and the road before me grows watery and unstable, the other cars swimming in a sea of merging images. I blink hard, and the road stabilizes under the firm foundation of anger. That son-of-a-bitch.

When I pull up, I am not alone. My heart is pounding, and I can't see straight as I run, cutting through two policemen huddled in a conference, almost smashing into the paramedics who are backing out of her doorway with a stretcher. I stop and refuse to see what they are carrying. It's obscene, and I scream at them to stop. And they do stop because now I am crying and screaming and cursing. A policeman steps up to intercede.

I ignore them and move towards the gurney. I reach over and touch her arm. Stay, I want to say, but she is already cool under her blouse, the pretty pink one I liked so much. I pick up her arm and put it back on the

stretcher. They'd let her body flop around as they'd loaded her, indifferently; just another dead drunk, one more meaningless Saturday night statistic. She lay sprawled across the mattress, the drape strewn haphazardly so all the neighbors could see the gaping hole in her head.

They're all quiet now, watching me. They are not unused to the stench of gore and blood mixed with the tart sting of gunpowder, and they stand around thinking of where they will have dinner after they are done here. My stomach turns, but what I feel is far worse. What they don't smell, but I do above the sickly odor of the booze, is the fresh scent of her hairspray, applied in a brave and futile surge of hope.

I reach over and tuck her in securely, and then I let them leave. Suddenly I notice the collision of colors and the world is awash in a rainbow of lights—red and blue, yellow and white—as the ambulance slowly pulls away into the silence of the night. And I remembered how I used to tuck Jeremy in when he was little, all of that energy finally winded down and how he was drowsy with little boy warmth. And then I would go have a drink.

Lindsay Adkins is a poet, screenwriter, and actress currently living on the East End of Long Island, where she is pursuing her MFA at Stony Brook Southampton. Her poetry has appeared in Gamut, Sugar House Review, Sequestrum, Vine Leaves Literary Journal, and Right Hand Pointing, among others.

Color-Blind at the Beach

Lindsay Adkins

My nieces and nephews catch comb
jellyfish in the shallow bayside water,
plop them in their buckets, lay them
between their legs in the sand.

I have said, *Red means*
venomous, sting. Clear is
okay. So they push fingers
into the mushy, faceless bodies.

I should tell the children more
about the glassy globs. I should
say, *Children, this cute ctenophore*
is both boy and girl, or neither.

I should say, *You see, it doesn't*
give a shit whether its cilia and
gonads light up blue or pink
at night. I should say, *Stop*

when the boys start pressing them
into their hair, spikey with sand and
saltwater, and whipping them into
the surf—projectile translucence. Or

when the girls start cupping them to
their cheeks for kisses so hard the
stickiness oozes between their fingers
and they shriek, turn, smile at the sun.

Instead I say, *I am sorry, little jellies,*
that the last thing you'll see before
slipping apart is the pink of a lip,
a cheek, an open palm, or the

blue of a pail, lifted to the blue of
the sky, lashed to the blue of
the water. And then I remember,
they don't have eyes anyway.

Annie Blake is an Australian writer who started school as an ESL student. She was raised, and continues to live in, a multicultural and industrial location in the West of Melbourne. She is a wife and mother of five children. Her main interests include psychoanalysis, metaphysics, and metacognition.

The Lament Of Dead Women

Annie Blake

I was in a prison. Sometimes it looked like a hospital. I didn't like hospitals. They reminded me of the panic associated with confiding in my mother. For some reason, she thought I was made of clothes. She wrung my insides like a screw. I have white coat syndrome. Doctors are like clowns. They look happy. But they have a knack for killing people.

#

A nurse was looking after me. Nurses were usually softer. Even though I was terminally ill, her mouth was like a guitar strung with a decisive and colorful vocal range. She counseled me like I was going to live forever. I told her I needed to fill my belly with living things.

#

Finnbar, the man I slept with didn't know he missed his mother. When he was born she couldn't convert her colostrum into anything thicker. So now he's pissed and bites all his wives. He's very childish that way. He's such a sucker. He still wants milk from someone. But he doesn't get that wives are supposed to be beyond that.

#

When she asked him if he would fill her belly, he agreed. So he made her lie down with him. I watched them. Her face glowed. Then she cried. Sweaty laps of fear swirled inside me like a soft serve. I begged him to stop. Like a child watching her father hurt her mother. But I was invisible. I saw him scalp her with his teeth.

#

Till her eyes were blind.

#

No one believed me when I told them it was wrong. In fact, a lot of people were watching. Even the nurse said some deaths were merciful. I was cold and spiky with dissonance. I kept seeing her. In flashes. The place her mind was spilt. Her pillow. Water places like the bathtub and laundry sink were like mirrors following me. She used to sit close to the warmth of the oven to fill her belly. I felt like an earthquake.

#

I kept hiding Finnbar's kitchen knives and scalpels. He tried to justify himself. He assured me she was half-dead anyway. She would never have survived a birth.

But I saw her. Her eyes moved around even though she was dead. They were open in her skull after she howled the last time. I remember now. I had long fingers. I didn't realize I was a midwife. And I saved what she made. What they both made. But Finnbar was oblivious.

#

I sang to the child every day. I was surprised she was half Anglo and half Indian. She was a beautiful mix. Her hair reminded me of black cats. And when she became a woman, I bought her a gold serpent to wear around her arm.

#

I wanted Finnbar too. I missed him. I was still waiting for him to abjure his tendency to cut out living things from his body. He was glassy-eyed these days. Like he was stoned. He walked around with a permanent smile on his face like a ventriloquist's puppet. His eyes didn't smile along with his mouth. We were separated by a fuzzy wall. Like a wall made of tracing paper. I kept trying to trace something with my pencil—trying to spread this wall out on the grass. Sometimes it felt stony like a threshing floor. I kept getting the picture of a star.

#

The woman who was terminally ill came back. I was floored. She was sitting on a throne. She pinned my star on top of her head. I walked up to her. Maybe I was hallucinating. She said she didn't like being dead. I gaped at her and she laughed.

#

She was smoking up. I sucked in my face to blow into the crackly fur of her hair. She smiled and said that the contour of my face was finally visible. Her hair was changing—succulent flames that pond the blood of beetroot on tongues. Hell was burning her bright.

#

Finnbar came in. He was excited to see her again. Initially, I was confused because he didn't look guilty. And his eyes joined in with his smile. Even his hair started to sprout. I didn't know he had yellow hair. I stroked his face. I loved him. I told him he no longer had to worry about obsessions during the day and bad dreams while he slept.

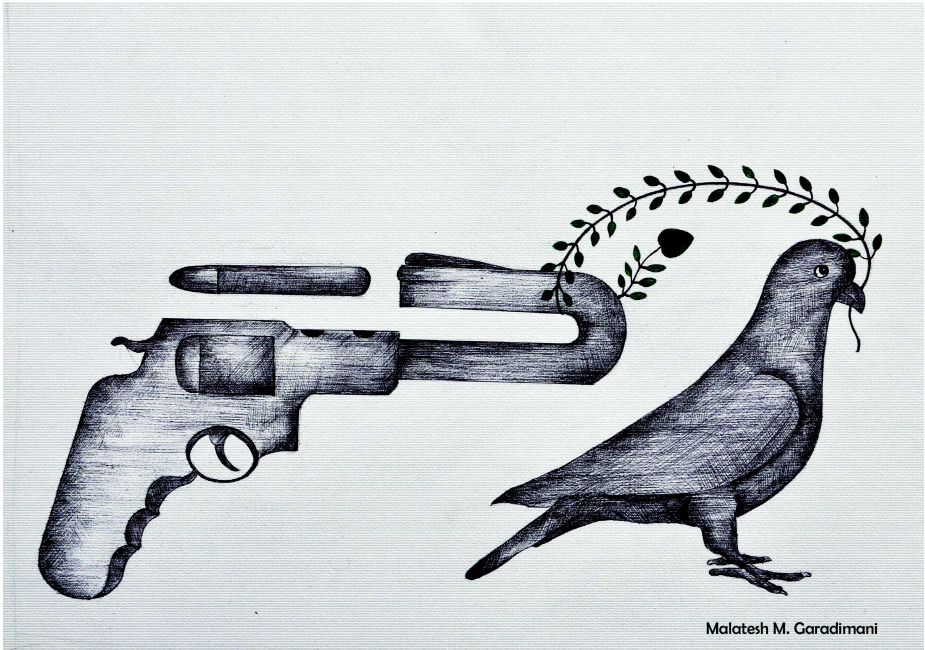
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All of us were there. We curled our hands in our hands. We were ululating like American Indians. We made love. Because we survived the scalping.

#

And became a coronation of hair.

Malatesh M. Garadimani



My Dream of Peaceful life

