
NEW
LOOK
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The Corner Club Press
where poetry and fiction converge

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Editor's Note

Finding hope when all the lights go out . . .

Alana Lopez, Executive Editor
The Corner Club Press

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Firstly, I will take this opportunity to welcome our newest member of staff, Tiffany Wang, to The Corner Club Press. This issue, which is surprisingly full, wouldn't have happened without her.

Originally, being so close to Halloween, which marks the slow descent into the winter months, this issue was going to be an homage supernatural fantasy, and the way words can tantalize and scare the senses. While we still have a few supernatural gems throughout, the larger thematic overtures that have appeared in this issue demonstrate that the true darkness of this world is entirely human in origin.

Yuan's *Autumn Evening* is the perfect opening to this issue, setting the scene for the closing of a season and the approaching darkness to come. The world becomes still, but restless, a sentiment seemingly echoed in Nims' *Good Night America,* Bazilian's *Faith,* and Donahue's *Here's the Church, Here's the Steeple.* In these pieces, we see the fragile façade of our finely constructed reality crumbled by the underlying violence it represses.

With Middleton-Watts' *Unfed Words,* we begin our dark decent into horror, of how the narratives that we tell ourselves have become unfit for purpose, have become like

shadow animals that haunt and prey, instead of comfort. The power of words is a definite through-line is issue, articulated in Bella's *I can go home again to the dark palette* as changeable by memory. Hicks' *Beauty Always Wins* illustrates how the corrupting power of our own narratives absorb and cripple, not only ourselves but each other. As Bella's *Short of Instincts* describes so eloquently, our words are ravenous "like an animal that hasn't eaten in days".

Image by Ryan McGuire, gratisography.com

Levine's *Her Blue Hair* and Schuett's *Bulkhead Doors* explore that origin narrative of companionship which often ends in lovers blindly navigating a world that seeks to destroy them. However, DeWeerd's *Familiar* reminds us that, despite differences, understanding can span the seemingly unbridgeable divide between lovers and friends.

Grayhurst's *Enslaved* and Hansen's *Limbo* serve us a turn, exploring the hopelessness of our living memories as justified lies to escape the reality of our mortality. This theme resonates in the poetry and stories that follow. Mc Ivor's *The King of the Dead* and Wang's *The Lost Boy*, which consider the decision of waiting for change in different ways—show us that in our darkest moments, we must somehow find the strength to continue within ourselves. Cullingford's *The Bewitching Hour* reminds us, the living have no choice but to "perfect the art of existence" at the break of day.

It is here with MacKenzie-Hutchison's *Final Verse* that we begin to see the benefit of uncovering and investigating our pasts; sometimes changing the narrative can fill us with enduring hope for the future. Telfort's timely redefinition of *Hope* allows us to appreciate the familial divide in Ha's *The General is Sleeping* with new eyes. We have suffered, now we see. Beautifully finished by Scott's *Longing Days,* we can look to the past without fear. With perspective, we can give life to new and beautiful moments.

Sincerely,

Alana Lopez

Executive Editor and Graphics Designer

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Autumn Evening

Changming Yuan

Sky and sea are zipped closed
By a flock of migratory birds

Beyond the groves of maple trees
The blood of the season gets dry

Dusk becomes deadly stagnant, as
The skyline is trimmed by darkness

Good Night America, March 6, 1975

Carolyn Nims

"I'm sorry, little lady, but your uncle just isn't interested in these questions anymore." As he climbed down from the roof with the empty paint bucket, his bulk shot shudders down the ladder. "A long time ago, I guess your uncle just decided what was what and stopped thinking about *does God exist?* And *where do we go when we die?* Hell, I don't even give a shit if I have free will."

"Nothing's free." I had heard it in a movie. "And God does exist, and he's an ass. I hate him." I spat on the grass, but I couldn't muster my brother's boogery globs.

Hunched, Uncle Felix grunted and rubbed his knees. "Language, little lady, and mind getting your uncle a beer?"

*

Mom unplugged the TV after Dad died. When Uncle Felix came to fix up the house, she told him she didn't want me and Jack to hearing any more of that *horrifying spectacle* on the news. News stations only aired the film past our bedtime, but everyone was talking about it all day. She was talking about JFK's head popping open like a melon, his wife scrambling after the seeds.

The news stations kept playing it over and over until I had the whole scene down like a prayer, but one that would make angels shit themselves. That mist over his head. She didn't know that Jack and I watched it on the late-night news when she was asleep, volume down real low. But now, during the day, our once-burning, blazing, screaming, popping-static TV set was a cold, gray mirror in the living room. Daily, hourly, it showed my mother in her drooping curlers, occasionally with a neighbor.

Occasionally, I would eavesdrop from the upstairs hall. The staircase led right into the living room.

"I *still* think the Russians are going to start a war," Cynthia Orcutt said.

"Oh, I don't know," my mom said. "But I suspected Harry may have had plans to build a bomb shelter."

"Okay, I suppose. The kids have been quiet mostly. Jacky is always off with that weird little kid from the neighborhood—the Krieg's son—with the glass bones, that brittle bone disease. Georgie? Anyway, more Sanka?"

"Would love some. Can you make it iced? I'm still not used to these hot flashes in Florida." Mrs. Orcutt patted her face with a folded paper napkin. Orangey foundation came away. I abandoned my perch at the top of the stairs, silent and on the balls of my feet.

I was playing alone in my room after school, folding Ken and Barbie in their best formalwear into their pink Barbie Dream Car Convertible. Jack and his weird, short friend with glass bones, Georgie, came in.

"The fuck you doing?" Jack squatted down next to me.

"Just playing," I said.

"We can see that," Jack said.

"Well, these are the Kennedys, in their car, and they're about to take a drive in Texas."

"Where's Oswald, then?" Georgie asked, leaning against the doorjamb.

"Who?"

"God, *Lee Harvey* Oswald," my brother said. "The guy who shot JFK, *stupid.*"

I wasn't stupid. I had just forgotten.

"Yeah, so where is he?" Georgie stepped over the pink convertible and took a rabbit off my bed. "Let's have this be Oswald."

"No. His name is Thunder," I said.

"Oh, whatever," Jack said.

Georgie kneeled down next to my bed. "From the edge of the bed here, he's got a clear shot."

Jack thumbed his cheek, his thinking look. "Shouldn't there be someone else?" he asked and looked around. He plucked Scruffy from his perch on the headboard.

"No!" I said. "You're messing up the story!"

If he were still alive, I would have liked my Dad to tell me a fairytale, like this: Once upon a time, there was a handsome king, John of Massachusetts, and his beautiful

queen, Jacqueline. They wore the finest clothes and took rides on boats. The blue of their water was the truest blue. They smiled and waved better than any other couple in the land of America. They had children, toddling around the White House. Over and over, they lived. The screens of all the TVs in the land would never stop showing them living.

"Only idiots believe what they see in the news," is what Uncle Felix says.

"But we *see* it," is what I say.

"As if that makes it's true."

I liked to kneel in the stream behind our house, feeling the cold stones etch into my knees. I'd scrunch the riverbed pebbles in my fists. It was simple and relaxing and the perfect thing for me to be doing when some boys from the neighborhood ran up behind me and slipped worms down the back of my shirt. Squirming, dirty, slimy night-crawlers. The boys screamed, "We're raping you! We're raping you!"

I saw Georgie through the tangle of arms, betraying me.

"Animals," I heard Uncle Felix boom. The animals scattered, and I could see him shirtless in the hot sun. Georgie was slowest. Uncle Felix caught him and bunched up the front of his shirt. He lowered his face into Georgie's. "Who the fuck do you think you are, you little piece of shit?"

When Uncle Felix released Georgie's shirt, with a little shove, Georgie tumbled back, legs kicking up in front and hands reaching back to catch himself. There were something like a pop and a crick, and Georgie's stubby limbs bent impossibly. His pain was big-eyed and breathless. Uncle Felix just looked down, ashamed for him. "Get yourself up." Uncle Felix flung out an arm in a vague direction. "I said move."

Faith

Morgan Bazilian

The images of school children
dead
arms up
like they are resting
stars
everywhere
in the wreckage of a
great plane

With burning rubble
and skin
I am now weakened
and dulled
so much that I do not
feel a thing
at the site of this
carnage

Focusing instead
on my performance
metrics
and rhythms of
holiday planning
and school breaks
and oil changes
“Nothing new

to look at
here”
the signs read
I acquiesce
and turn my head
down
to focus on lines
in the pavement

Here's the Church, Here's the Steeple

Sierra Donahue

If you want the whole truth, the *real* truth, the gritty dirt-under-your-fingernails reality of how Sunday hymns descended to fiery damnation, I won't tell you.

Because no one wants my truth. The happenings of a summer won't fit in a square box with a bow on top. You can't alphabetize sin and heartbreak in the filing system of one's white-steepled life. I used to try.

Instead, I'll tell you what I saw. Listen, then go back to your desk jobs and herb gardens and close all the blinds lest sinners like us slip in.

— 1 —

Reyna had a way of mixing hot chocolate that made people nervous. Each finger gripped the spoon with a grace indicative of prep school penmanship. Her hand swirled from the wrist in a rhythmic pattern, whirlpooling the dark contents of the tall, precarious glass. Then she'd raise the concoction to her lips, and that was the worst of it—the way the chocolate clung to her lip, beckoning the tip of that tongue to move just milliseconds slower than it should have. You'd expect a tongue to show some bashfulness, some common decency.

I thought Mrs Avenly was going to have a heart attack, checking children into nursery and Sunday school, slapping not one but two nametags to Isaiah's shirt.

"Must the refreshments be *this* close to the nursery?" she asked me. "It's not good for the children."

It certainly wasn't good for Mrs Avenly's husband, who waited longer than necessary for his coffee to cool before adding cream. I watched him watching Reyna lick chocolate from her lips. Suddenly, I realized I was no longer thirsty.

— 2 —

His name was Michael Bernard Avenly and he preached every other Sunday. There was no pulpit, not even a raised platform. Common man and all—nobody higher than anyone else in the congregation. Made it damnably hard to see.

My wife and I liked the second row, three seats from the aisle. With clear sight of the door to the lobby, the pacing Avenly, and the approaching tithe basket as it passed from hand to hand, I never doubted my view.

How difficult it is to see, when one thinks he sees everything.

— 3 —

My wife to me in July: "What should we bring to the potluck?"

"I dunno. Anything."

"It worries me . . ."

"What about your quiche?"

"No, not that."

"Don't make this harder than it is."

"I'm not!"

"Everybody loves your quiche. Nothing to worry over."

"But I am worried."

"For Christ's sake."

"Never mind."

— 4 —

That coffee shop on the corner serves lukewarm, overpriced lattes. But it's the least crowded, though not the quietest.

"I just don't know if I love her anymore."

Pastors need to find a better spot for marriage counseling.

I sipped my cooling latte and failed at trying not to listen. I considered coughing loudly, proving I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but already the noise was escalating. The

two at the corner table, Pastor Avenly and another, fatter man I didn't recognize, droned on and on, sticking me to my seat with words of ugly confession I didn't want to hear.

The pulpit practiced voice started, crumpled, then started again:

"I . . . I just, I . . . I'm seeing someone else."

Hypnosis finally shattered, I jolted from my seat and out the door before the words I tried not to hear chased their way into my memory.

Forgetting proved futile.

— 5 —

Me to my wife in August: "I think you're right."

"I hope not."

"Me too."

— 6 —

Isaiah apologized for the smear on his crayon coloring of Noah's ark.

I asked him if he spilled a drop of water in the corner. He shook his head.

"Mrs Avenly has allergies. That's why she cries so much."

— 7 —

The only one laughing was Reyna.

At least, so my wife told me after scrounging bits from the weekly women's group.

"Hellfire and gnashing of teeth—you'd think that's all they think about!" my wife growled before flicking on an episode of *Gotham*.

Screaming teeth and flames rose from the hot chocolate oceans of my dreams. After hours of darkness, I carried the phone to the back porch. I sat, waiting for courage or dawn, but dawn came first.

A woman's voice answered on the fourth ring.

"Hello?"

I told myself I was surprised to hear her voice. I was still very good at lying to myself.

"I'm trying to reach Pastor Avenly."

"Oh."

I pictured the tongue on those lips and forced myself to stay on the phone until his voice came through, sure and Sunday-morning bright. A pulpit voice.

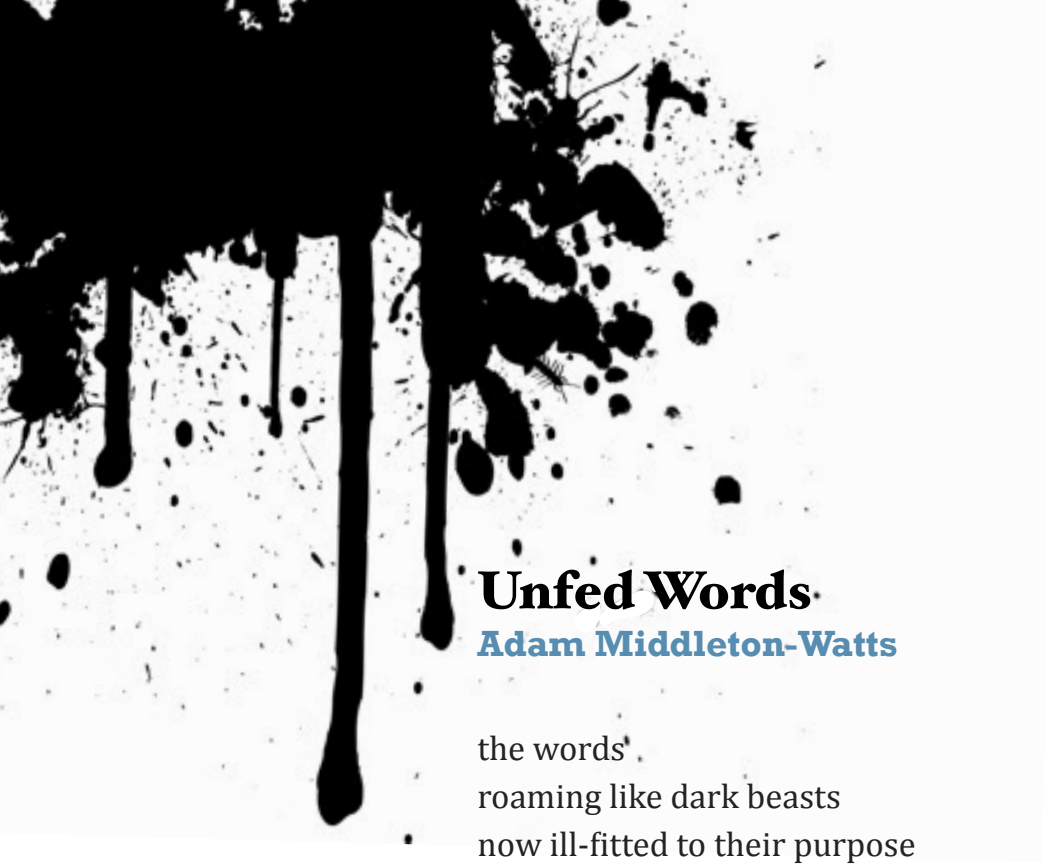
I hung up.

— 8 —

His name is Caiden James MacOwen and he preaches every Sunday. Mrs MacOwen checks the children into nursery and Sunday school.

When I suggested we move the refreshments nearer the seating, nobody objected, not even the new chapped-lip twenty-something pouring coffee. I thought it'd make me feel better, but it didn't.

And all my hallelujahs rang hollow.



Unfed Words

Adam Middleton-Watts

the words
roaming like dark beasts
now ill-fitted to their purpose
having lost their original intent
they shimmer like desert fictions
picking at their fangs with claws
no less hazardous a tool than misery
squatting in the corners of late night
indecision
wondering if they will ever be
used right
or used at all
waiting
they remain swollen
and agitated
while darkness protects their form

they have no better place to be


LOONAKI

I can go home again to the dark palette

Lana Bella

I feed him formless nouns
and fractured verbs,
as dark ink tips their wings
over my unfinished poem
then glides across the pages
like a dim sea.
He lays below,
waiting for the thickly settled slate
to nudge around my skillful hand,
trickling down his open lips—

when the waxlike skin on my wrist
moves into profile against the black river,
consuming just about all the polymeric resins
and carbon black in its wake,
leaving the stack of words short of breath,
a strange beauty, this,
can still be sought in this landscape
where odd verbiages are allowed
to grow and reshape
their contents and effects,
tricking the memory
into thinking back to those letters
that are long unread
with stagnant sentiments.

Beauty Always Wins

David Hicks

In Grand Junction, Colorado, the Green River and Colorado River meet, flow side by side, then converge; the former is silty and insecure, the latter sexy and confident, sparkling with its own potential. It seems impossible that the two rivers could blend, but follow them for a few hundred yards and you'll see it happen: the silt from the Green sifts and dissipates, settling into the dirty banks where the tamaracks choke out the cottonwoods, while the Colorado swells into its own magnificence, filtering and casting out the intruding river even as it absorbs it.

*

In the hallway of Grand Junction High School, Cheri Tyler stood by her locker, flipping through the April 21st edition of the school newspaper, the *Orange-and-Black*, with her best friend Sunny Rice. Cheri was small, or she liked to say, petite. She was an accomplished cheerleader—she was the one tossed up in the air in the center of the court during timeouts—an ardent fan of "Scandal", an open devotee of that rap artist Caitlin saw, or the band I follow on Twitter, and a closet fan of an old band called The Smiths.

She found the results of the Senior Poll on page 4, underneath an article called "To Tan or Not to Tan". When she saw that she had won Class Cutest, she let out a gasp. And look! Sunny had won Prettiest. Cheri pointed this out to her friend and bounced on the balls of her feet while continuing to scan the list, and as she did so, Cheri realized that Prettiest was far better than Cutest. Indeed, Prettiest was the Holy Grail of the Senior Class Poll. And—was this a good thing?—she had also won Class Flirt.

"OMG," Cheri said. "Do I really flirt that much?"

"Hey, I won School Spirit too!" Sunny said, pointing. She swept back her blonde hair and patted Cheri's shoulder. "Flirting is good," she said. "It means you're outgoing."

"Then why didn't I get Most Outgoing?"

"Ugh," Sunny snorted. "They give that to the Girl Scouts. It's like winning Miss

Congeniality." She pointed to the newspaper. "See—Marcie Steele got it. Like she's sooo friendly. Like she's everyone's besty."

"Please," Cheri said. "I saw her after Math and she was all, 'Good morning, Cheryl!' and I was like, 'you *wish*'."

Just then, she spotted Hank Mason lumbering down the hall. In a sea of students in a sea of colors—teal, faded maroon, even some tie-dye—Hank's enormous red head stood out, bobbing undeviatingly in Cheri's direction.

Hank Mason, senior shot-putter, car mechanic, *bon vivant,* winner of not a single Senior Poll award, took off his Big O Tires cap and swept it through the air with a bow—but alas, Cheri turned her back just as he began his *grand geste*. He was wearing the overalls his mother had purchased at Frank's Big & Tall in Carbondale, along with a plaid flannel shirt, both faded, both stained with smudges of dirt and engine oil. He worked after-school at Big O, but it was his ambition to someday be employed at Berthod Motors, where they serviced farm equipment. Eventually he might parlay this into a career at John Deere Agri Services up in Fort Collins, but that was just pie-in-the-sky for now. Hank was big, he was a big young man, and more than anything else—more than mastering Grand Theft Auto V, more than watching Carlos Gonzalez blast a home run over the right-centerfield wall at Coors Field—he loved to fix big machinery. Not cars, not SUVs, not "vehicles". Machinery. Like tractors. Like combines.

A half-step behind Hank was his best friend Jason, commonly known as Ferret. Nearly a foot shorter than Hank, Ferret wore slouched and dirty jeans, with the waistband of his plaid boxers exposed, and a tee shirt that read "Does Not Play Well with Others". Ferret nodded towards Sunny and Cheri, his hands crammed into his pockets. "Nice jeans," he mumbled so that only Hank could hear.

Cheri, who was seventeen but could pass for thirteen, wore Lucky jeans, and wore them tight. Once, while hanging out at Riverside Park after work, Ferret had demonstrated to Hank what it must entail for Cheri to put them on every morning: he lay on the grass, squirming and thrashing, pretending to tug on his skintight jeans as Hank roared with laughter. Then Ferret pretended to stand before a full-length mirror, looking back over his shoulder to see how firmly they contoured his backside.

"Top of the morning, ladies," Hank said as he placed his Big O cap back on his massive head. He slid his forefinger along his upper lip, then scratched a scab on his bicep. Hank had eczema. Blotching his bulky arms and legs were over a dozen scabs, one of them now glimmering with a fresh droplet of blood.

"So, what did you win, Cheri," Ferret said. "Most Likely to . . . Marry Abe?" They had already seen the poll results, and Ferret had told Hank what he was going to say: "Hey Cheri, what'd you win, Most Likely to Marry a Pothead?" (her boyfriend, Abiel, was the biggest stoner at school) or "Most Likely to Get Breast Implants?" (but Hank scowled and told him that was way too mean) or "Most Likely to Move to California?" But Ferret had apparently panicked upon delivery.

"Cutest and Prettiest," Cheri said, pointing first to herself, then to Sunny, who was exactly six inches taller than she was but only thirteen pounds heavier. "Now go away, Ferret. And good day to you, Gerald."

Cheri was the only person besides Hank's mother who called Hank by his birth name. That's because they had known each other practically their whole lives. In second grade, as the two new students in their class at New Hope Elementary, they had walked to school together, eaten lunch together, played together at recess, and did their homework together after school. Nobody knew this, not even Ferret, but in the drawer of Hank's nightstand were two photos: one of Hank's father, standing by his tractor, the other of Cheri and Hank at Hank's eighth birthday party. In it, Hank's hair was bright orange; Cheri's shimmering black, with a pink ribbon. They stood side-by-side as he blew out the candles on the cake, her mouth in the shape of an O as if she were helping him out. But in the ensuing years, Hank's father had died, Cheri's parents divorced, her mother moved to California, and the lovelier Cheri became, the bigger and uglier grew Hank. By the time they entered high school, Cheri was 4' 11", 92 pounds, and dazzlingly cute, with olive skin, white teeth, and a fetching mole on her chin, whereas Hank had swelled to 226 pounds, with hair that had devolved into a patch of mangled weeds. By then, Cheri had not only abandoned their friendship but had ceased to acknowledge they had ever had one.

As Cheri and Sunny walked into their English class, they found Ms. Mattingly distributing a quiz on the story they had been assigned, about a snotty but cute high-

school girl who meets a thirty-something poser whose apparent intention is to rape her. After a year of snoozer "classics" like *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Awakening*, Cheri had finally found a story she liked, so on the way to class she had decided that this would be the day she'd win some participation points. But as usual, after taking longer than anyone else to finish the quiz, Hank launched right into his analysis before Ms. Mattingly could even finish asking, "So what'd you guys think?" The moral of the story, he posited (even though he was perfectly aware that according to Ms. Mattingly, there were no morals in literary fiction), was that if girls could get the opportunity to develop a real self, a self with some depth, then they might not be targeted by predators like Arnold Friend—which, Hank pointed out, any dyslexic could easily read as *An old Fiend*, as in . . . Satan!

"Because as we all know," he added, "beauty is only, um, skin deep."

"You wish," Cheri said under her breath, and Sunny snickered.

Ms. Mattingly turned to them. "Cheri," she said, "Would you like to contribute to our conversation in a more meaningful way?"

"No thank you, Miss M," Cheri said, opening her eyes wide for her.

They could shimmer like moonlight dancing on a river, those eyes, and Cheri knew how to accentuate them, as her mother had taught her, with black eyeliner, mascara, and a touch of sparkle. She maintained her smooth complexion by refraining from oily foods, often skipping lunch instead of indulging in the cafeteria's cheesy fries or greasy burgers. Occasionally, if she ever had food that was super yummy but bad for her, like a Sonic chili dog or an entire row of Oreos, she compensated by way of an "expulsion", but she wasn't a bulimic; she just knew how to manage her appearance. In this way too she was like her mother, whom Cheri referred to as "the Traitor". When her parents divorced and her mother had decided to move back to San Diego where she was from, Cheri's father had won custody, and when Cheri was allowed to make her own decision about where to go to high school, she had chosen to stay in Colorado rather than move to California. When her mother tearfully asked why, Cheri said, "Because Daddy has more money."

"Except," Cheri added to Ms. Mattingly, "that the whole thing is obviously the mother's fault."

When Ms. Mattingly asked her to defend that "rather absolute reading" of the story, Cheri started to explain that the mother was jealous of her daughter, who was prettier than she was, so she constantly disrespected her, which was why the poor girl felt so insecure and lonely and why she didn't just tell the creepy perv to take a hike—but then the bell rang and Ms. Mattingly, who had been listening intently, raised her arms in frustration and dismissed them.

After English, Hank ought to have made his way to Algebra, but it was 10:45 and he had forgotten to take his Adderall, so he detoured down the hall to use the bathroom by the band room, the only one at school with a lock. He swallowed his pill, then put his hands on the sink and stared into the mirror. A pimple had sprouted in the middle of his nose, pink and rubbery, the kind that was best to leave alone. He washed his face, dried off his skin, and stared at it again. Then, since he thought he saw a bit of a whitehead, he squeezed it with his two index fingers, and when he did so his finger slipped, his fingernail dug off a bit, and a bright pool of blood bubbled out. He spent the next five minutes tamping down on it with toilet paper and running water over it, and by the time he felt ready to go back out into the hallway, he was late to class. He kept his head down as he lumbered to his seat.

After cheerleading practice, Cheri and Sunny went straight to Cheri's house. Upstairs, Cheri fell onto her bed and opened her MacBook to check her Tumblr page, while Sunny slumped into the leather desk chair, opened Netflix on the iMac, and started watching Season 1, episode 10 of "Pretty Little Liars". Both had their iPhones at the ready, and Cheri saw Sunny's lighting up, again and again, with incoming texts and Snapchats, while hers buzzed only twice—texts from Abiel, the first telling her he was "at the park", which meant he was getting high, the second to say that all day long he had suffered the indignity of being the boyfriend of the Class Flirt, and there was only one way for her to make it up to him.

When Sunny took a call, Cheri flipped over to Facebook and saw a notification that she had been tagged—again—in one of her mother's posts, a #TBT photo of Cheri when she was a five-year-old, leaning toward her mother, her lips pursed, her

chubby cheeks puffed. Her mother was beaming in expectation of the kiss. Cheri felt the familiar surge in her chest and quickly shut her laptop.

Sunny had been murmuring into her phone while keeping her eyes on the show, but now she stood up, widened her eyes at Cheri, and walked around the room saying "Really? Really?" When she hung up, she told Cheri that Ryan, her boyfriend, had just landed a job at Western Alliance, which started right after graduation, and this meant they were probably going to be engaged soon. Cheri, who had known this was coming, pretended to sigh with envy. "You're so lucky," she said as she pressed the "Ignore" button on her phone—Abiel again; he knew her father didn't get home until seven and probably wanted to come over, but Cheri hated how he smelled after he smoked. "Abey doesn't know what he's doing," she said. "Go to college, work for his father, play football, not play football . . ." She tossed the phone onto her bed. "He's got a free ride to CSU and he doesn't even know if he wants to go!"

"What a loser," Sunny said, then covered her mouth and giggled.

"Watch it," Cheri said, but then she put on a bright smile to show she wasn't really mad. "Prettiest," she said.

Sunny, now standing at the foot of Cheri's bed, grinned back. "Cutest."

"Hey," Cheri said. "Why didn't one of *us* get Best Body?" She laughed to show she meant Sunny, not herself.

"Good point," Sunny said. "What is not totally perfect about *this*?" She flipped back her hair and put her hands on her hips—tall and lean, with golden skin, and a white tank top that emphasized her new breast implants, a gift from her mother for her 18th birthday.

"Or *this*?" Cheri said, lying back and putting her arm behind her head in a mock-seductive pose—but then she quickly laughed, sat up, and covered herself. She didn't have much of a chest, there were moles all over her skin, she needed to paint her nails, and her boyfriend really was a loser compared to Sunny's. So.

After track practice, Hank headed to the boys' locker room. They had one meet left, the State relays, and he had a good chance at medaling in the shotput and an outside chance in the javelin. On his locker, someone had taped a cartoon of a man facing an archery target and squeezing a chest zit so that the pus splattered directly onto the

bulls-eye. Hank tugged it off his locker, folded it in quarters, and threw it away. “Very funny,” he said to nobody in particular as he put on his flip-flops and shuffled toward the showers.

“My god,” someone mumbled. “What’d you do, pick your nose with a fork?”

Hank hung his towel and turned the knob so that the water came out hot. He stood facing the torrent, letting it wash over his nose.

“Hey, Hank,” said Ryan Isley, the team’s best sprinter, “is that a dick between your legs or did your balls sneeze?”

“That’s clever, Ryan,” Hank said, keeping his face to the showerhead.

“Clever?” snorted Ryan. “Is that a word faggots use?”

“You are what you eat!” Ferret yelled out as he came into the shower area. Hank turned to see Ryan rush at Ferret, lift him by the underarms, and slam him into the tile wall.

“What’s that supposed to mean, Ferret?”

Hank cleared his throat. *Knock it off!* he wanted to say—it was his father’s expression—but instead he turned his face back to the water. Hank had no memory of his father’s normal voice. Either the man had been silent or he had been yelling.

“Try doing this to Hank,” Ferret grunted. Then his towel fell to the floor, and everyone in the locker area erupted in laughter.

Hank knew that Ferret was probably expecting him to help, but he kept his face to the water, his eyes closed. He was picturing his father in the field, an old film on perpetual replay. His father had bled to death out there over the course of an afternoon, until his mother had awakened from her nap, shut off the Christian radio station, and wondered why the combine hadn’t moved. What a severed artery can do, Hank would learn in Biology. What a scream for help sounds like from a hundred acres away, he would never know.

Or maybe he did. He’d been in the living room playing a video game that day. Maybe he’d heard his father’s cries, faint and forlorn, or desperate and enraged, but hadn’t wanted to wake his mother, who had gotten sick with his birth and had stayed sick ever since. Maybe he had just kept his eyes on the screen, hoping the cries would go away, until they finally did.

Or maybe there had been no cry at all.

The water washed over Hank's ears, shutting out the collective noise of the shower, the hyena-like laughter of Ryan Isley and his friends, Ferret turning on a shower with his head down, the phantom echo of his father's cry.

When Cheri's father arrived home, long after Sunny had left and just minutes after Cheri had shooed away Abiel, she was ready to brag to him about winning Class Cutest, but when he came into her room, he was holding a letter that had arrived from Colorado State University. Cheri had applied to six different colleges, three in southern California and three in Colorado, but so far she had been accepted to only one, San Diego State. As she read it, her eyes wide, her father went into his den and came back with a gleaming American Express Gold Card with her name on it. "I'll take care of tuition," he said. "And this is for books, a new laptop, anything else you'll need. Congratulations, honey."

After he left, Cheri kept staring at the letter, wondering why she hadn't received a cheerleading scholarship, as Sunny had. But that was probably something you had to apply for when you filled out your application. She let the letter fall onto her bed and closed her door, texted her friends with the news, posted it on Facebook, and right after she did that her mother "liked" the post and then called her. Her mother had never even graduated high school, but Cheri was surprised to find herself not boasting but crying, before she could even say hello.

"I'm so proud of you, my little Cereza," her mother said. "Hey, don't cry, you're going to have some good options now."

"*Proud*?" sniffed Cheri. There were more embarrassing childhood pictures of her on her mother's Facebook page, along with a new one of her mother with a handsome dark-skinned man. She hadn't told her mother about her acceptance to San Diego State, and assumed she would be angry again if Cheri stayed in Colorado for college.

"Who's this?" she said softly.

"Of course!" her mother said. "And hey, guess what? I'm starting college too. Night classes at SDS." Cheri stopped sniffling. Her mother was going to college? Her mother explained that she had finished her GED over the summer, and she eventually

planned on applying to nursing school. “Hey maybe we’ll be in school together! Have you heard from them yet?”

Whenever Cheri fantasized about going to college, she pictured lying on the green grass of the campus quad, her backpack flung to the ground, sunbathing and flirting with the boys playing Frisbee with their shirts off. She did not ever imagine her mother emerging from the library steps, shouting out her name, and waving to her on her way to class.

“You’re kidding,” Cheri said. “Mom, you’re like . . . how old are you?”

“Only thirty-seven!” her mother said with a light laugh. “I was just a kid when I got pregnant with you. Right around your age, in fact.” She sighed. “I didn’t know what I was doing back then.”

Cheri shook off the image of her mother sitting all cute and perky in a college classroom with a bunch of boys like Hank and Ferret. “Abiel got into CSU too,” she said, “on a football scholarship, so I’ll probably go there. He promised me he’ll make lots of money so we can get married after we graduate.”

“Oh, honey,” her mother said, “take your time with all that. You’re so young. And money doesn’t matter.”

“What are you talking about?” Cheri said, her voice rising.

“Well, you have to proud of yourself, right?” her mother said. “So you end up with someone you love, someone you respect. Someone who treasures you for the beautiful person you are.”

“But that’s not what you used to say!” Cheri said. Then she pretended she was outside, her phone battery was running out, and she had to hang up.

That same day, Hank received an acceptance email from the Vail/Eagle Valley branch of Colorado Mountain College, where they offered a degree in Automotive Service Technology. It was the only school he had applied to. He didn’t want to go too far from home, since his mother’s illness required him to be within reach at all times. He hadn’t told her yet that he had applied; he had decided to wait to see if he was accepted, and if so, he would soften the blow by stressing it was a two-year college, less than an hour away, and he’d still be living at home.

He told Ferret about it after work, as they drove to the Dairy Queen/A&W for their daily special: two double-cheeseburgers for two dollars. Ferret had applied to CMC too, but hadn't heard back yet, and in any case he probably wouldn't be able to go. Ferret had a single mom and seven siblings, only one of whom was old enough to work, so he needed to get a full-time job after graduation.

They ate at a picnic table in Riverside Park, alternating bites of burgers with sips of their Oreo Blizzards. Looming to Hank's right were the darkened peaks of the Rockies, to his left the blackened ridges of Mesa Grande, with a navy-blue sky as backdrop. From where they sat, he could hear the familiar rushing sounds of the cars on the parkway and the river behind them. Hank thought of how different his life was going to be, just months from now. At Big O, little was required of him besides replacing tires, so his mind tended to wander. Once he forgot to put one of the old tires in the customer's wheel well as a spare, and another time he replaced a lady's snow tires with her old spring tires instead of the new all-season Pirellis she had ordered. But soon, armed with a two-year degree, he wouldn't have to stoop to such mundane labor. He would be fixing machinery. He would be doing important work.

After they finished eating, Hank leaned back and lifted his head to the sky. The craggy mountains, the majestic mesas, the big Colorado River, the roaring interstate, the endless sky—it all reminded him of himself.

A few weeks later, Cheri and Sunny entered English class late, arm-in-arm and giggling. The class was seated in a circle.

"Oops," said Cheri, "sorry Miss M." She flashed her flirtiest look to the other students, who seemed to have begun a serious discussion that, knowing Miss Mattingly, probably had something to do with feminism. "But look," Cheri said, "Sunny's engaged!" When she felt her smile twitch into a sneer, she bit her lower lip.

Sunny extended her left arm and spread her fingers to show everyone the glittering ring. The class fell silent.

"Really?" Miss Mattingly said with a frown. She motioned for the class to open up the circle and make room for the girls. But instead of sliding her desk next to Sunny's, Cheri took an empty seat on the other side of the room. Ms. Mattingly, meanwhile, turned her attention back to Hank. "You were saying?"

Hank shifted in his seat, which caused the silver and bronze State Relay medals, both pinned to his shirt pocket, to clink together. "Well, hey," he said, "congrats, Sunny." Sunny flashed Hank a tight-lipped smile but stared bitterly at Cheri. "Quite the momentous event," Hank said, "even if, uh, a little premature? Anyhoo"—he turned his attention back to Ms. Mattingly— "I was going to say, that like, centuries ago, for girls, the standard of beauty used to be the paler the better, right? Like those chicks with the Bubonic Plague must have been pretty hot!" He roared out his strange and sudden laugh, which Cheri knew was a sign that he was nervous. "Um, but now it's sexier to be like . . . mixed-race or . . . Latina, like, uh, Vanessa Hudgens or Selena Gomez or . . ." His eyes widened, recognizing an exemplar in their midst. "Or Cheri!" he said.

Everyone turned to look at Cheri. "You *wish*," she hissed at Hank. She folded her arms and tried to stop herself from blushing.

Ms. Mattingly frowned at Cheri. "You're offended by that?" she asked.

"No, not at all," she said, looking down at her desk, and then sidelong at Miss Mattingly, letting her black eyes drill into her teacher's. "It's an old . . . . We're old acquaintances, me and Hank," she said.

"You're kidding," Ms. Mattingly said. "You two?" They both nodded, Hank grinning impulsively at first, then pursing his lips. Ms. Mattingly smiled oddly, and as she did, Cheri felt a sudden wave of nausea. She had thrown up her breakfast that morning, for the third day in a row. When she'd told Sunny about it before class, Sunny had said, "So what else is new? Really, Cher, you have to stop doing that to yourself. You should come to the gym with me instead," and Cheri had said, "No, I'm not *making* myself puke, I'm *puking*," and Sunny had said, "Uh-oh," and that's the real reason why they'd been late to class.

Cheri considered running to the bathroom, but decided to sit still and hope it passed. If she threw up in the classroom, at least everyone would be worried about *her* instead of staring at the ridiculous pyramid of cubic zirconium on her BFF's finger.

That night after work, Hank and Ferret went to Taco Bell for their four-tacos-for-a-dollar special (the Rockies had scored more than seven runs the day before) and

shared a Budweiser tall boy that Ferret had smuggled from the Big O staff refrigerator. After eating, they went to their hideaway in the park playground, up in the cockpit of the airplane slide, where they used Ferret's iPod splitter and listened to the new Imagine Dragons album together. They were bobbing their heads through "Radioactive" when Hank saw the shadowy form of a girl appear in the park with what seemed to be a man in pursuit, the two weaving as if they were drunk. Hank lowered the volume of the iPod in time to hear the boy yell, "Come on, we can still do it!" When the girl shrieked back, "You *wish*!" Hank pulled out his ear buds.

The plastic windshield of the airplane cockpit was dirty, and it was dark out, but Hank could see the two forms stumble close, and then away from each other. It was Cheri, that was for sure, but the guy's voice hadn't sounded like Abiel's. He saw the bodies draw together and heard Cheri say something, and when she did, the boy laughed a hyena-like laugh. Some scuffling followed, the two forms obscured by the darkness and by a tree trunk, and by the milkiness of the plastic windshield, and finally Hank crawled out of the cockpit and peered out from the top of the slide. He couldn't see much, but it sounded as if they were wrestling on the grass. Hank heard a gasping sound, then a muffled exclamation.

He slid down the slide, landing heavily on his feet, and struck out toward the two bodies, feeling the heft and strength of his thigh muscles. From behind him, he heard Ferret come out from the cockpit. He could make out the two bodies on the grass, one seeming to tug at the other. Then Cheri's voice: "I feel sick," she moaned.

"Hey," Hank tried to say, but his throat closed up and nobody heard it. He stepped closer. The moon had peeked up over the mountains, and it looked as if Cheri was curled up in the fetal position while the boy was crouched over her, maybe trying to pull off her Luckies. Hank knew that Cheri's jeans were her armor, and that before the boy could ever get them off he would pass out from drunken exhaustion. But still, to see his childhood friend on the ground like this, being pawed at like a straw-filled doll . . .

"Knock it off!" he bellowed, in his father's voice.

The man made a bewildered sound and scrambled to his feet. It was Ryan Isley, Sunny's boyfriend. Hank knew in the darkness he must have presented an enormous figure, so he raised his arms and flexed his powerful biceps, as his father had taught

him to do if he ever encountered a bear, and roared like an angry lion. Ryan took a stilted step toward him, then turned and ran off, still cursing Cheri.

Cheri lay on her side, facing away from Hank, with her face in the grass. Her blouse was pulled up, providing a moonlit view of her back. Hank wheeled around and waved his arm viciously at Ferret. "Quit looking!" he said.

"Go away," Cheri moaned into the ground. "Leave me alone."

"It's me," Hank said, trying to soften his voice. "Gerald." He shrugged his shoulders in the dark.

"I know!" Cheri craned her neck to face him. "Just go away!" She dropped her head back onto the grass.

"You wish!" Ferret yelled from behind them.

During the last week of school, the students in Ms. Mattingly's class got back their final assignments, and she asked them to read their work out loud, as a way of celebrating their achievements. It was a creative-writing assignment: they were to have written a story based on an event that had changed their lives, or perhaps their view of the world. All semester, Hank had been receiving mixed grades for his essays: A for content, F for spelling and grammar, for an average of C. "Your descriptions are so moving, your analyses sharp as a tack," Ms. Mattingly would write, "but your prose is nearly unreadable. I confess I don't know how to grade you."

Hank would fist the returned essays into balls, tighter and tighter, until the four pages were hidden in one of his massive hands. All year, in his literary-analysis essays, he had attempted to dissect the true meaning behind the stories and poems they read and not simply look up sparknotes and reword them like everyone else; and in his personal essays, he had divulged as much as he was capable of, even going so far as to articulate his complex theories of life. It simply wasn't his fault that grammar wasn't his strong suit. Nonetheless, all year long he had received those stupid split grades.

For this final assignment, he had decided to go all out. He would attempt to bare his soul, and Annette, his shotputting buddy (who had come in third at States and credited Hank with her success) had promised to proofread it for him.

As for Cheri, she had stretched the truth a bit in most of her essays: her biological father had abandoned her, like the guy in the *Scarlet Letter*; her mother had an affair with a younger man, like the main character in *The Awakening*; and an older perv had attempted to molest her, like the girl in "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" One of her "personal essays" was about her friend's bulimia, and the last one had been about her friend's recent abortion, which her rich father paid for. She had earned C's as well, all year, even though she typed her essays in Vivaldi script font and used pink-and-white paper clips. But for her, too, this essay would be different. She, too, had vowed to end the school year with an A. If she could gather up the courage, she would write something true. She was thinking of a story about a little girl named Cereza whose mother had left her when she was eleven and who had never truly been happy, not for a single day, ever since.

Cheri half-listened as Hank read through his, about the day his father died. She tried to pay attention, if only to get a good participation grade, but she was feeling listless and was having trouble focusing. At the end of Hank's paper, during his description of the funeral — the funeral Cheri had attended, sitting next to him in the front pew, holding his hand — his voice cracked, and for a moment Cheri felt something splinter inside her. Then Hank picked at a scab on his arm and it started bleeding and he needed to leave the room.

On this way back to the classroom, Hank held a wet paper towel to his broken scab. "Please see me," was all Ms. Mattingly had written on his essay, which had made him half-fearful he'd be criticized, half-hopeful she might want to praise him in person. Something extraordinary had happened during the writing of that paper: in his imagination he had stood outside the window of his house and looked in at himself—a nice boy sitting quietly in the living room, trying not to cause his mother any worry—and he had seen, at first from a distance and then up close, what had really happened to his father. He understood that it was terrible, an awful thing that had taken place that day, but it certainly hadn't been his fault.

He stopped short at the doorway: Cheri was reading her story, with her back to him, and he didn't want to interrupt. He listened as his childhood friend—the girl who had come home with him after the funeral and visited every afternoon for

weeks, bringing him his homework from school along with flowers from her mother's garden—read a story about a black-haired girl named Cereza who was almost sexually assaulted in Riverside Park, by a huge, red-haired boy named Gerald.

Hank threw the wet paper towel to the floor and scratched his arm, still standing in the doorway. When Cheri finished, Ms. Mattingly looked up, noticing him there, and all the students looked up as well—except for Cheri, who kept her head down, as if she were still reading. Then Hank saw her shoulders trembling, her back convulsing, and her forehead dropped onto the desk.

Out the classroom window, at the end of an ennobling stretch of farmland that followed the snaking bends of the sparkling river, the mountains spiked powerfully into the sky.

Short of Instincts

Lana Bella

when it's behind my back
you would have to reach down
to the tattooed flesh,
drag your fingers
across the raised skin
until a pale pink dawn
rests peacefully in your hands—

you want my tangled words and
cello strains and jet-black hair,
and all the guts of human faith
that cannot be washed away—

like an animal
that hasn't eaten in days,
you pluck my grit and bone
from the aerial pendulum
then plop me onto
the soft click of your tongue—

now,
time stands still,
while I am,
pressed down,
creaking towards my end
with my mind a continent away,
outside,
the world is dreamy and red—


LOONAKI
2013

Her Blue Hair

Tracey Levine

Rocco's father made bullets in the foyer at a tiny desk. We'd have to slip around him to get inside while he remained fixated on a hollow shell, pinched and suspended at his eye level. He never looked up but kept at it, carefully turning the shell with tweezers. Gunpowder made the whole house smell like boiled eggs and I imagined that if a flame were struck, everything would just go up.

I once asked Rocco why his father made bullets. He said, "He likes it. Keeps him busy." I eventually found out that his father didn't hunt, wasn't in law enforcement, didn't own any firearms, and didn't give the bullets away. He kept them in a shoebox in his room. He displayed some on the ledge of a mirror that hung above his dresser.

Rocco's mother had left them. Rocco told me this after I asked him about his father and, just as plainly, as he told me about the bullet-making. I never asked him anything more about his father after that.

On the last night we were together, I was left alone in his living room with the TV. Rocco was upstairs with his friends in his room. That was the way it was. Unacknowledged, I'd wait downstairs by myself, sometimes with his father folded away in the foyer. I'd always hear them through the ceiling: the music through a stereo, their imperative voices, the machines they used.

I didn't hate the waiting. I understood it. They needed me to give them the distance of a floor for a little while. But as I sat on the couch in that drafty room on that last night with the TV muted after an hour of channel surfing and no word from them, I got itchy.

I marched up those stairs. I opened the door without knocking, without even calling. I stood on the threshold though no one really looked up; they just threw some glances in my direction like they couldn't be bothered.

Rocco sat hunkered over a sewing machine table salvaged from the dumpster of a Catholic grade school. The other two, Tully and Fisher, were splayed on the floor with patches of cloth, spools of thread, beer cans, pins, needles and ashtrays. Everything

on the floor, including the boys, looked like it had been dumped from a demented toy box.

I asked, "So, what are we doing tonight?"

No one answered. Again I waited, focused on the rhythmic penetration of the sewing needle as Rocco meticulously moved some piece of clothing under it. I thought it was a jacket he had told me about. I saw the printed parts of the sleeve and cuff waiting to be joined to it sitting on the floor with a pile of patches. As they continued, and as I stood there just listening, still unacknowledged but accepted as this silent, unobtrusive presence, and then when Rocco did actually look up, his face blank but penetrating, I knew that I should have stayed on the couch.

Very shortly after that, we left Rocco's house in a flurry. When we were outside, after Tully and Fisher had deposited themselves in Rocco's car at the curb, he grabbed my arm like I was a child about to break into the street. He said that he was taking me home. His face was close and warm and his lower lip quivered. He let me go and I got into the passenger seat. I was grateful when Rocco put on one of my favorite albums that he had introduced me to only a few months prior. The sun was nearly set and it made the whole neighborhood devilish, made it seem more broken than before. It was a neighborhood my mother had forbidden me to go to.

The first time I went there was with co-workers. They took me to a party, and after a short while the room I was in had emptied. Everyone, including the two co-workers, had moved to the kitchen to participate in arm wrestling matches and I was left alone in a strange living room.

I've always hated eyes on me. That's why I started to smoke cigarettes, so that I could blend in more easily. That night, I pinched a cigarette from my purse but when I tried to bring it to my mouth, it fell down my shirt. It was snagged in my bra, and when I unabashedly shoved a hand in to get it, I looked up and saw Rocco for the first time.

He was halfway down the stairs that led to the second floor. He must have been in the house all along, but his presence didn't matter until then. I remember thinking he was attractive, but his eyes were too large. Straight on, he was just a head because his hair was shaved off. He was thin too; his arms complex and sinewy, like tree bark,

from some serious muscle tone. He was wearing black jeans and a threadbare tank. Standing there, with his mouth agape, the expression on his face was one of both fascination and repulsion. He came over and sat next to me on the couch.

I recall that first contact as one without many words. He showed me his pack of cigarettes, an unfamiliar brand. They were unfiltered. He lit one, gave me a drag, and I felt immediately nauseous. His leg was pressed up against mine though we faced forward and avoided looking at each other. But we took turns studying each other's profile. He had a bulbous nose and an inadequate chin that barely left his neck. After a little while of what had become an uncomfortable situation, he asked to take me home and I agreed. I left the house without saying a word to anyone.

He led me to his Nova; a car that I knew was fierce because I'd seen Steve McQueen movies. It was a jewel at that curb, and so blue it was electrically charged, a rarity, and dangerous. But it was not until I was in that car, when he launched it carelessly into the street, that I considered fear.

We didn't speak much during the ride except for directions. When we got in front of my house, he asked if we could sit outside on my front step for a while. I said that we could, and the first real thing he said to me was: "You know, I'm in a band."

I told him that I figured that and he accused me of being judgmental. I apologized and let him go on about how much he liked his band and his car. He told me the story of his car, how his neighbor just let it sit out at the curb for years growing rust until he heckled him, made a deal and fixed it up so much that the neighbor was left to painfully witness the revitalized glory of his adolescence being utilized by another.

I thought his car was beautiful, but I didn't tell him that then. I listened as he told me that he hated being made to do anything. He said that he was much better off on his own. I didn't know what he meant by that exactly but I nodded my head. And then he asked me, "You like school, don't you?"

I told him that I was going to college but hadn't decided on a major. He patted me firmly on the back then rested his palm, hard and flat like he was sorry, like someone had just died. It was late spring and warm, but the air still snipped at our faces and bare skin until we both shivered. He put his arm around me. I told him that I thought school was a joke and I had to teach myself a lot of things by reading stuff on my own. He liked that, started condemning authority figures. Delivery trucks hurried down

the street on their way to convenient stores and supermarkets, and as I watched them I felt a panic. Then he reached out and pulled me into him.

There were almost daily trinkets after that, ordinary plastic lighters with leopard-printed cloth glued to them, miniature notebooks with my name scratched onto the front. He once even pretended that he'd gotten my name tattooed on his arm. I beheld the six pristinely markered letters etched on the slope of his shoulder in the same way that I once looked at a photograph of a mother tiger nursing abandoned piglets. My lungs filled and emptied after he used spit to smudge my name, proving to me that it was a joke.

There was something natural about us. He arrived to take me away from my life every afternoon after he was done with his job stocking shelves at a department store. The first few weeks were insular. I told my mother I was working a lot of hours. We'd drive around and he'd play music for me. He'd tell me about it like I would have to know it for a reason that was beyond me yet. Sometimes we'd walk through the mall, ignoring the storefronts as if simply displaying ourselves to the public in a two-person parade. We sat at emptied playgrounds after dark some distance from both of our houses, complacent under a canopy of trees.

We would run away together, if just for a bit. He was stronger than anything I knew, and sometimes I thought that I understood, as I lay pressed under him on the dusty gray fibers of his car's seat. I could be there with him for a long time, and I could be happy.

We'd talk a little. He about how he hated his boss and how he wished that people and dinosaurs coexisted so that humans could see something so impossibly large and have to deal with it. He denounced his friends for inevitably fitting into normal lives, although he said there were some glorious fights and pockets of unbridled mayhem. He admitted to liking violence. He said that the act of hitting a face with his fist was like jumping into freezing water on a dare, and inevitably coming out a new, seething animal that was all bark.

I'd try to talk through ideas of my future, but they sounded so much less interesting. It felt a little like I didn't have a future at night, or a past. I was absorbing him like one would attend to a really great book. I imagined his world, what he

presented me with and even a place for me in it, not committing to the realization that it had been constructed entirely without a notion of me in mind.

After we were dating for about a month, we went to one of his shows together. It was in a church with a concrete likeness of Saint Catherine as oblong as a surfboard in front. When we got to the basement where the show was going to be, we pushed through the crowd together. Rocco held onto me as if I'd fall until we made it to a platform, acting as a stage, where two figures, who I was later to know were Tully and Fisher, sat with their legs spread as if to claim it.

They stood uneasily when they saw Rocco, like he was an authority, and jumped down with us amidst the stench of all of those close bodies that made the air as thick as a swamp's muck. The two saw me and their eyes moved from my face and slinked slowly down. When Rocco officially introduced me, Tully ripped a can of beer from a backpack. I reached out for it, was going to release it and politely refuse, but Tully took his hand away first. Then the three of them mounted the stage.

In that crowd, alone, I felt I was freezing in the heat. There was a tingling in all of my appendages. My arm was holding the beer up in the air as if it were a bracket Embarrassed, I pulled the beer to my chest just as the room became a singular entity. I was an infant—but it was all momentous, the song and Rocco's words, even my isolation. I cracked the beer and took a swig of it. I pushed it down my throat, and then I saw her.

She was in front of me, closer to Rocco, and moving with everyone. She was the only one that didn't look tortured. She was blatant because of her blue hair, but her face was aglow with something I identify now as ingenuity. The hue of her hair was like the color of Rocco's Nova. I watched it bob up and down, remarkable like an orb, until I lost interest. She was just a girl dancing in a crowd.

When Rocco's set ended I couldn't see her anymore. He came down to me immediately, and when he took me in his arms he seemed brittle for the first time, but only momentarily. Looking into his face I knew he was aware of it.

We packed ourselves into his car. It was the first time I had to share that space with others. We started to move, and Rocco and his band talked about the show while I looked out of a window. After a little while, I saw that we were driving into a

tangled, black mass of trees. We moved forward on a road that was unapparent before we got onto it. The trees started to seem more solid and ordered, thick and sturdy, like prison bars. Rocco turned off the headlights and stopped driving, and everything went black. I asked him where we were, and he turned around and said, "It won't be dark like this for long. Don't worry. We're near a golf course."

Rocco drove the car forward again, but more slowly toward a dull light coming from an indeterminate place that marked the path ahead of us. He stopped the car again at what looked like a clearing, and I vaguely apprehended rolling ground ahead of us. Tully and Fisher got out of the car, but not Rocco at first. He turned to me and told me to stay in the car for a minute. He then got out and walked toward the woods. The other two followed him, like they were cowboys, sauntering off.

Then others emerged from the woods. There were many, but not too many. They came out simultaneously from the thick. I imagined that some of them crawled out of hollowed trunks. Some of them greeted Rocco and the other two, but most continued onward, straight for me in the car.

There were suddenly faces blocking all of the windows. They spoke loudly, but I don't remember one thing that was said. They shook the car a bit. At some point, I gathered that they were assessing me, and then Rocco came and broke it up. All of the boys moved back from the car, and somehow, I felt that I'd been accepted.

Rocco opened the car door for me and I cautiously crept out. All of the boys stood across from each other, as if lining an aisle. Rocco didn't hold my hand, but held the top of my body with a very determined arm. The closer I got to the trees, the taller they got, but the space between them also widened, opening into hallways, and I remembered thinking that it was alright.

I braced myself on his back as we inched down a steep slope to flat ground again. We moved forward. I heard leaf and stem breaking all around us. There was an opening, a cove in the woods where fallen parts of tree trunks were strategically arranged like furniture. When we sat, my eyes adjusted to the dark and I saw the boy-shapes again. Cans of beer were passed around. I opened my can and swallowed a decent amount all at once while pressing myself up against Rocco.

The pops of the tabs on the beer cans in succession were unnerving, but I kept still and drank my beer. There was talk of things, very ordinary things. There were jokes and complaints about new menial jobs. The jokes were dirty, mostly about women, and the jobs were hopeless and dull, the pay enough to get somebody drunk and buy an occasional new article of clothing or a record. That cove was the ultimate for them, but Rocco cracked after a while, stood, and said, "You shitbags need to do something. I mean, how many of you even made it out to our show tonight?"

A voice from near me retorted, "I've seen you guys play. You seen one show, you seen 'em all."

Fisher then stood and Tully followed, just behind Rocco. One of them touched his arm. Then Rocco shouted, "I hope you guys choke on your own fucking vomit! I mean it! We get this thing together, and we're fucking doing something, and this is what we get from all of yas? No respect."

There were a few apologies from voices that had previously said nothing. I offered, "It was a good show."

Rocco twitched when I spoke. A current moved through me, and then the same voice that had said that all of the shows were the same asked me, "And what was so good about it, sweetheart?"

I looked toward Rocco and them in the dark as they stood, and felt them looking down at me. I answered, "It's an experience. You can't recreate those."

There was silence, and then the questioner chuckled, and what I'd said was ignored as talk just started up again. I thought that I'd done alright, and then he asked me, "So where are you from, girl?"

I told him, and then he asked me where I hung out, and what I did. It was so general that I hesitated, but Rocco spoke and said that I hung with him, and then I felt nestled, but not very comfortably, like I had found myself at the bottom of a well.

I said nothing else that night, but sat at Rocco's side until he ripped me up off the log by hooking his hands under my armpits. The other boys were off the logs then too, in and around the cove, cackling and moving. I was entirely fascinated and wanted to see them ravish something. Then I felt a rush, a wash of fever, and Rocco threw my back up against a tree. My head hit it hard, and I grew dizzy, then he started kissing me. He raked his fingers up and down the sides of my shirt and he was

pressing into me so intently, I thought I'd flatten. Although it wasn't pleasant I let him continue. I cautiously walked my fingers down his back, pressing harder as I got lower, until I was holding onto the fabric of his jeans' back pockets.

I felt a nub in one of them, something compact and solid. He stopped moving, but stayed pressed against me. He slid his hand into that back pocket and pulled something out. He backed away from me a little and I straightened, left that tree. He held a bullet, almost the size of a finger, inches from my eyes. It caught a glimmer of light from the overpass near us, and for an instant it seemed made of gold.

Rocco told me that he stole it from his father, and always kept it on him. He thought it was lucky. He didn't say anything more and I knew not to speak. He let me touch his face, but it was that bullet that mattered. I wanted it. I wanted to press it to my face. I wanted to touch it with my tongue and slide it under my nostrils. I wanted to know everything about it until it didn't matter. But instead, I pressed back into him, held his head between my hands. Nothing happened, we just stood there. He breathed heavily and naturally I did the same, sucking in and letting go of too much air, until it seemed time to return to the others.

We dated for two months after that. I cut my hair really short and became a part of them, but although Rocco and I seemed like that teenage couple who could not survive individually, that each of us would wilt if parted, we never slept together. Eventually, we barely talked, although we hardly did that in the first place.

On the last night I saw him, he dropped me off in front of my house. When I exited the car it was ethereally quiet. I remember thinking to not look back, but it was hard to do.

I heard his car scream as it started away. I walked toward my house and noticed the A-frame, the lace curtains, the glow from the downstairs windows. I noticed the meticulously planted bushes, each seeming to have their own square of dirt to live in, how carefully apart they were, autonomous and radiant.

When I went into the house on that last night, my mother was asleep and it was only about ten when I got into my pajamas. Careful not to wake her, I brushed my teeth and then went back down into the living room. I dimmed the lights and turned on the TV. I thought for hours in front of the TV of all of the places I would have no

reason to go to again, of all of the people I would never see. I thought of Rocco acquiring another girl.

I eventually fell asleep, and the next thing I remember was a tapping on the door. It took me a few minutes to decide to stay put, to allow the tapping to continue and eventually cease. I knew it was him. When I hadn't heard it for a little while, I walked to the window. He was standing beyond the front lawn in the middle of the sidewalk then, staring at the house. I was not visible, but it was as if he could see through the brick.

He was stoic, the white of his tank dirt-stained. I knew that he would not come back to the door. His face looked pink, evidence that he'd been drinking, and I knew what he wanted. He wanted me to come out and flutter down the concrete steps. Maybe we'd embrace and even pretend to run away. We'd slip into the car together, though before we'd take off, I'd request to go inside and get some things to take with, but he'd refuse to let me go. We wouldn't go far and I'd be home before dawn.

I don't remember when I looked away from the window, or how long I was there.

I heard what had happened a few days later. I hadn't seen anything on the news nor had I read about it in a newspaper. A girl I worked with was gossiping within earshot. She pretended not to know that I'd dated Rocco, but when she suddenly pretended to realize, she emphasized the fact that he wasn't charged, that they had let him go. They had found his bullet pressed into the mud, and when they began questioning people, they ended up at his work.

A jogger had found the girl in the morning, just after the sun had come up. The only reason he was able to identify her was because of her blue hair. She was lifeless on the bank of a creek. Her head was bent into the water's trickle. She was banged up, had obviously fallen down a steep hill, but there was no other evidence of violence. When Rocco and his friends were brought in by the police, they immediately pleaded that they were innocent. They hardly knew the girl, but they all admitted that she'd slipped into the woods with them the previous evening. After they were questioned for almost twenty-four hours, they were all let go, and it was decided that the death was a tragic accident. The girl had been drinking heavily, had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and had fallen.

I couldn't help but imagine that the girl with the blue hair was the girl I had seen at that first show. There were many girls who came to those shows, who came to the woods when I was there, many with shocking hair—pinks, yellows, oranges—but never blue. They came and they drank, and they attached themselves to some of the boys, but most of them seemed barely there, like apparitions forced to cover a certain ground.

I imagined the sight of her for weeks, in the brutal light, her body melting into mud. Water pulling her hair. People apologized to me, even interrogated me. I told the truth. I wasn't there, that the night she had died, he had come to my house after the woods. But I had been there. I had climbed down into those woods. I had been in Rocco's house. I began to remember his look on that last night differently.

I never saw him again, which wasn't hard to do. Boys like him live in pockets. I found another way for myself. But I think sometimes, though not often, of her blue hair. Then of him, and I feel cold with a longing that I've never been able to kill.

Bulkhead Doors

Kurt Schuett

Entrance and exit,
earnestly beseeching both the legged and un-legged,
all considered invitees to
its subterranean underbelly.

A world within a world
for both a girl and a boy,
employees by day
and tourists by night.

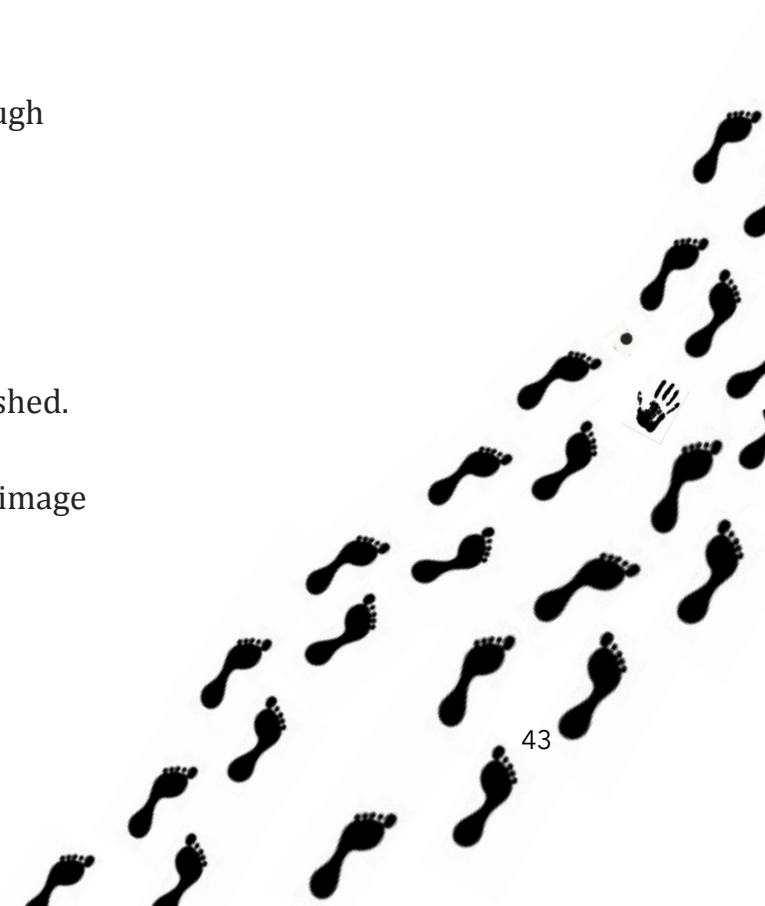
A trail of blight and decay
gleefully escorting the pair,
products of incubus with
death tattooing its walls.

A fusion of
folly and phantom,
a single crack running its course
while thirsty tributaries collectively lick its walls.

Solomon's demons
didn't build this temple,
this shrine forged entirely through
questionable deeds.

Altars torn down while
infancy tainted and muddied,
from the innermost sanctum
innocence permanently vanquished.

And all that was left of the pilgrimage
a girl and a boy,
earnestly beseeching
their shrine.



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the birds are screaming Maja-Lisa Kehlet Hansen

Familiar

Dorian DeWeerd

He'd had the dream again. That dream where he was a bird—a hawk, he'd like to believe—soaring above fields, hunting prey. He flew over the little yellow house set apart from the world, its yard littered with cages holding a menagerie of living things. Then he'd awoken, leaving the dream behind, but something remained: a memory, vague and distant as another life.

While Aiden thought he'd liked being the hawk, it also terrified him. Something about those cages—some square with holes in the top, others tall with elongated domes and arched doors in the wire walls, and a few vertically oval with flared tops: tell-tale bird cages in various hues—made him queasy. He'd awoken with nausea sloshing inside him.

Now that dawn had passed and the cold sweat had been washed from his face, Aiden was at work, unloading the box truck: setting crates of tomatoes, cabbage, carrots and corn in neat, slanted rows around the booth. Cool wind ruffled the white pavilion above him and brought the scent of flowers and fresh produce with it. Aiden smelled honey and raspberries, cherries and peppers. He was surrounded by color: white eggs, brown eggs, peppers of every sort, leafy greens, fruits, and vegetables. The booth across from his sold pumpkins and squash. Next to that was berries of every kind. Further on, maple syrup.

Aiden hated it. Every minute of it. At first, he'd thought this job was great; when he'd wandered into this Podunk town two months ago with no memory, no money, and no past, he was glad for the work. Now he was ready to move on. He'd met Nick on the road. Aiden hadn't known the name of the road or how he'd come to be there when Nick had stopped to offer him a lift. Naturally, Nick asked where Aiden had come from and where he was heading, but Aiden had not been able to answer either question. Since that day, Aiden had slept in the guest room of Nick's house and spent his days working this booth at the Fern Road Farmer's Market, selling vegetation under a long pavilion at Nick's stall.

Above him, a bird flew by and turned upward sharply; finding itself penned in by

the pavilion, the bird—a little brown sparrow—buffeted against the white ceiling, seeking escape. Aiden watched with pity. This seemed familiar, as if this exact same bird had done this exact same thing at another time. Maybe it was residual memory from his dream. Maybe it was déjà vu. Aiden's breath caught as if he were in a panic, though he could not have said why.

The girl startled him from his musings when she spoke.

"I need some asparagus," she said. "Onions, radishes, garlic and honey." She rattled off her list from memory, as if she'd been programmed to not forget it.

She was dark, maybe Latino, with long, black hair braided and slung over her right shoulder. Dangling from her left shoulder was a large satchel and she carried two bags in her arms. Her bare shoulders and elegant neck accentuated her soft features. This girl was familiar to him, but he couldn't recall ever seeing her before. The purple summer dress swayed with a natural rhythm both alluring and chaste, moving in sync with her slender body. Aiden stood to get a better glimpse of the hemline.

He wondered what she had in those bags.

"I have it all but the honey," Aiden said, pulling his eyes from her legs. "I can sell you the vegetables, but you'll have to go down to Jake and Ellie's booth for the honey. See it there? Between the flowers and the green beans?"

"Yes. I must have passed it."

"No problem," he said, smiling. "You'll just have to circle back that way."

"Goat cheese," she said.

"Excuse me."

"Goat cheese is on my list. Where can I find it?"

The girl seemed to be nervous, anxious, but unaware of it. She averted her eyes as to not look directly at Aiden.

"At the far end," Aiden said, pointing. He sensed something amiss with this girl, something more than rudeness or a lack of social graces. She was tense and fidgety, although pleasant enough, Aiden supposed; but she was also taciturn and a bit morose. Her want of social skills left Aiden divided: part of him longing for her to linger, a larger part wanting to speed her on her way. Setting down the other bags she

held, the girl took a canvas sack from within the one on her shoulder and began loading it with items from Aiden's booth.

"What's your name?" Aiden asked.

"Why?"

She looked up and Aiden followed her gaze. That same bird was still trapped under the pavilion, its wings beating in a flurry as it sought egress. He wondered how long it could keep that up. The girl looked unhappy and Aiden found himself feeling sad.

"Just curious," he said slowly. *What was this girl's deal?* "I'm Aiden."

"My name is—" she paused, as if considering something—"Seraphina."

Then she smiled. It was as if a spell had been broken. This standoffish girl had just cracked the most dazzling smile and Aiden was drawn in. He was certain they'd met before. Why was she so familiar? Had they met? No, he was being foolish. If he had met this girl before, he'd remember.

But still—

"What do I owe you?" she asked. Even the tone in her voice was different. She seemed much friendlier now.

Aiden tallied the total of Seraphina's goods and undercharged her by thirty dollars.

"See you around," Aiden said as she hurried away.

His eyes followed the swaying of her purple dress until a tall man in white shorts and a blue shirt stepped between them. He was an older guy and he was sweating. Aiden watched, mortified, as the old guy took off his golf hat and mopped the wide brow above his sunglasses. Sweat dripped in the morning sunlight straight into the peppers and the cabbage.

"What do you get for these peppers?" the old guy barked.

Aiden sighed again and told the man what he wanted to know.

"What's this?" Nick asked, picking up a bag from among the asparagus. He was a short, wide man, who waddled on small legs. Today his was wearing his red T-shirt and overalls tucked into black rubber boots.

"What's in there?" Aiden asked.

"Fruits and vegies," Nick said, looking at Aiden as if Aiden had asked something bizarre.

"Let me see that," Aiden said, taking the bag from Nick. Aiden recognized it immediately. It belonged to Seraphina. A bit hurt, Aiden realized that in her rush to be away from him, Seraphina had forgotten it.

"You know who it belongs to?"

"That girl who stopped a few minutes ago. The one in the purple dress."

"You better go after her," Nick said.

"She'll come back for it."

Nick looked at Aiden for a moment before speaking. "Look, I can hold down the fort here, Aiden. Go find the girl, huh? Do something nice. Pay into your karma pool; you might need it someday."

"Doubtful."

"Come on. Pretty thing like that, your age . . . Don't make me be the one to go after her. I wouldn't hesitate."

"Ok. Ok. Enough. Gross."

"I'm just saying, kid."

"Good God, man. Stop. I'll go after her."

Aiden took the bag and made his way through the bustle, heading for the goat cheese sellers, José and Maria. Maria remembered seeing the girl a few minutes ago. After buying her cheese, Maria said, the girl had headed toward the other end of the market.

The honey, Aiden thought. At the honey booth, Jake said that the girl in the purple dress had just left. He'd seen her walk out of the market toward the road, not into the parking lot. Jake didn't think she'd driven.

"Must live close," Jake said.

Aiden thanked him and jogged out of the market toward Fern Road.

When he reached the road, the wind was soft and scented with wilderness. Aiden looked up and down the road but saw no sign of the girl. Sparrows called to one another in the trees. In the distance a frog croaked and a brook babbled. A hawk passed overhead.

Aiden stood at the edge of the road holding a canvas bag filled with produce. Cars drifted by, some slowing and pulling into the market, others leaving. Aiden coughed in the dust kicked up by the traffic and flagged down a blue sedan. When Aiden described Seraphina the driver said that he'd seen her walking, about half a mile back the way he'd come.

Nearly a mile later, panting and more than a little sweaty, Aiden was closing in on the girl.

Seraphina walked with purpose, marching to a rhythm Aiden couldn't hear. Laden with bags, Seraphina sped along the dusty road, eyes forward, not turning, not seeming to notice the world around her. Aiden called out to her, but Seraphina did not respond.

He quickened his step, closing the distance, but did not want to startle the girl. She turned left, veering into a drive, her stride not wavering. Aiden followed her. Again he called out to her, and again she did not respond. It was as if she were entranced, bewitched. A small yellow ranch-style house sat nestle in a thicket of trees, around a bend so it was hidden from the road, and Seraphina moved unerringly toward it as if being pulled in by some unseen magnetism.

The house from his dream. Something deeper than déjà vu gripped Aiden's gut.

Aiden jogged the last few steps, reached out for Seraphina, and took the girl by the shoulder. They were in the drive, not quite to the yard. On either side of them were small groves. He didn't need to see the yard to know what lay scattered throughout it.

Whatever spell she'd been under, his touch broke it. Seraphina wheeled about, cobalt eyes locking on him, glaring. Aiden watched as surprise turned to panic and panic to terror.

"What are you doing here?" Seraphina hissed. "You can't be here."

Aiden was short of breath, his voice came out louder than he'd planned. "You left __"

"*You* left." She shushed him violently, pressing her soft hand to his lips. "Quiet. You must go. Now. Leave while you can."

I left? He thought. *What does that mean?*

"You don't remember?" she asked.

Seraphina's eyes darted around the yard, to the treetops, the sky, searched the ground for something. Aiden followed her eyes, his eyes confirming what his dreams had revealed. The place was littered with cages: dog kennels, aquariums, bird cages of various shapes and sizes, crates and an assortment of other containers. Most were empty, but in some aquariums he spotted turtles and frogs, snakes and mice. Two kennels held large black dogs. A tall brass, domed birdcage held a dove. The bird sang a mournful tune.

There were no vehicles in the drive.

"It's not safe here. You mustn't let her see you. Leave. And never come back."

"Are you in some kind of trouble?" he asked.

"All my life," she said. "But that's not your concern. Not anymore. Now go, before she sees you."

Seraphina placed one soft hand on Aiden's chest and shoved him violently away. He watched her face contort as if the motion had actually hurt her.

"If someone's hurting you," he said.

"Only you are hurting me. You are going to bring me trouble."

She turned, laden with more than she ought to be able to carry, and continued toward the house. She hadn't taken the bag from Aiden.

Aiden stood in the drive, thinking this was all very strange, but willing to put it behind him and leave the girl to her fate, if that's what she wished. He sat the bag of goods on the ground. He'd delivered it this far. Seraphina, or whomever she was living with that so frightened her, would find it the next time they came up the drive.

Turning to leave, Aiden had gone only ten steps when he heard the sound of a screen door being pulled shut by a taut spring, and the sound of an angry female voice. Creeping into the vegetation of the little grove, being as stealthy as he could manage, Aiden moved toward the house, keeping low and, squinting through the sunlight, watched the exchange at the yellow house.

A woman twice Seraphina's age, perhaps in her early forties, wearing a simple blue dress and a long white frock, stood at the door. She was speaking harshly, her voice not rising, but the tone powerful, threatening.

"What took so long? Did you get everything? Stupid girl. Put those in the kitchen. Go on. I smell him on you. You've found him? What have you told him?"

"Nothing," Seraphina said.

"You've been with him but you didn't bring him back? Foolish girl! It's back in the cage for you."

They disappeared into the house.

Aiden was horrified. Cage? This woman was keeping people in cages? Aiden knew he had to get help; he must report this to the police. This woman was clearly unbalanced—leaving animals caged in the yard in such numbers?—and threatening to cage a young woman? Something needed to be done. But he couldn't abide the thought of leaving Seraphina here while he went for help. He must get her out, take her with him, and together they would go to the authorities.

The screen door creaked open and the other woman stepped out. She had a small sparrow caught in her hand, a thin, shimmering chain attached to one of its legs. She placed the bird in a small, square cage atop a wooden stand and affixed the chain to a thin bar inside the cage.

"There you are, Seraphina," the woman said. "Now contemplate your failures you ungrateful beast."

No. There was no way. Did she call that *bird* Seraphina? Aiden crouched in the trees, watching, wondering, waiting. But waiting for what?

Seraphina—the *girl*—must still be inside the house, he thought. It's a coincidence that the bird has the same unusual name. People don't change into animals. Or the other way around. It's just not possible. Still, Aiden's curiosity was piqued. *What if?* If that girl was in trouble, then he had to rescue her. Didn't he? What was it that Nick was always preaching about? "It is the duty of the strong to protect the weak. We have to fight for those who can't fight for themselves." That sounded about right.

But was the girl really a bird? Or did a bird somehow become a girl? Neither was possible. Yet Aiden had dreamt something very similar. It was likely that he was the only person who'd ever witnessed such a thing. But what had he witnessed, really? A woman putting a bird in a cage? That was not so unusual. He hadn't actually seen anything weird. But none of that mattered. What mattered was that the woman had threatened to cage a person: a human being. Seraphina was a captive, held against her will. Aiden had to save her.

He moved through the grove, through the tall grass and weeds and choked flowers, to the dirt drive, picked up the sac of goods and, steeling his resolve, marched toward the single-story house.

As he crossed into the yard proper, wading among the multitude of caged dogs barking and growling, birds chirping and singing, snakes hissing and rearing, Aiden felt a wave of nausea flow through the core of his body. His limbs began to tingle as if all the blood had been drained from them. An overwhelming sense of dread stole through him.

He rapped on the door.

A moment later, the inner door opened and there, standing on the other side of the screen door, was the woman he'd seen from the bushes. Up close, she was marvelous. She was tall and beautiful, radiant in a slanting sunbeam, as if the sun had changed course just to alight upon her. Her green eyes—jade like the butterfly pendant hanging around her neck—entranced Aiden immediately. The eyes sparkled as the lips parted in a warm smile.

Aiden thought he'd seen her before.

"You've returned," she said, her voice wispy, seductive. "They always come back. I told you. Do you remember?"

"No," he said. "I think you've mistaken me for someone else. I brought your bag. I mean, there was a girl, at the market: she bought some produce from me and left this."

The woman hesitated, her eyes searching Aiden's face. She smiled.

"What girl?" she said.

"Seraphina. That's what she said her name was."

"There's no girl at this house."

"I tried to catch up to her, but she was too far ahead. I followed her here. So here's your bag." Aiden put his hand on the door to pull it open, then retracted that hand. He felt suddenly nervous.

The woman pushed the door open. "Don't be shy, Aiden," she said. "Come in."

"How do you know my name?"

"You really don't remember, do you? Interesting. I've never seen this happen before."

"I'm not sure what you're talking about."

"Well, Aiden," she said, her voice intoning allure, "my name is Angela. And we've known each other for some time. Would you be a dear and carry that into the kitchen for me?"

He walked into the house, limbs moving of their own accord, captivated by her voice.

"Is she here?" He seemed to know where the kitchen was, as if he'd been here before. Indeed, this house seemed as familiar to him as Seraphina had the moment he'd first seen her.

"Who, dear?"

"The girl. Seraphina. Is she here?"

"There's no girl here," Angela repeated.

Fighting the logic in his mind, the truth he knew, Aiden was struggling to not believe this woman. He was beginning to doubt if there had been a girl at all. But if not, why was he here? What was this bag in his hands?

Angela came near to him, quickly, in a single fluid movement, tracing her fingernails down his arm, urging Aiden to set the bag on the counter. Her body pressed against his. Her lips moist and near his ear. "There's only you," she said. "And me."

His eyes on hers, Aiden felt himself being drawn to her. Something was not right here. Part of him was aroused; another part, afraid. He didn't try to work it out. He simply fled. Peeling his eyes from her was the hard part. Breaking away and rushing to the door was easy.

He was at the door, bursting through, then out into the moonlight. The sun was gone. The moon shone in a clear black sky. How long had he been inside? It had seemed only seconds, but hours had passed.

Angela was behind him, moving quickly. Aiden's instinct was to flee, so flee he did. Racing through the maze of cages, he reached out and took hold of the cage containing the bird called Seraphina.

The kennel doors clicked, unlatched, and opened, though no one was near them. Immediately the hounds were on his trail. Two big, snarling shadows followed him

up the drive to the road. Headlights blinded Aiden as a truck approached. He darted in front of it and a hound followed.

Aiden, diving into the ditch, barely made it across. The hound slammed against the bumper. Bits of the grill tore off and fell into the road. The hound lay motionless. Dead. The other was coming. The truck slowed, stopped, and then drove off.

The second dog bounded across the road, coming for Aiden, its lips curling back, fangs bared, a growl caught in its throat, trying to spill out as if it were an unnatural sound for the beast to make. Aiden's hand wrapped around a bent and jagged piece of metal torn from the grill of the truck, while his other hand still gripped the handle of the birdcage tightly. He ran but the hound was upon him within a few steps.

Aiden wheeled as the dog surged forward, its forelegs driving into his abdomen, its maw seeking his throat. Placing the birdcage between them, Aiden used it to shield himself from the viscous, snapping teeth. Inside the cage, the bird squawked and beat its wings wildly. The dog pushed, Aiden fought to keep his feet, and the cage twisted from his grip and fell, crashing to the ground. The door opened and the sparrow took wing, flying into the night. The dog leapt for it, mouth open. Aiden lunged forward and drove the jagged metal rod into the dog's neck. Flimsy metal, probably aluminum. It bent and twisted back on itself, cutting into the animal's flesh, but causing no real damage. The bird flew away, back toward the yellow house. The dog turned its attention to Aiden. Aiden stabbed again with the metal as the hound's teeth ripped into his other arm. The metal scraped along the dog's nose and slid neatly into an eye. The grip on his arm increased, then the dog yelped and released Aiden's arm. Aiden drove the metal in with all his strength until it scraped the bone of the eye socket and sunk into soft brain.

The dog collapsed, convulsed, and then stilled.

In the moonlight, Aiden watched in horror as the canine body elongated, shed its hair, and reverted to its natural form. There in the middle of Fern Road lay the body of a young man, naked and broken, a piece of twisted metal protruding from his eye.

"What the hell?" Aiden said.

He looked down the road to where the other dog lay and saw, there in the shadows, the shape of another human.

There was no question now as to what he must do. He had to save Seraphina from this witch. For that's what Angela must truly be: a witch.

There came soft rain. A net of clouds blew in front of the moon, gliding softly past, and bathed the world in a new light. Aiden felt as if he were sailing under strange stars, caught in an undertow he could not resist. Treading on soft mud, he walked, as if in a trance, down the winding drive and descended into the cage-littered yard.

Light flickered in the windows like the flames of a candle. Shadows shifted within the house. As he crept closer, Aiden glimpsed a sleek, thin black cat perched in a window, crying softly to the night. Crossing the lawn, Aiden felt that weakening of his will once more; a fear, ancient and terrible, fought to hold him in place, to turn him about. He couldn't leave the girl trapped as a beast. Knowing that Angela was a witch and that she was binding people to her in the forms of creatures, there was no way Aiden could walk away without saving Seraphina from that fate.

He pulled open the screen door, pushed through the inner door, and marched into the house with a single determination: he would not leave without her. That sense of déjà vu, of familiarity, returned as he stepped into the living room. Candles burned everywhere, some spiked atop tall, black candle holders that rose from the floor and stood in the flickering shadows like gruesome pikes, others blazed in bunches upon ornate candelabras, and still more adorned the walls resting in elaborate sconces. In the dim glow or the dancing flames Aiden saw many books laying open. The cat, lounging in the window, pounced onto the green couch, then to the plush white carpet, and brushed itself against Aiden's leg.

"It's coming back to you, isn't it?" Angela said, entering from the kitchen. She was shorter now than she had been just half an hour ago. Her face had aged a decade. Her blonde hair now shone platinum in the flickering light. But her green eyes sparkled as they had, and as they had in the distant past that was haunting Aiden now.

"I knew you when I saw you," she said. "And I think you knew me too. I think you're beginning to remember yourself. It must have been eighty years ago that you came into my service. And only two months since your debt's fulfillment you've come back. I knew you would. One of my favorite familiars. I think you were a rat for a while. Maybe an owl. You have the look of an owl."

Terror gripped his heart. His dream of being—something else. Dark wings taking him into the sky, sharp eyes seeking prey below, fierce talons rending.

"A hawk," he said.

"Yes," she cried, delightedly. "That's right. A hawk. I'd nearly forgotten."

"I'd forgotten it all," Aiden said. "But now…"

"Residual memory from a former life," Angela said matter-of-factly. "We all have latent memories from former lives. Of course, my life is much longer than most people's." She stepped close to Aiden, reached for him. "I am sorry about the hounds. I hope they didn't hurt you. My intention was to have them retrieve you, but they can get carried away."

"They're dead," Aiden said.

"Pity," Angela said. Aiden doubted her sincerity. "I'm so glad you're back."

"I'm just here for the girl. Or the bird. Or whatever you've turned her into."

Angela's eyes flickered to the cat who was milling around near Aiden's feet. Aiden picked the cat up.

"She can't leave," Angela said. "She owes me a debt. Well, her father's debt, but that's just semantics."

"And I owed you a debt, in that former life?"

"Of a sort. But that's not important now. What matters now is that you're here."

"I'm leaving," Aiden said. "And I'm taking the cat."

"She'll come back to me," Angela said. "She's bound to me. Why do you think she returns when she goes to the market? Why do you think she flew back here? She is mine, she belongs to me. The magic is binding and cannot be undone until the debt is paid."

"You cannot own a girl the way one owns a pet," Aiden said. "Your magic doesn't give you that right, or that power."

"You know nothing of power," Angela said. "It seems the power or the magic binding you to me still lingers, Aiden. For your debt is paid and you've received your freedom, yet you've returned. My pets always come back to me."

"I am not your pet," said Aiden. "You hold no sway over me."

"Oh, Aiden," Angela said, smiling cruelly, "that you are here suggests otherwise. Let us see just what power I do have over you."

Angela pointed a gnarled finger at Aiden and began to recite an incantation. As she spoke, liver spots and wrinkled flesh distorted the smooth skin of her hands and arms. The lines around her mouth and eyes deepened and spread. She was growing old before his eyes.

Aiden's skin itched like hair growing back the day after a shave. His insides tingled. A sharp pain rippled up his back as his spine cracked. He dropped the cat and it sprinted from sight.

He remembered this pain. The twisting manipulation of his body as it morphed into whatever creature the witch desired.

Lunging forward, Aiden slammed himself into Angela. He knocked the wind out of her and her spell fell flat. Still, she raked with her nails and smashed at Aiden with her fists and elbows. They crashed into a table holding candles and an open book. The table overturned and the candles fell to floor. The book's pages were old and dry; they kindled instantly. The smoke detector chirped once, then began screeching. Smoke filled the room as Aiden threw Angela to the floor, into the flames. Taking hold of a barb-tipped, iron candleholder, Aiden plunged it deep into the witch's chest. She gurgled and spat.

"Fool," she muttered. "Many things accumulate debt." She chuckled, blood bubbling from her lips. "Do you think it is a girl you save?"

Somewhere in the smoke, a cat meowed. Aiden spotted it, sitting in the same window: Seraphina. Aiden's intuition told him that once the witch was dead, the girl would be freed from her curse and would return to her natural state. He pushed the candleholder through Angela to finish her. At that same moment, Angela reached for her little jade pendant, the shape of a butterfly, and with her last breath, crushed it to dust.

Outside, a multitude of creatures cried out in unison. Then the night went silent.

The cat, Seraphina, slumped from the windowsill and onto the couch.

Aiden picked her up and fled from the burning house. She wasn't dead, just unconscious from the smoke. In his arms, Aiden could feel the soft pulsing of purring breaths. As he walked, he felt her fur change texture, changing her shape. She was shrinking. By the time he reached the door, he held a little sparrow.

Seraphina's natural form.

Outside, the cages and aquariums and crates held human forms. Where the human condition was too much for its vessel, either the bars or glass had burst outward, or there lay such a horrid mess squeezing between metal that Aiden was forced to keep his eyes forward.

He found an empty birdcage and set Seraphina gently inside.

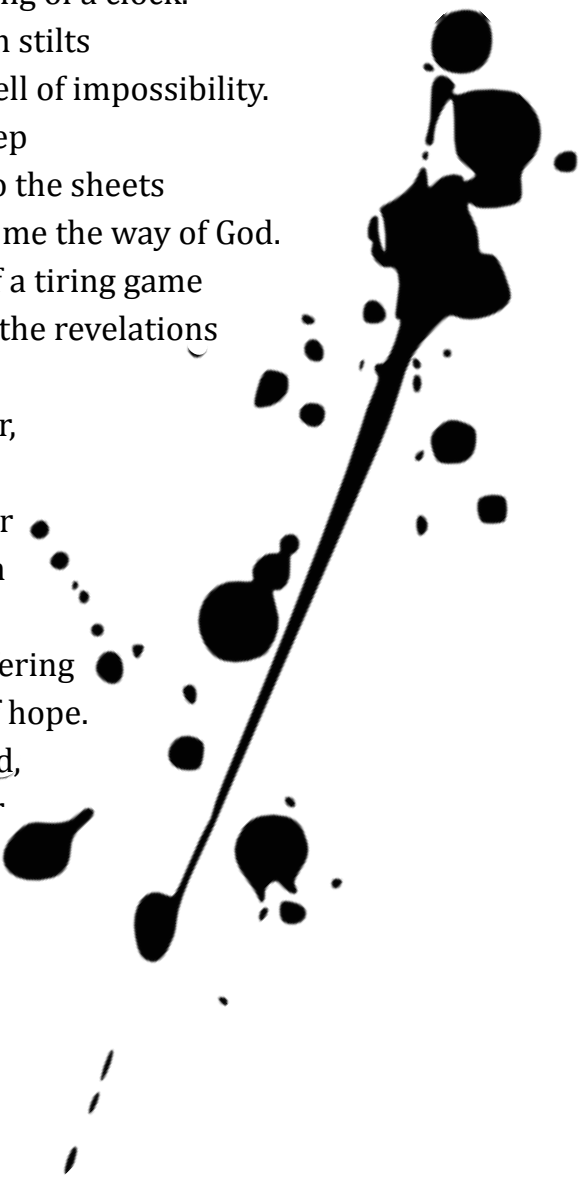
He carried it as he walked down Fern Road, exhausted. He wasn't sure where he was heading or why he was heading there. He had some vague notion that he was heading to familiar territory, toward the market. But what should he do with the bird? Seraphina, the girl whom he had seemed to remember, he hadn't truly remembered at all. They shared a bond that neither of them could understand: a boy transformed into a bird and a bird changed into a girl, both longing to be free. Somehow he'd broken away, but she had remained a prisoner.

Only one thing seemed right. Aiden set the cage down on the muddy road and opened the door. As the sparrow hopped to the opening and lifted into the air, flying to freedom, Aiden walked away back toward the market, toward a more familiar world.

Enslaved

Allison Grayhurst

It is in the language of the insects
I hear in the morning time
when I hear my daily calling
pass through me like the ticking of a clock.
It is these words that stand on stilts
and glove my future in the shell of impossibility.
It is ghosts I look to in my sleep
when my blood is sinking into the sheets
and there is no voice to teach me the way of God.
Floating face up in the fires of a tiring game
that lives and lives no matter the revelations
or the pain I learn to forgive.
It is a black eye in the summer,
a candy caught in the throat.
Where can I turn? What terror
breathes as large as the ocean
and will not find its tomb?
It is the flavour of unholy suffering
that has burnt the bandage of hope.
It is barren as a subway crowd,
like a broken kaleidoscope, or
a death remembered
and not the life.



Limbo

Robert Hansen

Dying sucks, but I got over it. It took some adjustment, though. One moment, I'm walking across the street minding my own business, and then the next, *SPLAT*, I get hit by a truck. "He died instantly—", yeah, right, that instant was a god-awful long one.

So here I was, the recently dead, and I had no clue what had happened. No body, no truck, no angel, no nothing. But I was dead. I knew I was dead. I don't know how I knew—something about the truck had sunk in, I suppose—but I knew I was dead. And there was nothing I could do about it. Dead is dead, and I was dead, dead, dead. But, like I said, I got over it. It wasn't because of *The Serenity Prayer*, either. I mean, sure, I couldn't change being dead by miraculously coming back to life, but I didn't accept it *because* I couldn't change it. I started to come to terms with being dead when I realized that my life sucked, too.

I had a bitchy wife. She nagged the piss out of me. If I did *this*, she wanted me to do *that*. And I never did *this* right to start with. Nag, nag, nag. I asked her once why she married me, and she said, "Because I love you, and I hate it." Yeah, it was easier for her to show she hated loving me than just loving me. She's that kind of woman.

Still, I suppose I deserved some of it—like that one time we were being almost civil to one another and she playfully pinched my cheek and said, "Love is blind." I should have kept my mouth shut, but I couldn't help it. I said, "Yeah, and stupid too." She didn't talk to me for a while after that. It wasn't the blessed reprieve I had been hoping for either; the silence was a "Just you wait . . ." kind of silence that worried me. I hate waiting. And then I died and now I have to wait around in limbo for a while, which—*surprise*—also sucks. There's not much to do here.

Limbo's an odd place, kind of like a sensory deprivation chamber, I suppose. There's no sense of time, no sense of place, no boundaries, no landmarks—hell, there's no up, down, left or right, either. It's just a *being* kind of thing, though not a being *someplace* or *something* kind of thing. It isn't a being *alive* sort of thing either, but I don't feel dead. I *am* dead, and that is it. In your dreams, Descartes:that "I think,

therefore, I am" state sucks, too.

Hell, everything sucks. Life, death, limbo, trucks going the wrong way on a one-way street, bitchy wives, and bastard bosses. Yeah, I had one of them, too. Greg, do this. Greg, do that. Greg, you're working late. Greg, bring me some coffee. Greg, Greg, Greg. I would have quit in a heartbeat, but that would've given my wife more to nag about. It's a damned good thing we didn't have any kids for me to beat.

Now, it takes some time to realize that when you're dead, you don't have anybody —or any *body*, either—and you have to figure it out on your own. That's what limbo's for: it removes all the limits life imposes on you and gives you complete freedom. That sucks too, when you don't know what to do with complete freedom—especially when you realize that the amorphous stuff-but-not-stuff that limbo is composed of is at your beck and call and all you have to do is *think* it into the shape you want. I found that out by thinking my non-dead wife into existence. That was when I realized how much my life had sucked. My limbo-wife nagged me too.

But what good is a wife without a home and hearth? I thought into existence the home she had always wanted—she had told me often enough what was missing in ours. She took one look at it and said, "It's a nice place, but it wasn't *home*." Try to please the woman, and that was what I got. Then *she* thought me into a job. I don't know how, but somehow I gave her free will and control over limbo—over me. I was working again—and, of course, I had a bastard boss. I couldn't think up something pleasant or exotic; I had to be a glorified gopher at a tire factory. Greg, do this. Greg, do that. Greg, bring me some coffee. All day long. At least, what I decided was a day; there wasn't any sense of time in limbo, either.

For a long time, I thought I was being prepared for hell, but then one pseudo-day I woke up to silence. Something in me had rebelled against the piss-poor things in my life, and I had thought my wife and boss out of existence. It was a good thing, too, since I don't think I could have survived an eternity with them. This was the day I accepted I was dead, and it made a world of difference—mainly because I got moved out of limbo and into something else. Sort of.

There was a pleasant fellow at the door—a normal wooden door suspended in the middle of the nothingness of limbo. I remember thinking it was strange that a door didn't have a house with it, but even thinking about a house didn't bring it into

existence. That's when I realized the door wasn't in my control. I knocked, and the sound echoed through my knuckles and into my head. It opened.

On the other side of the door was another dead guy surrounded by limbo, but it was a different limbo from mine. "Hi," he said, "I'm Hank. I'm dead, aren't I?"

"Um," I hesitated, looking at the gaping hole in his chest. It was a nice hole, really, not one of those jagged, bloody things. This was clean and went all the way through him—which suggested to me that he was probably dead, so I said, "I think so."

"Okay," he said, and started to turn away. The door began to close behind him, but I grabbed at it, at him. My fingers refused to go over the threshold into his limbo, so I caught the door before it closed all the way.

"Hey Hank," I called.

"Yes?" he said, half-turning his head.

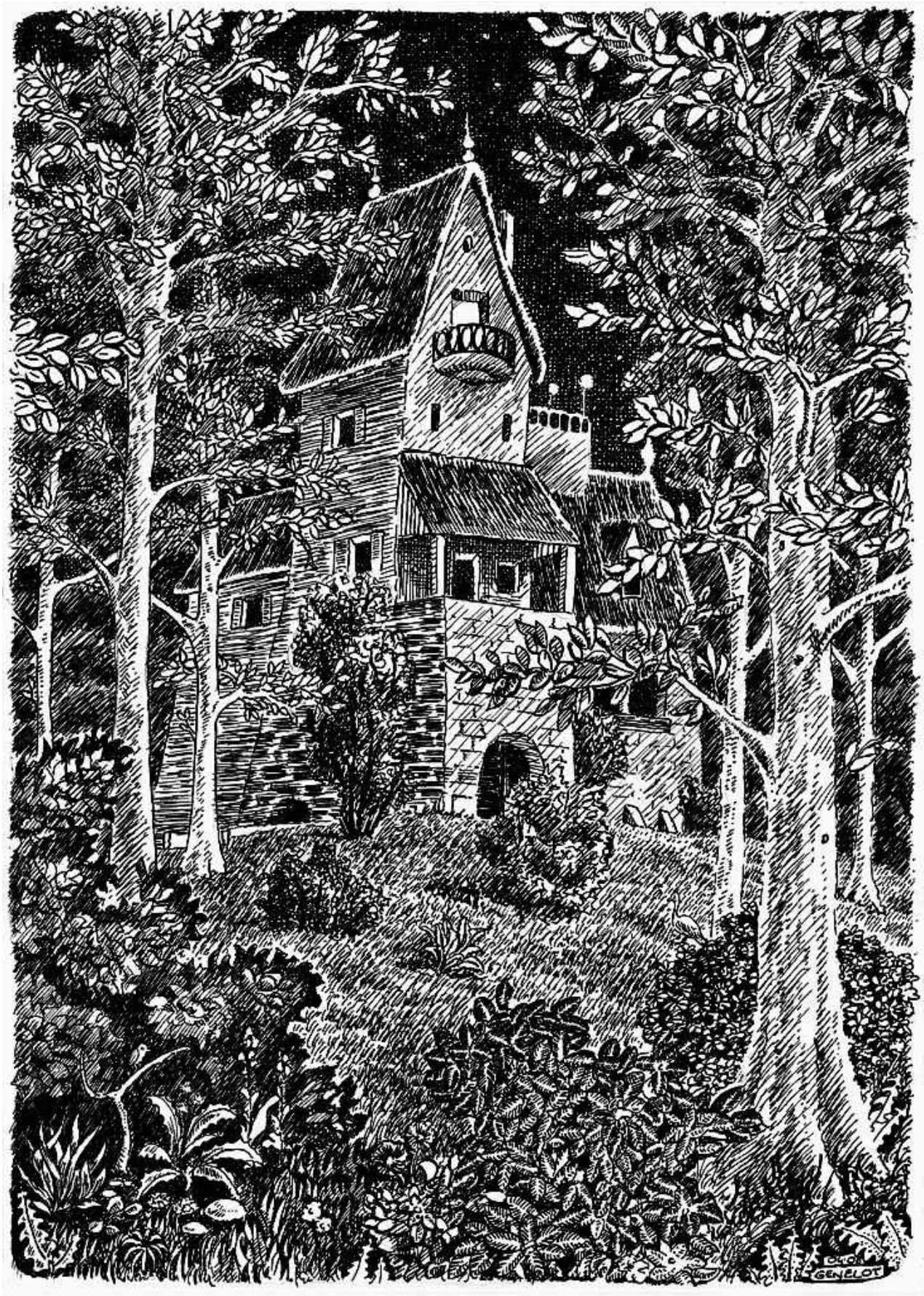
"I'm dead, too, aren't I?" I asked, hoping he would lie to me.

He raised his eyebrows and replied, "Look in a mirror." Then the door closed and disappeared.

Mirror? That hadn't occurred to me. I thought one into existence and took a look at myself. It wasn't pretty. Getting splatted by a truck leaves a few marks.

Then I heard my wife calling out to me again . . . .

House on the Hill Guillaume Génelot



The King of the Dead

Brandon Mc Ivor

The King of the Dead's mausoleum was built in a lonely corner of the Lourdes Cemetery that had, over the years, been taken back by the forest.

Lourdes was an old cemetery, and the families of the people buried there had forgotten their ancestors; had left Maraval for other cities, islands, continents, or they had died and were buried there themselves.

As time marched on, the forest grew, cradling the dead in pine and cedar arms, swaddling headstones with mosses and lichens, and carefully grinding away engraved names, dates of birth and of death, and long forgotten epitaphs. The dead were freed of all those things binding them to the world of men, and then they were left to rest, finally, in peace with all the millions of other things that had died before them.

By the time Travis turned sixteen, those forgotten lots of Lourdes cemetery had become so overgrown that there was no sign that anyone had ever been buried there. Plants had settled on headstones, and probing roots had split the foundations; other headstones had toppled over for some long-ago storm or landslide, and still some seemed to have disappeared entirely.

The only resting place that stood with some of its old majesty was that moss-covered mausoleum made specifically for the man who would one day become known as The King of The Dead.

Everything else began with a true story that Travis' uncle had told him:

A lonely old spinster who lived at the foot of the Paramin Hills had taken ill, and it was clear to those who knew her she was just a few years too old to recover. When she was asked whether she had any last wishes, she replied, “Only one. When I die, I want to be buried in Lourdes Cemetery alongside my father.”

She succumbed to her illness later that evening and it seemed to the people who were there—neighbors and church-folk since she had no family—she had only kepton living to make that final request. Probably, she did not have the health nor the money to put the plans in place herself.

The community, which had deep respect for its elders, resolved to come together to pay for the spinster's final wish. It was only after they had gotten the money it was revealed: the spinster's father had never been buried in Lourdes Cemetery. He had died overseas during the war and, although no one could know for sure, it was said his ashes had been scattered at sea.

“She was old,” said the priest who would listen to her confessions. “Her memory had begun to give away some years ago. Although I cannot reveal what she told me in confidence with the Lord, I can say this much: she forgot basic things like my name and the words to the simplest penances. Perhaps she was thinking of someone else who had been buried in Lourdes, but it wasn't her father.”

Those who lived at the foot of the Paramin Hills and some of those who lived just a little further up, uncertain of how they should honor the spinster's impossible last request, resolved to bury her in Lourdes Cemetery anyway. She had to be buried somewhere, they reasoned.

So, the spinster was buried in an empty lot of Lourdes cemetery alongside people she probably never knew.

Travis' Uncle lived just far enough up Paramin Hill to be absolved of having anything to do with the whole affair. But he did his part and shared the story as he heard it, passing it up along the hill until everyone knew about the spinster's lonely grave. That was how Travis first came to Lourdes cemetery at the age of sixteen: to soothe his heart by mourning a woman denied her last wishes and buried among strangers.

It was a simple detour on the way back from the bakery. There was no gate or grave-keeper. Travis only needed to follow the winding path into the churchyard, through the dusty car park, past the grotto, and then, to come in beneath the wrought iron archway into The Land of The Dead.

He did not know his way around the cemetery. Although he knew the spinster had been buried there recently and that people must come in to bury the dead and after, to mourn them, there was little sign anyone had been to the cemetery in years.

Still, it was not difficult to find the spinster's grave. Sprigs of grasses and weeds flecked the gray headstones and upturned earth, and the bright orange and yellow petals of plastic flowers lay on beds of rotten mulch from long ago condolences. The spinster's was the only lot still untouched by the decay that seemed to have swallowed up the rest of the cemetery.

Her name was Alice Armani, and she had been born in 1912, Travis learned. Her epitaph seemed scant to Travis, who was accustomed to reading "*Loving Wife*," or "*Mother to Seven and Grandmother to Eighteen*," and other such inscriptions. But none of those for Alice Armani. There was only: "*Rest in Peace*."

Apparently, inscribing "*Mother to Us All*" had been considered, but the community admitted that, although Ms. Armani was a good hearted woman, no one really felt kindred to her in that way.

The sun had reached its highest point in the sky when Travis finally brushed the dust from his trousers and walked away from Alice Armani's grave. He realized then he did not really want to go, though he could not say why. Sitting at the foot of Alice Armani's grave and picking out the grasses and the weeds had been calming. It was like making a new friend, but without the need to speak or to lock eyes.

As Travis walked out, back under the wrought iron archway, past the grotto and through the car park, he was already thinking about returning. Maybe Alice Armani's grave had been put there for people like him, he thought.

As long as Travis could remember, he had lived with his Uncle. If Travis' mother had thought differently and had introduced the man to an infant Travis as "Daddy," that would be who he was. But "Daddy" was not a word Travis learned growing up. There was only "Uncle." It had become such habit that little incongruences were routinely ignored or missed. Every other man in Paramin was also "uncle" but the intonation must have been different, as Travis never observed the similarity between those scores of uncles and his "Uncle."

In conversations about one's parents that would arise in school, Travis seamlessly substituted "Uncle" where another child would have said "Father." And if someone were to ask directly about Travis' father, Travis would respond automatically with information about his Uncle, hearing, forgetting, supplanting automatically.

This led many to believe Travis' Uncle was a paragon of virtue—that he had stepped in where Travis' father had abandoned him, and that Travis had come to see his Uncle as a role model, but this wasn't the case. Travis' Uncle had always been his father, in every sense but nomenclature. And like any other father, he suffered the same fallibilities, was the object of the same unconscious hatred.

It wasn't clear whether that word "Uncle" held him back, but the relationship between Travis and the man who might as well have been his father was cold. Only once, after he had seen a particularly sad movie, did Travis call his Uncle "Dad." Travis' Uncle did not respond, but a look of panic came over him, his chest puffed out and his eyes glazed over as they do when someone looks not at their surroundings, but into the past. He did not correct Travis, but Travis knew not to make the mistake again. What he always remembered was that look on his Uncle's face: not surprised, but uncertain—terrified.

Between errands or when Travis wasn't expected back home on the dot, he would stop off in Lourdes. In exchange for a few minutes of solitude, Travis would mourn some forgotten soul in the cemetery, always seeking out those headstones with the most weathered inscriptions, the oldest dates and the most antiquated names.

One day, when the mist that settled in the trough of the valley was at its thickest and the sun was soft—a time when people could believe in promises and folklore—Travis found himself skirting the edge of the Lourdes cemetery that was just beyond The King of The Dead's domain. Past a web of thick vines and wild bush, that ancient and forgotten corner of Lourdes stretched out into the vastness of the Northern Range. And The King of The Dead called out to Travis in an old tongue, beckoning him to cross the boundary. He was curious to know what human had become so taken with the dead.

But Travis did not cross the boundary that day. Instead, he settled at a tombstone on which he could only make out the letter "J," and that damnable hyphen separating two distant but illegible years.

It was months later before Travis found himself again verging on The King of The Dead's empire. It was hot that day, and the shade of the drooping willows offered the only refuge. As Travis sat in the gentle cool of the valley, The King of The Dead beckoned again. *Who are you?* the wind asked. But Travis did not respond. He was listening to a woman 80 years gone, survived only by the words "never to be forgotten."

Travis continued coming into Lourdes Cemetery—almost but never quite setting foot into The King of The Dead's dominion—for half a year. And always, The King of The Dead listened for his voice, counted his footsteps, caught his short breathing in the valley breeze. He knew that one day, the stranger would find his way into that corner of Trinidad belonging only to the dead. And he thought of how he would, depending on his mood, greet his guest, or repel the intruder.

At first, what Travis thought he wanted was people. He craved a life beyond his family; he wanted the company of people he hadn't met yet.

But when Travis thought about his life—what it was and where it was going—there was only one constant: the ramshackle house sitting just above the foot of the Paramin Hills belonging to his mother. And Travis couldn't imagine anything or anyone new fitting into that life.

He was young, but Travis was already certain nothing he was being prepared for would allow him to find a place of his own. No, his legacy was that house and the life just above the foot of Paramin Hills, standing there for almost a century.

The life wasn't a bad one, but when Travis thought about the future and when he gave his mind the space to dream, everything was reined in by that 40 foot by 40 foot lot. The future became cramped.

What Travis found in the cemetery was not people—not, at least, living ones—but emptiness. He found a space to have dreams beyond Paramin and school and his family. When Travis was tucked away in the cemetery, removed from Paramin and the people who lived there, he could dream about anything and anywhere. He dreamed

about times long ago and he dreamed about times yet to come, people long dead and people yet unborn. Travis dreamed about lives unencumbered by what had come before and what would come after.

What Alice Armani, and later, The King of The Dead, had given Travis was this: a place where he could dream—dream of a life without expectations, constraints or consequences. It was a life that, once extinguished, was covered over and buried away, until the world forgot such a life had ever been.

It was raining the day Travis finally met The King of The Dead. June had gone away and with it, the dry season. It had become even more difficult to stay at home and now, even when Travis did not have a reason to leave, he would run off to Lourdes. There, he did not have to spend his quiet moments pretending to study.

The rain came down softly at first, but within a minute it had become torrential. There was nowhere in the cemetery for Travis to take shelter, so he retreated to the willows, which were dancing under the weight of the heavy raindrops. Without knowing it, Travis inched further and further back into the forest, trying to stay clear of the storm.

The King of The Dead awoke, and he felt Travis come in closer to his domain than he ever had. He called out to Travis, but his voice—already faint—was lost in the rainfall.

Travis stopped on the threshold.

Lourdes Cemetery had been become a tiny window in the overgrowth, frosted with the valley mists. He had come far enough—he was completely clear of the rains now—but something in the air made him shiver, and he stumbled back just one more step. And that was it. Suddenly, Travis fell under the jurisdiction of those laws laid out by The King of The Dead. He was walking atop the oldest part of the Cemetery, a place that did not belong to the world of the living.

From the corner of his eye, Travis noticed one of those ancient tombstones—heavily weathered and coated with moss—rising up from the earth. It was obvious to Travis that the tombstone was decades older than anything else he had seen in the cemetery. Curious, Travis walked further into the forest. Then, all at once, he noticed the hundreds upon hundreds of graves hidden away deep in the valley.

The rainfall waned and the voices in the forest became louder. The air became lighter. In a trance, Travis walked from tombstone to tombstone, passing his hand over the gritty limestone and moss, following The King of The Dead's voice without knowing it until, near the end of the way, a mess of bushes and fallen tree branches stood before him. He tossed some of the lighter branches to the side, stepped over, stepped around, stepped through the rest.

Then, he came upon The King of The Dead's ancient mausoleum.

Wild passionfruit snaked itself about the trellises flanking the structure, and a forgotten bird's nest sat nestled in the rafters. Travis parted the curtain of vines hanging in the archway, and went inside. The tomb itself had been built into a pit in the ground, so only a slight lip and the covering were visible. On either side of the tomb there were blocks of limestone, and carved into one of the walls was the inscription, "Visitors Welcome."

Travis looked around for dates in the mausoleum, but there were none. It seemed as if the mausoleum must have taken a very long time to be built and that it must also have cost a lot of money, but Travis could tell none had been there in a very long time.

You must have been very important when you were alive, Travis thought. *But now, I am the only one who knows about you. Now, you are only important among the dead. I wonder what your name was*.

The King of The Dead whispered a name that didn't belong to him.

No matter, thought Travis. *You are The King of The Dead out here. I am glad that I am welcome here.*

And so, Travis sat in that mausoleum alongside The King of The Dead, who felt accommodating that day. Their time together then was brief, but the seeds had been planted. Travis would be back, and The King of The Dead would welcome him when he returned.

Travis was in 5th form, so he was meant to sit CSEC in a month. That was the culmination of his education: he needed CSEC passes to get a job, or CSEC distinctions to get into 6th form. By and large, those were the only two directions his

life could take. He already knew he did not want a life that had anything to do with Biology or French, but his future depended on it, all the same.

He was frank with his mother: he did not like his subjects—they didn't appeal to him. What he wanted out of life was not hidden away in the syllabuses of the eight subjects he had been forced to choose. Somewhat to Travis' surprise, his mother was supportive. She knew there was something else waiting for Travis out there. He would grow beyond Paramin and his eight subjects, and maybe even Trinidad. She knew that already.

But the road to what lay beyond was paved with those same subjects: Biology, French and English Literature. He needed the passes. They were stepping stones, she said.

Travis told his mother he understood—that he would try, but that it was difficult to do so for something he did not care about.

But Travis was not honest with his mother.

His great secret was that he tried harder than anyone. Whether it was his underlying apathy or inadequacy, he wasn't sure, but he always failed. His mother said the subject didn't matter—that he didn't need to care about the French verb conjugations or Shakespearean sonnets. The world just needed to know he could complete tasks—that he could think logically and that he could be creative.

Travis knew what his mother said was true, but it was no good. He failed at everything.

Travis began to wonder whether there was anything out there that he could be good at. Was everything in life barred off to him because of his inadequacies in French and English Literature?

So long as Travis was failing his subjects, there could only ever be one course of action: to get better at them. His future depended on it.

But he never got better.

Travis' life was a cycle of studying and failing. And every time he returned to study, he lost confidence. He knew it was all in vain. He spent hours reading information, forgetting it and then reading it again. He hurried to take practice tests —just to see his scores go up by a little bit—but they never did. Travis did enough

tests to know how well he could do if he got lucky—if fate turned all mistakes in his favor and all his guesses were all true—and even then, he would fail.

There was nothing to be done, but there were no other turns for Travis' life to take. So, he kept studying in vain. He kept failing. His only reprieve was with The King of The Dead. In the mausoleum, there was no prerequisite to make a life, or to live. Travis felt the burden of test results lift whenever he went into the forest. When he was among the dead, he knew that even the best test scores led to the same place. The ultimate resting place—the ultimate life—did not care, after all.

Some weeks, they needed nothing. Their time together was as simple as Travis' sitting down—his back against the wall and one arm resting upon the tomb—and closing his eyes. Other weeks, Travis spent his time thinking, running ideas past The King of The Dead. They were idle ideas, but it thrilled Travis to give them voice; what if he took the ferry into San Fernando and never came back? What if he were to set his school on fire? What if he spent the rest of his childhood in the forest and only came out once the world a different place?

Sometimes, the quiet of the forest was too much for Travis. He couldn't help himself and his mind wandered to simpler things: he thought about sex, and though he held himself back from going much further, he would find himself aroused, his hand lazily resting on his crotch. Once, he brought a copy of *The Sunday Punch* back to the mausoleum, and with The King of The Dead's permission, he opened out the centerfold and studied every detail of the model's body: the slight goose bumps on her thigh, the sheen of oil on her stomach, and the subtle indents and folds on scant clothing. After a half an hour's scrutiny, it was no longer sexual: Travis was simply fascinated to have gotten such a close look at another person's body for so long a time.

He became curious about The King of The Dead's body.

I wonder what remains, he thought.

He immediately imagined there was nothing left but the skeleton. But then, he recalled images of mummified corpses and news stories of bodies that had been found halfway decayed. If The King of The Dead had been buried within the

mausoleum in a stone box, surely something more than the bones would remain. What of the skin? Or his clothes? Did the dead have goosebumps?

Travis asked, and The King of The Dead was demure. Travis could answer his own question if he could muster the strength to remove the seal from the tomb. But something stopped Travis from doing so; he was not ready to look The King of The Dead in the face. It would be like seeing a dear friend naked.

Travis did not bring another edition of *The Sunday Punch* into the forest, although he kept the single centerfold spread from the first issue and he would, every so often, study the body of the model, pleasing himself to find that he remembered every curve, every blemish and every shade of color.

Once, after a particularly bad result in a practice test, when Travis felt the pressure of returning home to Paramin most heavily, Travis tried to study in the mausoleum. Maybe, he thought, the peace of mind he found in the forest could help. But the moment he began to recite the verbs—to practice his accent—he felt a sudden, violent nausea. The forest became hostile and Travis could hear the dead become stirred into unrest.

It wasn't the place for CSEC. Travis left his studying at that one false conjugation, and The King of The Dead relented. The forest became welcoming again. The King of The Dead had made a provision for Travis, but his life outside was not welcome.

The King of The Dead and Travis reconnected over subtler things. Travis forgot about his exam and of returning home.

It was almost nightfall when Travis remembered his life in Paramin, his mock exam and his Uncle. Travis left the forest, and The King of The Dead fell back asleep into his world beyond Travis' worries.

Travis left his CSEC Mathematics Paper II exam half an hour early. He hadn't done well, but he had done as much as he could. That was the last of his chances. By his estimates, he had failed four subjects now. It didn't matter how he had done on the rest any more. Four fails meant fewer than five passes. There would be no 6^{th} form for him next year.

When Travis left Mathematics II half an hour early, he went immediately to The King of The Dead's mausoleum. But even after Travis had left the world of the living, Mathematics II followed him.

"As nice as it is to come here," said Travis, "I always have to go back. I am not like you. I cannot stay here forever. My Uncle and my mother are going to kill me."

It was getting dark and Travis remembered he was some ways into the forest. In a few minutes, he wouldn't be able to see his own feet in front of him. And of course, his Uncle and his mother would begin to worry. Last week, a CSEC student had been found hanging from his belt in his school's art room.

"You can always stay," said The King of The Dead.

The wind blew, rousing fallen leaves into a hissing din, and a creature outside shrieked and ran off deeper into the forest.

"I cannot stay here," said Travis, but even as he said it, he realized he had been out in the mausoleum for longer than he had thought. Hours must have passed. It had become very dark.

"Stay," said The King of The Dead.

Travis heard the voice in his head, but he could have sworn that he heard the echo of it coming from within the tomb.

"I have to go," said Travis, and he ran outside into the darkness.

There was no light, save faint threads of starlight that had filtered through the treetops. Travis stumbled in the dark, trying to remember the way he had come, but he tripped over himself, became entangled in the brush. Lingering prayers and the cries of animals came to him, and then, the peal of the church bell. Travis followed the sound, scrambling through the darkness tearing his skin on thorns and ragged tree branches, until he fell out of the forest, back to the base of Alice Armani's grave.

He sat there for a moment as the adrenaline settled and, all at once, his body began to itch and to ache. He looked at the base of Alice Armani's headstone, where he had first sat down some months ago.

The artificial flowers had disappeared, and the weeds had grown back.

For a long while before his exams, Travis had taken it for granted: he would continue school, he would sit exams, he would attend more school, he would sit more exams,

he would leave school, and then he would work. How could it be any different? Even if he were to fail at that juncture, it wouldn't affect the course of his life; he would repeat, try again. That was the only way.

But after Travis had spent some time with The King of The Dead, he began to consider that there were paths beyond what he was being prepared for. Perhaps failure was not a hiccup for his current life, but a juncture into another. He hadn't yet convinced himself to abandon his current way—his life in school and Paramin—but the openness of choice comforted him. It was always there—that sacred something else. And every day until results came out, he considered it.

Perhaps it would be too much to say that Travis hoped, but he waited.

It had been some time since Travis had come into the forest, and The King of The Dead began to forget his face. He remembered the color of his breath, the sound of his footsteps, but slowly, everything else began to slip away. Without Travis' presence, he could confuse a minute for a year. There was nothing else to mark the passage of time. The King of The Dead began to grow restless, and then, lonesome. He called out to Travis, but he was far away.

In the depths of his loneliness, The King of The Dead remembered: the mausoleum was not built for him. It was built for a man across the seas, whose morbidity had made him purchase his grave while he was still alive and in the best of health. He could already feel the bullet in the back of his head, he used to say.

The King of The Dead did not have a home when he was alive, so for him, the empty mausoleum became a sanctuary. He came into the cemetery on the pretense of mourning at first, and after that, he became genuine. He came to love the man who had gone abroad to die, who had prophesied his death and who had, in so doing, bequeathed him a place in the world.

The King of The Dead slept in the mausoleum at nights, and when the girl would come to see the structure, which was not often, The King of The Dead would steal himself away into the forest.

When the man in war had died, The King of The Dead knew. That was when the girl stopped coming to the mausoleum, and that was when the forest began to take back the cemetery. The mausoleum and that old cemetery belonged to him now. That

was the moment when those buried there began to slip from everyone's memories. The King of The Dead was the only one who remembered.

The King of The Dead died in his sleep, on the mausoleum floor. They found his body because of the smell, and he was buried in a shallow grave out in the forest.

People wanted to wash the cemetery from their minds after that. The wild hurried its advances and crept over the cemetery, taking everything back.

The King of The Dead found his way back to the mausoleum from his unmarked plot in the forest before long. He waited to meet the man with bullet in his brain, but he did not come back. The King of The Dead waited so long that he forgot whether he was waiting for the man, or whether he was the man with the bullet in the back of his head, waiting for someone else.

Time passed and the forest wiped the names from the headstones, and with them, the memories from the dead.

The King of The Dead remembered only that he was waiting.

When Travis found his way just beyond the threshold, The King of The Dead remembered: he had been waiting for Travis. It was a false memory, of course, but something in Travis encouraged him.

Travis was waiting too.

Dead Boy Stare Maja-Lisa Kehlet Hansen

The Lost Boy

Tiffany Wang

I.

He was awake when the girl walked into the room, her high heels clicking against the dulled tiles. She had hoped he would be asleep, but he was sitting up in the hospital bed instead, staring out the window and at the moon. The clock on the wall read ten twenty-two.

When he said hello to her, she thought he had a nice voice. She was a bit taken aback by how *young* he looked, though, as he asked her if she was lost, which she thought was sweet. She said she was just waiting, and he said he would be glad for the company – so she sat down and that was that.

His tone was both tired and quiet. He talked about his condition as casually as could be expected, but she heard his voice's drained edge, which he tried to disguise.

He sounded like a boy who had been broken by life.

II.

"So do I know you?"

"We might've met before, in passing."

"You're not a doctor, are you?"

"That depends more on your point of view."

"Are you an angel?"

"Oh, God no."

III.

A little after midnight, their conversation took a darker turn.

Before, it had been his first kiss and his last love and the dog that he used to have who would chew up only his older brother's shoes but never his own.

After. Dying and if it would hurt and what it was like and if miracles really did exist.

And, of course, who she was.

IV.

"I pictured you a lot differently in my head. After the doctors told me how long I had left, I started researching you on the Internet. I've read stories about you and all that, but you're nothing like how I thought you'd be."

"I've never really been one for those stereotypes. I don't fancy scythes, and the whole soul-sucking image is too melodramatic for my taste. Sorry to disappoint."

"You're not. I just thought I'd let you know that dying sucks, though."

"I know."

"No, I mean *it really fucking sucks*."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I'm just as sorry as you are. But now, seeing you here, I think you're beautiful. No, I'm not hitting on you or anything. I just thought you might want to know. You seem like you don't."

V.

She realized that she'd seen him twice before when the clock struck one fifty-three. He'd looked familiar but she saw *so many* that—well—faces blended together after a while.

The first time had been ages ago, back when he was only in elementary school. She recalled that the highway had been slick, while peppered with broken glass. The impact of the red car against metal had shattered his mother's neck into pieces, while he sat in the backseat, still buckled in. He had been silent, with only a single, dripping cut across his left cheek, when the girl had peeked in, one hand over her eyes to shield from the spattering of rain.

The second time was two years ago. When she'd arrived, she had known who he was immediately. There was one instant where he raised his head from his lap, and her heart had pounded in her chest. She could've sworn he saw her, standing in the shadows. Then he looked back up at the body hanging from the ceiling and went back to crying—long, shuddering sobs for someone who would never hear him.

VI.

"Do you believe in karma?"

"On occasion."

"I do. My older brother, Davis, killed himself before he turned eighteen, and I'm about to kick the bucket before I do too."

"How is that karma?"

"When Davis came out, everyone was a douchebag to him. Small town, you know? People had known him all of their lives, but one little change and nobody could take it. He got beat up every other day and nobody did anything because they didn't want to get branded as a gay lover. Dad couldn't even look at him and threw him out of the house after a while. I knew where he was staying, so I went to see him. I swear to God that I was going to tell him I loved him, but when he opened the door, I—I called him a faggot instead."

"And why the hell did you do that?"

"I wanted to be the man my dad thought I was."

VII.

She saw the change at three thirty-seven. It was subtle—how his mouth trembled slightly, while his teeth clenched together. The girl bit into her bottom lip as she watched his features collapse.

Because even talking of dying hadn't made tears streak down his pale cheeks.

VIII.

"You know how the stupid things come into your head when you think about someone? Well, Davis always loved the moon. No, you don't get it. He said talking to it made him feel better, like it could hear him and everything. Whenever he had problems, he used to sit on our porch and watch it for the longest time."

"Not crazy. That's quite poetic, actually."

"I don't know. What's the point of talking to something that won't reply to you?"

"I get the feeling your brother was more into symbolism than you."

"I'm into reality, that's what. This shitty place is mine."

IX.

He began talking more when the clock struck four, his words quick and halting, stumbling over themselves in an effort to be heard.

He was trying to taste every word life had to offer.

X.

"There was this one day, when I was still a little kid. Davis had joined the baseball team, so he took me to this park across the street to try to teach me. Anyways, it started to rain when we were there and, God, I was so mad because all I wanted was to keep playing. But Davis just grinned at me like there was no place he'd rather be and, just like that, I suddenly felt *happy*. I'm sorry that I'm a terrible storyteller. I just keep thinking back to that day when it was raining and it sucked but I was still so, goddamn happy."

XI.

He grew quieter after a while.

The girl knew what would happen soon: his blue eyes would flicker, a desperate reach in the closing dark, before getting caught in a mesh net that they couldn't escape. That his breathing would become shallower, until it would slip into the air, dissolving into among the silence.

His eyes flicked towards the clock, catching the time—five-eleven—and she knew he was ten million miles away, thinking of shadows and the moon and warm rain, washing down on a tiny park near his house. She traced the inside of her palm, feeling for new patterns that she didn't think were there, waiting for him to look back up again. When he finally did, he gave her a slow smile.

And she thought it was the saddest one she'd ever seen.

XII.

"Do you think I'm a horrible person?"

"What?"

"You don't have to lie. I'm dying, not blind, and I have to make my peace and all that. I'm still not convinced that this isn't completely in my head, so you might as well answer my final requests. Do you think I'm a horrible person?"

"No—"

"Don't lie—"

"I'm not. I don't think you're horrible. I think you made stupid decisions, but I don't think you're half as bad as you think you are. Nobody really is. Anyways, in the end, does it really matter?"

"I guess I'll just have to wait and see."

XIII.

At five-seventeen in the morning, she kissed him gently on the forehead.

The moment of death itself is surprisingly quiet.

XIV.

XV.

She pushed open the hospital door, feeling the frigid air bite into her skin. When she got to the curb, she carefully removed her high heels and sat down heavily.

He wasn't the first, and by no means would he be the last. That was the way things had always gone and the way they always would be. She would forever be at the door of a hospital or a house or on the side of a road, always in her perfect shoes and perfect dress, kissing someone else on the forehead.

Yet for the next second, life collided to a halt. For one agonizingly long second, it was just a single girl sitting at the corner of the street, pinned against the night. She didn't move a muscle, except for the tears streaming down her face, for the boy who would never grow up.

And when she was done, she stood up quickly, wiping her eyes with her sleeves. She looked up to the ghostly shapes in the sky, which were waiting for her to react to the story of yet another lost boy.

XVI.

"*I really fucking hate this job*."

XVII.

But the moon, of course, said nothing back.

The Bewitching Hour

Sommer Cullingford

Sleep—
each night's consignment

is divvied out by secrets
and if you're not caught waiting,

supplicating
to the capricious vagaries
of their amusements,

visions slit your lids and peel
them open to pass the hours;

festooned over the rungs
as supernal sentries,

we are denied entry.

When preludes of a day,
strained
through the stray notes

hitch in
on a fleet of wings,

they shiver
through the vertebrae of repose—

rousing to a sick revival,
every other function.

But we—wreathed—linger
and perfect the art of existence

by expanding into the full fury
of our innovation

and without breaking our shape,
we strike at the horizon—

while the departed lie still,
still, in apery of dying.

Final Verse

Jennifer MacKenzie-Hutchison

Ellen steps inside the house and breathes in the scent of roses, luxuriates in its familiarity. There's a tinge of something else. Decay. Stale elements that swirl around like slender, frantic ghosts. It's been almost a week now. Almost a week since Mary Elizabeth Carruthers wrapped her favorite pashmina around her slender shoulders, pulled her silk-lined gloves from the wicker basket marked 'gloves', checked her lipstick in the antique mirror, and shut the door behind her for the last time.

Had she known it would be her last day, perhaps Mary Elizabeth would have lingered a little longer to survey the living room: its bookcases, neatly filled with alphabetized volumes rescued from secondhand shops, antique markets, and rummage sales; the elegant curtains in vibrant blue; the vase on the coffee table filled with yellow and pink roses. She might have smiled. Not a broad, life-has-been-good kind of smile, but one of contentment, an acknowledgment that things could have been worse.

Ellen hasn't been over to the house since the accident, except to pick out something nice for her mom to be buried in. She's already dealt with the reams of paperwork, the insurance claims, the funeral arrangements, the trips to the lawyer's office; the drunken tourist, the ass who had tried to pass on a narrow, winding section of Brackley Beach Road, is still in intensive care after slamming straight into her mother, who'd been on her way to meet a friend at Faye's café.

Mary Elizabeth was nothing if not tidy and organized, so Ellen tells herself that it will take no more than a couple of days to pack up her mother's life. Some boxes to keep; some for the Salvation Army. She shrugs off her purse, then moves into the living room and picks up the vase. The brittle petals follow her in a funereal trail to the kitchen, where she tosses the dank swill in the sink.

The garburator accepts the contents with a groan that reflects Ellen's mood. Which room to tackle first? As she considers her options, her phone rings, an irreverent trill in the silence. She pulls it out of her pocket, sees her sister's name

slide across the screen. “Hi, Soph.”

“How’s it going so far?”

“What do you mean?”

Silence. “I mean, you know, with all the sorting.”

“Why? Feeling like you should be here?” She stares out the window, at the apple tree with the gangly limbs that she and her sister used to climb.

“Come on, Elle, I told you that I needed to be at the meeting this morning. We have to get backers for this film or it won’t go ahead. It’s as simple as that. You know how much work I’ve put into this thing.”

Ellen sighs inwardly. Sophie had flown in on the red eye for the funeral, where she’d looked gorgeous in a short, cream-colored linen skirt with a matching jacket and high heels. After a witty yet tear-jerking tribute to their mother (which, as the older sister, Ellen should have done herself, but was too emotional), she’d kissed, smiled, waved, drawn admiring looks—*She looks amazing. I hear she’s a big-shot movie producer now. Wow? Really?* Then she’d blown back to Los Angeles. Mom’s funeral. Check.

But Ellen could hear the guilt floating around the edges of her sister’s voice. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll be fine. You know Mom. She hates clutter, so there’s not much to go through.”

“Hated.”

“Pardon?”

“Hated clutter—you have to start using the past tense, Elle. I hope you’re not in denial.”

“So what if I am? It’s one of the four stages, you know.”

“Of what?”

“Of grief!”

“Oh…oh, right.”

Silence.

Sophie lets out a long-suffering splutter. “Okay, well. I’ve got to go. Sean and I are taking a couple of our potential investors to a baseball game. We’ve rented a box.”

Nice. Ellen’s resentment returns at the image of her sister enticing her backers with flirting and expensive canapés while she packs away their mother’s belongings.

"Have fun."

Pause. "I've taken care of the movers and auctioneers and I've rented the storage locker. Let me know if there's anything else I can do, okay?"

Any more phone calls, she means. "Sure."

Ellen pushes a button to end the call, then leans over the sink. The intricate strands of grit from the flower water have slithered their way into a man's face, one that eerily resembles her ex-husband's. It takes only one blast from the nozzle to annihilate him and reveal the sparkling surface underneath. Mother never leaves… *left* her house with anything to clean.

An early evening sun shower descends on the backyard. A stream of silver reflects off a metal bucket and jets across the dewy grass. Beautiful. Artsy. Worthy of a poem, perhaps. But not now. She needs to get out there. The familiar combination of sea, fish, mud, and motorboat oil reaches her nostrils. How she misses that smell. In Charlottetown, any scent drifting off the sea is diluted by the competing smells of the city. She walks up the slope to the wooden lounge chair under the apple tree, the white paint long chipped off. The splintered slats creak under her weight, the drizzle soft against her face. To the one side, rows and rows of potato plants tumble toward the gulf, green leaves bursting from the rich red soil. To the other side, her mom's manicured lawn with her prized rose garden as a centerpiece.

Moving to the rose garden, Ellen crouches down and lines up the bushes as though evaluating a golf shot. The shears are nearby. She prunes a couple of branches, walks around, and trims some more, continuing until the bushes are perfectly symmetrical, just as her mother would have liked. Four rows of four, neat and square, lying in wait before the show of flowers. Leaning against the metal shed, she projects her mother into the space.

Mary Elizabeth's thick chestnut hair is tied up under an old golf hat of her husband's. Smudges of dirt conceal the high cheekbones and smattering of freckles, but her eyes blaze green. "Ellen, honey, can you come over here for a second?"

Ellen is fourteen, maybe fifteen. She groans from the lounge chair, lays her book on her chest, and peers through the apple blossoms. "It looks great, Mom."

"Do you think? Are they all the same height from where you are?"

"Yes." God, does it matter? Please don't notice that the bushes on the left are *slightly* shorter than the others.

Silence.

Good. Ellen returns to her book.

"No, dear, look at the ones over there, they're shorter than the others. Can you please come and stand where I am and guide me as I prune them?"

"Mom, who cares? God!" She throws her book down and walks over. Stands where instructed, arms akimbo.

"Don't use that tone with me."

"What tone? You're just weird."

Her mother looks at her, hesitates before speaking. "Just kneel down and tell me when they're perfect."

The wet of the shed eases through Ellen's shirt but does nothing to cool the tumult inside. Mary Elizabeth had treasured her roses. Every day she'd be out here, pruning, fertilizing, coaxing. Gentle coos of endearment. Unconditional love.

Ellen takes a step toward the garden and sluices off the top of one of the bushes. Appraises her work. "What do you think, Mom?" she inquires under her breath. "Oh no, it's *so* much shorter than the others." She lobs off another branch. "Whoops." Then another. She continues to hack away, transforming the topiary automatons into lively, misshapen creatures. "Damn you." Her breath comes in jagged waves. "Just like you to leave without saying goodbye. We aren't—" she frowns as she negotiates a particularly thick stem—"done yet. Right, Mom? You and I?" She squeezes the shears, her arm muscles straining, while the tiny spike-like thorns pierce her skin. The tears come, weaving salty paths through the grime on her face.

*

The alcohol stings against her scrapes. Despite the long shower, she hasn't been able to wash away the ill effects of her outburst. Her lids are heavy, her skin dry, and her throat bruised by the lump that had failed to shore up the floodgates. She throws on a comfy pair of sweats and an old UPEI Panthers basketball jersey from one of the bins that her mother had stowed away. A glance out the window reveals a group of forlorn stick figures in the receding light, some slumped over, others reaching pathetically skyward.

"Sorry, Mom," she whispers. Speaking aloud to her dead mother feels strangely cathartic.

Although it is close to 7 p.m., she makes a pot of coffee and is soothed by the regular hiss and hum of the Black and Decker that has stayed loyal since its Eaton's-catalogue prime. After pouring herself a cup, she pulls out a kitchen chair, grabs her notebook, and writes, using only her feelings to guide her. Her words may find their way into a poem or sit idle on the pages. Death, loss, guilt, anger, and jealousy stream out, tied together in a bow of failure. Friends tell her that she must find writing therapeutic. Ellen never sees it that way; sure, she reveals her anxieties and insecurities, but isn't a therapist's job to find ways to *get over them*?

What, exactly, had their mom done when they were at school all day? She lived off her share of the sale of the farm, which she was smart enough to wrestle from Ellen's dad before his swift departure for parts unknown. Sometimes she lent herself out as a hired hand on the very land she used to own. What must it have been like? To have been left with two small daughters and nothing more than a high-school education—especially for a woman like her, with her love of books, concerts, and plays? Why hadn't they moved into the city? Money, most likely. She'd put away every last penny for her daughters' university tuitions. After a sip of her coffee, now cold, Ellen pulls her cellphone off the counter to call her sister.

"Hey," Sophie says amid cheers and laughter.

"Your team winning?"

"Yep. Ahead by two. What's up?"

She hates that expression. It denotes impatience, a yearning to get back to more important things.

"Nothing. It was stupid to call."

Sophie skips a beat. "Just a sec, Elle. I'm going to move to a quieter spot." Ellen waits as the ambient noise grows softer. "Okay, what is it?"

"Why were we so selfish?"

"What do you mean?" Sophie's voice is wary, tinged with annoyance.

"I don't know," Ellen steers into the uncomfortable void. "I just wondered what Mom did all day while we were at school. Did you ever ask her?"

"Come on, Elle. That's easy. Housework, you know, cleaning, cooking, and stuff. Plus she did some farming for the Bouchards."

"Yeah, I guess. But do you remember helping her much? Do you think she was happy?"

"Sure we helped, but we had our chores to do. And yes, she seemed happy enough. Why?" A burst of booze-fuelled cheering explodes in the background. "Listen, Elle, I can't talk right now. Okay? I'll call you later. You're sounding strange. Relax."

"Fine. Okay. Talk to you later." The line goes dead and Ellen sits in silence, save for the ticking of the "grandmother" clock in the hallway, the term born in the spirit of feminism that her mom had cultivated, despite her days spent floating around the house, taking care of her daughters. Had she been satisfied with this? Ellen releases a slow stream of air, stands up, and heads to the car to unearth boxes and packing tape.

Kitchen first. She tugs at a cupboard, warped and sticky, and is stilled by the fragrance that seeps out. Of early mornings, hot porridge, fresh milk from the Bouchards, her mom's pink floor-length housecoat. Of warm hugs and a race to the school bus, eager faces at the window, gossip stretching along the bumpy road. Enough, she sighs. Think forward, not back. *Just do it*. And like the Nike slogan, she kicks herself into gear and works well into the night.

*

Although both physically and emotionally exhausted, Ellen can't sleep. She looks around her old room in the filtered moonlight. Her mother had packed away both her daughters' things years ago. Gone were Ellen's ACDC posters, basketball trophies, and bright purple walls. In their stead were framed pictures of PEI farmland, African violets, and scented candles against a cream-colored backdrop. She feels like she's on display at a department store, trying out the bed.

Her thoughts run roughshod over the day, over the years. Why is she so on edge? So angry? At her sister, obviously, for being away at a time like this. And, even more troubling, she finds herself resenting Sophie for being so damned successful, having met and surpassed the standards set by Mary Elizabeth.

And Ellen? Why doesn't she meet those standards? She's not a total loser, after all. She has her Masters in English Lit, runs her own bookstore café in Charlottetown, is a

successful writer. Her poems have been published in prestigious literary journals. *So, what is the problem, Mom? Why did you glean more happiness from your precious roses than from me? Did I fail you? What more did you want from me?* These questions dart around the edges of her mind until she is finally rescued by sleep.

Her mother stands in the darkness and unfolds a long, blazing-white piece of paper. A checklist. "Field of study. English Literature." She looks up. "I told you at the time, dear, that the arts don't pay." She puts an 'x' on the page instead of a checkmark. "Love life. Aaron Bouchard and Daniel Wright." She shakes her head sadly. "Aaron? You wasted so much time on him—a farmer's boy—and then you married Daniel, a self-serving real estate agent with no sense of business." She adds another 'x,' then moves her finger down the list. "Career choice: Writer and bookstore owner." She sighs, pencil in midair, and looks at her daughter. "Oh, honey, you should have listened to me. Sophie did; now look at her—she's in Hollywood!" Her mother's sad eyes loom large before receding into the black.

*

Ellen shakes off her fatigue and gets up early to finish the packing. More than anything, she wants to get out of this house. She slides one of her mom's CDs, *The Rosary Sonatas,* into the disc player, turns it full blast, and heads to the master bedroom. The top shelf of the closet buckles under stacks of brightly hued sweaters. The house was always drafty and there was never enough money for insulation. Ellen brings some wool to her face, breathes in lavender sachets, wood smoke, and pot roast. She folds the sweaters into boxes, enjoys the crisp screech of finality as she stretches the packing tape over the cardboard. Next come the dresses and skirts, which she throws one by one onto the bed, crisply made and covered in pale green chenille. A small pile, really, given that her mom had rarely needed to wear them. She lifts up a canary yellow mini dress. Such a tiny waist! She puts it against her own, heavier frame and looks at her reflection in the oak mirror attached to the chest of drawers. The color doesn't suit the fair complexion she'd inherited from her dad, but her mom's olive skin had worked well with bright summer hues. She remembers Mary Elizabeth wearing this dress on one of the rare occasions that she and her husband had gone into the city for dinner. She had looked so beautiful.

Ellen pulls out a garment bag made of a thick plastic material embossed with flowers, and unzips it slowly, careful not to tear anything inside. She marvels at the silk wedding dress, ivory colored, with tiny pearls sewn into the lace. Such elegance and beauty—too good for *him*. Ellen had tried the dress on once when she was a kid and her mom had been terrified, ordered her to take it off immediately because it was being saved for her and her sister's weddings. And she'd refused to deface the dress with any alterations. So on her big day, Ellen had barreled herself into it, tiptoed gingerly down the aisle in a Saran Wrapped cocoon. Her sister hadn't wed yet, but undoubtedly the dress would fit her beautifully, unless Ellen had stretched it beyond repair. As she re-zips the bag, she notices a large velvet box, shaped like a treasure chest, wedged in the corner atop a pile of magazines.

She sets aside the dresses and hauls the box up onto the bed. For a moment, she fingers the bedspread, the tufts of green chenille, thinking how her mom's own hands had smoothed it over last. When she tries to lift the lid, it won't budge. It is then that she sees the pewter clasp with a tiny hole for which there is no key.

Ellen returns to the garment bag and roots around. Why had her mom wanted to keep this so private? What secrets could she possibly have had with her humdrum days and nights spent keeping house? She starts pulling out the drawers of the antique dresser. "Damn it, Mom! This is ridiculous." She leans against the polished wood, thinks of where else to search, but just about everything has been packed up. Pointless to keep looking for the key. Instead, she pours herself into her work for a couple of hours. Unwilling to strip the sheets, she shuts the door on a roomful of boxes, incongruous against a bed fully made, as though waiting for its occupant to return.

The dining room is next, and after that there's only the basement left to do. She plops into her old chair at the table, traces the familiar knots in the cherry wood with her fingernail. "Guess what, Mom?" she says under her breath. "I never got the chance to tell you that there's a publishing house interested in my poetry collection. They want me to send them more samples. I'm thrilled, but even that isn't enough for you, right?" She thinks back to the afternoon she'd sat here and filled out her UPEI application while her mother cleaned the silver.

"Don't be silly, dear. English Lit won't lead anywhere." Mary Elizabeth had looked over her shoulder at Ellen as she shook out some of the foul-smelling polish onto the cloth. "You're getting nineties in science. Why don't you move in that direction, like your teachers keep telling you to do? Imagine! You could be a scientist or a doctor."

"I don't want to be either of those things."

"Well, it's your life. It's entirely up to you," Mary Elizabeth had said, scrubbing furiously at the teapot.

Ellen shakes herself from the reverie, tops up her coffee with some Baileys. She empties the hutch and places the contents into boxes she had bought specifically with matching slots. Of *this*, her mom would have approved. She continues from one box to the next, her pace distilled by pleasant lightheadedness. Propped against the wall, she thinks of Aaron. Of course he had come to Mom's funeral. He and Ellen had grown up together on neighboring farms. And yet she wasn't prepared for the shakiness, or the words that clattered nonsensically out of her mouth when he'd arrived. He'd looked at her the way he always had, his Mediterranean blue eyes never lifting from hers, the concern etched across the sun-swept canvas, still handsome after years of working in the fields. When their childhood friendship had evolved into something more, her mother had pressured her to end it. And she had caved.

"He'll never be anything but a farmer," she'd told her.

"But you *married* a farmer," Ellen had shot back.

"Exactly."

Ellen had let her mother dictate her love life. Anger, almost comforting in its familiarity, eddies through her mind, her chest, her veins. "Stop it, damn it!" she says aloud. "It's too hard, all of this." She slumps down the wall and allows the alcohol and the sonatas to lull her to sleep.

There's a crick in her neck when she wakes. Still groggy, she slips a livelier disc, jazz, into the player and adjusts her packing rhythm to match. She is kneeling on the floor, packing up teacups, when she finds it. The key had announced itself with a jingle at the bottom of a delicate porcelain cup, which had been Mom's favorite. Not sure why. Perhaps the slender ear of the handle and the pale pink roses edged in a thin line of gold. Or perhaps because it had belonged to her own mother. Nevertheless, Ellen had never seen her as emotionally charged about anything or

anyone as she was about this cup. Once, when Ellen was a little girl, she had been caught using it for a tea party with her dolls and the strangely inhuman noise her mother had made upon discovering Ellen with the cup haunts her still.

Perhaps this is her mom's way of telling her to open it. Ellen drops the key into her hand and returns to the bedroom. She sits on the floor, watches the sunlight play on the curved velvet lid, then swiftly pops it open.

*

Tucked away under some tissue paper lies a thick, leather-bound journal, cracked and worn. She picks it up gently, as though it were a living thing. Words and phrases fly up at her, a direct hit that countermand her wildest expectations—pages and pages of verse in her mom's delicate hand.

Bare Bones

Thoughts *lurk in the shadows*
Like animals *they stalk their prey*
For hours *days*

The attack *when it comes*
Is expected
With purpose, zeal *they devour the mind, the soul*
Leaving only *the carcass*
Play, rewind, repeat *play, rewind, repeat*

A farmer's daughter

She is drawn to
The fields
By a force
Both genetic
And magnetic
Her auburn hair,
A gift, the
Only one,

From her father
Strays beneath her cap
Catches the sun
As she digs
Among the furrows
Sows contentment.

Wrath, etc.
A woman swept
Into
A tornado's fury
Of disappointment
In herself
In him
Yet feels
The tug
Of love's
Gravitational pull
Toward life
Toward her daughters.

Ellen is still, but her emotions roil within. "Oh, Mom," she whispers, "You're a writer." She reads the first few poems over again, gently peels apart the layers like the skin of an onion. Tears prick her eyelids. Disappointed in yourself? Why? It's not your fault. He was a lout. Put it all on him.

For a full two hours, she reads through the rest, ignoring the bleats of her cellphone, pausing only to get tissues. Afterwards, she leans against the bed frame and stares straight ahead, unseeing. The poems go right up to the week she died. Melancholy is the overall theme, interspersed with moments of wit and lightheartedness. Mary Elizabeth had been a talented poet.

Why had she said all of those things about writing? About how ridiculous it was to even entertain the idea of becoming a writer, when she had been one herself?

Anger inches its way along Ellen's chest like a sloth. "What the hell, Mom. We had this *in common*, you and I. And yet, you never encouraged me. Far from it—you pushed me away whenever I talked about my poetry. I was the loser, remember?"

Untethered, Ellen drifts into the kitchen. She roots around the boxes until she finds a dusty bottle of port circa her childhood and winces as she takes a mouthful—one part tar, one part gasoline. She checks her messages and sees that they are all from Sophie. Guess what, Soph? Mom didn't toil all day long with housework.

She is about to call her when she remembers the pile of magazines that had lain beneath the box. In the bedroom, she hauls them out, spreads them onto the floor. She recognizes some of the titles instantly. Literary journals. She lifts up one and an envelope slips out. Tucked inside is a rejection letter for one of her mom's poems. *Mom, is this the only journal you tried?* It's the most prestigious journal to this day. They reject everyone, including me.

Then Ellen remembers her mom's perfectionism. Of course this is the only journal she'd submit to. If she couldn't be accepted by the best, then she wouldn't make it as a poet. She sits for a moment, awash in frustration. She puts the letter aside and opens the last remaining volume, a scrapbook from all appearances.

Glued carefully inside are pictures of her and Sophie, as well as every single one of their ribbons, certificates, and awards, no matter how trivial. She smiles as she looks at her *Participant* ribbons from track and field alongside her sister's *Finalist* ones. She works her way through the drama and swimming certificates, the Brownie badges, and even the *First-Class Potato Digger* award that she had won at the agricultural fair. Then come the pages marked "Poetry." The tears erupt, pleasure mixed with pain. Every poetry award she won, every poem she wrote, including those written on napkins at the kitchen table from the time she was six years old, is pasted onto the pages. This isn't real. As cliché as it sounds, she pinches herself. "You were proud of me." The surprise springs from her voice, ricochets off the boxes.

On the next page, she finds a newspaper clipping about the opening of her bookstore café. She stares at the picture of herself standing under the awning, a wary smile for the camera. She remembers thinking that day that her mom had been right, that she'd just sunk a lot of money into something that probably wouldn't pay off,

that she couldn't get back. The phone jolts her upright. She glances at the number. Sophie again.

"Hi," she blurts.

"Why haven't you called me back?" Sophie reproaches.

"Because I've had a life-changing couple of hours."

"What do you mean?"

"I found something here."

"Oh, yeah? Anything interesting?"

"Yes, actually. Hence the life-changing thing I just mentioned." Ellen hears the sound of an announcement being made in the background. "Where are you?"

"At the airport."

"Where are you off to now?"

"I'm here. In Charlottetown."

"What? Why?"

"I came to help."

"I only have the basement left."

"Well, let me do that."

Ellen smiles. "Sure. I'll come get you."

"No. That's okay. I'll grab a taxi. But tell me, what's so life-altering?"

Ellen doesn't know how to sum it up. "She was proud of me, Soph." The words bubble forth, like a gin fizz.

"Of course she was."

"Why do you say that?" Ellen says, startled.

"She was always going on to me about how well you write."

"What?"

"Yeah. Trust me. She made feel as though I was illiterate."

"Really?" Ellen takes this in, feels a smile play at the corners of her lips. "She always told me to forget about writing, that it wouldn't lead anywhere."

"She wanted us to succeed." Ellen could hear the shrug in her sister's voice. "I felt the pressure too, you know. She had exacting standards, was forever telling me to avoid the movie business, that it was too risky."

Ellen lets this sink in. Of course. Above anything else, their mom had wanted them to be independent and happy. To not have to rely on a man who was going to drink and disappoint. She knew how little writers make. Ellen thinks again about the rejection letter in her mom's closet. *She wouldn't show us her poems because she didn't think they were good enough.*

But Ellen knew better. She had recognized her talent instantly. What she could have done with it.

"Elle?"

"Yeah. Sorry…you'll never guess what Mom did with all her spare time. And it *wasn't* just housework."

Sophie laughs. "Okay, I'm intrigued. What was it?"

"Nope. You'll just have to wait and see for yourself." Ellen ends the call.

But you see Mom? I am independent and happy. I have my own café that's doing reasonably well—I also have my writing, a book club, and friends. And that's enough for me. I've made some bad choices along with the good ones. But that's okay. We all do. Have I lived up to your expectations? Probably not, but no one could. Not even Sophie, not even you. The important thing is that you were proud of me. You have no idea how good that feels, Mom. We needed more time, you and I.

Ellen grabs her phone and plugs in her editor's number, feeling sad yet impossibly light, as though she's shed some extra pounds. A quick glance at the slight bulge in her middle proves this untrue. "Hello?"

Diane sounds tired, exasperated.

"Brighten up. I've got another poetry collection for you to read. And it's perfect."

Hope

Murielle Telfort

/hōp/
verb

1. The barefoot leap into rain and cushioning grass,
   feet sinking into a green water bed,
   tickling balance with each step,
   as feet float down trusting plants to catch them.

noun

1. The sound of sucking on a straw
   when your cup is empty
   because who needs water in that glass
   when it's full of fresh air?

2. The taste of pizza when you open
   a fresh box and basil smells form on tongue.

3. Because years under rocks
   makes life under a pebble something to strive for.

The General is Sleeping

Khanh Ha

She was rail thin and tall. By now, after three days of lying in the same hospital bed, I could tell upon waking when she had been in the room. That unmistakable musk in the air that came from her body.

A fragrance perhaps.

Coming out of sedation the first time, I felt a cleanness below. Someone must have washed me, as I was clad only in a hospital gown. The leg—my right leg—was suspended by a contraption: a pulley and a horizontal metal rod met overhead. The leg seemed to have a life of its own after having been crushed in a head-on collision between my car and a drunk driver's; it pulsed to its own heartbeat. On the second day, they gave me medication when the pain became very bad. I couldn't remember much after that, just that smell of her.

The third day, when I woke, I thought the pillow was a giant beanbag. It felt very cool between my legs from the moistness of an antiseptic tissue. The rubbing. I had feigned sleeping while I was being cleaned. A rustle of a gown, then the warmth of a washcloth pressed against my face. That musk scent got into my nose.

I opened my eyes. A golden-brown face was looking down at me. The long-lashed eyes gleamed. A smile with dazzlingly white teeth.

"Ah, you're awake now." She said, upturning the washcloth as she watched me take it all in.

I said hello but couldn't hear the word for the drumming in my head. She stooped to look me full in the face, as though trying to detect a sign of life in my eyes. "How are you this evening, Mr. Lee?" she said with an accent.

"*Leh*," I corrected. "Not Lee." I spelled it for her. LE.

"Ah, Mr. *Leigh*. I'm Aida."

I was amused at how she pronounced my last name. The small tongue roll with the L. She dabbed my stitched forehead with the washcloth. The musk aroma went with her hand. She had an oval, delicate face. Twentyish perhaps. Her cornrows, knotted into a thick plait, were slung over her shoulder and rested upon her chest.

"I'll bring your dinner, Mr. Leigh," she said, straightening.

She was tall in her blue uniform. If I stood next to her, my head would be to her ears. It surprised me so much that I almost let her walk out the door.

"Wait," I said quickly. "Where are you from?" I squinted up at her, eyes twinging from the headache.

"I'm from Senegal."

"Do you speak French?"

"Yes. Do you, Mr. Leigh?"

"A little. My father spoke French fluently."

"Ah. It brightens my day whenever I hear someone speak French." Her clear voice had a resonance. Then, frowning, she leaned her head to one side. "You have received no visitors since you've been here, though."

"My father died some years ago."

"What about your mother, Mr. Leigh?"

"She died shortly after my father's death. I have no siblings."

Aida folded the washcloth. "You aren't married, Mr. Leigh?"

"I was, once."

"Did she know about your accident?"

"No. And even if she did . . ."

The curt way I spoke had Aida dip her head. "You sound like you have something against her?"

"She hated my family."

"Why?"

"My father and my mother didn't attend our wedding. It embarrassed me, but it humiliated my wife—my ex-wife, that is." I looked up, still self-conscious that Aida was the one who had been cleaning my body. Her gentle smile encouraged me, "But if there's one person in this world who she hated most, it was my father."

"I don't assume that your father was a terrible man, yet somehow I get that feeling from you, Mr. Leigh."

I nodded as I turned her words over in my mind, "My wife—my ex-wife—had never told me about her own family, though she knew much about mine. When we decided to get married, she told me about her father. He used to be a celebrated

musician in South Vietnam. Millions of fans idolized him. To me, he was a gentleman, and I liked him. When I brought home the news, though, hell broke out."

Aida blinked. She had dense lashes with a dramatic upsweep. They were a God-made beauty.

"My father said to me, 'That scumbag is a communist. He lives right in our backyard and we can't do nothing about it.' I asked him, 'How do you know?' and he said, 'He's a mole. We have many moles and termites like him in our army too. We executed several of them, but we couldn't touch a man of his stature.'"

"This was back in Vietnam during the war, Mr. Leigh? You and her . . ."

"No, after we came to America. We met here. But our pasts never died."

"And what did your father do during the war?"

"My father was a general. A four-star general of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam."

"Ah. So he was a big shot." She squinted. "It must be very difficult for him to leave Vietnam and come here."

"It was."

"For a man of his position, I'm sure." She put the washcloth in her blouse pocket. "What did he do in this country?"

"He drove a forklift." I paused. "From five to midnight. Every night."

"I guess nobody knew who that forklift operator truly was."

"Just an old Asian man who came to work every night with a dinner box his wife had packed for him. Every night for nine years."

"Then what?"

"Then his kidneys started failing. He had diabetes. Eventually . . ." I kept nodding to the endless beat of the unfinished sentence. My hands started to shake, " . . . he lost a leg to amputation, and from there it went downhill fast."

We both glanced at my leg in the stirrup. Aida went around the bed to check on the urinary catheter. "You need to drink more," she said, dropping my gown down. "You still think a lot about your ex-wife?"

I held her gaze until she blinked. Those almond-shaped eyes on that warm-brown visage made my heart go soft. "Yes," I said.

"What about her?"

I tried to smile. It must've looked like a grimace to her, for she took my hand in hers, held it and said, "You have nice hands, Mr. Leigh. Like my people's." She opened her hands. Long tapered fingers with symmetrical nails. "Let me get your dinner. Are you hungry, Mr. Leigh?"

My hands were still shaking, so she fed me. I didn't have a brain injury. Besides a gash on my forehead and my shattered shinbone, I had walked away with only a mild concussion. It explained why my hands trembled the first time I tried to feed myself.

I wasn't hungry though, only numb in my lower leg. In time the dullness gave way to pangs. As she placed the tray on my lap, the food smelled stale, unappetizing.

"Do you like lentil soup, Mr. Leigh?" she asked as she lowered the bed and sat down in a chair by my bedside.

"I like clam chowder."

"I'll check with the kitchen next time."

She spoon-fed me. My tongue felt rubberlike and it wasn't until the bowl was empty that I began to register the aftertaste of lentil. I watched as she sliced through a golden breaded chicken cutlet.

"I knew this man," I told her. "A male nurse who took care of my father when he was confined to a nursing home." She fed me a piece of chicken, her lips slightly parted as I opened my mouth. "He's like you, a Senegalese."

"Really." She spooned some mashed potato and I ate that. Then she pierced a baby carrot with the fork and held it until I opened my mouth again. "What's his name?"

"Ibou." I chewed the soft baby carrot. I liked carrots. Their familiar smell suddenly made me feel homesick.

She fed me another slice of chicken. "Was he also young like me?"

"No. He was a senior nurse." I swallowed. "He loved to speak French with my father."

"*C'est beau*."

"He found out that my father was once a four-star general, that he was a Viet Minh who fought the French during the Indochina War. Ibou told my father that his own father was with the French Foreign Legion that fought in Đien Bien Phu in 1954. A decorated soldier who lost a leg during the siege. Ibou joked with my father that,

wouldn't it be extraordinary if it was my father who had set the trap that claimed his father's leg?"

Aida smiled. She had a perfectly shaped upper lip and a full lower lip that pouted when deep in thought. "You two must be of the same age, yes?"

"I'm thirty-six. I couldn't tell exactly how old he was."

"We Senegalese do look younger than we are. Just like the Asians." She tilted her head sideways as if to avoid my gaze. "Did he make an impression on you?"

"He was always polite. I remember his accent—like yours. He was some kind of a rare species . . ."

Her lips puckered. "How do you mean, Mr. Leigh?"

"He must be at least seven feet tall." I looked toward the door and back at her. "Whenever he entered through the door, he had to lower his head. Have you seen anyone like that back home?"

"Tall, yes, but not that tall." She let me take a gulp of chocolate milk, and I gladly obliged—she'd told me I ought to drink more. "Did you get along with him like your father did?"

"Yes. Ibou was a gentleman." I watched as she peeled the lid off the cup of red Jell-O. I chewed, feeling its raspberry flavor bursting in my mouth, and she pinched a flake of jelly off my lips. The musk fragrance became mixed with the raspberry scent.

"So he took care of your father?" she continued, "For how long?"

"Two years. Until my father died." I dropped my gaze to her hand. "He used to change my father's clothes all by himself. Before him, it'd take two female nurses to do that chore. My father's imbalance after losing a leg made it harder to change him out of his clothes or dress him. But Ibou did that chore so effortlessly, he became my father's sole caretaker."

She paused with the spoon in midair, "Were you married then?"

"Yes. But my wife never visited my father."

"Your ex-wife must be beautiful."

"To me."

"And you must have had lots of girls before you met her?" As she brought the spoon to my mouth, her little finger touched my lips. At my smile, she tipped her

head back. “Short girls, tall girls. American, Asians. Yes?” Hearing me chuckle, shaking my head, she said, “How tall are you, Mr. Leigh?”

“Five-seven.” I nodded at her. “And you?”

“Five-eleven.”

“I’ll bet you don’t ever need high heels.”

“I don’t look right in them.”

“You’re long-legged, like those *Vogue* girls.”

“Those million-dollar girls.” Aida shook her head, her eyes trailing away. “I don’t look anything like them.”

“No, you don’t.” I saw her startled look. “You look plain and beautiful—the way you are.”

I thought I saw a blush on her cheeks, for the first time. “I used to be self-conscious of my own skin,” she said, “because my mother had told me how it was when she grew up in the colonial time. Black and despised. Forbidden from the white society without its permission. Growing up, she was an educated and beautiful girl and yet she dreaded the color of her own skin so much that she wanted to cover her arms, her neck and put on a big straw hat with a veil to hide her face.”

Aida paused with a distant memory. “But age gave her maturation and she realized that she didn’t want me to suffer the same identity crisis—though, she still feared that someday I might have mulatto children. She took me to social events, where I performed our *sabar* dance, to express myself in the free form of footwork and arm movements. She made me aware of such words as *nègres* and *négresses*, telling me that the word *noir* for black ceased to exist after the 1791 massacres in Santo Domingo.” Aida paused, with a gentle smile on her face. “Do you know about the Santo Domingo massacres?”

“No,” I said, ashamed of my ignorance.

She went on to give me a brief history of the slave revolt in the French colony of Santo Domingo that led to the expulsion of the French colonial government and the establishment of the independent Republic of Haiti.

A smile spreading across her face, she put down the empty Jell-O cup. “Here,” she said, picking up one of the two cookies. “I threw these in. They only give you one kind of dessert.”

"Jell-O and cookies." I took a small bite then handed her the other one. "Please, try it, if you like cinnamon cookies."

She nibbled it, her eyelids drooping. Those thick lashes with that beautiful curl would never need mascara. She looked up. "What do you do, Mr. Leigh?"

"Call me Minh."

"*Min*?" She made a humming sound with the *M*.

"Yes." I reached for the milk. "I'm a photographer."

"So you take pictures? Of what?" She looked at me with a spark in her eyes.

"I shoot advertising photography. For printed catalogs. Things that you browse before you decide to buy."

"Not fashion photography?" She asked, with a note of hope.

"No. Just an old-fashioned photography business. No fashion models or nude girls."

At my grin, she laughed. Her fluty laugh sounded girlish as she tossed her head back and her hair plait swung behind her nape. For the first time I noticed her slender neck, framed by the collarless round neckline of her nurse's uniform.

"Mr. Leigh," she said suddenly, when she was done. "Were you close to your father?"

"Minh." I put the last piece of cookie into my mouth. "I was not."

"Ah. But you *love* him, don't you—Min?"

I said nothing at first, then I nodded. "It took me all my life to feel that, and only after he died."

"In his condition, he must have looked to you for your loving care." She tore the packet of sanitizer and gave me a wet tissue. "I'm very close to my mother. She almost died giving birth to me. But God saved her. And me."

"Where is she now?"

"Back home. With my father." Aida covered the meal's plate with its lid. "My father was struck with a viral disease once. He bled in his bowels, in his nose, and there was blood in his urine. Hemorrhagic fever. We were with him all the time during his illness, because he needed us. He cried when he was alone, for it made him think Death was waiting for that rare moment to take him away in his sleep."

I cleaned my mouth with the wet wipe. I couldn't help but remember the sanitizing smell that hung in the room whenever she cleaned my body as I slept. "My father was different," I said firmly.

"He didn't need you? I mean, we all need love and care." Slowly, she folded my tissue into quarters. "Maybe he didn't want to show you his tender side. Yes?"

"I can't say that he was an affectionate father, so maybe I was insensitive to what he might've needed from me."

No, I never felt close to my father.

I told Aida about incidents during my childhood whenever I did something terribly wrong, and he would lash me. To keep count of the lashes, he had our chauffeur—a corporal—call out each lash. One, two, three, four . . .

To this day, I still heard the counting.

But I had thought of him a lot after the car accident. I thought of him while the doctor did a thorough evaluation of my shattered leg, while they wheeled me back to my room. Could they save my leg? Well, they would tell me soon.

Through the window I could see a full moon. I didn't feel pain in the leg, but the painkiller hadn't worn off yet. Closing my eyes, I could smell her familiar musk in the room. She must have been here while I was taken to the examination room.

A female nurse came in, bringing a dinner tray.

"Can you eat by yourself?" she said as she placed the tray over my lap.

"Sure." I pushed the control to raise the adjustable head section.

"If you need anything else, please ring." She glanced at my leg suspended in midair. "Do you have any pain, Mr. Lee?"

"Not at this moment." I slid up on the bed. "Where's Aida?"

"She's on her round. We have a new patient."

I ate after the nurse left. My hands still shook, so I concentrated on every movement. Slowly my hands became steady. I sipped some apple juice, looking at the tray. Baked salmon with mashed potatoes. Peas and carrots. Chicken noodle soup. A chocolate cake for dessert.

I took a deep breath. Sometime tonight the doctor would come in and tell me the news. My father looked calm on the day he had his leg amputated above the knee. If I

hadn't lifted up his gown to look, I would've sworn that it was just another day to him.

He never mentioned the surgery, not even on the day, though he'd asked me to bring my mother when I saw him next. "Do not let her drive," he said. "Her nerves are very fragile now."

Later Ibou had told me something that kept haunting me since. "The general didn't remember," Ibou said to me. He always referred to my father with that title. "It is common, though, after you wake up from a surgery. When I changed him, he pulled up his legs. And, trust me, Mr. *Leh*, a thousand words could not describe the look in his eyes. But the general recovered quickly. He began to chat with me in French. *Oh-la-la*." Ibou laughed heartily. "He told me things."

"What things?" I asked and Ibou had replied, "Fragments of his life as a boy and as a soldier. Fascinating. One day I asked him if he could read them into a cassette for me, and he said, *Bien sûr, mon ami*. So I brought in a mini-cassette recorder, and during his undisturbed moments he spoke those stories into the recorder. When he gave me the whole thing back, he asked me, '*Pourquoi voulez-vous de garder ces histoires*?' I told him that I was a writer. '*Un écrivain*?' he said. '*C'est très noble*.'

"There was one story I couldn't shake off. It took place in the summer of 1972. He called that summer the Blazing Summer—the Vietnam War was at its worst. The Vietnamese marines had recaptured Quang Tri Province. From Hue, a convoy was dispatched to Quang Tri to relieve the marines and to reinstall the former administration. Local merchants and residents tagged along the convoy to return home. The general was one of them." Ibou wagged a finger as if to warn me not to ask, "The convoy had to cross a bridge. Just as it approached the bridgehead, the Viet Cong started firing mortars. The mile-long convoy was broken up, but, after many rounds of shelling, the Viet Cong had still yet to hit the bridge. Then all eyes fell upon an old woman who appeared out of nowhere. She was carrying two cane baskets suspended from a shoulder pole. In one was her clothing, in the other a little boy. The shelling trapped her in the middle of the bridge. She froze. No one from the convoy dared to leave his cover. The general jumped up and raced toward her. He half-carried the boy and the old woman back to the roadside shelter. Within minutes, air support came. Soon the convoy got rolling again."

Ibou put his hand on my shoulder. “Now you may ask why the general disguised himself as common folk. *Très bien.* It was so that he could assess the morale of the troops and the civilians, and to take in firsthand the damages to the city against possible false reports.”

I guessed my father’s memories, or perhaps a boxful of them, now stayed alive in somebody’s possession other than in his own son’s.

I was resting, half reclined, with the dinner tray on my lap, the meal unfinished, my eyes closed. The musk scent woke me from my reflection.

I noticed a cardinal-red ribbon that adorned her usually plain plait. “It looks pretty on you, Aida.”

“Thank you, Min,” she said, looking down at me and then at my dinner.

“Where were you?” I already knew the answer, but I still wanted to hear it from her.

“I was in here earlier. You were being examined, they told me. So I went to where they needed me.” She touched the cup of chicken noodle soup, still lidded. “It’s getting cold. Do you want me to reheat it, Min?”

“Don’t bother. Do you have to go soon?”

“No, I’m on my break.” One glance at the uneaten meal and she said, “Let me see if you can eat by yourself.”

I removed the lid of the soup cup and, distracted by her watching and her fragrance, my hand started trembling. She pressed the control button; the bed whirred and dropped. She sat down on the chair and took the cup from my hand.

“You’re on your break, Aida,” I said meekly.

“That’s why I’m here.” She held her smile as she brought the spoon to my lips.

Taking her time between spoonfuls she asked me about the examination. I told her within an hour or two I would know. “Know what they will do with your leg,” she said, with her eyes cast at my suspended leg.

I nodded.

“You didn’t want to eat. You must be worried. Yes?”

“I’m fine.” I lied and she knew.

“You should pray, Min. It will take worries and fears off your mind.”

"I don't see how." My throat felt dry despite the soup. "I never believe in it."

"My father said that it's belief, faith that keeps men in touch with the supernatural beyond the prayer, the worshipping. He said men are ignorant enough to think they can get along by themselves." She put the cup down and held my hands in hers. "Just open your mind and pray, Min."

The earnest look in her eyes had me bite my lips. I nodded like a simpleton. My father, as I recalled, had derided priests and monks. I couldn't say if he had sowed that notion of distrust in my mind. When my mother asked him, during one of his lucid moments, if she could have a religious rite for his funeral, my father had smirked. "Them priests and monks!" he spat out. "Their spiritual lives are nothing but the empty sounds of recitation and chanting. Without a pagoda, a church, what'd have become of their spiritual lives, eh?" That was before the deterioration of his mind that eventually led to his dementia.

Aida looked lost in thought, She sighed, "Min, I'll pray for you, so you won't end up like your father. You never asked him much about his life, no?"

"No. I never asked him anything. Maybe someday I'd read somebody's stories about him and realize that it's him in there. That's my dad, I'd say."

"And Ibou would be the author?"

We both laughed. Then Aida scanned my face, "Who do you look like? Your mother or your father?"

"My mother. I have no resemblance to my father."

"You sound like you deny it."

Her smile drew my gaze to her lips.

"In her younger days," I said, "my mother had the kind of beauty you'd call classic. I often wondered what made her fall in love with my father." I cut the chocolate cake in half, lifted a piece with a napkin and pushed the other slice toward her. "Please, share it with me."

She started eating and I noticed that she was left-handed. "Your father must've adored your mother very much," she said before taking a bite.

"He was unfaithful to her," I said before I'd thought it through. "She told me that, though it came from her after he'd become an invalid. I guess she'd bottled it up all her life. But she must have been upset with the way he'd always perked up when he

was with Ibou. Completely animated. Just carrying on and on in their small talks. In French, of course. But when she was with him, he'd clam up. Most patients, I noticed, couldn't wait to see their loved ones—it's so dreary, downright lonesome for most of them. And he didn't need her—his own wife."

Aida looked riveted. "How did he . . . betray her?"

"Women have uncanny instincts, don't you agree?" I asked her and saw a glint of amusement in her eyes. "I didn't ask what triggered her suspicion, but at some point, she told our chauffeur—the corporal—to report to her every place he drove my father to. My mother was the godmother to our chauffeur's little daughter. He told her that every day around noon he'd drop my father off in downtown Saigon, where he'd spend an hour or two in a pharmacy. One day after dropping my father off at the usual place, our chauffeur came back and drove my mother there. My mother waited inside the car until my father came out. It shocked the daylight out of him when he got into the car. She asked him to wait, then she went inside the pharmacy. Fifteen minutes later she came back out, got in the car and told the chauffeur to drive home. From that day on, my father quit going to visit the pharmacy."

Aida's eyes widened, but she said nothing.

"You want to know how my mother found out? She happened to go through his wallet one day and saw a picture of a woman. Yes, someone else's photo besides hers in his wallet. It was foolish of him to keep his woman's picture in there. But I guess we're all blind when we're in love, aren't we?"

Seeing me shake my head, Aida chuckled. "It must've shocked your mother deeply when she saw the photograph of your father's mistress. I would too—if something of that nature happened to me."

"It tore her to pieces. She could never imagine such a horrible thing. A man of his stature? A man who was so madly in love with her when they first met that he kept count of the days being away from her by marking cuts with a nail on his rifle's buttstock? You know what my mother did when she came upon the pharmacist's picture?" I met Aida's eyes—she hadn't touched the rest of her cake. "She cut it up and left the pieces in his wallet on the day she decided to meet his courtesan."

Aida giggled. "I like that word."

"That's the word my mother used when she told me the story. I thought it was because my father was a man of rank. Like a king at that time."

"Do you have *any* love for him, Min?"

"I've thought of him a lot since he died. And, despite all this, I still think my father was a good man."

"Of course."

"He never impressed me as a loving father. But he had a heart of gold. I've known this ever since—" I hesitated with remembrance.

"Something that happened back home?" Aida prompted.

"No." I offered her my glass of apple juice and she took it. "I was working at this advertising agency—my first job out of college. One late afternoon, just before I left my cubicle, I saw an Asian woman, a cleaner. She was in her fifties. She must've been in earlier than usual because I'd never seen her before. She didn't make a sound when she came into my cubicle, though I could sense her standing behind my chair. When I finally turned around, she was standing there, watching me. She gestured with her duster toward a framed picture on my desk. 'Is that your father?' she asked in plain Vietnamese. In that picture I was about five years old, sitting between my mother and my father. She took a step closer to my desk and said, 'He was in jail in 1961, right, Mister?' Something knifed my gut and, nodding, I said yes. The military coup d'état, to overthrow President Diệm, had failed, and my father—then a major general—had been sentenced to life—that much I knew from my mother.

"The woman's gaze never left the framed picture on my desk and I was growing irritated by her curious eyes. 'Thank Heaven and the Buddha,' she blurted out. 'I knew it was him. I've looked at him every night when I've come in, but I didn't know who to ask. Mister, I don't have many debts in my life but one. A debt I owe your father for the welfare of my family, and . . . and . . . ' She stuttered. 'It had to do with my son . . . He's studying to become a doctor, in California. But in 1961, when he was a few months old, I was imprisoned by the Saigon government.' She paused briefly, checking me for signs of judgment, but I was intrigued.

"She said, 'They charged me with conspiracy of silence. It happened after my husband suddenly disappeared. I didn't know where he went, but I knew he was taken by the Viet Cong. It happened all the time in my village. The Viet Cong said they

recruited you, but nobody could ever say no to them. I reported it to the local authorities. They questioned me and asked me to come back in a week. I came back the next week. Where's your husband? Back yet? they asked. No, he's still gone, I told them. That's when they arrested me.

'They said, We know where he went. Tell us where to find his base. I couldn't tell them anything. How could I? They drove me and my four-month old baby to Saigon and put us in the police headquarters' jail. They took us to ward B—the ward for Viet Cong. We were kept in cell number one, the only cell for females.

'I was tortured every day. They forced me to drink soapy water until I became bloated. Then someone stepped on my stomach and water came out of my mouth and my nose. The next day they jammed wires under my fingernails and turned on the current. My whole body jumped and went numb. I thought I'd lose all my limbs . . .

'By the third day my baby got sick. They had given us no blankets though everyone else had them. It could be hot outside, but it was chilly inside, all the time. You know, Mister, there in damp cells, a blanket equals life. Without one, prisoners often caught pneumonia and died before receiving medical attention.'

"Her eyes blackened with emotion, but she continued anyway, 'My baby began having diarrhea. His cries kept everyone awake at night. By the end of the first week, he became unconscious. He was so weak I couldn't breast-feed him anymore. I cuddled him with what was left of me to keep him warm, but he was going away.

'But then, someone from another cell gave up his own blanket for my baby. When they passed down the blanket, they said it was from *Anh Ba*—Brother Number Three. I heard that, from that night on, he slept on the floor with a rush mat wrapped around him to keep warm. But his blanket brought my baby back to life. His diarrhea stopped and he was feeding again.

'One month later I was freed. When the warden let us out, I turned left instead of right for the exit. You want to stay, woman? the warden said. No, sir, I said, but allow me to thank Anh Ba. I went up to his cell. Cell number four, I remember to this day. There were three men in that cell, and Anh Ba was a man in his early thirties. I put my baby down, prostrated myself in front of his cell and kowtowed to him three times. He waved me off, obviously embarrassed. But I said to him, *Ân nhân*—savior—my son and I will owe you this debt for the rest of our lives. I have

nothing to give you in return, so please accept my three kowtows as my gratitude to you. I wept in silence in ward B as people in other cells listened. Then I got up, bowed to him again and left.'"

Aida returned my glass of apple juice. "Your father is an unusual man," she said with a note of admiration in her voice. "It's ironic though that his own son knows less about him than someone who happened to light his fire."

I nodded in agreement. I often wondered about it, after my mother told me of my father's infidelity, what makes a person want to share his soul? What did others have that we could not give him? They had something provoking, that indefinable fire that lit up his soul. People like his courtesan, like Ibou . . . Like Aida.

The nurse who occasionally brought me dinner entered the room. Aida said to her, "He's almost done. Let me take care of this."

"Sure," the nurse said. "Mr. Lee, Doctor River will be here in half an hour to discuss your medical issue."

"Half an hour?" Aida and I both looked at the wall clock. It was nine thirty. After the nurse left, Aida sat with her eyes cast to the floor. I could see a grim expression on her face. "Are you afraid, Min?"

"Perhaps," I said. In fact, I felt calm. Thinking about my father, and his indifference towards his own physical tragedy, had given me the much-needed mettle.

"I'll be back at ten." Aida rose, lifting the tray off the bed. Then, looking down at me, she bent and kissed me on the forehead. "I'll go and pray for you."

She dimmed the room light as she left. I heard the wall clock tick as I lay looking at the ceiling. The leg didn't hurt anymore, save for some occasional throbs. What did Doctor River see after he ran the battery of tests earlier in the evening? I wasn't there the day the doctor told my parents that—because of the gangrene—they had to amputate my father's right leg.

Whenever I came to visit him in that nursing home, my father—in the first year there—never talked about his handicap. If I happened to mention his amputation, his answers were casual, as if he was talking about missing slippers. And there was no gloominess about him whenever my mother and I left him at the end of our visit. Sometimes, looking back toward him, I would see him turn his face to the window

and sleep, and I wondered what he thought of while he was awake. With all the time he had, lying in bed, or being wheeled outside for fresh air, it must have passed by painfully slow. But then I wasn't him. I had never had his mettle. His absence of self-pity.

One day he simply looked at me and smiled. My mother said, "That's Minh." And he kept smiling as if he and I had never met. Only the sight of Ibou still stirred him up with excitement and pulled back slivers of his memory.

After he died in the hospital, Ibou called me to ask how the general was doing. I was in the hospital room where my father was lying under a white sheet when Ibou arrived. He stood by the bed, looking down at my father for some time, then crossed himself.

"The general is sleeping," he said.

Now I heard voices in the hallway. I could hear Doctor River's voice. I closed my eyes, waiting.

Then I could smell a musk scent. She was here.

Longing Days

Sherman Scott

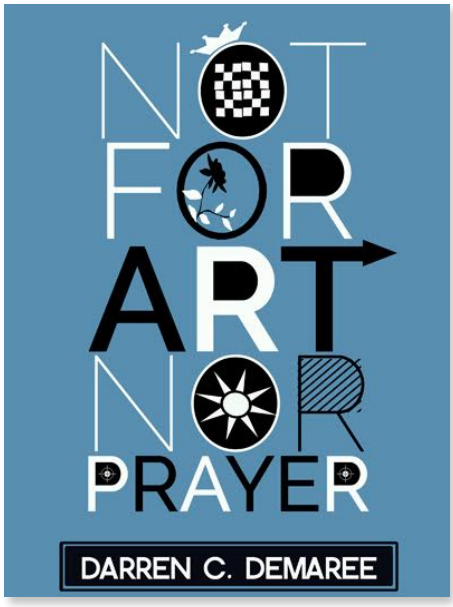
Painting white horse heads
onto the trees.
They look up to guiding stars,
mother river.

There are no edges here
just portals to all the times we've been loved
bored into bark.

Put ear to the dirt and listen
to splitting thunder underneath.
Charming eons shifting in the womb,
ready to be birthed
into the warmest of our moments.

Impressions: *Not for Art Nor Prayer*

Mariah E. Wilson



I had the pleasure of reviewing *Not For Art Nor Prayer* by Darren C. Demaree, from 8th House Publishing. The book is split into four segments. *Adorations, All of Them Whole, Wednesday Mornings* and *Emily as a Mango Hitting The Ground.*

The poems in Adorations feel extremely personal, as if the poet has told his life story in a series of snapshots and these poems are the thank you notes to the people who have made an appearance in his life, whether the role be a recurring one, or just a walk on part.

Adorations #30 was powerful. It evoked images of a survivor and contrasted it with the awe us non-survivors must surely feel when we come face to face with someone who has been through something we will never understand.

Adorations #56 speaks of an abstract gift and though the actual gift is never mentioned, you get the feeling that the gift is something of great importance that can neither be boxed, nor wrapped.

My favorite of these was *Adorations #111*. To me, it felt nostalgic, as if all the really great lessons in his life were learned long ago.

The transition from the personal snapshot style of the *Adorations* is quickly, and quite jarringly contrasted by the first poem in *All of Them Whole.* The section opens with a rather graphic poem about a sheep that is struck and killed on the side of road. The sudden shift in subject matter is like being on a rollercoaster. *Adorations* is the slow, pleasant chug at the beginning, and *All of Them Whole* is the sudden, delicious, delightful drop.

All of Them Whole has many wonderful poems. *Without Lamentations* is thick with imagery, but it comes at you rather slowly, in bite-sized pieces thanks to the skilfully crafted stanzas and the artful enjambment.

A Brief Suspension of all History #2 speaks of the poets love for Ohio. It's a poem with a quiet passion that is appreciated more with each additional read.

Meanwhile, the poems of *Wednesday Mornings*, while brief, are rich with language and meanings that are often poignant.

#35 seems erotic or sensual, yet uses none of the language usually associated with such things.

#85 evokes that languid feeling you feel when you know you've just been asleep, but are not yet awake. It perfectly describes how it feels to be caught between waking and sleeping.

And last, and certainly not least. *Emily as a Mango Hitting The Ground.* I almost wish the Emily poems were a collection all on their own, because if *Adorations* and *Wednesday Mornings* are part of his life, then Emily *is* his life. Though the language isn't what you'd always expect from a love poem, the emotion is there, even if it's not immediately present.

Emily as a Concept, to me, truly embodies an emotional depth many poets would envy. Its brevity makes it seem as if it were effortlessly written.

The collection closes with the poignant, and perhaps accidentally, humorous poem (I found it funny, but in the best, most delightful way) *Emily as She Loses Focus in a Poem* where the poet describes Emily's reaction to being immortalized in verse.

I'll give this collection five stars. Though I usually gravitate toward short poems, Mr. Demaree has a way of writing a poem that makes the reader need to read it again and again. And even in his longer poems, he still manages to somehow be a man of few words. I'll definitely be reading this collection again.

NB: Darren C. Demaree has a previously contributed to *The Corner Club Quarterly* in issue 16 with "Emily as a Limbless Maple" and issue 15 with "The Obvious Damages".

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Lana Bella has a diverse work of poetry and flash fiction anthologized, published and forthcoming with over one hundred journals, including a chapbook with *Crisis Chronicles Press* (early 2016), *Aurorean Poetry*, *Chiron Review*, *Contrary Magazine*, and *QLSR* (Singapore), and is a Featured Artist with *Quail Bell Magazine*, among others. She divides her time between the US and the coastal town of Nha Trang, Vietnam, where she is a wife of a novelist, and a mom of two frolicsome imps. facebook.com/niaallanpoe

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Sierra Donahue's passion for storytelling spans everything from journalism and social critique to science fiction and fantasy. When not writing, Sierra can be found conducting cooking experiments in her home in the Pacific Northwest.

Allison Grayhurst is a member of the League of Canadian Poets. Twice nominated for *Sundress Publications* "Best of the Net" 2015, she has over 700 poems published in over 330 international journals. She has eleven published books of poetry, seven collections, eight chapbooks, and a chapbook pending publication: allisongrayhurst.com

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Tiffany Wang is a senior at John H. Guyer High School, on the outskirts of Denton, Texas. She loves experimenting with different types of prose, especially at three AM with copious help from coffee. She's received a national silver medal from the Scholastic Awards, and has been published in numerous publications, including *The Cadaverine, Crack the Spine, The Blue Monday Review,* and the *Apprentice Writer*. In her spare time, she peruses for new coffee shops and dreads becoming an adult.

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