

déraciné

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Winter 2020



Volume VII

Déraciné

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Cover art, "Ornithophobia," by Kristin Fouquet

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Editors' Letters

Dear Reader,

As winter comes upon us, we know that this time can be so difficult for many, and this year we face difficulties perhaps unlike anything we have faced before. I encourage you to reach out to your friends, family, neighbors, acquaintances, even strangers, and check on them. Make sure they know they are not alone. It's up to all of us to remain as connected as we can, even when we still must stay physically apart.

This year has seen many changes and setbacks, and achievements and struggles that took most of us by surprise and altered our perspectives—for better or worse. And although this year is coming to a close, there is still so much work to be done, and still so much we can be doing to help one another. Fight for what you believe in. Use your voice. Hold yourself and others accountable. And keep being true to yourself.

We've been able to continue *Déraciné* only because of you, our dear contributors and readers. Together, you've created and shared meaningful stories and poetry that have resonated with us, comforted us, even disturbed us—in the best ways. I believe such understanding and collaboration is necessary for other aspects of our lives too, especially now more than ever. And if you find yourself in need this season, please do not hesitate to reach out to loved ones, or your colleagues, or us. You are worthy, and you are loved.

We sincerely thank you for your continued support of *Déraciné*, and we're thrilled to show you Volume VII, full of impactful, beautiful work that we know you'll enjoy.

Have a safe and warm season,

Victoria Elghasen

Editor

Dear Reader,

At this time of year, the hours of sunlight are short and pale. Like myself, many struggle with the change in seasons, and with the constant presence of dull light and long hours of darkness. This year, the winter may feel colder and darker than ever for many of us, considering all that keeps us apart. But even in the face of loneliness, there is hope: for understanding, for change, and for connection.

The stories, poetry, and art in this issue reflect inner and external darkness, negotiate with emotions that are painfully human and sometimes disturbing, and challenge us in many ways to consider the hearts and minds of those with struggles we both can and cannot see. I hope that these wonderfully, thoughtfully created works will prove to be tools of catharsis, of learning, of understanding, and of interconnection.

Even far apart, even when facing immense challenges, even when lonely, we are not truly alone. None of us are alone in how we feel, in how we experience the world, and in how we wish for positive change. We are all human, we are all struggling with personal battles and global events, and we all have a need to reach out to the hearts of those around us, to grow, to support one another, and to find hope together.

Our talented contributors have entrusted us with their words and art, with their emotions, with their hopes for their voices to be shared. I am so thankful to them for entrusting these deeply personal and evocative pieces with us. And I am thankful to you, dear reader, for listening to their voices, for engaging with their works, and for supporting our magazine.

We come together twice a year to publish works that are dark, unsettling, and sometimes even upsetting, but these are important words, important images, and important voices. These are feelings that must be addressed in order to understand, to improve, to heal, and to hope.

I wish you all safety, happiness, good health, and a season full of love and hope, no matter how dark times get. These times will be a memory one day, one I hope we all will grow and learn from, alongside those we love, even when we have to love at a distance.

As always, I cannot thank you enough,

Michelle Baleka

Editor

TIFFANY SHAW-DIAZ

here

this will
be our secret

the busted door
leading to

a darkened hallway
you may have

loved her first
but i

was the one
who found you here

crumpled on the stairs
your head in

my arms and
do you remember

what you confessed
between those

first hitched breaths

denial

this isn't
my blood

and these are not
my hands

i want to believe
each mountain

is a quiet river
and that your sickness

was only my
twisted fantasy

but this is
my blood

and these are
my hands

KIERAN SETRIGHT

Taking Out the Guilt

Two pale, narrow pairs of eyes
look to each other, their flickering torches,
then down at the bulging, life-sized bag
whose stink is already rising
like the yellow mornings over these uplands,
each new day as close and unavoidable,
as fated as one's fingerprint,
as that single, two-way look that says
It's beneath us now. It's over.

SEAN BARRY

The Mouth

The mouth opens gulping
 animal-sized breath
 feverishly panting wild glance

as the window peers curiously
 through a crack
 where the pavement died

and the house lifts to one day
 leave its body.
 The horns on the wall reject

their death. Where there was once
 wind, now bakes patiently
 in the curtains cloaked light.

Floorboards creak like
 accordion teeth dragging
 and clawing still.

Hungered hands rip
 through chicken too tired to run.
 The window smeared

by hands of ketchup and rust.
 Dog shit and diapers meadow'd
 in the yard. Cars honk

in standstill traffic murder.
 Home movies burn in the dawn
 of fires ache.

Medications relinquish
 their control as the mouth begins
 to speak its silent moan.

JULIA RETKOVA

Surrender

Flowers grow on his tongue:
I have tried to pluck them out; *it burns*
bright and furious
for they keep growing and growing until he can't lift his head
and so he lies, for days, miserable with
time eating away at him.
And when we came back we could not even find him.
Did not even know where he was buried in the midst of all that bloomed.

MEG SMITH

The Blood Nest

We drew it, conjured it,
a riddle of found things—
ribbons, twigs, a doll's shoe,
More than this, we wept, and bled
for this floor. We breathe, slowly,
in sleep. You've lost a foot. How this ghost
will hobble. When I open my eyes,
I look up, and laugh,
and brush your hand as you sigh.

RICHARD LEDUE

Ghost Noises

My thoughts scattered
like ashes flung from a mountain,
only to miss the lake and land
in puddles below,
sticking to rubber boot soles,
wiped off with good manners
by some, yelled at for tracks
on hardwood floor by others.

Or is the blank paper
staring back at me
just the inside of a coffin?
Death prepaid and planned,
even my funeral suit, folded
inside a labelled grocery bag
(bottom drawer on the right).

My inspiration from yesterday
no louder than worms nibbling
at the back of my brain—
tiny mouths
telling us everything.

The eventual poem but a whisper
in an empty room,
or footsteps you hear
when home alone.
Words dark as eye holes
cut in a white sheet,
the séance proving nothing
except I once was.

No More Than This

Hope my final moments aren't a struggle
for one more breath, stolen from
a circle of faces,
but a gift given to an empty room
that allowed me to babble at walls,
whose silence offered more wisdom
than any friendly advice,
while ceiling watched it all,
like a god who knew better than to
take credit for the tiny miracles
of avoiding broken glass in bare feet,
or finding a blank page
when there was no one listening
(bitterness flirted with,
but not allowed to snore
in the same bed).
People always the problem,
making us believe there's more
to this than living enough
to earn our deaths.

Victim 49

List lengthened,
but not even a name.

Partial remains,
no way to reconstruct the face
of a ghost,
too easily labelled "Jane Doe B-20."

Part of a long line,
her inheritance
decay down to the bone,
but no flowers for her grave,
only hikers, strangers thankful
it's not them,
or their mothers, sisters, daughters.



Triskaphobia by Kristin Fouquet.

MAX HENNINGER

After E.H.

we've stopped reading the paper.
we're waiting
for s/thing to happen.

we've locked out the sun watch this
tower of days collapse:
fever.

some nights we smile into
our pillows. our sleep is
full of rain.

JOAN MCNERNEY

Clandestine

In the rinse of another grey day
unrolling before us like an empty film,
I want to scream out against
flat skies, tear up coarse air.

Another grey day gnawing
sounding metallic beats
with long lists of minutiae.

Acrid weariness crawls up spine.
shifting pain like broken shards
of glass cutting my fingertips.
My eyelids drooping shut.

Today marches forward...another
tin soldier knocking yesterday aside.
Each night coming faster, faster.
Winds blowing stronger, stronger.

Cats howl in cold circles as
ragged leaves cling to boughs.
Raindrops fall like black ink
under small pools of lights.

Darkness gathers close—
my shadow, that long black
silhouette slanting down
follows me into the night.

EBUKA EVANS

Man in the Kitchen

Man in the kitchen, rats in dichotomy
On his sleepy entrance in a night of dreams
Beaten awake by cold, lungs like grandma's bosom

Light poles in a bedroom
Over bedridden darkness
So much care, he gives

Loses his name in the call
Hands deep in black
Eyes become a night

For shoelaces, hold walk
Into a single shoe where
Crawling leeches maraud as brain cells

Man lost in the wake
Head ablaze from grainy dream
Corpse on the move; this bike trip will be very long.

DS MAOLALAI

the people the flesh.

the city all bone,
wild beetles
and moss.
a skeleton lodged
in the sand
on a beachside.

the people; the flesh
and the organs and livers.
the people the life
in the arteries.

in the red light
of streetlamps, a man
on a bridge.

he goes over slowly
and nobody
sees.

ROBERT BEVERIDGE

Island of the Alive

You can't make out
what it is
but it lies
by the side
of the road

you just passed it

it looked like a body
but you can't
really be sure
can you?

It's a bit of a stretch
to say it
might
have moved
tried to crawl
to the road
for help

you'd rather just drive on
I guess

JESSE MIKSIC

A Little Bird Told Me

Magpie mirror's edge, a shrill
Of bitter cold in summer,
Cryptic text suggestion from
A nameless local number —
Songstress, grief
That knows itself,
A burden borne on
Azure wings, a venture
Up the old road, singing
Of these cruel
Unproven things —
And if you see a
Sad reflection flying
Past you in the sky,
Don't ask me who
Set loose your
Facing edge, my curse,
Because it
Wasn't I.

Artificer at Giza

I am building my god from the inside
I am a small instrument, exceptionally sharp
for shearing the crags off limestone
and buffing it clean.

I am a memory leaving my traces,
Small and protected spaces
Where my god will imagine
Its radiant icon,
Supine in the milky crevice —

My absence will be a universe of pressure
Round the abscess left
At the site of abstraction.

I am a sweating hook drawing
out my god's pulpy excrescences —

Here will be a void of my fashioning.
Where the stone is gone,
The name Khufu can linger
And live on.

LUKE KERNAN

Dictionary of the Lost

We let our fingertips
glide into the radial lumens
of wispy liquid's cool bearings,
looking for raw coral beds.

This Atoll's lilac sunset—
dancing by its force of mauves—
inks crimson clarity
into the fathomed cerulean
of our water's blue magistrate,
blind and beautiful.

Colour and memory
cascade toward ocean. Wordless,
we stood adrift—hunger-pinned—
for those rustic cracks of shelled life.

I shallowed my hand,
reaching for you. Cut.

These howling desolate sludge stars,
fulcrums of our skyline,
whining their furies volcanic—
meticulous black expanses—
beating their irons of light. Blips.

Impertinent beads (falling red—
falling red) thick of spidered wounds,
speckling this moonlit map
with our botched blood trails. Bodies.

Balmy of touches.
Of gasoline-dowsed mothballs
combusting. Can you see?
Swarms of gallows—
their heat, sticky with tar and wax—
as I graft this Icarus
upon our monarch's
wick of destruction. Sizzling...

Seconds. Seconds. Seconds.

I write down what I cannot remember.
Words, these sound-seeds,
plucked from the earth
and this edge of air tasting of longing,
of longing, of love-fermented memories.
Of continuity's kiss, never returned.
Have you heard them?
These illusive little specks of grammar—
umbilical imprints and cords,
morose of gravity and fed to us
upon a belief.

Impressed.

I wonder what will be of this world—
chalked and hungover by its scratched outlines?

When these dead words outnumber the living.
These entries as they beat our heretical ghost-lanterns
into sun-battered journals. Can you remember
the Caspian tigers stalking our barest of imaginations?

Dead fires: nimbly woke,
daring, and damned—they spoke.
Or, those Newfoundland wolves,
growling god at the veins of crescent waters,
rushing, rushing to this darkly crater.

Silence of thought—calm tonality—
dips further into this last bright hue.
Violet, deep reds. I watch this rustling.
The sway of sounds, slow winds
against Saskatchewan sweetgrasses.

I hold inside myself,
trembling broke to thunder
and these skies of her,
my grandmother's words.
Я чувствую себя потерянным без них.*

**"I feel myself lost without them."*

hall monitor

bravery is a swelling emotion
something like bravado

bravery is a swelling emotion

something like bravado

but what of shrinking, folding in and dissipating
—urgent 'til the danger passes?

—urgent ‘til the danger passes?

my first lesson on standing steadfast as the waves break against me:

waves break against me:

eldest sister holds my hand in the
church pew even though she doesn't
like to be touched

church pew even though she doesn't

like to be touched

tender-hearted sister reads two novels in a day,
memorizes all forty-five presidents and their first
ladies by name

memorizes all forty-five presidents and their first

ladies by name

she must have lived a hundred rebirths to
bolster a tenacity most would fall like ninepins
against

bolster a tenacity most would fall like ninepins

against

she is

fire: hungry and devouring the air:
the first of us: the one who holds the night

the first of us: the one who holds the night

lighthouse of my voyage:
impervious to darkness and there to guide me safely
from it

impervious to darkness and there to guide me safely

from it

sister carries it all on her shoulders:

wipes the floor with courage: makes it a PB&J sandwich, asks about its day

sandwich, asks about its day

and me?

i sometimes cannot help being anything but a moment
brought to its crisis

i'm looking for the lighthouse but
falling out to blacker seas:

falling

falling

falling

out to where i find it so often paralyzing
—to be a body and a brain

SHANNON CUTHBERT

Ozone

stand on a crater
between here and the unknown world
whose rocks have touched the arms of gods.
make yourself small you won't be spotted.
make your peace with birch-limb,
with skeletal birds whose beaks shred the sky.
wallow in shadow.
wait as its borders caress your carved face.
no statues here.
no marble magnificence.
no mansions with vines twined into philosophies.
wait for the lanterns to excavate innards,
to open the space exhalation forms.
wait for a scent, a clutchable future.
maybe roses steaming from rain.
maybe grasshoppers, their tinderbox legs,
striking you open your senses free.



Interior with the Moon by V.B. Borjen.

LE FRANCIS

Venus in Aries, Mars in Gemini

She told me to blame it on the moon,
the fickle stars that burn the truth into
the roof of my mouth, too afraid to
either spit it out or swallow; to stand

beside or become this ache that I
vowed I'd never feel again, ever
breaking my promises as if to remind
myself that words are not permanent

& neither is this. I'm just a temporary
burning, same as this wanting that will
someday soon eat the center out of itself
& collapse, tear a hole through space

& time & rip the bones out of the fabric
of the galaxy, bit by bit, as insatiable
in death as in life. No matter how many
suns die, loud in the infinite between my

lungs & my mind, I must accept this
is nothing & so am I & in this the moon
is blameless & the truth in the stars is
only the truth before the collapse & I

can always find another way
to make myself empty.

MERCURY-MARVIN SUNDERLAND

Mashed Potato Mix

for my dinner tonight
i boiled
two and a half cups of water
and half a stick of butter

i added a cup of rice milk
and stirred in a package
of mashed potato mix

i fried
two eggs

and made a cup of
frozen blueberries

and tonight i
didn't talk to anyone
and i tried to ignore the memory

it was the last package
in the box
what was once touched by your hands
is no longer
in my pantry

and i wish i could say
that i felt pride
that i felt grief
or anything

everyone says that
romantic breakups hurt

but nobody talks about platonic breakups
and how they are
so much

i never
want to see you again.

i don't miss you

for my dinner tonight
i boiled
two and a half cups of water
and half a stick of butter

i added a cup of rice milk
and stirred in a package
of mashed potato mix

i fried
two eggs

and made a cup of
frozen blueberries

and tonight i
didn't talk.

BRITTANY MISHRA

Déjà vu

You look at the stars and know them.
You look at me and know me.
You look at the earth and say,
“I’ve done this before in some other life.”
You remember the tangle of them,
blackberry brambles unravelling.
The weight of each life
kept inside of you
like a fist of flowers
picked too soon;
they can never
fully bloom.

CARLA SARETT

I knock on a door

I knocked on a door,
before I woke in a river,
before I woke on the floor
of a bus speeding past my stop
where I saw myself waiting
snow falling and falling.

I waved to my old life who
never wore waterproof anything.
I wonder where she *thought*
she was going that day or
the year after, wanting and
wanting everything
impossible.

with life hurling forward and backward
in the fast-flowing river
with all of my selves.
I press them to me,
closer and closer.
I knock on a door.

FRED POLLACK

Life and Kitsch

You might have come downstairs
as badly armed as usual
against disapproval,
vocal or silent, within and without;
advancing, aloud or by
your mere controversial presence,
a proposition without proof,
a preposition without object.
You might have expressed, in a sense,
a desire the house
in its penury or wealth
couldn't meet, and which was
in any case unsuited to
its taste. Through a crowd
of the living or dead
or as yet undecided, you
might have decided to go out.
In so many deserts, signs
announce courts and lanes
that will never, now, be built,
or weren't seriously meant.
There are so many photographs of these
that one no longer cares;
the lot, however desolate, is safe
and you may come downstairs.



Wormhole Harmonica by V.B. Borjen.

RON TORRENCE

the circular stairway

memory's gravity
pulls

luminous tube
coiling
deep
my brain

childhood pathways
searched
time and again

clutching
shapeless shapes
through
lens of dreams

vacant rooms

silent hallways

empty streets

kissing
tongueless lips

caressing
touchless fingers

yearning
for
embrace

born

dead

all the while

my future

unfolds

behind

me

Moreness

Juliet had tossed and turned thinking about that little boy she'd almost killed in the Chipotle parking lot. He'd zoomed by in a low-to-the-ground tricycle as she'd turned into a parking space. Zoomed right past her front-left tire and through an opening in the fence. Juliet had slammed on her brakes. The only witness to the gap-toothed smile of the fence where the boy had disappeared, she stood in the parking lot, staring at that small yet just wide enough cavity. Picturing a smashed body against it, blood, limbs, tricycle parts. She was forced to leave the lot three hours later when a skinny employee rapped on her window: "You've been parked here past the limit." Her stomach growled all the way home.

Before that day, Juliet had been considering moving. She had never been urged to move anywhere but closer to home, if not back home. At thirty-three years old, Juliet was starting to feel the repercussions of going to the local college, then getting an online library science degree, all the while saving her tutoring money and living in the room she grew up in. Posters of smiling celebrities in 90s clothing covering every inch of the ceiling. Some winking.

Juliet's first boyfriend had been the boy that carried her books in middle school. She'd only really said yes to his handwritten proposal because she recalled her mother's warning that if she turned down one, she was turning down them all. Juliet's parents were harsh when she told them she'd broken up with the boy only two weeks after they'd started dating. "He wanted to kiss me!" she told them as if that explained it all.

After eleven months into dating her second boyfriend, Juliet realized she just couldn't broach the topic of *sex*, and having no other way to avoid it, she broke up with him by changing high schools. Her parents didn't know about him, but they were okay with her sudden transfer to an art-centered alternative high school only a few blocks away from their house.

Her third relationship, however, progressed in a manageable way that let Juliet experience the art of imagination. Mark frequented the same grocery store as Juliet and on several perfectly timed occasions, conversed with her in the shopping line. Juliet weaved together snippets he'd shared into full blown weekends away and phone conversations. Their relationship lasted about a year's worth of daydreams until Mark must have moved away. Juliet started seeing her therapist when her parents complained that they were going to die without grandchildren.

"My mother began hysterically crying out of the blue," she told Dr. Margaret. "Weeping to a degree I've never seen her cry before. And all because she said she was afraid I'd be all on my own once she and Dad die."

"Do you believe she's correct?"

"What does it really matter?"

"Must matter some, Juliet, since you're here?"

And then she almost killed someone, a kid nonetheless. She didn't have a real partner in life, and as her therapist pointed out, this child was willing to risk his entire life by riding fast with seemingly nowhere to go.

"But you see, Juliet. There's always an opening somewhere."

Juliet pictured the smiling fence and bought a two-story cottage *two* cities away from her parents' house.

"This is a big step for you, Juliet. Just be patient." Here, Juliet noticed Dr. Margaret's gap between her two front teeth.



Juliet heard it come at night. She had just slipped into bed after brushing her teeth. Though it seemed familiar, she could not place the sound. It was something soft footed but definitely strong. She could tell by the drop of each step. The *dun-swish, dun-swish* of the toe and then the heel. Almost like wind with a swinging tail.

Juliet visualized the feet as they moved closer to her bedroom. Through the front door and up the wooden steps—*dun-swish, dun-swish*—but she lost sight of it once it approached the top of the staircase, her heart filling her ears.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to get here, Juliet," he called from outside her door. His voice sounded strained. "But at least I'm here at all, right?"

Juliet closed her eyes. The voice. She'd heard it many times before, but the face was an empty apparition. She looked at her bare shoulder. She could feel his breath, short and cold.

"Cole?"

"Yes, darling, who else would it be at this time?" A smooth hand pulled her up by the back of her neck. "Unless you have a secret lover hiding beneath the bed!"

At this, he dropped her, and Juliet sprang back up from her pillow to watch a body slide beneath her queen-sized bed. She laughed as boxes sprang out from the other side, and she laughed even more as she listened to Cole push himself after them.

"Nobody!" he called.

"Of course there's nobody," Juliet whispered. "There's nobody really here. Not even *you*." Juliet slipped out of the bed and locked herself in her double-sinked bathroom. Juliet pulled her eyelids down with her fingertips and rubbed her cheeks red with her knuckles. "If you're seeing anybody, Juliet," she told her reflection, "it's Dr. Margaret this Thursday."

A light tapping, and Juliet hurriedly turned on the shower, stepping into the cold water—her night slip on.

Juliet should have called in sick the next morning. She had practically given herself a cold—pneumonia—hypothermia—falling asleep in the shower like she had. *Achoo*.

But Juliet didn't call in sick. Instead, she peeled off her night slip, wrapped herself in her thickest robe, brushed her teeth, blow dried her dark hair, rubbed some lotion on her chapped lips, and then unlocked the bathroom door. She tried not to look too hard around her, though she confirmed there was "nobody" with a sigh.



Juliet worked as an adult librarian. Questions she received related to legal advice or computer help, and then there was the occasional, “you’re too nice to work here, lady.” Her boss, Fernanda, agreed.

“These people take advantage of you. They ask you how to turn on the computer, and you spend the whole hour with them *not* using the computer. Instead you listen to how they’re a newly certified pastor marrying a convict, *blah, blah, blah!*”

“Maybe that’s what they need,” Juliet replied. “Sometimes people crave someone to talk to.”

“*Maybe,*” Fernanda would say, “they really need to get on the computer so that they can get a job and talk to their new coworkers about their convict hubby instead.”

After getting her degree, Juliet imagined life as a librarian as something like this:

My grandfather is dying. He likes me to read to him. What series sounds great read aloud?

Let me just show you this new series over here...

I’m going on vacation and need small books to take on the plane. Do you know any mysteries that wrap up within 200 pages?

Why, yes, I do! Let’s see if we have it here at this branch...

What Juliet achieved from being a librarian was much more than she’d imagined, though. What she’d imagined before seemed so silly to her now that she was almost ashamed she’d ever thought that way. Books, they couldn’t get you places outside of the page. Instead, they kept you locked inside of yourself, leaving you feeling unfulfilled. Empty.

Juliet often didn’t recognize her own voice for this very reason. When she spoke to library patrons, it was in such a small whisper that when she caught herself saying sentences with conjunctions, she jumped back, startled—“you okay?” She’d give a small nod and smile in return as they continued on about convict husbands, crazy landlords, children that never called them back. *Do you know why,* they asked, *my friend request never goes through?*



When Juliet returned home from work and a quick run to the grocery store, she found Cole had already done the shopping and was currently dividing the goods on the counter for “fridge,” “cabinet,” and “to-eat-now.”

“You went shopping?” Juliet dropped her bags in front of the kitchen door.

“Honey! I didn’t even hear you come in! Let me get you a glass of this wine,” Cole held up a red. “Came highly recommended by the cheese lady.”

“I went shopping.” Juliet looked down at her feet and instantly noticed that she’d forgotten milk. She looked up as Cole handed her a glass of wine.

"Sorry, babe," he said as he kissed the top of her head. Juliet felt its moisture on her scalp. "I forgot milk."

Juliet watched her hand reach for the glass. Instead of falling through her grasp, it stood. "I did, too."

"Ha! What a pair we make. I'll go ahead and unpack the goods—unless it's *your* goods you want me to unpack—" Juliet let herself curl into Cole's grip. When she closed her eyes, she saw him clearly. Green eyes, curly brown-blond hair, tan skin, long neck... When she opened her eyes, she saw ice cream melting down the cabinets.

"I'm going to bed," she sighed.

The next morning, she peeked inside the kitchen on her way out to work—she was purposely running late—and saw neat countertops, sparkling cabinets. To her delight, there was also a to-go cup filled with tea and a clear container filled with what looked like lemon chicken soup, her favorite.

She'd find an "I love you" note tucked into her jacket pocket later when she searched for a loose coin to give a gentleman at the library who was short a dime for the copy machine.



That night, Juliet wasn't startled when Cole pulled her closer into him on the bed. "You know, it's been a year since we first met?"

"It has?"

"That's a long time now, don't you think?"

"I'd rather not think about time."

"Time is everything. No way to trick it, to fool it—it'll catch up with you no matter how hard you're running. *And I will, too.*"

Juliet reached for Cole's hand, which she felt cradling her stomach. "What are you saying, Cole?"

"Well—" Cole squeezed her hand back, "I think it's time you and I talk about marriage."

Juliet opened her eyes and looked down. Laced within her fingertips were square fingernails and bony fingers. "I don't think that's a good idea." She squinted as she tried to focus on Cole's hand. She willed x-ray vision to see a sudden shudder, a sudden twitch of pixels.

"Look at me, Julie."

Juliet closed her eyes and turned her body to face Cole's bare chest. She burrowed her head into his neck.

"Julie."

When she opened her eyes, she saw a stubbled bump protruding from Cole's throat. His Adam's apple quivered as she blew on it.

"I need you take me seriously, Juliet. I take our relationship very seriously."

"I do, too, Cole," she mumbled into his chest. "I haven't even mentioned you to my therapist."

"That's a good sign?" Juliet felt Cole gently create distance between them. She kept her eyes down. "Look at me, Julie. You never really look at me."

Juliet moved her eyes slowly away from his stomach to his chest, back to his neck, his chin—his nostrils flared, and she took a deep breath.

"If I say yes, what does it mean?"

"What are you asking?"

Juliet closed and then opened her eyes to a tan chest. "I don't like going to sleep with you and waking up alone."

Juliet felt the whole of Cole's warm body as he embraced her. "That's why I moved in. Now that that's done, I think we should decide more."

"It's these moments, I just can't trust these moments," she whispered to herself.



Juliet watched her life carefully. All the moments from her relationships with the other men rolled neatly into a few showcase made-up memories. The moments of her relationship with Cole, they started that way in her mind until he actually started showing up, and then they began to roll out all over the day—taking over the laundry, the gardening, the recorded TV.

"What can you tell me about Cole?" Dr. Margaret took out a large, blank sheet of paper. "I used to sketch facial composites for LAPD."

"He's got green eyes—" Juliet glanced at her watch. "His hair, umm I think it's brown, but a light brown, and curly."

"Close your eyes."

"Okay, but I was seeing him just fine without my eyes closed... His hair, it's got some blonde shades in it, too. He's got wide shoulders but skinny arms. Long arms and neck—"

"What's he do for a living?"

"Finance."

"Specifically...?"

"He makes a lot of money."

"Have you met his family, Juliet?"

"I've spoken to his mother on the phone at least eight times."

"You have? What's her telephone number?"

Juliet opened her eyes. "What a great idea," she said as she scrambled through her purse for her cell phone.

"Here you go." Juliet handed her phone to Dr. Margaret.

"Amanda Cole Mom, huh?"

"So I wouldn't confuse her with this other Amanda I know since I don't actually know this other Amanda's last name."

"I see." Dr. Margaret turned the sketch towards Juliet.

"I saw you drawing, Dr. Margaret. Why is the paper blank?" Juliet got up from her seat. Before she could snatch the sketch from Dr. Margaret's lap, she heard the vibration of her phone.

Dr. Margaret looked up at Juliet. "It's Amanda Cole Mom! Answer!"

Juliet took the phone.

"Put it on speaker," Dr. Margaret whispered.

"Hello?" A light voice said.

"Hi, Amanda, how are you?"

"Oh fine, fine, Juliet. Just fine."

"Oh?" Juliet began to scratch the soft spot behind her ear. She watched Dr. Margaret watch her talk.

"Well, honey, the truth is—well, the truth is I'm a bit worried."

Juliet heard the quick quiver of Amanda's voice and turned away from Dr. Margaret's stare. "Oh, Amanda, what's there to worry about?"

"Ask her to confirm she is the mother of Cole Mal—"

Juliet angrily threw her hand towards Dr. Margaret. "Amanda, are you there?"

"Yes, honey."

"What's wrong?"

"I've upset Cole, and I fear he won't speak to me ever again."

"I'm positive that's not the case."

"Oh, my dear, but I know better than you. I'm his mother." Juliet hurriedly muted her line to scream *ha!* "I told him I'm not going to make it to your wedding."

"What do you mean?"

"Juliet? See, I've angered you now, too!"

Juliet scrambled to unmute her phone.

"I understand why you'd be mad."

"No! Amanda?"

Even Dr. Margaret was up.

"Julie?"

"Amanda, is this about flying?"

"Oh, no, no. It's about *dying*."

"Dying!"

"Julie, that hurt my ear!"

"I'm sorry, Amanda. What are you trying to say about dying?"

"Cole can't know, Juliet."

"Everyone dies, Amanda. Just because you think you're old doesn't mean you're going to die now."

"I've dreamt it's coming, and that's that."

"If you're really serious, we should visit you—"

"No! There's no time. A dream's a dream, this is serious business. I'm dying. I'm not saying when. But know I can't make it to your wedding."

"I think she just hung up!" Dr. Margaret grabbed the phone from Juliet. She redialed Amanda Cole Mom. The line rang and rang.



When Juliet got home, Cole wasn't there. No note beside the phone or on the fridge. It was roughly six o'clock. She liked having dinner by this time, so instead of waiting for Cole to appear, Juliet put water on to boil. *Pasta*, she thought. *Cole loves pasta*.

While the water boiled, Juliet undressed herself. She left the clothes in a neat pile underneath the kitchen table. A chill came and forced her to at least put on an apron. After finding a sturdy pair of black patent heels, Juliet turned on the oven.

The oven pre-heated faster than she'd anticipated. Juliet frowned at her barely made up face in the bathroom mirror. The instructor from the tutorial on the perfect eyeliner continued on through Juliet's phone. The buzzer for the oven beeped and beeped, and then Juliet heard the front door. "Fuck!" Juliet slapped her cheeks for some color and rushed down the stairs.

Once in the kitchen, Juliet hurriedly pushed the garlic bread into the oven and spooned out a pasta for taste.

Juliet listened for the sound of shoes, for his voice, but neither came. She turned off the burner and chewed the bowtie as she tiptoed soundlessly to the front door. Her heart raced as she peeked around the hallway. The door was shut. The latch she'd routinely latched perfectly in place.



The next morning, Juliet called in sick.

"What do you have? Juliet, don't suffer in silence." Fernanda's voice rang in Juliet's ear. "I didn't even know you were capable of being sick."

"Migraine."

"I have some Vicodin. I can easily bring some to you. We've got enough library aides today, I can slip out for a sec or two—"

"I'm fine."

"Or three...You're fine? Juliet the faithful is fine and yet at home with a migraine on a Friday?"

"Thanks for understanding, Fernanda. I'll see you on Monday."

"Just take it off! You've got more vacation days than me and the staff combined."

"Talk to you later."

Juliet hadn't slept all night. Instead she waited in bed listening, her eyes closed. She tried hard to picture Cole returning home with a bundle of daffodils, apologizing for not leaving a note, for not texting. He'd been in an emergency meeting. A big client had almost left the firm. And there was more; he'd thought she was sleeping so he warmed up the pasta, and wow! It was amazing. *And you claim you can't cook*, he'd add as he kissed her forehead.

And then Juliet would open the covers, Cole would slide underneath, fully clothed. He'd feel her warm bare body and laugh at her for wearing her heels in bed. *If this is what it takes to be a master chef, I fully support your career change*. And then he'd say, *missed you so much today*. And then they'd love one another to make up for the day.

Instead, Saturday turned into Sunday. Juliet slept through Saturday loving and redefining loving to Cole. Sunday night woke her with its silence. Juliet cringed at a rip as she untangled herself from the covers. Her heels, still strapped on, sliced through the blossom of a hydrangea pattern.

Juliet reached for her phone. No messages.

"What the fuck?" Juliet threw her cell across the room. *Just continue feeling*. Is that what Dr. Margaret had said? What was Juliet feeling? Pure shame.

After taking three Benadryl, Juliet read Frank O'Connor stories until she finally couldn't keep her eyes open anymore. She went to sleep to stories about women who gave love but couldn't receive love, about confessions and grieving parents. Stories fabricated on the feelings of others and repurposed for the readers who felt more. *Books*, Juliet thought, *you leave me wanting*.



Juliet woke up feeling rested. It was bright outside, and when she looked at the clock, she realized it was Monday morning. She could make it to work if she wanted to.

"Fernanda, I think I'm going to just take this week off. Call me if you need anything. I'm sorry I didn't give more notice. Have a great day and week. Bye!"

The first thing on Juliet's to-do list was to make room. *Where has Cole been keeping his stuff?* Juliet opened her closet. Tucked neatly in the corner were a pair of men's tennis shoes and men's loafers. *Easy enough to miss.* When she peeled back her clothes, she saw five button-ups hanging next to five slacks, two sweaters, three jeans, and two scarves folded above. How had she not noticed these things before?

Juliet went through each bathroom cabinet and found one prescription bottle with Cole's name on it, a Head & Shoulders bottle, and a new package of razors for a high-tech men's shaver she found in a black leather case. In the kitchen, too, were things Juliet had never bought or knew of. Items like veggie chips and mint chocolate chip ice cream. The kicker was the tub of overpriced olives from the upscale market downtown. She smiled when she saw a slice of German chocolate cake, her name neatly printed on the plastic container. She cracked the container open as soundlessly as she could before sticking a finger into the frosting. "Mmmmmm."

Juliet's to-do list was quickly tossed away when she realized Cole had made room for himself just fine. A minimalist in the end, which suited her well, balanced her, really. She jumped in the shower and hummed till she remembered it was Monday and she hadn't heard from Cole since Friday.

"Amanda, it's Juliet. Please pick up the phone." Juliet called over and again. After four hours, she searched for obituaries online. Had Amanda died and Cole found out? Left hysterically on Friday not sane enough to call and alert her? If this idea were true, would it make her feel better?

"Cole, darling, it's me. I am sorry to bombard your phone with my voice, but I'm very worried. Should I call the police? I guess I can't rely on you for an answer to that..."

Juliet turned her phone off and then on again. Nothing.

"Dr. Margaret, it's Juliet. I don't know what to do. Cole has suddenly disappeared. Hasn't been around since Friday. I'm thinking about calling the police."

Juliet started to dial her parents but hung up before the second ring.



Tuesday arrived with rain. It poured so hard Juliet couldn't see through it. She was awake to welcome both Tuesday and the rain. She had plugged in the coffee machine next to her bed with a tray holding three different blends and replacement filters, and didn't forget the small green compost bin she'd found on the counter that she hadn't had before, full of orange peels from oranges she hadn't eaten.

Her stomach growled angrily at her around five o'clock, but Juliet refused to get out of bed. What was she wearing? It was cold outside of the covers. She had forced herself to forget she had to pee hours ago.



Juliet woke up having to pee very badly. She glanced at the clock reluctantly. It was a few minutes into Wednesday. Juliet rolled and rolled beneath the covers, rolling harder and harder until she fell out of the bed. She crawled to the bathroom and her pee spluttered out of her so quickly she nearly missed the toilet bowl.

She sat on the toilet for a good amount of time before she dragged herself up and into the shower. She hadn't been dressed these past few days and the water covered her in a more soothing way than the blankets and sheets. Juliet stood there without washing. She could feel the hot water waning.

"Julie!"

Juliet?

"Julie!"

Me?

"Juliet, I have terrible news."

There he was. Juliet watched the sparkling effect of the water running down the glass shower door. It was as if the rain from outside had entered the house, the roof opening itself up for it, and as a reward for the hospitality the raindrops were twinkling, lighting up everything around it.

"Julie?"

Cold water shot out suddenly, and Juliet quickly turned the knobs off. The silence disturbed her. Cracking the door, Juliet pulled a towel off the hanging rod. It was being tugged away from her, but she managed to keep her stance and pull it away from the bony hands snatching at it.

"Juliet, be careful, you could slip!"

That song she didn't realize she'd been hearing for days, it came back to her and she hummed and listened as her throat tried to sing through the hums.

Soft cries slowed her song down and Juliet wrapped the towel around her body; it was smooth, her legs, her arms. Juliet tucked in the towel's edge so it would stay up.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered to the fogged mirror. She'd forgotten to turn on the vent.

And then that hand. That bony hand reached beyond her shoulders, the arm attached grazing her cheek as the hand wiped away the fog and revealed nothing.



On Thursday, Juliet dressed in her Christmas dress, black satin with a low cut back. It stopped raining the moment she left the house. She stuck out her tongue to catch any leftover raindrops.

"You look so well." Dr. Margaret hugged Juliet close. "I am so sorry about Amanda."

"She knew it was coming."

"Doesn't really prepare you, though. Did it prepare you?"

"Yes, actually. I'd dreamt it."

"You mean Amanda dreamt it?" Dr. Margaret had her sketch pad out. Juliet didn't crane her neck to see the strokes. She just watched the pencil move as she felt Dr. Margaret's stare.

"I've been living in my head so much that I have no real feelings. I can't just go with my feelings, Margaret. I can't make him stay. I'm sure you knew that."

"Juliet, look at you. You're a successful woman. You've no one to thank for your success but yourself. A nice home, a good job. Your feelings are real, you're just dissatisfied with them."

"May I see your sketches?"

Dr. Margaret looked down as if she hadn't known she was sketching. A small left foot tap, then right, and then a nod.

Juliet reached up from her seat, and Dr. Margaret passed a group of thin papers. She could almost see them all, they were so transparent, the sun shining through them.

"I shouldn't rely on you so much for confirmation."

"Juliet, there's nothing wrong with needing someone else to voice your feelings. You're not the only person I talk to."

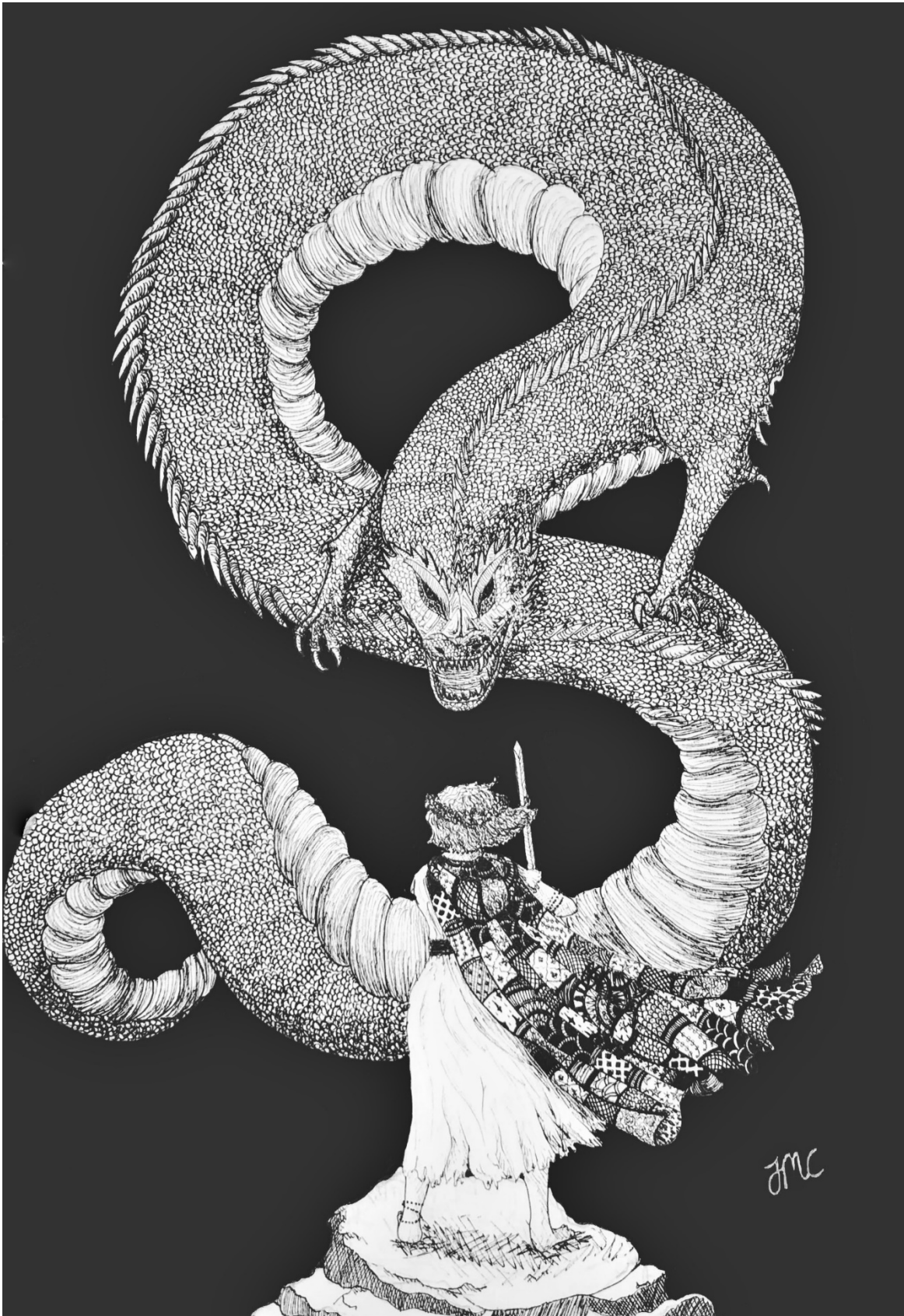
"Your drawings, they're lovely. The thinness of the paper makes my face seem livelier."

"Your face is lively."

Juliet grabbed at her stomach. It seemed to her that it had grown in that moment.

"A lot of women get married after having a baby. Heck, it's the new tradition. I'd say I met myself for the first time when my son was born. Like I was looking straight at myself. Didn't matter if his eyes looked like his father's, or his nose for that matter. He was me. Came out of me. And my whole world was *more* at that moment. I was more. That moreness, it reflected *me*."

Juliet's phone buzzed on the pillow beside her, and she stifled a cry. A text lit up the screen right after the voicemail buzz came through. *When will you be home?*



Fighting the Dragon by Jenni Coutts.

The Fireflies Went Back to Their Homes

I.

When Mari first told me, in the summer spent by the river, that she was going to war, I'd only just turned eighteen. And so had she. She thought to get trained as a nurse, and in exchange for that she'd get shipped off to the front.

Back then she was as tender as a doe—sweet and young and with a warm personality, and an absolute mane of wavy brown hair. The sort of person you could get lost looking at. But when you were lost, the magic was that she found you again. You came back to yourself, and she was there, and there was nothing better.

"It's not like I'll get an education any other way, will I?" she said, full of resignation and cheer.

"That's one way to get one," I said, nodding my head as if the thought didn't hurt me.

At the time, I knew her to laugh with her whole soul, the roots in the core of her taut tummy. Her breathing alone could sustain the weather and the world. At the time I wasn't articulate, but I had the sense that it would all get removed, like with an ice-cream scoop.

"We can't all afford to be engineers. Have you even filled out your draft card? Albert told me the deadline is Tuesday."

"No need," I told her. "The university arranges for everything."

She looked hurt. "You mean you're not going?"

"I'm not," I replied.

"Oh." Then we sat in silence for what felt like a day and a night. And she sighed. "I bet you'll be glad when this is all over. Won't you?"

II.

Time passed me by, and suddenly I was on track for a partnership at my firm, and I was a qualified civil engineer—a career for me that was less about the prestige and more about the pride of construction. But when the crash happened, arrangements had to be made, and they couldn't just keep me on the payroll, they said.

"Don't get yourself riled up, old boy," my boss told me from the comfort of his mahogany office. His bristles moved as he spoke. "This should all just blow over presently. Consider it a vacation, if you must, to get through it. We've no capital for workers or machinery at the moment, so don't worry, we shan't be getting on with the building without you. And anyway, you must

have a sweetheart at home, don't you? Come now, don't give me that look. You young men and your secrets. Human nature doesn't change. But anyway, it's no business of mine. Though I'll make it clear: we shan't forget you. Not a fellow with your history of impeccable work, and at such an early stage in his career!"

His assistant came into the office to usher me out. He must have had other associates waiting in line, dispersed around the office so they wouldn't notice each other. For what it was worth, I believed him. So I got to packing away my desk.

Through the window that let sunlight in on my drawing board, I could see an abandoned building works. Just the day before it had been covered in labour, as though swarming with flies. And now it was just a naked skeleton of wrought iron and steel. There was an empty ribcage, where the heart used to be.

III.

I didn't love the idea of coming home, but mostly because it embarrassed me. My savings weren't going to sustain me. They were meagre, even before they were worthless. Everyone else had a good enough time with it. They found ways to justify it with reference to the circumstance. *That's okay*, I thought, *no reason to bend myself out of shape if nobody cares*. But still. Something about a grown man moving back home, to his parents' little place in the country, set me on edge. These are the hazards of the non-compete clause, I suppose. I wasn't going to starve or sleep in the street, so I phoned my folks. And of course they wouldn't mind, they told me.

At first, I couldn't stand the claustrophobia in that little wood shack. I loved my folks, don't get me wrong, but I needed my space. One day, I navigated myself to the spot by the river, where Mari and I had once spent a summer, touching.

What shocked me the most, beyond nostalgia, was the way the place had grown so barren. Where once there were green banks and wildflowers even in the heat of August, now in May the grass was as dry as a widow, or like a mother who had lost a son. Each of whom could only make it by dabbing themselves on the cheeks with the ash. I wondered if the fireflies still came out at night.

And that was my honest impression. But the old willow tree remained, stalwart, though at what must have been twice the size I remembered it. Don't things from one's youth grow smaller with time?

Then I had the sensation of so much coming back, and I felt like an idiot. *Who's to say that a visit home is not a gift?* It certainly was just then, in that moment, as all the images came rushing past; the scent of those wildflowers; the excitement; the rush. Knowing that together nothing mattered, at least for the course of an afternoon lazily spent. *That was okay, in the most holistic possible sense*, I thought. *So then this could be okay too*.

IV.

It was a few months past when I said I'd be gone, although I still hadn't left. Whenever I brought it up, my mother was sanguine. She said she was happy to have me around, and that I was willing to help out was more than enough compensation. She sent me often for some milk and some eggs. *Let it be*, I figured, *no pride is due to the inescapably provincial*. And that's what I was for the moment, so I went with it. And besides, I liked Walther, the grocer, and a chat over the counter was just what the doctor called for.

The sweet grey-haired man rang me up, and suddenly I saw Mari through the storefront glass, pushing a trolley down the way and picking through a fruit stand. Walther tried to spark up a chat, but I had a hard time following. I didn't want to come off rude, so I agreed with and acknowledged whatever he said, though I couldn't really hear.

To tell you the truth, I don't know why I let myself get so excited. I'd managed to avoid the riverbank since that day months before—too much pain in nostalgia. So I'd barely thought about her. But now, seeing her again, all I wanted to do was be near her.

By the time old Walther had forked over my change, she was gone. And I must have been looking for her for hours, until eventually I ended up on her doorstep.

Before I could ring the doorbell, I saw something inside. It was a figure, flashing in the light of a television screen, seated on the couch. In the darkness I couldn't make out an identity. But the eyes were so dull and unfocused, and my stomach turned when I saw that his skull had such an *odd* shape—like a broken egg, with a deep cavity. As though it had been tapped with a spoon, so you could get out the yolk.

At first, I thought that the person was dead. But then I squinted my eyes, and I could make out the definite signs of his breathing, though I still had no luck with his identity.

As far as I could tell, Mari hadn't made it back home. So I sat on her stoop and waited, and I must have sat there alone right into the night. Once it got dark, I started getting antsy, but I thought I'd better not give up too soon. Then I thought the milk would go off, so I got ready to set off back home. No sense in prompting a fuss.

But before I went, I looked back to the shadowy figure through the glass, and he hadn't shifted an inch. He was right where I left him, breathing little shallow breaths in his chest, and staring blankly at the light, full of twinkle but uncomprehending, as though that screen symbolized his own grave.

V.

One night, I walked past her, sitting underneath the willow tree by the river. And I saw that the surface of the water was black, and completely starless, as if the fireflies died out. I mentioned it to her, and she replied.

"Do you remember what I used to say about fireflies?" I sat down next to her on the bank.

"You used to say you loved them, because in the water, you couldn't tell the difference between their light and the stars. You said you loved them because those little lights each came to a point, like the tip of a spear, or like the taste of apple cider. They were sharp, and bright, and glowing."

"That's right."

I took the opportunity to spy what time and life had done to her, and now the sight of her gave me the impression of a burnt-up stick of incense. I suppose to anyone else they would have just seen any old sight of Mari, but I could tell the difference. Her long hair was shorn short, so it tickled her ears. *Less to grab*, she told me. And her breathing was always so shallow with fear, like it had poked a hole into the bellow at the core of her being, right down in the root of the soil.

We'd been sitting in silence for what had most likely been an hour, before she reached out her palm and put it on top of mine, flat. She felt so light, as though she was compacted out of ash. But she was beautiful. I turned my palm over, and I took her hand in mine, and our fingers interlinked. She started, quietly, to cry.

I asked her what was wrong.

"Just who do you think you are? Coming back like this. Again. After so many years away. Like a storybook prince, or a lost soldier."

I didn't know how to reply to that. But I knew I didn't want to fight. So I decided to stay quiet. Poor Mari; little one. They had plucked all the stars out of her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said. Then she switched topics abruptly, "You know, shrapnel usually enters a body red-hot. So it doesn't bleed them. They don't usually bleed at all. I don't know why I'm saying this. But it only cooks them." She looked at me, like all she wanted in the world was for me to understand that. That they didn't bleed.

"Is that what happened to—?"

"Albert. Yeah," she confirmed. "I know you saw him the other day. That's exactly how it went, actually. It was a piece of flint though, coming out of the ground when it got hit with a shell."

"Oh, Mar—I didn't know."

"You couldn't," she hissed. Then she started trembling.

"You know, so often, at night, I can still see them. And I can still hear them praying out loud and calling for their mothers." She told me that the coffins they used to put the soldiers in the ground started to look like seeds, until after a time they ran out of coffins. She told me how one day she had been ambushed by a falling acorn. She dived for the deck as though it had been a bomb, on reflex. Of the bombs that fell, she said she thought of them as falling stars. They fell without fail every day, and that made it feel like rain.

"I can still hear the wheezing," she said. Her sorrow burst forth in ragged weeping. And she nestled up against my chest. In any other moment, the love of that might have killed me. But not this time.

She started reciting a list of full names, attached to their ranks. They must have belonged to a series of men, over a hundred, all recounted from memory, each a man she had seen die in her care.

Her voice rose and fell as she spoke, until it burst forth in a roaring crescendo, like a paean to a horrible god. I just did my best to hold on.

After a while, she settled down, until I couldn't tell her voice from the river, which I suppose must have lulled me to sleep. In the end, my back was supported by the spine of that bent willow. And her weight was supported by me, which must have made me useful for once.

VI.

The next morning, I woke up alone. The first things I saw were the willow branches, spread out against the blue sky like the fingers of God, commanding me to stop.

Over the next couple of days, I tried to find Mari, but I couldn't, no matter how hard I looked. Her house was suddenly empty, and over the next two weeks, nobody could remember having seen her. Eventually, I learned that she had skipped town. The police believed me when I said I didn't know where she'd gone, and that I had nothing to do with her disappearance.

Though cannier minds had a hypothesis. Through the grapevine, I had learned that her brother had been shipped off to some government hospital, specially constructed for those in his sort of condition. Which made sense. It's not like there was work for nurses anywhere near our hometown. So I concluded she must have gone wherever Albert was. I suppose there was no reason for her to stay.

Now I've been back where I belong for a few months, back at work in the city, and I've almost managed to forget the stress of the year. And to tell you the truth, I hadn't thought all that much about my little sojourn back to the past. The rush of life was intoxicating, and there were bridges to be built, after all. And I met someone new. It's been going well.

I was necessary, so I lost myself in my activity. But lately, I've been having these awful dreams that I cannot escape. And now, as I work, my body hurts. It's like I'm full of shrapnel, and I cannot shake my sense of loss.

In my dreams, I see a man in a helmet, laying down on shattered cobblestones. Everything is in the roar of mortars, like a flyswatter, and his green uniform is torn, and turns black in places with the blood leaking out of him, as he is full of holes. In the silence all I can hear are those names, and the horrible, long doom whistles of the bombs. And the wheezing.

I look to his lips, and he's muttering. He's muttering that same list of names. Every single one. With every name, a firefly crawls into a hole in him, like a burning maggot, given birth to in reverse.

The Laundry Girl

Maggie was crocheting by candlelight when the knocks came. Five or six of them, frantic and close-fisted, startling her so badly that she nearly slipped off the sofa cushion. A soft, childlike voice followed, but the solid oak door and double-pane windows muffled the words beyond recognition. Jake remained dozing in his rocker beside the fireplace. Maggie braced her swollen stomach with both hands as she righted herself on the sofa.

"Jake," she whispered. Then a little louder. "*Jake.*"

His left eye cracked open. "Hmm?"

"Someone's at the door."

He rose to his feet, rubbing his eyes. "Who?"

"I don't know."

Two more knocks, followed by another string of words. Only one was clear enough to hear: "Please."

Jake crept to the door. Maggie watched from the sofa, clutching her crochet needle. He peered through the peephole for a few seconds and tiptoed back to her.

"Too dark to see," he whispered. "I'll go out and take a look."

"It could be anyone."

"That's what the Mossberg's for."

"Maybe you should wait until morning."

"We can't have someone lurking around, scaring the horses or worse. It'll be fine. Just lock the door behind me."

Jake retrieved his Mossberg .22 from the hall closet, checking the battery of its flashlight mount with a quick on and off, then fetched a mask beneath the kitchen sink. He exited through the back door and proceeded down the driveway, stepping lightly to avoid cracking the gravel as he approached the front of the house. No sounds from the porch. Jake gave a silent three count and lunged to the side, leveling the rifle as he clicked on the flashlight.

"Hold it," he said. "Don't move."

The LED beam caught a lone figure huddled against the door, clad in a raggedy sweatsuit with a hood over their head. They complied.

"Anyone else with you?" Jake asked.

The figure shook their head.

"Hands up, turn around."

They turned slowly, the hood slipping down to reveal the face of a young woman. Petite and thin-necked, with wide eyes and sharp cheeks framed by wisps of black hair. No mask, no coat, and Jake saw her feet were bare. She shivered in the night air, both hands raised.

"Sick?" he asked.

"What?"

"Are you sick?"

"No. Just cold."

"Show me your stomach."

The girl lifted her sweatshirt. Even from a few yards away, Jake could see the outline of her ribs poking through the skin, but no signs of the rash. He lowered the Mossberg and wiped sweat from his forehead with his jacket sleeve.

"Where did you come from?" he asked.

She pointed southeast. "Down the road."

"Greer place?"

"That's right."

The Greer brothers lived about three clicks away, as crows flew. Not nearly far enough. Jake cringed just thinking about them.

"What do you want?"

"Place to sleep."

"That's against the law."

"I got nowhere else to go. It's so cold. I'll be gone in the morning, I swear."

Now was his turn to shiver a little. She might make it another mile or two on those bare feet, and then what—die of hypothermia in the middle of the road? He took a deep, frosty breath and slung the rifle over his shoulder.

"Wait here," he told her. "I'll be back in a minute."

Jake double-timed to the back door and knocked. Maggie unlatched the deadbolt and opened the door, her brows creased with worry. He walked inside and set the rifle on the counter, detaching the flashlight from its mount.

"A girl from the Greer place," he told her. "Looking for somewhere to bed down."

"Is she—?"

"No. No symptoms, anyway. I'll make up a bed in the stable."

"You think we should let her stay?"

Jake lifted an eyebrow at his wife. Normally she was the sympathetic one.

"You know those Greer boys, Mag. Lord knows what she's been through already, and it—"

"No, no." She exhaled deeply. "You're right."

He gathered two heavy flannel blankets and a pillowcase from the hallway closet, then returned to the kitchen sink cupboard to fetch a spare mask for the girl. As he headed to the back door with supplies in hand, he noticed Maggie following him, tying the straps of her own mask in place.

"You should stay inside," he said.

"I want a look at her. Don't worry, I'll keep my distance."

"The day I stop worrying is the day you should start."

"You've used that one before."

"Just...hold the flashlight, will you?"

She followed him out and they walked to the front porch together. The girl sat with her back against the door, hugging her knees. Maggie cast the light on the porch boards, away from her eyes.

"You can stay in the stable," Jake said. "For tonight."

The girl hopped to her feet and bounded toward Jake and Maggie.

"Not so close," he snapped.

She stopped suddenly. "Sorry."

"My wife's seven months pregnant. I can't risk her getting sick."

"I told you, I ain't sick."

"Even so, put these on." Jake set the girl's mask on the porch. "Follow a few feet back."

The girl did as she was told. They crossed to the stable, which stood opposite the house on the other side of the driveway. A few of the horses grunted and stamped their feet as Jake slid open the door and entered, followed by Maggie with the flashlight. The second stall on the left between Wilbur and Steamboat was empty. Jake peeked inside to make sure the floor was clean, then laid down the blankets. The girl remained in the doorway. Wilbur let out an aggressive neigh and she jumped a little.

"Don't worry," Jake told her, "they'll settle once the light's out." He pointed to the other end of the stable. "There's a few bales of hay back there. Fill the pillowcase with as much as you need."

"Thank you."

"Got a name?"

"Emma."

"Nice to meet you, Emma. I'm Jake, and this is Maggie. You hungry?"

"Starving."

"I'll fix you something. Get settled in the meantime."

Leaving the flashlight with Emma, Jake and Maggie left the stable and walked back to the house.

"You think the Greers'll give us a hard time over this?" Maggie asked.

"Maybe. Better if they don't know."

"I feel bad we're making her sleep in the stable."

"We can't let her in the house. You know what would happen to the baby if you got sick."

"I know."

Maggie was tired and sore in the knees, so she retreated to the bedroom once they were inside. Jake went to the kitchen to fry some eggs and bacon for Emma. He watched the grease melt in the skillet, shaking with anger at the thought of sharing a county—much less a catchment area—with Matthew and Samuel Greer. The brothers had run off many of Jake and Maggie's neighbors in the eighteen months since they'd installed those water tanks on their property. Others left on their own accord. The few who stayed behind were forced to reckon with their contempt for those boys and keep the peace with them, or at least keep quiet about all the unpleasant things that went on inside their house. With the local reservoir shuttered like so many others, these tanks were the only reliable water sources within twenty square miles. Nobody understood the situation better than Jake. If the Greers cut off their farm's access, every last horse, pig, and chicken they owned would be dead from dehydration inside a week.

Jake served the bacon and eggs on a paper plate and poured a glass of water from the kitchen faucet. Walking into the darkened stable, he could hear Emma snoring softly from her stall. He left the plate and glass on the floor, then crept out of the stable and slowly closed the door.

As he returned to the house, a vehicle on the road caught his eye. He crouched low to the ground and froze, squinting at the silhouette of a midsize pickup slowly moving east. The truck stopped at the end of their driveway and sat idling for several seconds. No one emerged from the cab, and from a couple hundred yards off, Jake couldn't tell who was inside—but he had an idea. He remained still until the brake lights went dark and the truck continued down the road. Then he exhaled. Morning couldn't come quickly enough.



Jake rose with the roosters at four to fill the pig troughs and check each animal's underside for rash symptoms. Back when he and Maggie had hired hands, he'd usually sleep in until quarter to five, but they'd been on their own for the better part of two years. Longer days weren't a problem for him—strange as it seemed, they passed more quickly than the shorter ones. But he always dreaded that first walk alone through the pens each morning, not knowing whether any of his hogs had come into contact with a raccoon, a rat, or another warm-blooded carrier during the night. The rash could spread quickly enough to ruin them in a matter of hours. He knew of one rancher in South Prairie who awoke to find thirty head of cattle stricken with fever and covered in rose-colored blisters.

Thankfully, all the pigs appeared healthy that morning. Once Jake was done inspecting the pen, he hopped the fence and headed to the chicken coop. The roosters and hens clucked and squawked as he scattered cracked corn on the ground. He collected about a dozen fresh eggs, many of them still warm.

On his way back to the house with the egg basket in hand, he stopped by the stable to feed the horses and fill their water troughs. The plate he'd left for Emma was licked clean to the paper and the empty glass lay nearby, next to the flashlight, but the girl was no longer in the stall. By all appearances, she had kept her word. He retrieved the items from the floor on his way out and headed back to the house, wondering if he'd ever see her again.

Jake entered through the back door, pausing mid-step when he heard voices in the next room. He found Maggie in the kitchen, stirring a pot of porridge on the stove. Emma sat at the dining room table with a plate of food, barely stopping to chew between mouthfuls of fried potato, egg, and sausage. Maggie's mask was tied in place while Emma's hung loose around her neck as she ate. *At least there's that*, Jake thought to himself as he set the basket on the counter and kissed his wife on the cheek.

"You should be off your feet," he said.

"It feels good to be on them for a change." Maggie turned to the table. "How's the coffee?"

"Perfect," Emma replied.

Jake tugged at Maggie's shirtsleeve. "Can we talk?" he said quietly.

"Sure." She set down her wooden spoon and turned off the gas. "Porridge is done, sweetie," she told Emma. "Come dish up when you're ready."

As Emma rose from the table, Jake and Maggie slipped into the living room. He closed the door behind them.

"You let her in the house?"

"I went to check on her. She was shivering, Jake."

"We've got more blankets for that. Christ, now she's sitting at our table."

"You said yourself she didn't have symptoms."

"That was last night. You know it can take a couple days for the rash to show up, and that's if she has symptoms at all."

"Her stomach was clear, and I made her put on the mask before she came inside. I'll wipe everything down when she's done. Will that make you happy?"

"It's a start." He walked to the window and peered through the glass. "Anyone see you bring her in?"

"No. Why?"

"A truck drove by last night. Stopped in front of the house."

"Greers?"

"Yep."

"That makes sense." Maggie sighed. "Emma told me she's a laundry girl."

"Those were her exact words?"

"Mm-hmm. She's sixteen."

"*Sixteen?*"

"She wasn't the only one, either. Said there were a dozen other girls working in that house."

"Christ," he muttered, running a hand over his scalp. "Goddamn savages."

They returned to the dining room. Emma had already polished off half of her porridge. Jake and Maggie took the chairs at the opposite end of the table. The girl looked up and smiled, her lips and chin pasted with white bits.

"Emma," Jake said, "are you still planning to leave today?"

"I'm just finishing up. I'll be done in—"

"No, no, take your time...but if you don't mind me asking, where will you go from here?"

"I got an uncle in Tacoma."

"Does he know you're headed his way?"

She shrugged. "Probably not."

"He might not like you showing up on his property unannounced. Folks these days are pretty cautious, even when it's family."

"I ain't got anyone else."

"You're walking there? That's close to thirty miles." He exchanged a glance with Maggie. "Maybe you could stay another day or two."

"That's kind of you, but I should really keep moving."

"Hear me out. You showed up last night. That means we can test you for the infection tomorrow evening, assuming you don't show any symptoms in the meantime. You test negative and I'll drive you down to Tacoma first thing the next morning—Friday, that'd be. We can go to your uncle's together. I'll bring the kit to show him you're clean."

"That's so kind." Emma wiped her eyes. "I couldn't ask you to do that, though. You've done so much for me already."

Jake shifted in his chair. "Maggie says you were working at the Greer place."

"I was doing laundry there."

"Right. And they let you leave on your own accord?"

Emma went silent and stared into her coffee cup.

"It's alright," he said. "I'm glad you left, but those boys...you shouldn't be on the road alone, is all I'm saying."

"How can I repay you?"

Jake considered the question. "Ever taken care of horses before?"

She shook her head.

"Well," he smiled, "let's change that."



Emma had a gentle sweetness that made her seem even younger than sixteen. As Jake walked down the stable aisle, checking on the horses in their stalls, he could hear her cooing and making kissy noises over his shoulder. She asked each animal's name, how old it was, whether it was a boy or a girl. As long as she kept her mask on, Jake permitted her to feed the horses one carrot apiece. The loud chomp made her giggle every time.

"That's Junebug," he said when they reached the last stall on the right. "She's our oldest mare. Twenty-one this September."

"I didn't know horses lived to be so old."

"Some. Lucky ones, I guess."

They entered Junebug's stall. The mare lay on her side. She lifted her head to greet him and he stroked her muzzle.

"Is she sick?" Emma asked.

"Nah, just tired. She's got an inflammation in two of her knees. Hurts her to stand like the others."

"Can she walk?"

"When she wants to. I let her be most of the time."

"I like her white spots."

"Skewbald."

"Huh?" She crinkled her nose.

Jake laughed. "That's the name for her color."

"*Skyoo*-bald."

"You got it."

A heavy rumbling from the driveway caught his ear. Emma heard it too. Her eyes widened.

"Stay here," Jake said. "Don't come out for anything."

He walked outside, shutting the stable door behind him. The same pickup from the night before was heading toward the house. The windows were heavily tinted, and Jake couldn't see inside the cab. His chest tightened as the truck drew closer and stopped about ten feet in front of him, idling for a few seconds before the engine went silent. The driver's door opened, and Matthew Greer hopped out. His lips were set in a tight scowl—as usual, he wasn't wearing a mask.

"Good morning, Matthew. What can I do for you?"

"Jake." He spit tobacco juice onto the gravel. "Lookin' for a girl."

"A...girl?"

"Dark hair, skinny thing. She been by?"

Jake opened his mouth to lie but stopped himself. Given the circumstances, a half-truth would suffice—he could protect Emma without buying too much trouble from the Greers.

"Oh, her...sure. She needed a place to stay last night. Left first thing this morning. Why?"

"Which way did she go?"

"West, toward the highway. Said something about an aunt in...Puyallup, I think it was. Strange young woman. Good riddance."

"You let her stay in your house?"

"She slept in the stable."

"Mind if I take a look?"

"I do." Jake made fists inside his jacket pocket. "The horses spook easily. Like I said, she's been gone for hours now."

"You tellin' the truth, Jake?"

"I've got no reason to lie."

Matthew spat again. "She stops by again, you come get us. Comprendre?"

"Of course."

"While I'm here, we need another pig."

"Already? It's only been a month."

"Lots of mouths to feed these days."

"That isn't the agreement. Four per year, remember?"

"Hook us up this one time. We'll make it worth your while."

"When do you need it?"

"Tomorrow."

Jake clenched his fists until his fingers hurt. "Fine."

"Much appreciated."

Matthew climbed back into the driver's seat and slammed the door. As the engine roared back to life, he crunched the gas pedal and sped in reverse down the driveway, cranking the wheel into a squealing skid when his tires hit the road. Jake fanned away the dust and watched the pickup cruise east.

He turned to the stable and saw Emma peeking through the door.

"He's gone," he told her. "You can come out."

She didn't budge.



While Jake led the horses out to the pasture, Maggie took Emma into the kitchen and brewed a pot of coffee. Once he'd joined them, they each poured a cup and took their seats at the table. Maggie and Jake at one end and Emma at the other, just as they'd sat during breakfast.

"Emma," he said, "what you were doing at the Greer house?"

"Laundry, like I said."

"I know what you said before. Now I need the truth."

"It's embarrassing." Her eyes drifted to the floor. "Sounds like you know already."

"That's fair. I guess what I mean is, *how* did you end up there?"

"A girl I met at the shelter told me about the job. We went together, along with a few others. We all rode a bus to the Greers' place."

Jake nodded. He'd heard of such jobs, and such buses. All rumors, of course. He had neither the disposable income nor the inclination to obtain the services of one laundry girl, let alone a dozen or however many were staying with the Greers at any given time.

Maggie took over.

"Why did you leave the house?" she asked Emma. "Were you mistreated?"

"It wasn't that. This one girl from our group got sick on the third night, puked in the bathtub. When we checked her in the morning, her stomach was covered in those blisters. Three more girls got sick that day, including my friend."

"But not you."

"No, ma'am. I keep checking myself to make sure."

"And you just...ran away?"

"That's right. The night guard at the house sneaks into the backyard to smoke. After lights out, I waited until the coast was clear and ran for the cornfield behind the water tanks. I didn't even know which direction I was headed. You don't know how happy I was to find a road. I'd

probably still be on my goddamn feet if you—" Emma covered her mouth. "Sorry, that just slipped."

Maggie grinned. "It's alright, hon. I say that word sometimes too."

"Emma," Jake said, "do you mind going to the stable? Keep an eye on Junebug and the other horses for a bit."

"Should I bring more carrots?"

"Nah, they've had enough for the day. Check their water and watch out for more trucks on the road."

The girl nodded politely and walked out the back door. Jake waited for the latch to click.

"It's true, then," he said. "Those bastards are infecting their girls on purpose."

"Everyone knew that already. If they get sick, then they can't get pregnant."

"Yeah, but just rumors until now. How much you think they paid for her?"

Maggie shrugged. "I've heard some of those girls sign contracts for less than a hundred dollars a month."

"You think they'd go chasing her over *that*?"

"Money's no concern to the Greers. They're chasing her because she ran away from them."

Jake took a deep slug of coffee. "Hate to think you're right."



Much as he'd enjoyed Emma's company earlier in the stable, Jake figured she might not want to join him in the pen that afternoon. Maggie agreed to keep the girl occupied with house chores—curtains drawn in case they received another visit—while he tended to the slaughter. He was loath to giving into the Greers' demands, but they had the stock to spare an extra pig. No sense in starting a rift over a sacrifice he and Maggie could afford to make.

He walked the length of the pen with the Mossberg over his shoulder and the sticking knife tucked in his back pocket, sizing up each animal before settling on one of the smallest feeders. The runt of its litter, as he recalled, no more than sixty pounds. He hopped the fence. Most of the pigs scattered when his boots hit the mud, but the feeder remained where it was, like it had already made peace with the situation. Jake had little trouble scooting the animal into the covered slaughtering pen where the others couldn't see. Pigs were funny creatures, smarter than most people realized, and after thirty-six years on the earth—more than half of them spent hopping in and out of sties—he knew better than to treat them as inferiors.

Cinching the rope around the bleeding rail, Jake pulled the line at each end to make sure it was secure and then tied a knot around the feeder's hind legs. Kneeling down, he produced a small apple from his back pocket, which the pig snatched from his hand. Jake scratched between its ears while it snorted and chewed. Once the apple had been nibbled down to the core, Jake rose to his feet and leveled the Mossberg with the animal's forehead. One shot brought it down.

Moving quickly, he tugged the rope until the feeder was vertical and its snout dangled over the ground. The blade of his knife was sharp enough to sever both carotids in one stroke.

The afternoon passed slowly. Jake sat in the shade for an hour or so while the pig bled out, then lit a fire beneath the scalding tub and dropped the carcass inside to soak for a few minutes. Dehairing, skinning, deboning, and butchering didn't take too long on account of the animal's size. He was washing his hands in the basin when the sun began to set.

Pausing to enjoy the cool evening color before going in for supper, he remembered something for the first time that afternoon. He was about to become a father. Matter of weeks now. He wondered about Emma's parents. Who they were, where they'd gone, when she'd last seen them, if indeed she'd ever. A lot of these laundry girls came from orphanages and foster centers. No one to miss them, no one to seek them out.

This uncle better be worth a damn, he thought to himself as he headed inside.



Lying in bed with the candles out, Jake stared at the ceiling planks. No matter how early he rose in the morning, sleep always eluded him on worrisome nights. Maggie rolled over to face him and placed her hand on his chest.

"What's on your mind?" she asked sleepily.

"I was trying to remember...what was the name of Maria's little girl? The one who used to feed the chickens."

Maggie thought for a moment. "Sophia."

"That's right. Wonder whatever happened to her."

"She left with her father when Maria and the others died."

"After that, I mean."

"I don't know where any of them ended up. That was almost two years ago. What makes you think of her now?"

"Couldn't tell you. Last thoughts before bed, you know."

Maggie squeezed his hand beneath the covers.

"I'm worried about Emma too," she said. "I hope she's warmer tonight."

"I gave her an extra blanket."

"Even so."

"What if this uncle isn't where she says he is?" he asked. "Where do I take her then?"

"One of the shelters, I suppose."

"That's how she ended up with the Greers in the first place."

"We're doing everything we can for her."

"That's what's bugging me. Still doesn't seem like much. I just hope it's enough."

She cozied up to him, nestling her nose in the groove of his neck. He could feel her warm breath as her round stomach pressed against him.

"I'm worried about you taking Emma in the truck," Maggie whispered.

"She'll ride in the bed. I'll put some blankets over her."

"What if the Greers stop you?"

"They'll have to catch me first."

"That isn't funny. They could be armed."

"You think I haven't thought about that?" Jake exhaled deeply. "We're shaking hands with the devil every time we drink that water."

"We could move."

"Move where?"

"Another catchment area. One with decent people in charge of the water supply. They can't all be this bad."

"It's a thought." Jake sighed. "Tell you what. After I drop Emma at her uncle's place, I'll visit a couple of those property offices in the city. See if anyone's selling land down there. Might not be as expensive as we think."

"I like that idea." She closed her eyes. "I don't want to raise a child within a hundred miles of the Greer house."

"Hell, that isn't even enough."

Soon Maggie fell asleep and went still. Jake closed his eyes as well, but it was no use. He'd never been much good at tricking himself.



Jake woke the next morning at his usual time and went straight to the stable. Emma was still asleep, wrapped in a cocoon of blankets. She'd left on her mask during the night and the cloth muffled her snoring. Jake watched her for a moment, then lightly knocked on the stall door. Her eyes opened slowly.

"Maggie's got chores for you in the house," he told her as she yawned and stretched. "Ought to keep you busy for the morning at least."

"Can I feed the horses first?"

"No, better get inside pronto. I'll take care of them. How's your stomach?"

She lifted her shirt. No rash.

"Good," he said. "We'll give you that test tonight."

"Then we can go tomorrow morning?"

"That's the plan."

Emma nodded obediently and took her leave. Since he was already in the stable, Jake decided to feed and turn out the horses before tending to the pigs and chickens. Each one greeted him with the usual grunts and snorts as he filled their food buckets with hay and poured water into their troughs. None showed any rash, but Junebug looked more lethargic than usual. She slowly lifted her head when Jake entered her stall, breathing heavily and gazing up at him with weary eyes.

"You're alright, pretty girl," he told her, rubbing her muzzle with shaky fingers.

He blamed his father for the softness he felt in the presence of weakened horses. The old man used to weep through the night every time they had to put down one of their own. Jake's hands trembled and he felt that familiar pinch along his temples, so he rose to his feet and took a deep breath. No time for that nonsense today. He made sure Junebug had plenty of roughage and water, then left her stall and led the other horses out of the stable.

He spent most of the morning in the slaughtering pen. While the fat rendered over the fire, he wrapped the hog's other parts in butcher paper and tied them off with twine. The entire animal fit inside two burlap sacks, and once the fat had cooled, he strained it through cheesecloth into a large plastic tub. Before heading inside for lunch, Jake stopped by the garage at the end of the driveway where his Chevy Crew Cab was parked. The truck's exterior had gathered dust since the last time he'd driven it—two, maybe three months earlier—and the rear tires sagged a bit lower than the other two. Thankfully, the key turned over without too much resistance and the engine still had plenty of hum. He pumped air into the tires and cleaned out the bed, rearranging the crates and storage bins to create an Emma-sized space for her to ride comfortably. One blanket on the floor and another on top of her would conceal her from passing vehicles, probably keep her warm too. He'd keep a low speed to prevent them from blowing away.

After lunch was finished, the three of them retreated to the living room. Emma lay on the floor leafing through an old magazine while Maggie crocheted on the sofa and Jake sat in his rocker by the fireplace, pretending to whittle when he was really just nicking at a stick. Maggie was the first to hear the pickup. She set down her needle and walked to the window, peeking through the curtain.

"Greers?" Jake asked.

"Mm-hmm."

He rose from his chair. "Don't answer the door for anyone but me," he said sternly. "Stay away from the windows."

Jake walked out to the porch as the truck rumbled up the driveway and stopped next to the house. Matthew Greer climbed down from the driver's seat. Then the passenger door opened and his older brother, Samuel, stepped onto the gravel. Samuel managed the Greer property. He was smarter than his brother, had a cleaner cut to him, but Jake knew better than to trust him more for it. And like Matthew, Samuel never wore a face mask.

"Morning, Jake," Samuel said. "Always a pleasure."

"Likewise."

"We really appreciate the extra hog. How can we make it up to you?"

"Help me haul everything from the slaughter pen and we'll call it square."

Samuel grinned. "Can't argue with that."

Jake kept a few feet of distance between himself and the Greers on their walk to and from the slaughterhouse. He carried the heavier lard tub while each brother took one of the burlap sacks. As they were walking back to the truck, Matthew muttered something about how light his sack felt. "Hush up," Samuel hissed.

After they'd loaded everything into the truck bed, Samuel reached into his jacket pocket and removed his wallet.

"What's the going rate for a pig these days?" he asked Jake.

"Really, it's—"

"I insist. We don't want to put you out."

"Six bucks a pound."

Matthew removed four hundred-dollar bills and held them out to Jake.

"You're overpaying."

"Call it a convenience fee."

Jake stared at the bills for a moment before taking them.

"While we're here," Samuel said, "I understand one of our girls was bothering you the other night."

"Not a bother. She slept in the stable and left—"

"Left first thing in the morning. Matt told me. She didn't leave an address for where she was headed?"

"Nope."

"Thing is, she's a contracted employee. We paid her a month's wages up front and she ran off after only a few days of work. We're just trying to settle up her debts."

"How much does she owe you?"

"About two hundred."

Jake held out two of the bills. "This ought to cover it."

"I can't ask you to do that. She should pay us back herself."

"Judging by the look of her, I doubt she's in the shape to do that."

"Still, we'd like to get in touch with her all the same."

"I don't see why. You have plenty of girls already."

Samuel smirked. "Come again?"

"Forget it."

"You take issue with how we run our house?"

Jake could feel his blood running faster and hotter. "I take issue with barefoot children showing up on my doorstep, needing a place to sleep."

"Those girls are our employees, Jake. We compensate them for their time, and we compensate them well."

"To do laundry."

"And other household chores. Just because they're called 'laundry girls' doesn't mean that's the only—"

"Right."

"They're classified as essential domestic employees. Perfectly legal, if that's what you're driving at. I can show you the permits." Samuel sneered. "Really, you shouldn't be lecturing anyone about the law after you let that strange girl stay on your property without authorization from the quarantine office."

"She slept in the stable."

"Even so. The law's the law."

"Come on, Samuel." Jake's fingers wouldn't stop trembling, no matter how tightly he squeezed his fists. "We all know what's going on."

"Going on with what?"

"Those girls. How you bus them in, get them sick, do as you like with them afterward because they won't be able to—"

"I have no idea what you're referring to."

Jake scoffed. "You know damn well what that disease does to a woman's body, rotting her from the inside. That's if it doesn't kill her first."

"I can assure you, no one on our property is sick. That would be utterly negligent of us, given our responsibility to this catchment area. Never mind stupid. Our investors would cut ties with us in a heartbeat if there was so much as a whiff...but it sounds like you've heard differently."

"Rumors. But you know how it is when you hear the same rumor enough times."

"Are you unhappy with our agreement?"

"Look, I—"

"If you're concerned about the quality of our water, we're more than happy to cut you loose. But I dunno, Jake. Seems like the arrangement we have now works for everybody. You kick us a pig every so often, we keep your water bill low. Not sure where you'll find a better deal than that."

"Truth is, we're thinking about moving."

Samuel arched an eyebrow. "Where?"

"South of here. Tacoma, maybe."

"Tacoma?" He chuckled. "Do you know how much land costs down there? No offense, but even if you sold your property and your stock, there's no—"

"Don't waste your worries on us."

Samuel cast a glance back at Matthew, who had been standing silently beside the truck throughout the exchange.

"How far along is Maggie now?" Samuel asked.

Jake locked eyes with him. "Seven and a half months."

"Not long, then."

"Nope."

"You don't want to uproot her now, do you?"

"Like I said, only thinking for now."

"Tell you what, you've been such a good sport all this time. How would you like water for free?"

Jake sighed. "Free, huh?"

"Hell, I'll even throw in a steer as long as you keep those pigs coming."

"It's a tempting offer."

"Think on it. Now, you said Emma went to see an aunt in...Puyallup, right?"

"That's what she told me."

"So she'd be heading toward the highway."

"I have no idea where she—"

"Funny thing about that. Matt's been driving this road up and down since she left, keeping an eye out. Even knocked on a few doors apart from yours. No one's seen her. Like she just vanished."

Jake shrugged. "Don't know what to tell you."

"No worries. We'll keep watching the road like we have been. She'll turn up." Samuel nodded at his brother. "I'll get out of your hair. Give Maggie our best and, uh...let me know what you decide about the new agreement."

He walked toward the truck's passenger door, but only made it a few steps.

"You can have your answer now," Jake said, "if you like."

Samuel stopped and turned around. "Sure, let's have it."



The truck reached the end of the driveway and hooked east. Jake watched the rig until it was out of sight, then headed back into the house. The living room was empty.

"You can come out," he called, "they're gone now."

Maggie slowly emerged from the kitchen, followed by Emma.

"Did you hear any of that?" he asked them.

Both shook their heads. "What did they want?" Maggie asked.

"Just blustering. Emma, did those men give you any money?"

Emma shook her head. "They said they'd pay us after we worked a month."

"I figured as much. We're leaving first thing tomorrow. Five sharp. Think you can be ready by then?"

She nodded. "Probably won't sleep tonight, but I'll be ready."

"Good," he said. "What do you say we take care of that test?"

Jake fetched one of their spare testing kits from the bathroom cupboard, blowing dust off the box as he brought it into the living room. While Emma swabbed her nose, Jake prepared the testing solution in a small drinking glass. The swab bobbed around in the water for a few moments before a purplish streak appeared. Soon the entire solution held a lavender color.

"I'm not sick?" she asked.

"No ma'am," Maggie replied. "How would you like to take a nice, warm bath?"

A long smile drew across the girl's face. "That sounds wonderful."

"Fresh towels are under the bathroom sink."

The girl scurried up the steps so quickly that Jake feared she might trip. The bathroom door slammed shut. Soon he could hear her singing lightly through the floorboards.

Maggie embraced her husband. They stood in the living room holding each other for a long moment. He could feel the baby wriggling inside of her.

"I'll give her clothes a quick wash," Maggie said. "I guess this means she can sleep in the spare bedroom tonight."

"Don't see why not."

"I'll make a big supper tonight. Fill you both up."

"Sounds good."

"Hey," she said, backing away. "What's the matter?"

"Huh?"

"You sound funny."

"Oh, it's nothing. I'll just be glad when this is all behind us."

Maggie wasn't joking around about the big supper. Baked ham with apple dressing, mashed potatoes, carrots, butter rolls. The meal was so filling that all three of them remained at the table for some time after finishing, holding their bellies. Jake and Maggie told Emma stories about the farm. How they'd bought the land not long after they'd married and left the farm Jake's father owned. How they'd lived peacefully there until the rash killed six of their hands and infected three more. How they'd slowly grown accustomed to life in the two years since the outbreak began.

Emma talked about herself, as well. She'd lost both parents during her freshman year of high school, and her grandmother a short time later, but she'd never gotten sick herself. For the last year or so, she'd been floating between foster centers and odd jobs. She'd never planned to work as a laundry girl, but with how much the Greers offered at the time, she couldn't turn them down.

"Learned my lesson," she said bitterly.

"What's your uncle's name?" Maggie asked her.

"Bruce. I met him once when I was little."

"He's a good man?"

"I think so. That's how I remember him."

"Emma," Jake said, "I've got something for you."

He reached into his pocket and removed the four bills Samuel Greer had given him. Emma's voice caught in her throat when she saw the money.

"No, I...I should be paying *you*."

"It's not up for debate. You're taking this money."

She eyed the money cautiously. When she didn't take the bills, Jake reached across the table and placed them in her hand.

"Don't show that to anyone. Got it?"

"I'll pay you back someday," she said quietly, stuffing the money into the pocket of her shirt. "I promise."

"Take care of yourself. That's all we ask in return."

Lying in bed that night, Jake could hear Emma snoring from the next room. Maggie lay still, her head leaning against his shoulder. Even the frogs and crickets outside the window seemed

quieter than usual. Yet there was Jake, eyes wide and steady. Some nights, he wondered if he'd ever sleep peacefully again.



Jake knocked on Emma's door around quarter to five—he'd slept in for a change. She answered a moment later, her eyes still closed.

"You all ready?" he asked.

"Mm-hmm."

"Before we go, I was thinking we could feed the horses. You can say goodbye."

She grinned. "I'd love that."

The morning breeze brought a sharp chill that nipped at Jake's nose and ears as they walked to the stable. He fumbled with the padlock on the door. Emma stood shivering nearby, arms folded tightly against her body. Once inside, she immediately went to Wilbur's stall.

"Good morning, Wilbur," she cooed. "Hungry, buddy?"

She held out a carrot and squealed with delight as he began chewing. Jake remained by the door as she skipped to Steamboat's stall. *Sixteen*, he thought. She'd be alright. Whole life ahead of her. Hell, there were plenty of people who thought Jake was still just a kid, and he had twenty years on her. By the time she was his age, she wouldn't even remember what sixteen was like.

Emma reached Junebug's stall, last on the right. Jake took a long look at her, then called out from the door.

"You finish up," he told her. "I have to run inside for a minute."

He slid the stable door shut and clicked the padlock into place, leaving its key in the slot.

Maggie was still asleep when he entered the bedroom. Kicking off his boots, he crawled into bed and held her from behind, clasping his hands around her stomach. She sighed contentedly and brought her hands to his.

"He's fidgety this morning," she said, guiding Jake's fingers. "I think he's ready to come out."

"He, huh?"

"That's my guess. Where's Emma?"

"In the stable."

"Shouldn't you be leaving soon?"

"In a minute." He pushed his hips into her backside. "The Greers offered us free water."

"Oh?"

"And a steer. Samuel told me yesterday. Didn't want to mention it in front of the girl."

"They can go to hell."

"One less expense would be nice when the baby comes. Plus, that's a lot of extra meat. A steer would last us until late summer, minimum."

"I don't care. I just want to be away from here. Are you still stopping by those property offices today?"

Jake sighed. "No."

"But...why not?"

"We can't afford that land. You and I both know it. We could sell everything we own. Won't be enough."

Maggie let go of Jake's hands. "Still, it can't hurt to look while you're down there."

"I'm not going, Mag."

She attempted to roll over. Jake squeezed her arms and pinned her to the bed.

"Jake—you're hurting me."

"Just sit tight."

"Where's Emma?"

"I told you, she's in the stable. They'll be here to get her soon."

"What?" Maggie craned her neck to look him in the eye. "Who?"

"They're gonna find her anyway. They'd be waiting for us on the road right now if I hadn't told them she was here. We don't have a choice."

From the bedroom, Jake could hear Emma pounding on the door inside the stable. Maggie heard it as well.

"Let me *go*," she hissed.

"She ran away once, she can do it again. And this time she'll have that money I gave her. She'll be alright."

"Please tell me you didn't."

"This is for you and the baby. Try to understand that."

Jake heard a low rumble in the distance. Five on the dot, just like he'd discussed with Samuel and Matthew. Maggie tried to free herself, but he held fast, even when her elbow caught his stomach. The rumble grew louder as the truck barreled up the driveway. Maggie thrashed harder. She might have had a fighting chance with her previous figure, but the weight of her stomach pushed her toward the mattress.

"Emma!" she wailed through tears. "Don't take her!"

The pickup stopped next to the house, but the engine remained idling. All four doors opened. Several pairs of boots cracked the gravel as the passengers hopped out. The lock on the stable door clicked open, and the horses whinnied and stamped their feet. Even Junebug brayed

from her stall. Emma screamed and shouted obscenities at the men who had come to retrieve her. Jake could hear her bare feet dragging across the floor. She was still hollering as they brought her outside and forced her into the truck. Then the doors slammed, and she went silent. The only sound came from the rumbling engine as the pickup sped down the driveway. Jake released his wife. She remained where she was, sobbing into her pillow.

“I’ll go check the horses,” he said softly.

Maggie didn’t reply.

He rose from the bed, left the room, and walked downstairs. Before heading outside, Jake stopped in the kitchen for a drink of water. He held an empty glass beneath the faucet and pulled down the handle, but no water came. Not a drop, or even a gurgle from within the pipes. Feeling his chest tighten, he toggled the handle several times, and when that didn’t work, he flung open the cupboard doors at his feet to check for leaks.

As Jake was about to run upstairs to inspect the bathroom faucet, a small rivulet of water dribbled out. Pressure kicked in and soon a thick stream poured. He reached for the empty glass where he’d left it but stopped himself—his hands were shaking too much.



The Arrival of Pulsars by V.B. Borjen.

Counting

Twelve years ago, I saw a nature show on TV that told me the average American yard contains approximately 20,000 spiders and another 700,000-800,000 insects. Spiders are not insects, you see; they are arachnids. But that's not really the point. What is, is that Americans have metric shit-tons of bugs in their yards. Literally. I mean, let's say that the average "bug" weighs 0.002 ounces (a conservative guess, since things like cicadas can be quite heavy while others, like mosquitoes, are very light), and that if there are approximately 750,000 of them per yard, and there are 300 yards in just one neighborhood, that means a typical subdivision has at least 28,125 pounds of bugs, because:

$$\frac{0.000125 \text{ pounds}^*}{1 \text{ bug}} \times \frac{750,000 \text{ bugs}}{1 \text{ yard}} \times \frac{300 \text{ homes}}{1 \text{ neighborhood}} = 28,125 \text{ lbs./neighborhood}$$

Coming to this realization, I then researched how many subdivisions were in the United States. Specifically, the average number of homes in each neighborhood, but I couldn't find that number and I hurt my head trying. So I figured it would be easier to find the approximate number of single-family homes (not apartments or condominiums), and I was right. 114,761,359 according to the U.S. Census Bureau—which I rounded up to 115 million, because the government is usually wrong. Meaning that at any given time, the United States has almost 11 billion pounds of bugs in its yards, which was really quite easy to determine based on the following formula:

$$\frac{28,125 \text{ pounds}}{1 \text{ neighborhood}} \times \frac{1 \text{ neighborhood}}{300 \text{ homes}} \times \frac{115,000,000 \text{ homes}}{1 \text{ USA}} = 10,781,250,000 \text{ lbs. bugs/USA}$$

Okay. Why do I care about such arcane cocktail trivia? What is the point of extrapolating the seemingly irrelevant tonnage of things that creep and crawl and propel themselves on waves of undulating legs, as millipedes do, when there is so much else in the world that actually matters—racism, corruption, the climate, economic injustice, you name it? I dunno. All I know is that I can't do anything about it.

See, I have Asperger syndrome, which really isn't a disorder at all. It's a gift. Because one of its primary traits is the ability to focus, tenaciously so, on a particular subject—which means people like me tend to get hung up about the things that interest us more than almost anyone else in the general population. Some of us may be consumed with sports trivia. Others, film noir. A particular shade of blue. 18th-century British naval vessels. Satellite technology. Anything.

Take Abraham Lincoln as an example. Though Asperger's wasn't first described until the 1940s, it's widely believed that Mr. Lincoln had the condition, for two reasons. First, before his

*I had to convert ounces to pounds, dividing 0.002 ounces by 1 bug then ÷ 16 ounces/lb.

election to the presidency in 1860, Lincoln lost eight other elections, and running repeatedly for office the way Lincoln did is indicative of a seemingly illogical perseverance. A ritualistic need for routine even when it doesn't appear to be working—a classic symptom of the condition.

Second, he was tenacious about ending slavery. Which of course begs the question: was he born a good man, or did Asperger's help him to become good? Did his condition work like an eternal flame to keep his passions burning, or would he have retained the tenacity of those passions without Asperger's? Personally, I think his condition magnified what was already inside of him. It helped. Just as I hope my passion for counting, for numbers, will help me before I take my last breath 11 days from now.

Since 1820, a total of 505 individuals have been executed in Arkansas. Even as I write this (June 21, 2020), a total of 29 men, myself included, are under a sentence of death in the state. Most of them will proclaim their innocence to the end. To hopefully convince someone to reopen their cases and find evidence of prosecutorial misconduct, a witness who was coerced to lie, a defense attorney who provided lousy representation, you name it. Unlikely, because the 28 other felons here on Death Row with me are, in fact, murderers. And though I've hunted my fair share of animals over the years, I have never, and would never, kill another human being. Not with willful intent, anyway. Which is why I'm writing this. So you'll understand a bit more before a man I've never met sticks an IV in my arm and takes away everything I was and everything I could ever be. My appeals have run out. My words and my numbers are all I have left.

I will of course be dead by the time you or anyone else reads this, so I'm fully aware that this letter will likely be viewed as inconsequential. Then again, it's my last chance to set the record straight, so I'm taking it. A last-ditch effort to help ensure that my death won't go without notice. Even though it probably will. It's just the way things are. The way the world works.

I suspect my outcome would have been better if I had been someone—if I were wealthy, connected, or had started my own successful business. But I was 20 when I was arrested and charged with my father's murder. What could I have accomplished of significance before then? I may have been smart, but I was never Bill Gates or Steve Jobs smart. I didn't even know what I wanted to become when I was 20, partly because I never knew where I fit in. And because I wasn't a senator or a hedge fund manager who crushed it on Wall Street, my life didn't matter. It wasn't worth much. A fact that became all too clear at 2:46 pm, February 9, 2005. The time and day I was sentenced to die.

Since that moment, I've spent 5,612 days in maximum security, 149 of which have been in a solitary cell on Condemned Row—about 549,527,000 heartbeats in all, as my heart ticks at a very reliable 68 beats per minute. Which, ironically, was my father's age when he died. Something I'll get to in a minute.

The cell I'm in is nine feet wide and eight feet deep. 72 square feet of painted gray concrete, stainless steel, iron bars, and one fluorescent tube that's locked under a heavy metal mesh basket to prevent me from doing God-knows-what to it. Needless to say, there isn't much to do here. Even numbers are hard to come by, because I lost most privileges, including Internet access, some time ago—and the Internet had always been my primary source of learning. My local school system, if you can call it that, was too easy and too terrifying for me to stay beyond the 11th grade. The teaching was rudimentary, no one was equipped to help someone like me, and no one seemed to care. That, combined with the unending ridicule from my alleged peers,

meant that I had to help myself—with books and the always available Internet. They were my real friends and teachers, because neither had to modify its behavior in a transparent effort to “reach” me. My questions could be answered anytime, which gave me great comfort.

Now, though, the only comfort I find is in counting the areas of chipped paint in my cell (121), the hairline cracks on the floor (14), the number of sheets I have left to write with (13), and the individual hairs on my left forearm (18,476), because doing so temporarily silences my doomsday clock. My only reprieve is the fifteen minutes I’m given twice a week to shower in a metal cage under heavily armed supervision. Going online, running to the grocery store, sleeping under a tree with the sun on my face are things I will never be able to experience again.

Tomorrow, I will enter what is called Phase II of Death Watch. Two guards will remove all of the property from my concrete hovel, including this notepad and pencil, while others will sit in front of my cell, recording everything I do 24/7 until I’m strapped to a table, prayed over, and put to death. During this vigil, I’ll also be measured for my execution/burial suit and will be given details on how my body will be disposed of after the legally required autopsy—as if there would be any questions regarding the cause of my death. I know this because I saw and heard it happen to Rich, the guy directly across from me when I first got here. Guards even performed dry runs of the execution with him, forcing Rich to realize that he’d made the final turn toward the inevitable—to make him smell the sulfur stench of death creeping in after every little thing he could read or write or watch or amuse himself with had been taken away, leaving him with nothing but bare walls and boiling thoughts. The point where we all start counting our lives by minutes instead of days. Something I’m already tragically proficient at doing.

Still, I have to admire the irony. Because the thing that has always driven me is now the thing that’s killing me. I don’t even have it as good as the common brown house moth that’s remained immobile on the high wall above my stainless-steel toilet for the last 33 hours. Because if it’s spent 1.375 days in the same spot ($33 \text{ hrs} \div 24 \text{ hrs/day} = 1.375 \text{ days}$), and has a life expectancy of six months (which it does), then it has so far spent .76% of its life not budging. Far better than me, who will spend 5,612 days in prison with a now-known life expectancy of 33 years, 244 days, or 44.34% of my life behind bars, because:

$$33 \text{ years} \times \frac{365 \text{ days}}{1 \text{ year}} = 12,410 + 244 \text{ days} = 12,654 \text{ days}$$

And,

$$\frac{5,409 \text{ days}}{12,654 \text{ days}} \times 100\% = 44.34\% \text{ of my life}$$

Thus, how we spend our days matters. And because time is nothing but counting, and counting is nothing but numbers, math is the only thing we should pay attention to if we hope to make any sense out of anything.

Case in point: for the first 7,299 days of my life, I had never received a present of any kind from my father. He was usually too mean, too drunk, or too both to care. So you can understand how confused I was on the morning of my 20th birthday (day 7,300, if you’re paying attention),

when I walked into the kitchen for some early morning coffee and saw a narrow present resting by the pot.

I approached the poorly wrapped box and picked it up to feel the weight of it, the heft. It couldn't have been more than a pound, but it somehow felt heavier; substantial, almost like a rock. "Happy Birthday" was written in black magic marker over a shiny yellow balloon. There were no ribbons or bows on the gift, just wrinkles of clear tape covering the crumpled, uneven seams. I pinched one edge to create a small tear, then ripped the paper to reveal "Puma Coyote Stag" printed in gold on the white lid. A prime number of mammals.

When I lifted the lid, I found an eight-inch, fixed-blade sheath knife with real stag antler for a handle. I was confused and touched at the same time. The father who never gave me anything was now giving me something really nice. And exceedingly sharp, I confirmed, when I placed the tip against the wrapping paper and felt it slide through effortlessly. Combined with its front bolster, which distributed the weight perfectly (heavy enough to give the sensation of the knife wanting to dip and seek flesh, but not to the point of utter obviousness), it was the perfect tool for skinning and dressing game, which I hoped to be doing once the fall deer season started.

What continued to baffle me, however, was why my father was giving me a gift—and for the very first time. Was he trying in some way to make up for my mother's absence? Had he finally accepted me, Asperger's and all, as a son he actually loved? Did he suddenly feel guilty about his years of abuse? If so, why and which instances? So many thoughts bounced through my brain that the only way I could silence them was to stare at the blade and lose myself in its perfectly polished surface, how it effortlessly reflected beams of early morning light directly onto the village of burns on my arm. Marks that, after nearly 13 years, were now uneven lumps of scar tissue with little to no sensation. I trained a beam directly onto one of them until the dead flesh sent a sickeningly sweet smoke trail up to my nose—the same smell I remember as a child when my father put his cigarettes out on my arms.

I slid the knife into its leather sheath, threaded the sheath through my belt, and walked outside. Mug in hand, I followed the matchbox-sized tractor several hundred yards out by the easternmost border of our land. Dozens of camel crickets scattered around my feet, their thick bodies jumping bluntly against the dew-addled undergrowth. There were so many that it sounded like corn popping as their plump hulls smacked against the rubbery leaves, their two-inch lengths jumping up to three feet, or 18 times their body length, which was the equivalent of me jumping 108 feet:

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc} \text{36 inches} & \div & \text{2 inches} & = & 18 & \times & \text{6 feet} & = & 108 \text{ feet} \\ \text{jumped} & & \text{cricket} & & & & \text{me} & & \end{array}$$

I kept walking until I could make out my father clearing a patch of earth under a big pin oak, tilling the red clay, breaking up the underlying soil so it would be softer and easier to dig. He didn't notice me until I was about 20 yards out. He turned the tractor off, crossed his thick forearms over the cracked Bakelite wheel, and stared blankly at my approach.

"What?" is all he said when I reached the machine. His wide frame cast me in partial shadow from the low slant of an early morning sun.

I kept it short by thanking him for the knife and telling him how special it was. How helpful it would be for hunting.

"That it?" he said.

His beaten-up sunglasses were too dark for me to see his eyes. Even the deep creases on his face were impossible to make out with the sun behind him.

"Well, I'm going to drive to Little Rock a little later. I thought you might like to come with me."

He spit tobacco juice onto the churned soil. "What have I fucking told you? I'm already doing enough for that bitch right here. Stop wasting my goddamn time."

Little Rock was where my mother was dying. She was suffering from Mucinous Cystadenocarcinoma, a rare form of pancreatic cancer that affected only 6,284 people in 2005, or 0.967% of a worldwide population of over 6.5 billion. After receiving her diagnosis, it took only five months for the disease to ravage her completely. 152 days. So I visited often. To make her situation a tiny bit more tolerable while she was still conscious. To let her know that someone still cared.

I usually brought her crossword puzzle magazines or those sugar-coated orange slice candies you could get at any drug store for about a buck a bag, sometimes two for \$1 when they ran a special. They were her favorites. When she put one in her mouth, it was as if her whole body smiled, a profound peace visibly falling over her as she slowly lolled the candy over her dry tongue, reading the thousands of sugary bumps as if they were Braille. "They're good," she always whispered. "So good."

But on my birthday, the very day she brought me into the world, she was a few hours away from being ushered out of it. The cancer had spread to her lungs, liver, and intestines, so the doctors put her into a drug-induced coma 11 days prior. It was the most humane choice, they said, and were probably right. I didn't want her to suffer while the disease kept eating her from the inside out, her body caving in on itself the way hot piss eats fresh snow.

I tried not to dwell on it too much when I walked into her room that last time and listened to the mechanical pump breathing for her (15 "inhalations" per minute) and held her desiccated hand. But the reprieve lasted only so long, as my focus invariably went back to the jaundiced canvas of her body, to the contours of her skull and the outline of her teeth pressing through the thin parchment of her upper lip. Which is when more thoughts I didn't want to have blossomed.

What kind of a turnout we would get? Who would the pallbearers be? Would it be sunny or raining when we laid her to rest? Would my father bury her in a simple pine box, something he would make himself, or was he going to go all out and buy something more substantial? Would he include a vault to prevent the earth from caving in on her and to keep worms from finding their way in? I had no way of knowing and knew I couldn't ask. But with 25 earthworms per square foot of soil in Dallas County (according to a University of Arkansas study that I found online), I felt that it was not only reasonable but right to know. After all, if a standard casket is 84" long x 28" wide (16.1 square feet), a total of 402.5 worms could feed on her at any given time if my father didn't bury her properly:

25 worms per square foot x 16.1 square feet/casket = 402.5 worms.

Morbid, I know. But this was my mother. The only person who tolerated me, so I felt that it was my duty to do whatever I could to stem any further ravaging of her body. But I had no money, no building skills, and therefore no security in knowing that things would be done right. All I could do was hope and wonder, especially since I'd shared my concerns with my father a couple months prior, and he told me to go fuck myself and never bring it up again. "Let the bitch rot," was the extent of his response.

But rotting, biting, was what she was already doing. I gave her one last, long look and caught the stew of decay and medicine that was seeping through her fallow skin. Listened to the oxygen being forced into her lungs that didn't make her any more alive than the bed she was melting into. A sight made even more macabre as the sun, streaming through the slats of the hospital's blinds, set aglow the mummy of her body and made the staple scars on her cheek shine like tiny white shoelaces—evidence of the time my father broke her jaw after she put dinner on the table twenty minutes too late.

I said my final goodbye. Kissed her skeletal face. The 90-minute drive back to Willow would give me the time I needed to sort things out. To ask myself if I would be okay, now that my mother would never be.

The sun was close to setting when I reached Jenkins Ferry. Great droves of chimney swifts punctuated the sky above endless rows of soybeans that blazed golden in the slanted light. How wonderfully free those birds were. How unlike we were from them.

How I wished I could hold onto such things. To not just recognize beauty, but be moved by it. Unfortunately, the lack of the latter has always been one of the greatest challenges of my life. I agreed when something was beautiful, just like other people did, maybe even commented on it every now and again. But I was rarely "filled" in any emotional way by beautiful things. I couldn't look at a leaf and relate its significance to my own life like a poet could. Not in a sustained way, anyway. I instead wanted to know *why* something was beautiful. How things like a bird or a leaf or a sunset created such a sense of awe and emotional wellbeing in so many others. Not surprisingly, the answer usually came down to numbers.

Take flowers as an example, which almost everyone (including myself) considers beautiful. Unlike others, however, I always considered flowers beautiful because of math. And only because of math.

Consider: orchids, lilies, and irises all have 3 petals. Buttercups, larkspur, and columbine have 5. Delphiniums, 8. Marigolds, 13. And daisies can have 34, 55, or 89 petals. All Fibonacci numbers, which are the sum of the two numbers that precede them:

0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, 144, 233, 377, etc.

Beauty in flowers, like so much else, is therefore dependent on numbers. On counting. And even when something isn't beautiful, math is often the reason why. Because math controls everything and always points to a truth. The number of my father's abuses against me and my mother (21), for example, was a Fibonacci number, even if there was no beauty in that fact. But

there was a mathematical truth: my father was going to continue to harm me, and numbers proved it.

The law of probability states that the likelihood of any event is determined by dividing the number of ways an event can occur by the total number of possible outcomes. In my father's case, the "P" below represents the probability of event (A) happening:

$$P(A) = \frac{\text{The number of ways a single even can occur}}{\text{The total number of possible outcomes}}$$

As always, there were four dividends: verbal assaults, fists, household objects, or the brandishing of a gun. The divisor also had four variables: emotional harm, minor bodily harm, major bodily harm, or death. Which meant there was a 100% chance of experiencing more abuse through the hands of my father, because:

$$P(A) = \frac{4}{4} = 1.00$$

So here's the question you're probably asking yourself: why, after all of my beatings, burns, a dislocated shoulder, and black eyes (not to mention a broken jaw for my mother), was I coming to this conclusion now? Why had math suddenly—completely—convinced me of my fate, when the evidence had been right in front of me my whole life? Who knows. Maybe it was because I subconsciously blacked it out. I just didn't want to admit it. Or the loneliness of my drive back home made me realize that I would soon be the only other person left in the house, the only available punching bag, and I had to figure out a way to avoid becoming that.

An episode of *Lost* was blasting on the TV when I got back home. My father was slumped in his beat-up blue recliner, snoring in front of the set. On the screen, Jack and Hurley were bringing a wrapped body to a burial site near the beach—a circle of survivors bowing their heads and holding hands around the forever hole. My first thought was that there were no worms in that earth. It was too sandy for that. My second was that I was going to miss my mother. So I walked to my room, shut the door, and tried to think—of anything, really, to take my mind off where I was, with whom, and how long it would take for the next violent thing to happen.

I initially chalked up the retrieval of my birthday gift to instinct. What it turned out to be, of course, was fate. An invisible code that makes flowers beautiful and that binds all of us together, including me to my father. Something that didn't cross my mind when the bony undulations of the knife's handle dimpled my flesh. At that moment, all I thought about was surviving. A mathematical purpose to do something that the numbers told me to do.

My father was still sleeping when I walked back into the living room. But because of the way he was situated (chin tucked into his chest, shoulders up high due to his elbows resting on the arm rests), access to his neck was limited. I would instead have to sink the knife directly into

his skull. Luckily, there was a small patch of thinning hair in the middle of his head—a clean target to ensure satisfactory placement.

According to the law of velocity, I quickly determined that the knife would be traveling at six feet per second before slamming into his brain, because velocity is measured by dividing the distance an object is moving by the time it takes to get to its destination:

$$V = \frac{d}{t}$$

With my arm fully extended, I estimated the distance to my father's head at 3 feet. I also estimated that with a powerful thrust, the knife would take no longer than ½ second to reach its target. In other words:

$$V = \frac{3 \text{ ft}}{.5 \text{ sec}}$$

Thus, six feet per second. I took a deep breath, held the knife up high, and readied myself to punch through bone. The lack of any meaningful consequences for the depths of my father's depravity, and the fact that math proved that the depravity would continue, necessitated it. Living in fear, in abuse, couldn't continue. Especially since the numbers told me I was guaranteed to keep experiencing both.

Jesus, though. I couldn't do it. Because I also knew that I wasn't a killer and didn't want to become one. I couldn't live with myself knowing that I had taken a human life, even though my father rarely displayed any of the traits that help make us human. Kindness and empathy, for starters, just weren't on his radar. So why not go through with it? Even the math was on my side, and math never lies. It obeys laws that no man can change. Something St. Augustine also believed. Which made me wonder, albeit briefly, if he had Asperger's as well.

Shit. I sheathed my knife and walked into the kitchen, rooted around for something to eat. The clinking of plates and what not must have woken my father, because the next thing I experienced was a sharp blow to my head. I went to my knees as a spent bottle of Old Crow spun to a stop beside me. I reached around to the back of my head and found an open gash saturated with blood.

"Whatcha doin,' pussy boy?" My father grinned behind bloodshot eyes and a Colt .45 pointed at my face. "I was trying to sleep, you little bitch."

The phone went off a millisecond before his gun did. The bullet slammed into the refrigerator door behind me. A ribbon of gunpowder rose through the air as more shrill rings came. My father tried to maintain his composure, but couldn't. He yelled so loudly at the phone, put so much of his body into it, that he actually lost his balance and fell on his ass. Which gave me an opening. Quickly, I unsheathed my knife and ran at him before he could fire again. He was wide open. I sank the blade into the hollow just below his left eye.

"Mr. Green? Ralph? This is Loretta at Retreat Hospital in Little Rock."

He reflexively fired another round into the floor as the answering machine continued.

"I'm so sorry to tell you that Mrs. Green passed away a few minutes ago."

When I removed the knife, his eyeball came with it. So did more screams.

"But I can tell you that she passed peacefully, with no pain or distress of any kind."

I slammed the full length of the knife into his throat, sinking it all the way to the bolster. A foamy ring of blood and mucus bubbled up quickly around the handle.

"I know this is a very difficult thing to hear, so take your time before calling me back. We'll need to discuss delivery of Delia's body, according to your wishes."

His lips moved like a goldfish's, but no more noise came out. His freshly extracted eye rested beside his thigh, staring straight at me, and all I could think of was how perfectly round it was. That if I divided its circumference by its diameter, I would arrive at pi—which was true of all circles, regardless of size.

"God bless you two. You are both in my prayers."

A sustained gurgle escaped from his neck hole. He looked at me with his one remaining eye and smiled. Calmly. Then silently mouthed the words, "Thank you," right before he died.

Which is why the sonofabitch gave me the knife. And why, drunk as he was, he intentionally missed turning my head into a Picasso when he fired toward me. My birthday present was a present for *him*, I realized. Something he was hoping I would use to end his miserable life since he could never muster the courage to end it himself. The shot he took toward me was simply an act. Something he was hoping would provoke the right reaction from me.

So here I sit writing and waiting for death, resolute in the knowledge that I never have, and never would, willfully kill another human being. I simply did what had to be done or be killed myself—or so I had believed. Plus, taking the action I did meant that I was doing more than defending myself. I was defending the invisible code that my condition gave me. Honoring the truth that the numbers revealed. Fulfilling my destiny, just as Abraham Lincoln fulfilled his. And in doing so, we both made the world a bit safer. Slightly more free.

Speaking of which, the moth that's been hanging out in my cell for the last 34 hours just flitted out between the bars. He may be in his 60s by now. Maybe even 68. The same age my father was when he died.

Irony. I wonder if there's an equation for it.

Ralph

Ralph Emerson Green
Inmate #SK664931
The Varner Unit
Lincoln County, Arkansas

The Remains

Irman only had the one chair. It was just him, the chair, and the plastic folding table set up in the center of an otherwise empty room. There was the square of paper and the pencil too. And the reading glasses and the cup of water. But besides that, nothing. Completely empty. *Thank stars for that*, Irman almost said out loud. He couldn't afford even the smallest distraction, what with a pile of sod baking in the driveway and the young man still nowhere to be found.

He hunched over his square of paper and after some consideration decided it would be better to sit on the floor. A creak had developed in the chair's rear left leg. Why risk snapping the thing in half? He moved the reading glasses, the pencil, the square of paper, and the cup of water onto the chair. He sat, legs crossed, in front of it.

The only thing Irman had in excess was rooms. There were four others, all empty, if you didn't count plumbing and electrical fixtures. Which sometimes he did. Mostly, the rooms felt to him like old memories. Faded photographs in a worn album that he would only dust off when he felt like dampening one of his handkerchiefs. Or shirtsleeves, as was more likely the case. He got by fine without them. When it was time to eat, he would grab whatever was closest at hand and swallow it where he stood. When it was time to sleep, he would roll the day's pants and shirt into a tight bundle and lay down. For these six years, the nomadic lifestyle suited him just fine.

Now it was time to work. He held the pencil between his thumb and three fingers, hunched over the square of paper on the chair. Handwriting had never been Irman's strong suit, so he took each letter slowly, devoting about a quarter of the paper to each.

T-U-R-

Halfway through the shorter arm of the F, the pencil started to rattle against the paper. A low rumble traveled up through the floorboards and into his fingers. He scrunched the right half of his face, clenched his teeth, and grabbed the pencil in a closed fist.

From the front door he could see the road was empty as ever, disappearing between two soybean fields in either direction. There was no tree, no fence post. Irman had no tape or thumbtacks. And so he stood in the driveway with his paper sign pinched between two fingers. An invisible current hummed down the road, found his feet, climbed up past his knees and hips. It was only after he was numb to the waist that he reconsidered some of the finer details of his plan.

He ran back for the table, then the chair. Gathered the sod fragments heaped along the side of the driveway. Piece by piece he arranged his collection on the table, moving the healthiest specimens to the front and allowing plenty of space for each. The hum had become a growl. Then a roar. The soy plants shuddered in their rows. Irman licked his hand and straightened his hair. He held his paper sign by the corners.

When the silver car came, it came all at once. Through tinted windows, Irman could barely make out the young man's face before he shot past with a hot wind. The paper sign flew down the road after, and by the time Irman turned around, the car was rattling in the gravel ditch. The young man stood in the driveway looking at the sky.

"Afternoon," Irman said. All that was left of the car's roar was the ringing in his ear.

The young man continued smiling at the sky, hands stuffed in his pockets. Even buried up to the wrist in the flaps of his suit coat, it was plain to see that his arms were abnormally long. They bent back at a sharp angle, like the legs of a pond frog. He unfolded one and checked his watch. Then looked back up at the sky, then down at the watch, several times before turning to Irman with a toothless smile pulled across his face.

"Hello, today. Or on today, rather."

Irman had never been quite sure where to place the young man's accent. It was more of a lack of an accent, with clean syllables that snapped out one at a time.

"Please, may I ask, how will you do on this—rather, how have you been, as the case may be?"

With his paper sign gone, Irman had trouble deciding what to do with his hands. "Well enough, thanks."

"Excellent," said the young man, so loud that Irman was forced to take a step back. The young man spat out a few more garbled sentence fragments, as they stood under the hot sun.

"Now, may I ask, what do you have on offer?" he said.

The two of them looked down at the table, at the collection of sod fragments. They were arranged over the white plastic surface like broken pottery. Irman remembered them a little, well, greener. But after half a day under the sun, they were wilted and bare at the roots. He was worried that they looked less like sod and more like ragged dirt clods he had scraped out of the backyard with the kitchen spoon.

"Got plenty." He drew his hands behind his back and picked at his calluses. "Locally sourced."

The young man smiled at the folding table without blinking or even seeming to breathe. He calculated for another minute and then reached down to pluck a single blade of grass.

"Fescue?" he said, holding the blade up to his face. "Kentucky Blue? What is the name of this?"

"Grass. Regular kind," said Irman, and hastily added, "But fresh. Quality."

The young man continued to study the blade, turning it back and forth an inch in front of him. He bit the end, inhaled through his teeth, and clicked his tongue rhythmically.

"How much?" the young man said finally.

"Well," said Irman, breathing a sigh of relief. "It did take me all of yesterday to, uh—harvest."

He splayed out his palms as proof. The young man bent over them, studied each callus and sore with the same consideration he had paid to the grass.

"Besides which, took all spring to grow."

The young man looked up at him and pressed his lips into a thin line. Somewhere behind his eyes a small light flickered.

"Yes, grow," said the young man, as though trying to stifle a laugh.

Without another word, he handed Irman a wad of bills. He loaded the dirt clods into his car, along with the table and the chair.



It had been years since the funeral. Six, Irman remembered. Looking back, he was surprised at how easy everything had fallen into place. How natural it all had been. Funeral home? The one closest. Cemetery? Same. Invitations? No family to speak of. Flowers? Music? Coffin lining? Whatever is most popular. He continued sleeping on the same side of the bed. Settled into the same craters on the sofa and the recliner. When the television flicked on, it was always at the right channel. At some point he realized he could keep going that way forever. That he probably would. He had worn his ruts too deep, and now he was too old to climb out.

This was the thought running through Irman's head the moment his foot caught the corner of the Persian rug, sending his head (and thoughts therein) crashing through the curio cabinet's four glass shelves. As he stared back at his living room refracted through painful shards, he was struck by a new sense of purpose.

The next day, he rolled up the Persian rug, wiped the blood off the cloisonné bowl, and gathered the little blackwood elephants. He arranged them all on the white plastic table in the driveway. No more than an hour later, the young man roared down the road.

"A beauty," was what he said that first time. He cupped the carved elephant in his hand like a newly hatched chick. "Such a beauty I have never seen."

"Like the elephants, huh?" Irman had said. It had been so long since he had met somebody new. Especially someone so young and different and, well, *young* was the word.

"The elephants!" said the young man. He bent his face even closer, as though the word had revealed some hidden truth. "The elephants. Yes. I loved them. I will love them."

"Picked them up in Marrakesh. We used to travel all the time."

"Used to," said the young man, and laughed for so long Irman felt uncomfortable. He wiped the tears from his eyes and sniffled.

"I will take each. All. How many of the elephants does the man have? Ten of the elephants? Twenty of them?"

"Just the two," said Irman. He went on to tell him about the woodworker with knotty hands, the awnings painted in a rich Arabic scrawl, the displays of bronze lamps and flip flops. The young man listened attentively and laughed again. This time Irman joined him.

"I would take just the two. If you pleased."

"Sure you don't want to hear about the time we—"

“Just the two. If in all possibility.”

Then he did something Irman would think about years later. It was a simple enough gesture, reaching his hand into his pocket. He was still chuckling to himself, though beneath his laughter Irman sensed that the man’s fingers were curling around—something. A knife or a gun. Or not a knife or gun exactly, but something like it. Something worse, though he didn’t know what that might be. When it did come out, it was with an assortment of different-colored bills, which the young man fanned in front of him. Irman recognized some as Euro, Won, Dirham.

He took the two with the most familiar shade of green. The young man collected the elephants, the Persian Rug, and cloisonné bowl and drove off.

Next month, Irman laid out the wicker mask and the painted vases. The month after that was the paper kite and nesting dolls. Then the cigar boxes, the miniature clog that had once been filled with licorice, the snakeskin belt, the pebble of amber. Each time the young man would come roaring over the road, buy everything there was, and leave in the opposite direction he came. He bought Irman’s collection of shot glasses and snap-back hats, as well as the snow globe containing the maraca-wielding cactus.

Each time Irman watched the tchotchkes and souvenirs disappear down the road, he felt the satisfaction of a long-awaited exhale. Of course, the young man couldn’t understand that. But Irman didn’t need him to understand. Imagining the contents of his life displayed in some faraway high-rise was enough.

Soon the dining table and chairs went, followed by most of the larger furniture. Then the old shirts, books, soap dish, stack of flowerpots, knit blanket, spatulas, pillowcases, playing cards, coasters. There didn’t seem to be any limit to what the young man would take and soon he had taken everything.

Now, at last, it was all gone. No rugs to trip over or furniture to bump against. One by one, Irman surveyed his empty rooms. He stood in the doorway of each and leaned back like he had finished a large meal. His spine cracked.

There was the spot where he and Ilsme had set down the first moving box. And there, right under the window, was where Felix would sit and lick his tail whenever his water needed changing. He remembered the hand-stitched curtains that had faded and frayed over a decade, and the store-bought ones that replaced them. Uncountable different arrangements of framed pictures, hung calendars, photos, and embroideries populated and depopulated the walls, leaving behind barely discernible silhouettes of unfaded paint. With the house empty, the memories came flooding back. All at once they rushed to fill his consciousness, playing out the entirety of their life together on a high-speed loop. He let it run over and over. And over and over and over.

Of course, he thought some days later, there were still the electrical fixtures. And besides which the window frames—did those count? He tried prying them off the wall until his fingernails hurt. No, of course they didn’t count. Couldn’t.

He leaned against the empty window ledge and looked outside. “Oh no,” he said.

There had been an oversight. A big one. Really, how could he have overlooked it for so long? The grass, yes, had been sold. Thank stars for that. But beyond—

Luckily, the young man had left him with enough. Just a few dollars were all he needed. Irman hated the thought of bringing something new into the house, but what could be done? He stuffed a few bills in his pocket and headed into town. Later that evening, he returned with a shovel.

Clutching the handle of his new tool, he surveyed the little backyard plot. Twenty feet by maybe, oh, twelve. But deep. Who knows how deep? He imagined himself sinking lower and lower into the earth, until the sky was nothing but an electric-blue playing card above him. Until it disappeared completely, along with the young man and everything. Through soil and clay and rock he would dig. He would go all the way to the center if he had to. Would never stop. Deeper and deeper, until he was left with nothing but a speck of white-hot magma.

Red Bell Peppers

Translated by Toshiya Kamei

“Mii? Oh, God, Mii! It is you.”

Only my middle school classmates had called me Mii. We stood in front of the bell peppers, baskets nearly touching. Even so, I couldn’t place the white-haired woman before me.

“I wrote to you many times,” she continued, “but you never responded.”

Was she . . . ? I squinted to get a better look. She was that dyed redhead who made my life a living hell back then.

“I moved to Osaka, so I didn’t receive any correspondence,” I fibbed. I read only her first letter and threw away the rest. I sat in the gloom and tore the paper into bits and pieces until the ruins of her words covered my legs. That was over twenty years ago.

Write back if you can ever forgive me. Even now, I could still feel the cold, dirty tiles pressed against my knees. She had snickered when she dunked my head in an unflushed toilet bowl and made me gag on the sullied water. Over and over.

I threw yellow bell peppers into my basket.

“I’ve got a takoyaki stand near here,” she said. “Why don’t you stop by?”

“I hate octopuses because they’re red,” I spat out. “I hate these red bell peppers, too, because they remind me of a certain redhead I’ve hated for years!”

I took a big bite off a yellow bell pepper and joined the checkout line. The white-haired woman followed close behind. She opened her mouth to say something more, but nothing came out.

Cupid's Bow

I lie belly-down in bed in midnight greyscale. The bitten-off moon floats in the liquid black sky behind milky clouds. I'm hunched over Nathan's face, three inches from his nose, and next to his face I'm holding the smudged mirror from my bedside table. Nathan's face is perfectly still because he is sleeping. My face is also perfectly still, except for my eyeballs, which slide between his face and my reflection. We both have bowed lips. I decide that's probably the biggest similarity. A deep ridge runs down from each of our septums and ends in the arrow of our strung cupid's bows. Our noses are not dissimilar, except my nostrils are enormous. Or maybe that's just the angle I'm looking from. His eyebrows are darker and a lot nicer than mine. They look like those bushy eyebrows female models have now where they comb them diagonally upwards. He doesn't even touch them and they look like Audrey Hepburn's eyebrows. My eyebrows are patchy and the hairs are curly and I have to trim them to stop them from meeting my eyelashes. Nathan likes to be clean-shaven, but by this time of night his jawline is peppered with breakthrough stubble. I can't stop myself from thinking he's gorgeous.



The first person who said something was Nathan's petite Welsh co-worker whose name I forgot or was never told. She said, "You two look *really* similar. Don't you think you look similar? It's kind of weird."

I spat my Coke into my glass, and she laughed and said she was joking. We had moved to town six weeks before. We were terminally happy. She was drunk and Nathan was drunk, but I was driving that night, so I remember her slurred words with surgical precision. They tumbled over her wine-stained lips like they were nothing. I replayed them on the drive home and said to Nathan, "Do you think we look similar?" But his glassy eyes were half-closed, and his mouth hung open.



The next night we were fucking and I saw it for myself. He rolled me on top and his bone structure kind of rearranged itself at that angle, like his face seemed wider and his cheek bones flattened out. As I was riding him, I thought to myself: it's true. He looked just like my brother. I had to keep closing my eyes and looking away so I could keep going. He didn't seem to notice, so in the morning I asked him again if he thought we looked alike. His eyes creased to a smile, but the laughter dried up in his windpipe when he saw my face. He shrugged. "I guess we don't look dissimilar." I must have looked horrified because he said, "What? We're two skinny white people with brown hair. Does that mean I remind you of your Dad?" I felt sick. But then he smiled a smile which, in that moment, really didn't look anything like my Dad, or my brother, and he kissed my brow bone and put a slice of buttered toast in my hand. "We need milk," he said, and then everything seemed normal for a while.



Three days ago, I made a new friend at work. I've been there just over a month and am still the new girl. She asked me all the usual questions: when had we moved and why and from where. I told her about Nathan's job, and she asked where we were staying. I pulled out my phone and showed her photos of the flat, mainly the fireplace, which I love, and then when I swiped to the next photo, Nathan appeared. He was standing at the front door, grinning, one balled hand slouched inside the pocket of his hoodie and the other pointing up at the brass number plate on the door.

"Aw, is that him?" My new friend smiled and tilted the phone so she could see better. I watched her face all the while. Her gaze moved like a laser beam over Nathan's lanky pale frame, his wavy brown hair which licks the backs of his ears, his angular nose. Her eyes came to rest on his lips, that tell-tale cupid's bow, and the corners of her own mouth sank. I knew what she was thinking. She glanced at me for a microsecond, without even moving her head, and then back to the photo. It was enough to confirm what she suspected. She plastered a polite smile onto her face and turned back to me, pressing the phone into my hand like it hurt her to keep touching it. "How lovely!" she said.



A triangle of moonlight breaks through the clouds and the thin curtains and slopes across Nathan's neck. His eyeballs roll around behind his lids. His eyelashes flutter. I sigh and roll onto my back. On my phone I search—not for the first time—phrases like, "My boyfriend looks like my brother;" "People say my boyfriend looks like me." The same forums and clickbait articles appear, none of them helpful. I don't know what I hope to find. I click through to an article titled "Celebrity Couples Who Look Like Siblings Will Never Not Be Creepy." I scroll through images of sparkly-eyed people with straight white teeth and sharp cheekbones and decide that all celebrities look alike. None of this makes me feel any better. I sit up and pinch the flesh of my thighs between my fingers. I hunch my shoulders and cup my boobs to try to make them look bigger than they are. I slip into the kitchen on quiet feet and check the calorie content of the energy bars Nathan takes to work. There are three left in the box. I stand over the kitchen sink as I eat all three, chewing methodically. I push the wrappers deep into the bottom of the bin.



Early in the morning, I tell Nathan I miss my cat and I'm going to spend the night at my parents'.

"Are you sure?" He squints, his eyes crusty with sleep. "Do you want me to come with you?"

My bag is already packed, and I've bought my train ticket. As I leave, I kiss him on the cheek and say, "You'd look so great with a beard."

On the train, I call my oldest friend Lauren, but she doesn't pick up. I send her several messages asking her when she can meet me. I rest my head against the window and stare at my partial reflection and try to picture Nathan. Trees and fields and sheep pass through my cheeks

and forehead. What if I got bangs cut in? That would surely make me look different. When the café cart comes round, I order crisps and chocolate and eat them as fast as I can.



After almost two hours, the train stops in the small seaside town where my parents live. My mum picks me up from the station. “You look well!” She beams. I am relieved when she tells me my brother is not around this weekend.

At home, everything is the same but different. The cat is getting old and skinny. “It’s just me,” I tell her when she flicks her ears back, “Remember me?” I can feel her old bones under my palm as I run it down her spine.

My room smells of my mum’s plug-in air fresheners. She has folded a set of clean towels and left them on my bed like at a hotel. I stand at the mirror and scoop my dark hair into a ponytail. I bring the end of it down over my forehead, covering my eyebrows. It looks like a horse’s thick mane. The spiky split ends poke my eyes and the skin of my forehead bristles under the itchy hairs. I look basically the same, I think, but rounder. I let my hair back down and smear on some of my mum’s thick concealer and pink lipstick.

I eat lunch with my parents and try not to study my Dad’s face too closely. My mum feeds me sandwiches, salad, crisps with dip, bread sticks, sponge cake, chocolate mints wrapped in foil. I eat all of it.

“You should visit more often,” says my Dad.

I am sitting on the patio using an app on my phone to swap my face with Nathan’s in various photos when I get a message from Lauren. I walk into town and meet her at the café where we both used to work as teenagers. We hug and order coffee and sit in the back by the window. The sea tumbles over itself onto the shining pebbled beach.

“I’m kind of freaking out,” I say to Lauren with a forced half-laugh.

“What do you mean? Don’t you like it there?”

“No, it’s not that. It’s going to sound really stupid.” I push around the foam on top of my coffee with a spoon. “We were at this party the other week, with his work friends.” Lauren leans in. I avoid looking at her. “I mean, it’s nothing really, but this girl said something weird.”

“What did she say?” Lauren says, sounding concerned.

“She said me and Nathan look really similar,” I laugh and shrug before Lauren can say anything, “It’s so stupid. She probably fancies him or something.”

Lauren laughs, following my lead, but her laugh dies out too quickly and she looks confused. “Probably,” she says. “She’s just jealous.” She sips her coffee. “Anyway, lots of couples look alike.”

My ears turn hot. “What do you mean?”

She shrugs. “It’s like, science, or something. People are attracted to people who look like them. They want to fill the world with lots of little mini-me’s.”

“I guess,” I mumble, looking out the window.

"It's funny, actually. When I first met Nathan I kind of thought you two looked alike," she snorts.

"What do you mean, you—" The words catch in my throat. I look down and realise my knuckles are turning white on the handle of my coffee cup. My fingers prickle with heat.

"It's not a big deal," Lauren says, "Like I said, lots of couples—"

My head is turning slowly from side to side. The back of my neck bristles. "What am I going to do?"

"About what?"

"Lauren, he looks like my brother!" I hiss. "Could you fuck someone who looked like your brother?"

Lauren sits back and looks vacant because she doesn't even have a brother. "Amy, you're being insane."

My head is still shaking itself. She leans back and eyes me like, *now I get it*.

"Okay. This is a totally normal reaction," she says. "Things are going great, you've moved in together, you're actually finally happy. It's scary. It makes total sense."

"What makes total sense?"

"Getting cold feet. Classic response." Lauren shrugs and drinks her coffee like, *case closed*.

I stare at the pink lipstick stain on my mug. Even she can see the similarity. Has always seen it. I wipe my forehead and beige makeup comes away on my fingers. Tears sting my eyes and now I see two blurry lipstick-smeared mugs.

"Amy? What's wrong?"

"Sorry, I—don't feel well. I need to go," I mumble. I grab my bag and walk out, waves crashing with each step I take along the promenade.



On the way home, I pass a drugstore and have an idea. I go inside, jingling the bell, and slip between the shelves. Lined up next to the shampoos and body lotions are rows of smiling white women, all of them showing their teeth, tossing their glossy hair in an artificial breeze. I grab the brightest blonde I can find and buy two boxes. As I walk along beside the water, I think about what life would be like if I dumped Nathan. I would have to move back here, probably. Leave my new job. There would be no reason for me to stay in that new city. And then in a few months, or maybe weeks, I would scroll past his all-too-familiar face on Tinder. Sooner or later he would match with someone. Someone beautiful, intriguing; someone with full, shapely eyebrows. Maybe it would be that petite Welsh girl from his office. He would kiss her, bring her back to our flat, seduce her in front of our fireplace, probably fall in love with her. A hot lump swells in my throat. I stop walking and stare at the sea. Water peels back from the pebbles, giving them a short moment to breathe, then charges forward again.



I am standing on the scales in my parents' bathroom when I hear the back door crash open and a man's hollered greeting. Daniel's greeting. "Ugh," I say out loud and tilt my chin all the way up, consult the ceiling. The ceiling has nothing to offer. I turn to the mirror and picture Daniel. Daniel looks like me, of course, but more man-like. The bones at his temples are sharper and his chin is more square. His hairline is receding. He has a cupid's bow just like me and Nathan, only he sometimes grows a weird eighties moustache. I hope more than anything to see that ugly moustache, but when I go downstairs, I am greeted only by dark stubble and bowed lips and brown eyes.

"What's up, shithead?" my brother says.

My mouth opens but I say nothing. My throat feels hot and narrow. Mum looks at me and I must look like I'm about to cry because she tuts and says, "Oh, Daniel! Stop it!" while slapping at him with a tea-towel. She puts her arms round me and steers me towards the dining table. "Come on, love, dinner's nearly ready." It smells like lasagna, which mum thinks is my favourite because I said it was once about thirteen years ago. Daniel and my Dad sit at the table, chatting, with beers open in front of them. Daniel gets white froth on his top lip and wipes it away with the back of his sleeve. Dad laughs and the corners of his eyes crease up. I shunt my chair back, say I'm not feeling well, and race upstairs.



My treacherous reflection shows me my own boyfriend's face. My boyfriend in mascara, my boyfriend in drag. I stand still but she leans forward, turns her face from side to side, gives me a good look. She reaches up and wipes away her lipstick with the back of her wrist, pulls back her hair to make it look like short boy hair. She laughs. I find that I am gripping the sink with both hands and I can hear myself sucking in breaths. I run the taps and splash my face with cold water. The box of hair dye says: "mix bottle one with bottle two. Shake well." I peel the plastic gloves over my fingers. They rustle as I unscrew the bottles and squeeze the contents of one into the other. The liquid makes a slapping sound as I shake it. I screw on the applicator and start squirting it into my roots and along my hairline. I do not comb or section out my hair. I don't have time. The liquid inside the bottle looks white and soon my whole scalp looks white. In the mirror, my reflection follows along, grabbing at random strands and soaking them through, grinning all the while. It's like I'm watching Nathan dying his own hair, always one step ahead. As my hair gets lighter, my skin looks darker, and I can almost see a faint shadow spreading along my jaw line. I hurry to break open the second box of dye and mix the liquids with slippery, gloved fingers. I keep going until every strand of hair is saturated. I set a timer on my phone for the recommended time plus ten minutes and sit on the edge of the bath, watching all the colour fade out of my hair. I pinch my cheeks and the backs of my arms, but they don't seem to be getting any fatter. Purple crescents hang below my eyes, and my lips are dry and flaky, but still my stupid reflection smiles.



When I see Nathan standing at the train station my face sinks. He has not grown a beard. He doesn't look too happy either until I get close, and then he plasters a smile across his face and

raises his eyebrows, the left first and then the right, catching up. "Wow!" he says, "I didn't recognise you."

"Do you like it?" I ask.

"Yeah," he says, "I mean it's—different!"

At home, we eat dinner late, and every time I look up from my plate I catch his eye just as he looks away. Afterwards, he comes up behind me while I'm drying the dishes, presses his front against my back. He buries his bowed lips in my neck and puts his palms against the flesh of my hips. "I missed you," he says. He turns me around and I can't stop myself from checking whether his hairline is receding like Daniel's. My dinner turns over in my stomach. I duck out of his arms and put a plate away in the wrong cupboard.

"Are you okay?" he asks later, his perfectly shaped eyebrows reaching towards each other.

"Yeah, of course." I shrug. "What do you mean?"

He looks away, picks at a loose thread on his sleeve. "Nothing."



At work, I stare at my computer and wait for the microsecond when the screen turns black before the screensaver kicks in. In that microsecond, I see the flash of my reflection's dark grin, her laughing black eyes. I start to sweat, but when she disappears I have a craving to see her again. She is like a smoking car wreck I can't look away from. If I try to click away, I hear her tapping at the screen and I know she is inside. I push back my chair, take long, silent strides to the bathroom, my eyes on my shoes.

She locks eyes with me as I grip the sink. "What are you going to do?" she asks, then laughs. I can feel makeup sitting thick on my skin, dried mascara collecting in my tear ducts, but it has all faded from her hard, boyish face.

"Be quiet," I mumble. "Keep still." My hand shakes as I try to reapply lipstick, chasing her open, giggling mouth across the mirror. I paint it on until my lips feel baked in dried mud. I go back to my desk and keep my head low, avoiding eye contact with anyone who might have ever seen photos of Nathan. Probably they have all stalked him on social media, laughed until they felt sick at pictures of us together.

I wait for the screensaver.

My manager wants to see me, just to check in, make sure I'm settling. She keeps a box of tissues in the middle of her desk, as though either one of us might need them.

"Right then, Amy—oh!" She says when her eyes connect with my face. She pushes the tissues towards me. "Here, you've got some lipstick on your—" She taps her false nail against her teeth. She carries on talking while I rub at my teeth and gums, never quite sure whether the lipstick is gone or whether I've smudged it around until it looks like I've been snacking on roadkill.

I don't remember asking about holidays, but my manager is turning her screen towards me so she can show me where to find the spreadsheet and the annual leave request form. Then

she leans back in her plush office chair and talks about her trip to Bali last Christmas. I try to smile. I feel cakey foundation sitting in the creases of my cheeks. In the corner of my eye, my manager's computer screen turns black. I shut my eyes and wait for the screensaver. But when I open them again there is no screensaver. My dim reflection is there, grinning. My eyes widen as she pinches her cheeks, pulls at her hair.

"Stop it," I hiss. My manager stops mid-sentence. I cough-laugh to try to cover up the noise I just made, but my reflection laughs louder. I spread my palms across the table and half-stand.

"Amy? Is everything—"

My reflection balls up her fists, thumps at the inside of my manager's screen. Her shrill cackling fills the room.

"Stop it!" A scream tears ragged through my throat. When I unscrew my eyes, everything is quiet. My reflection is gone. My manager stands with a hand pressed to her mouth.



Six weeks later, I try to remember the last time we had sex. I weigh myself and find I have gained at least a stone, but in the mirror I can't see where the weight has gone. All my clothes basically still fit. My reflection twirls around in the mirror with more energy than I've had in weeks. She throws her head back and laughs so loud I hiss. She glares back at me through Nathan's dark eyes. I couldn't dye those.

"Amy, we need to talk," Nathan says one day after work. I try to remember the last time we really talked. "We can't carry on like this," he says in a rehearsed way. When pressed he says reluctantly, "Something's changed—you've changed. I don't know. Maybe I've changed, too. Maybe this was all too soon." He shakes his head. His eyes are wet. "I've spoken to Jason at work and he said I can stay at his for a bit. Or—I don't know—if you want to go to your parents? I really think it would do us some good, babe. Just for a couple of weeks, maybe. And then we can see what..." he trails off. I open my mouth to protest, but over his shoulder I catch sight of a packed bag in the hallway. I realise he's still wearing his shoes. He says something else, kisses my cheek, and leaves.

I go to the bathroom and sit on the edge of the bath. I try for a long time not to look at my reflection. When I do, I can almost see a flash of myself: my dark roots have grown out and patches of my box-blond hair have turned brassy yellow. My cheeks are somehow looser, my eyebrows plucked to a thin pencil-line. The next moment, her hair is dark again, her makeup gone. A stupid smile spreads across her bowed lips. Outside, the car door slams shut and the engine starts as she laughs, and laughs, and laughs.



Ghost by Jenni Coutts.

A Subtle Shift

I almost can't believe how undefined and taupe this whole place is. Everything is washed out and blended. A field of static. The tiled ceiling feels low, and rows of vinyl chairs seem to reach out endlessly. It's disorienting. Looking around sort of hurts my eyes, and I'm having trouble focusing on anything. A door with a clouded-glass pane in it opens and a man emerges. Behind him, a woman in a pencil skirt is following with her face pulled into a forced look of enthusiasm. They shake hands, and when she turns, her expression breaks into some kind of terrified relief. Glancing down at a clipboard, the man calls out a name that's not mine. Someone sitting against the same wall as me stands up and strides across the carpet. My eyes have the heavy burn of exhaustion in their lids. I flick my tongue against the back of my teeth and try not to yawn.

There's something unnatural about this whole process. The resume in my hand dips in and out of focus on my crossed leg. Little flashes of light move around the periphery of my vision, and I can't tell if I'm seeing things. It's dehumanizing here, entire lives are reduced to an electability of bullet points. There are about a dozen other people waiting here with me. They all seem comfortably occupied picking their nails or tapping their feet or twitching their faces. This fact disturbs me, although I'm not immediately sure why. Random impressions, strategic word choices, subtle body language. This is the land of clerical gladiators. I become painfully self-aware, unable to position my own body in a way that I think will appear natural. I'm a grid within a map of time. Just then, the door opens again, and the man with the clipboard looks out and says loudly, "Zachary Zanelli?"

The room he takes me into may be even more bland than the one I was just in. He motions for me to sit while silently reading whatever documents are in his hand. Between us is more than a long desk. Tubes of florescent light recessed into the ceiling are situated overhead in such a way that there are no shadows in the room. The pattern on the carpet under my feet looks like a series of ellipses. After a pause, the man introduces himself as Johnson, giving no indication of first or last name. He's stolid and rehearsed.

"So, Mr. Zanelli, let's get right into it. Tell me a little about yourself and why you applied for a position here at Lombard, Gadow and Sacks."

When he speaks his lips stretch wider in length than in height so that the movements of his mouth don't match the words being produced. It's rather uncomfortable to watch, but I can't look away. People always say eye contact in these kinds of circumstances is critical. I blink forcibly.

"Right, let's see. Well, I just graduated and wrote my thesis on somatic mapping. I guess my—"

"Alright. I'm going to have to stop you right there. You wrote your thesis on what now?" His hands drop heavily into his lap.

"Somatic mapping."

"That's...unusual," he sighs. "And what is that exactly?"

I shift my weight and cross my legs to appear confident before responding. This question is always looming, and I tend to shuffle through a few variations of premeditated answers. I'm fairly certain I haven't concocted the right one yet. Puzzle pieces in the spectacle. "To put it simply, I studied the way people experience being in their bodies. More specifically how the mind maps onto the physical self and what that means in terms of identity and individual awareness."

He moves his hands up to the desk and lays them there palms down. The way he does this is meant to show his patient irritation with me. His lips pull apart and he speaks with dramatic clarity. "While that does sounds interesting, this is an accounting firm."

"Yes, I know that."

There's another pause and I feel the air in the room getting heavier and more taupe.

"Right. Well, let's move on. Let me tell you about what we do here. Then you can see if you think sonic mapping may fit in."

"Somatic."

His eyes dart to the side. "Right. What makes Lombard, Gadow and Sacks different than most firms you find in today's market is our innovative approach to..."

My mind immediately wanders and it's a slow, itchy sensation. I try to stay focused on his eyes as his ventriloquist mouth jerks around suspiciously. My vision is tunneling. The room has the faint citrus smell of wood cleaner. I can hear the clack of vents from somewhere in the bowels of the building. Every so often I nod reassuringly. I'm not really sure what I'm doing here because I don't want this job. I never really did.

"...so that annuity for our clients spans a diverse, but always profitable return across the bulk of their portfolio..."

A few weeks ago, I found myself in bed at like three in the morning, covered in the sweat of a cold uncertainty. Having finally left the stability of school, the future laid before me a wide, snarling gape. I could see the road leading to my grave reach back all the way to my feet. Terrified in that stark hollow way that only comes in the middle of the night, I looked at my palms but couldn't see any folds in the skin. My chest felt tight, and the early morning was shrinking around me as if the darkness in my room was not empty space but instead something material and unbreathable. I turned on all the lights, took out my computer, and frantically applied for every job I could find online. My applications must have had a desirable desperation because quite a few people called me back. Last week I was trying to explain the subjectivity of self to the HR representative of a sliced meats emporium.

Johnson is still speaking. I hope I haven't missed too much to feign attentiveness when he stops and I need to pick up the conversation. There's a moving warmth in the room I hadn't noticed before, like a hot wind is blowing in from the window. I look around and the one window in the room is closed.

"Well, Mr. Zanelli, what do you think?"

I attempt a simple response, but my jaw won't open. In fact, I can't really feel the lower half of my face. The ex nihilo wind blows hotter and moves across my neck and through the collar of my shirt, over my back and chest. For some reason I'm not frightened by any of this. My head

settles firmly on my body. Suddenly the door behind me swings loudly open. I try to turn my head, but my neck is a warm pillar.

Johnson stands up quickly. "Excuse me. What are you doing? You have to wait outside for your name to be called like everyone else."

The person behind me is a woman with a soft and confident voice. As she speaks, I can feel her stepping into the room even though I still can't see her.

"I'm here about the snakes," she says.

Johnson's comportment relaxes and he replies casually, as if he has been waiting for her all afternoon. "Right. Please come in."

I have a vague feeling of floating in my chair and wonder how many other people have been seated here today, sweating.

Johnson rolls his chair into the corner, revealing a wide crack in the wall directly behind his desk. It's a triangular break that opens at the floorboard and within it are slithering shapes and a pulsing fiery glow. I lean in for a closer look and realize I can move my neck again. What I see is that the hole is some type of furnace in the wall and inside that furnace are braids of snakes. The room becomes washed in a throbbing pinkish gleam. Shadows appear. An unsettling concern moves down my chest into my stomach. I can see the woman now. She's short with black hair and rigid bangs. She's wearing a yellow dress and red cowboy boots. Her skin is almost translucent, and the faint blue-green outline of veins traces her legs. She is carrying a leather bag and approaches the crack with a calm urgency. From the bag she removes a handful of small brown pellets.

"This should take care of it," she says, throwing them into the fire.

There's a rushing commotion in the wall as the snakes begin eating the pellets. As they do, they turn to blue smoke. Johnson looks pleased and rolls his chair back into place. The woman turns and faces me. Her eyes are black, bottomless and deeply comforting. Looking at them, I'm standing in the darkest reaches of space and simultaneously glancing in a mirror. I feel as if I know her but am sure I don't. She points to the wall and says, "I bet you weren't expecting that, were you, Mr. Zanelli?"

I'm unable to answer. The chair below me has turned almost entirely into saltwater. Ruby shadows span the length of the room. Corrosive silhouettes. I wonder how she knows my name.

"Mr. Zanelli?" she continues. Her voice remains soft, but as she repeats herself, it grows insufferable and trenchant. "Mr. Zanelli? Mr. Zanelli? Mr. Zanelli?"

When I open my eyes, Johnson is standing over me.

"Mr. Zanelli?" he asks me sternly. "Did you just fall asleep?"

It takes me a moment to realize what is going on. My eyes are watery and unfocused. Johnson's waiting for me to say something, but my thoughts are spread out over vast expanses, scattered and uncollectable. I say the first desultory thing I stumble on. "Sorry, it was an honest reaction."

The face hovering above me turns to angry stone and asks me to leave.

On the drive home, I think of nothing but the pitch of those immeasurable eyes and the curious stretch of my own inaccessible imagination. Something in me aches. I'm sick for a place I have never been and that has never existed. I have déjà vu of something that hasn't happened. Then I have déjà vu of that déjà vu. My hands on the steering wheel are bones and muscles and tissue. I imagine the wet tunnels of my internal workings. The involuntary muscle contractions and cellular processes. My thesis advisor liked to remind me that most of what happens in our bodies we have no control over. That what makes us who we are is more perception than flesh and blood. I make a hard right into the parking garage of my building.

In my apartment I'm still webbed in the lacy veil of sleep. I look around for my roommate, but she isn't home. I float into the kitchen and make a pot of coffee. It swirls in my cup like a pupil. At my desk, I look aimlessly at the computer. I want to do something but am not sure what. There's a restless malaise about me. The paper blind over my open window holds back the summer and flickers against the screen. I contemplate vacuuming when I hear the ceiling creak under the weight of someone walking in the apartment above me. For a while, I listen to the rhythmic white noise. I reach for a glass of water on my desk and accidentally knock it over. I can see coruscating light reflect in the liquid as it moves in elegant patterns. When the trail reaches my computer, there's an electrical popping as the spill floods the hardware. The screen goes dark. Somehow, the creaking sounds have moved from the ceiling down to the floor behind me. With sudden concern I get up to wipe up the water.

A voice startles me. It's soft and confident. "Don't worry about the computer. It will be fine."

"How do you know?" I ask, although I know why and even who is talking.

The cowboy boots are still red but the dress she's wearing is now turquoise. The bag is slung over her shoulder. The eyes are timeless.

"Because you're dreaming," she says.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Watch this. Get in bed and wake up. When you do, your computer will be fine."

I stand up and fall into the bed. It's as if I'm dropping through many layers of consciousness, like moving through floors in a building. When I land on the quilted comforter, I open my eyes. I look at my desk and it's no longer wet, although the glass is still knocked over. The screen of my computer is glowing.

"I bet you didn't expect that did you?" she asks.

Shaking my head, I sit up. The sun is directly outside my window and the room is brightly lit. I squint against the orange spread. It continues to brighten to a point at which I can no longer see. I hold my hand to shadow my eyes and speak as if yelling into an illuminated cave. "If I was dreaming, how are you still here?"

"You know," she answers and begins walking away.

I get up, but I'm afflicted by the wide glow. It feels incredibly important that I'm able to follow her. I grope the space around me, and in my disorientation I panic. A loud crunch coming

from above me drives me back into bed. I realize something is going to fall and crush me. My hands shoot up reflexively and a disquieted shout shakes itself from my throat.

When I open my eyes, I'm at my desk. It's dark outside. My neighbors in the apartment above me are shuffling something loudly, maybe moving furniture across the room. The glass of water on my desk is unspilled.



The winter sky is a shallow and textured gray with deep gashes and veins. I'm standing at the designated meeting location, my back against the brick wall, as usual. There are many series of shoe prints on either side of me and all of them are mine. My breath is curling into ribbons of vapor. I hate doing this, but it's the only way. I'm aware of the heaviness of my body, its stiffness and inefficacies. Recently it's been feeling distant and not my own. An awkward container holding my mind. I'm tired but not sleepy. I can feel a constant redness in my eyes, overtly aware of the lashes brushing together each time I blink.

Finally, the silver pickup I have been waiting for pulls into the lot, chewing gravel under its tires. When it parks, I walk up to the passenger window. In the driver's seat, Rilo is already fishing things from his pockets. He has oily hair and a philosopher's mustache. Acne populates his chin.

"Damn, Z. You're not looking too good, man."

"Says the guy selling me drugs. Thanks for your concern. You got my stuff or what?"

"Alright, alright. Relax. I got it right here." He hands me a pill bottle and I toss a wad of cash onto the passenger seat.

"You know," he continues, "this stuff isn't hard to get, right? Probably even easier for you than me. If you're so impatient, why don't you just go to a doctor and tell him you have insomnia or something? Get yourself a prescription."

"I already have a prescription. It's not enough."

"Seriously? That's pretty wild, man. How much do you sleep?"

I walk to a bus stop and sit at the plastic bench. The backrest is an advertisement for auto insurance, which feels like a bad joke. While waiting, I realize one of the legs of my pants is tucked into my sock. I don't fix it. Instead I watch a bird circle above me and wonder if I have enough time for a nap before the bus arrives. All around me, the usual havoc of a busy street murmurs. An irredeemable slog. The street itself seems to be grieving and helpless. Forces of our own design are at work that nobody seems to talk about. People passing by move as if walking into a strong wind, leaning into the opposing force, making the best of it. Is that the most we can ask for? To press through without collapsing? I have never met someone who can't commiserate with misery. A truly ruthless commonality. Somewhere inside me an absurd laugh bubbles, but I swallow it down. There are overt agonies here I want to get away from. This whole choreograph seems senseless. I finger the serrated edge of the cap in my pocket, picturing the transparent bottle and the clean lettering that spells out Restoril on the label. My thumb is on the childproof locking device. The bus finally arrives.

As I slide the key into the deadbolt of my apartment door, I can tell my roommate, Skully, is on the other side of it because I hear muffled TV sounds that I think is someone asking, "After something like this, how can he ever be the same?" but I can't be sure. She's standing in front of the couch, as she often is, surrounded by screens, the largest of which is the television. The light in the room is a synthetic blue. She's wearing a large t-shirt with a faded Tetris logo and black fishnets under denim shorts. A show is on I have seen her watch many times. On the coffee table, her computer is open playing the same show but on mute, and what looks like a different episode. The phone in her hand lights up her face from the bottom. She will occasionally type something effortlessly into it and, when she does, a series of plastic bracelets click together on her wrists. I step inside and she turns off the volume and faces me, a gesture which is usually the precursor to a conversation that will have levels of seriousness to it I don't want to deal with right now.

"Judging from the expression you're making, I assume you already know what I'm about to say."

"You're upgrading our cable package?"

"Don't joke. This isn't funny. I'm worried about you."

"Why? Because I still didn't find a job? I told you, no one cares about—"

"It has nothing to do with that."

"What then?"

"Seriously, Z? Don't make me the bad guy here."

"Okay, don't be. I'll just go into my room."

"That's the problem. You're in that room way too much. Your skin looks like it's going to fall off your face."

I touch my cheeks and there's a waxiness to them. "Listen, there's nothing to worry about."

"What are you even doing in there all day?"

"Nothing. Just sleeping. I've been tired."

"How can you be tired if all you do is sleep?"

"Not that kind of tired."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's hard to explain."

I think about the textured warmth of walking through sand. My legs hang below me like pendulums that have misplaced their momentum. When I breathe, I hear the exhale in my skull.

"Have you ever had dreams that sort of continue? One picks up where the last left off? With the same places and people?"

"A reoccurring dream?" she asks. "Sure. I used to have this dream where I was with my sister in this outdoor market trying to buy hand-dyed indigo rugs. I always woke up before we found them, though."

"Yeah but you know your sister. She's a real person in your life. You ever dream about someone you have never met?"

Skully points to the television. "All the time."

I look at the screen. Blueish emanations sputter out.

"Yeah, exactly. Dreams like a TV series."

"What then, you're saying that you watch TV in your dreams?"

"I mean dreams that work like episodes."

"But people don't dream like that. Most of the time people don't even remember their dreams."

"Well, I do."

"You do what?"

"Dream like that. I fall asleep into the same dream. Same one every time. A lot of them take place on this beach. Some of the same people are there. Always this one woman with these wild eyes. And everything loops together. One dream flows right into the next. If I drop something in the sand, I can pick it up the next time, right where I left it."

"That's not possible. Who dreams like that?"

"Me."

"I just can't imagine it."

"Imagine it like...instead of waking up to the world, you go to sleep to it."

"I mean, I can't imagine it to be true."

"I have a whole life there. Things happen and develop. I have friends. I take walks, eat meals, stargaze, have conversations, brush my teeth, shower. I have motivations and desires."

"You can't be serious."

"Once I read an entire book there. A long one too."

"This is only making me more worried."

"I also planted vegetables from seeds. They grew and I ate them."

"Even if all that were true, and somehow you were the only person on the planet having these elaborate and connected dreams with libraries and gardens, none of it's real. You still know that, right?"

"Real. What is real?"

"Don't give me that. Real is real. Everything not imaginary. The world we are in right now. Where we live and pay rent—which you owe me, by the way."

"How are imaginary things not real? Are thoughts not real either then?" I nod toward the television. "You watch shows all the time. What are they if not imaginary plots and stories? Is TV not real?"

I can see her thinking. "The actors and cameras and all that are. This is a real TV set that I turn on by pressing a real remote with my actual finger. Dreams are complete fiction. There's no emotional value. In dreams you are missing the cause and effect. There are no long-lasting repercussions. At least with a TV show you get value from the time you spend with it. With dreaming, any emotion you have ends when you wake up, so it doesn't really matter in real life."

"And I'm saying, in my dreams, there's all of that. Repercussions and time and emotion."

"When I finish watching TV, I turn it off and go on with my life. This life. Don't you think you're taking this a little too far? You need to turn it off, wake up, and get on with things."

"You've never binge-watched something more than you should?"

She pauses, looking into the corners of her eyes. The light in the room is flickering between silver and white. I feel like I now have a point to prove. But is it to me or to her?

"I found your pills," she tells me. "I had to look up what Restoril is. They're sleeping pills. Is that what all this is about? You trying to justify getting hooked on sleeping pills?"

My mind moves from my head into my pocket, then back again.

She continues. "You can't intellectualize this away. What happens when you can't tell the difference between things that have really happened and things you dreamt? You're all over the place. You crashed your car last month. You smell like you haven't showered in at least a week. And people are calling me asking about you because they can't get a hold of you, which I know is true because your phone charger has been on the coffee table in the exact same position longer than I can remember. Your life is falling apart. You can't tell me that's okay because you're having some weird continuing dreams." She stabs the air with her index finger. "Your pant leg is tucked into your sock for chrissakes!"



I'm following the footprints of cowboy boots along the coast. The air is still, and I can hardly feel my body. My mind moves freely. To my left, ocean waves roll and hum over the sand. The sky is a crisp blue sheet stretched tightly over the beach. I realize for the first time this is the only place I know that has sound but not noise. It's a place I know well. A few scattered groups of people sit on blankets, looking out at the blurring horizon. I recognize a few and they recognize me. When I pass them, they wave and nod. Their deep and broad smiles are untortured. Across the water the sun is always setting. A marigold nimbus. There's grass growing from the rise and fall of dunes; pink flowers bloom perennially. I don't stop to think how they can grow in the dry sand. Impossible things have become commonplace and part of the background here. The general atmosphere is that of something too good to be true. I try and sink myself deeper in the ground each time I take a step. High above me is a pulling momentum that I duck away from. I focus on

the footprints laid out before me. When they finally end, a familiar body appears next me. Red boots match my gait.

"You're still here," she says.

I turn into the fullness of dark eyes that open into what feels like fate. "Where else would I be?"

"You know."

I know, but I try not to think about it to avoid the pulling. Somehow the grass has moved down to the water. Flowers rise from the sea. A field of water. When I breathe, my exhale fills the sky. I'm aware of a momentous contentment and felicity that radiates out from my stomach into the ends of my limbs. A deep and unspeakable satisfaction. It's at once a physical feeling and an emotion.

"There's no road under my feet," I say.

We continue to walk and reach a dock that stretches out on concrete pillars. The soft smell of salt and old wood fills my nose. I know the smell is important, like I'm meant to be here inhaling it. For a moment, there's only an eternity of space. It doesn't last, no matter how much I try and stay with it. Suddenly, I feel the impermanence of everything. There's a heavy pulling, and an abysmal crater opens in the center of me. I push myself into the space around me, knowing I'm about to lose the fullness of complete satisfaction. The pulling gets closer and stronger. A cold swallowing above me. Things begin to shrink from view. My throat is hot knife edges, and I'm having trouble getting air into my lungs. Pressure builds behind my eyes and up into my temples. Heaving gasps make vacuums of my lungs. The entirety of my body shuttles into itself and the momentum sweeps me away.

I wake up amid an irreconcilable friction, like rising out of cold water, panting and deeply dismayed. My bed is an unfamiliar plateau. My body feels weak and smothered. *I can't continue like this.* To get to the bathroom I have to step over the forgotten relics of a past life. Clothes on the floor, empty water bottles, wadded-up tissues, unintelligible spills, packaging from frozen food. The mirror above the sink is splattered with toothpaste. I wet a hand towel and wipe it clean. The face I see is only partially my own. None of this feels solid. Under my feet, I may feel the grit of sand on the floor. I think back but my memories all have the uncanny disjointedness of trying to piece together something distant. Something Skully said. Little crescents of dirt sit under my overgrown fingernails and I'm not sure how they got there. Somewhere in the void, no doubt. One world of many.

I turn on the ceiling light and the shape of it burns into my vision. I close my eyes and still see it, a white circle radiating little flares, hovering in a darkened stratum. *I can't continue like this.* The light seems to be spreading out, covering more of my sight. My thoughts are of all the particles and waves in empty space, of blurring thresholds and unseen qualities. The interstice between belief and truth, a slipping between opposites, areas of widening gray. Everyone is moving toward some kind of escape, making their way across the subtle shift. Something breaks and my footing loosens. I blink my eyes. A redness appears at the periphery of the light. I blink them again and again. I lean back and drift into the image of a fading line, the stillness of a womb, and a haloed figure pointing in two directions with glass hands.



Chorophobia by Kristin Fouquet.

Groceries

Mia was three and her dad loved her very, very much. Mia had a sister who had just been born, a sister who was barely older, and a brother who was eight, and they shared a room until their mom and dad could sell their house for a bigger one. Mia's dad loved them all very much. Mia's dad was a businessman and he often had to stay out late. Most nights, Mia was the only one still awake when her dad came home, and she was very quiet so she didn't disturb Dana or Talia or especially baby Junia. She noticed that her dad would often trip a little when he came through the front door and look around like he didn't recognize where he was.

One time, he caught Mia peeking through the doorway in her bedroom and he scooped her up and took her back to the bottom bunk of the bed she shared with Talia. When he leaned over to kiss Mia's forehead and then her cheek after brushing her wispy ocher bangs out of the way, Mia felt fire in his breath, but it was not warm. It smelled so clean it stung the insides of her nose. She didn't pull away, like her siblings would. None of them were used to touch—Dad was the only one hugging or kissing the three oldest—and they were all jumpy except Mia. She felt less hungry deep inside whenever an adult's hand made contact with her, even when she didn't think she should. Dad didn't kiss Mia's mom when he came home this late, but Mia knew it was because he was trying to be quiet and not wake anyone, just like she was doing. Baby Junia made Mom tired, Dad told Mia. Mia asked if she made Mom tired, too, and her dad said he was too tired to remember.

The day Mia turns twenty, her four roommates will have a retro-themed party for her in their house on College Avenue. Two of her roommates will have raided her photo albums—Mia is the mawkish type and asked for them as a high school graduation gift—and pinned baby pictures of Mia and her siblings all over the living room and kitchen and scattered them around the food table. Her face will crinkle like she's about to cry, the way it always does in a smile. There will be a pixelated, blown-up photo of her a few days after she was born, with 10-month-old Talia squalling on the hard, lacey couch next to her. The ones with her mom, dead since Mia was 12, will make everyone sigh at how Mia grew up to look just like her. Mia will still think she resembles her dad's side of the family, especially his sisters, in every way. This, anyway, is what Mia will have come to think her dad might have been thinking about his daughters.



Mia's mom stayed asleep until after breakfast almost every morning. Dad usually set out cereal and milk, but he didn't always have time to also pour the milk or the orange juice. Baby Junia used up almost all the air crying until Mom could get up and go to her. Mia thought Junia's jaw would come off every time. When Mom finally figured out what Junia wanted and got her quiet, she would often lean against the wall and almost fall asleep with Junia's drool dripping like a faucet on the carpet next to them.

At breakfast, Dad winked at Dana, rustled his curly, nearly black hair, and thanked him for

being “such a big little man.” He snatched his coat by the hood off the freestanding rack, which wobbled and almost toppled, and hurried out the door.

“Lunchboxes!” Dad said over his shoulder. “Don’t let anyone leave without one.”

Mia’s mom startled awake. She managed to quiet Junia’s fusses just in time for Mia to hear Dad’s car door slam and the last stutters of the engine, which had been about to go to pieces for years, as he drove away. The engine always sounded to Mia like *but but but but* all the way down the street.

Mia’s mom used to take Mia and her siblings to the grocery store sometimes. Dad would stay home. When Dad was home, the house would feel too crowded, like someone was watching wherever she went. Watching but not seeing. Mom stopped going to the store after Junia was born so Dad would have to go. Mia was the only one of her siblings that liked going to the grocery store—the many beautiful colors and delicious smells and grownups that could notice her and smile kindly and pat her head or take her hand if she reached one out. They wouldn’t have to breathe cold fire breath on her cheeks like Dad, but they would always have to put their fingers in Mia’s hair.

“My only copper top,” Dad said every time. “Looks just like my baby sister.”

Aunt Randi was the youngest and smallest of Dad’s siblings. Dad thought Aunt Randi’s hair, which was so straight she couldn’t get a crimp in it with a curling iron, was beautiful. He loved her very much. Children weren’t allowed in their parents’ closet, but Mia snuck in once to try on Mom’s shoes and saw that Dad kept several pictures of his sisters on his dresser by his stack of solid-colored sweaters. They were all older than Mia in the pictures, but still girls. One was of Aunt Randi when she’d let her hair reach her hipbones and it looked like she was wearing a fraying, red cape. She wasn’t looking at the camera. None of them were. They didn’t seem to be aware they were having their picture taken.

Mia wasn’t aware Dad was watching her from the other side of the closet door, through the small spaces between the hinges, until she reached for one of the pictures. Dad pushed the door open so hard Mia thought it would snap in half, and she started to cry as Dad’s big, rough hands fastened low around her waist and he whisked her off to her room, holding her out and away from him like rotting food on the way to the dumpster. He left her on her bed, forbidding Talia and Dana to go into their own room, until it was time to go to the store.



Mia will have to go to the grocery store for the first time by herself when she’s 12. Her mom will have fallen asleep while driving Talia to her first dance recital and will not be able to leave the hospital even after a week. The only separation between her and her elderly, rickety roommate is a curtain that could have been made out of paper. Dana will be on a road trip with friends to celebrate having only one more year of high school. Dad won’t leave Mom’s bedside, so Mia will stay with Talia.

Mia will see the blue and purple blooms on Talia’s cheeks and jump when Talia moans for

her to stop staring. Talia will have gotten released from the hospital after two nights but will still need attention. Dad will seem hollowed-out as he tucks Talia in and changes the bandages on her arm and hand; this will be the first time Mia will not feel watched at all when she is at home with Dad. There won't be dinner the night Talia is released, so Mia will walk the seven streets down and six streets over to the Albertson's and find a cart to push up and down every aisle, the thick hues of soup cans and cracker boxes and popcorn packaging and sports drinks kaleidoscoping as she tries to focus, carts clanging down the aisles around her and calls for price checks over the intercom and the sandy *huzz* of the old fluorescent lights throbbing in her ears like underwater pressure. She will avoid Junia's favorite section—the potatoes and squash and onions, for some reason—completely; she will just try to imagine what Junia would look like as a nine-year-old.



Dad's voice thrummed in Mia's ears during other fights she heard when she pretended to be asleep. Sometimes, they were about her and Talia and Junia and Dana as if they were other people's kids.

"Dana is not your brother," her mom said the one time Dad was home on a Saturday afternoon and the sisters, all under age five still, were supposed to be napping. "Your brother should be in prison for what he did to you all." Her mom seemed like she was feeling better. She was standing up and folding Mia's clothes next to a stack of paper grocery bags.

"And the girls," she looked up, "are not your sisters." She eyed Junia's crib. "Except in the off-limits way." Whenever they visited Auntie Jeri or Auntie Randi, only Mom went with them. They did not ever visit Uncle Chris.

Junia snored louder than Mia had ever heard Dad snore. Talia stretched in her sleep and tapped the headboard with her fingernails. Dana, too old for naps, glared at a jigsaw puzzle he'd been struggling with for days. No one noticed Mia crouched by the door of her room. Her mom slowly stacked Mia's skirts and some of Talia's sweaters into one of the grocery bags.

"Not threatening to leave again, Rachel," Mia's dad said, pinching the part of his nose that was squashed between his eyes. Dad stepped toward Mom and he noticed Mia in the doorway. Mia felt like big hands were covering her ears and pushing on them, like her dad sometimes did when he screamed over Junia's screaming so Mia wouldn't hear him swear trying to wake up Mom when Junia couldn't. Her face felt like how tomatoes look.

"And in front of the kids, too," he whispered, keeping his eyes slanted down on Mia.



Mom was at breakfast every day for the next week, but Dana still poured the juice and the milk because he wanted to. He poured too fast and his glass overflowed, which he wiped with his sleeves, leaving a snot-like run of orange on his cuff. Mom glared at Dana and tossed him a fat cardboard coaster.

"You'll ruin the wood, Dana."

Dana narrowed his eyes and crumpled his eyebrows. "But trees are outside all the time and the sky is allowed to put water on them." He crossed his arms high on his chest. "And the only time I ever saw a ruined tree was that one that got hit by lightning."

Mom frowned at Dana, then turned to wipe Junia's face.

"When we visited Uncle Chris once and you were the only girl in the family still, don't you remember?" Dana stood on the seat of his creaky, metal folding chair and sliced his hand through the air as he jumped down to the stained, light blue carpet. "It was so awesome!"

"Dana got to visit Uncle Chris?" Mia asked.

"Without us?" Talia slammed her juice on the table. "Why does Dana get to do *everything*?"

Mom ripped her placemat from under her breakfast to catch the cranberry dribble of Talia's juice. "Happy now, Dana?" she said over Talia's whining and Mia's questions and Junia's warm-up whimpers.

"Hey, Mom?" Dana didn't hear the question. "How come we never visit *your* siblings?" His curls bounced with each creak he was making with his chair.

"Because she doesn't have any, bud," Dad said as he appeared in the entryway. Late for work, he skipped through the kitchen, kissing everyone on the tops of their heads.

"The only specialest one in her family. Isn't that lucky?" He paused over Mom's matted brown hair and said, "Summer is coming." He stretched his lips down to just barely touch her head. "You and I will have to talk tonight."



Mia loved to swim and wished her mom would get in the pool with her. Mom instead sat in the grassy area surrounding their neighborhood pool while Mia played in her water wings with Dad. Sometimes, her mom walked along the side of the pool behind the tall lifeguard chair, but she always had all her clothes on, even her shoes. Mia always thought it was too hot in the summer for anyone to be cold, but her mom was always shaking.

Mia started asking to swim a few weeks ago. They will only go once this season. Mom will wear a fading hoodie with a purple and orange tiger, her college's mascot, leaping across the front of it and baggy yoga pants that are gray as static. Dad will ask loudly why Mia's mom bothers to wear a shirt representing a college she didn't graduate from, but before she can answer, he will try to coax her into the water.

"Your babies want to play with you," he will say. With her foot, Mom will bounce Junia in her suspended wheelie chair and raise her eyebrows before she looks away. Dana will throw a beach ball at Talia's face and Mia will almost lose one of her water wings trying to adjust it.

"Did you even wear your swimsuit under all that fabric?" Dad will glare at Dana, who ducks underwater and swims away.

"You're worried about too much coverage suddenly?" Mom will pull her sleeves down over her knuckles. "No two-piece suits for Mia or Talia but—"

"Not sure where you get the idea it even makes sense to compare yourself to the girls, but yes. You are not to get them those little hair ties they're calling bathing suits these days."

Mom will try hard to smile at Junia, keeping her eyes on Junia's pacifier and away from the pool.

"Did you hear me? No skank suits. I don't want my girls getting looked at."

"No, that's apparently just *your* job." But it will be under her breath so Dad can't hear.

Mia's mom will look down at Mia, who is using her legs to make a ferocious tornado of herself and roaring at Talia to look out. "And in front of the kids, too," her mom will say, also hushed, more at Mia than Mia's dad.



The day of their only trip to the pool, Mom came into the kids' room with a large paper grocery bag. Junia slept; Talia helped Dana with his puzzle. Mom knelt and waved at Mia with her fingers, pointing at the bag with her other hand, then put her finger to her lips.

"We can't tell Daddy, now, okay?" Mom slowly pulled out of the bag, set by set, ten bright, two-piece swimsuits, all the colors of the rainbow and some colors not even in the rainbow. One even had little rainbows on it. Rainbows and bulging pink hearts. Mia reached for the closest one, otherworldly blue, like baby Junia's eyes, with purple and yellow butterflies, but Mom snatched it away from her.

"We can't wear them just yet," she said, spreading them out on Mia's bed. "Not 'til we go to Aunt Randi's house. But aren't they lovely?" Mia nodded and put the tips of her fingers in her mouth. She looked at the suits and smiled until a key slid into the front door. Mom scooped all the beautiful suits back into the grocery bag and crumpled it so it would fit behind the wavy blue curtain, thin enough to glow with sunlight, just as Mia thought she heard the lock click.

Talia ran into their bedroom in a new two-piece suit. "Daddy's home! We can go to the pool now!"

Mia's mom caught Talia's wrist and jerked her toward the bed, waving Mia over. She pushed hard on their heads, forcing them down behind the bed while she grabbed two of her own T-shirts and tossed them in the girls' direction.

"Put these on," she said as Dad tripped into the house and started loading the car with the pool stuff Mom had set out earlier. "This is the last time we have to go to the pool."

Talia crawled into a shirt and held it open for Mia. "We could both fit in here," she said.

Mia saw thin, red stripes on the inside of the shirt, down low toward the end.

Mom shushed Talia and waved her hand for her to get more hidden. Talia sank down, and as Mia huddled with her face squished between Talia's feet, her neck sore, she thought about

twirling in the water, the lacey skirt of the pink suit rippling around her waist. She thought of spinning around in the grass during the lifeguard's break, the strings of the one with yellow stars and white unicorns flying out like her arms. She thought of jumping from the side of the pool toward her dad, ready to catch her, his "little sack of potatoes," the ruffles of the red and purple swimsuit flapping like flags before being stopped by water, lifeguard whistles signaling adult-swim time or lightning storms, or, Daddy's scratchy, clutching hands.



They stay two hours before Dad remembers the dire need to go to the grocery store. Everyone packs up nicely and the drive home is quiet. Mom steps out of the car and leans over to unbuckle Junia.

"Mom, what are those scratches on your tummy?" Talia asks and points.

Her mom jerks herself upright and tucks her shirt in quickly. "Stretch marks," she says, eyeing Dad. "From Junia."

"They're not healed yet?"

"Healed yet?" Dad turns around and hooks his arm around the passenger seat like he's about to back out.

"Talia, they're—"

Talia interrupts her mom. "Yeah, they're red and one of them had blood on it."

"Inside. Now." Mom turns Talia hard by the shoulders toward the house.

"Actually, Talia, I want to hear more about Mommy's scratches." Dad steps out of the car and in Talia's path to the front door. Talia starts to shiver in her T-shirt, which hasn't begun to dry yet. Mia is cold, too.

"Do you guys really have to fight all the time?" Dana kicks his beach ball out of the car. Talia is too frozen to cry. "We're all starving and freezing out here and all you care about is who can yell louder." Dana grabs an armful of towels and pool noodles, handing some to Mia and Talia and motions with his head for them to follow him inside. Mom gathers Junia. The sliding door barely latches before Dad reverses out of the driveway to go to the store.



Mia is ready to go to Aunt Randi's like her mom said before the pool, but her mom collapses on her bed. As her dad turns into the driveway, he sees Talia and a neighbor boy run into the boy's house, holding hands, wearing only swimsuits. Talia's is a bright orange two piece. He forgets the food in the trunk, walks in the door, and Junia's cry blusters in his face before he sees Mia peeking through the crack of the bathroom door closest to the hinges. She is squinching her eyes and nose and jamming her fingers so hard into her ears it looks like they could be touching in the middle of her head. Paint is peeling. Skin is hair-raised and creeping with the screams. Mom,

besides the shallow up and down of her rib cage, is as motionless as the sea floor in bed. Dad rubs his ears, calls for Mia to come out. When she does, he glares, jaw-dropped, at Mia's mom, and squeezes his fist so hard all his knuckles crack. Mia's swimsuit seems cracked open in two by rolls of baby fat and is so tight it creates more.

He looks up. Mia has taken all the two-piece suits Mom has just bought into the bathroom to try them on. They are strewn about like seeds on hard ground. Junia's wailing somehow gets louder.

When Talia is 14, she will get felt up by a high-school senior at a pool party.

Mia's mom rolls over under the covers.

Dana will create new life with two girls before he's out of college; none of them will finish.

Junia has run out of tears but not air.

Aunt Randi finally stopped wondering whether she should have reported Uncle Chris. She would have been the only one brave enough, but their mom would have split into two pieces. Their family might have, too.

Mia is three and Dad loves her very, very much. He says so. He walks to where Mia's mom is sleeping, wrenches the pillow out from under her, and places it over Junia's gaping hole of a mouth.

"She will not be seen by the wrong eyes and missed by the right ones," Dad says. Then he presses and holds the pillow down until the only sound is the slow *oooo, kkkk* of Mom's breathing in and breathing out.

Second Person

Someone is talking to me—a soft voice, a woman’s maybe—but I’ve got no attention to spare for that. The only thing that matters is the top of my head feels like it’s been dunked in sulfuric acid. My hands are clamped to it as if I could draw the pain off. My eyes are squeezed shut.

And you—whoever you are—it seems you have questions. Not now.

“Rob,” the woman says. “Rob. Are you all right?”

It’s cold underneath me, where my knees and elbows touch the ground. I still can’t let go of my head, but the pain is receding. “Not sure,” I manage to say.

“I think you were out for a minute there.”

Something is not right here. I know that much.

I feel the woman’s hands on mine.

And you—if I knew where I was, what had happened, why would I keep it from you?

I open my eyes. Everything’s blurry. The ground is light, blotched with brown, like dirty cement. And cold. It’s not cement; it’s ice.

“You hit your head pretty good.” She’s very calm. “There’s a little bit of blood. I’m going to grab a bandage from the first aid kit.”

The woman, at least, seems sympathetic. And familiar somehow. But you—where did you come from? I can’t see you, but you’re here. Why is it I’m supposed to explain all this to you when I don’t understand it myself?

“Is this okay?” The woman tugs gently at my hands, separating them, lifting them away from my head. “Oh, damn.” She doesn’t sound quite so calm now.

I bring one of my hands down where I can see it. The blue glove is covered with bright, shiny red. Blood is dripping on the ice, pooling in the pits and crevices of refrozen snow.

Her hand stays on my head, pressing down. Not so much pain now. “All right, no biggie. Scalp wounds tend to bleed.”

Right.

It’s dripping into my eyes.

“Can you sit up? Get gravity working for us?” You’d almost think she knew what she was doing—could she be a nurse?—but no, there’s an edge of panic in her voice. She’s making this up as she goes along.

Sorry, that’s all I can give you.

I sit up. Not good. For a second I see grey sky, huge blocks of ice stacked to a truncated horizon, a black cliff seamed with white rising into the bottom of a cloud. Then it's like some mutant gravity rises from the ground and throws me over on my side. My head is whirling.

I would tell you her name if I knew it. Whoever she is, she swears, freaked out, and the blood-soaked bandage falls out of her hand right in front of me. But then from somewhere else she grabs a piece of cloth, a shirt or a sweater, and presses it to my head. "Are you all right? Hold this. Hold this. Fuck."

Jennifer. Her name is Jennifer. That comes to me, even though I am pretty well focused on the velocity of the whirling inside my head. It slows. Not so bad. I think about trying to raise my head again. No. Maybe the bleeding will stop anyway. It's got to start clotting. Pretty sure I have thick blood from all the junk food I eat.

And you're thinking, he knows he eats junk food, but he can't remember his name or where he is or what happened.

I can remember my name. I can remember that I'm tall, that I'm white, that I speak English. And French. A little Italian. I can remember who's President—that's what they always want to know, right? Not sure they still ask that question. There are things you're better off not remembering.

But...Jennifer. If it is Jennifer. I knew a Jennifer at some point; this might not be her. Could be another Jennifer. Somehow I remember that the world is full of Jennifers.

"Where are we?" I ask her.

"Almost to the icefall." A pause. It goes on long enough that she realizes I'm not asking for a GPS fix. I'm asking, What mountain? What range? What country? Come to think of it, what continent are we on?

Good, you're thinking, he's clear on the planet. Fuck you. Aren't invisible companions supposed to be comforting? That's what I seem to remember. Messner on Everest, some Brit lost in the Antarctic, Slocum on his solo circumnavigation—they felt something, someone, a presence. Not like this, though.

"The icefield," Jennifer says. "Columbia Icefield."

Canada. Okay. Alberta. Or is it Saskatchewan? Anyway, Canadian Rockies. I've been wanting to come here. Though apparently, it's not working out.

"We need to get you back to the trailhead. It's not that far."

Far is relative, Jennifer. Or not-Jennifer. Far can be a hundred miles. Right now far is the next little hummock of snow.

She tries again to get me up, but she's small and I'm large. Am I cooperating? Not exactly, because I can feel that if I did actually get to my feet, I would topple right over. But she coaxes me, and I get to my knees, swaying back and forth. And then like water filling a glass, blackness comes up out of the ice and rises to my eyes and over, and down I go.

We try waiting, we try me crawling, we try her dragging me, but none of it moves me more than a few yards. She leaves me there and goes for help. My pack—must be mine, since it's not hers—is lying on the ice a few yards away. She digs into it and sets me up: waterproof groundsheet between me and the ice, sleeping bag wrapped around my shoulders, water bottle near my hands, energy bars even. A fresh T-shirt for a bandage. There's a new red splotch on the T-shirt each time I check it, but each splotch is a little smaller than the previous one.

"Okay," she says. "You're fine. You're going to be fine. This won't take long. I'll be back."

I nod. I can finally look at her closely for a moment. Her hair is blonde, but maybe not really blonde. She's spent a lot of time in the sun—creases around her eyes, a deep tan. Greyish-green eyes, a round face, small nose. Deep furrows in her forehead—maybe she worries a lot, maybe it's just the situation right now.

Does she look familiar? Yes. Yes and no. It's a pretty face, and I want to say a kind one, but not a distinctive one.

She hefts her pack, tells me one more time I'll be fine, and walks away. Her ice ax is strapped to the back of her pack, and I want to tell her to use it, the last thing we need is for her to slip and sprain an ankle. But her crampons seem to be enough, because she motors away, taking one last look at me over her shoulder before an undulation of the glacier takes her out of sight.

When she's gone, the first thing I notice is how hard the wind's blowing. A river of clouds is pushing down the glacier, puffing whorls of mist right down to the surface, driving the odd grain of snow against my face. I have to wonder why we were heading onto the icefield with this kind of weather brewing.

How do I know we were heading up and not down? Can't say, exactly, I just do.

Second thing I notice: with her voice absent, yours, though it's silent, is a lot stronger and more insistent. My head still aches, and badly, but compared to how it was when I first came to, it's nothing. I'm warm enough; she's wrapped me up well. And the bleeding is not much more than a trickle. So it's all good, relatively speaking. Except that there's nothing to compete with your silent yammering.

What do I remember? What happened? Why am I here?

I remember everything since I woke up on the ice. At least I assume I do. If there are gaps I don't know about, are they really gaps? But before that—sorry. The accident? You can stop asking. The rest of the trip, the journey from San Francisco to here? Nothing.

San Francisco, okay, that's something. But a street, a house? No. All right, yes, a building, 101 California St., the tower where that madman killed all those people decades ago. Maybe an office? No. Walking around the Financial District, a park by the Transamerica Pyramid. No clue why that's coming back.

Other mountains? you want to know. Definitely. Whitney. Shasta. Hood. Rainier. Mont Blanc? Maybe, not sure. New Zealand, a glacier, ice caves, something went wrong.

I get your point. Is there some reason to think that Jennifer and I know what the hell we're doing up here? Because there's some reason to think we don't. How did I manage to knock myself unconscious on a gently sloping glacier?

And right here, your tone shifts. Maybe it wasn't me that knocked myself unconscious.

Stop. Shut the fuck up. That's ridiculous. The glacier is a massive pile of ice, groaning under its own weight, slashed by streams of freezing water, riddled with caves, crevasses, sinkholes. It's a million accidents waiting to happen. I slipped jumping across a puddle, or one of my crampons came loose on a steep slope, or I stepped in a hidden seam in the ice...whatever.

That seems to shut you up for a bit. Snow starts to fall, soft blobs riding the erratic currents of the wind. I'm not inclined to move my head much, the dizziness has too strong a grip, but I try to look around. There isn't much to see—the ice stretching down below me into mist, above me to an icefall, a jumbled ramp of seracs, crevasses, snow-bridges. Off to the right, dimly, crags looming up, not sheer but lumpy like a diseased face. To the left, a slash of blue where a stream cuts its way downhill through the ice.

I wonder how long it will take Jennifer to get back to the trailhead. Could be she'll even meet someone coming up. Then again, could be she'll get to the trailhead and no one will be there. Whatever I knew about this place, I've forgotten. Can she call for help?

Couldn't she have called from right here? you wonder blandly.

Not really the kind of place you expect to get a signal.

Still, seems odd she didn't try.

How would I know if she did? I was unconscious for...I don't know how long.

I know, the moment I think about it, where my phone is—the small outside pocket of my backpack, the one with a bit of green wire twisted through the hole in the pull of the zipper. But the phone is dead.

Weird? Sure, it's weird. Lots of things are weird. Your fucking existence is weird.

The wind keeps picking up. Snow gathers on the groundsheet, on the sleeping bag wrapped around my shoulders, on my legs. I brush it off and it blows away. Repeat. And repeat. And repeat. I'm starting to feel the cold. In my feet, my cheeks, my hands. Before she left, Jennifer wiped the blood off my gloves, but somehow in the process I got snow inside them.

You're good at hypotheticals. Yes, it's possible there will be no one at the trailhead. Yes, it's possible she won't be able to get cell reception there either. Do I need to think about these things yet? It's been, what, twenty minutes?

Then it's been longer, an hour maybe. Still, I don't know how far up the glacier I am. I rummage through my pack to see if there's a map. Less dizzy now, I notice. But if there's a map, I can't find it.

It's odd about Jennifer, I'll give you that much. It seems like she and I must be close. Otherwise, what are we doing together on a mountain in the middle of nowhere? But if we are close, shouldn't I feel that connection? Shouldn't that be the last thing that a concussion would take away from me?

I get it, you don't think I should trust her. I don't know what your agenda is.

But fair enough, I don't know what hers is either.

The weather only gets worse. Thicker snowfall, a pall of cold mist that shuts out all but a dozen yards of view. Somehow I had thought it was early in the day, late morning at most, but now the light fades as though the sun has gone down. A night out here would not be good. The falling snow will make it hard enough to find me; if it's dark as well, the chances drop even further. If Jennifer finds real help, park rangers or an experienced team of climbers, that's one thing. If it's just hikers or tourists that she manages to flag down, unlikely they'd even try.

In which case...right. It's up to me to get myself down.

I try again to stand up, but I get no further than my knees before I feel myself about to black out. Even on hands and knees I'm unsteady. So I slide downhill on the ice, sitting with my legs stretched out in front of me. I keep getting tangled up with the sleeping bag, and I have to drag my pack along behind me.

Sometimes gravity helps for a few yards, but the slope of the ice is uneven, and the surface is rough. I still have crampons on, and when the left one catches a ridge of harder ice, I rotate and start sliding downhill headfirst. I don't have an ice ax, so it's a matter of digging in with my elbows and dragging my heels to slow down until a gentler gradient brings me to a halt. I stop for a rest after that.

Of course you're curious about the ice ax. Did Jennifer take it with her by mistake somehow? Or not by mistake?

Right. One more thing I can't explain. But what? What are you saying? That for some reason she brained me with the ax, then threw it down a crevasse? Because it had my blood on it? But then she stayed with me, made sure I was all right, and went to get help.

And didn't come back.

I can't think about this. I need to just keep going. If she's not coming back, and now I start to think she really isn't, I absolutely need to get down off the glacier before dark. There should be a shelter of some kind at the trailhead.

I can stop pretending—I'm starting to get hypothermic. And the pain in my head is getting worse again. Water would be a good idea, and I'm guessing there is aspirin in a first aid kit in my pack. But I don't do anything about it. I don't seem to have a lot of will power. It's not so much the pain, and it's not the possibility that I'll freeze to death or have a cerebral hemorrhage. Those are not the things that are knocking me flat in this moment. It's the idea that I don't understand how Jennifer, or whoever she is, could have just walked off and left me out here.

I start moving downhill again. Without my noticing just when it started, I'm sliding sideways, slowly at first and then, almost at once, fast and out of control. The overall slope of the glacier is shallow, but I'm in one of the water-carved gullies that run the length of it. I'm skidding down the side of the gully. Crampons, elbows—no use.

Something catches, I'm tumbling, and then with a splash and a jarring impact I'm in the stream.

And sliding, with freezing water pouring over me and shoving me along. It's not deep, a foot or two, but the streambed is polished blue-white ice, impossibly smooth. It curves around a boulder and I make a grab for that, but I just get punched in the chest and whirled past like a bug in a shower stall.

Some of these streams disappear into moulins, holes that plunge down under the surface of the ice. I've always wondered what becomes of bugs that go down the drain, but I suspect it's not good. Maybe this stream stays on the surface, maybe it's a free ride to the bottom of the glacier where it will just spit me out onto the gravel pile at the terminus. Not taking that chance. I get a crampon semi-planted on one side of the channel and push myself out onto a flat spot between the bends of an S-curve. Sharp pain in my knee, dull explosion at the base of my skull, but I flop out of the water and lie there in a shallow puddle.

It takes a while, it hurts, but I sit up. I have to move. No ambiguity about that. I'm not completely soaked, because my jacket and pants are waterproof, but enough meltwater has gotten inside them that I'm shivering already. The sleeping bag is gone, somewhere up on the slope above the stream. I could climb back and look for it, maybe, but on hands and knees? Even getting out of the bottom of the gully is going to be hard.

That's when I hear voices. A man's, shouting something I can't make out. Another man's, answering, calmer. Then a woman's. Jennifer's, calling my name. I can't tell where the voices are coming from, but it seems I don't have to.

You're strangely quiet.



It turns out the two men are Mounties. No red jackets, no funny hats, no horses, just two off-duty cops who were at the trailhead trying to decide whether to hike up into the storm. On the one hand, they don't seem impressed by my injury—they haul me down to the trailhead parking lot like a misplaced duffel bag. On the other hand, they show no hesitation about calling for a helicopter to take me to a hospital in Jasper. They lay me down on the back seat of their Land Rover while we wait. Jennifer sits in the front passenger seat.

"You don't recognize me, do you?" she asks.

"You mean from more than an hour ago?"

"Right." She smiles, a little edgily, as though I'm being annoying in some way that's very familiar to her. "From, let's say, eight years ago."

"Not really. I think I might know your name."

"Okay, good." She looks at me expectantly.

"Jennifer?"

"No."

I consider trying other names that come to me. She looks like she could be a Gail or a Sara. But what are the odds? "Then, I'm sorry, I don't know."

"Fair enough." Again, that smile. "Caroline."

"Caroline," I say. "Okay. So...well, this is embarrassing, but how do we know each other?"

"I'm not sure if this is the time or the place." She glances over at the Mounties. They're both on their cellphones, looking across the parking lot into a gorge full of clouds.

"Sure it is."

She holds her left hand in front of my face, palm down. I shake my head. She sighs, grabs my left hand, holds it next to hers, also palm down. Both hands have a pale spot on the ring finger.

"Really," I say.

"Yes, really."

"Damn."

"Damn?" She raises an eyebrow.

I'm about to say, "You'd think I would remember." But then it strikes me that maybe what she'd rather think is that the *damn* was about the fact that we're not married anymore.

"Well, something must have happened, right?" I say. "Something bad."

"You could say that."

"But maybe not that bad, or why would we be climbing mountains together?"

"Also true."

"Are you going to tell me?"

"Not now, I don't think. You've already got a lot to process."

"Well, all right," I tell her. "I guess it will all come back. If not..."

"If not?"

"You seem nice. I'm sure I'll enjoy getting to know you." It hurts to smile, and it probably looks godawful. But she smiles in return, and her expression is a mirror for how I feel—exhausted, uncertain, but relieved; safe for the moment, at least.

One of the Mounties points off into the clouds. I don't see anything, but after a moment I start to hear the rhythmic *fwop fwop fwop* of a helicopter rotor. Underneath that sound, silent but not really silent, I hear your voice, whispering to me about the ice ax.

You, Me, and the Others

I was walking down the county road, which followed the creek we used to dig in bend for bend. It clung like loose skin on the natural feature. I must have cut a pathetic figure on the side of it; my hands were in my pockets, and I was going shirtless on account of the heat. I let the warm wind scour the sweat off me, felt my chest go from wet to dry. Sand blew into my eyes and I tried to blink it away. I tried not to think about you.

A cop car came up behind me, stalked me for a few minutes at a walk's pace. Then the siren barked, and I stopped.

The cop, who I vaguely recognized, unfolded out of the driver's seat with his wide, flat hat. He walked up to me, big thumbs hooked into his belt.

"Where you headed, Jake?"

"Nowhere," I said.

"You know they put in a call for you."

"Figured they might."

"You want to go back there? Apologize?"

"No, not really."

We—all of us boys who hadn't proved ourselves—lived in a big shack along the creek. Since the day you got proved and moved out, I got sick of how we all ran together, thoughtless and careless, always fighting or wrestling. The other boys talked about what they'd do when they saw their own reflection in the calling circle, when they stepped in there with it. As though putting thought or effort or pageantry into a way of killing reflected differently on the kill, or the one who did it.

Earlier that afternoon, some kid was talking about how, when he saw his old self, he'd put its eyes out first. The way he said it got an itch in me. You and me, we never talked like that. So I put out one of his eyes, saying, there you go, now when the day comes, you'll have half the work.

Nobody fucked with me on the way out of the shack. I started walking, no destination in mind. You know how it is when you're a boy, and you walk around like a magnet, or a lure in a lake, looking for trouble to find you.

"You took things a little far, Jake," the cop was saying, "You want to take me to see your daddy?"

"Nope," I said.

He kind of sighed and laughed at the same time. "Well, I got to take you, one way or the other. You going to go quietly?"

We stood there a moment the way men do, aware of one another. He tipped his head and gave me an eye behind his mirror shades.

"You want to drive somewhere with me?"

Heat passed over the base of my neck like a breath. I didn't think of you, precisely, but you know how we get past thought with these things. The feeling, in muscle or stomach, that comes first, and then comes the half-thought, the silhouette or the aura of the thought. But I didn't think of you.

"Nope," I said.

"Fine. But you're headed in the car with me. Don't give me any shit, I'm not some kid. Hands."

I presented them. He secured a zip tie and reeled me to the backseat.



The cop kept eying me in the rear-view mirror.

"Little bit old to still be living the boy life, aren't you?"

I didn't say anything.

"It's alright, my reflection didn't show 'til I was, God, 19. That was back before we knew about the day's difference, you know. So it looked exactly like me, exactly. It was fuckin' wild." He laughed.

"You gonna tell me how you tore it up?"

"No. Boys do that shit; fantasize and pump up on what they do. Part of the whole thing, getting to be a man, is taking it serious after the fact. You're not just killing something. Any boy can kill something. It's more than that."

He looked at me again in the mirror and his eyes had a strange, unreachable quality. "You're closer to getting that than most kids, right?"

I thought over it. I thought about this man. Laurence, Laverne, something. I knew him from around, how he had kept around like a bad penny. In a town like ours, I ended up understanding more about people than what they say about themselves. You know what I mean. I did get it, though, I got what becoming a man meant in our neck. I got it, I thought, more than he did. Because of you.

It was supposed to be about giving something up, putting it aside. It was a decision.

Before I could answer the cop's question, the radio on his dash, which had been emitting cryptic gibberish for the entirety of the ride, seemed to seize his attention. He pawed at the corded microphone.

"This is deputy Lawson, ten nine, over."

I couldn't make out the response.

"Copy that."

We picked up speed and my back pressed into the warm plastic of the cruiser's backseat.

"I've got to check something out," Lawson said over the hum of the engine. We drove away from the creek, up along the county road nuzzling town. Trees multiplied, began to crowd one another.

"Where are we going?" I said.

He didn't answer. We pulled off to the side. Through the windshield, I could see a mailbox that I recognized even through the wire mesh. The Barrons, our kind of people. Or my father's, at least.

"What's going on?"

He parked, killed the engine, turned to me. "Disturbance just off this turn, here. Road's blocked down the way, apparently, so no sideshow for you. I'm going on foot." He unlocked the long gun secured in the front seat, racked a round, and then spoke, as if to himself, "Know these woods like the back of my hand."

The Barrons' mailbox marked the edge of their property. The only thing of any significance there was one of our calling circles. Something was happening.

"Don't go anywhere," Lawson said, and got out, trudging across the road and into the wooded land beyond.



You taught me the trick. I had presented my hands for the cop with wrists turned upwards, so I twisted them around until my thumbs met. The zip tie had a little give, but not enough. I decided my left thumb would be the one to suffer so that the rest of me might go free. So I gripped it with the fingers of my right hand and straightened up in my seat.

The key to breaking something is to be firm, and quick, and to let action precede thought. That I knew before I met you.

I took a deep breath and then I pulled, and my nostrils filled up with the ecstatic scent of necessary pain, like the salts they give you when your bell's been rung in a fight. My eyes let loose their tears. I let the breath come out high in my throat and laughed my way into the back of the driver's seat through that first wave of agony.

With the left thumb pressed into my palm, I had room to slip my right thumb out of the restraint, and that was it. My hand was angry. Angry angry angry, with that tailing note of sadness at my betrayal of it. I let it go through what it needed to go through and did my best to let it be while I went on.

I had been wearing my steel-toes, you remember how I loved them, and I congratulated myself silently for my forethought. My luck—the windows gave, even crumbled into the semi-neat cubes that don't cut so bad. I got out of the car with just a few scratches, plus the thumb, still angry.

Again, my luck. Lawson had left his door ajar, as though he were going to be coming right back. The CB radio was still on and it rumbled low like a tarp in the wind. There were no keys in

the cruiser's ignition, naturally, but right on the passenger side seat was my cell phone. I opened it up—it still had some charge. A couple of missed calls from my father. I tapped and he answered on the first ring.

"Jake," he said. "It's happening. Circles stopped working."

"I know. Deputy picked me up off the road. He's run off toward the Barrons'. Left just a few minutes ago."

"Forget him. Do you have a car?"

I looked again at the empty ignition. "Not as such."

"I'll have someone pick you up. You're needed here, we need to shore up the circles. We have to do these motherfuckers' work for them. Weakness," he said.

"You're not mad about the eye thing?" I said.

"Nature of boys to get kicked around. It's not important and I don't care."

"Clearly."

"Where are you?"

I told him.

"A car's coming. Stick there."

"I'm going to see Clark," I said.

"Don't be stupid."

"I don't care if I'm stupid. I'm going to see Clark."

"If you're going to be stupid, then at least don't be sentimental, Jake."

I hung up. Talking to my father made me want to wash my hands. I threw the phone back in the car where I found it.

From the county road, a half mile or so opposite the woods, a rough field stretched through where the closest subdivision started. I knew you lived there. I thought how I wanted to see you, whether I'm a man or no. You were, in your day, as unaccountable as I was.

I had to set my mind along a tightrope and maintain a terrible sort of focus—I could no more follow my many available trains of thought (how bad is it; how bad can it get; was this inevitable; where were you) than Moses could have taken a left turn through the Red Sea.

My left hand leapt with invisible fire, a crack through which hot light was let into my brain. It was already swelling. I ran, in a dead heat. Across the field, into the subdivision.



I didn't see anybody out on the street as I ran, not driving or walking or lounging or drinking. Riding mowers sat motionless on half-shorn lawns. There were flashes in the sky, but whatever throat up there issued thunder was a dry one. There was only the wind, the weird bite of air

anticipating rain, the weird light of the magic hour that gave the sidewalk a lavender tint. The thump and scuff of the steel-toes, not made for running. I was on my tightrope and my mind maneuvered around the implications of the lack of life on the street. I was headed to where I thought you might be.

I was thankful, in a way; I wanted to see people, but did not want to see them. Not seeing meant not having to determine precisely what was happening, what it meant.

I ran down that barren straightaway you moved to with Cathy—strange the way that a place so open can feel so confining. I saw that your '71 Cutlass, ridiculous and sleek and shit brown, was parked at an angle in your driveway. Either you were home, or absent in a sense that was not mundane.

There again I felt the wanting and not wanting, the aura of the thought of you. My broken thumb was an antenna receiving bandwidths of ache. I could feel the sweat slipping into the corners of my eyes and running between my bare shoulder blades, coming out the tops of my toes and making the socks itch under the boot leather.

I reached into the Cutlass, into the cooler in the backseat. I was surprised you still stocked it, married man and father that you are, but then you kept the Cutlass itself, hadn't you? I plucked a silver can from the stale water and I let it distract me before I had to go inside. The porch light was on, the door unlocked.

It was dark inside. To aid the porch light, which glanced secondhand through the front door, there was only the lingering dusk through the picture windows and the glass doors out back. The rest of it was a dark smudge beyond the few feet in front of me. Everything about the place seemed undisturbed, dormant. I shivered, half-naked in the warm, captured air of that house.

And then, with the needling whine of my thumb prodding my thoughts, I found the circle in the den, drawn at the corner of the fireplace. Not meant to be there, and you must have known that as well as I did—the point was for everybody to see you kill. Having a calling circle at home, in private? It was bizarre, ominous. Perhaps, in some way, it was daring. I liked that spin on it. It flattered you.

I walked toward it, until the line of it became sharp in my vision. I was trying to make sense of all of it, which I guess is the problem, because sense isn't something boys make. I thought the two of us made something like sense, though. I looked into that empty circle. I wished, not for the first time, that I had someone I could talk to, even if it wasn't you.



When I was a kid, I had a favorite shirt, a red plaid button-up that was warm enough in the fall but somehow cooling in the summertime. And the girls, when we saw them, they liked me in it. One day my old man calls on all us boys to dig clay along the creek, some material for whatever they were trying in the circles at that time, and I'm wearing the shirt, so I take it off and leave it in the truck. I think, I can dig bare chested. My old man sees this, and he tells me to put it back on, so I do that. And then he calls who but you over, and he gives you a big silver marker, permanent, and pops the cap on it.

My father says, "Boy, Clark here's gonna come after you, and you're going to keep that shirt spotless."

The fact of it was that no matter how good I was at wrestling, the shirt was going to get marked. And because I started from a point of wanting to preserve something, I was unprepared for loss of it. By the time he called you off, I was silver all over. The lesson was: you go into a fight, you fight like everything you can spare is already gone. Then my father tears the shirt up with his own hands, as if the point needed emphasis. I still had the little silver marks showing from places you got me, places where the shirt didn't cover.

You gave me your best shirt after that, by way of apology. Right off your own back. I wore it at night around the shack, after you proved and left us. It wasn't cooling the way my old favorite was, but I liked the way it felt, for a while.



I noticed a breach in the circle. A slash of the white shape had been overlaid by a substance on the ground, both within and outside its boundaries. It spattered in an uneven line, a fountain pen stroke that was black on the carpet, but where it crossed over the circle it was a ruby jewel tone, like damp and thickened Kool-Aid powder.

I followed the black trail, which thinned and fattened without reason, away from the circle and toward the door (I must have stepped in it on the way in, without realizing it), until I saw it snaking up the stairs to the second floor of the house.

I knew what I'd find, were I to continue up the stairs, but I didn't want to think about that. You were somewhere; I could feel you near, but the ambivalence between wanting and not wanting to see you there had tipped.

I knew I didn't have any desire to obey my father, nor was I in a place to care too much about being constructive with my time and energy. I had, after all, just put a boy's eye out for no reason. So maybe our circles, our little doors, opened both ways all of a sudden. I hadn't even thought about the things on the other side of the circles, because my turn to face another me hadn't come up yet. But you'd killed yours already, so I knew—I'm pretty sure I knew—which one you'd be when I saw you. At the time I didn't think it mattered much.

I decided to return to the circle. Carefully, with the sleeve of your old shirt pulled up and bunched around my thumb, I wiped away the reddened portion, tried to stretch the line back into wholeness. It was salt, mainly, but also crystal bleach, whatever else is good for keeping things separate. It left a little white ghost of a smudge on the fabric.

I didn't have any real expectation that correcting the break in the circle would do anyone any good—even in the dark I noticed how the section of compromised circle scored the tile, like a blown fuse—but staying functional, and recognizable, will sometimes lead you to deny even self-evident things.

They would say to us, way back when, that a man through time only becomes more of himself. It was the same as saying that you can look upon yourself as you were yesterday, and for whatever resemblance is held within that distance, you know it isn't you. The thing within the

circle is immaterial. Who you will yourself to be in the present and future will hold you fast against that stranger.

I thought about the deserted lawns and darkened windows of the street. I had the image in my mind of a circle in every home, in studies or attics or basements, in which the things, the false selves, would be faced alone. Hidden corners, hidden failures. Confusions.

A light flickered in the kitchen. I got up from the floor and walked over the threshold.

And there you were, on the far side of the room.

Beside you, on the lip of the sink, a votive candle sputtered. Your hair was closer cropped than I remembered. It bled into the gloom of the doorway leading to the garage, and you looked, in the soft glow, dazed or in wonderment at the flame. You looked like you.

"Hey, partner," I said.

"Hey," you said, blinking at me.

"I've been looking for you," I said, and I moved close.

"It's you, isn't it?" I didn't know if you were asking me or yourself.

I reached out to you in that dark kitchen. You had the slickness of sweat on your cheek.

"Are you real?" you said.

"As anything."

You put your arms around me, the sweat of your neck warm on my dry skin. And then you pulled back, leaned against the counter.

"We heard the alerts over the CB. How bad is it out there, Jake?"

"Past helping, I think." It was a feeling I had that was like knowing; anything my father didn't have a tight grip on was something beyond gripping.

"Jesus," you said, "Jesus Christ."

"We can pack up the Cutlass and go, we don't need much," I said. My mind bent around the image of the trail going up to the second floor, around what it meant. "We'll go somewhere, fuck all this."

No fist hits like the look you gave me then.

"Jake," you said, "Cathy and the baby are in the cellar. I can't leave them."

"Why aren't you there with them now?"

"Non-perishables," you said, not looking at me, "We only had enough for a few days down there, we didn't know how long to wait out whatever's going on."

Cathy and the baby—I don't think about them often. They were the choice you made, what you were willing to call true.

"They can come with us," I said, and felt stupid immediately. The Cutlass didn't have that many seats, and besides, I didn't really care about them.

You had that indescribable look on you, and then you got up off the counter.

"Better idea, come down with us. Help me carry down the cans. Hell, I've got booze in the freezer, grab that too."

You smiled at first, and you made a little laugh. I was sorting it out. My thoughts went through the motions. But you know how we get past thought with these things. Past them, I could tell that it wasn't what I wanted.

When I hesitated, your smile sort of sagged.

"Let me think about it," I said.

I went to the freezer and opened it up. The blast of cold air was brief, but there was a handle of vodka there on its side and I pulled it out, twisted it open. You were standing across the kitchen, and there was an uncertainty in your stance that was unlike you. I took a pull from the bottle, a long one, exhaling out of my nose like it was my first time. I kept it a second or two past the limit of my breath, so when I stopped I coughed up some, letting it spill out through my nose, feeling the scouring heat of the alcohol in my nostrils.

I held the bottle out to you, and after a few seconds you came to claim it. You took your own pull, more modest, and I socked you in the shoulder.

"Fuckin' weakling," I said, and we both laughed. You put the bottle down on the counter, and then you took me by the wrist, held the cuff of your old shirt between thumb and forefinger.

"This shirt," you said.

"Old man couldn't take everything from me," I said, and I felt proud.

"I'm sorry, Jake. I really am."

"For what? What's there to be sorry about?"

"You know," you said, "that I've got Cathy now. I've got the baby."

I think you saw something in me. You moved forward, held me. There was rain now, tapping at the window.

"Jake," you said. "Jake."

"What about the circle, then?" I said.

You pulled back, holding me by the shoulders. You were playing at confusion. "What?"

"The circle in the den."

"The circle is—" Your face of mock confusion fell, and I was glad for some measure of honesty. "He was there the whole time, that thing wearing my face. Even after I killed him."

"You could have just let him be."

You let me go, and it wasn't a shove, but it felt like one.

"No, I couldn't. You haven't been there, Jake. You don't know what it's like. It wasn't easy, but I did it. Because those things, they're not who we are. He kept coming back, and I kept having to kill him. We are not the same."

Did you think I wouldn't fight for you?

"You could have gone to the church, to the Barrons' barn, done it again with all the other guys. Isn't that what proven men do?"

You covered your eyes with one palm, grimacing. "I did, many times. I'll tell you this, Jake, because I don't think it even matters anymore. Everybody has to keep doing it, or most everybody, but even then I could still feel him, lingering. And I don't need a bunch of old men to keep me honest, I don't need them to tell me I made the right choice. I can do it myself. I know who I am."

Then the man who wore your face took his hand down, and he saw the boot print of black I had trailed onto the tile. As if pulled by a fisher's hook he moved past me, not even seeing me, to where his eyes could rest on what was left of the circle.

"Which one are you?" he said, quietly.

I looked down at my hands, flexed them. My hands, but softer than they had been. I had been a fool, of course. I realized that you and he were not the same.

The you who was you had been in a circle, in a barn or somewhere else among all those men, and he—the him I saw in the kitchen—saw you and then he'd thrown you away, the you that meant so much to me.

I didn't believe him, about knowing who he was. Why had he made his own circle? Because he regretted what he'd done to you? Because when he'd seen you and said no, that isn't me, I'll prove it, his heart wasn't in it?

I think it was because he wanted it both ways. He'd wanted to be him, with his wife and his child and his house, but to have you, in secret, for himself. He wanted you but never meant to claim you.

When I walked into his house, looking for you, I had hoped to see you, or him—I didn't appreciate the difference—but when I looked into the circle, I could only see myself. I was there, and I was wearing your shirt, the one I'd worn just last night. I remembered how soft it was.

I made my choice. I can't pretend, I can't lie. I'm never good at that. I let me be me. I cut myself to break the barrier, and we—myself—went upstairs. We knew that we could only have the one body, and that one was in better shape than the other. It was a mercy, but I couldn't look afterward, and I could only think of you.

This man wearing your face had killed you how many times? A dozen? A thousand? Pulled you through and caged you up in that living room, while the people he promised to love were none the wiser. And all the while, the me that loved you was alone in a shack full of animals. Why? Because he couldn't stand to be you, but he couldn't really be without you?

"There's only one of me," I said.

His face—not yours—twisted up. Maybe I could have just taken him up on waiting down in the cellar with his chosen family. I could have avoided this, but my heart wasn't in it, and being reconciled to myself was too new a thing to compromise on. I made my choice.

He lunged, and first I thought he was going for me. I don't know if I would have fought him. But instead he went past me, for the sink and the dishes.

A knife is not all that different from a marker. But what I had—you—was already gone. I knew I would never see you again. He is not you. He chose that. And my life was just beginning.

When he came for me, I let action precede thought.



I walked out into the street. The rain had resolved to a light drizzle. It wasn't enough to wash the blood from my clothing, but the skin began to show itself, the water pooling around my boots tinted slightly. I was in mourning, out of control. I had kicked his body until my steel-toes were slightly convex.

I thought about Cathy and her baby, somewhere down in the cellar of the house, waiting for the man with your face. I felt for them, but the son—a boy—perhaps he wouldn't have to live under pretense, the way we'd had to.

The light from the horizon, bruised beneath the clouds, diminished to nothing, the streetlights turning on. I thought of the father—the other father, not mine. Mine, in that other place, is not a cruel man. For a moment, I considered the hope that the other might have reconciled with himself, like I had.

I think denial seeks to correct itself back into truth, that prevention of the mending is what demands violence. I think I don't want to hurt anyone. I don't think I ever truly did, outside my madness. Denial is desperate, and the desperate are cruel.

The squeal of rubber sounded out somewhere in the maze of streets beyond the house. I figured that maybe the other father had sent some of his people to find me, or the other you.

Other men gathered on the street. I think that I recognized them. Some fast together, some alone, some with women and children. It's not just me. It's not just me.

We could see the cars emerging. The headlights shone brightly, the engines hitched and snarled. I noticed that none of the men around me were bloody, as I was. If this, our emergence, was in any way a disaster, it was due to these others, coming down the straightaway, in their desperation, in their cruelty.

At the fore of the convoy is the old truck, the other father's. Maybe he will stop; maybe he will step down and talk to me. What would I say? I consider acting out some charade—even now it may be possible to live among these others as myself, somehow. But what good would it be to live that way? Are death and denial of the same unbending nature? Is any choice final, except death?

There is no convincing anyone that I'm something other than I am.

Contributor Biographies

POETRY

SEAN BARRY is an artist living in Windsor, Canada.

ROBERT BEVERIDGE (he/him) makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in *Red Coyote Review*, *Deep South Magazine*, and *Aromatica Poetica*, among others.

SHANNON CUTHBERT is a writer and artist living in Brooklyn. Her poems have been nominated for three Pushcarts, and have appeared in journals including *Plum Tree Tavern*, *Bangor Literary Review*, and *The Oddville Press*. Her work is forthcoming in *The Metaworker*, *Big Windows Review*, and *EcoTheo Review*, among others.

TIFFANY SHAW-DIAZ is a Pushcart Prize and Dwarf Stars Award nominee who also works as a professional visual artist. Her poetry has been featured in *Modern Haiku*, *The Heron's Nest*, *Bones*, *NHK World Haiku Masters*, *The Mainichi*, and nearly 100 other publications. Her chapbooks include *says the rose* (Yavanika Press 2019), *filth* (Proletaria 2020), and *tyranny of the familiar* (Yavanika Press 2020). You can find her on Instagram and Twitter via @tiffanyshawdiaz or through her website: www.tiffanyshawdiaz.com.

EBUKA EVANS is a stateless poet who writes from the remote town of Nsukka as a tribute to the life and death of Christopher Okigbo. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Third Coast*, *20.35 Africa: An Anthology*, *Defunkt*, *Kissing Dynamite*, *Roadrunner Review*, *Rigorous*, *New Feathers Anthology*, *Nanty Greens*, and elsewhere. He studies English and Literature at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

LE FRANCIS is a recovering arts journalist writing poetry and fiction of varying length from the rain shadow of the Washington Cascades. Find her online at nocturnical.com.

MAX HENNINGER is a translator and writer based in Berlin. His novel *Strange Dreams* is forthcoming from Dr. Cicero Books.

JULES INCORVAIA is a 23-year-old queer/bisexual writer, actor, and dancer from Nashville, Tennessee. This is her first publication. She has been writing creatively off and on since childhood and is currently working on a themed chapbook collection. Her writing style

frequently paints topics like anxiety, codependency, abuse, and self-actualization through a dark and Grimm's fairytale-reminiscent lens.

LUKE JAMES LEO KERNAN (Ph.D. Student, University of Victoria) is a poet, mythographer, and graphic novelist. His doctoral work in anthropology explores sensory experiences of psychosis, and his ethnographic fieldwork will construct a sensorial narrative of what psychosis is like, i.e., a psychotic break, from arts-based workshops—to model these moments through comics and poetry. Luke has often featured as a spoken-word performer, and he has recently published an article on suicidal bipolar poets in *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* (vol. 16, issue 1) alongside two of his poems, "Skylarks Swallowing Stars" and "The Hanged Man's Nour; A Note-taker's Needle." His ethnographic essay, "Being Psychotically Adept—Placing Change, the Poetic Self, and Community Arts Together," in *Somatosphere: Science, Medicine, and Anthropology* delves further into how psychosis and poetry present intuitive ways to reimagine the human project. Correspondences to lkernan@uvic.ca. Twitter: @lukekernan.

RICHARD LEDUE was born in Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada, but currently lives in Norway House, Manitoba with his wife and son. His poems have appeared in various publications throughout 2019, and more work is forthcoming in 2020, including a chapbook from Kelsey Books.

DS MAOLALAI has been nominated eight times for Best of the Net and three times for the Pushcart Prize. His poetry has been released in two collections, *Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden* (Encircle Press, 2016) and *Sad Havoc Among the Birds* (Turas Press, 2019).

JOAN MCNERNEY's poetry is found in many literary magazines such as *Seven Circle Press*, *Dinner with the Muse*, *Poet Warriors*, *Blueline*, and *Halcyon Days*. Four Bright Hills Press Anthologies, several *Poppy Road Review* journals, and numerous Spectrum publications have accepted her work. Her latest title, *The Muse in Miniature*, is available on Amazon and Cyberwit.net. She has four Best of the Net nominations.

JESSE MIKSIC is a graphic designer and writer living in the suburbs of Philadelphia. He spends his life writing poetry, ranging the small-hours suburban sprawl, and having adventures with his wonderful wife and daughter. Recent placements include *Juke Joint*, *Bodega Magazine*, *Anti-Heroine Chic*, and others. Find him on twitter at @miksimum or surf his updates and publication credits at www.miksimum.com.

BRITTANY MISHRA helps make medical devices for a living and writes poetry and fiction as her passion. Brittany has lived in Washington, Oregon, and Connecticut, and she now lives in Washington (again) near the Puget Sound with her husband. Brittany's poetry can be found in Shabda Press's *Nuclear Impact Anthology* and the online journals *Voice Catcher*, *Sky Island*, *The Write Launch*, and *Chestnut Review*. Recently, she won 1st place in the Joy Bale Boone Poetry

Prize sponsored by *The Heartland Review*, and the winning poem was published in their Spring 2020 issue.

FRED POLLACK is the author of two book-length narrative poems, *THE ADVENTURE* and *HAPPINESS*, both published by Story Line Press, the former to be reissued by Red Hen Press. A collection of shorter poems, *A POVERTY OF WORDS*, was published in 2015 by Prolific Press, as well as another collection, *LANDSCAPE WITH MUTANT*, in 2018 by Smokestack Books (UK). Fred's work has appeared in *Hudson Review*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *The Fish Anthology*, *Magma*, *Iota*, *Orbis*, *Neon*, *Bateau*, *Main Street Rag*, *Manhattan Review*, *Prick of the Spindle*, etc. Online, poems have appeared in *Off Course*, *Brickplight*, *Allegro*, *BlazeVox*, *Mudlark*, *Occupoetry*, *Faircloth Review*, *Triggerfish*, *Thunderdome*, *Neglected Ratio*, etc.

JULIA RETKOVA is a King's College London graduate student with two degrees in Literature and Digital Studies. She's currently working on her dissertation while running a small literary journal called *Nymphs*. She was born in Ukraine but grew up in the south of Spain. She loves reading books in the sun and writing when everyone's asleep. Her writing has been previously published in *Storgy* magazine, *Literally Stories*, *Masque & Spectacle* journal, *Sublunary Review*, *the tide rises*, *the tide falls* journal, and *Literary Dwelling*.

CARLA SARETT's recent work appears or is forthcoming in *Third Wednesday*, *Prole*, *Hamilton Stone Review*, *Bowery Gothic*, *The Virginia Normal*, *isacoustic*, and elsewhere. Her essays have been nominated for Best American Essays and the Pushcart. *A Closet Feminist*, her debut novel, will be published in 2022 (Unsolicited Press). Carla has a Ph.D. from University of Pennsylvania and lives in San Francisco.

KIERAN SETRIGHT previously had work published in *Neon*, *Brittle Star*, *Prole*, *Sofia*, and *The Poetry Bus*.

MEG SMITH is a writer, journalist, dancer, and events producer living in Lowell, Mass. Her poetry and fiction have recently appeared in *Raven Cage*, *The Horror Zine*, *Dark Dossier*, *Aphelion*, *Blood Moon Rising*, *Sirens Call*, and many more. She is the author of five poetry books. Her short fiction collection, *The Plague Confessor*, published by Emu Books, is available on Amazon. She welcomes visits to megsmithwriter.com, on Twitter @MegSmith_Writer, and facebook.com/megsmithwriter.

MERCURY-MARVIN SUNDERLAND (he/him) is a transgender autistic gay man from Seattle with Borderline Personality Disorder. He currently attends the Evergreen State College and works for *Headline Poetry & Press*. He's been published by UC Riverside's *Santa Ana River Review*, UC Santa Barbara's *Spectrum Literary Journal*, and The New School's *The Inquisitive Eater*. His lifelong

dream is to become the most banned author in human history. He's @Romangodmercury on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter.

RON TORRENCE published his first short story at age 50 and his first poem at age 80. His fiction, nonfiction, and poetry have been widely published.

FICTION

BRAD FIORE is a writer with a background in visual art. In 2019, their short story “Wise Because Night” was published in the print anthology *The Rabbit Hole*. They live in Chicago, IL with their wife and cat.

GRAYSON ELORREAGA is a writer and mental health worker who lives in Edinburgh. His work has appeared in *The Mays 25th Anthology*, *Hobart Pulp*, *Doppelganger*, and the University of Lisbon's literary magazine *Os Fazedores de Letras*, among other publications.

BEN GAMBLIN is a professional writer and editor who resides in the Pacific Northwest with his lovely partner and exceptionally large dog. His work has previously appeared in publications such as *Ink Stains Anthology*, *The Dark City Mystery Magazine*, *Literally Stories*, and *The Rabbit Hole*, as well as the *Strange Stories Vol. 1* collection from Forty-Two Books and the *XVIII* anthology from Underland Press. Follow him on Instagram @bengamblinofficial.

TOM GARTNER's fiction and poetry has appeared in numerous journals, including *California Quarterly*, *Concho River Review*, *The Madison Review*, and most recently, *New Limestone Review*. One story was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Other work is forthcoming in *Levee* and *Aethlon*. He lives in California, just north of the Golden Gate, and works as a buyer for an independent bookstore in San Francisco.

EMILY IVES-KEELER lives in Aberdeen, Scotland with her husband and cat. She works for a charity and writes short fiction in her spare time.

TIFFANY JIMENEZ is from Oakland, California. She earned her BA in Creative Writing from UC Santa Cruz, and her MFA from Saint Mary's College of California. Other than being an ardent supporter of the imagination and the art of storytelling, she writes a lot, laughs a lot, startles easily, and loves potatoes.

MICHAEL MULLEN dirtied his soul in advertising for far too long and is now writing poetry and fiction as a form of penance. His poems have appeared in *Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, *The Hampden-Sydney Poetry Review*, and *Three Rivers Poetry Journal*. His last published short story appeared in *Concho River Review* and was nominated for a 2020 Pushcart Prize. Michael lives with his family in Virginia, and his Twitter handle is @Prof_Mullen.

AYUMI NAKAMURA is a part-time radio announcer based in Tokushima. In 2020, her short story "Ori" won the Tokushima Shinbun Award in the third Awa Shirasagi Literary Prize. Her short fiction has appeared in *Tokushima Bungaku*.

The writing of GABRIEL SAGE is a sludge-covered collision of consonants and consciousness; an examination of the delicate daily minutiae that becomes life. He is inspired by the intersection of compassion and language—literature as cohabitation. Gabriel has a BA in English and creative writing from UC Berkeley and is currently composing his first novel and second book of poems. He is the recipient of the 2019 Yoshiko Uchida Prize in Writing Creative Nonfiction and was a finalist in Adelaide Literary Best of 2019 Contest in both fiction and nonfiction. Strands of letters he arranged can also be found in publications such as *Kestrel* (forthcoming), *Oddville Magazine*, *Ishmael Reed's Konch Magazine*, *Eleventh Transmission*, and *The Charleston Anvil*.

JOHN WM THOMPSON lives in Denver, CO. He is an active member of the Denver Horror Writer's Association and the Lighthouse Writers Workshop.

MEGAN WILDHOOD is the author of *Long Division*, a poetry chapbook. Visit meganwildhood.com.

PHOTOGRAPHY/ART

V.B. BORJEN is a writer and visual artist, currently based in the Czech Republic. His paintings, drawings, and photographs have been featured in *The Esthetic Apostle*, *Rattle*, *High Shelf*, *Chaleur Magazine*, *Not Your Mother's Breast Milk*, *IceFloe Press*, *Honey & Lime*, *NEMA*, and most recently in *Parentheses*. He serves as Guest Editor of *Palette Poetry* and *Frontier Poetry* magazines. Tweets @Borjen. Art on Instagram: samoniklo.

JENNI COUTTS is an illustrator, speculative fiction writer, and junior doctor based in Glasgow, Scotland. In her artwork she enjoys exploring themes of darkness, femininity, strong emotions, and the fantastical. You can find more of her artwork on Instagram @jennicouttsart or Twitter @jenni_coutts.

KRISTIN FOUQUET is a photographer and writer from lovely New Orleans. Her photography appears in online journals and magazines, on chapbook and book covers, album artwork, and occasionally in galleries. When not behind the camera, Kristin writes literary fiction and is the author of five books. Visit Le Salon — <https://kristin.fouquet.cc>.