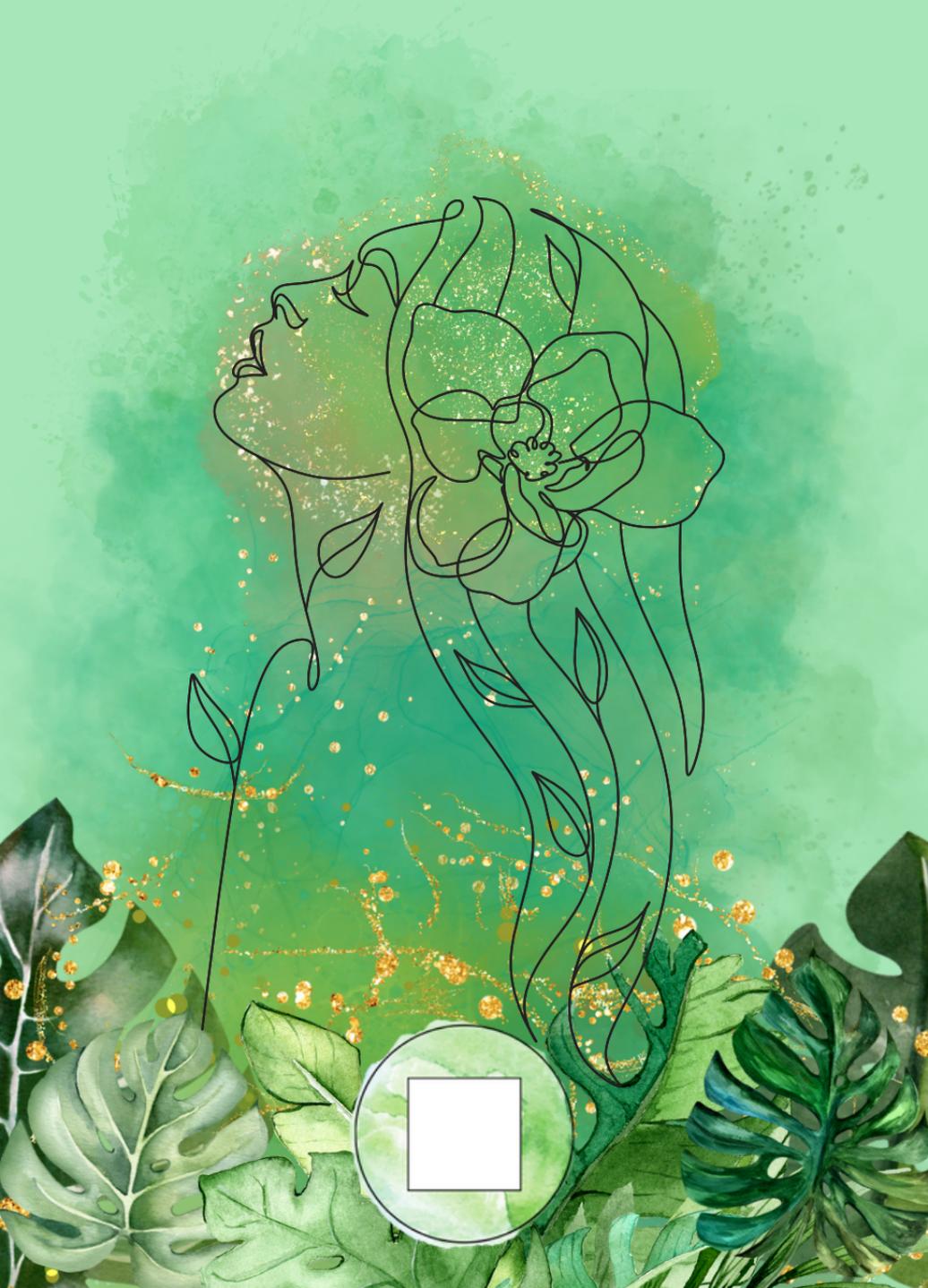


TABULA RASA REVIEW

ISSUE TWO



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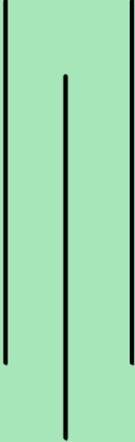
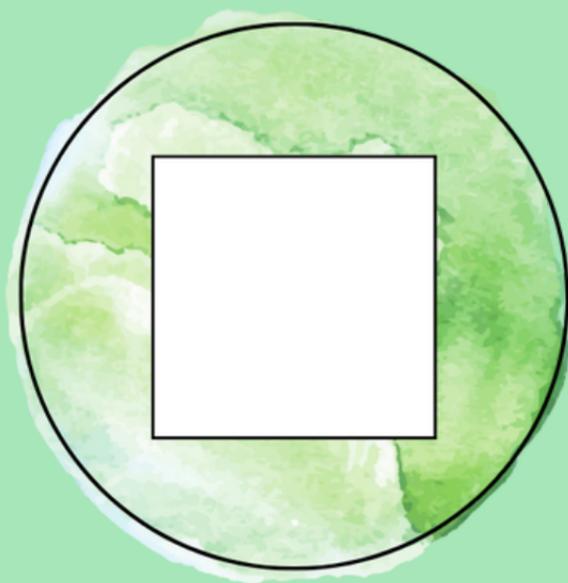
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Emma Snyder graduated with a B.A. in Creative Writing and a B.S. in Psychology in 2021, paired with a minor in Digital Studies. Almost every fiction and nonfiction piece she wrote during her undergraduate career has been published, with a total of seven publications currently circulating in little literary magazines around the world. Her favorite genres to write and read are psychological realism, anything Bildungsroman, speculative fiction, and stream of consciousness. She currently works at NAMI Central VA as the Program & Outreach Manager, and is incredibly passionate about mental health and mental wellness.



Ross Christensen

Ross Christensen graduated with a B.A. in Creative Writing in 2020, and currently works as the Volunteer Coordinator for Meals on Wheels at FeedMore. He is fascinated by the surreal, fantastical, and nonfictional, either separately or combined. He happened to sit next to Emma Snyder in a nonfiction class, and the rest is history. Both he and Emma were on the masthead of *Rappahannock Review* during their undergraduate careers, and loved being involved with a literary journal. This ignited the conversations that led toward the creation of *Tabula Rasa Review*, for which Ross has taken the position of Managing Editor for the second issue.



Stephanie Stephan

Stephanie Stephan is a red haired writer in love with bone china and bone chilling tales. In 2017 she received an M.A. in English from Arcadia University, and has worked as an editor and literary coach, providing creative guidance and critical feedback to fellow writers. Her fiction has appeared in *Tabula Rasa Review*, *Patchwork Lit*, and *Myth & Lore Zine*, and more. In 2021 her story about galactic lollipops was nominated for Best of the Net. When she's not writing, she loves reading tarot, cross stitching, and trying out new recipes. Visit her on Instagram [@stephanie.stephan.writes](https://www.instagram.com/stephanie.stephan.writes) or at stephanie-stephan.com.



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Kendall (they/she) is a Chicago-based Queer, neurodivergent writer with a double B.A. in English-Creative Writing and French Literature & Language from Loyola University-Chicago. They have found that the written word is one of the most powerful ways for like-minded people to connect, and they aspire to use their voice to break down taboos and the barriers they create. You can find her work in *Diminuendo & Cadence*, *Heroica Magazine*, *Eclipse Zine*, *The SOUR Collective*, and *Poetically Magazine*. She's terribly honored to be part of the incredible literary magazine that is *Tabula Rasa Review*. Find them on Instagram at [@hopelesspoetesse](https://www.instagram.com/hopelesspoetesse).



Gretel Valdes

Gretel Valdes is a Las Vegas local with a passion for poetry and an undying appreciation for the catharsis the writing world has brought to her. Gretel was both a co-editor and head editor of her alma mater's literary magazine, *Camas*, from 2018-2020 and the assistant editor for the *High Desert Journal's* creative nonfiction section in 2019. Aside from that, she has also led various poetry nights for her college, has been submitting relentlessly to literary journals across the country, and is in the process of pursuing writing out here in her glittering desert oasis.



Divisha Chaudhry

Divisha is a South Asian ace woman with a B.A. in English Research. Her writings have been published across various zines/journals, including *Livewire.in*, *Tabula Rasa Review*, *Bullshit Lit*, *Mantissa Poetry*, *The Alipore Post*, *The Phosphene*, *The Horizon Magazine*, and *Verse of Silence*, among others. She has worked as a proofreader for *The Freewheeler Magazine*, as a researcher for *Fridays for Future* in Delhi (India), and as a content writer for an NGO. For the past year, she has been a staff writer for *The Phosphene Magazine*, which represents the South Asian Dalit and Queer communities.

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AUTHOR BIOS

listed alphabetically by first name

ACE BOGCESS

Ace Boggess is the author of six books of poetry, including "Escape Envy" (*Brick Road Poetry Press*, 2021), "I Have Lost the Art of Dreaming It So", and "The Prisoners". His writing has appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Mid-American Review*, and other journals. An ex-con, he lives in Charleston, West Virginia, where he writes and tries to stay out of trouble. His seventh collection, "Tell Us How to Live", is forthcoming in 2024 from *Fernwood Press*.

ANDRENA ZAWINSKI

Andrena Zawinski's latest full-length poetry collection is "Born Under the Influence" (*Word Tech*). Others are "Landings" (Kelsay Books), "Something About" (*Blue Light Press*, a PEN Oakland Award), "Traveling in Reflected Light" (*Pig Iron Press*, Kenneth Patchen Prize). She has also published a collection of flash fiction, "Plumes: And Other Flights Of Fancy" (*Writing Knights*). Zawinski is a veteran teacher of writing and activist poet who was born and raised in Pittsburgh, PA but makes her home in the San Francisco Bay Area. Her poetry has received awards for lyricism, form, spirituality, and social concern.

ANITA HOWARD

Anita Howard is a writer, storyteller, and actor living in Passage West, Co. Cork, Ireland. Her work has featured in numerous publications, including *HeadStuff*, *Poetica Review*, *the JA Books Magazine*, the "Fall is Here" chapbook (*Written Tales*), "Zooanthology" (*Sweetycat Press*), *the Querencia Press*, and *Msllexia*. She can be found on Twitter as [@AnitaHowardSto1](https://twitter.com/AnitaHowardSto1).

ASHLEY SCOTT

Ashley Scott lives with her family in the Pacific Northwest. She loves writing that packs a lot into a little. You can find her short stories and flash fiction in online literary publications, including *On the Premises* and the *Magnolia Review*.

CHLOE ENGLAND

Chloe England is an emerging poet and writer from Wales interested in the themes of girlhood, history, home, and art. You can find her other works in *The York Literary Review*, *Sunday Mornings at the River* *2023 Poetry Diary*, *Kissing Dynamite Poetry*, and *Bloom Magazine*.

CYNTHIA BERNARD

Cynthia Bernard is a woman in her late sixties who is finding her voice as a poet after many decades of silence. A long-time classroom teacher and a spiritual mentor, she lives and writes on a hill overlooking the ocean, about 20 miles south of San Francisco. In January, 2023, she began her studies in the MFA program at Lindenwood University, with a concentration in Poetry.

DOMINIC BELMONTE

Dominic Belmonte served Golden Apple Foundation as its Director of Teacher Preparation, President, Chief Executive Officer from 1996–2017. At York Community High School, Dom was an English teacher and Chairman of the Department. In 1989, Dom co-created the Golden Apple Scholars of Illinois, which encouraged 2,000 people to become teachers in Illinois. In 1996 he co-created the GATE program, which brought over 400 mid-career adults to Chicago classrooms. Dom most recently served as Distinguished Professor of Practice at National Louis University.



DOUG VAN HOOSER

Doug Van Hooser's poetry has appeared in *Roanoke Review*, *The Courtship of Winds*, *After Hours*, *Sheila-Na-Gig Online*, and *Poetry Quarterly*, among other publications. His fiction can be found in *Red Earth Review*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, and *Bending Genres Journal*. Doug's plays have received readings at Chicago Dramatist Theatre and Three Cat Productions. More at dougvanhooser.com.

ERIC WEINTRAUB

Eric Weintraub holds an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Mount St. Mary's University in Los Angeles, CA, and is the author of the novella "Dreams of an American Exile". His short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *History Through Fiction*, *The Rush*, *The GroundUp*, and other publications. A collection of his work was recently shortlisted for the 2021 Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction.

GEMMA FABLE

Gemma Fable is a writer from the UK, who spends most of her time staring at empty word documents and not writing.

HARRISON CAMPBELL

Harrison Campbell is an NYC-based writer, actor, and poet originally from the suburbs of Acworth, GA. He received his BFA in Acting at Hofstra University, and now devotes his focus towards creating new works of theatre and telling bolder stories with his words. When not working on new writing projects, he can be found silently experimenting with his poetry or turning the works of Shakespeare inside out. You can follow his work at <http://txti.es/poetica-centrum> and follow him on instagram @ [harrisonjc](https://www.instagram.com/harrisonjc).

ISABELLE WEI

Isabelle Wei is a writer and literary editor. She loves poetry, pastries, and painting, although not necessarily in that order. In her spare time, she enjoys writing and reading stories that reflect her love for the natural world.

JESS ROSES

Jess Roses (she/her) is a disabled, neurodivergent creator. Her focus is the transformation of relationships and experiences with pain and the taboo. She explores how these communal experiences form and relate to societal and personal narratives within and without the psyche. She has been published in *YAWP Literary Magazine*, *Coffin Bell Journal*, *Raven Review*, *Bloom Magazine*, *Lovers Literary Journal*, and more. You can find her work on Instagram at [@evitchprincess](https://www.instagram.com/evitchprincess).

JOHN BRANTINGHAM

John Brantingham was Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks' first poet laureate. His work has been featured in hundreds of magazines, *Writers Almanac*, and *The Best Small Fictions* 2016 and 2022. He has nineteen books of poetry and fiction, including "Life: Orange to Pear" (*Bamboo Dart Press*). He is the founder and general editor of *The Journal of Radical Wonder*. He lives in Jamestown, NY.

JONATHAN FLETCHER

Originally from San Antonio, Texas, Jonathan Fletcher, a BIPOC writer, currently resides in New York City, where he is pursuing a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing in Poetry at Columbia University's School of the Arts. He has been published in *Arts Alive San Antonio*, *The BeZine*, *BigCityLit*, *Clips and Pages*, *Door is a Jar*, *DoubleSpeak*, *Flora Fiction*, *FlowerSong Press*, *fws: a journal of literature & art*, *Half Hour to Kill*, *Lone Stars*, *MONO.*, *Moot Point*, *New Feathers*, *OneBlackBoyLikeThat Review*, *riverSedge*, *Otherwise Engaged Journal: A Literature and Arts Journal*, *Spoonie Press*, *Synkroniciti*, *The Thing Itself*, *TEJASCOVIDO*, *Unlikely Stories Mark V*, *voicemail poems*, *Voices de la Luna*, and *Waco WordFest*. His work has also been featured at The Briscoe Western Art Museum.



KATE GARGO

Kate Gargo (she/her) is a poet, fiction writer, and essayist. She has a B.A. in English Creative Writing from the University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire and is currently pursuing an M.A. in Professional Poetry Writing from the University of Denver. Kate received honorable mention in the Association of Writers' 2022 Intro Journals project. Her work focuses on nature, the confluence of grief and joy, trauma, and coming of age. She currently lives in Northeast Wisconsin.

KENNETH POBO

Kenneth Pobo (he/him) is the author of twenty-one chapbooks and nine full-length collections. Recent books include "Bend of Quiet" (*Blue Light Press*), "Loplop in a Red City" (*Circling Rivers*), and "Lilac And Sawdust" (*Meadowlark Press*). His work has appeared in *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Asheville Literary Review*, *Nimrod*, *Washington Square Review*, *Mudfish*, *Hawaii Review*, and elsewhere.

KIM WELLIVER

Kim Welliver is an autodidact who has been passionate about the written word, in all its iterations, since early childhood. Her work is informed by history, folk and fairy tales, and the marginalization of women. Both a 2021 Pushcart Prize and Best of Net nominee, her work can be found in print and online publications, including *Rock & Sling*, *Mid-American Review*, *Night Picnic*, *Corvid Queen*, *West Trade Review*, *Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, *Fairy Tale Review Anthologies*, and many others.

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Kristiana Reed is a writer and freelance editor. She is the Editor in Chief for *Free Verse Revolution*, a literary & arts magazine. She has self-published two poetry collections, "Between the Trees" and "Flowers on the Wall", and her work has been recently published in a *Beyond the Veil Press* anthology and *The Hyacinth Review*. You can follow her on Instagram [@kristiana.reed](https://www.instagram.com/kristiana.reed).

LILLIAN FUGLEI

Lillian Fuglei is a queer poetess based in Denver, Colorado. She began writing poetry in high school, after a lifetime of attending open mics thanks to their mother. They bounce between poetry, journalism, and academia, hoping to find a home for her writing somewhere in between the three. You can find them on Instagram at [@literary.lillian](https://www.instagram.com/literary.lillian).

LU HAN

Lu Han is a Chinese-American writer currently living in Hell's Kitchen, Manhattan. Lu's fiction and memoir explores the stories of the undervoiced, with a particular focus on displacement and immigration. Her work is published or forthcoming in *The Margins*, *Overachiever Magazine*, *Inheritance Magazine*, *The Jarnal*, and elsewhere. Find more at www.helloluhan.com.

MAYA LINSLEY

Maya Linsley is an undergraduate student currently living, working and writing on Vancouver Island, Canada. Her work has appeared in *The Sunlight Press* and *antilang mag*. In her free time she enjoys wandering aimlessly, meeting the neighbourhood cats, and buying as much local cheese as financially possible.

MEGAN CARTWRIGHT

Megan Cartwright is a writer and English teacher based in Australia. Her poetry has appeared in publications including *Arteidolia*, *Authora Australia*, *Meniscus*, *October Hill Magazine*, and *oddball magazine*.

NICK YOUNG

Nick Young is a retired award-winning CBS News Correspondent. His writing has appeared in more than twenty publications, including the *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *Bookends Review*, *the Nonconformist Magazine*, *Fiery Scribe Review*, *Sandpiper*, *the San Antonio Review*, *Flyover Magazine*, *Pigeon Review*, *The Best of CaféLit II*, and Vols. I and II of the *Writer Shed Stories* anthologies. He lives outside Chicago.

PHILIP WEXLER

Philip Wexler lives in Bethesda, Maryland and is retired after a long career at the U.S. National Library of Medicine. Some 200 of his poems have appeared in magazines. His poetry books include "The Sad Parade" (prose poems), and "The Burning Moustache", both published by *Adelaide Books*, "The Lesser Light" (*Finishing Line Press*), "With Something Like Hope" (*Silver Bow Publishing*) and "I Would be the Purple" (*Kelsay Books*), the latter 3 all published in 2022. He also organizes and hosts Words out Loud, a monthly spoken word series convened in-person at the Friends of the Library of Montgomery County (FOLMC) bookstore in Rockville, Maryland and via Zoom.

RACHEL MAKINSON

After graduating from Newcastle University with a B.A. in English Literature with Creative Writing, Rachel Makinson went on to work as a content editor. In early 2021, her short story "Lily Pad" was published in Volume 6 of *Otherwise Engaged Literature and Arts Journal*. In early 2023, her short story "Beatrix Peterson Didn't Kill Charlie" was published in *Marrow Magazine*.

SARAH-MARISSA MARQUEZ

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SAVANNAH COOPER

Savannah Cooper (she/her) is a leftist bisexual agnostic and a slow-ripening disappointment to her Baptist parents. You can almost always find her at home, reading a novel or cuddling with her dogs and cat. A Pushcart Prize-nominated poet, her work has been previously published in *Parentheses Journal*, *Midwestern Gothic*, *Mud Season Review*, and multiple other publications.

SYDNI TRAMERI

Sydni Trameri likes when her dog buries himself in a blanket and looks at ferns. She writes poems and tries not to commit arson in Georgia. Her work can also be found on *Anti-Heroine Chic*.

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Talya Jankovits' work has appeared in a number of literary journals and has been nominated multiple times for a Pushcart Prize as well as The Best of the Net. Her work has won competitions as well as received Editor's Choice awards. She holds her M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Antioch University and resides in Chicago with her husband and four daughters. To read more of her work you can visit her at www.talyajankovits.com or follow her on Twitter, Instagram or Facebook [@talyajankovits](https://www.facebook.com/talyajankovits).

THEO ARMSTRONG

Theo Armstrong is a writer and movement artist based in Brooklyn. Their work has appeared in *Isele Magazine*, *Sinking City*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, and *Culturebot*, among other places. They recently co-founded and edited *Refuze Review/MasterBondsman*, an online journal.

TOTI O'BRIEN

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

TRAE STEWART

Trae Stewart is an emerging queer poet and psychiatric-mental health nurse practitioner. He writes poetry to center and ground himself so that he may best help others. Trae's poetry has been recently featured in *San Antonio Review*, *Aurum Journal*, *orangepeel*, and *Survive & Thrive*. He is also a widely published academic researcher and seasoned educator.



POETRY

POETICA

CONSIDERING CIGARETTES

Sometimes lovely from the outside, if never in. Pretty only from a distance, pose more than posture, composition more than act. Some things are better in gray. Maybe because

I'd always been told not to, I didn't. We talked for hours about smoking in the basement before your eighteenth birthday, on the same couch where, years later, your dad

would sip wine and gently mock you for that night when you mixed too many drinks and ended up with a porcelain crown. *How about a pipe?* you said, but that was too much

expense and effort than a pack of cigarettes at the gas station, too reminiscent of professors and old authors, dim offices and books with cracked spines. When you finally turned

eighteen, I bought you a box of cigarettes made of chocolate, a gift bag of lottery tickets and plastic knickknacks, a lei, a coconut bra from the dollar store. You won two dollars

on that scratcher card. Just once, I said, but we never bought any, although there was a convenience store down the street and a Hy-Vee across the highway. We were in college then,

we were going to experience things, but even at twenty, we were two old women, talking about literature and our dead acquaintances. We forgot about cigarettes, stumbled

ahead while looking behind, marked morose anniversaries with calls, then texts, then nothing at all.

LIFE LESSONS

When I was a child at the zoo,
my favourite of all its wonders
was the Tropical House.
It must be great, I thought,
nose pressed up to the glass,
to be a tortoise, or a gecko,
or even a Gaboon viper.
No-one rounded them up
to march them off to school.
For reptiles knew it all, didn't they?
And to proclaim this
they got their own glass cases
warmed to their blood temperatures,
and food given to them each day
exactly to their liking.
They weren't tormented
and held up to the world
for being less-than-adequate Gaboon vipers,
or geckoes that talked out of turn,
or tortoises that asked for help.
It was enough that they were what they were
in all their singular variety.
And heaven was secured as well,
somewhere beyond glass tanks,
where people gazed in awe
upon a waterfall that thundered
to a pool of darting carp.

To swap their prisons for mine,
take on those subtle, shifting scales of freedom,
I'd have chilled my blood
and cultivated venom.
Instead, when people asked me
what I wanted to be when I grew up,
I told them I would like to be a vet.



THRESHOLD

The bare hilltop on which they once built their house is thickly overgrown. Buried in green, husked by a net of foliage and branches. Fifty years have passed since when the first trees were planted.

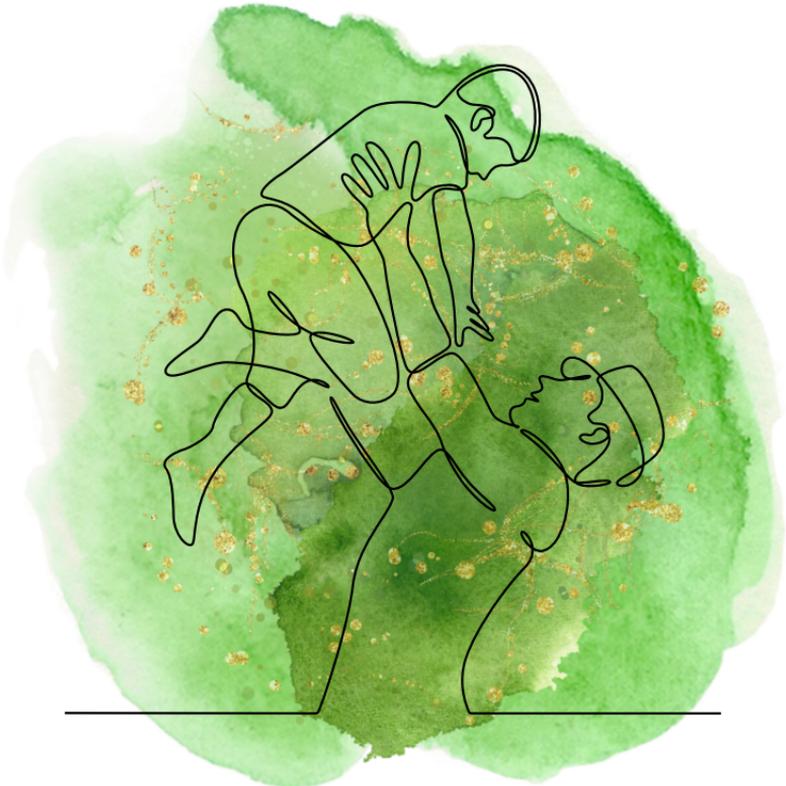
As a child, she had longed for mystery and shadow, mushroom, moss, the warp of impenetrable canopies. Now wildness reigns at last, burying brick and gravel, building tunnels and chambers of dark.

Now she could hide, hushed by the soft whisper of leaves that carries the past, and its depth—the wide mold where futures are birthed. But this past is her own and holds little promise.

Can't conceal the smell of decay to her adult senses. Can't hide the scars of neglect. They have the same age—woman, garden. She should shrink like Alice in order to find solace, nest within the green maze.

Still, she can love the rickety villa where her old folks are dying, the derelict jungle—soon to be sold, abated—where no children will play.

She can worship this edge where
ripeness and ending meet. Like a moon
that starts waning as soon as it's full.
Like those yesterdays that tomorrow
has birthed, in the blink of an eye.



WITH WINTER'S APPROACH

The coreopsis, saturated in yellow
a month ago, dwindles in color,
but I cherish what's left more
than lament what's lost. I find
conflicting advice on whether
to cut it back in fall or wait
until spring, with most favoring
the latter, so I expect I'll be patient,
but at least snip the sisal rope
I bound it with to contain
its unruliness, for it deserves
to be ungirdled now. What use
anymore to hold one's breath
for appearance's sake? Admiring
its lavish disarray, I cannot
but accept with good grace
the reality of seasonal decline,
reminding me of my own,
and think no less of it than ever.



LIVING WITH THE ELEPHANT

I guess the fog has little cat feet
sometimes, but around here
it dances with the wind,
wild and fierce,
especially at dawn.
Howling across the ocean, up the hill,
gusting my robe against me,
sloshing coffee into my face as I try for a sip.

I guess aging is gradual
sometimes, but around here
it's a tempest, arising suddenly,
wild and fierce
and relentless.
Wrenching my days apart
into a before that can never be found
again—and a very different now.

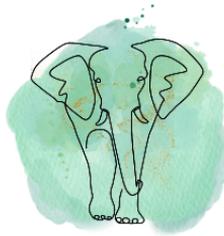
I guess one could fight it
sometimes, hair color, face cream,
supplements and potions,
exercises, affirmations,
denial.

I guess one could simply accept it
sometimes, but around here
arthritis has swept in on elephant feet,
fierce and relentless,
and no pill, no potion,
no affirmation, no meditation,
can sweep it out again.

I guess one could handle things gracefully
and sometimes I do,
but around here there are other times, too,
when everything seems to hurt
and I want to stay under a quilt
for whatever part of forever
I get to see.

And then again, there are
yet other times, sometimes,
the majesty of the ocean at first light,
the sweetness of love found late,
my hand sliding into his.
New buds on the camellia,
rain on the roof, deer in the yard,
granddaughter's smile,
or a nothing-special-time
in the exquisiteness of the now.

And I find that
sometimes, increasingly often,
I welcome it all:
the cat's feet and the elephant,
things wild and fierce,
quiet moments and raging ones,
lines on my softening face,
creaky joints and aching bones,
wind in my hair,
full heart,
fog over the ocean at dawn.

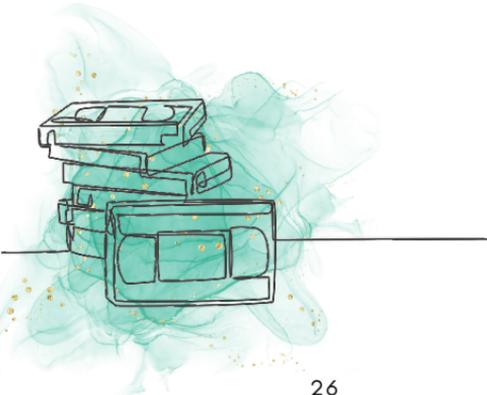


BEFORE REDBOX AND NETFLIX

When BLOCKBUSTER was still around, I measured my age by the shelves of the store: once taller than me, then later my height, even later, much shorter, my changes in movie choices gauges of growth, too: *Gladiator* for *Fern Gully*, *Varsity Blues* for *The Sandlot*. But my mother never seemed to age, nor did the stars of her picks in film.

She always stuck with Stewart and Hepburn, Peck and Bacall, all long gone, like her. In the store, she'd gently remind me: only two. As I browsed the KIDS films, I tried to guess the classics she'd choose, the mismatched movie nights our rentals would make: *Free Willy* and *The Philadelphia Story*, *Homeward Bound* and *Designing Woman*.

Every so often, one of the video tapes stuck in our VCR, which spit out chewed-up ribbon, tangled like bows on gift-wrapped presents. Movie night ruined. Except it wasn't. Like the spools of a cassette, we still had each other. We still do: my memories of us old yet durable, like a VHS tape, rewind and replayed, rewind and replayed.



THRIFTING

My beloved drags me, out
of the shine of the Goodwill
fluorescents. We have barely
been there five minutes,
enough time to briefly thumb
the mugs, acquire cuts from
their chips, catchy slogans stained
with coffee brewed well before
our births. They will litter the
shelves well after our deaths.

It's too grimy here, she complains.
The floors scuffed by shoes that
cost 1/10th of the shirt she wears.
She grabs my arm, tugs me though
the shelves of books. Well-loved
paperbacks call out my name, beg me
to drop her hand, interlace my fingers
with their pages instead.

We wind up in the coffee shop across
the street; it isn't Starbucks but
it might as well be, the walls
screaming of localized corporatism.
A \$9 black coffee warms my
hands as she gazes lovingly
at my feigned grin.

She's ignorant of what she left
behind, the sweaters gifted to lovers
you've never known, still
containing fragments of their souls
to keep you warm in autumn's
chill. The skirts, bordering
threadbare, kicked
to the air in dances
long forgotten. The toys,
cast aside
years ago, yearning for
the touch of children who
have become your contemporaries.

My beloved leaves them on
the shelf in wait,
in want, of hands
who will hold them
once more, as the
same hands that
unwrapped them
when they were
still shiny and
deserving of
monetary love.



STEALING FOR DAD

previously published by Silent Spark Press, 2022

My arms to elbows in some Illinois
speckled churned field.

"Son, go get some," Dad said, handing me a bucket.

"Good stuff."

We drive past a construction site.

"Son, see that lumber. Get some."

I pinion my twelve-year old frame to clutch two-by-fours,
green and brown. Good stuff. Bricks too,

A caddy trunk brimming with good stuff:

chicory leaves picked alongside the Eisenhower Expressway to make
sour salad, misplaced tools,
wood and brick, iron and earth

For projects never begun, stored under basement stairs,
in eaves alongside photo enlargers,
chemicals in unmarked bottles,
linotype parts, wrenches, saws.

I stole for dad

who best liked his good stuff

"Not quite hot, son, just warm,"

his trunk filled with schemes.

"We're trying to steal more time for him," the oncologist admitted,
taking me aside to avoid my mother.

We carry him home, his eyes focused.

"I've gone from Sampson to Delilah," he sighs. "Sampson to Delilah."

How to feel grown? Diaper your father.
Carry him from chair to bed as he once did you.
"Hey, thanks a million, son." Laugh with him as he downs an Ensure.
"Good stuff." Say it through a grimace: "Golden years. They suck."

I want to rush into his liver,
steal away the glowing parts,
toss 'em in the trunk
unused, awaiting the never project.

I start his "big f'in Cadillac" as ordered
to keep the battery alive—aimless thoughtless drive.
I hear good stuff roll in the trunk on turns, hum Italian songs,
stare at his handkerchief on the dashboard. In the rearview mirror,
I take over.



MEMOIR FOR A TURTLE

I dug my first grave today.

But it was not
for a person,
as you might expect,
nor even a dog.

It was for a lone sea turtle
we found belly-up
baking in the midday sun
without a twitch
nor pulse of life
between flesh and shell.

I once heard that sea turtles
could live to be
hundreds of years old;

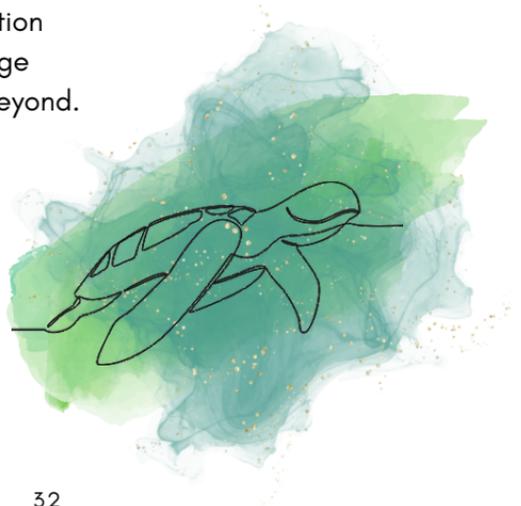
this one didn't even make it
five minutes.

I wondered
whether to bury it
or send it out to sea,
because that seemed
more appropriate
for the being at hand.

But this infant turtle had never
tasted the sea before.
Its only knowledge of the Earth
was shellbeds and moonlight.

So I dug a pit
in the soft sand
and carried the turtle
atop a pillow of
wet sand and shell fragments.
I buried him deep
below the surface
by the lowgrown
sea oat and dunescape,
where the storm winds
would never wash
the grey sands
from its body.

I marked
the gravesite
with a line of shells
in the shape of a turtle
marking its soul
for collection
and rehabilitation
by the exchange
of the great beyond.



CROSSING OVER

He thinks a poetry reading is a seance,
as if with each lift of my voice,
I communicate with the dead, ask
for their tales, trials, and sweetest moments,
as if I am the one who puts them all to rest,
crossing over women tired of haunting hallways
and children no longer interested
in following their murderers
wherever they may go.

As if I have the power to release them all,
to let them walk the air without the chains
of earth keeping them here,
to allow them the space and time
to kiss their favourite things goodbye;
I wonder how many would revisit the sea
or return to their childhood home,
if they ever had one,
or to some great forest with trees far older
who still speak their name.

But this, I guess, is just the poet in me,
because truthfully I know you fear
the words I raise and birth
between teeth and tongue, finger and thumb,
and you call it a seance because you are afraid
your ancestors will come to stay
and tell me everything I already know.

That's the man in you, unaware
I have already figured out every inch,
and I am just waiting, patient, a ghost
of the girl I was when I met you, waiting,
to leave you when the time is right,
and the tide is going out, out, out.



OLD-FASHIONED TENT REVIVAL

The girl sitting outside the revival
tent, long hair windblown in her face,
only here for the free meal promised
before the preacher starts talking.

That's how they get you, promise you
a fullness and then leave you starving.
They make fun of the Catholics for priests
with white collars, the confessional

like a secret room every weekend,
but they have you down on your knees until
they turn raw-red, crying out your sins
at every key change. Do not turn

back, don't look behind. Her face
under the white tent is holy, eyes
catching the lights that stain the pastor
with sweat. Come as you are, he says,

but she has no other way to come,
dress too old and too short, her knees
showing beneath the worn cotton hem,
and maybe this will be enough, this feeling

in the moment of epiphany, the music
becoming one with the summer heat.
Maybe she will finally hear every word
she needs, and if she closes her eyes

and lifts her hands to the sky she can't see,
almost, the noise sounds like God's voice
or somebody's at least, bigger and broader
than any she's ever heard, and maybe

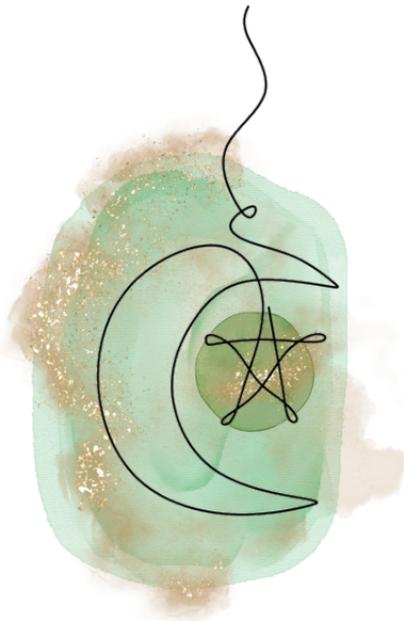
it will be enough, to take hold of this
salvation in the palm of a stranger's hand
and pretend it feels like love.



UNPACK

I unpack night
star by star
and put its many possessions

in the closet
where morning waits
to throw them out.



CAN YOU END MY LONELY NIGHT?

spam e-mail subject line

Been wondering the same.
How will I keep company?
Not with you, I mean.
You're a robotic distress beacon next to an ATM.
Sorry to put it bluntly.
I've lived enough of my life in fiction.

Besides, there are plenty of strangers—
real blood, flesh, fluids—
who would praise their stranger gods
for an hour of licking, slurping, slapping,
or embracing & sharing
an episode of anything on TV.

All they want & all I want
overlap in momentary contact
like a Venn diagram
where A on the left is sadness &
B on the right is an open mind,
while at the center, C, is a hotel room at twilight.

We can go there, meet up, & play a game
of full-contact forgetting
or not let so-so sex get in the way
of a good conversation about gas prices &
how the country's broken—even spam bots
feel it in their icy bi-numeric hearts.

LOVE POEM

three days we stayed in bed. you
were sick, not with a snuffle nor stomach bug
but shadows snaking at your cerebellum.
bedside drawer a bingo cage
of scattered pills, the trifecta—
clozapine, lithium, and seroquel.

for those three days, we followed the frail sunlight
creeping across the floor until it collapsed
into dusk. old cartoons reflected
in your glassy eyes, television
mumbling to our tomb of blankets.

why won't my supplications
save you from the dark river of your mind?

when you finally tell me to leave, i do,
biking towards the bridge past the stadium,
and now i'm flooded in the fluorescent din,
heat of the rapture pulling me upwards
but i descend, brakes wailing the whole way down
until i am suddenly on my side of town and i begin to weep
over the mythology of you.



QUANTUM SUPERPOSITION

She stopped taking her medication,
now lived in a novel—
I didn't want to read the next chapter.

Each morning I went to her apartment,
keys chiming in skittish hands
like a grapevine of squirrels
sharing their raucous hawk-warnings.

Ascending, I unlocked her door,
entered, unsure. Trembles
shuttered through me, born from fear of finding her lifeless,
or the certainty. As if pushing past black curtains,

when I saw her still breathing, I whispered thanks,
grateful though she cussed at me
as if I were a drunk stumbling home.

Contempt didn't matter; I was
a day closer to her recovery,
another further from the worse-still
kind of day that might have been.



A MAGPIE IN FRAGMENTS

after Nina Mingya Powles

#0001B | midnight black: suspicion

The eyes catch upon the body first. Dark wingspan, a blot against all season sky. The alarm of mothers circling their own nests. A dance of death with ink and beady-eyed envy. A beak created for capture, thievery. A softness of black we ignore.

I try to imagine stars in your feathers.

#F1F1F1 | silver chest: redemption

You glimmer much like the things you love. A glimpse of warmth. The ability to mother your own young. Hungry mouths covet more than shiny things. Tiny hearts. Boney bodies. A breakable childhood; never saved by being the predator's daughter or son. Your bruises, hidden beneath down, are the first.

I try to imagine stars in your feathers.

#17026D / 00807C | teal turquoise; gold in the right light

And the magic—a treasure map in hand. A moment, a flash of ocean gold. I see the ocean, the kissing shore in your tail, in the ascent and descent of flight. I imagine you with gold rings, emeralds, topaz talons. Trees heavy with your majesty. I forget how you devour the unborn—the corvid in your blood.

I imagine I see stars in your feathers.

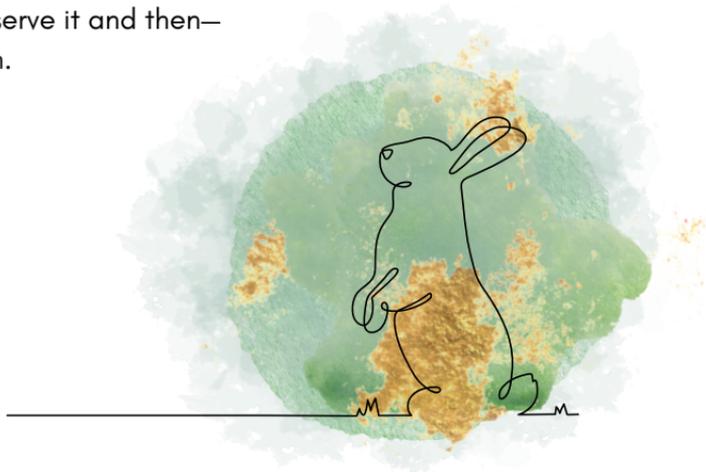
TALISMAN

Scatter-skit, a soft-furred rabbit's kit
scrabbles across ice, brittle nails seeking traction,
splitting, scratching, scrawling
a makeshift SOS in the permafrost.

The creature skirts the surface as it begins to thaw,
the earth opening, fracturing
separating the spheres of the cryogenically frozen head of Walt Disney.

The rabbit plummets, Thumper thumping to the ground
the squeal abruptly severed,
a life measured by the *drip, drip*,
drip of cerebrospinal fluid,
leaking cake-batter brains,
drip, drip, dripping from the edge of a flat-Earther's conspiracy
to splatter the depths of an echo chamber.

The rabbit lies still.
Track the supple body to a rock-bottom burrow,
now a lizard-man's hovel.
Sever the foot, preserve it and then—
you have a talisman.



COYOTE CANTICLE

Coyotes sing this hour into being,
carry blue light in their satchel of night.
Coyotes seed stars with teeth bright as bone,
with the little deaths of hare and vole.
Over and over, they voice their praise-song,
ostinato of sacred darkness unwinding
from their throats.
Canyons fill with their ululations, and the clear dark sky
pours over them. Something calls them
to vespers, something fierce
and unknowable in their nocturnal blood. In their hunger,
and night-cold fur. It fills their lungs
with ancient song.
With the grind of a planet's slow turning,
and the numinous moon above dog-toothed hills.
With the enormous shadows of a midnight-purpled desert,
and the ciliced monks of cholla and saguaro.
With our scattered bones, white and small.



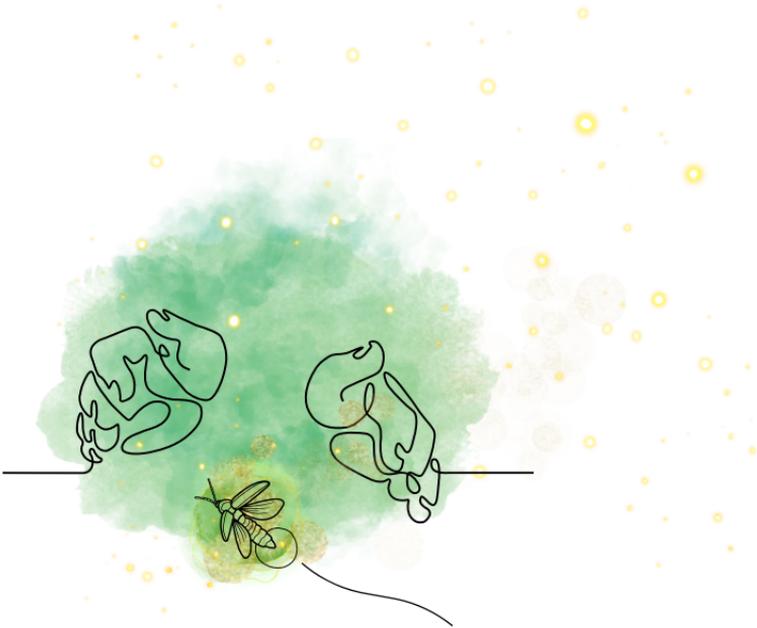
TO BE GENTLE

I have learned to live life like this:
rose-petal fragile & perfumed with hope.

This is a life on the ledge,
one foot in the warmth of courage,
another cowed in fright.

This is where fear walks along a thread-bare line.

But, oh, is there beauty in this world of in-betweens!
Cusped in my hand like a firefly, cradled as one would a rose,
I handle with care these half-sparked flares,
cherished like old keyrings or memories tucked beneath sheets,
waiting for their time to be strong.



FOOSBALL WITH PECANS

Beagle waddles
through the Bermuda grass,
scattering dandelion seeds
with her metronomic tail.

Her teats sag
from the suckling of
back-to-back litters.

They balance her tail,
playing foosball against one another
with fallen pecans.

The shade beckons her,
between the rusted Craftsman pop-up camper
and the octopus crape myrtle.

Cool soil, bumpy from erosion
and moles burrowing for critters.
Time to herself.



DECIDUOUS

Outside my window,
the ash's bare branches look entangled,
furrows of bark rivulets creased in thought.
Three leaves cling,
yellow caution they are about to fall,
do a forward triple somersault to the ground.
But they hold their petiole grip,
refuse to dive into the yolk pile.
Every year the same deciduous decision,
drain the chlorophyll, shed the year's green cloak,
and refuse to shiver hearing the winter wind's words,
the temperature's cold attitude.

I wish I were deciduous,
could drop everything,
hibernate, stand stoic as a statue,
ignore the snow's cold shoulder.
Be patient for the thaw.
Another chance to leaf
and hear the breeze whisper metaphors,
the blue jay's smart aleck replies,
the squirrel's insistence,
the rush and high of chlorophyll.
Bending just enough
to let the thunderstorms pass.

THE PICKERS

previously published by The Progressive Press, 2007

"Stronger and stronger, the sunlight glues
The afternoon to its objects..."
from *Against the American Grain*, Charles Wright

The pickers, back-bent and dozens abreast, rise before the sun
past the blonde grasses, behind the concertina wire
running between Soledad and Salinas, move in squats,
toss artichokes from sun-pocked fields into pickup cabs,
calloused fingers pricked by the thorny thistles.

They pour seeds into rivulets of dry earth
that will burst into lettuce, chard, the great bouquets
of broccoli and cabbage along El Camino Real's humpback hills
where foremen watch, arms folded across their dusty boredom,
and the long light of days stretching inside another summer.

Bodies at work, long after limbs tire, long after chests heave
beneath bird-bone beads, abalone shells, scapulars dangling
from red strings, or even chains of gold glinting off the sun,
faces muffled in scarves and hoods, sweat scenting the air,
back bent and dozens abreast, birthing a history of earth.

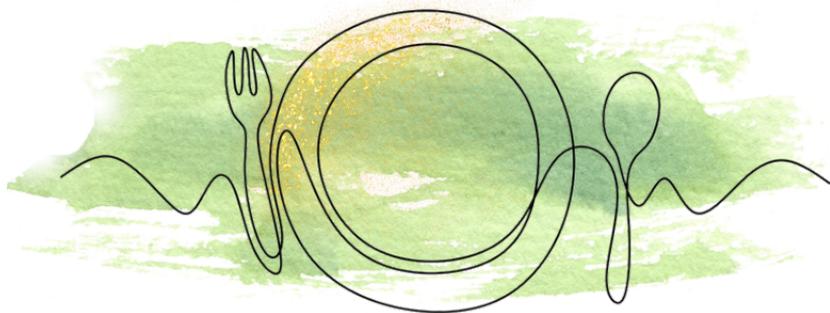
And so they move, the pickers, silhouetted against the horizon,
westerly winds crossing groves and vineyards farther north,
farther south, they move, follow the crops, follow the seasons,
Steinbeck's ghost among the harvest gypsies in the fields,
pen in one hand, pail in the other, working towards some end.

As sure as low clouds cool the day down, the bodies turn toward evening, lay down the ache of the field in the stretch of legs, slope of shoulders, move toward dreams of the unburned, pain-free, unafraid, unspent paper in the pocket for some half-hold on a home on the road, birds skittering tree branches at sunset, pecking at the unpicked.



MAGPIES

You hear that magpies steal shiny things:
the antique china plates on the table,
glass beads by the sea, a swirl of gold
earrings, the silver spoon you sucked
at birth—a candied moon in your
mouth. You learn that dignity comes
with a price, that silt-stains don't
rinse out, that the world is a bubble
for the gilded-one breath and seas
are blown away, one misstep and
riches burst *pop pop pop*
splashing in the river-
watered silver, blackened.
The magpies disappear.
You look for shiny things.



THE BED STILL HAS SIDES

1.

I don't want to be your wound, I want
to be your wife. I want our love to consume
this mistake, this imbalance, to transform
Armageddon into just one more summer storm.

2.

A daily ritual: I think about what it would take
to swallow the time between us, but it only grows,
and I am powerless to stop it. You built a wall,
and I promised to put away the dynamite.

3.

I carry the agony like a sleeping infant,
refuse to put it down, scared to jolt it awake.
It's what I have. Call it your ghost. Call it a dream.
There is nowhere else to put this love.

4.

A secret I wasn't sure I would tell:
I searched *men's gold wedding bands*, thought maybe
it'd all turn around in the final scene. Thought about getting
down on my one good knee. I don't know your ring size.

5.

But I know you know what I know about Hope,
how she's the only immortal thing we can touch.
Every night she whispers to me about your return.
Because I love you, I hold her head under the water.

6.

In the morning, she's waiting on your side of the bed.

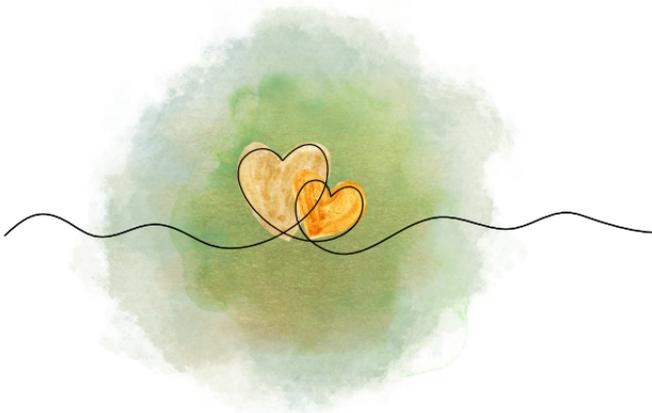
NATURE POEM

folks aren't fond of rape poems.
audiences recoil at the overdone histrionics.
so, i write nature poems instead.
this is a nature poem.

a boy once burned my name into his bicep,
four-letter forest fire singed from skin to sinew—
but this is a nature poem, just lover's initials
etched into a leering oak. my name bled through the bandage
like stars blurring at dusk.

when a star dies, doesn't it collapse into itself?
fluorescent lights burst into a luminous stellar explosion
as i folded inward beneath the boy's gravity, became a nebula
of ghosts. not every dead thing is beckoned back home
by the worms.

this is a nature poem where boys rip earthworms in half
boasting, they have two hearts so now there's more
to go around. but what we'd give to be whole again
instead of in pieces.

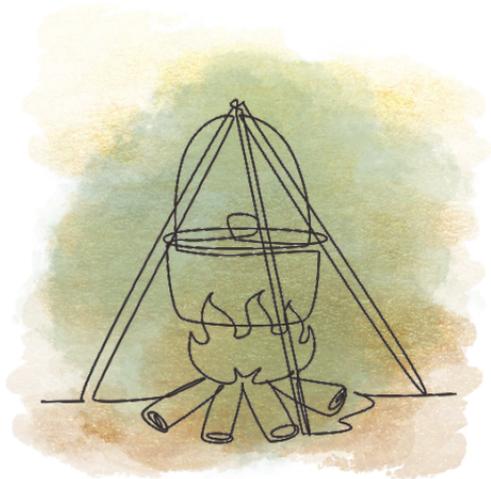


BONE BROTH

the parts of you that live in my bones,
the deep-lodged marrow ache, soften
like your features in my memory;
the shards give way, melt
in a salt bath sustenance song
boiling on the stove.

the broth is like
a purge of your winter grip;
it is spring in eleven days
and i look back on the cold months
wondering when the first frost came
then letting it fall from my hands to the floor, still, the soup of my blood
boils clarity in citrine
the same deep-lodged marrow ache
a majesty
to behold, churning
straw into gold.

under heat
the alchemy steams subtly
transforming me, pulling out
the impurities
the you, still
buried inside the bones of me
rising like steam
and vanishing.



PROSE

PROSA



BIRTHRIGHT

- Trees -

When I was born, my father tramped out into the woods behind our house, his arms full of mulch and shovels and seeds, and planted a tree. As she tells it, my mother, thinking he was mad, called out after him. "Dan," she cried, "Where are you going? Have you lost your mind? You've just become a father and there you go, traipsing off into the forest like a man possessed." My aunt Sassy was there and claims that everything Momma said about that night is true. They both laugh when they tell the story. They also exchange glances, always right at this very spot in the tale, where I imagine they must've exchanged glances when it happened, too. "If you must go, get a beer and a smoke with your mates," they say together, "It's a day to celebrate!"

Poppa tended to leave when the story got started. If he couldn't leave, he would scuff his feet, look down at the floor, and smile a little. He would blush under his beard like it was some kind of a secret. He never recounted his part in this exchange, so Aunt Sassy filled in for him, lowering her voice to a rough rumble, "You have the child to yourself," she intoned on his behalf, "I am celebrating."

Momma would continue. "I imagined him just as mad as his own Poppa before him," she would say.

That day, so long ago, my father, Daniel, Poppa, marched through the crisp fallen leaves of early October until he reached the spot where the creek split in two and ran off into the forest. It must have been nearly two miles from the house.

Once, and one time only, I got Poppa to tell the story to me. It was a late summer evening, one of those nights where twilight lasts almost till dawn, and we had worked all day mowing hay. We were tired and sweaty and drunk on summer, and we stayed up too late, him sipping cold beer from cans and me sipping root beer and pretending that I was grown like him.

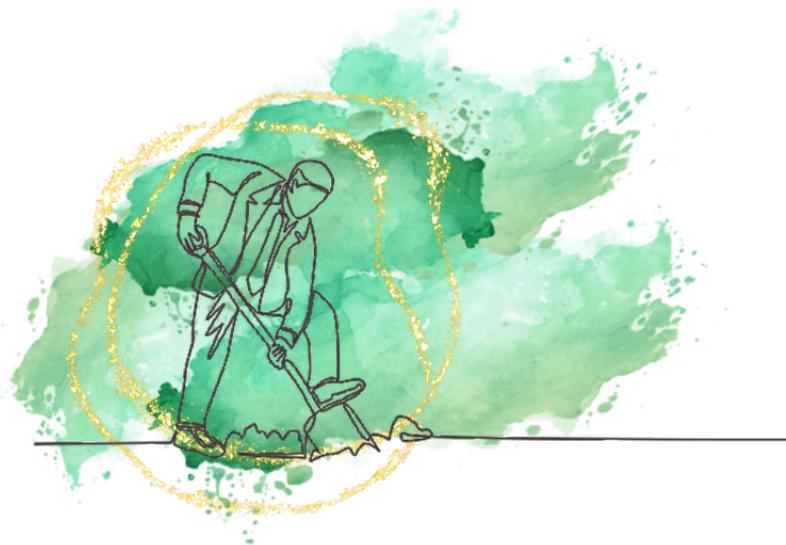
“Momma’s gone to bed,” I whispered, conspiratorial, as if the story was a secret we were keeping from Momma, “Now tell me about the tree.”

“It’s a blessing you weren’t born in December,” he said, tousling my hair in the way that I both hated and loved.

I have no doubt he would have hiked the two miles with snow up to his eyeballs if he had to. He was just that kind of a man. Right at that split in the creek, he fell to his knees on the autumn ground, whispered the name he had chosen for his firstborn child, and dug his shovel into the forest floor.

“Mary.”

The word echoed off the trees as if it had been snatched from the air and tossed back and forth by the elves and fairies of much older times. As he told it, the water itself seemed to sparkle at the sound. In short enough time, he was done. There, bathed in the shadow of a single proud fir, was the wispy seedling of a willow tree. He turned and began the hike back home to spend the evening with Momma and Aunt Sassy and his newly-named Mary. The beer and the smoke, he decided, could wait.



I knew something was wrong before Poppa told me. I knew those trees like the back of my hand. Even before I could walk, he would carry me there on his back. Momma never came with us, and that seemed alright. She didn't have a tree there, after all. She and Aunt Sassy would stay home and greet us with smiles and laughter when we returned. I remember huffing and puffing through snow halfway up my shin bones one winter, erupting through the front door to the warm glow of the fireplace and the irresistible smell of chocolate chip cookies—Aunt Sassy's secret recipe. Poppa would scoop Momma up in his arms and kiss her on the lips or the cheek or the forehead, and reach down to mess my hair.

Poppa never explained our trees to me. There was no need. I knew from the first instant I could know anything that my tree's energy ran through me and that my energy ran through it. Visiting the trees was not an adventure or a ritual. It was a need. When I was little, we would go together most of the time. It was far and I was small and there were bears and cougars in the woods. It simply wasn't safe for me to go alone. But I grew, and my tree grew. Once I was in high school, I started going alone, albeit armed to the teeth. The bear spray was courtesy of my Poppa, and the old BB gun courtesy of Marky Reynolds, a red-headed, slightly buck-toothed boy in my class who was sure I would get eaten by a mountain lion if I ventured out unarmed. I'm embarrassed to say how many hearts with initials I carved into my tree over those years. None of them were Marky's.

I was 16 when I first noticed the rot on Poppa's pine. It was a greenish-yellow fuzz just starting to coat the tips of the branches. It was so faint I had to reach up, on tiptoes, and bend one of the branches down to even see it. It looked like nothing, but at the same time, it felt like so much more.

We didn't talk about the rot for a long time. He was my father; although not a man of many words, he had always been truthful with me. I thought if there was something to know, he would tell me about it. I started going out to the grove daily after school to see if the rot had spread. Sometimes it would stay the same for weeks and weeks, and sometimes, I could tell the change overnight.

He finally told me about the rot when the yellow-green fuzz had completed its gnarly march from the tips of the branches all the way down to the trunk. Except it wasn't rot; it was cancer, and it had metastasized to his bones. The doctors said that he had some time, but not enough time. Time to see me graduate high school, but not enough to see me get my college degree. Time for one last summer of laying up hay and drinking beers (or root beers) on the porch, but not enough time to walk me down the aisle when I married Mark (by the time he was 30, he had finally convinced everyone but his mother and baby sister to abandon Marky - it was not an easy fight).

Poppa died at home, just like he wanted, with Momma next to him and Aunt Sassy in the kitchen, cooking casseroles to keep Momma going. She would hardly leave his side to eat, but when Aunt Sassy or I slid a plate in front of her, she would clean it up, mostly. I wasn't there, which was also what he wanted. I was in the grove, my back pressed against the tall pine. It sounds crazy, but when I sat like that, I could feel the waves of energy radiating out through the bark. The energy from Poppa's tree had always been calm and low and solid, but over the last weeks the waves had been getting smaller and longer. The rot covered the trunk now and it would leave little burrs on the back of my sweater when I finally stood up.

I watched the sun set over the horizon. It was early fall, that nostalgic time of year when the darkness has just started to eat up the daylight and the evening breeze whispers of future things – sweaters, campfires, cocoa, the first snow – though at midday, it's hard to tell the difference. It was the time for letting go of those glorious days of summer and preparing for the bare bones of winter to rise like a skeleton from a shallow grave.

A flock of swallows swooped through the leaf-heavy branches. A month or so and the branches would be all oranges and reds; two months more, and the branches would be bare as stones. Nestled among the small cacophony of animal noises, I felt waves of my father's steady energy slowly ebb and quiet and fade out into a stillness that I had never felt in this place before. Three years before, back when I noticed the rot but before we had started to talk about it, the moon eclipsed the sun, plunging a bright August day into an eerie twilight. Poppa was on the tailgate, not even looking at the sky. Instead he watched me in my goofy eclipse glasses, smiling as I laughed and pointed and marveled. The moment of his death, under the branches of his tree, the last remnants of energy still tingling in my spine, was just like that. A moment that was somehow solemn and joyous and magnificent and terrifying and natural and eerie and strangely, strangely still. My tears were rain on the forest floor.



- Seeds -

Without the energy, Poppa's tree gradually wilted and darkened. Long ago I asked Poppa why there were only two trees, mine and his.

"Where is your Poppa's tree?" I asked, in the persistent way children do. "Or your Momma's?"

He smiled and tousled my hair (I still liked it back then) and told me that someday, when I was older, everything would be clear. "There's a time for everything, Mary," he said. "Nothing can stay forever."

Every now and then, usually after a heavy storm, his pine would drop a blackened branch to the ground. That branch would become a teeming home for ants and termites and other tiny creatures, and eventually, it would return to the soil. While the main trunk stood black and hollow for a long time, it was strangely abuzz with other life. I collected the birds' nests when they fell and floated them down the creek, imagining them to be Viking funeral ships, wishing that I could set them ablaze and watch the light dwindle down the creek.



I went away for a time. Momma and Aunt Sassy and I packed up my things into boxes for easy loading into the old, last-legs pickup that I insisted on driving around; it had been Poppa's, and I liked the way my fingers fit into the grooves his fingers had worn into the steering wheel after so much time. I kissed their cheeks and they waved goodbye and I drove away for college. I had no idea how much I would miss our trees - my willow, which had grown tall and graceful and supple in a rugged kind of way, but especially Poppa's, as dead and blackened as it was. Arriving home, I would greet Momma and Aunt Sassy and then take off for the grove to press my hands and face against the bark, like my skin was soaking in as much as it could to last me through until the next visit.

It was an easy choice to come home after graduation. There was no other choice, really. Moving away from the grove was not an option, and anyway, it seemed foolish to abandon forever the small town that had raised me. So I came back, settling back into my old room, now stripped of the pink and frills of childhood. Marky didn't live next door anymore; he had bought a parcel of land near the old mill, just down the left branch of the old creek, and was raising sheep there. He showed up on my doorstep about two weeks after I moved back, cap in his hands, and asked if he could take me out to Dell's Cafe for a cup of coffee or some breakfast. Of course I said yes, and he started coming by more and more often. He appeared on the porch at dusk or sometimes on a weekend afternoon, more and more frequently with a handful of wildflowers he had pulled somewhere between his front door and ours. It took about a year before I could call him Mark. It also took about a year for him to propose, and another year after that before we were married. Poppa would have approved; he had always liked Marky.

On the day our son was born, in the living room of our house just down the left branch of the creek, I knew exactly what had to be done. I had begun preparing weeks before, assembling a pile of mulch and shovels and seeds in the corner of the screened-in patio. He was a beautiful boy, strong and vibrant, full of life and energy and a wail that seemed like it could split existence. Momma and Aunt Sassy welcomed him into the world and placed him into my arms. Mark and I watched him in wonder for minutes that seemed like an eternity and also no time at all. Then my eyes drifted to the window, in the direction of the grove, and Mark caught my gaze and raised an eyebrow.

"Time?" he asked.

"Time," I said, and leaned in, and whispered into his ear.

Mark gathered the mulch and shovels and seeds and tramped out into the woods behind our house. It's a blessing it wasn't December. It was spring, and the trees were just now beginning to burst into tiny, fragile green leaves. Momma and Aunt Sassy exchanged a look in the kitchen, I'm sure, when they heard the screen door slam. And while I held our firstborn close to my heart, drinking in his scent and marveling at all of the small fingers and toes that we had created, Mark planted a tree. It was right between my tree and Poppa's, as I would discover later, nestled into the cradle created by the branching of an old, dropped tree limb that was slowly dissolving back into the earth. A perfect place, full of nutrients and something more than nutrients, something stronger, older, deeper, richer. And just before he dug his shovel into the soil, he whispered one word. I wasn't there, of course, but I imagine that it echoed off the trees as if it had been snatched from the air and tossed back and forth by the elves and fairies of much older times, and that the very water itself seemed to sparkle at the sound of it.

"Daniel."

ELEVEN

Eleven would be the age I returned to, when it all seemed clear, though it was also the age it began to unravel and discohere. Back then, it was all sandlot baseball and basketball, double-pumping fingertip rolls until dark, or opening fire hydrants with a stolen fireman's wrench. He had been driving by when he ordered me to close up the hydrant; I took off with his wrench down an alley.

My lookouts would keep watch while I would command, donning my impossibly red spring jacket with that stolen wrench tucked inside a pocket. Spray caps were my specialty, thrown off roofs to crack them into half-broken perfection. The cap would arc the spray and conjure rainbows from the hydrant's spray. Men in Dago-Ts would wash their cars or look for women in yellow or white tops to escort into the mist, their squeals and shrieks only partly protest.

These were days of pinners and Kayo and conspiracy with my best friend Miguel Godinez, whose father convinced me that tortillas came from birds and kept his tequila on the floor by his dinner chair.

On Community Discount Value sale days, both our mothers separately bought that same spring jacket, impossibly red, with black and grey stripes atop each other running from shoulder to navel. Miguel and I were now running all of Polk Street in our matching jackets.

Sister Ann Robert phoned me that day. *Miguel is dead. A ruptured appendix.* And since I was the class leader and had the list she gave me, would I make the calls?

"Mike is dead. Mike is dead. Something broke. I don't know. Mike is dead."

That night, Mother tried to prepare me for whatever a wake was, but he was not awake, she warned. Expect flowers, flowers beyond how flowers should smell, twilled into shapes. Clocks stilled. Hearts rent. These are symbols, she told me.

In the chill of that June night in west side Chicago, the impossibly red jacket on my shoulders made the hot room hotter. Miguel, lying there, impossibly red jacket on.

I said to Mrs. Godinez something I practiced in Spanish on the walk over, something about friendship, which caused more crying and Mother explaining again: symbols.



FOUR DOLLARS MORE

I sat on a bench by the front door, across from the cubbies where the other kids kept their shoes. I was showered, dressed in a clean button-up shirt, with my hair combed back. A trash bag beside me was filled with clothes that the shelter was allowing me to keep.

“She’s here; I’ll let her in,” one of the counselors called out, walking past me to unlock the front door. She paused to enter the code on the dial pad, and made sure the door locked behind her when she left. Through fogged glass on either side of the door, I watched the counselor greet my cousin Elena. I’d never met Elena before, but I had left my family in La Libertad almost six months ago to reach her. Only now, on the brink of meeting her, did I wonder if she would accept me. What if she looked at me and turned away? If she rejected me, I’d be stuck here forever. I’d never be able to send money home to my family. Or worse—if the shelter realized I was unwanted, I feared they’d send me back to the detention center.

The counselor returned to the door, entered the code, and in rushed a woman I’d only seen in photographs. She threw her arms around me.

“Thank God you’re safe; I was so worried.”

She was plump, with dark skin, brown eyes, and a mop of curly hair. The way she looked reminded me of my ma and abuela. But there was something that set her apart. Perhaps it was the roundness of her eyes, the narrowness of her chin, which made her look unmistakably American.

I hugged her as if I’d known her my whole life.

On the way to her house, Elena drove us down an enormous six-lane highway that I hadn't seen since I was transported from the detention center four months earlier. She'd insisted that I sit in the backseat, saying it was part of California law because I was only ten. She said the ride would take an hour, we were driving from Fullerton to another town called Boyle Heights. I didn't understand why the cities had different names. As far as we drove, we never got away from the houses or businesses and into the countryside. One shop passed after another.

It would be easy to find work.

"Can you teach me English?" I asked.

She glanced at me in the rearview mirror. Her eyes smiled. "What do you want to say?"

"How do I ask for work?"

She tilted her head and chuckled, then caught herself. "Sorry to laugh. I was expecting you to ask how to say 'hi' or 'how are you.'"

"Where do you work?"

"At a hospital near where we live."

"Could you help me find a job there?"

She focused on the road. I felt strange talking to the back of her head. When I'd asked the counselors to let me out of the shelter so I could look for a job, they sat me down and explained that I was too young to work. I assumed they said this because they only let me leave the shelter to go to school. I'd been working in La Libertad since I was six. Still, Elena's silence hinted that now was not the right time.

"We'll discuss this later," she said. She turned on the radio. The music blasted at full volume through the car, startling me. She apologized and turned it down. Even with the music, I couldn't move past her silence. I didn't like that she ignored my question. Finding work was the reason I came all this way.

All of the houses on Elena's street had metal gates in front of their yards and bars that covered the windows. The roads were torn up and jagged, and her car bounced as she drove down the narrow street. She turned into a driveway entrance and left the car running to roll open a sliding driveway gate. Then, she parked the car and led me inside.

When I stepped through the door, I thought I'd entered a mansion. She had a big screen TV hung on the wall, a section of the house reserved exclusively for what she called a "dining table," a refrigerator big enough to fit my father inside, a machine she said washed the dishes for us, and a separate bedroom for each of us to sleep in. My father had told me that she was willing to take me in because her husband left her and she lived alone.

She opened the door to my room and turned on the ceiling fan light. Posters of musicians and superhero movies covered the walls. The bed pressed against the far corner of the room was long enough to lay on both frontways and sideways.

"This is my son's room. He's at college in Texas." She lifted a large plastic bag by the door. "I bought you some clothes. You want to freshen up?"

Now I had two sets of clothes. God bless America.

"Can I call my family?" I asked. "To tell them I made it?"

She set the bag down by my bed. "I already told them you're here. They want you to call them on Sunday when they're at Señor Mendoza's." She referred to our closest neighbor in Guatemala who had a phone. "Shower and we'll eat."

I showered and changed into the new clothes Elena had bought me. All the clothes I'd worn before had been owned by my older cousins in Guatemala, or were donations to the shelter in Fullerton. I found the new clothes stiff and itchy.

We sat across from each other at a dining table big enough to fit my parents, brothers, and grandparents. Elena served me spinach salad and slices of an oven-cooked pizza for dinner, a feast compared to the pot of rice I used to share with my family back home. Although I hadn't eaten since breakfast, I picked at my food. The thought of eating when I knew my family was starving had overpowered my hunger since I arrived at the shelter.

Elena watched me eat. "I must admit, I'm impressed. When your father told me you were coming north alone, I wanted to kill him. I'd never let my son do something like that. But here you are." She folded her hands on the table. "Do you want to talk about it?"

I shrugged. I could've told her about the journey to the border, the three days in the detention center, or the four endless months I'd spent in the shelter. But my father never spoke about the hard parts of his life, no matter how difficult our work together could be. I figured I should do the same.

"Elena," I said. "I need you to help me find a job. Please."

She leaned forward on the table. "You know you're too young to work..."

"I worked on a coffee farm back home."

"Francisco, you can't work in this country until you're older."

"I know. They told me at the shelter. But my father fell off a hill picking coffee cherries. He broke his leg. We don't have enough money to buy food. Didn't he tell you that?"

"He never told me he sent you here to work. I think he knows you're too young."

"I'm not too young, I've been working since I was six!" I'd almost fallen off a moving train, I'd hid in a sewer drain to avoid la migra, I'd seen children younger than me beaten and raped by bandits. I'd gone through it all to find work.

Elena walked around the table toward me. I jumped back and my chair fell over with a clatter. For half a year, I'd been in survival mode, toughing out a journey that'd killed people older and smarter than me. But now that I was back in the safety of a family member's home, the ten-year-old inside me came up for air.

She approached me with her arms out. "It's okay. It's going to be okay," she said with a hug. "Nobody expects you to work."



I couldn't tell her that she was right. My parents had only encouraged me to go north for new opportunities. They never pressured me to send money home. Only my brothers knew my plan. It was the one thing I could tell them to keep them from crying as I left home. *I'll send money back, I'd said, and you'll never be hungry again.* After four months in the United States, they thought I'd lied to them. But it was only because I was trapped in that shelter. Now that I was free, I needed to make good on my promise.

"But I need to help them," I said.

Elena put her hand on my cheek. "Nobody is going to make you work here. You're gonna go to school, and one day when you grow up, you'll have a great job and be able to help them all. Okay?" I didn't know what to say. She had a beautiful house. Good food. A good job. I didn't understand how this woman could live and act this way when her family in Guatemala had nothing to eat. That's when I knew she wasn't going to help me find work. I'd need to live with her until I found another way.

"Okay," I said.

We sat back down. She put another slice of pizza on my plate. I ate to make her think I was happy. It was the most food I remembered eating at once.



I slept sideways on the bed with my head under the window. To wake at first light, I kept the blinds open like I did back home. The alarm clock on the nightstand read 5:30AM . I dressed, tiptoed through the house, and snuck out the front door. I never made it this far at the shelter. No matter how closely I watched the counselors enter the door code, I never got past the dial pad.

A blue mist hung in the early morning air. I walked onto Soto, the nearest major street, and took in my surroundings. A hospital the size of three city blocks towered over the neighborhood on the other side of the freeway. I began my journey toward it in search of work.

Once I was on the other side of the freeway, I walked north on Marengo Street. Three blocks down, I noticed a restaurant with gray and yellow walls. I recognized its logo, a giant M on a pole, from a trip my family had taken into the city when I was five.

When I entered the restaurant, the smell of grease and oil was the first thing I noticed. The cashiers gave change, the cooks in the back made greasy egg sandwiches, a janitor wiped down the tables. I could tell they needed help. I stood to the side of the counter and waved to get a cashier's attention. A customer in line noticed me first, and they shouted something at me in English. I didn't respond, so they repeated in Spanish to go to the back of the line. A cashier glanced at me and went back to helping his customer. After this, I knew they wouldn't take me seriously - so I left.

Another block down, on the side of the street opposite the hospital, I saw a man lifting a roll-up gate to the entrance of a store filled with party supplies. His eyes reminded me of the people I'd seen when I took the train through Oaxaca.

"Excuse me," I said. "Are you the owner?"

He looked down at me, then glanced side-to-side, as if looking for someone who was with me. "Yes," he said.

"You have any work? Taking out trash? Lifting boxes? Anything you need, I can help." I'd made the pitch in every town I traveled through when I needed a job. It rarely worked, but I found they were more likely to send me off with a couple centavos if I offered to help than if I begged for change.

The store owner locked the gate to stick at the top of the entrance. "Where are your parents?"

"Why?"

"It's not every day I see a kid asking for work."

"They're dead."

He said *oh* under his breath, looked down either side of the street again, and then waved me through the front door. The store was filled with tables of all sizes, deflated balloons sampling their colors, wedding altars, a tall machine with popcorn painted on the side, and a large plastic fountain.

The store owner put his keys in his pocket. "Switch out the trash bags and pull out seventy-five folding chairs from the back. Do that, and I'll pay you four dollars."

"Eight," I said. I didn't know how much four dollars was worth in quetzals, only that eight was worth more.

The man laughed and asked, "Where're you from?" I kept quiet, afraid the wrong answer would get me thrown out of the store. "This is the United States, chico. Everything has a set price."

He walked to the cash register. I was tempted not to bargain. I should consider myself lucky for getting work at all. But more money meant more food for my family.

“Six,” I said.

The man turned to me. “Four. Take it or leave it.”

I wanted to ask for more. Looking for work had taken almost half an hour and I wanted to get home before Elena woke up. But time was precious and I imagined U.S. dollars of any amount were worth more than the quetzals back home.

“Okay. Four dollars,” I said.

We shook hands. I switched out the trash bags and hauled the full ones to the dumpster in the alley beside the store. Before I heard anyone coming, hands grabbed me from behind and lifted me into the air.

I thought of the detention center guards who’d lift me up in the middle of the night to rip away my blanket. I yelled and tried to pry the fingers off of me.

“What the hell are you doing out here?” said the person holding me. I realized it was Elena.

My body went stiff. “Stop—I can explain!”

Elena carried me to the backseat of her car and slammed the door. I tugged on the handle, but it was locked from the outside. I pounded on the window and called her name, but she ignored me, got into the driver’s seat, and drove back toward her house. The store owner walked out of the front door and watched us leave.

“He was gonna pay me!” I cried.

She looked at me in the rearview mirror. "What the hell were you thinking, coming out here on your own? Do you have any idea how many streets I drove down looking for you? Who was that man? What were you doing?"

"I was working."

"We've been over this..." she glanced back at me. "Put on your seatbelt."

"You need to let me work. My family will starve—"

"You are ten years old. It is not your responsibility to send them money."

"Then why don't you send them money?"

"Because I'm supposed to be taking care of you," she said. "You can't go walking off in this neighborhood. It's dangerous."

I wanted to keep arguing, but I feared she'd send me back to the shelter if she was angry. Then I'd never find work. I threw myself back into my seat. Through the window, I saw kids walking to school, cars commuting to work. I'd grown up in Guatemala. I'd traveled alone through Mexico. I'd spent two nights in a detention center holding a toddler I'd never met who was burning with fever.

What could be dangerous about Boyle Heights?

I looked down at my hands, hands that were sticky from tying up trash bags. "I'm sorry," I said. "I won't leave the house without you again."

Elena pulled into the driveway. She'd left the gate open from rushing out to look for me. I realized that she was still wearing pajama pants.

"Hurry up and get ready," she said, putting the car in park. "I need to get you to school."

Within the hour, we were walking down the hallways of Bridge Street Elementary. My hair was wet and combed to the side. I wore jeans and a light blue shirt that Elena had bought for my arrival. She led me to the front office and spoke in English to the woman behind the reception desk. They spoke as if they'd met before and the woman waved to me with interest.

"Hello, Francisco," she said. "We've been expecting you."

Elena squatted down to my height and put her hands on my shoulders. "I want you to have a good first day at school. *This* is your job now."

She hugged me goodbye, and the receptionist led me out of the main building behind the school to a small house on wheels that she called a "bungalow". Inside the bungalow, posters of words written in English and handmade student projects were plastered to the walls. A class of kids who were around my age sat in front of their desks on a carpeted floor designed to look like a map of the United States. I sat on Maryland.



Ms. Contreras, a thin woman with hair that went down to her shoulders, paced in front of the whiteboard. She spoke to us only in English, and I strained my ears to understand what she was saying. Anytime I heard a word that sounded familiar, I rolled it over in my head for so long that by the time I figured out what it meant, she was already ten words ahead. I didn't realize she was introducing me to the class until she said my name. She followed my name with a sentence in English. When she realized I was looking at her wide-eyed, she switched to Spanish.

"Do you want to introduce yourself?"

The other kids looked at me. I hadn't been to school in three years. I imagined they all spoke English better than me.

"I'm okay," I tried.

"Can you tell us where you're from?"

I didn't want to tell them I was Guatemalan. Most of the kids looked Latino, but others looked like they were from somewhere else, places I'd only seen on TV. I didn't know how they'd react if they learned I crossed the border illegally. My eyes plead for Ms. Contreras to move on.

"All right," Ms. Contreras turned to the whiteboard. "Let's start."

The bell rang. Another woman sitting off to the side, who I guessed to be another teacher, led the others out the door for lunch. I sat at my desk, which was two tables pushed together to sit four students. Ms. Contreras sat in the chair next to me. I feared she'd kick me out of class for not speaking English. Then what would Elena do with me?

"When was the last time you went to school?" Ms. Contreras asked.

I kept my eyes on my desk. "I was six. Almost seven."

"And you never learned to read or write?"

"Only my name."

"That's more than some." She craned her head in front of me, so I had to look at her. "I'm supposed to teach you English in a year. It's not going to be easy, but the important thing is that you try. Don't worry what the other kids think."

I looked at my hands, cupped together on the desk.

"Okay?" she asked. I nodded. "Good." She put her hand on my shoulder and stood up. "Go play outside."

Instead, I sat at a table and watched the other kids play tag, baseball, and fútbol on the concrete yard. They left the tables the moment the other woman in the classroom told them they could play, leaving their half-eaten lunches. I hadn't played during lunch since I was six. Nobody stopped to eat lunch while working on coffee farms. The kids in my hometown only played fútbol on the days when it rained so hard that the farms closed down.

I thought of what my brothers were doing at that moment. Alejandro was waking up early to work at the farm by the time I left. I imagined him climbing a muddy hill, picking cherries from a hard to reach tree. *Where is my brother?* I imagined him thinking. *He was supposed to send us money!* My youngest brother Juan was still in school, playing in the yard like these kids. In a year, he'd drop out to pick coffee cherries too.

I looked at the chain-link fence that surrounded the school. I wanted to climb over it and go back to the party supply store to collect my four dollars. I came here to work, not play games. But I imagined the second my feet touched ground on the far side of the fence, Elena would be there to snatch me up into the air.

On Sunday, I sat at Elena's dining room table and dialed Señor Mendoza's number off a yellow legal pad into Elena's cell phone. My ma answered on the second ring.

"Pancho," she said. Her nickname for me. "We're so relieved you're safe." Juan shouted hello to me from the background. "How are you?" she asked. "Is your cousin treating you well?"

"I'm fine," I said. I was sitting in a beautiful house where my cousin was cooking chicken for dinner. Who was I to complain to them?

"Where's Pa?" I asked. "Where's Alejandro?"

"Your father says hello. His leg didn't heal right. It was too hard for him to walk here."

"Is he working?"

"Not yet." My ma told me she'd taken another caretaking job in Huehuetenango. She woke up before dawn six days a week to take the bus and came home after dark. "This is my only day off."

"I'll send money home soon."

"Don't. We've burdened Elena enough."

I ignored her. Like my father, I knew what was best for my family.

"Where's Alejandro?"

She cleared her throat. "Want to talk to Juan?"

"Okay," I said, unsure why she'd avoided the question. My mom said she loved me and handed Juan the phone.

"Where's Alejandro?" I repeated.

"He's working," Juan told me.

I looked through the doorway to the kitchen, where a clock hung over the sink. It was an hour earlier in Boyle Heights than in La Libertad. Elena had explained the concept of a time difference to me that afternoon.

"The farm closed four hours ago," I said.



“He works at another farm in Todos Santos.”

I went to Todos Santos once with my father. It took three hours by bus. Now Alejandro, who was only seven years old, was going by himself.

“Does he come home after work?” I asked.

“Sometimes. Sometimes he just sleeps there.”

I put my hand over my eyes. I was supposed to provide for my family. I was supposed to send money home for food, clothes, and anything else they needed. But I’d taken too long.

I cupped my hand over the mouthpiece. “Tell him I’ll send money home soon.”

* * *

I approached Ms. Contreras at the front of the room before class the next morning. She looked half-awake, copying the day’s lesson plan onto the whiteboard from a notebook held in her arm.

“How can I ask for work in English?” I said.

She glanced at me. “Why?”

“I just want to know.”

She told me the English translation. *Do you have any work?* For the rest of the day, I repeated the phrase in my head. It was a harder sentence than I thought it’d be. The word “Do” seemed unnecessary; we had no word for it back home. I reminded myself to pronounce the H in have. *The way a J is pronounced in Spanish*, Ms. Contreras told me.

Elena picked me up from school at three. We drove to her office, in the hospital that spanned three city blocks. I sat at a table across from her desk and did my homework for two hours. Doctors walked in and asked her questions in English, then gestured to me and asked about me. After they left, she said the doctors thought I was cute and a good cousin for sitting there working so quietly.

I looked at the doctors in their suits underneath their spotless white coats and imagined they each earned in a day what my family made in a year. I knew from back home that it took a lot of schooling to be a doctor. If I stayed in school and learned English, I could be like them. I'd help my family far more by earning a doctor's salary than by cleaning a party supply store.

"How many years do I have to go to school to be a doctor?" I asked Elena.

Elena looked from behind her computer screen and laughed. "Years and years."

I didn't have the luxury of waiting. By the time I started practicing, my family would've starved. Something would've happened to my ma or my brothers.

After work, Elena and I walked to a park down the street from her office. She brought me to a section of the park where little kids played on bars, slides, and swings. She called it a playground. Her cell phone rang and she told me to play while she took the call. I felt too old to go on the slides, so I sat on the swing. Elena stood under a tree at the edge of the playground and talked on her phone. She kept looking at me while she spoke. She looked worried, the way my ma looked when I'd come home from work too late at night. I tried not to think about how much I missed her.

Elena put her phone in her purse. She sat down on the empty swing beside me. "That was your teacher. You asked her how to ask for work?" I put my foot down to stop the swing. I didn't know Elena had told Ms. Contreras about my wandering off and I resented my teacher for being a snitch. "Why'd you ask her?"

"Just curious."

"Are you thinking of going off again?"

I looked her in the eye and pretended to act hurt. "No. You never told me. I just wanted to know."

She wrapped her arm around the swing's chain. I could tell she was having trouble believing me. "When you came here, you thought you were gonna work and make lots of money. It doesn't upset you that you can't do that?"

I paused. I wasn't used to adults asking me questions like this. "No. I'm too young."

"If something's wrong, you know you can tell me, right?"

"I know. Thanks, Elena."

"Okay," she said. "Good." She reached over from her swing and pushed me forward. "Who do you think can go higher?" She kicked the ground and we swung beside each other.



That night, I snuck out of my room into the hallway. I looked at the crack under Elena's door to see that the bedroom light was off, grabbed the plastic bag filled with new clothes and tiptoed into the dining room. I found her purse on the dining table and pulled out all the money she had. *I'd pay her back*, I told myself. I wanted to write her a goodbye note, but didn't know how to spell, so I took the back of an opened envelope off the kitchen counter, wrote my name, and drew a hand waving.

Outside, I closed the front door behind me. I walked to Soto Street and waited at the bus stop on the freeway overpass. I'd made the mistake last week of looking for work too close to where Elena could find me. If I was going to work, I needed to go far away, so she could never stop me again.

The bus arrived. The name of the city spelled out in electronic dots on the destination sign was meaningless to me. I only knew that the bus was facing east. I stepped on, inserted a dollar into the fare machine and sat toward the back. The driver seemed unconcerned that a ten-year-old was taking the bus alone at midnight. I guessed that in Boyle Heights, it was common.

I rode the bus for hours. Every time I reached the end of the line, I waited for the next one to take me farther. I decided I'd keep going until I left Los Angeles and reached the next city. But like the drive from Fullerton, no matter how far I traveled, the buses continued through neighborhoods, past businesses, and under highways. Los Angeles seemed to go on forever.



I stepped off my fourth bus alone. It drove away and I sat under the bus stop shelter. Behind the stop was a gravel field that led to train tracks and a wall tagged with graffiti. On the other side of the street stood a giant windowless warehouse. The road ahead disappeared into the darkness. Compared to Boyle Heights, kept bright all night by the lights of distant buildings, this part of the city was dark. I felt like I was back in Mexico, waiting to jump onto the next train north.

This city is dangerous, I remembered Elena saying. I wondered if her words were more truthful than I'd thought. Every distant screech of a car's tires on a dark street, every sound of an invisible force kicking another rock put me on edge. I waited for what felt like an hour, two hours, but another bus never came.

At that point, I wanted to go back to Elena's, return the money, destroy my goodbye note, and climb back into bed before she noticed I was missing. I looked at the bus map displayed behind glass under the shelter. I couldn't make sense of it. I didn't know how to spell Soto or Marengo. Even if I did, I didn't know where I was. I hadn't kept track of the bus routes and wouldn't know how to get back even if a bus came for me.

I reminded myself not to be a chicken. I never thought to turn back once I left Guatemala. I'd traveled through Mexico alone. I never once thought of giving up the days I spent trapped in the detention center with sick kids half my age. Now was no different.

I continued to wait. My stomach growled, and I hated myself for not bringing a piece of fruit with me. In my anxiousness to leave the house, I'd feared that if I crinkled open my plastic bag to put an apple inside, Elena would hear me.

A car turned onto the street and sped past, windows rolled down and music blasting. I caught the strong odor of warm, greasy food. Maybe there was a place nearby. I was going to need my strength if I found a job in the morning.

I walked in the direction the car came from. Around the corner, two blocks down, I saw another gray and yellow restaurant with that M-shaped sign.

I entered the restaurant, where three others sat alone eating. I approached the cashier and looked up at the menu. Since I couldn't read the names of anything, I pointed to the pictures of the food. I ordered what the cashier called a Sausage McMuffin and a hash brown and handed her money.

"It's okay," she said. "We got it."

I sat down at a booth in the corner with my food. The cashier talked to another worker and glanced at me. I wondered if they were planning to call my cousin or the police.

I unwrapped my McMuffin and took the first bite. It was juicy and delicious—and that made me hate it. How dare I enjoy this sandwich when my family had nothing to eat? I imagined my parents and brothers walking through the restaurant doors and seeing me—a pathetic pig eating his fancy American food because he'd gone hungry after a couple of hours. I didn't deserve this food. But I couldn't leave it either. I couldn't be like those kids who abandoned their food the moment the teacher let them play.

I took the next bite.

I deserve this, I thought.

Another bite.

They won't hate me for eating as long as I send money home.

A third bite.

How can they expect me to provide for them?

I ate my hash brown.

I'll never be able to send enough.

I dipped the hash brown in ketchup.

Elena is right.

I finished my meal.

I need to get back to her.

A police officer entered the restaurant.

Maybe she won't know I left.

The officer approached my table.

Maybe she'll forgive me.

"Are you okay?" the officer asked. "Are you lost?"

THE ALCHEMY OF ASSIMILATION

previously published by Beyond Words Literary Magazine, 2022

i. milk

Mama says I slept well as a newborn, so well and so soundly it was like I knew what I had already cost her and did not want to cause any more trouble. I cried every night the first month, but after Mama started giving me cow's milk in addition to her own, I slept through the night.

Mama likes to tell people about this like it was a gift I gave her, how I slept each night with a belly full of warm milk and did not wake up until sun-up and Mama was a memory of a kiss on my cheek.



ii. tea

In a room with bare walls, Ba sits at a table surrounded by his brothers and close friends. Laughter and shouting bounce off the walls. Ceramic tea cups and ashtrays dot the table as a dozen waitresses parade in with hot dishes straight from the kitchen.

Ba lights cigarette and smoke blows through his nostrils, hangs around his face, dances around his eyes that crinkle with laughter in the middle of a story he's telling. More cigarettes are lit around the table and the dense smoke seems to draw them closer in a hazy embrace.

The smoke makes my eyes water, but my Ba is happy, so this time I don't tell him not to smoke. He won't see any of them for a long time.

I pick up a teacup with my fingertips, touching as little of the hot surface as possible. I blow across the cup and watch the surface ripple, and the few jasmine leaves that escaped from the teapot flutter around like a little tornado. I saw a tornado in a moving picture once at someone's house. I wonder if Mei Guo, the Beautiful Country, will have moving pictures, or tornadoes.



iii. vinegar

Freshly-made dumplings are best paired with pure black vinegar. The filling is pork mixed with a vegetable, usually celery, white cabbage, or chives. Celery and cabbage add texture but don't contribute much to flavor.

But chives are different. Chives are assertive. Ma grows chive shoots in her garden, and they flourish under her careful watch. When chives are chopped and mixed in with the rest of the filling, they add a fragrant, herbaceous pop of flavor that melds seamlessly with the sesame-oil-marinated pork.

Ma has been telling me for years not to bring leftover dumplings to school or work or anywhere with white people who have only had take-out for Chinese food. Regular dumplings are ok, but never chive dumplings. Chives transform overnight in the fridge, their pungent scent unfurling into something unrecognizable, like foam escaping from a pressurized can. The fragrance intensifies, and to the unprepared, assaults the senses and can be mistaken for the stench of something going bad.

Ma has never forgotten the day she brought leftover pork-and-chive dumplings for lunch. The humiliation of her boss—normally a kind, even jolly man—straightening suddenly in his chair, erect as a startled meerkat, shouting across the lab, “What *is* that smell?” She laughs now when she tells the story again at dinner, mimicking her boss's startled English accent, like it was a joke she played on him and not an agonizing moment when she realized what it meant to be a foreigner, and that she would always be one.

Every time she tells the story, I listen like it's the first time. She learned this at a cost. So when she talks, I pay attention. When she instructs me not to bring leftover dumplings for lunch, I give her my word.

iv. spirits

The first sip of baijiu is swallowing a lit match that burns a trail from your throat to your stomach. There it sits, warming your belly like embers in a fireplace.

In the brutal winters of Jilin, baijiu is the drink of choice. The body is ill-equipped to survive the tundra of northeast China, where winds whip and blister the skin, and the ground hardens to solid ice that does not thaw until well into the spring.

A bottle of baijiu gathers your family under the roof. Passed around and poured, it quiets fears of having enough food next week, of which of your children will find livelihoods and which ones will fall into drink and stupor.

It helps you believe that your son will not suffer too much when he leaves this country. That the people of Mei Guo will remember that they too were once foreigners in a new land and treat your son and young family with kindness. Like any good mother you expect your son to chi ku—to eat bitterness—because it is sewn into any path worth walking.

In the nights before we leave for America, Ba's family rallies around him. Ten-course dinners are served, domes of rice sit steaming in blue-and-white porcelain bowls, and shot glass after shot glass of baijiu are emptied and immediately refilled. With his brothers, baijiu was a shared joy, a revelry of family, the magic of a new year, the hope of a more abundant future.

Today, hundreds of thousands of miles away from his family and decades older, he pours himself a shot of baijiu to ease the soreness in his muscles. He raises his glass, and though neither my Ma nor I partake, we clink our glasses with his.

As he empties his glass, I want to ask him if the baijiu helps the bitterness go down. I want to know if his ability to chi ku, to endure years of hardship and insults, is fortified by baijiu. I want to ask him if he knew that he would need to give up the family he was raised in to build a life for his own. And Ba, I want to know, does the baijiu, which soothes as it burns, remind you of how far you are from home, but also how far we've come?



THE COLDEST DAY OF THE WEEK

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you pick me up and I forget to bring a sweater. I will ask you later for the puffer jacket in the backseat to cover my lap. You keep it for me, and the heater on my side set to 76 degrees. Driving anywhere with me is long. This time, two hours to an apple orchard in Oak Glen. You've never been, but I am returning for a \$20.00 bag of Stayman Winesaps. I settle in, a regular passenger princess. I tuck my hands under my thighs and look out of the window at blue mountains, waiting for a layer of smog to lift or drop. Clusters of yellow cassia blooms swaying in the autumn wind, whispering to each other in the secret way of wildflowers. I see buildings and more buildings, but no trees for a murder of crows. *When do they rest their wings?* I want to stretch out my arms and offer my bones to become branches, a sturdy shelf to land on. You want to exchange news. Your neighbor is having his wedding at the end of May. You tell me that we will go together, or you won't. You don't wait for me to understand but turn the radio on to a classic rock station, and I must resist speaking no and relax my tongue. Keep my hands under my thighs. Ignore the rope in my stomach snapping, snapping. There is no excuse for the unworn dress in my closet, but I am not made for it, dainty white lace, the dancing floor, and no one knows it is there.



BOOMERANG

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As she passed the city limits sign she stepped hard on the gas. No more town speed limit. *No more fucking town*, she said to herself, reaching for the cigarette lighter. Joy Tallmadge was two months shy of thirty and two hours past her vow of never blowing out the candles on another birthday cake in Creek Bend, a dirt-bag dot on the road map. Yes, it was the place. Mostly, it was him.

She lit her cigarette and nudged the side vent window open so that the smoke was sucked out into the cool April night.

No moon.

Joy did not much like driving after the sun went down, not on that two-lane blacktop, not in her state of mind.

Fifteen more miles and I'll hit Route Three.

Then? It wouldn't be Sikeston. She was done with Missouri. Now, she was done with Illinois, too.

Three hours I can make Memphis.

If her nerves could take driving in the dark that long. She feared a creature, maybe a racoon, scuttling across the pavement, freezing in her headlight beams, causing her to swerve. Worse, it might be a deer leaping without warning from the trees that crowded each side of the road. Or, what if her car broke down with her all by herself? There was so much that could go bad.

And if it can go bad, it'll damn sure go bad for me.

Nervously, she took a deep drag off her cigarette and pulled it away. A flake of tobacco stuck to her chapped lower lip, and she began working at it with the tip of her tongue.

Goddamn him.

Running. Again. She had been in Creek Bend for a year-and-a-half, and she had made her peace with the town, drab as it was. At least there had been no melodrama in her life. Not like Sikeston or Cape Girardeau before that. Not until she had hooked up with Travis Freeman. That started it all over again.

Now, with the pavement spooling out in front of her, Joy was desperate for some distraction from the thrum of the car's motor and the anxiety and anger squeezing her chest like a vise. She clicked on the radio and began spinning the dial up through the frequencies.

That station in Little Rock—where was it? Nine hundred?

Through the crackle and fuzz, she finally caught the signal and the tail end of "Higher and Higher."

"Jackie Wilson on the Mighty Ten-Ninety, KAAY, where the hits never stop, night people!" And while the disc jockey rocked, he rolled into "Born to be Wild." Travis liked to crow that it was his theme song.

Oh, fuck me! I can't even get away from him on the goddamn radio!

She snapped it off, took a last drag from her cigarette, and flipped the butt out the window. It was pushing one and the thick clouds that had been rolling in steadily for the better part of an hour began to open up, fat drops drumming heavily on the windshield.

Just what I needed.

She turned on the wipers and started them whipping across the glass, throwing off thick ropes of water. At the same time, she eased up on the accelerator as the rain began washing down in sheets. This stretch of road was especially treacherous—*asphalt, unmarked, snaking through hilly terrain. There were no good places to pull off. Joy didn't trust the shoulder, which was narrow, falling away sharply into a deep ditch. So, with the beams of her headlights cutting a murky wedge through the downpour, she white-knuckled the steering wheel. Her eyes flicked to the rearview mirror, worried that the heavy rain would find a way into the trunk of her shitbox Corvair, where she had hurriedly thrown her clothes and what few possessions she called her own.*

Goddamn him!

"I can't take it no more, Mace," she had said to the other girl working the lunch counter that night at the truck stop on the north end of town.

"He gettin' rough with you again?" Macy asked, knowing the answer was always the same with Joy.

"Sometimes I just want to kill him."

"I'da done it already. I don't let no fucking man raise a hand to me."

"This is it. The last time. I'm outta here—this crummy-ass job and this dead-end town and my shitty life with him."

She finished her shift, took her paycheck from the back room slot labeled with a strip of masking tape that had her name written on it in ballpoint, went straight to Travis' trailer, gathered up her things and climbed behind the wheel. As she drove away, she cast a look back at the rundown single-wide that occupied the lot nearest the road at the mobile home park.

'Scenic Vistas.' What a joke!

A dozen or so trailers—old, poorly kept, with more cracked red clay than grass for any kind of yards to speak of. It was dismal, a place that blighted the outskirts of the town like a fly speck.

Joy had known such places before, but never had really shaken them since moving in with her boyfriend a month after she quit high school. He was twenty-one; she was seventeen. Her father had no use for him, but she couldn't have cared less. The old man never paid her one day's worth of respect or affection. The same way he treated her mother. He was, plain and simple, a lousy bastard who drank himself into dark rages, until the night five years before, when he put both barrels of an over-under in his mouth and ended everyone's misery. Joy hadn't bothered with the funeral.

It was her corrosive relationship with the man she'd taken up with—Jim Tatum was his name—that set a tone for her life that kept repeating, a bad dream that had unfolded yet again, forcing her to cut and run.

Jesus, I can't see a thing!



She had slowed the car to a crawl and turned on the high beams. But with the windshield starting to fog up, it made the visibility worse, so she quickly switched the headlights back and swiped her hand across the glass, clearing it enough so that she caught the outline of an overpass up ahead. She tapped the brakes and eased to the side of the road beneath its shelter. The pounding of the rain stopped abruptly, leaving the frantic wheeze and creak of the wipers. Joy shut them off, slipped the car into park and lit a fresh cigarette. She let herself slide down until her head rested on the back of the seat, and drew in a deep lungful of smoke. She didn't think it was possible to feel so bone-tired.

My life is nothin' but a broken record.

Sometimes she wished she could cry—and this was one of them—but there were no tears. Not anymore. She was all cried out. What remained was anger at herself. And frustration.

Why?

Each guy had turned out to be like the one before, and all of them carbons of the old man in their skill at inflicting heartache.

Travis? Well, it had seemed different with him in the beginning. He was back from two tours in 'Nam, poor like her, struggling to make some kind of life as a mechanic at the truck stop. The war had left deep scars. He was edgy, suspicious, withdrawn. But she knew he was hurt and vulnerable, and while he pushed others away, he let her in. She salved his wounds, calming him, making him feel whole, at least fleetingly. Giving to him allowed her to renew the sense of herself that the other men had tried so hard to crush, the belief in her worthiness beyond the sad trappings of her existence.

For a few months, the hard angles of life became softer, with a glimmer of hope that she just might have a future with this one. But then the old pattern began again. The more she offered of herself, the angrier he became. When it happened, especially when he was drinking, he took it out on her verbally, bitterly.

"You needy little bitch! You want to suck the life out of me!"

Then it turned physical. Not every time, but lately more often than not, sometimes when she least expected it. The bruises she could cover with makeup or long sleeves and high collars.

Inside, her soul curdled.

It never failed that the remorse followed. He would break down, baring his shame, begging her forgiveness, and she would relent because he held her in a way that pulled her from the lip of the abyss of extinction. And in those moments, filled with soothing words and passionate caresses, she absolved him, fearing abandonment more than his cutting her heart yet again.

Joy sat up, threw her cigarette away, and laid her forehead on the steering wheel. Outside, the storm seemed to be losing some of its fury. She sighed and reflected on her slender prospects. There wasn't much money to make a new start. She had managed to squirrel away a few dollars, tips mostly, which she had wadded up in her haste to leave. She picked her purse up from the seat and snapped it open, pulling out the bills and her folded pay envelope. By the dim dashboard lights, she counted out the bills: ninety-eight dollars.

God—that's it?

All the rest of the money she had in the world was in her last check.

No way that's going to make another hundred.

She saw that the flap on the pay envelope had already been opened, so she folded it back and reached inside. Along with her check came a small piece of paper. It was smudged and smelled of motor oil, lined, with a frayed edge, torn from a spiral-bound notepad. With her thin fingers, she angled the paper to catch what light there was inside the car. The writing was nervous, a pencil scrawl:

*I'm sorry, little buttercup. I truly am. I love you like sunshine in the morning.
T.*

She closed her eyes, her lips drawn tight.

Not this time.

The downpour had subsided into fitful showers, bursts of lightning and intermittent thunder. Joy tossed Travis' note onto the seat beside her, shifted into drive, and pulled slowly back onto the pavement and out from under the overpass.

She thought about the radio again, but decided she preferred the slow rhythm of the windshield wipers.

He must take me for a real fool.

She drove on for several more miles, but there was no exhilaration, no feeling of triumph or liberation that welled up within her.

We started out so good together.

There grew a sadness more profound than any she had ever known, and a yearning for human touch so strong she thought her insides would burst.

He wrote. He never done that before.

She resisted her first impulse, but finally relented and reached out until her fingers found the scrap of notepad paper. She lifted it up and read it again, then put it close to her nose, inhaling its smell.

Maybe it was me after all.

Another mile, maybe two, and in the Chevy's headlights, Joy spotted a mailbox on her left at the entrance to a gravel driveway that cut into a thick stand of trees. She slowed, pulled in and sat, feeling the ragged, low rumble of the car as it idled. A dull half-moon slid from behind the last scraps of storm clouds. The rain had moved northeast and the wind had fallen away. After a long moment, she took a deep breath, then turned the car around. The dashboard clock glowed green: 1:25.

He'll be waiting.



LIBRA

I pour everything into one cup. Then I put the cup on the edge of the table.

Then I use my knife to nudge it further off the edge, because it's fun to see how long the balance will last.

It's only water, plus I'm not wearing jeans, so whatever if it spills. But then it spills and it's acid. How did I mix them up? and how to stitch my skin back together, now that the mistake has been made?

I watch the flowers wilting on the windowsill and the balance drips, drips, drips off the table and into my palms until I can see bone.



THE ROOM OF HER OWN

The size of the bruise on her neck came as a shock to him. He discovered it as he leaned over her svelte neck to kiss it. It always thrilled him, its delicate grace—her trachea so vulnerable in his grasp. He often marveled, even aloud, how he could snap her neck with only the force of his thumb and palm. Sometimes he held on to that neck, a little too long, a little too tight, but just enough to excite him. But this bruise—he had not put it there, and it caught his breath to see it.

“What is this?” It came out accusatory, but he meant it as anything but. Whoever did this to her would pay.

“It’s nothing,” she said.

“Oh, it’s something all right. It’s half your neck! It must sting like hell.”

“Please, drop it, just forget it.”

He didn’t mean to, but he got carried away again. As his hands wrapped around her neck, he noticed how perfectly the bruise disappeared beneath them.



There was a room she kept in the new house, all for herself. He didn't mind; he thought it adorable that she needed this little space of femininity. She chose it before he even saw the house, when she did a walk through with the agent, when she saw it a second and third time, and lastly, when she made the official bid. She wanted to use some of her own money to pay for the house, and of course she did have some of her own money, from when she worked before they met, and he wanted to give this to her, this house, and when she asked for it, this room as well. It was a room at the end of the hallway, the room with the chipped green door and a porcelain knob with an almost heart-shaped keyhole. She showed it to him before they closed on the home, but after he put the bid in. She took him right up to the closed door and said, very casually, "This will be my room."

"Your room? You don't mean your bedroom, right?"

"No, not my bedroom! Don't be silly. Just my room—a room of my own."

"That's a wonderful idea! Of course you should have a room to yourself," and then, without even thinking, he leaned forward to open it. To his surprise, the knob didn't turn.

"Oh, it's so silly," she laughed. "It has this unique old lock, and the agent still has the key. He said he'll give it to me, once he gives us the key to the home."

"You want a room to yourself that you've never seen before?"

"Don't be ridiculous—of course I've seen it! But come, you must see this quaint porcelain tub in the guest bathroom. It has brass feet!" She dragged him through the house, showing him every room, each cabinet and corner. With each new space she showed him, he found his curiosity increasing about the one room she would not. This curiosity quickly morphed into irritation. One day, it got the better of him.

They only moved in a few weeks ago, and he had forgotten about the room entirely after days of unpacking box after box and collapsing afterwards to eat greasy take-out dinners and watch television. No boxes were marked for this room of hers, so it slipped into oblivion at the end of the hallway.

It wasn't until he was climbing the stairs, a long day of work behind him, when he found himself approaching the door. He told himself that he just wanted to see if she had done anything with it yet, so he could compliment her. When he grabbed the knob, it was almost lost in his grip. The neck of it could have easily snapped off the base, broken into a million pieces. He was so powerful, so cunning, so masculine. Instead, he turned it, a gentle twist, expecting the door to easily open and allow him access into its cavity. He found the knob firm and unmoving. It was then that he remembered the key, that special key, which must be somewhere, since of course she would have used it by now. He was tempted to try the knob again, but didn't dare leave evidence—a bruised knob would lead to many questions.

"What are you doing?" she asked. When he snapped around to face her, he straightened himself up to tower over her in his rightful place.

"I just wondered why the door wouldn't open, that's all."

"Because it's locked."

"I see that. Might I have the key?"

She laughed. He liked her laugh; it was soft and girlish and often happened after he made a joke, and she was beautiful when she laughed, and he was always automatically attracted to beautiful. Most of all, her guard was down when she laughed. He knew that he could ask anything of her when she laughed; he could lean in and just start kissing her, never needing to ask for permission. But this laugh was different.

That's when he saw a new bruise, one that was the size of his hand across her cheek.

"What's the matter? What happened there?" He reached out to brush her face, but she pulled away, expression stern.

"Please, don't fiddle with the knob again. It's one-of-a-kind, and if it breaks, it can't be replaced," she said. He nodded in understanding, all the while wondering how he could get that door to open without arousing her suspicion.

A few days later, he tried the knob again, and it was still locked. He asked her about it over dinner that night.

"Sweetheart, where's that key to our room upstairs?" He was cutting his steak when he asked, trying to act very casual with each tug and pull of the knife.

"Our room? Our room doesn't have a lock." She poured herself a glass of wine.

"No, not our room—the one at the end of the hallway."

"Oh, you mean *my* room, not *our* room."

"Well we *are* married, so I would think it belongs to both of us—wouldn't you say?"

"No, I wouldn't say." She leaned back in her seat and took a sip from her wine while looking directly at him. Under her gaze, he felt as if he were a child again.

"Are you saying I can't go into the room? That you have actually locked me out of it?" He put the knife down, the steak forgotten.

"I just can't show you the room right now," she said as she leaned across the table, placing her hand on his. "But I promise you when I'm ready, I'll let you in."

Over the next week, he tried the knob often. When she wasn't home, when she was in the bath, when she was on the telephone. He held onto that knob as tightly as he could, shook and turned and pulled, but it never budged. Afterwards, he would always find her with her eyes swollen, her neck bullied, her shoulders sore. She looked used, ugly even.

He confronted her each time about the bruises and sores and scratches—there had to be some kind of explanation. She couldn't keep showing her face like this without providing him with some kind of answer. Often, she changed the subject completely, rambling on about some triviality or another, like the unusually warm weather, or who she ran into at the supermarket that day, or whether or not he would be home in time for dinner. Until one day, she changed her tune.

"Have you noticed that the knob to my room looks loose?" she asked him, swirling the Merlot in her wine glass before taking a sip. She sat across from him at the kitchen table. "You know, it is one-of-a-kind. It's very fragile—valuable, too. I would hate for anything to happen to it."

"No, I hadn't noticed," he said with a frown, which he hoped would appear genuine. "But you know, darling, there are plenty of other knobs out there. Antique ones, even. There might be one even more valuable and beautiful than the one already on your door. We can replace it if you want—I'd be happy to do it for you. We could modernize it, maybe—there are so many different aesthetics for doorknobs now, and it might be nice to have a change."

She finally met his gaze, her expression incredulous. "But I love it," she said, placing her emptied wine glass on the tablecloth. "That's the whole point; I don't *want* to change it."

He put his hand atop hers, marveling for a single moment on how hers completely disappeared under his own. "Then we'll take good care of it," he promised solemnly. "Just like I take good care of you."

In the few days that passed, he noticed that her bruises were beginning to pale, except for a fresh one that had sprung up at the base of her collarbone. The day that he first saw it, she took it upon herself to bother him with a call at work, something she had never done before.

"Did you fiddle with the knob on my door?" she asked, almost accusatory.

He was taken by surprise—to be confronted while in his own workspace? What was the matter with her! He felt the heat of his anger course through his body, and he tightened his grip on the phone.

"Of course not! How could you possibly accuse me of that?"

"I think you did," she said.

He had a client in the room—it was wholly unprofessional for her to be confronting him here.

"Well then, it's your word against mine. There's no proof of anything. Can I get back to my job?"

Weeks passed and still, her door remained locked. And what's more, he never saw her open it. He mulled over this, this absurd control—why ask for a room all to herself if she were never going to use it? Why not just let him in?

For all his curiosity, he was still taking care not to be caught again. It was demeaning for a man of such power and strength to be called out by such a weak, tiring woman. In all honesty, he was beginning to feel bullied. He knew he had to figure out how to get into her room, but it would have to be without him begging her for permission to hold the key. He wasn't the kind of man that asked more than once. He never had to.

He kept trying, any chance he got. He wrapped his hand around the neck of the knob, all his fingers squeezed into the small space where its metal curve met the wood of the door. He knew he could just grab it by the porcelain if he wanted to and rip it completely. But then, how would he explain the damage, to quench her absurd need to assert it was irreplaceable, to ignore the smug look she would have on her face once he was finally outed for his snooping? He held onto the knob just a little longer, squeezing, feeling his frustration wane the tighter his grip became, until he felt satisfied enough to let go.

It was then that he knew he would have to extract the knob expertly, enter the room and see what she was hiding, and then replace the knob when he left so she would never be the wiser.

On his way to the hardware store to get the supplies he needed, he passed her napping on the couch. At least, that's what he thought at first. When he turned back to glance at her, something struck him with concern. It was the way she was laying, as if she had not intended to lie down, but had fallen over while sitting. He approached her carefully.

"Sweetie? You awake?"

She didn't stir. So he bent over her, shook her by the shoulder for a moment or two. She came to slowly, opened her eyes and looked about as if in a stupor.

"What happened?" She looked up at him, uncertain.

"I think you fainted." He sat down beside her and supported her as she sat up.

"Oh—why, how strange. I don't believe I've ever fainted before!"

He put his hand gently on her cheek, gazing upon her like a collector on his most prized possession. At first, as he was each morning, he was taken by her beauty, the porcelain of her skin, the blush of shame upon her bones, the curve of each brow, not symmetrical but perfectly placed above each brown eye, and the shape of her lips, the lower one larger, the top one more pronouncedly heart-shaped than the bottom.

"I was just on my way out," he said, his hand falling from her face. "Do you need me to stay?"

"I think I'll just go up to my room—I must have had a dizzy spell."

"What room?"

"Our room. "

"Yes, yes our bedroom, that's a good idea. Go rest. I just have to run a quick errand."

She looked back at him without an ounce of fear, without a trace of suspicion. In that moment, there was something about her expression, her quiet little demeanor, that began to drive him mad. Something that ignited his irritation, stirred the fury in his stomach.

There were moments in their marriage in which he had *almost* struck her. He would find himself there, as if he had just come to, with her hair gathered up in one hand and the other raised in the air to strike her. But he never hit her. He never actually hit her. And then he bought her this house, and he gave her a room, and they hadn't fought in months, and he hadn't raised a hand to her and he never would again anyway, but somehow, the room had taken a hold of him. This part of herself that she refused to let him see, it wasn't right. It wasn't fair of her. He needed to be inside of it. He needed to know.

So, he left for the hardware store to get what he needed to open that damn door.

The hardware store employee helped him navigate the aisles expertly. Up and down each row was man after man, which he found a bit of comradery in, almost a comfort zone. It was then that he and the sales associate passed a lovely young female making her way across the store—she was lost, obviously, among the drill bits and the lumber.

"Vanity mirrors are in aisle four," the associate said aloud. The look on the woman's face showed little appreciation.

"I'm not looking for a mirror," she replied with a roll of the eyes.

The associate forced a smile. "Well, I'll be right with you once I'm done over here.," Then he turned away from her, and muttered under his breath, "Women! Am I right?"

"Yeah man, got one at home—they're real killers."

"You got that right! Anyway, if you gotta replace a knob, then you'll just need to go down this aisle right here."

“Oh no, no, you misunderstand—I don’t want to replace the doorknob. In fact, it’s imperative to put the exact doorknob back in the exact way it was originally. I just need whichever tools will take it off and put it back on.”

“You sound like a man trying to break in,” the sales associate said with a chuckle.

“No, no, this door is in my own house. I just got locked out of it.”

“Then maybe you need a locksmith, not a drill bit.”

A locksmith, an expert in unlocking. Why hadn’t he thought of that! He was a pen-and-paper kind of guy, a 9-to-5 kind of guy, sometimes a 9-to-10 or later, but he was used to offices with a view and freshly pressed shirts. Removing and replacing a doorknob was definitely not his thing, but calling a locksmith, that he could do. He just needed to find the perfect time to do it.

When he returned home from the hardware store, she was still upstairs in bed. Dinner was not ready as it usually was, and the grumbling in his stomach was beginning to irritate him. He climbed the steps up to their bedroom, which lay at the opposite end of the hall from the room of her own. Her eyes were open, but she was staring off into space, one hand was haphazardly placed right atop the center of her belly.



"Sweetie?" He approached slowly, like one would a wounded animal. He didn't want to frighten her. As he stood over her, he began to imagine that she was filled to the brim with him, life pulsating right beneath the palm of her hand. He had been wanting this so bad, for so long—in fact, it was the primary reason behind the purchase of their home. The extra two bedrooms upstairs. The possibility of filling those bedrooms with babies. The first, a boy, a junior, and the second, a girl that he would spoil with ballet lessons, dolls, and tiaras. He had been waiting, waiting, waiting, year after year, and never did she mention it, never did she express any interest in motherhood, and quite frankly, he couldn't understand what it was she did with herself all day! He had created a life in which she could make and raise babies. But now, with the fainting spell that morning, with her hand on her stomach as she lay in a wonderful state of beauty, he found himself certain it was finally their time.

Her eyes fluttered and she moved her hand off her stomach as he sat down next to her, placing his own hand right where hers had just been.

"Could it be that you're pregnant?" he murmured, tapping his fingers against her abdomen.

"No, oh no, I'm so sorry, did I make it look like that? No, love, I'm not—I think I fainted again. I was sitting and reading, and then I just felt as if I couldn't breathe. Next thing I knew, you were waking me up. But no, dear, I just got my period yesterday, so it's not that."

It was too much for him to bear. The locked room, the gaping absence of children, her total lack of interest in conceiving.

It was just too much.

"God fucking *damn it*, you are really something else, you know that?"

"Excuse me?" Her face startled, and he sensed her flinch.

"You're selfish; you think it's just you who gets to decide. But I've been waiting, I've been waiting and waiting for you and I'm getting mighty sick of it. It's not just your decision. It's mine too."

"This is ludicrous! Where is this coming from?"

He sprung on her, not to grab her, not to harm her, just so she could feel the physical force of his presence. It's not his fault that his body was one of great muscle, that the sheer sudden shift in weight unbalanced her, left her crumpled in a mess on the floor.

"It's not going to be like this," she cried, and with great effort, she rose from the floor and slammed the door behind her as her steps disappeared down the hall. He heard the door to her room open and then shut. He wasted no time running after her, almost losing his balance on the hardwood floor. He slammed his full weight into the door, grabbed that doorknob and shook it back and forth with a strength that had been brewing inside him for quite some time. The knob, to no surprise, was locked. He pounded on the door, yelled at it, grabbed the knob again, threatened to break the door down if he had to, and then finally, he just gave up. His shirt was soaked with sweat, his hair in disarray, and his palms raw and red.

Fuck her.

The locksmith was scheduled for early afternoon the next day. She had a doctor's appointment, which he knew was across town and would leave him plenty of time alone in the house. He had his secretary clear his appointments, and shortly after lunch, he came home to greet the man who would allow him full access to his wife's secret room.

"Happens all the time, don't even worry about it," the locksmith said as he explained he had misplaced the only key to the door.

"My wife is very attached to the knob though, so it's really important we get another key but keep the same knob."

"Women, they sure are funny, eh? My wife is the same way, gets hung up on the silliest stuff. Well, I've got good news and I've got bad news. Good news, I can get you into this door in seconds. Bad news, to replicate the key for this lock, I have to take apart the whole thing. I'll need to keep the knob for a day or two, but I can have it back and installed in a jiffy." As the locksmith knelt down and gently eased a screw loose, the man waited patiently, leaning against the wall. He was waiting, watching, when his phone began to ring.

"Just a minute while I get this," he said, fishing his phone out of his pocket. When he first put it to his ear, he was thinking only of how eager he was to get off and finally enter her room. That's when the voice on the other end began to register.

"Oh my god! Okay, I'm coming right now." He put his phone back in his pocket and looked at the door in front of him. He was so close, so, so close to stepping inside the room, but it would have to wait. "I'm so sorry, I need you to come back another time. That was my wife's doctor; she went in for testing about some fainting spells she's been having and collapsed in the waiting room. I have to get over there right away."

"I'm real sorry to hear that," said the locksmith, standing up. "I hope she's okay. Are you sure you don't want me to just take the knob now and come back tomorrow with another key?"

"No, no, just put those screws back in there. I'll call you later about replicating the key. If you don't mind, just let yourself out, I really have to run."

He arrived at the hospital in a rush of fear and concern, guilt creeping up his spine. He hadn't even spoken to her or seen her since their argument the other day, when she had locked herself in her room and he had banged on the door, tore at that knob, shaking it back and forth violently. He had said terrible things to her too, he had yelled at her, said there had to be some form of punishment for her, to deny him a baby. He called her ugly, repulsive inside and out, told her she was aging, losing her beauty. He told her that he owned her, owned her room, owned everything.

A doctor approached him, interrupting him from his thoughts.

"Are you that woman's husband?"

"Yes—is she okay?"

"Actually, I'd like to ask you that question."

"I beg your pardon?"

"She swore up and down that it wasn't you who caused those bruises on her body."

"Bruising? On her body? I don't know what you're talking about. I haven't seen my wife since yesterday."

"Well, if this is self-inflicted, then we have some other large issues to consider as well. I suppose you can go in and see her; we are running some tests and continuing to monitor her. But she'll be cleared to go home soon."

"Thank you doc, thank you," he said, considering the doctor's words as he walked over to his wife. Self-inflicted. Was she harming herself? Could that be something she was capable of—being the reason behind the bruises on her neck, her face, the fainting? It was her own doing, her own fault all along?

She was sleeping when he entered the hospital room, her chest heaving, noises from machines humming around her. She was in a hospital gown, which he lifted one side of to reveal deep and horrifying bruises all along the side of her body. He let the gown down and checked the other side to find the same. He sat down on a chair near the bed to think, hollow with shock. This behavior was harmful, dangerous—she couldn't be left alone, she couldn't be trusted. And that room! That room. That must be where she was doing it. He should have had that knob removed and seen for himself what was going on in there.

That was it—he decided to go home right now and put an end to it.

"Is that you?" she spoke softly, stirring slowly from sleep.

"It is sweetheart, and don't you worry, I'm going to take care of you, I know just how to do it. You rest—I will be back very soon."

He sped through their neighborhood, racing through stop signs—he was a man on a mission and he didn't have time for formalities. Once through the front door, he threw his keys on the floor and raced up the stairs, out of breath when he reached the top of the stairway. He looked down the hall at her door, at her stupid one-of-a-kind doorknob—he was ready to rip it off in one swift jerk.

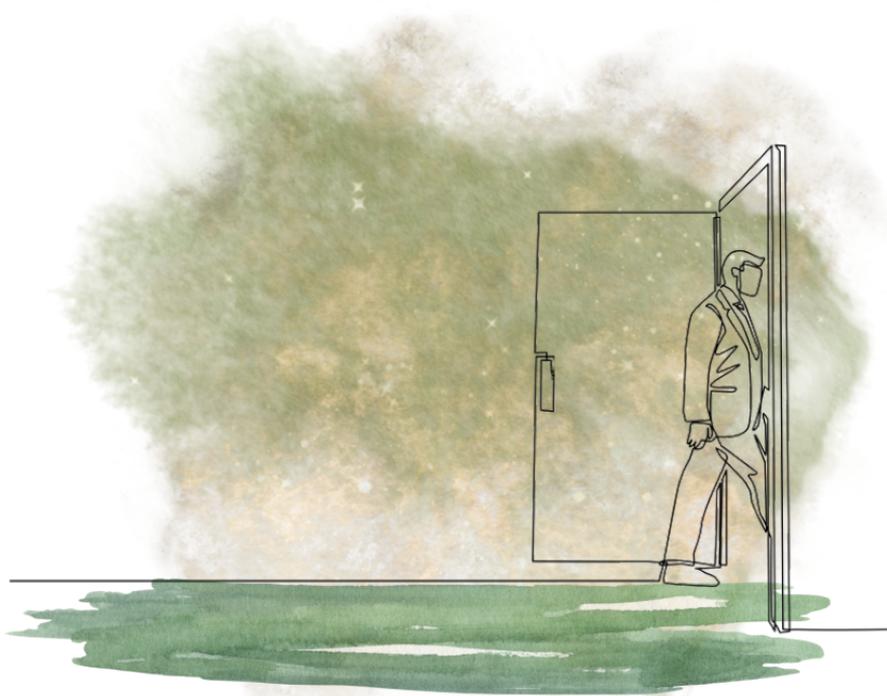
He walked down the hallway, slow with intention, and placed his whole hand over the small, fragile knob. For the first time, he noticed its beauty, blue with cream floral and a gilt design. It was lovely, and it was a shame to have to break it, but it was for her protection. This room could no longer have a lock, or even a door—it would have to be open for him to see, to supervise at all times, to know whether or not she was using it appropriately.

With all his strength, he tore that knob loose. It didn't fight him much, and although it took a bit of work, he felt a great power surge through him as the knob detached from the door and became clenched in his fist. Hinges creaked as the door let loose, hanging an inch or so open, not enough to see anything just yet, but enough to let some light through. He put his other hand on the door, ready to push it open, just as his phone rang. He hesitated, then dug it out of his pocket and put it to his ear.

"Hello?" he said.

"Yes, hello—it's about your wife. I'm so sorry to have to make this call, but I have terrible news..."

"Yes?" he said, dropping the knob on the floor as he pushed the door open wide, wider, until the whole room was before him and he walked right inside.



ECHO = NARCISSUS

Narcissus noticed Ophelia was drowning; or, rather, noticed that she looked prettier than he did. Her hair trailed in the water like willow fronds. Her bedraggled brocade dress caught wetly on rocks and coiled like the pelt of an exotic animal. She was sinking, but so slow. *The drama.* Every so often, bubbles broke the surface around her, a halo of fate. Her eyes were closed, and she was clutching flowers in both hands.

Narcissus sighed. Would it be more fun to stay at the edge of the river, gazing, or take a dip himself? To surrender to the current and join his reflection? He looked at his own wan countenance on the water's surface, premature lines drawn in liquid ripples over his high cheekbones and aquiline nose. God, he looked good. Too good to perish, no? He loved himself so much—so much! He said it aloud—*I love you.* He jumped when his voice resounded in his ears, a cacophony of repetition. Damn it, that dumb bitch Echo! Narcissus had forgotten about her. Intruding as usual. He resolved to stay at the water's edge. Narcissus couldn't be Ophelia. Narcissus must be Narcissus: must marvel at his own beauty, get lost in his own eyes. Oh, those eyes! Those limpid green pools made greener and more limpid by the water's mirror.

Narcissus: I love boys.

Echo: *I love boys*

Narcissus: I love boys like me.

Echo: *I love boys like me*

Narcissus: I love me!

Echo: *I love me*

Narcissus: The most beautiful boy...

Echo: *The most beautiful boy*

Narcissus: Is me.

Echo: *Is me*

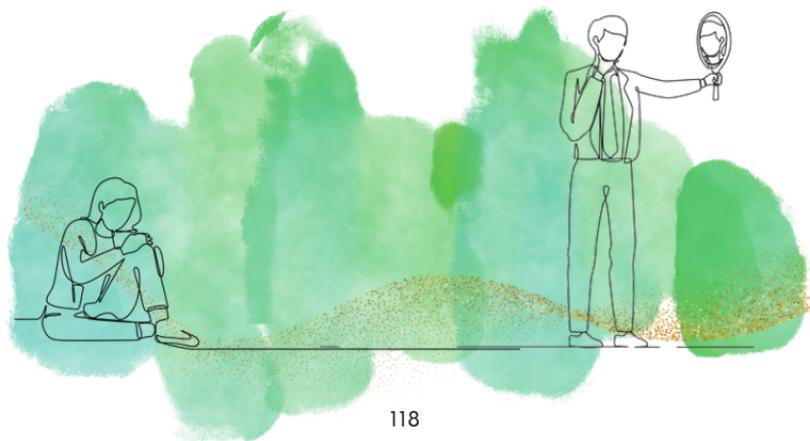
Echo swallowed. She was a shadow of herself; or, rather, a shadow of him. Narcissus: that delicate guy staring at himself in the water. Echo wasn't so sure she loved him anymore. She had, once, before some god stole her replies. Sure—he's fucking hot. But ever since Echo held his voice in her mouth, she started feeling unfamiliar feelings. Re-organizations. Unfoldings. Deepenings.

Every day, Narcissus and Echo performed this routine: he would speak, and she would throw his words back to him. She had no voice of her own anymore; instead, she sounded exactly like him. Of course, Narcissus' voice was as beautiful as his face. No part of him was unlovely. A voice like silver, husky and smooth, pitched at the heartstopping interval between tenor and bass. A handsome voice; a man's voice. And Echo—who had once spoken and laughed and sounded very much like a woman—felt this new handsome voice vibrate in her throat and chest.

Echo loved it.

At first, she was shocked, dismayed. Where was her cute bubbly giggle, her hysterical shriek? But after a few days, when Narcissus' mellifluous tones flowed out of her as if they were her own, Echo forgot what she had sounded like before. She forgot how she looked, too. She forgot everything about herself and became merely a voice.

Narcissus' voice subsumed her.



She memorized every lilt and rumble of that voice until she knew it by heart: the gravelly sighs when he woke up, the whistled notes when he took a piss, the crooning admonishments to the ducks and butterflies to clear the water so he could gaze upon himself. She knew him better than he knew himself. And every day, all day, his whispers of *I love you* redoubled and bounced from him to her— from him to himself, which was how Echo started to think of it. She was his mirror. More than the water, even. She knew him better. She started to refer to herself as Narcissus, started an internal monologue with him as the main character. She was he. And he was happy.

Ophelia: drowned because a boy did not love her

Ophelia: drowned because a boy was consumed by madness

Ophelia: drowned because she was consumed by madness

Ophelia: drowned because it was easier than being a girl

Ophelia was drowning, and thinking aloud. She was drafting her epitaph. This was a game she played often. While trying to sleep, while baking pear tarts or fermenting mead, while walking in the woods to escape her family's arguments, she thought about the right words to encapsulate her existence. Brief, terse, concise. A totality of Ophelia-ness. She closed her eyes, opened them, closed them again. Nothing to see here.

The water tugged at her dress, coaxed her downriver, licked at her face. This damn brocade! It was so heavy. She'd chosen it on purpose for the weight. It was a ridiculous garment. She knew she looked good in it—waist cinched, sleeves drooping, belled skirt all flares and furbelows—but good to whom? Men, probably, or other women with expensive taste. Ophelia sighed. This whole drowning thing was getting old. Did she really want to die, like, for real? What choice did she have? It was a nunnery, Hamlet and his bullshit, or this.

Bubbles rose from her skirts. Petals detached from her huge funeral wreath of roses and blue cornflowers and chamomile, drifting away, eddying, graceful. At least she would be beautiful. Mad, dead, and beautiful. Ok, not so bad. Ophelia could get used to this. In her mind's eye, she saw herself sinking. And just as her chin tipped towards her chest and her lips sank underwater, a noise—

A voice. *That voice!*

Ophelia sat up, hair streaming, eyes wide. Where—where did it come from? The river had gone shallow. Her feet grazed rocks and sand at the bottom and her dress snagged on fallen branches. The flowers she once held were long gone. She clawed at the tendrils of hair around her face, trying to get a better look at her surroundings. Where? Who? Silver in the air, a weird music. Somebody speaking to himself, repeating the same words over and over. She knew she was far from the castle, far from Hamlet and Laertes and weird Polonius and everybody, but she had no idea exactly how far “far” was.

The voice in the woods dripped honey in her ears. Pure and warm and ringing. Deep. She shivered, not with cold, but with desire. She was done with drowning. Drowning was so over. Now was the era of life, love, and the pursuit of mysterious voices. Ophelia flailed to the water's edge and gathered her skirts. She clambered up the bank, squinted into the willows. There was nothing but green, a blur of vegetation—wait. A figure—

Echo tried to hide, but he was curious. After rehearsing Narcissus' sweet nothings in stereo all morning, he was restless. So when Narcissus fell asleep by his mirror-pool and Echo heard someone else speaking, he had to investigate. It was a small, insistent voice, sweet and bitter at the same time. Hard at the edges, all amber and ice. A defiant sound.

The river was loud, but the voice rose above it. Echo crept towards the noise, squinting, straining to find the source of the sound.

In a clearing, sun dappled the river and revealed a shape in the water. A body. The body in the river stood up, clambered to the rocks, straightened to their full height. Echo gasped. This entity stumbling towards him through the trees—Echo couldn't say whether mortal, god, naiad, or dryad—was the most beautiful, the most imposing, the most—wow.

Echo's heart raced against his ribs. They were so different from Narcissus. A new thing entirely. The creature clutched their skirts, turned around.

Ophelia clutched her skirts and turned around. A slight, sweet-faced boy with a quizzical expression met her gaze. He jumped, tense as a rabbit. She stretched out a hand, wiggled her long fingers.

It's you—

Echo opened his mouth. Nothing came out.

The singing? In the woods?

He tried again.

Oh my god it was—I felt—ugh, what am I saying, I don't even know you—do I know you?

Do I know you?

Ophelia and Echo regarded each other. Looked each other up, down, and sideways. Blinked. Blinked again. Echo blushed. With no Narcissus to feed him lines, he had no idea what to say. His voice had come out lower and more confident than he expected. His voice was his alone. Terrifying. Liberating?

Ophelia smirked, brushed a lily pad off her chest.

Well?

Echo blushed harder, cleared his throat.

I don't know you, but I do—somehow. You're very beautiful.

Narcissus woke up from his nap with a start. *Good morning, gorgeous*, he crooned to his reflection. The afternoon sun caressed his face and the dragonflies hunted over the pool. *Lovely boy...* Narcissus paused. Tried again. *Lovely*—hang on. Didn't he usually have a chorus amplifying his self-love? Where the hell was Echo? He uttered some other platitudes into the still air. Definitely gone. Whatever, Echo only existed to repeat and annoy. Narcissus didn't need her. No, he was self-sufficient.

He pouted a little at his reflection. His reflection, so predictable, pouted back. He raised one eyebrow, then the other. He pursed his lips. Cute! He pushed his hair from his forehead, examined his ears and jawline. Ah, yes. He was starting to forget about Echo. How could he think about anything else but his own gorgeous visage? Perfect. Lovely. Adorable. Narcissus closed his eyes for a moment and when he opened them, a stranger's face stared back. What the—

Hamlet stared at a face that wasn't his in the surface of the pool. He was so far from anywhere—how could it be possible? The face blinked, tightened their eyebrows in annoyance. Hamlet also tightened his eyebrows, but more in confusion than anything. He'd been thrashing through the woods for hours, looking for Ophelia. He'd really messed up. He'd said something insensitive in a flash of mania, raged around and pissed her off and generally fucked everything up.

He needed to apologize. To her. Preferably on his knees, in a compromising and penitent position. Ophelia probably wouldn't listen, but Hamlet would do the right thing anyway.

The face in the pool shook slowly from side to side. Hamlet squinted. Did he know this guy? He was so—Hamlet searched for the right word. Beautiful? Hamlet blushed. The face in the pool smirked, then disappeared. Lust clawed at Hamlet's belly. He didn't want to admit it, but—the face reappeared beside Hamlet's, paired with a shapely man's body. Naked. A naked man's body. Hamlet bellowed and stumbled back into the rushes. The beautiful—yes, beautiful—man now stood over him.

And so...

Narcissus fell in love with Hamlet
Hamlet fell in love with Narcissus

Ophelia fell in love with Echo
and Echo fell in love with Ophelia

Narcissus and Hamlet indulged each others' onanism and selfishness. They complemented each others' intense personalities, spending many hours sitting by the pool, gazing, deep in thought. Hamlet introduced Narcissus to nihilism and Narcissus taught Hamlet how to meditate. They took turns painting each other as they lay by the pool. Narcissus forgot about Echo's echo and instead came to love Hamlet's voice reading philosophy and poetry to him before they fell asleep each evening. They were very happy.

Ophelia and Echo talked for hours about everything and nothing. Ophelia couldn't get enough of Echo's perspective—he saw the world with compassion and slow attention, considering all angles and possibilities. Echo loved Ophelia's acerbic sense of humor and admired the way she wove words together into soaring observations. They took turns telling jokes. They went on long walks and took up fencing and archery. They prepared elaborate meals and filled their evenings with wine and sex and stargazing. Echo braided Ophelia's hair in the morning and Ophelia sewed elegant bespoke doublets for Echo. They mounted mirrors everywhere in their home, filling their dwelling with prised images of their beauty. They especially liked the silver-framed mirror above their bed. To satisfy their fantasies, they commissioned elaborate pleasure instruments from Hephaestus, who of course obliged (being of fabricated body himself, the god had a soft spot for deviants). They lived and lived, grew gray together, and watched each other change. They were very, very happy.



FALLING STARS

When she had said, “I won’t go out with you until the stars fall from the sky!”, she hadn’t meant it. What she had meant was “no”. Additionally, (and this is key), she hadn’t expected it to happen.

But there the stars were, dropping from the sky: thin streaks of light behind them, glittering raindrops sliding down the window as if lit by the moon behind. And there he stood, beneath her window, a waterfall of stars behind him, holding a bouquet of roses.

She didn’t remember how she had gone from sitting on her windowsill wanting to yell to sitting across from him in this restaurant. But, well, here they were. At a table beside the window, illuminated by the end of the world.

He wasn’t even looking at the sky. His eyes darted anywhere but—down at the menu, across the empty restaurant. He must have been able to see the stars, though. To her, they were everywhere. Their dying light reflected against the cutlery, on every wineglass behind the bar—anything with a slightly reflective surface dazzled with them. When she looked down at her bowl of soup, it seemed to be made of a murky universe.



"How have things been with you?" he asked.

"Well enough."

"Do you still see Olivia?"

Outside, a stray meteorite smashed into a shed, setting the crushed wood and much of the garden ablaze. The crater, with the smouldering rock in its centre, was like a giant egg nesting in what crushed remains were left of the shed. She knew because it was just about visible through the restaurant's window. He hadn't noticed—he hadn't even jumped at the impact.

"From time to time. She moved away."

The fire continued to blaze. Furiously. She couldn't make herself look away.

"I did wonder why I hadn't seen her around."

Further along the street, a billboard fell. It died in the middle of the road in a shower of sparks. Insignificant beside the cascade of stars.

"Still working for—"

She cut him off, voice tight. "Not anymore. The office was hit."

"Oh. Oh!"

A silence. The fire had spread into the next garden. Several cars had stopped in apocalyptic diagonals as they edged around the dead billboard.

"Was anyone hurt?"

"No. It happened at night." She hesitated. "Not a bad hit."

The tower looked as if a giant had grabbed it in a fist. The land around it was a desert of ash. It was still, technically, standing. Much of the city was like this: cobbled together out of scaffolding and half-crushed material, covered in black dust.

"You aren't blaming me for all of this, are you?" He twirled a hand, a gesture encapsulating the entirety of the world. He still wasn't looking.

"No. Why? Should I?"

"No. Of course not. No," he said. "That would be ridiculous."

"Well then."

She watched the stars and felt her face glow with the flames.

"Only, I thought it might have been you."

"Me?"

He reached out a hand and wrapped his clammy fingers over her fist. She resisted the urge to pull away.

His face settled into a criss-cross of lines. "If it was, you didn't have to. I would have given you another chance, you know, even though you were rude."

She couldn't come up with a single word. A shocked sound somewhere between an actual syllable and a gasp was all she could manage. Then, she dragged her hand out of his grip and crossed her arms so he couldn't grab it again.

"Rude?" she scoffed, "I wouldn't have had to be if you'd just left me alone. You couldn't understand a flat-out 'no'. I had to say something stronger. I only came today because—because I felt sorry for you."

He sat back in his chair. Finally, he looked right at the stars. His eyes glowed with their light.

"I knew it."

"What?"

"You missed me. You missed the attention," he said with conviction. "You realised you messed up and did this. Destroyed the world for a second chance."

"Are you ins—"

"You're crazy."

He threw a handful of coins down on the table between them and stormed out of the restaurant.

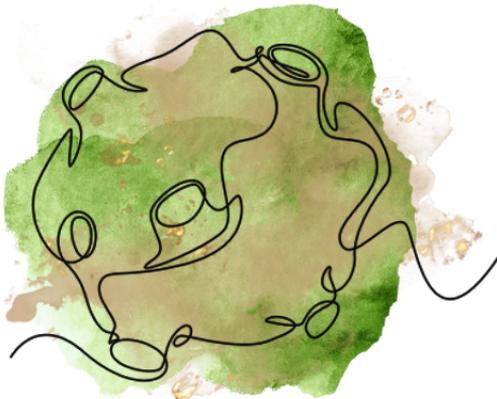
She stared at the coins for a moment, transfixed, watching them glow with the fire across the road and shimmer with the last light of the stars. The coins were odd—one seemed to have a turquoise hue despite the reflections. Another featured a misshapen head on one side and, when she flipped it over, it was etched with letters she didn't recognise.

She stood upright, face pressed against the glass of the window as she searched up and down the street. He was gone.

From around the corner came a blinding flash of light. She shut her eyes against it, aware of only the cold window against her forehead. When she felt the light dim, she opened her eyes.

She looked down from her bedroom window, the dark shadows of the twisted buildings dark against the glow of the stars. He stood there, again, the same bouquet in his hands. There was something different in his smile, in his eyes.

That was when the meteorite hit.



CARLA BRINGS COOKIES TO HER MOTHER'S WAKE

Carla regrets the cookies when she sees Uncle Tim, her father's brother. She has wonderful childhood memories: when he built her a treehouse and when he played Santa Claus and told her how wonderful she was. She also has the night of her father's funeral. She ate 23 of her mother's cookies, but he and her mother drank a bottle of Cutty Sark. Later, she listened to them banging and moaning against the bedroom wall. When he left to drunkenly drive home, he saw her at the kitchen table and said, "Sorry." She wonders if he remembers that moment too.



LET THEM EAT CAKE

Simon scratches at the edge of his plate with the tip of his butter knife, like a dog pawing at its empty bowl. His head sinks deeper into the fold of the morning's paper.

Record-high inflation. Cost of living out of control. UK prime minister resigns. England faces its worst drought in nine decades.

"One kipper, Simon, or two?"

"Two."

"Before tennis?"

"And more bread."

"You'll get a stitch."

"Nonsense. I need the energy."

He turns the page, preens the tips of his slug-like moustache.

His wife, her cotton dress protected by a plastic apron, dishes the kippers onto his plate and passes him another slice of sourdough.

"Problem is these people don't graft hard enough. When's anything ever been free?"

His wife fluffs her curls in the Welsh dresser mirror.

"More butter?" she asks.

"Please."

She peels back the foil wrapping and places the golden block on a blue ceramic dish before her husband. His cheeks are stuffed, hamster-like, with fish and chunks of bread.

"If you can't afford to feed your family, get another job. Never killed anyone. I knew a fella once, a friend of a friend, who started up his own business alongside working at the bank—owns five houses now."

"You've got butter on your chin, Simon."

The wife tosses him a napkin.

"Lazy pigs. Easier to blame the politicians than it is to polish themselves up. Do I smell marzipan?"

"There's cake if you want it, Simon."

He nods, smacking his lips with the corner of the napkin, now stained with grease.

Turning her back, the wife opens the pantry cupboard and takes out a loaf of Battenberg. She cuts off a large piece, then hands it to her husband with a placid smile.

"Here you go," she says.

He nods and takes his first bite.

"Hopefully Roddy remembers his new racket, the old one's a piece of junk. We didn't win a single match last week."

There's a sudden thud.

Slowly lifting his eyes, Simon sees the pantry door has been pushed slightly ajar. Another Battenberg loaf sits in the middle of the terracotta floor.

"How many did you buy, woman?" Simon says. "The cupboard must be a mess, let me see." He pushes back his chair and shuffles over to the pantry.

He heaves out a sigh and opens both doors wide. A flurry of pink, yellow, and beige follows.

Thud, thud, thud.

He curses, slams the doors shut.

"What in Christ's—ice! I need ice, woman."

He turns to the chest freezer, looking for something cold to soothe his Battenberg-beaten cheeks. But as he opens up the trunk, he only finds more pink and yellow loaves, wrapped in frosted beige marzipan.

"Woman, are you mad? What have—"

Beneath the frosty Battenbergs are other frozen cakes. Victoria sandwiches. Chocolate cake. Red velvet cake. Banana loaves. Lemon and blueberry loaves. Scones. French fancies. Swiss rolls. He slams the chest closed.

Turning, Simon gasps.

Where his wife had stood, a giant Battenberg loaf now towers, surrounded by tiny cupcakes and stacks of cinnamon doughnuts.

He yelps, cries her name, calls the dog's name. Twice. Nothing.

Then thud, thud, thud.

More pink and yellow loaves drop from the pantry doors.

The room is filling up, flooding with a flurry of cakes and elaborate desserts.

Tiramisu, profiteroles, mille-feuille, Black Forest gâteau, lemon tart, fruit cake, carrot cake, Simnel Cake, Madeira sponge, trifle.

“Jesus Christ!”

Simon drags himself through the kitchen, down the corridor. Fresh cream and icing and crumbs coat his hair and clothes.

Slowly, slowly, very slowly, he makes it to the front door. He’s exhausted and his right eye is blinded by custard.

He reaches out for the doorknob but, seeing his fingers stretched out before him, a desperate wail escapes his lips.

Simon’s fingers are alternating pink and yellow sponges and his chewed fingernails are now marzipan, perfectly shaped and sweet.

“God—dear God!”

His wife’s laughter echoes through what space remains of the cake-filled house.

