

SCHEHERAZADE



The MPC Literary Magazine
Issue 9

Scheherazade

Issue 9

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Submissions

Scheherazade considers submissions of poetry, short fiction, creative nonfiction, novel excerpts, creative nonfiction book excerpts, graphic art, and photography from students of Monterey Peninsula College.

To submit your own original creative work, please follow the instructions for uploading at:

<http://www.mpc.edu/scheherazade-submission>

There are no limitations on style or subject matter; bilingual submissions are welcome if the writer can provide equally accomplished work in both languages. Please do not include your name or page numbers in the work.

The magazine is published in the spring semester annually; submissions are accepted year-round. Scheherazade is available in print form at the MPC library, area public libraries, Bookbuyers on Lighthouse Avenue in Monterey, The Friends of the Marina Library Community Bookstore on Reservation Road in Marina, and elsewhere.

The magazine is also published online at
mpc.edu/scheherazade

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“The Moon-Colored-Skin Man,” by C.W. Arvidson and “The Headmaster,” by Windsor Buzza are the winners of MPC’s annual Halloween Writing Contest.

Cheryl Ku

Thank You Cards

The cards arrived in a box wrapped in brown paper shipped from his mother's address. Inside was a note:

"Write your thank you notes. People are waiting for them. Love, Mom."

She'd even sent bright green envelopes, already addressed and stamped.

Austin Trent dropped the box on the couch, next to a half-eaten pizza, and sunk down into the dirty cushions, burying his head in his hands. He hadn't felt so awful when the graduation checks from aunts, uncles, family friends, and both sets of grandparents were still sitting on the table un-cashed. But his bank account was getting dangerously low and rent was due. Besides, his mother had told him his grandmother was waiting for the check to clear. So he'd cashed them. He knew his mother wouldn't let up, and the guilt was making his stomach hurt, so he grabbed a pen from the kitchen and sat down to write.

Dear Aunt Mabel,

Thank you for the check you sent me for graduation. Now that I've graduated college I plan to...

He stopped. What could he say? There was no plan. He picked up the remote and turned Buffy The Vampire Slayer back on.

He woke abruptly sometime during the start of season five to a rapid knocking on the apartment door. He stumbled over, too drowsy to think about switching on the porch light and looking through the peephole. He opened it to see a mass of matted brown hair covering a tear streaked, familiar face.

“Anna,” he said. She fell into his arms, sobbing.

“I’m sorry,” she cried. “I just didn’t know where to go. I can’t stay with my dad anymore and I can’t take another day with the old people I take care of. I can’t.”

Austin patted her back weakly, wishing he had pretended not to be home. Anna was her own train wreck, one he’d spent two years dating, and he didn’t need that now.

“Okay,” he said. “Here, come in.” Anna sniffled and walked into his living room, running her eyes over the mess. Take out containers and bowls with dried up Ramen noodles covered the coffee table. Dirty laundry was strewn about the floor. He knew she was judging him. “Sorry—I uh, haven’t had company for a while.”

Anna turned toward him with mascara-ringed eyes, her face blotchy from crying. She put her hand on his chest and moved closer, her eyes on his mouth. She kissed him. He knew he shouldn’t. This was a trap. But fuck it. He hadn’t been laid in months. He kissed her back, hard, and grabbed her ass.

It was already afternoon when he woke up on his mattress and Anna was gone. Maybe she’d decided a mattress on the floor wasn’t good enough anymore. Maybe she couldn’t handle the mess. He sighed with relief, but then he smelled bacon. He walked out of his room in his boxers into a slightly

cleaner living room. The pizza was gone from the couch and the dishes had been cleared from the coffee table. Anna was smiling at him from the kitchen, standing over the stove dressed only in one of his old t-shirts.

“Good morning, Babe,” she said. “I had to learn how to cook bacon because that’s all Herbert wants to eat. At lunch I tell him he already had bacon with breakfast but he doesn’t remember. As soon as I take his plate away he asks when lunch is and I have to remind him he’s just eaten. Sometimes he looks so sad and confused I break down and cook more bacon again.”

“You don’t eat bacon,” said Austin. “You don’t eat pork. You said pigs are smarter than dogs. You said—”

“I know. But it’s the only joy he has anymore.”

“Still, I don’t see how you can compromise your morals like that.”

“You know I don’t believe in absolutes. Anyway, breakfast is ready!”

Don’t believe in absolutes? Anna was the definition of absolutes. Her father had gotten sick her sophomore year so she took a semester off to care for him. He went into remission and was doing fine now, but Anna couldn’t let it go. She got it in her head that she needed to make more money in case he got sick again, even though her dad was a successful businessman with plenty. She dropped her Graphic Design major and enrolled in Pre-Med. She claimed it was her calling. But she sucked at math and science and had spent many nights crying on Austin’s chest. She never listened when he told her she needed to go back to art, her passion. She blew him off as an unrealistic bozo even when

she graduated with a GPA so low no medical school would take her. Caregiving work was easy to come by, so now she wiped old people's asses. Everybody needs their ass wiped at some point in their lives.

After breakfast Anna took his computer and updated Austin's resume. She wrote a stock cover letter he could send to prospective employers and searched job-hunting websites all afternoon. Meanwhile Austin drank four beers and watched her suspiciously.

"I emailed your resume to a few places. No one's hiring right now with the economy and all, but the job skills seminar I went to last week said you just have to be persistent. You'll need to call them tomorrow to follow up."

Austin stared at her blankly. "Uh. Thanks. But shouldn't we be finding *you* a new job?"

"We will. I just need a break. It's easier for me to focus on you right now." She sounded like his mother, a realtor who hadn't sold a house in over a year, but still offered a wealth of unsolicited advice on how to persuade people to hire him.

"Should you maybe check on Herbert? You're like his only source of food, right?"

"His granddaughter is supposed to look after him for a few days. I just feel so depressed in his old house." She looked at the clock. "It *is* time for his medication. God what if she forgets and leaves his pills out where he can find them. He'll forget and overdose again. No, she knows not to. Doesn't she? I'll call her." She dialed as Austin looked on.

“She’s not answering. Ugh I’ll just go over there.” She pulled on her tight jeans from the night before, walked to the door, and turned back to face him. “Babe, why don’t you write a few of those thank you notes while I’m gone. You graduated nearly four months ago. You’re a writer. It shouldn’t be that hard.”

“Yeah...”

As soon as the door closed he ran over to lock it. Maybe he’d pretend to be out when she got back. Unless—shit. She might still have a key.

He kicked the back of the couch in anger, hurting his toe. Furiously, he sat down and scribbled out the rest of the note to Aunt Mabel.

Thank you for the check you sent. Now that I’ve graduated I plan to slowly die of boredom in my shitty apartment. I’m sure the money will help pay for my funeral.

He laughed to himself. The thought of old Aunt Mabel’s face when she read this note made him feel maliciously happy.

Buzzed and angry, he grabbed another note card.

Dear Aunt June and Uncle Ben,

Thank you for the check you sent for graduation. As you may have heard by now I have failed to contribute to society in some meaningful way. No one will hire me and I’ve become a slob with a nagging ex-girlfriend who thinks she lives with me now. The money will help support my alcoholism and make my final days on earth much more bearable.

Sincerely,

Austin

Austin laughed aloud for the first time in weeks. It was immensely satisfying.

Dear Grandma Rose,

Remember when I was a little boy and you took me to feed the ducks at Miller Park, but some big geese attacked me and I dropped the bread and ran away and fell down and skinned my knee and you said, 'Don't worry. Soon you'll be bigger than those mean old geese and they won't scare you anymore.'? You lied. The whole world is full of mean old geese and no one cares how big you are if you don't have a paycheck.

Love,

Austin

P.S. I'm still sorry for wasting all the bread.

Austin smiled to himself and laughed pathetically. He really was fucked up.

Dear Mom and Dad,

Thank you for lying about being almost bankrupt and going into debt to pay my tuition so I could spend four years pretending I was going to be somebody. Thank you for driving around with that god-awful "My child is an honor student" bumper sticker and for saying "All that matters is you tried your best" when I didn't make valedictorian. Remember that time I won an essay contest and the vice principal told you I was going to go places? Well he was right.

I went straight to hell. For being a self-righteous little prick. I know this wasn't your fault. You tried your best.

Love,

Your failed offspring

P.S. Please adopt Anna after I leave the country. I know she is the daughter you always wanted. You guys deserve each other.

Dear Grandma Pearl,

Thank you for the check you sent for graduation. I bought some SpaghettiOs with it yesterday. It's really helping me to develop my beer belly. I think I look like a young version of Grandpa, before he got cancer and lost 80 pounds. He always called me his little Boy Scout and taught me how to do cool things like tie knots and fish. This will come in handy when I move to the forest and live off the land. I'm glad he died before I abandoned my Eagle Scout project to join that band that I quit to go to college where I graduated cum laude but failed at life.

Love,

Austin

Austin was dimly aware that this was an insane thing to do but he couldn't stop. The writing felt better than the beer. He felt he was scraping the bitter, crusty insides of his soul, and it made him grin with delight.

Dear Uncle Ben,

Thanks for being the weirdest person in the family and sending me a compass for graduation to "help me find my way"; however, I'm disappointed. For my middle school graduation you gave me a

book on how to find my third eye. I would have found it too, if mom hadn't dragged me to those counseling sessions for spending too much time staring cross-eyed in the mirror. The compass is cliché. I suppose I can use it in my future endeavors as a cartographer. That will be nice and practical. Thanks for selling out, Uncle Ben. I thought you were better than that.

Warmest wishes,

Austin

Dear Aunt Judy and Uncle Joe,

Thank you for the \$200 you sent me for graduation even though you haven't seen me since I was 9. I know the money came from the big oil companies Uncle Joe pimps himself out to writing bogus environmental impact studies, but I'm still glad to have it. I felt good when I gave it to a homeless man who was touching himself in the park. At first I yelled at him to put his dick back in his pants, but then he looked like maybe he was just peeing. The public restrooms were closed due to vandalism. I felt bad so I gave him the money. He looked really happy and said he would use it to buy chalk for his street art. I haven't seen any new street art yet but I haven't seen any dicks either so I think it went to a good cause either way.

Sincerely,

Austin

Dear Aunt Nancy,

Thank you for the check you sent me for graduation. I'm sorry you got depression and have to be drugged out all the time. My mom

says it runs in the family and keeps bugging me to go back to a psychologist like I did when I was a kid trying to find my third eye. One time I really thought I could see the future. I saw myself in a little room signing books for all of my fans. Only I just kept spilling root beer on everybody's books and ruining them.

*Love,
Austin*

As he signed the last card he looked up to see the door opening.

"He was fine!" announced Anna, who apparently did indeed still have her key. "He was fine. I think I worry too much, you know. I have anxiety. I need to calm down."

"Beer?" offered Austin, casually shuffling the pile of thank you notes into a stack and moving them to his bedroom. She followed him.

"Oh you did do them! Good job honey. I'm so proud of you." She wrapped her arms around him. She smelled like old people. "Let's get dinner. When was the last time you left this apartment?"

He couldn't remember. There was sleep, bowls of Top Ramen or SpaghettiOs, watching Buffy, and sleep again. There was no "outside" in his recent memory.

"Let's go, come on. I'll take you to Gino's." Austin wanted to tell her to fuck off, but the neckline of her shirt had slipped down and her cleavage told him one more night was worth the nagging.

At the restaurant Austin ordered red wine. He drank deeply and felt better by the time their pizza arrived. Anna made him wait to dig in while she snapped a photo of the pizza for Instagram. She was always taking photos of her food. It bugged the shit out of him. She turned her phone around and showed him a bubbling pizza, glowing in the dim light from whatever magic filter she must've used. It looked better than the real thing.

"You were supposed to be a photographer," he said. "You fucked up."

Anna's face fell and she looked down at the table, her bottom lip pouting. "I did what I thought I had to do Austin. What you should have done. You're the smart one. Go back and get an accounting degree or something."

"Accounting. So I can count rich people's money and cook the books for some corporation? Everything's a sham, Anna. Anyway I can't afford to go back."

"Your parents would help if they knew you were serious about going back."

"My parents are broke. Hey, this isn't about me. How long are you gonna avoid work while Herbert and the other old folks get taken care of by their actual children?"

"You need to quit drinking. You get mean when you drink." She looked hurt.

"Sorry Anna." He rolled his eyes but she was looking down and didn't notice.

"It's okay. I know you've been having a hard time. Look Austin, I'm okay with my work for now. In the spring I'll go to x-ray technician school or phlebotomist training. That'll get me

into the medical realm at least.” She leaned in and stretched a hand toward him across the table. He picked up his wine glass and drank deeply instead of returning the gesture. “I didn’t really come here because I was desperate, Austin. I came because I care about you. And I’m worried. Your mom said you hadn’t called in weeks.”

His mom? Anna was still talking to his mother about him. The two were conspiring, ganging up on him to make sure he knew what a fuck-up he was. Two self-righteous know-it-all women who’d both failed in their own lives conspiring to breathe advice down his throat. How disgusting. Anna wasn’t here because she was also failing at life. She was here because she was his nagging mother’s mini-me. And he’d spent two years with this woman. Anna had come out of pity. He felt the wine and pizza burn in his stomach, fizzling up into his throat. He bolted through the door and out to the sidewalk. He puked in the bushes.

Anna got him home. She cleaned him up put him to bed without a word.

The apartment was silent when he woke up. Anna had left a note on the fridge.

I’m sorry but I really had to go. Call if you need me.

Good, he thought. Finally, he could die in peace. But the silence sounded loud in his ears. It echoed deep within his brain like a loud ringing. He was alone. He could die here and no one would know. Not for a while. How long would it take? A month before his neighbors noticed the smell? With Anna gone there was no one to remind him of meals at regular times, to tell him

what day it was. A deep ache was forming in the pit of his stomach. He poured a shot of vodka to make the ringing silence stop and retreated back to his room to fall on his mattress. That's when he noticed the cards were no longer on his desk. He frantically searched the room. The cards were gone. He called Anna. She answered immediately.

"Austin. I'm sorry I just had to go - "

"The cards! What did you do with them?"

"Oh, your thank you cards? I took them to the post office for you."

"ANNA!"

"Dear God Austin. Calm down. I didn't read them. I know you hate other people reading your stuff. I promise I only looked at the names and put them in the right envelopes."

"Oh my God. How long ago?"

"Just on my way out, like an hour ago."

He dropped the phone and sprinted out the door. There was still time. He would intercept them, that's what he'd do. He would march in there and demand they find the cards and return them to him before they went out. He would tell them it was a matter of life and death.

Austin sprinted the three blocks to the post office, interrupted only when he had to pass normal people out enjoying the sunny day. "Move!" he yelled at a couple jogging down the sidewalk. They couldn't hear him over the music from their earbuds and he nearly knocked the man over trying to pass between him and the traffic in the road. A car honked and the man yelled some obscenity. Austin only ran faster, his mind on

those cards inscribed with his drunken thoughts making their way toward unsuspecting family members.

A woman with a baby stroller was struggling to exit through the post office door. He pushed past her, throwing the door wide open only to find an elderly gentleman and a middle-aged woman in line before him. He hesitated, not wanting to make more of a scene. But the old man up front was counting out pennies onto the counter and he couldn't take it. He pushed past the woman and set both hands down flat on the counter beside the old man.

"Excuse me. Excuse me. I'm sorry, there's an emergency." He tried to catch his breath. "Some mail. Some mail that shouldn't have gone out. My girlfriend came in here an hour ago with a bunch of cards? She's my age, average height, long brown hair." he stammered, aware that he was describing every girl in this college town.

"Sir, you're going to have to wait in line." The large woman behind the counter looked over the top of her glasses at him.

"Yes. The line. I'm sorry. It's just. It was a mistake. She thought they were for someone else. It's very important that they don't go out. Please. It's—It's a matter of life and death," he finished lamely.

"Sir, I need you to calm down."

"Look just let me see the mail that came in in the past hour. Is there a drop box or something?" He looked toward the side wall, there must be a space just on the other side where letters poured in from the other room. "She might've just

dropped it in there. If I could just –” He jumped up with his arms on the counter.

“Sir, customers are *not* allowed on this side of the counter! Get back in line or I’m going call the police.”

“Okay. Right, right. I’m so sorry. But you can get it for me, right? It’s a bunch of small envelopes.”

“Sir I am not authorized to give you any information about another person’s mail. I need you step away from the counter.” She raised a phone to her ear, glaring at him.

“No! Please, please. Look I didn’t mean to scare you. I’m just – ”

A big pot-bellied man emerged from the back room. “Sir, I need you to step outside the building.”

Austin sized the man up. *I can outrun this guy. If I can just get around the corner to where the letters come in through the slot in the wall.* He hoisted himself over the counter, swung his hips around and landed with two feet on the ground while the shocked pot-bellied man ran toward him. Austin sprinted around the corner to the right and saw the large bin that collected envelopes on the other side of the mail drop. There, on top of a mountain of mail were his bright green envelopes. *He had them.* He dove on top of the bin, grabbing an armful containing the envelopes and knocking the bin over with him inside. He tumbled out in an avalanche of envelopes, rolled with the armful of mail clutched to his chest, and scrambled to his feet. The pot-bellied man pushed him from behind and Austin fell, protecting the green envelopes close to his chest like a running back hugging a football on the way down. His head hit the floor, hard.

...

In his hospital bed, Austin learned that he was famous. Anna read him headlines in a sad, matter-of-fact tone. “University Graduate Attempts Post Office Robbery, Insanity Plea Expected.” The online articles were even better. “Recent College Grad Storms Post Office in Attempt to Rescue Deranged Notes to Relatives” and “Forget Drunk Texting: Man Writes Snail Mail to Relatives, Suffers Head Injury Trying to Recover Cards from Post Office.”

That was only the local news. But by the time he left the hospital there were memes and vines all over the internet. It was never clear how the notes were leaked to the media. But from his locked room at the State Hospital while he awaited trial, Austin saw photos of the notes he had written. Someone had even turned them into an artistic collage in which quotes from the cards were paired with photos of random shocked old people to portray his relatives’ reactions.

Austin felt only numb at first. They said he’d hit his head pretty hard. His parents had gotten him committed right away. They were convinced he’d lost his mind. When he protested, they informed him that stealing mail was a felony. There were also accusations that he’d assaulted a post office worker, though Austin didn’t remember it that way. In any event, spending time getting his banged-up head on straight was better than jail, and it could help support an insanity plea, which he thought might be his best option.

The attendants at the institution brought him pills, which he usually hid under his tongue until he had a chance to spit

them out. When he didn't talk much in therapy sessions they encouraged him to write in a little notebook. Austin sat down on his bed and held pen to paper for the first time since the dreaded cards. The first words he wrote surprised him.

I'm free.

He looked up at the blank wall as a smile slowly crossed his lips. He thought about the headlines, about the internet memes that haunted his dreams. Against all logic, Austin laughed. Maybe they ruined his familial relationships and had gotten him locked up, but those were his words that had the internet laughing. They were his own thoughts, honest, and raw, and people cared what he'd had to say.

Austin started opening up in therapy sessions. He told the nurses he didn't regret his actions. He was happy he didn't have to pretend anymore. And he enjoyed being famous. They just gazed at him like a curious specimen and wrote notes on their clipboards. He responded by doubling down in his own notebook. As soon as he got his phone back he'd post photos of the pages on the Internet. Anna had told him he had thousands of new friend requests on Facebook. He'd start a blog. If he ended up in prison he could still write letters and find someone on the outside to publish them on his behalf. Although his counselor kept trying to get him to talk about the shame he must be feeling, Austin had never felt more liberated. The world knew exactly who he was. Austin was no longer a failure. He affirmed this by scrawling an "About Austin" inscription on the inside cover of his notebook:

*Austin Trent is a no-bullshit, tell-it-like-it-is, crazy-ass
writer.*

Austin Trent is real.

The Bureau of Ungentlemanly Warfare

Five years, seven months, and twenty-two days ago, Monsieur Jacques Sauvage purchased a small, secluded mansion in the forests of Europe. His father and grandfather had both died in the chaos of the Great War, and had each left him what might be called half a fortune in francs, family heirlooms, and the like. His father had died first, quickly shot to death as he attempted to save a wounded comrade. Jacques heard of his grandfather's passing only two months later, valiantly fending off German troops before a flame trooper took his life.

This predictably resulted in Jacques's inheritance of enough earthly possessions to label him rich. At first, he refused to accept what was allocated to him in his ancestors' wills, for he couldn't accept their deaths. Soon after, though, he had signed his full name, Jacques Lopin Sauvage, on the two documents which granted him his income.

He had purchased this mansion because his old home held many memories. Happy ones, yes, and joyous, but quickly tainted with the sorrow of lost loved ones. It was also a way of fulfilling his father's dream of moving to England and living a peaceful life— a dream, sadly, that his father would never see. Furthermore, there was something peculiar about the place. Something that reminded Jacques of his father and grandfather both; what it was, however, he could not discern. It had nagged

at him for the past five years, seven months, and twenty-two days.

According to the post office, this particular mansion and the five-square-kilometre property that surrounded it had no address, for its mail was received by an individual named Nicholas, who let Monsieur Sauvage use his address for mail deliveries. Once every day, usually at the setting sun, Nicholas would drive an hour's worth to give Jacques the mail that had come for him. Sometimes, Nicholas would call to say that Jacques had not received any mail that day. Most of the time, however, Monsieur Sauvage could expect the sound of a rumbling engine, the gravelly crunches of the ground underfoot, and the knuckles rapping on the door that all combined to announce Nicholas's presence. He was almost as reliable as a clock.

One evening, Jacques heard the engine, the footsteps, and the knocking just as he did almost every evening prior. He opened the door to his home and found Nicholas standing in front of him. A quick glance at Nicholas's hands showed that he had a rather large handful of mail tonight, but he was also holding two wrapped gifts: one about the size of a book, and one the size of an average desk drawer. Jacques chuckled through his nose.

"On time as always, Nicholas," he said, stepping to the side and allowing his friend to come inside.

"Despite what everyone else might say," Nicholas answered, "your accent's getting better."

Jacques smiled. He had been developing various accents for the past three years as a hobby. Violin had been intriguing at

first, but quickly became dull, so Jacques quickly decided to perfect his voice instead of his music and discovered a newfound interest in the craft.

“Are you coming in?” he asked.

Nicholas stepped into the mansion and set the mail and the gift on the table beside the front door. When he finished, he turned to his friend and spread his arms wide open.

“Happy birthday, Jacques!” he said.

Jacques pulled Nicholas into a friendly embrace, slapping him twice on the shoulder blade before stepping back to talk.

“How have you been?” He picked up a letter and turned it around, careful not to disturb the contents inside.

“Oh, not too poorly— writing articles, learning which of our lads has given our good friend Adolf another nasty smack on the chin,” Nicholas reported. “Not much has changed since yesterday. And you?”

“Dentistry isn’t the most exciting occupation,” Jacques replied. “It’s rather lucrative, though.” He read the front of the envelope (judging by the handwriting, it was from a friend on active duty), then set it aside and focused on his visitor. “As long as you know what you’re doing, that is.”

Though Jacques may have looked happy to Nicholas in that moment, the churning waters of his soul harbored an old sourness. Nicholas had mentioned the Second World War; when France involved itself in the first conflict, Jacques was too young to serve his country. In fact, the war ended two months before his eighteenth birthday. He had wanted to serve France in the years following, but they had turned him away from the military

when they discovered he suffered from something named multiple personality disorder. Jacques had never heard of it before the fitness exam, and was very shaken by it and by his sudden disqualification from military service— even though there wasn't another thing wrong with him.

Nicholas must have read his mind, because his smile dropped a little.

“Ah,” he said. “Thinking about the exam?”

Jacques nodded silently.

Nicholas stood there for a second or two. Then he broke into another smile.

“Oh, don't give it another thought!” he said. “It's your birthday! You should be happy! A smile on your face and joy in your heart! Don't worry about the exam. Thin blood, indeed!”

Jacques couldn't help smiling. Nicholas was good with words. A skill acquired while writing reports on the war, no doubt. Jacques hadn't told him the truth, however; Nicholas was under the impression that Jacques suffered from a rare blood disease that made his body take longer to repair wounds. It was silly, yes, but better than telling Nicholas the real reason he was rejected. So he put a smile on his face and showed that he was grateful for his friend's kind words.

“So how does it feel to be forty years old?” Nicholas asked, looking around the inside of the mansion as if he didn't get the chance to see it every day, even though he did.

“It feels like being thirty-nine years old, but with fewer smarts and more back pains,” Jacques answered, closing the door.

“It sounds like I should have something to look forward to next month,” Nicholas laughed.

“Nicholas, please don’t change your schedule for me, but—” Jacques started.

Nicholas scoffed. “It’s your birthday! For you, I’d cancel plans with the queen today.”

“I want to talk to you about something,” Jacques admitted. “Perhaps we could sit out on the veranda and have some wine? I have a Riesling Auslese from 1935.”

The sound of sweetened alcohol cast fishhooks in Nicholas’s eyebrows. “Really? D’you know, I think I’d rather like that. Let me gather your mail and grab a pair of glasses and we can have ourselves a little party.”

“Splendid,” Jacques said as Nicholas turned to grab all the things he brought. “I’ll fetch the wine.” He turned and walked down the hallway, shoes clacking like metronomes on the patterned tiles. He entered the room at the end of the hall and looked around at all the tables: poker, billiards, shuffleboard, and the like.

The wine cellar, for reasons to which Jacques was blind, had been built so that the only way into it was through a very secret passage in the floor of this room. This passage could only be accessed by an immovable table on the other end of the room, which had an immovable chess board with immovable chess pieces on it. At first, Jacques had thought the last person to own this mansion had glued it all together to joke with unsuspecting guests, but soon discovered that some of the pieces twisted around if you turned them. He had found the combination to the

wine cellar after three hours of meddling, but he only learned the code after finding a cryptic note in the bedroom with initials for each piece, the amount they were to be turned, and the direction in which they should be turned. He had never forgotten the code since— queen three-quarters to the right, king halfway to the left, rooks one full rotation apiece, and then twist the pawn in front of the king until it stops. The pawns would reset after a few seconds, to make sure the entrance was reusable.

Jacques walked over to the table and put the code in. When the pawn stopped moving, he watched the entrance slide open and reveal a set of stairs that weren't much wider than a grown man. He stood up, maneuvered through the other game tables, and descended into his dusty wine cellar.

The 1935 Riesling Auslese was cleverly hidden behind a large cluster of red wines in bottles of various shapes and sizes. Jacques had been fond of the Riesling, and looked forward to the day he finally got to open it and drink. Carefully snaking his arm through the necks of the other bottles, he took hold of the Riesling by the top and slowly brought it out. He cradled the bottom of it with his other hand once he had gotten it out of the way of the other bottles and turned to walk back up the steps. But something kept him.

He looked over his shoulder at the wine cellar, and suddenly became very aware that the place was rather...empty. He had never thought about it before, but it seemed quite basic. He supposed that he didn't drink wine often enough to justify using it as a wine cellar. But then what to use it for? He wasn't sure. After putting it aside, and promising himself to think about

it tomorrow, he walked up the steps and closed the entrance to the cellar by pushing the button hidden underneath the back right pocket of a billiards table.

Jacques walked down the hall again to the front door, but this time he turned and headed up the flight of stairs that led to the second floor of his home. Whoever built the place had done so in such a manner that the veranda was the first destination on the right, marked by double-doors. When he arrived at the top of the stairs, he saw that the doors were open wide, inviting him to join his friend. The veranda was home to a few luxurious chairs, the biggest ones positioned near two small tables, and some potted plants, all guarded by an intricate iron gate which patrolled the whole area. The sky was getting foggy and dark now, and the quiet, cold wind stung Jacques's nose a little.

Nicholas had already set the glasses down, one on each table, but was holding onto the gifts.

"Sit down wherever!" he said, jovially. "It's your birthday."

Jacques smiled. He should have expected as much; Nicholas was very particular about minor traditions when it came to birthdays. Still holding onto the Riesling, he sat down in the chair on his left, suddenly feeling as if a weight had been lifted from his soul. He sank into its soft cushions.

Nicholas sat down in the other chair, putting the gifts on the table next to Jacques.

"What were you hoping you would get this year?" he asked, almost like a child.

Jacques sighed. "Nicholas, can we talk first?"

“Of course. I’m sorry.”

Jacques waved him off. “Don’t be sorry for being a good friend,” he insisted, grabbing the wine as Nicholas produced a bottle opener from his pocket.

“I’m glad you hold me in such high esteem,” the latter said, uncorking the bottle and moving to pour Jacques a glass.

“We’ve known each other for four years,” Jacques replied, watching the golden, sweet-smelling wine fill his glass. “If that doesn’t constitute friendship, I’m not sure I want to know what does.”

Nicholas stopped pouring the wine, leaving Jacques with a quarter-glass, and began to pour another quarter-glass, this time for himself.

“Well said, mate,” he agreed.

Jacques took his wine and sniffed it. He was never envious of some people’s ability to discern exactly which flavors were in a wine and what dishes made them taste better; in fact, when he encountered such people in public, he usually held the glass up to his ear and pretended to listen to the wine in an attempt to confuse them. But this wine was different. There was an amalgam of aromas in it: pears, honeycomb, and vanilla bean among them. Jacques could nearly smell the sugar in the wine, and the air around the mouth of the glass seemed to thicken, like the sweetness of the mixture was being absorbed into the atmosphere. He took a sip and was rewarded with a wine balanced like a well-done lemonade: just sweet enough to overpower the sourness of the wine itself.

Nicholas, satisfied that Jacques had drunk first, took a small sip too. When he lowered the glass from his mouth, he made a sound of approval.

“That’s a lovely wine,” he said. “Did you know that the Riesling vine was discovered exactly five hundred years before this wine was bottled? Some German found the vine in 1435. There may have been some monks who discovered it a hundred years before the German bloke did, but no one has had luck proving that.”

“Where did you hear all this?” Jacques asked, skepticism in his voice.

Nicholas shrugged. “I forgot. I read so much I can never remember when I’ve read something, or where I read it.”

Jacques’s eyebrows quickly jumped up and back down. That was definitely believable.

“So what did you want to talk about?” Nicholas asked.

Jacques set his glass on the table and took a deep breath. He wasn’t sure whether he wanted to bother Nicholas with all of it. But when he looked over and saw the expression of genuine concern on his friend’s face, he couldn’t keep quiet any longer.

“I feel as if I’m not helping,” he said.

Nicholas looked befuddled. “How would you be not helping? You have an occupation, you help people who need it...I don’t understand why you feel—” Then his eyes lit up in enlightenment. “Oh, the war.”

Jacques nodded. “Yes. Every day, I hear something about what our brave soldiers are doing in the fight against the Nazis and their allies. An Axis train will be stopped one day, an attack

on Allied territory will be quenched the next. Every day I see or hear something like it, and every day I can't stop myself from thinking that I'm doing nothing to help. I'm just...sitting here, looking at teeth and pulling them out, when I should be holding a rifle in my hands and defending our country."

"I know that it can't feel good, Jacques, but the British military simply won't let you join. For the same reason the French military turned you away."

"It's ridiculous," Jacques protested. "I don't like it, not one bit."

Nicholas opened his mouth to speak, but thought better of it and fell silent.

"Every one of our soldiers is risking his life to stop pure evil," Jacques persisted. "I have just as much of a right to fight for my country as they do."

Nicholas had a look on his face, one that frequently showed itself whenever its owner was brainstorming.

"Nicholas, are you all right?"

Jacques watched his friend, taking a sip of wine to pass the time. Suddenly, Nicholas clapped his hands together, quickly and loudly enough to give Jacques a good startle and nearly spill his wine.

"I've got it!" Nicholas said. "The crown won't let you into their military, so we can just make our own military!"

In the forty years of Jacques's existence, he had never heard a sincere idea quite as massive— or as ridiculous— as this one. Nicholas did have a reputation for proposing ideas such as this one, but normally he only made them to serve as a set-up for

a joke, or a hypothesis that could only be truly enacted in a perfect world, which this one, of course, was not. Jacques set his wine glass down and thought about what Nicholas had just said.

“You want to create an army?” he asked his friend. “Just you and me?”

“Why not?” Nicholas answered. “All we need are the right connections, the right people. I know a couple of people who are ex-military, and they all want to charge headfirst into the battle with all of the young soldiers!”

“Connected though you may be,” Jacques replied, “I doubt that you could form an army out of a handful of men who are all older than us.”

“We wouldn’t rely on them as our muscle,” Nicholas explained, as if to a slow child. “We would rely on them as our brains, our experience! Teaching the recruits and being our intelligence people, you know?”

“But where do we get the people?”

“From everywhere!” Nicholas spread his arms and looked all around him. “Let me tell you a quick story: There was a man drafted in the same company as my father in the Great War. He was the least likely person on Earth to become a soldier: couldn’t shoot a rifle, nearly died every time he did more than fifteen push-ups— everything said that he wouldn’t pass through training.” Nicholas had leaned in by now, telling the story with a passionate fervor. “By the time the war was over, he had turned into a warrior. He killed dozens of German troops, and the crown gave him so many medals he nearly fell over face-first once they pinned them all on his chest!”

“What’s the point of this story?” Jacques still couldn’t understand why Nicholas wanted to create an army.

“The point is that we have soldier material all around us. Here’s what we do. We take in random, everyday people—the type of people you wouldn’t look at twice if you passed them on the street— and we turn them into the deadliest fighting force known to mankind. Guerilla warfare and covert operations taken to the next level. Hand-to-hand tactics, weapons lessons, all of it unconventional and completely unpredictable.”

Jacques pursed his lips. Nicholas sounded crazy, but there was something to the idea. “I think we could do it, yes, if we had the proper governmental support.”

“That’s the spirit!” Nicholas applauded him. “It’s a deal, then. We’ll form a new branch of the military, one that any old chap or lass can join.”

“Women, too?” Jacques was surprised; Nicholas had never mentioned anything about supporting military service for women.

“Why not? They’d blend in. No one expects a woman to be a soldier.”

“I suppose that’s a good advantage to have.” Jacques stared out into his grassy field. “What should we call it?”

Nicholas paused. “I hadn’t thought that far, actually.”

“Something clever, of course.”

“Yes, of course. How about ‘The Plain Sight Agency?’ You know, because our agents could hide in plain sight without any suspicions being raised?”

Jacques shook his head. “Doesn’t sound right.”

“Special Operation Task Force?’ It’s more official, certainly.”

Jacques shook his head again.

Nicholas shrugged. “We’ll give the name a go some other time, I suppose.”

And then it came to Jacques. “The Bureau of Ungentlemanly Warfare.”

Nicholas, who was in the middle of sipping his wine, looked at Jacques for a second. Then he suddenly burst into raucous laughter, swallowing the wine beforehand to avoid spraying Riesling out of his mouth.

“That’s perfect!” he hollered, setting his glass on the table. “The Bureau...” He couldn’t finish, instead devolving into hysterical belly-laughing. This went on for some time, time in which Jacques nearly joined Nicholas in laughter, before the latter was coherent enough to speak.

“It’s humorous,” he said. “More than that, it’s clever. You can’t have a bureau of ungentlemanly warfare if you don’t *have women!*” He struggled to get the last two words out of his mouth before laughing again.

“I’m glad you approve,” Jacques said in an amused tone, not sure if Nicholas heard it over his own laughter.

After another few seconds of boisterous guffawing, Nicholas composed himself.

“It’s settled, then, I guess?” he said. “We’ll found the Bureau of Ungentlemanly Warfare—” Here he paused, bouncing a couple of times as he kept his laughter on the inside. “—as soon as we can.”

“Once we have enough resources and trust from the government, of course.”

“Of course.”

“But where would we build our headquarters?”

“Why, right here!”

“Here?” Jacques could think of many reasons why that was a poor idea.

“Yes! A large area of land. A large building to operate out of. You could train and you could take care of the government work at the same time!”

Now Jacques couldn't help but agree. The wine cellar! It could house supplies and personnel if they needed, couldn't it? They would just have to drink all the wine, or sell it.

“Well, that's enough thinking, eh?” Nicholas said, taking a gulp of wine. “Now get to work on these letters and such, you. Who wished you a happy birthday? I shuffled the letters so you won't know which one's coming next.”

Jacques obliged; he grabbed the pile of letters first. Some of them were bills or statements from the bank, but most were letters sending the wishes of “happy birthday” from those who sent them. His mother and father (who had written their letter in French and enclosed a family photo and a ten-pound note), his aunt and uncle and cousins, some of his coworkers and friends, and one friend who had been deployed to fight the Nazis— all of them wanted him to know that they cared about him on his fortieth birthday.

Nicholas was grinning, and his smile seemed to grow wider with every card Jacques opened. Finally, there were no more letters left; only the two gifts.

“Who sent these?” Jacques asked.

“I’ve no idea,” Nicholas said with a sly grin. “I would check the tag if I was you.”

So Jacques checked the tag on the gift, and he saw Nicholas’s name written in cursive. He looked up at his friend, who was still smiling.

“What could this be?” he asked, opening the gift.

“I’m sure I have no idea.”

Jacques reached into the box and brought out a hardcover book. Upon reading the title, he saw that it was a copy of *Jekyll and Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson.

“Have you read it before?” Nicholas asked.

Jacques had secretly wanted to read this book for a while, but had never gone to buy it. He hadn’t heard much of it for a while, and was glad that he didn’t yet know what happened in the story. It was rumored to be a double-edged sword.

“No, I haven’t,” he answered aloud.

“Oh, I think you’ll like it,” Nicholas said with a hint of anticipation. “I saw it and instantly thought of you. I’m not completely certain why that was the case, however.”

Jacques smiled and set the book aside. “Thank you very much, Nicholas.”

“That’s not all I’ve brought,” Nicholas said. “This second gift is from me, as well.”

Wondering what Nicholas could possibly have given him on top of a book, Jacques took hold of the second gift and noticed that a card was inserted in the folds of the wrapping paper. He opened the card— which had been written in French— and read it aloud in his native tongue.

“Jacques, many years pass with friends, foes, and family alike, but the only thing that cannot be forgotten is a memory. Happy 40th birthday to my best friend and fond memory. Nicholas.”

He lowered the card with water in his eyes and emotion in his chest. With a look at Nicholas, he thanked him yet another time. The latter answered with more kind words.

Setting the card down, Jacques began to open the gift. It felt a little heavy for its size, but he was sure it was worth it. He took the wrapping paper off and peered inside. He couldn't help but let out a laugh.

It was a large cake sitting on a plate, a spongy layer of yellow with powdered sugar sprinkled lightly atop it. In the middle of it were three large plums surrounding a stick of cinnamon. Two forks lay beside it, no doubt haphazardly thrown about as Nicholas navigated to the mansion. Jacques brought the plate out of the box and set it on the table.

“Do you remember?” he asked.

Jacques nodded. Of course he remembered. They had met at a restaurant; Jacques's old heartthrob had arranged their dinner so that they would be dating with another couple— Nicholas and the woman who would become his wife. They had ordered a soul cake just like this one, and they had all fed it to

each other in a square formation— Jacques fed his heartthrob, who fed Nicholas, who fed *his* heartthrob, who fed Jacques. They had quickly finished the treat and were left with the cinnamon stick, so Jacques and Nicholas had each grabbed an end of it and pulled. Jacques's hand had slipped and caused Nicholas to hit himself in the face. They joked about it occasionally.

“You never knew what hit you,” Jacques chuckled.

Nicholas chuckled too.

As they sat and talked, eating soul cake, Jacques thought about what had happened that day. All in all, it was a good birthday, an important thing to have for someone's fortieth year on Earth. And furthermore, he was happy with this plan, this Bureau. It wasn't just a birthday musing; it was a plan. And more than that, it was a plan to serve his country— something he had never before been able to do. But the best part of it all was that he had found an answer to his question: what made this home remind him of his father and grandfather? Serving his country, of course. It was an answer that he found after a long, long search— five years, seven months, and twenty-two days, to be exact.

That answer, and Nicholas's company, were two of the greatest gifts he ever could have received.

Springtime in Ireland

The plant that kills us is the same one that keeps us alive, so I eat.

I trace my fingers across the raspy skin of the potato, caked with dirt and grime. We only have the one knife, and I use it to slice through the starch flesh, disregarding the undesirable collision of rust and soil. The unshapely body splits into two halves, each a clean cream tone, pristine and untouched against the jagged wooden table. I long to eat a full halve, to feel my cheeks bulge, to have enough to chew and swallow. Ava shuffles besides me, impatient. I glance down at her brown eyes and hollowed cheeks, and I know that she is secretly wishing for the same things. I lift the knife and slice the potato in fourths, then eighths, and like clockwork, the arms begin to reach across the table. Ava and I manage, but the hunger is hardest on the younger ones - they fuss and fight in vain, and their bones tire from being robbed of their ability to grow. It is all we can do to dress them in layers, to hold whatever warmth or breath of life they have left. I set aside one portion, for my father, who has fallen ill. He sleeps in the corner, a shawl wrapped around his mouth, his skin pale and lifeless. Typhus has gripped him, a disease that feeds on the starved. It coats his body in red growths. The food goes first and the people follow, until all that is left in Ireland is grief.

We eat in silence, forks stabbing into our morsels of food, the only sound being the spit of the cracking fire. Although we have dodged sickness, we live in gasps - speak in hushed tones, move slowly, sleep long, anything to conserve our energy. Ava and I are the only ones who leave home. The weather is far too brutal on the younger ones, and my mother is occupied with caring for my father, pressing cool shawls against his forehead. It is like wrapping tea leaves around wounds; like watering a fallen crop. I envy her ability to hope.

The stone walls are more bare than usual. I close my eyes and I can see the fur coats, the pots and pans hanging from hooks, but I know that this is only wishing. The landlords took all we have - they left no space for personal belongings, no room for pleasure of any kind. All we ask for is food, and even that we are denied. Regardless, we sold all without hesitation, for the cost of walls to keep us warm and a roof to shield us from the snow. We know the alternative. We know the houses raided in the middle of the night, the greedy redcoats making ruins of shelter. Many Irish turn to rioting and boycotts, but mother reminds us to keep our heads low, and besides, their bellies are full. We know who has the real power.

The spring of 1846 is unforgiving - snow lingers on the tips of the grass blades, and the little crops that survive both the weather and the poison do little to quench our hunger. It is not enough to sit and be idle, to make corpses of ourselves, so Ava and I wake every morning to rake through the fields, to search for anything deemed edible. I've learned now to be more careful. I look for the signs - deep lesions spouting from the leaves and

stems, green and purple like bruises, white growths sprinkled across like spilled flour. It takes only one rotten plant to poison the whole field come nightfall, a drop of black ink dispersing through water.

Although Ava and I rake through dirt for hours, it is to no avail. Each day, we are less successful than the last; we are lucky to find one potato. Our field is blessed in that we are free of disease, cursed in that our yield is reduced to almost none. It is only a matter of time before our crops begin to rot. Today, we feast on grass and leaves. As the night falls, I blow out our single candle and press my body against those of my sisters, wrapping my limbs around their frail frames, reciting prayers as lullabies.

The morning light spills through the cracks in the walls and awakens me. I tug on the sleeves of my shirt. Although we have no energy for walking, let alone for work, Ava and I are making the journey to the public workhouse. It is a distance of roughly three miles, and I am grateful to have her beside me to encourage me to go.

Along the way, we pass by a field of barley and oat, property of the landlords. My stomach turns as I watch the bones prodding from the ribs of battered men, of women without the energy to stand, young children crying in vain. They tend to the yellowed fields, picking the heads off the grains for harvest, their lifeless movements a contrast to the nourished plants sprouting beside them. Their labor is fruitless; in short time, the landlords will gather their barley and oats and ship them out of Ireland. Ava and I turn our heads. I am guilty of my clothing layers, of our

obnoxious shoes and too-loud footsteps, and I decide never again to complain.

Inside the public workhouse, Ava and I endure long hours and broken backs, doing all that we are told. In exchange, we are rewarded with a starvation ration - bowls of watery soup, warm enough to comfort our fingers. It is not much, but it is all we can do. We arrive home and set the bowls against the table, satisfied with the day's outcome. Our return is not acknowledged. Mother weeps in the corner, low groans that shake her body. Ava gasps, and it is only then that I see the red bumps trespassing among the skin of the younger ones. I worried that this would happen - they breathe the same air as my father, spend too much time besides one another.

Father continues to moan, his face now white as sleet. It is a selfish thought, but I am reluctant to hand over my bowl. I imagine the soup running down my throat, caressing my insides and filling me with energy. Mother's eyes meet mine, lined with deep circles and grief that tugs on my shoulder until my fingers relax, and I choose to feed the dead.

Tomorrow, we return to the public workhouse, only this time, we speak to the women about the boats that load the dock. Ava and I return home and split our single potato in two, letting it cook in a bucket over the open fire. I savor each bite, careful to take few. I am unsure of when my next meal will be. Today we are boarding the ship to New York. We cannot stay here - not with death lingering around the corner, not with guilt scraping the innards of all that we are. The compact stone walls remind us of the little time we have before the sickness takes us. Mother

refuses to come with us to the States; she is unable to leave her children and her love behind. She promises to join us come next ship, if God gives her the strength to live so long.

Ava embraces her, then I next, and we exchange statements of love and hope - it is all we have left. Mother kisses our foreheads and cheeks and noses. As we bid our home farewell, I notice that the snow beneath our feet has begun to melt. I pray the springtime becomes gentle enough to care for Ireland.

Clark Coleman

The Divine Wind of Midnight

One cardboard box of residual photos and mementos from a recently failed marriage remained for Milton to unpack. He decided to leave the box unpacked and to get a sense of his new surroundings. The only items that found places on the walls were some of Milton's black-and-white landscape photography.

The view of the neighborhood from his new home was exceptional, due to the fact that the house was at the end of a cul-de-sac nestled in a small canyon. Facing the house from the street, the house to the left of Milton's was a mirror image of his but in beige instead of grey. The neighbor's sprinkler in the front yard, which sounded like a whispering machine gun, scattered water over the well-groomed lawn to keep it green in the Arizona heat. The house to the right of Milton's sat vacant in vibrant white with a "For Sale" sign that occupied the front dirt.

The second house to the right was the first to be built and the oldest on the street. An ornate fence with carved wooden dragon filigree surrounded the property. A few trees shielded the house. About three to four homes were scattered about the rest of the street. The remaining land clinging to the street was peppered with small cedar stakes adorned with day-glow orange strips that fluttered softly in the afternoon wind. The street caressed the foothills and snaked out of view toward the town of Cave Creek in the valley.

Milton was feeling every one of his forty years. He ran his hand through his brown hair in a feeble attempt to avoid looking disheveled. He put on some blue jeans and an old t-shirt, his gardening garb. Once outside he clipped and trimmed small hedges that lined the footpath to the front door. A small trail of green grass confetti peppered the walk. The sound of an opening and closing door echoed softly in the neighborhood. Milton looked up and saw a tall African American man in his late forties approaching from the beige house on the left. He wore jeans and a yellow long-sleeved button-down shirt and carried two frosty bottles of beer.

"Welcome," the man said, handing one of the bottles to Milton.

"Thanks," Milton said. He shook the man's hand. "Milton."

"Paul," the neighbor said, surveying the street in appreciation. "What do you think of the neighborhood?"

"I like it, though I've only been here a few days."

"I'm pleased to hear that," Paul said. "I am here to invite you to a barbecue that has become a monthly tradition on this street. It's a chance for neighbors to get to know each other and promote a tight-knit neighborhood."

Milton laughed and nodded in the direction of the empty lots. "It looks like there's not much to knit yet."

Paul smiled. "We have to start somewhere." He sipped his beer. "So can you make it to the barbecue?"

"Yes, of course."

"Great." Paul smiled. "The barbecues are always held on the first Saturday after the full moon." Paul read Milton's puzzled

expression. "I know, I know. I didn't set the schedule. Our other neighbor, Tanaka, is responsible for that." Paul pointed to the dragon-fenced house. "That is also where the barbecue is held. The next one is two Saturdays from now. Hope to see you."

"It's a plan," Milton said as he returned to his clipping.

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The grandfather clock chimed 6:30 p.m. as Milton gulped the last spoonful of minestrone soup. He took the bowl into the kitchen. A blood-curdling sound caused Milton to drop the bowl into the sink, sending a burst of glass to sprinkle around the drain. Milton looked out his window and saw a small calico cat stuck in a tree in the front yard two doors down, just behind the dragon fence. The cat cowered on a limb about 20 feet off the ground. Milton was just about to look up the local fire department's number until he noticed a Japanese man in his early sixties come out of the house to survey the situation.

The man wore a white linen long-sleeved shirt and blue jeans. He walked casually toward the tree in his yard. He positioned himself just under the branch and held up his hands toward the cat as if he was trying to halt traffic. The man's casual demeanor diminished.

Milton slowly opened his window in order to see and hear better. Another sound was being made now but it wasn't from the cat. It was a combination of humming and clicking and, though it sounded inhuman, it was coming from the man under the tree.

The cat stopped crying, closed its eyes and went limp. It slipped off the branch, falling into the arms of the man. The man

let out the same eerie sound again, but softer this time. The cat awoke and shook its head as if waking from a deep sleep. Seemingly unaffected by the incident, it bolted from the man's arms and scampered away. Milton closed the window and picked up the broken pieces of the bowl, but could not stop thinking about what he had just seen.

Saturday morning broke into Milton's house with vibrant sunlight, the perfect weather for a barbecue. He was still thinking of the incident from last night when a knock at the door derailed his train of thought. Milton's old city reflexes led him to look through the peephole. Paul's head looked oversized in the viewer, like a Mardi Gras mask. There was a blonde woman with him.

Milton opened the door. "How's it going?"

"Are you kidding?" Paul said, looking up to the sky. "Look at this day. You ready to go?"

Milton held up a six-pack of beer. "Yep."

"I want you to meet my wife, Doreen," Paul said.

"Pleased to meet you," Milton said as he shook hands with Doreen. She wore a blue denim shirt with a turquoise necklace. Her black jeans contrasted nicely with her tan white skin, the pant legs tucked into well-worn boots.

"I see my husband dragged you into this," Doreen said with a laugh.

"I am coming along willingly," Milton said as he closed his front door behind him.

The man who saved the cat stood in front of his home smiling as Milton, Paul and Doreen walked through the front gate. He extended his hand to Milton. "Welcome."

Milton shook Tanaka's hand. "Thank you for having me."

The man smiled. "I am Tanaka Nishima. Today you are my honored guest. There is a cooler out back where you can put the beer. Thank you for bringing it."

Soon Milton was at ease with his new neighbors while enjoying a tasty burger and a nice cool beer in Tanaka's backyard.

Milton looked around and noticed many neatly trimmed hedges that surrounded the brick patio, where neighbors congregated around the grill. Wives laughed in their cliques drinking margaritas while the men shared stories over beers. He noticed a nice, tranquil pond at the far end of the backyard. A series of wooden boxes, each about one foot cubed, layered the back wall of Tanaka's house in three rows. An oversized mail slot adorned the bottom of each box. Only the back door was free from the boxes. A white German Shepherd bounded over to Milton and playfully scrambled around his legs, its tail spinning excitedly like a boat propeller.

"He likes you," Tanaka said as he patted the dog's head. "My dog Cody is a good judge of character. This is indeed a good sign."

Milton patted the dog on its head. "He's beautiful. "

"He is my close companion. I have a certain affinity with animals. A bond between man and beast like no other." Tanaka's gaze became palpable.

Milton sipped his beer to steady his nerves. He remembered the cat incident but decided not to bring it up. "What's with all the boxes on the back of your house?"

"They are bat houses. The bats help keep the mosquitos out of my garden." Tanaka looked back at the boxes. "There are about forty boxes."

Milton nodded. "I'm guessing your line of work has something to do with animals, Mr. Nishima."

Tanaka smiled and closed his eyes while he held his hand up. "Please, call me Tanaka. We are neighbors now and can dispense with formalities."

Milton nodded. "Sorry."

"Don't give it another thought," Tanaka said. "Anyway, I am a retired realtor. I learned everything from my mother. Right after the last internment camp closed, we arrived in the United States and she purchased some land, which later appreciated. She sold that and purchased a parcel far superior to the first." Tanaka looked off to the horizon. "I learned much from her. Only recently I decided to sell some parcels. The land surrounding this cul-de-sac and canyon is my land. Paul designed my house." Tanaka nodded to Paul. Paul raised a beer in acknowledgment. Tanaka continued. "This was the first house to be built. I was so pleased with Paul's design and his integrity as an architect, I let him and his wife have the parcel next door to you at a very good price. The day Paul moved in is when we had our first barbecue. Little did we know it would become a monthly tradition."

Milton looked around at the happy neighbors milling about, laughing and telling stories and clinking bottles. A nearby speaker played classical music.

"You see," Tanaka said. "The barbecue is a great way to learn about neighbors. It helps facilitate the forging of a strong neighborhood and community."

"Thank you again for the invite," Milton said. "You mentioned your mother. May I ask about your father?"

Tanaka bowed his head slightly and retrieved a small photo from his wallet. He carefully handed it to Milton. The old, brittle photo was once black and white but now had the color of coffee with too much creamer. It had a few rips held together by yellowed glossy adhesive tape. Some adhesive had dried into yellow bits of powder. In the photo was a young man in his twenties wearing a headband while standing in front of a Mitsubishi Zero airplane. The boy held up a cup of sake as if toasting the photographer who took his photo.

"That was my father," Tanaka said solemnly. "The picture was taken during his ceremonial cup of sake. Forty minutes later he made the ultimate sacrifice for his country in a Kamikaze attack on an American aircraft carrier." Tanaka's mood shifted, leaving sorrow in its wake. "The white headband my father wore is a hachimaki. It is from the ancient samurai and was used in preparation for battle to keep the sweat and hair out of their eyes. The headband came to symbolize courage. After this was taken he shaved his head and mailed locks of his hair to close relatives. For this was a time-honored tradition. Since he no longer needed the hachimaki, it was sent on to my mother along

with some of his locks." Tanaka grew somber again. "I was never old enough to know my father." He wiped a tear from his cheek and took a quick sip of beer to try to terminate his sad reverie.

"I'm sorry about your father," Milton said.

"Thank you," Tanaka said with a wan smile. "Enough about me. What about you? What do you do?"

"I'm a commercial photographer," Milton said. He suddenly remembered he was still holding the brittle photo and gently handed it back to Tanaka. "That's my bread and butter. I do artistic photography on the side in an attempt to get a gallery show in Phoenix someday." Milton sipped his beer and became despondent, his shoulders slightly slouching in defeat.

"Someday."

"In time my friend, in time," Tanaka said with a smile. "Now it is time for me to bestow an honor to you."

Paul dashed into the house for a moment and returned with a makeshift plaque made with a crossed barbecue brush and fork. Paul handed it to Milton.

"What is this?" Milton exchanged looks with Paul and Tanaka.

"It's your turn to greet the next new neighbor," Paul said. "It's your unofficial duty to invite the new neighbors to the barbecue."

"You don't know who is moving in?" Milton asked Tanaka.

"No. As the case with your house, I sold it to a realtor. I want time to enjoy retirement."

Milton held the plaque up for a better look. It was nothing but a piece of plywood with two semi-rusty barbecue tools haphazardly nailed to it.

Tanaka let out a hearty laugh at Milton's expense. "I am looking so very forward to our next barbecue."

• • •

Milton woke Tuesday morning to a cacophony of sounds. He went to the kitchen and poured a cup of coffee while rubbing the morning into his eyes.

In the driveway next door sat a moving van with a steel ramp that hung off the back of the truck like an outstretched tongue licking the driveway.

A man in his late forties with blonde hair and a light complexion unloaded a small table. He wore a flannel shirt and black jeans and boots. The man then unloaded one dining chair. Milton laughed to himself. Perhaps another casualty from the wars of divorce.

A few days passed and Milton decided it was time to visit the new neighbor. He grabbed two beers from the fridge, popped the lids off and sauntered out of his house.

The new neighbor was soaping down his white SUV, oblivious of Milton's approach.

"How's it going?" Milton asked the man.

"So far, so good," the man said without looking up from his scrubbing.

Milton noticed some suds drip off the rear bumper to reveal a confederate flag bumper sticker. He set a beer next to

the bucket of suds. The neighbor stopped scrubbing when he heard the bottle touch the pavement.

"Consider it a welcome gift," Milton said.

The man wiped his hands on a rag and cocked his head sideways as he looked at Milton. He was unsure of the courtesy but accepted the beer nonetheless.

Milton felt the growing seed of awkwardness infiltrate the moment and decided small talk was needed. "Where you from?"

"A city," the man replied with deliberate ambiguity.

"And that would be?" Milton attempted to oil the wheels of a sluggish conversation.

"Not really important." The man set his bottle down trading beer suds for soap suds. He began scrubbing the blazer again.

Milton stood in the silence like a man lost in the desert. "My name is Milton."

"Bill," Bill said, not looking up.

"I just wanted to let you know about a barbecue that will happen three Saturdays from now. It'll be held in the house next door to you." Milton pointed to Tanaka's house. "Starts at 11 a.m."

"I don't know," Bill said rubbing his chin. "That's pretty early for me. I work the graveyard shift at a 24-hour towing service." He paused for a moment. "But if you ever need a tow, it's on me."

"Thanks. That's good to know." Milton felt the last bit of awkwardness vanish.

Tanaka's dog Cody scampered up to Milton with claws clicking on the sidewalk in rapid succession like a jazz drummer going to town on the snares. Milton reached out to pet Cody and noticed that Cody's eyes were on Bill.

"I thought this was supposed to be a quiet neighborhood," Bill said with a hint of frustration.

"It is." Milton rubbed Cody's ears.

Bill was shaking his head. "You don't understand. I am not fond of loud dogs."

"You're joking, right?"

"No joke."

Milton felt uncomfortable now. Cody wriggled from Milton's affectionate petting and returned to exploring the neighborhood. Milton decided to overlook the moment. "You think you can make it?"

"Yeah, I can make it," Bill said begrudgingly.

• • •

It was a Saturday to end Saturdays. The vibrant blue sky became a majestic backdrop to the neighborhood as the smell of canyon chaparral drifted on the warm breeze, swirling into Tanaka's backyard, meshing with the scent of grilling meat.

Tanaka shuffled some hot dogs around the grill and flipped some of the burgers as Milton approached the barbecue.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Milton said.

Tanaka smiled. "Just enjoy my hospitality."

Milton looked at his watch. 11:45 a.m. Bill was going to be late or a no show.

The faint sound of a doorbell meekly made its way to the patio through the din of the crowd.

"Please excuse me." Tanaka set the tongs down and went inside to answer the front door.

Bill stood peering into the house past Tanaka, his eyes darting back and forth looking for the familiarity of Milton who, so far, he knew best.

"Welcome," Tanaka said as he gestured for Bill to come in with an arm movement that looked like he was sowing seeds in slow motion. "We have been expecting you. Everyone is in the backyard."

"Thanks," Bill said as he made a beeline to the yard. He found Milton sitting at a table.

"Hey. I thought you weren't going to make it," Milton said. "Beer?"

"Sure." Bill joined Milton at the table.

Tanaka approached the table. "Welcome to my home." He extended his hand to Bill, who was slow to reciprocate the shake but did and wiped his hands on his pant leg, then quickly picked up his beer.

Milton watched as Tanaka's smile faded like a dying flower. Tanaka slowly lowered his hand after Bill shook it.

Paul popped out of the house carrying a big pot of chili. Doreen was close behind with plastic bowls and spoons. "Sorry it took so long," Paul said, setting the pot on the table. "I had to get it just right."

Doreen kissed Paul on the cheek. "He's such a perfectionist."

She set the bowls and spoons down, causing Milton's bottle of beer to wobble.

"You must be the new neighbor." Paul extended his hand.

Bill turned and looked at Milton like he had been had. "I have to go."

Tanaka, Paul and Doreen exchanged puzzled glances.

"What?" Milton stood up. "You just got here."

Furious, Bill turned and stormed into the house. Milton followed while giving Tanaka and Paul an expression of helplessness. He caught up to Bill just outside the front door of the house.

Bill stopped and noticed the front door was ajar so he walked back to close it. "Those two guys back there are not like us. They are not pure."

Milton could not believe what he was hearing. "What do you mean, 'not pure'?"

Bill leaned close to Milton and whispered. "You know, white."

Milton stood paralyzed in shock.

"And what's with the white woman with him. If she has a baby she will dilute our race."

Milton could not believe what he was hearing. There goes the neighborhood.

"Come on," Bill said in his regular talking level. "You and I can have a barbecue at my place."

"Not happening," Milton said. "I'm staying here. These are my neighbors and friends."

Bill shrugged. "Suit yourself." He started to walk down the steps but then turned abruptly back to Milton. "But be sure to stay the fuck away from me if you are going to keep non-white company." He turned abruptly away from Milton and walked briskly away toward his house.

After Milton heard the expected slam of the front door to Bill's house, he turned back to enter Tanaka's house and noticed an elongated, eye-shaped gap in the front window blinds which closed quickly. A newfound tension formed within the pit of his stomach.

Milton rejoined Tanaka and Paul. The incident had thrown Milton's ebullient mood off its axis. He struggled to put on a game face, pretending nothing was wrong, but it was unsuccessful.

"What's wrong?" Paul asked.

"I think Bill is racist," Milton said.

Paul nodded and arched his eyebrows. "Yeah, I got that vibe." He took a swig of beer. "Well that's his problem, not ours."

Tanaka stood up from the table. His expression was grim for his mind was occupied.

The barbecue ended, leaving Milton with a satisfied appetite, yet uneasiness crept into his stomach and wreaked havoc with his food. His next-door neighbor was a bigot. Milton flopped down on his couch and flicked on the TV. The evening sun cast long golden rectangles of light into his living room. As the sun slowly set, Milton's eyelids followed suit.

A loud popping sound jolted him awake. The living room walls flickered in muted TV blue. Milton rubbed his eyes and

grabbed his phone off the coffee table to check the time. It was 10:50 p.m. Milton started to come awake and felt something was wrong. He got up and stretched, still smelling of barbecue smoke. Carefully he went to the kitchen window, in time to see Bill clad in a dirty bathrobe and carrying a handgun, walking back into his house. Milton noticed something in the street reflecting the moonlight. It appeared to be a white bedroom pillow. He saw Tanaka running out of his house toward the pillow and realized it was not a pillow but Tanaka's dog. Milton froze. He was not sure if he should go to Tanaka or not.

Tanaka kneeled and petted his dog's bloody neck. Cody's eyes quivered at Tanaka's touch. Tanaka picked up the dog and one of his hands accidentally brushed against the dog's wound. Cody let out a weak gurgling sound. Tanaka quickly and steadily carried Cody back to his house, feeling the last semblance of life ebb from his dog.

"Keep your fucking mongrel mutt off my property!" Bill bellowed from the front of his property. "I work late and I will be fucked if I lose sleep because of a stupid fucking dog."

Tanaka did not acknowledge Bill's words. Soaked in Cody's blood and urine, Tanaka did not waver from his path, solemnly carrying his dead dog through a side gate into the backyard.

The incident sent Milton's blood coursing. He was completely awake now. He waited a few minutes before he called Tanaka.

"Hello?" Tanaka's voice was sad.

"It's Milton. I saw what happened. Is there anything I can do? Is Cody alright?" The silence was the answer. "Oh, God. I'm so sorry."

"Do not be," Tanaka said. "My anger is tempered by the fact that nature has a way of correcting bad things. I must hang up now for I have much to do." He paused. "Thank you for your concern. Goodnight my friend."

Milton jumped in before Tanaka could hang up. "What about your goal for the peaceful unified neighborhood? You can't let him get away with this. You need to call the police."

"No." Tanaka's voice was firm and loud. "No police. Do not call them. As I said, nature and the universe have a way of correcting wrongs. Goodnight." He paused. "No police."

Milton hung up the phone. He couldn't sleep now so he decided on some night photography to keep his mind off what happened. He grabbed his camera bag and tripod and bounded out his back door to take some time exposure shots of the hillsides in the moonlight.

The night air helped cleanse Milton's senses as he walked up the hill behind his house. The air was crisp and stars peppered the sky, merging on the horizon with the twinkling lights of town in the distance. Light from an almost full moon cast eerie shadows on the few cacti scattered about the landscape. The moonlit canyon appeared like the setting in a black and white movie.

Milton was able to walk up the hill without the use of a flashlight. He passed behind Bill's house and continued to traverse the hills that surrounded the cul-de-sac. He came up

behind Tanaka's house and was going to start hiking directly up the hill, until the sound of a door opening caught his attention. Milton had a perfect vantage point to see into Tanaka's backyard. He walked slowly over to stand behind a shrub.

Tanaka carried a tray of candles out and began placing the candles in various areas around the backyard. Tanaka's attire was different now. He wore a ceremonial robe and it gave him the appearance of looking like a prehistoric spirit in the candlelight. Tanaka placed the last candle on a carpet which sat on the backyard patio. A beige headband also sat on the carpet. Tanaka returned to the inside of his house with his tray.

For the moment Milton could not take his eyes from the proceedings and felt a pang of guilt for spying on Tanaka. The photo shoot could wait. He set his bag down and sat on the warm desert soil.

Tanaka returned with the tray, only now it held a large ceramic container and a small sake cup. He set the tray down on the carpet by the candle and took off his robe.

Milton could not understand what Tanaka was doing.

Tanaka now stood completely naked. He kneeled, picked up the cloth and wrapping it around his forehead, tying it around the back of his head. Tanaka then poured a cup of sake and drank it down quickly. After a moment, he repeated the procedure. He did this again and again. Cup after cup Tanaka drank.

Milton guessed about 15 minutes had elapsed since Tanaka had his first cup of sake. He surmised that Tanaka had probably consumed about three quarters of the bottle.

Tanaka stood up now and stretched his arms out from his sides as if frozen in the middle of a jumping jack. The surrounding candles began to flicker wildly in the still air. Milton was amazed that Tanaka could maintain a semblance of composure after consuming so many cups of sake.

Milton slapped at a buzzing in his ear. A mosquito then landed on his arm and began drilling for blood. Milton slapped his hand down, squashing the mosquito in a miniature crimson Rorschach test. The buzzing grew louder still. It sounded like someone was flying loud drones overhead. Milton sensed movement to his left. It seemed like a floating shadow, only it wasn't. It was a giant convoy of mosquitoes clustered together in an undulating, serpent-shaped cloud with the circumference of an oil drum, probably 200 feet long or so and headed straight into Tanaka's backyard. Though the swarm of mosquitoes traveled past Milton, none chose to feed off him. By the time Milton decided he should try to get a picture of this spectacle, the tail end of the buzzing swarm had passed by.

Milton grabbed his camera and attached a telephoto lens to get a better view.

Tanaka stood motionless as the cloud of mosquitoes swarmed around him like a tornado. Slowly, the tornado dissipated and patches of darkness appeared on Tanaka's skin. Milton watched as mosquitoes slowly covered Tanaka. Soon Tanaka's arms were completely covered. It looked like he was wearing long, black, bubbling gloves.

Tanaka started to moan loudly over the drone of buzzing mosquitoes. His body grew darker now, with only his head being

visible. The quivering mass pulsed on Tanaka's body giving the appearance he was wearing a vibrating wetsuit. A perfect line of demarcation on Tanaka's neck showed where the mosquitoes ended and skin began. Tanaka's head was completely free of mosquitoes. Milton noticed about ten to twenty bats fly out from some of the bat boxes, starting to feed on the mosquitoes.

After about ten minutes, the mosquitos began to depart Tanaka's body. The suit of darkness slowly came apart, then it came apart faster, looking like a time-lapse film of moths devouring a black suit. Tanaka's body was visible again, but his skin was covered in red welts. Now bats were swarming out of the boxes.

Tanaka put his robe back on and closed his eyes. He tossed his head from side to side to kick-start his senses. Slowly, with reverence, Tanaka walked through the swarming bats and around his backyard. He extinguished all of the candles except the one on the carpet. That last one was left to burn out as Tanaka went inside.

Milton was no longer in the mood to photograph landscapes. He stood up and felt tingly pain scatter around his legs, which had fallen asleep from sitting in one position. His legs became wobbly as he stood and brushed some twigs and leaves from his pants. Milton grabbed his camera gear and started to head back home. For a moment he thought he heard strains of Strauss in the air.

Milton walked briskly, staying alert. He focused on getting home. The sudden roar of an engine startled him. It had come from Bill's garage. He looked over the roof of Bill's house to

the front and watched a growing keystone of light appear on the driveway as the garage door opened. The white SUV then flew out in a fury. The angle of the driveway caused the headlights to shoot over the garage roof to the spot on the hill where Milton was walking. He froze like a prisoner in a prison yard with a spotlight trained on him.

The SUV jerked down the driveway with squealing tires. It turned and lunged forward, speeding out of the cul-de-sac off over the crest of the hill toward town. Milton could still hear the sound of the SUV after it was out of sight. As the sound diminished, so did Milton's tension.

Milton started down the hill toward his house but now a new sound caused him consternation. This was no engine. The sound was faint but grew louder. Milton walked faster now and tripped over a root, his camera bag and tripod slipped from his grip, the bag tumbled down the hill and stopped at the base of Milton's back fence. The sound, just behind and above him, was almost deafening now. Milton decided the ground was probably the best place to remain and couldn't bear to look up. It sounded like a hundred wool blankets hanging on clotheslines in 50 mile per hour winds. The moonlight on the ground around him became splintered and broken, turning into a mosaic of light and vibrating shadows like white noise on television. Milton covered his head with his hands. Something or some things were moving through the sky out over the neighborhood. He realized then that it was a colossal convoy of bats. It was at this moment Milton considered moving again.

As the sound faded and moonlight returned unbroken, Milton stood up using the tripod as a walking stick and briskly walked down the hill. In a rush, he picked up his camera bag and sprinted through his back gate and into the safety of his house, locking the door behind him.

• • •

Bill was driving with angry sleepless eyes and watched as the road was devoured by the SUV's headlights. It was going to be a long night and a long shift. He did not get the sleep he wanted. Like a blind man, he reached out and rummaged through a box of old music cassettes on the passenger seat, careful to keep his eyes on the road which was now turning into hairpin curves snaking down the hills toward town. He found a tape and popped it into the deck. Instead of the sounds of Lynyrd Skynyrd, he heard clicking. Bill ejected the cassette from the player only to see brown, spaghetti-like tape spill out. Frustrated, he tossed the cassette over his shoulder into the back seat.

Bill was about to grab another cassette when something hit the windshield. He recoiled and almost lost control of the vehicle. He tightened his grip on the wheel. Whatever was on the windshield looked like a rotten peach in silhouette against the backlight from the headlights on the road. Perhaps prankster high school kids egging the car, Bill thought. Kids? But what were kids doing way out here in the middle of nowhere?

Something else hit the windshield. Sweat beaded up on Bill's forehead. Now two splotches impeded his view. He reduced his speed and turned on the wipers, smearing the splotches across his field of vision.

Thump. Thump. Thump. Three more things hit the windshield in quick succession.

Bill pulled over and slowed down until he found a turnout. He was shaking now and decided to leave the engine idling. He turned on the dome light and leaned close to the windshield to examine the blotches. He couldn't make out what they were. Bill grabbed a rag from under his seat and stepped outside and used the rag to grab one of the blotches off the windshield. Bill cradled the rag in his hands and examined the contents in front of the headlights. At first it looked like a clump of strawberry jelly and fur. Upon closer inspection, Bill recognized the glop of viscera to be a bat. Its wings were broken and crumpled, the fur matted in blood. Bill shook the bat carcass from the rag and used the rag to remove the remaining clumps of carnage from the windshield. He threw the bloody rag into the bushes and hopped back into the SUV. He gunned the engine. Rear parallel fountains of gravel spit up into the red light of the taillights.

After a few minutes of driving without incident, Bill began to relax. He saw the lights of town twinkling closer now. The guys at work are not going to believe this.

Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump. Four more bats slammed onto the windshield.

Bill shuddered. Visibility was lessening now. He tried the wipers again but the weight of the carcasses slowed them, causing them to jerk clumsily across the bats.

The bats came at him from every direction now, smashing onto the SUV. Bill became frantic and looked up and

around. To Bill, it sounded as if it was raining softballs all over the SUV. He turned the wipers on high but the bats kept flying directly into the windshield far too quick for the wipers to keep up. The wipers jerked through the syrupy slop and then got stuck and stopped altogether.

"What the fuck is going on!" Bill yelled out to no one as he pounded his steering wheel. "Leave me alone! Stop! Stop this!" He watched in horror as the windshield started to crack. A small silver spider web line appeared in the center of the windshield and branched out in more tendrils with each consecutive hit. The silver web spanned the whole windshield now. Another bat slammed directly into the center of the windshield, causing the glass to break with a crunching sound.

Bill screamed as an avalanche of bat bodies spilled into the cab amidst the rush of night air and broken glass. Loose papers danced around Bill like drunken ghosts.

For a fraction of a second, Bill's visibility returned long enough for him to see the road, which, after 300 feet, veered off to the left.

The terror was not over. The bats continued to fly into the SUV through the space the windshield once occupied. They dove at Bill's face and he reflexively threw his hands up to stop the aerial onslaught.

The SUV took on a life of its own yet kept a course that did not coincide with the highway. It veered off the road, crashing through a guardrail. It tumbled down the hill, plowing through the brush, bouncing end over end, leaving a trail of

twisted metal and pieces of plastic in its wake. The crumpled misshapen heap finally settled against a boulder.



Milton shuffled into the kitchen as the sun broke through the windows. He switched on the kitchen TV to fill the morning void. Milton turned the volume up. *"Last night a local man, William Rogers, was killed in a bizarre accident when his vehicle was, as investigators say, 'attacked by bats,' causing the vehicle to lose control and leave the roadway."*

Milton watched the television. A tow truck was winching the wreckage up the hill

Milton switched the TV off. His tension vanished, causing him to feel guilty for feeling better at the news of Bill's death. Milton stepped jauntily outside into the crisp and exhilarating morning air. It was going to be a beautiful day in the neighborhood.

Paul and Doreen were out for a walk holding hands.

"Want to come over for cribbage later this afternoon?"

Paul asked Milton.

Milton smiled. "Uh yeah, sure. Did you happen to see the morning news?"

Paul and Doreen shook their heads. "No," Paul said.

"Something I should know about?"

"Bill died in an accident last night." Milton said.

Paul's expression did not waver. "That's too bad. Are we on for cribbage?"

"Yeah," Milton said. "Yeah, sure. See you two then."

As Paul and Doreen walked away, Tanaka slowly walked along the sidewalk toward Milton. Tanaka's hands folded in front of himself as if he was going to church.

"Good morning," Milton said in a cheerful manner, feigning ignorance.

"Yes. Yes it is." Tanaka stopped.

"It's a tragedy what happened to Bill," Milton said, fishing.

"Quite. Quite," Tanaka replied softly. He looked up into the sky. "Nature has a way of cleansing itself." He looked down and shuffled his feet, then looked over at Bill's house. "I must avoid the services of a real estate agency. They do not screen potential tenants very well." He turned to Milton. "What is the saying? If you want something done right..."

"...do it yourself," Milton said.

Tanaka allowed a laugh to escape his reverent demeanor. He resumed his walk around the neighborhood, cheerfully whistling a passage from *Die Fledermaus*.

Alivia Peters

Westley

Westley's wheelchair rolls over my foot bluntly, drawing an odd yelping noise from me.

"Why are you in my way?" he asks when I toss a glare in his direction. I bend over to pick up the groceries I dropped when I "got in his way" and follow my older brother inside the house. His new wheelchair is heavier but narrower, so it fits through the front door without having to take his leg rests off.

He gets through the narrow entryway and suddenly turns to face me, his knees bumping into my thighs and nearly knocking me over again. He waves his hands while he talks and I'm barely paying attention to what he's saying, too busy trying to right myself without dropping the groceries again or knocking the pictures of his kids off the walls.

A thought occurs to me as he turns back around, wheeling himself into the kitchen: the only reason he's being so messy with his steering is because he hasn't adjusted to his new chair yet. He has only been home for two days now. He didn't want to do his time, but he changed while he was in last. It's like he realized he doesn't have to hate everyone all the time. It was really nice to finally know my brother.

We're fifteen years apart.

I'm currently twenty-one.

This is the first time we have been able to really do things together. As he states often, “Yeah, you’re old now. I don’t have to worry about corrupting you. You’ve already done it all yourself.” We do a lot of things with his kids. The oldest, James, is thirteen. Alexander, the middle boy, is nine. His only girl, Sarah, is seven. Allen, the youngest, is four.

“...are you even listening to me?” is all I comprehend through the fog of my thoughts as I round the corner into the kitchen and get hit square in the forehead with an orange.

“Westley!” I scold as the paper grocery bags slip from my arms, falling sideways, spilling various food items onto my feet over the bruise from him steamrolling me earlier. I huff in exasperation, scowling at him. My hair is falling forward from where it was tucked neatly behind my ears as I bend down to try to put the groceries back into their bags, again.

“I’m gonna be pissed if your forehead bruised my orange,” he states while closing the fridge and rolling towards me, drinking straight from a carton of cranberry juice. He finishes and smacks his lips impolitely. “So yeah, if you could like stop dropping my groceries and start putting them away, I’d really appreciate it.” He wheels himself past me and gets into his ADA lift, heading for the garage and his toolbox. “As soon as you’re done with that, I need you to help me with something on the truck. Hurry up.”

I look at him incredulously through the curtain of hair continuing to fall over my shoulders and across my field of vision.

“Hey Wes, I’ll help your salty ass if you answer a question for me,” I state as I bend my knees into a squat to pick up the rest of the groceries and get my hair out of my way.

“Sure.”

“Why are you such an asshole?”

“Because you’re such an idiot, now shut up and start putting things away.”

He exits the lift with an unceremonious clang of the lift’s door against the wall, heading into the garage. He didn’t even have to say anything and he was obnoxious.

I scoff at him with a wry smile on my lips, standing up with crinkled paper grocery bags in my arms, and turn to set the groceries on the counter and stock them away carefully, keeping everything as organized as possible

~

“Are you even turning it the right way?” Westley yells from where he sits a few feet away, micromanaging my every move.

He can’t even see what I’m doing and he still knows that I’m doing it wrong.

Typical.

“Unless someone changed the way you’re supposed to turn it, I am!” I yell back, straining with the effort I’m exerting on the Snap-On ratchet in my right hand. I groan in frustration as I look in Wes’ direction, seeing only his feet and the wheels of his chair from my position under the truck. I sit for a moment remembering him before he was put in that chair. He wouldn’t even need me right now, he would’ve been under here himself

fixing this properly and adjusting minute amounts like I will never be able to learn. I know basic knowledge, which I am able to get by with, but never will I be smart like him. If he was able to do this himself, he probably would've been done already. That's the paradox of all this; in his haste and desire to be independent he made himself the ultimate dependent. He couldn't do anything without Mom, Dad, and I. Grace tried to help when she could, but with three kids and a full-time job, that doesn't leave much extra time. We understand, we always had. We don't understand why she dislikes us. I hang so closely to Westley because it lets me see the kids. While he was on two feet, I had raised these three. The fourth was in San Jose, with his mother. She's the better mother of the two, even if she is dumb as a box of rocks. She has good intentions and takes great care of Allen, so we overlook her blonde roots.

I stare at the bottom of his chair, lost in my thoughts when he wheels suddenly, steering himself carefully around the truck in the driveway and towards the street. While adrift in my head, I had failed to hear Grace's minivan pull in behind the truck. I'm alerted to its presence by its door opening loudly, and hearing the kids milling around the van from where I was hidden beneath the truck. Sarah is yelling about Alexander and James is yelling at them all to shut up because he was reading.

I realize with a jolt that Grace has no idea that I'm here. I can see what she is like to him when we weren't around. The idea intrigues me and a greasy feeling slides down my spine, seeming to pool in my stomach as I attempt to loosen the bolt before me again, settling in to listen. I can hear very little of what

they say over the music blasting through the truck's system. I hear bits and pieces of an argument about who has the kids this weekend. It's late summer and the days are long and hot. Westley wants to take them to the beach and Grace is saying no. She does it just to be mean. I know the kids would just sit inside the house, all the blinds closed, doors shut, windows locked, and playing some video game their "daddy" had bought their affection with this year. I furrow my brow straining to listen. She's getting ugly, slinging insults about Westley being a bad father and even jokes about his chair that are in terrible taste. It makes me wonder what his retorts are, his low voice not carrying far enough for me to hear, but her voice is easily heard over a crowd. It has that non-conductive, nails on a chalkboard kind of quality. She sighs exasperated and finally relents, finalizing the argument with a *very* female line: "I don't really care what you do, but they're *my* kids."

I don't hear his response, but she is going to walk away and there are things I need to know when we have the kids and they are things Westley doesn't think he needs to ask. I slide myself out from beneath the truck, standing up awkwardly, being in a hurry and clumsy to begin with; the creeper I had laid on proves to be a momentous obstacle, slowing me down more than a few times as I clamor over to the sidewalk. The kids exit the silver sport-mobile in a clamor of backpacks, sticky hands, and loose sheets of paper that are probably important.

"Make sure you empty your shoes before going inside!" I yell after them as they tear past their father and myself, beelining for the house. Grace chooses now to comment on Westley's

ability to control the kids while not taking her eyes off the phone her face is typically glued to. I'm surprised she got out of the vehicle at all.

"Do we have them all night? Or do they need to be home for bed?" I shout to her over the idle of Westley's truck and the ruckus coming from the kids inside the house. The stereo is on now and songs keep playing halfway through. I imagine that one sibling puts on a song, then after it plays for a little bit one of the others changes it and around the cycle goes. Grace doesn't answer as she gets back into the car. I frown and sigh, aggravated that I have to go to her and physically gain her attention.

I get to her window quickly, jogging to catch her before she backs out of the driveway and leaves. I knock on the glass loudly and her brown eyes meet mine, bored and bothered. The hair, slick and black like oil, spills over her spindly figure, all brown elbows and shoulders. She raises a thin eyebrow. "What makes you think you're worthy of my attention?" her face reads.

"What time should they be home?" I ask, fiddling with my hair, nervous of this slight woman. She has the ability to be so vile, I hope I don't entice her wrath today. I have to choose words carefully, avoiding anything too opinionated and clearly stating intentions. I am able to outsmart Grace into telling the truth, asking questions too open ended for her to lie about. *Make her be specific*, I tell myself.

She shrugs, giving me a noncommittal answer and she knows it.

The ball is in my court now.

“What time do they have class tomorrow morning?” I ask, taking a different route than she expected from me. I am no longer the clumsy twelve-year-old girl I was when we had spent time together. I grew up around women, learning their manipulative and conniving ways early in life. My most important lessons had come from the quarrel between her and my mother over things she couldn’t name, and we had failed to guess. It had been going on strong for the past few years, since Wes was still walking.

She looks away from me and in this moment, with the sun in her face, the youthful Grace I had known since I could remember looks old. She looks tired from the years of slithering her way between people and tearing them apart no matter what was left in the end. The stress the children put on her is evident in her too, but not as heavily as the stress of manipulation. Her voice is high and sounds like the bells that ring when you walk into a corner store when she answers, simply, “Early.”

“So, seven-thirty if I feed them dinner?” I ask, pulling my phone from my back pocket to check the time. “For them to be in bed by eight?” I furrow my brow slightly; it is five-fifteen. That gives us an hour to do homework, a half-hour to eat, and a half-hour for fun. James has a project due next week we have to spend some time on, and I need to help Sarah memorize her multiplication tables. An hour would be cutting it close, and that means I won’t be able to make a proper dinner.

“Sure,” Grace says, rolling her window up in my face and ending the conversation abruptly.

I let out a deep breath slowly through puffed-out cheeks as she drives away and turn back to the truck. I turn it off deftly. I'll put it back together tomorrow. Wes doesn't need to go anywhere else tonight. I close the door softly, not wanting to be complained at for anything. I walk around and clear the hood, placing everything in its place in the garage and his toolbox. I close the garage door with the automatic switch next to the door that leads into the house.

I emerge into the other side of the kitchen. Wes sits at the dining room table telling James about the gases in stars for his project and checking Sarah's multiplication practice simultaneously, bouncing his vision between things on a worksheet in front of James and the paper in front of his only daughter as she completes problems. In the light from the fixture above the table, Wes looks old, too. My big brother always seemed so invincible, so strong; but he has come back from prison skinny and grey. His face is creased with wrinkles and he is almost completely salt and pepper. I am twenty-one and have a fair amount of grey hair, so I am not one to talk. But I look at him behind the table, anchored forever to that chair of his, and he looks so meek and helpless. He is armed with nothing but his mind and his words; both have become much sharper since he was home last.

I don't mind it. Mom does, though. She is so soft compared to the rest of us. She has suffered her share through the years and is a razor on her own, but words cut mom to the bone. She chooses to be around Wes when she needs to be, like at the doctor and such. Other than that, she leaves it to Dad and I.

I don't mind. Looking at Westley at the table with his children, or at least the closest of them, I am humbled somewhat. Before the accident, you couldn't stop Wes with a pair of handcuffs, and he slowed down for no one. One well-placed bullet and he is forced to live life at the same speed as the rest of us. That bullet is the only reason he is even sitting before his children and the only reason I even know him. He would have been moving way too fast all the time to have room in himself to store feelings for people he didn't have time to see.

In this moment, it is almost okay that he is forced to live at our speed in that chair, not running unbounded on his own. Here, he can truly live. He can experience his children and screw with me because it's exactly what suits him, and whatever else he wants. When he was out of the chair, he was never allowed the luxury of taking time to truly live. It was always the next job, the next dollar, the next high, the next. Always about what was next. The chair has made him stop and look at what is in front of him. The life he never had time for. It is this thought that settles in me like a stone in a pond and peace spreads from it. Even if he comes with more problems than he solves, I wouldn't trade him for the world. The only reason I know this man, my hero, is because of that bullet. In this sliver of time, this pocket of *okay-ness*, I realize that much worse fates could have been waiting for him, if it wasn't for that bullet.

The Headmaster

For the third time, Carlton read the proposed budget for Princeland Middle School's spring semester. It wasn't out of due diligence, though he normally read these documents multiple times; rather, he had forgotten everything by the time he reached the bottom of the page, and was forced to read it all over again to prepare. Such a lack of concentration was always debilitating. At this time of year, however, he had grown accustomed to it. Fall had graced the leaves with its yellows and oranges, and now the last day of October had come. That meant sweets, children masquerading as beasts and horrors they truly knew nothing about, and more work for him to endure.

Making an exasperated noise through his nostrils, Carlton scratched at an itch behind his ear. He looked out of the window and into the parking lot, where the seventh-grade class was running the mile under Ms. Perkins's relentless, near-omniscient watch. She had her wrists pushed up against her hips with a clipboard in one hand and a timer in the other. Sometimes she would call out to a student or two, and Carlton would hear her talking to them, her voice muddled by the transparent window barricade between the office and the fresh air. Carlton gave a small smile as he watched the kids running laps around the parking spaces, their fists clutching colored popsicle sticks as they streaked and jogged and meandered past the line that

marked the start and completion of the running test. Some of the kids were already close to attaining the Coveted Dozen— a nickname the faculty used for the twelve sticks that, when trapped inside a child's fist, indicated a completed test.

Carlton turned back to the computer screen to give the budget a fourth read, catching his hand before it wandered into the middle drawer of his desk. Now was not the time for such indulgent distractions, and he knew it. He set to work, reading. This time, he retained what he read, and found everything to be satisfactory— except for the extra £50 of the after-school program that accounted for the missing £50 of teacher salaries.

That was all the paperwork he needed to take care of for now. Carlton stretched in his chair, fists reaching for the ceiling and toes yearning to pop out on the other side of his desk. He closed his eyes and yawned. Last night was one of restlessness and paranoia, an unforeseen nervousness of tonight. Carlton had never been nervous of this before; he had done it countless times without a single second thought.

This time, then, must have been different.

It was getting to him now. His brain began to lose concentration, his body began to give the slightest trembles. Impulsively, Carlton's hand went to his desk drawer and opened it wide, presenting semi-neat papers, a few small plastic containers with tacks, the envelope he needed to hand off, and the one thing he needed most right now— a pack of cigarettes. They were specially made and packed for him by a friend, and they came with a secret ingredient in them which had been successfully proven to calm people of his sort. Carlton grabbed

the pack, brought it out into the open, and checked to see that no one was around, then realized he probably should have done that last one first.

Not a soul was nearby; the closest eyes were all running twelve laps around a parking lot, and their supervising adult was keeping watch over them like a hawk. Carlton's heart raced. He could do it, he could get away with it. He opened the pack and brought out a smoke stick, put it between his mouth, and reached for his lighter with the adrenaline of rule-breaking activity thundering in his ears.

His lighter was missing. With a defeated groan, he remembered having to leave it at home: he had rushed out of the door after spending too much time preparing for tonight's festivities, forgetting to bring his notes, his reading book, and, yes, his lighter. He had a spare, but he stored it elsewhere, and wouldn't have access to it until tonight. He couldn't go before then; too risky, and he didn't want to do it during lunch. He was feeling a bit hungry after having to skip breakfast.

Carlton took the cigarette out of his mouth and put it back with the rest, making sure that it stuck out from the package so he would know which one to grab when he had the opportunity. He closed the drawer and began checking his email, though he didn't have any new messages. Doing something, even if it was pretending to do something meaningful, was a way to distract him from the looming shadow of the evening.

A knock on his door grabbed him and pulled him out of the old emails. He sat at attention to keep up appearances, fingertips pressed together in a pyramid. The door opened

before he could call out an invitation to the person behind it. In a last fit of nervousness, he straightened the wooden name plate on his desk that read “Carlton H. Pye, Headmaster.”

The visitor was a woman. She was tall, fit, and remarkably muscular for her proportions. Her green eyes studied everything around her, constantly processing each miniscule detail of the world through thin-rimmed, teardrop-shaped glasses. A sharp business skirt and suit clung to her frame, looking almost uncomfortable to wear. Her hair was so black, it nearly disappeared against the backdrop of her dark suit, but it was too unkempt to blend in; her hair seemed to be the only disorganized thing in her meticulous wardrobe. A sense of professionalism and tradition emanated from her, so much so that Carlton could nearly feel the air in the room getting thicker. She looked right at him, her eyes demanding respect. Behind her trailed a very skittish student, shuffling his feet and looking at the ground.

“Ah, Ms. Wolfe,” Carlton greeted her, rising from his seat. “What do you need?”

“Young Lukas here couldn’t stop rambling on about seeing a werewolf last year,” said the clearly unhappy Ms. Wolfe in her distinctive American accent, grabbing Lukas by the shoulder and forcing him forward to stand beside her. “Right in the middle of history class!”

“Were you teaching them about the monster mythologies?”

Ms. Wolfe looked, if possible, more unhappy. “I do it every year to get them into the spirit of the holiday. What

difference does it make?" she said, almost hostile. Lukas shrunk a little as she said it.

"You've put the idea in his head, Ms. Wolfe," Carlton pointed out. "You know all too well how much a child's imagination can get away from him."

"He says the cursed thing nearly killed him!"

Carlton raised his eyebrows. This changed the situation entirely. He considered his options, then spoke.

"Lukas, could you come closer, please?"

Lukas, very hesitantly, approached the headmaster's desk. Ms. Wolfe tensed up, almost like she was about to shove him forward, but thought better of it.

"Tell me what happened," Carlton said in a soft voice. "As much detail as you can recall."

Lukas, still looking at the ground, began his story.

"I... I was walking through the woods near my home," he said nervously, almost as if he expected to be slapped at any moment. "My parents and me and my brother and sis...we always go out to the woods on Halloween to tell each other scary stories before bed. But there was someone else with us. Some...*thing* else."

Carlton looked up at Ms. Wolfe as Lukas said this.

"Da was leading us when he stopped and said it wasn't safe, and that we were supposed to go back. So we did. He went further into the woods to see what was the matter. And then..." Lukas took a rather shaky breath. "And then we heard Da screaming."

Ms. Wolfe gave a skeptic's sigh before Lukas gathered the bravery to speak again. Carlton rubbed his eyes in an attempt to pay closer attention.

"He came running out of the forest, pale as the moon...and something was chasing him. We never got a look at it, but as we ran away, we heard...we heard something howling. Something too big to be a n-normal wolf— or any animal, for that matter," he added quickly, predicting the question that lay at the front of Carlton's mind.

"The whole thing sounds absolutely preposterous," said Ms. Wolfe, sounding a bit too much like a no-nonsense babysitter for Carlton's tastes. "I say disciplinary measures must be taken, to ensure that the rest of the class doesn't have nightmares because of one child's delusions!"

Carlton silently and slowly moved his gaze from Lukas, who was staring at him in horror, to Ms. Wolfe, who was staring at him in a way that promised ghastly consequences if he didn't put her proposal into effect.

"Ms. Wolfe," he began, in a voice that sounded almost, but not quite, unamused, "I believe your holiday tradition has simply allowed poor Lukas's imagination to get away from him, and I don't think he has been able to get it back yet. There will be no punishment, small or otherwise, in response to Lukas's actions. He merely wanted to contribute to your class. Isn't that right, Lukas?"

The young boy nodded, his long and messy black hair bobbing as he did so.

“However, Ms. Wolfe, I do need to talk to our young friend,” Carlton added. “I’m sure he and I would both prefer to do so alone.”

Lukas nodded his head timidly as Carlton spoke.

Ms. Wolfe gave a quiet, unhappy sigh, and looked down at the back of Lukas’s head. Then her eyes flicked up to meet Carlton’s, as if to test whether he would really go through with this. When she realized he wouldn’t cave, she nodded stiffly, twitched her lips, turned on her heel like a soldier, and walked out of the office, closing the door behind her.

Carlton sighed and looked down at Lukas. The boy lifted his head for the first time since he had entered the room. His blue eyes were a little watery, likely from the fear of getting punished that had only left him a minute ago.

With the least aggressive voice he could muster, Carlton began to speak. “Lukas, I realize that a child has a great imagination. I’d wager that, if we really thought about it, we’d see that I was a little like you when I was a child.”

Lukas stared at him, looking a little surprised and— Carlton thought— a little excited. “Really?” he asked.

“Yes, I had quite a few stories that the grown-ups loved to hear,” Carlton said, allowing a smile to show on his face. “In fact, I had one that they asked me to tell all the time.”

“Really?”

“Really.” Carlton paused to pique Lukas’s interest, and when he saw the child seize up in eager anticipation, he asked, “Would you like to hear it?”

“Yes! Yes! Please, yes!” Lukas answered, keeping his voice down as if they were in a secret meeting.

“Years and years ago, when I was only a few years younger than you, I used to tell everyone that I was a little werewolf boy,” Carlton began. “My parents befriended a foreign man on our street named Lycoe. He was a very friendly neighbor and became well acquainted with my parents very quickly. For reasons I didn’t know, he made them develop an affection for him— a ‘soft spot,’ it’s sometimes called— so that they would trust him more than anyone else in the world.

“One day, my parents went on vacation. Just the two of them. When they left, they appointed Lycoe to be my guardian. He was closer than any of our relatives, and children always seemed to love his adventurous tales. My parents were going to leave for a whole week. I was so excited!

“All that week, Lycoe began teaching me things: how to repel vampires, how to escape from a zombie. He even taught me to shoot a longbow and a crossbow. Then, on the last night he was to be my guardian, Lycoe put medicine in my dinner and I fell asleep.

“When I woke up, I had been bitten, and Lycoe was gone. I told my parents about it, but when they checked, the teeth marks weren’t there. They didn’t believe me, and I was doomed to live a werewolf’s life until I died.”

Lukas was so enthralled by the story he had sat down in one of the chairs, and was leaning forward so much he could have tumbled out if he moved even a portion of an inch further to

the headmaster's desk. "Wow," he said. "Is it real? Are you really a werewolf?"

Carlton chuckled.

"That's the idea, Lukas," he said patiently. "I've told the story so many times I can't even begin to count them all. But it doesn't matter how many times I tell it, because it never happened. You see, Lukas—" and here, Carlton lowered his voice to impress the severity of his message— "The human brain is designed to be creative, and sometimes that creativity makes us believe things that aren't real, or true. Our neighbor, Lycoe, was really our neighbor, and my parents were really very good friends with him, but I made up the rest of it."

Lukas seemed to lose a little of his excitement. "Oh."

"In the real world, Lukas," Carlton said, "Werewolves don't exist. Neither do vampires, or witches, or any of those things. They're simply stories made to give people a good fright."

"But...but the howling..." Lukas said in a small voice.

"I'm sure it was just a grey wolf," answered Carlton. "We tend to see them more often around this time of year. Your father was right to get you out of the woods before anything truly terrible happened. But always remember that all those mythical creatures that you hear of are simply myths. Nothing more."

Lukas nodded silently.

"Go back to class now, Lukas," Carlton finished. "And please tell Ms. Wolfe that I should like to speak with her."

Lukas obeyed, and turned to leave. As he walked through the door frame, he stopped and looked up at something to his

right, something Carlton couldn't see, and spoke to it. A second later, Ms. Wolfe re-entered the headmaster's office.

"Ah, Ms. Wolfe," he joked without a smile. "Lovely for you to drop by today."

"Principal Pye, I'm really not in the mood."

"Headmaster," Carlton corrected her. "Is there anything I can get for you?"

"About three more weeks to plan and a lot of strong whiskey," she snapped. "I hate everything about this cursed holiday. Kids running around, devouring sugar, refueling every five minutes. It's all just a guise."

"Better than what lies behind the curtain," Carlton replied. "In the days of old, this was a very different holiday."

"Holiday. If it can so be called," came the answer as Ms. Wolfe watched the running children through the window. "Sugarcoat it and toss out reality. Over and over and over in circles. Halloween, history, politics..."

"It's the way of the world now," Carlton said after a brief silence.

"Well, whoop-de-doo for the world. Everything needs to be like it used to be."

"I don't disagree."

Ms. Wolfe gave a very exasperated sigh and turned to Carlton. "Anyways, to answer your moronic question, I'm here, and you know what I need."

Carlton nodded and opened his desk drawer again, making sure that Ms. Wolfe wouldn't see his cigarettes. He took hold of the envelope and presented it to her.

“You know the rules,” he said. “Don’t open...”

“Open the letter until the sun sets,” Ms. Wolfe spoke the rest of the rule with him, taking the envelope with a delicate touch. “I’ve got it.”

Carlton nodded. “Right.”

Ms. Wolfe headed for the hallway just outside, but she stopped in the door frame and looked back.

“Let’s try not to muddle anything up like what happened last year, all right?” she said.

Carlton chuckled. “What do you think I’m going to do? Go into a bloodthirsty rampage and howl at the moon?”

Ms. Wolfe’s eyes narrowed.

“I’ve gotta have a word with Lapine about those stupid cigarettes,” she said, and left without another word, closing the door rather forcefully. Carlton forgot that she normally lost her sense of humor around mid-October.

He sat back down, continuing to distract himself from what was to come in the next eighteen hours. At the very least, he assured himself, she hadn’t taken his cigarettes. Now all he had to do was brave the rest of the day and get everything set for the night.

His lunch break had never been farther away.

* * *

The bell rang to signal the end of seventh period, and Carlton felt the dread flow through his system. The sensation left as quickly as it came, but it was still jarring nonetheless. A wave of kids walked past his office, their thundering, excited footsteps seeping through the opaque wall between the headmaster’s

office and the hall and announcing the innocent anticipation that always came with a holiday. Carlton took his pack of cigarettes and put it in his suit, slipping it into the pocket that rested in the shoulder area of his suit. It was time to drive home and prepare for the evening's festivities.

Carlton stood up, logged out of his computer, and walked into the hallway, taking great care not to get trampled by the students who were still blazing paths to their parents' cars.

As he stepped out of the building and into the parking lot, most of the parking spots were unattended; most of the cars had opted for the pick-up lane made of cones, which allowed parents to quickly retrieve their children from the throng of backpacks and drive home. Carlton waited for a gap in the line of cars, and when he saw one, darted through the pick-up lane before the next parent in line had a chance to run him over. Some of the students— mostly first-years at the school— were watching him and pointing to their peers. They had never seen their headmaster leave early before. Then again, this was Halloween, and special circumstances require special action.

No sooner had the headmaster got to his car— a blue sedan he had named "Loupie"— he stopped. He suddenly had an odd feeling in his stomach, and he knew someone was watching him, for he had felt like this before. Whether they were using their own two eyes or more...unique methods, he didn't know.

Carlton sniffed at the air. Something foul was close. He checked the parking lot, eyes darting around the tarmac to find whoever might be watching him. Nobody. He turned his gaze to

the trees and the tops of the buildings around the school.

Nothing. So they must be Sighting him. Even worse.

Carlton climbed into Loupie and turned the key in the ignition, the feeling in his stomach as present as ever. As he backed out of the parking space, he thought of where to go. He didn't know how patient his audience would be. Making sure that another car wasn't heading for the exit, he drove out of it and onto the street, beginning a drive that would end wherever and whenever his instincts chose. Within ten minutes, he found himself driving deep into a nearby neighborhood. The trees around him were an amalgam brown and orange and yellow leaves, all translucently channeling the sun. Carlton would have appreciated them on any other day, but the stranger was still watching him, and he could focus on nothing but the road and the feeling in his stomach, the one feeling that could never enter his home.

For a fraction of a second, he moved his hand over to bring out his mobile from the glove box. A quick phone call to someone who would listen and it would be over. But then he thought better of it. The identity of the person watching him was still unknown, and he couldn't risk outing anyone. Reluctantly, with his heart beating even faster than it did when he had tried to smoke, he put his hand back on the steering wheel and focused on the road in front of him.

Then the feeling began to fade, and before Carlton knew it, it vanished completely. He started to breathe heavily, not realizing he had been depriving himself of air. A small black car drove by him, piloted by a short-haired man with dark

sunglasses. He smiled as he passed by, and Carlton tried to smile back, but it was too late. No matter. Satisfied that he was no longer being watched, Carlton drove out of the neighborhood and set himself on the path to his house, where the sweet embrace of smoke called him.

The drive back was fully subconscious, so much so that Carlton suddenly found himself taking the exit off the motorway that led to his home. He remembered that he probably should have called someone, maybe Ms. Wolfe, as soon as he had been freed of his anonymous stalker. Reaching into the glove box and taking out his mobile, he watched the road and flipped the device open, hitting the speed dial button for Ms. Wolfe. He put the phone up to his ear as it began the call. Ms. Wolfe didn't even give it a chance to ring twice.

"You'd better have a very good reason for calling me on this phone," she said immediately, nearly growling.

"Someone just Saw me," he said shortly. "I drove around the neighborhood next to the school and threw them off my scent, but I don't know if they can do it again."

"If you're calling me and they're still there..."

"Oh, please. I'm not—" Carlton brought his mobile away from his ear and pretended not to notice the policeman hiding behind the low-hanging branches of a tree. When he was satisfied that the officer couldn't see him, he resumed talking to Ms. Wolfe. "I'm not a moron, you know," he hissed, as if he was afraid that the policeman would hear him.

"At least you've got that going for you."

“But why would anyone use the Sight?” Carlton took a left turn towards his home.

“To see. Why else?”

“They know we’re convening at the highest moon, and they know what we’re going to do.”

“Listen, it doesn’t matter why they Saw you. It’s too late for them. Our plans are set, and they can’t change, no matter who or what tries to stop them.”

“So why take the time to spy on me?” Carlton persisted. He pulled into a random open space on the sidewalk, parked Loupie, and unbuckled his seatbelt, leaving the engine running. “They must have plans of their own if they’re bothering.”

“I don’t know, but it doesn’t matter, Carlton. They know who you are. They’ve always known who you are. That’s why you’re off-limits.”

Carlton flared his nostrils and watched a black car drive by. “If they attack me, you’ll be the one to blame. You get that, right?”

A brief silence pierced through both his ears, then—

“You know, I think it’s cute that after all this time, you’re still scared of the smallest things.”

Carlton gave a noise of annoyance. “You know I hate being called cute.”

“Just meet me an hour after the sun sets, and shoot anyone whose costume looks too real.”

Carlton hung up and put his mobile back in the glove box, turning his blinker on like any normal, sane human being would do in such a situation, and driving back out onto the road on his

pathway home. It was just up the street, in the very middle of the cul-de-sac. Around this time of year, it was easy to spot: no dazzling lawn ornaments shouted merriment, no fake spiderwebs draped from the sides of the house and curled about in the autumn wind, and not a single plastic skeleton, zombie, or otherwise filled his porch with good-natured threatening stares. The same could not be said for the Oblivious that lived nearby; all of the homes that surrounded Carlton seemed so covered in “haunted,” store-bought artifacts that he believed their owners’ wallets were a few kilograms lighter because of it. Another benefit of dreading the last hours of October.

As he pulled into his driveway, Carlton watched a few pigeons fly off his rooftop, frightened away. He shut Loupie off and opened the door as a refreshing breeze of fall air kissed his face, flooding his nose with the smell of leaves. The scents of animals lingered behind that crunchy smell, though— Carlton could make out squirrels, the birds that had so skittishly departed from his roof, and a lone fox, one that was far away and likely rummaging through the neighbors’ garbage. Most animals tended to stay away from him, for they knew by instinct what he was; those birds must have been very brave, or perhaps they had lost a bet. Carlton closed Loupie’s driver door, laughing to himself at the thought of birds having a wager.

And then he smelled it again: the same thing he had smelled in the parking lot before he sensed the Sight turning its eyes upon him. He quickly looked about, eyes narrowed in suspicion, trying to mask the fear seeping through them. His heart pounded hard enough that he could feel himself shaking

with every pulse of blood. No one, nothing was out of the ordinary.

His eyes caught on an orange zap of movement to the left, but it was just the fox he had smelled earlier, dashing out of a driveway on the end of the cul-de-sac. It had a fake sword in its mouth, for reasons known only to itself. Then, it stopped and looked at him, its head tilting as it stared him in the eyes. Seconds later, the fox lost interest, and trotted into the wilderness behind the home it had just robbed, its ear twitching a little.

Carlton took a deep breath, attempting to calm down as he kept a vigilant watch for whatever evil may have found him. He walked backwards slowly, nearly tripping over the steps that led to his porch. The three steps passed beneath him and were soon followed by the porch itself. Carlton could hear the wooden beams squeaking under his feet. With his key in his hand, he reached for the door and tried to fit it in the lock, his eyes not deviating from the cul-de-sac even once. His first attempt missed, dreadfully. His second attempt brushed past the lock but didn't hit home. He tried again, but failed once more, the key deflecting off the other side of the lock.

Finally, he felt the key move into place and he turned it quickly. The lock sounded out, and no sooner had Carlton felt the door unlock than he pried it open and hurried in, closing the door and locking it behind him. He gave a small sigh, letting the anxiety wash off him like dirt under a waterfall. He was on hallowed ground now. Nothing could get to him.

He looked around the place that, over these last few years, he had grown to call home. It was much more barren than most of the places he had been invited into. The living room had only some furniture, like the couch and two cushioned chairs. A glass tabletop, propped on a metal frame and short metal legs, sat in the middle of the room, completely vacant. The television was old and forgotten, for it had never once been used; its wooden frame was beginning to show sun damage after enduring hours upon hours of sunlight. The bookshelves stretched from floor to ceiling and nearly took up the entire wall, but the only thing that called them home was the thick layer of dust that could be found on each shelf. Next to the doorway that led to the kitchen, a staircase sat, carpeted and heavily used.

Carlton passed by the staircase and walked into his kitchen, where the dust was nearly as bounteous. The only things not covered in dust were the plates, who peered out at him from inside the windowed cabinets, and the end of the table nearest to the stove, where he sometimes ate. He approached the stove and twisted the dial that would normally ignite the rear left burner, but he wasn't planning on cooking. He twisted it three times and pushed the button in the center console for the oven, right next to the dial. It prompted him for a baking temperature, but he was working subconsciously, and typed in the code before he had a chance to process its message.

The oven beeped five times, like it always did, and Carlton turned away from it. He walked out of the kitchen and up the stairs. His legs were beginning to ache a little, scolding him for making them endure such a long day of sitting in dread. As he

reached the top of the stairs, on his way to the second door on the right, he spotted something odd out of the corner of his eye.

A lone pigeon, perched just outside of his bathroom window, was looking at him. Its head was turned to the side so he could only see its right eye, but it was undoubtedly watching him. It tweaked and turned its head around a few times, as pigeons do, and it blinked. Carlton wondered if it was braver or more daft than its brethren, for at least they had had the instinct to flee when they saw him. Even the pigeons knew what Carlton's kind was capable of doing. He took a step forward, slamming his foot on the bathroom tile and raising his eyebrows at the pigeon as he did, daring it to come closer.

For the smallest of moments, it hesitated— but then it flinched, came to its senses, and took off. Carlton made a face of confusion; he had never known a pigeon to hesitate before.

He walked to the second door on the right and opened it, feeling tired at the sight of his bed. It was strewn about like mad, not the neat, delicate way he always left it; a casualty of his faulty alarm clock. Carlton's eyes traveled to the bookcases on either side of it. Unlike the ones in the living room, these bookshelves housed actual literature, but they were historical books, pamphlets and encyclopedias, and the like— and most of them were about mythical beasts. Vampires, wendigos, devils, witches and wizards, the Resurrected, and, of course, werewolves. He had read everything on the bookshelves at least twice. The ones he had read more than that, he reckoned, were too important to sit in a bookcase.

There was a button on the far end of the bookcase which sat to the left of his bed. It was located on the underside of the third shelf, above a book named *The Signs of Necromancy*. Carlton pushed it and heard the mechanism click. He turned and approached his closet, pulling both doors open and half-expecting to be buried by the clothes he stored inside. Every shirt, coat, and pair of jeans stayed on its hanger, though, and he pushed them out of the way to access the back of his closet, making sure to shut the closet doors behind him.

The wooden wall greeted him quickly, so much so that Carlton could have sworn his closet had shrunk. Or perhaps the season was making him grow. He looked at the ceiling and grasped around in the dark for a while; soon, he could feel the shape of a cord in his palm, and he yanked it towards him, revealing a secret passage just above him. A ladder slid out from it and landed right at his feet. Without hesitation, he climbed up and into the passageway, flicking the light switch on out of muscle memory.

The workshop was illuminated instantly. The light cast life upon the books that lay open and bookmarked, written in and heavily used. Gadgets of all sorts, most of them in pieces and yet to be finished, lay scattered across the far table; assorted weapons cluttered the table nearby. The shelves were not filled with books, but with more weapons, armor, potions and elixirs, and everything else Carlton had ever thought he might need. Dust was almost extinct in here, for he knew the importance of keeping a clean workspace— especially in this line of work—

and made sure that everything about the room was in perfect shape.

Carlton reached for one of the shelves, and his hands closed around a charm. He brought it out and inspected it. It looked like the full moon: craters engraved in a silver disc, hanging from a silver chain, and radiating with power that even the Oblivious could sometimes feel. He draped it over his own neck and tucked it into his shirt, though it wouldn't remain that way for long.

It was October 31st, and tonight the moon would demand nothing but flawlessness. It was paramount that tonight be void of mistake, for the realm of the Oblivious and the Realm of Ancient Souls were the closest that they would be for the next twenty years. The howling of Carlton's ancestors echoed through the millennia and rang in his ears, and he felt the beast inside waiting to come out.

Tonight, Carlton would have to hunt his brethren.

Audrey Word

Roller Derby Dreams

During an evening when I lay in bed engrossed in Stephen King's memoir, *On Writing*, my four-year-old son, Emmett, interrupted me not once, not twice, but three times to present me with a repulsive booger on the tip of his index finger. I set my book aside for the third time, grabbed a Kleenex from my nightstand, and considered how being part of a roller derby league would be a welcome relief from the frustrations of life as a forty-year-old stay-at-home mom.

By 10:30 PM, Emmett, with his tan skin and short brown hair, was beginning to tire out, as I could see by his reddening, almond-shaped brown eyes. Per our normal routine, he pushed me with his feet to the edge of the queen size bed, and I fluffed up the flower-print comforter and pushed back at his pillow. I used the side of his pillow to prop up my books for nightly reading, and he insisted on putting his head on the outer edge to prevent me from doing so. Our sleeping arrangement was less than ideal, but such inconveniences were trivial and I felt grateful to be living in Monterey at all.

Our apartment was four steep blocks up the hill from Cannery Row, a tourist-infested street on the Monterey Bay made famous by the legendary author John Steinbeck, in his novel of the same name. An elaborate water fountain featuring some of the novel's life-size characters sits in a park-like setting

outside the restaurant where my husband and I first met, I as a payroll clerk and he as a bartender.

Cannery Row is not just a scenic street with a world class aquarium, or a vacation destination for the wealthy residents of nearby Silicon Valley. It is much more than a visual paradise with otters floating on tranquil waters atop a kelp forest. It is also a street rich in history, with covered wooden walkways high above the street, connecting buildings that were once fish canneries, maintained as they were in the 1930's and 40's when John Steinbeck was writing his novels. The street pays tribute to a writer, and that sentiment is not lost on me.

My husband Ansel, a Latino with an attractive smile, has worked at a former sardine factory turned restaurant on Cannery Row for over twenty years. I often think of him as a real-life character from Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat*, in which hardscrabble characters gather together each day for a drink. He couldn't care less about Steinbeck and doesn't read much of anything, but for me, the daughter of a former bookstore owner and book collector, reading is a way of life.

While working towards the Certificate of Great Books at Monterey Peninsula College, I was required to read fiction, a departure from my tendency to read primarily nonfiction. I appreciated fiction, but when I saw the nonfiction writing course listed in the school's spring catalog, I felt inclined to take it. I was a reader, not a writer, but even if it turned out that I couldn't write well, at least I would learn what it took to write something worth reading.

When Henry Marchand, the seasoned instructor of my Nonfiction Creative Writing class, gave us the option of writing about an event, I was excited. I was desperate for a night out, preferably without my husband and son. The Wednesday night class, which ran from 6:00 PM until around 9:00 PM, was my only guaranteed reprieve from the constant demands of parenting. Mr. Marchand had bestowed upon me the most precious of gifts, a writing assignment that gave me an excuse to spend a night out alone. It was homework, and it was necessary.

I first saw the advertisement for the Monterey Bay Derby Dames' opening game listed under Events in the community section of Craigslist. I had an image of myself free from the distractions of parenting, watching women battle each other on roller skates. There was only one problem; Ansel and Emmett thought it sounded like fun too. After several attempts to convince them otherwise, we headed to the season opener in my black Nissan Frontier truck, listening to the soundtrack from Disney's *Coco* for the umpteenth time. Ansel and Emmett sang along in the back seat with Ansel's perfect Spanish filling in where Emmett faltered.

We had never been to a roller derby match before, but I had an idea of what to expect from an advertisement I saw on the Dames' website. There was an illustration of a derby girl poking out of a keyhole-shaped frame with an *Alice in Wonderland* theme in keeping with March Madness. She stood staring straight ahead with her hands on her hips, pastel blue skin and dark blue expressionless full lips, blonde braids, and a Mad Hatter top hat. The hat's pink ribbon displayed the Monterey Dames' logo of a

retro pin-up girl oozing sex appeal, with a tattoo of an anchor on her right shoulder. She was perched inside a ship's wheel, wearing knee pads and striped stockings, pointing her black roller skates downwards, accentuating her legs. The *Alice in Wonderland* theme was all I needed to feel at one with the Derby Dames. It was one of my favorite Disney movies; I had been eating off *Alice in Wonderland* themed dinnerware for years. It was already as if I was an unofficial member of the team.

The roller rink is on the outskirts of the town of Marina on the sandy slopes of what was once a part of the thriving Army base, Fort Ord. Formally called the Army Rec Center, it is now called the Water City Sports and Roller Hockey Center. The surrounding drab, sand-colored Army barracks are left in shambles, their broken windows and graffiti-covered walls behind a chain-link fence, but the roller rink has survived, with its curved, dome-like roof and dusty blue paint job.

The area near the rink, close to Highway 1, has been revamped with a suburban housing development and an ever-growing shopping complex with a Target, which was ground zero for me as a mom and considered toy heaven by my son. The location for the derby match seemed ideal for the attendees were likely the lower- to middle-class families of Seaside and Marina who occupied this side of the bay, and students from California State University of Monterey Bay's campus less than a mile away.

As we drove up to the building, I noticed a man dressed as the Mad Hatter coming out of a side exit and looking momentarily lost before heading back inside. Parking was limited and I noted the absence of the usual Porsche and BMW

SUVs that I was used to seeing in Monterey. We parked across from the venue and joined the other attendees who were streaming toward the entrance carrying fold out chairs and blankets. A row of warmly dressed Latinos from Jose's Mexican Restaurant had a table set up outside the front door where steam was rising up into the cold air. They were busily serving up carne asada tacos—something we would have loved to have known ahead of time, before we ate our go-to dinner of black beans and huevos.

A short, blond man with crooked front teeth and wearing a hooded Santa Cruz sweatshirt manned the front door, but he seemed preoccupied with the festivities inside. It was hard to tell if he was working in any official capacity, but he nodded to the people entering who displayed the red pirate skull hand stamps as proof of having paid the entrance fee. I asked him about seating, and he pointed toward the three rows of wooden bleachers, warning me about how fast they fill up. Since we had arrived so close to the 7:00 PM starting time, I was concerned that we wouldn't be able to find seating. The bleachers looked full and there were dozens of chairs set up by fans several rows deep surrounding the track on the linoleum floor. I was worried that Ansel and Emmett wouldn't enjoy it, and suddenly I didn't know whether I wanted to be there at all. After hesitating for several minutes, I decided it would be worth it to attend.

I paid the entrance fee to a teenage girl working at a nearby table of \$15 per adult, my son being free, and charged forward determined to find seating. The bleachers were close to the wooden wall surrounding the rink, with plexiglass atop the

wall for viewing the game and protecting the spectators from harm. I could see that Ansel was uncomfortable and didn't want to sit at all, but I was able to find just enough room for the three of us to squeeze into a spot on the second row.

Just as we were seated, Lou Bega's 1999 hit song, "Mambo No. 5", began playing from the loudspeaker. On the center of the far wall directly across from us was the DJ booth, and the teams from Monterey and Sonoma sat in rows of fold out metal chairs on either side.

"Welcome to the season opener of the 2018 Derby Games," the announcer shouted into the microphone. He called out the names of the derby girls as the skaters made a lap. Some of my favorites were: Smack a Roni and Cheese, Betty Clockher, Scary Poppins, Andy Wardoll, Buenas Nalgas, Storm Trip Her and Ivanna Shot.

Surprisingly, the roller derby girls were not young women, but mature women, many of them a few pounds overweight (I could have easily fit in as a member of the team). They were average women who had trained to become professional skating battle warriors. Their punk rock styles and outlandish names gave them a platform for expressing themselves. The women showed off their oversized backsides with spandex shorts printed with phrases like "eat me". Their jobs and identities outside the rink were irrelevant on game night, or so it seemed.

The audience was asked to stand for the National Anthem and we all stood with our hands over our hearts, facing an American flag hanging on the wall next to the entrance, though I

had a hard time locating it amongst the advertisements from local businesses. An older musician in a leather jacket belted out the song on his electric guitar, with a sound reminiscent of Jimi Hendrix's 1969 Woodstock performance. Emmett complained about the noise and covered his ears.

The game began and I turned to the man behind me and asked, "Do you know how this works? I don't see a ball."

"No, there's no ball," he said. He pointed out the skater wearing the fabric with the star on it over her helmet and explained that she was trying to make a lap around the track. Once she broke free of the skaters from the other team, who were doing their best to block her, she seemed free to circle the track. She was careful to stay within the lines, while one of the referees, in a black and white pinstriped shirt, skated in the inner circle beside her with an outstretched arm pointing at her as she made her way back to the mass of derby girls waiting for the sequence to repeat.

I marveled at how the star-capped girl was able to stay within the lines, and was impressed at the strength of her thighs as she crouched low to the ground, bringing one heavy old-fashioned roller skate forward and to the left of the other as she made her lap. My own legs felt like marshmallows as I watched and I felt the ache of wanting to join in, but I didn't think I wanted to wear a tank top jersey and expose my bare arms to the cold. I wasn't sure how anyone knew whose turn it was to wear the star cap or when the cap came into anyone's hands, but I understood that the main attraction was watching one team try to block the other teams' star-capped player. It surprised me that

anyone would be able to pass through the wheeled mob unscathed, but despite numerous scuffles and several skaters falling, many laps were made. The victorious star-capped skater emerged time and again to do her victory lap while the projector screen above the judge's table displayed her name above the running score.

The rules of the game were unclear to me, but at least I knew when to cheer. I felt proud that women were being celebrated, as I looked around at the enthusiastic crowd. There was incredible enthusiasm for a game played predominantly by women on a Saturday night. Families showed their support by dressing up in costume, fitting in with the *Alice in Wonderland* theme. There were children in Tweedledee and Tweedledum propeller hats with triangle flags spinning, and adults dressed like the White Rabbit in rabbit ears and with oversized clocks hanging around their necks.

The DJ played an array of popular hits meant to take us down memory lane, and I expected at any moment to hear Vanilla Ice's 1990 smash hit, "Ice Ice Baby". He did not disappoint. When the song came on, I was catapulted back to my childhood days on the roller rink in Astoria, Oregon near my hometown of Gearhart. In those days, my red-headed friend Sandee's grandmother, the chicken farmer, liked to drop us off there while she enjoyed a night of bingo elsewhere. I was in the sixth grade then, and those were the days of childhood fun that still belonged to me, before I started working at the Dairy Queen and the dozens of dead-end jobs after that.

The DJ in Astoria loved “Ice Ice Baby”, and I remembered skating arm and arm with Sandee in my skin-tight jeans with the rips that allowed my knees to bend. Sandee and I sported matching bangs plastered with hairspray into three-inch-high tidal wave formations. Our scrunchies pulled our hair tightly upwards, stretching the sides of our eyes into what we thought was an alluring foxlike expression, and we flirted harmlessly with the older guys who came to ogle us, knowing that Sandee’s grandmother would squash any advances when she came back to pick us up.

The derby game continued, and more seating opened up on the lower bleachers as fans jumped onto a tall wooden platform support for the back of the bleachers. A man’s sneaker almost hit me in the head as he joined his friends directly above where I was sitting.

At half-time a costume contest was held for the best *Alice in Wonderland* costume. A Derby Girl, matching the description of the girl in the advertisement I first saw online with blonde braids, named BB Kiddo, swung little girls around in the center of the floor. Once the teams were seated again, they kicked up their legs in unison, like a scene from a Rockettes’ show, to Frank Sinatra’s song “New York, New York”.

The allure of women dancing in skates was no match for Emmett’s desire for toys. Ansel left with him to buy a toy at Target and returned carrying Emmett shortly before the game ended. He stood near the doorway motioning that it was time to leave. I ignored him. Emmett was holding a green, squishy, chemical-scented toy shaped like a roll of toilet paper with blood

shot eyes, another addition to his squishie collection. I had no intention of leaving and ignored Ansel's pleas to leave early.

The DJs held a raffle and continually mentioned the after-game party was to be held in Seaside at Buffalo Wild Wings restaurant. I wanted to go to the party, but thought better of bringing my four-year-old to a sports bar. The Monterey Bay Derby Girls won the game with a final score of 189 to 132 and I wanted to celebrate too. The best I could do was to drive by and peer longingly at the bar as we stopped to pick up fresh Mexican bread from San Pablo Bakery across the street.

As we approached the exit to Monterey that night, I felt a surge of delight. While the rich were lounging in their million-dollar homes just over the hill in Pebble Beach, Carmel, and seemingly all around, I, and others like me, had found real raucous fun, the kind that put a Cheshire Cat-like grin on my face. I felt victorious. The Monterey Bay Derby Dames had won the game, but more than that, ordinary people had succeeded in coming together to celebrate women of little means who were now the shining stars in a quiet coastal community where the rich seemed to always win. Finally, score one for women, score one for regular people and score one for me, because I knew there was a Derby Girl in me waiting to roll out on hot pink wheels. We were a team united, the Derby Girls and I.

On Wednesday night, when I returned to Creative Nonfiction Writing class, I was excited to focus my attention on the craft of writing. I had even fantasized about joining the roller derby league, but realized that exercising my mind was perhaps more important to me than physical exercise, though I could

always dream. I lay in bed that night studying up on grammar rules, turned off the bedside lamp, and pictured myself as a Derby Girl. I was fearless, skating around the track in leopard print spandex with the words “Booger Queen” on my tank top jersey.

The following Thursday, I spent the day working on my story. Ideas came in droves, causing me to stop and make notes here and there. I wanted to finish the story so that I could put my mind to rest, but it was constantly evolving, too long, heavy with backstory and convoluted in the middle.

I went to bed that night and awoke before 4:00 a.m. My t-shirt was soaking wet, which was not unusual, because I have suffered from night sweats since I was a kid. I opened the window to let in the cool air. Seagulls were crying, sea lions bellowed from the Coast Guard pier, my son’s steady breathing comforted me and my Silky Terrier, Little Dog, curled his warm body up next to me beneath the covers.

I changed into a new shirt and crawled back into bed where I conjured up a memory of my first pair of roller skates. It might have been 1987, just before Christmas, and I would have been in the third grade, but I couldn’t be sure. I remember looking at a pair of roller skates in the Sears Christmas Wish Book that my mom had picked up from the Sears store in Seaside, Oregon, two miles from our home in Gearhart. It wasn’t a department store, but more of a place to pick up orders. Sitting in our powder blue Ford Pinto station wagon, I asked my mom if she would buy me a pair of My Little Pony roller skates. She

asked me if I was sure that I wanted them, and then I remembered the elation of receiving them for Christmas.

In my memory I see myself in those white skates, with padding around the ankles, cartoon ponies on the sides and Velcro closures. I skate down the dead-end road in front of my house, sometimes falling on the loose gravel scattered on the pavement, but then getting back up again. My mom finally allowed me to grow my hair out, and it feels good swishing from side to side. I'm wearing a light pink puffy jacket with chevron piping and extra elastic at the wrists. It's a good memory from childhood, and one that I wanted to hold onto. It was then that I realized that Mr. Marchand had given me something. I hadn't gotten a night out alone, but I did receive a gift. The gift of remembering a time when I was happy, and perhaps that is what I needed most, after all.

Heart First

Memory is an amazing thing. A question about a dog's treatment at my clinic flashed me back to my student days and my interaction with a dog I had not thought of in years. My client's dog was being fitted with the dreaded Elizabethan collar to keep him from licking an open wound on his hip. She asked me if it was really necessary to restrain him. If dogs instinctively lick open wounds, she wondered, wouldn't there be some survival value in their doing so? I explained about the usual bad results—the infection and delayed or nonexistent healing that resulted when animals were not restrained from this practice. But suddenly I remembered the one case I knew where an animal had healed despite terrible health conditions and almost constant licking of her wound.

I was a struggling veterinary student at a Canadian university. Some fellow students and I had taken a holiday on the cheap for a few weeks in warm and sunny Morocco – a break from both our studies and the Canadian climate. Our student budget allowed for some very low-level accommodations, not the fairy tale of life in a resort hotel. We stayed in a trailer park on the edge of a small Moroccan village. Skinny children and starving animals roamed the dusty streets.

One day, on the way back from a hike up the trail behind the trailer park, I noticed a mangy pile of grey fur that almost blended into the rock beside the trail. I stopped and bent down to take a closer look.

“Stop!” one of my companions cried as the fur moved.

“It might be rabid!”

Dark, soulful eyes looked up at me, as a head lifted a few inches from the ground. The dog was painfully thin as most of the village animals were, but clearly there was something else wrong. Ignoring the warning of my friends, I stroked the dog’s head.

“Hello, there,” I murmured. “Can you stand up? Let me see what’s wrong.”

Then the dog shifted to lick its hind leg. To my horror I noticed that not only was the skin torn, but that the end of a broken bone protruded from the flesh. It was with sadness that I realized that I could not help this dog. I was studying to become a veterinarian because I wanted to help animals, but how to help this injured dog?

Treating an unrestrained wild or half-wild animal without medication or facilities of any kind seemed impossible, no matter how much those soulful eyes tugged at my heart.

Later that evening I climbed the hill alone to bring water and some of our dinner to the injured dog. I knew I couldn’t cure it, but I could, at least, relieve some of its hunger. She, for it turned out to be a she, wagged her thin, almost hairless tail once as I approached.

For the next few days I fed this dog up in her nest of rocks. She would never let me touch her leg, and I knew I could I have done nothing useful without anesthetic or medicines.

Then one evening, as I was starting out the door with her food and water, I saw her sitting in front of the trailer. She

wagged her tail slightly. Her leg, although badly deformed seemed to be healing. I fed her, glad to be relieved of the climb to the rocks.

In a few days, our group left the trailer camp to tour for a couple of weeks. I did not think that the skinny dog with the broken leg had much of a chance. People in that village barely had food for their children, let alone for one of the many starving dogs.

On the evening of our return, I set out food and water and sat on the steps, waiting without much hope. She had probably starved or succumbed to infection in the weeks that we had been away. Then I saw her, emaciated beyond belief, limping down the trail toward the trailer. Although extremely misshapen, her leg seemed to have healed. Her greatest problem now seemed to be hunger. I expected her to immediately go for the food. But, to my amazement, she walked past the food and water without hesitation. She gazed up at me for a moment with those soulful eyes and then pressed her nose into my hand and wagged her tail before turning and heading for the food.

“Heart first,” I told my client, a little embarrassed at having gotten off the track of the medical issues under discussion. “Hungry as she was, she greeted me before she went for the food.” I paused for a moment remembering that long-ago dog.

“And,” I finished, “that’s the only case I’ve known where licking the wound didn’t seem to cause a problem.”

Angel Chenevert

Planet Earth

Nighttime does not mean that the sun disappears, only that it's shining on the rest of the planet. Even so, its rays still peek out through the heavens, and shine on the planet Earth.

One day, he was there.

Then, he was gone.

One day, he was in my life.

The next, he was but a memory.

Will always be.

His name was Ivan.

He was one of my brothers.

He was my mom's stepson from a previous marriage. When he was 45, he walked into my life. I was just barely 8. It was like a lonely puppy meeting another lonely puppy.

He was so warm, so loving. His father, Roy, had died a few years earlier, and he became completely dysfunctional. When he pulled himself together, he reached out to my mother for company and comfort.

It takes a lot of effort to pull yourself out of trauma.

I know that. Sometimes, I like to think that he is still alive. I like to think that he is by my side, silent and comforting, warm and calm. I like to think that he is waiting to chill with me at the kitchen table over some pretzels and pesto. That was his favorite food. Mine too.

It all started and ended abruptly in May of 2013. Ivan had been complaining of stomach aches since he was 15 years old. He was missing work, and he couldn't eat. He would constantly argue with my mom about his health. My mom is highly educated in the health world. She insisted that Ivan get some specific bloodwork and lab tests.

One day he was there, the next, he was gone.

I wanted to know where my brother was. Both of my brothers were gone; one was off at college, the other, Ivan, was nowhere to be found. I was worried. I mean, obviously. I was scared. What if he was dead? Hurt? In prison?

I was always thinking about Ivan. I think everyone was after he disappeared, including my mother.

I loved him so much.

He loved me, too. He always tried to make time to talk to me, relate with me, laugh with me, love me. He may have had no romantic relationships, or children, but he was able to keep an office job at Kaiser Permanente, and a loving relationship with us.

He was a squat man, but fairly square. He had a rectangle face, coarse and stubbly. He had a couple of moles, and tan colored skin. His arms were hairy, and so were his legs. His hair was straight, stiff, and brown. When other people looked at him, they felt sort of uncomfortable, the way that one feels when they don't know if they should point out that someone has their fly open. This is because he had not taken care of himself the right way. His eyes were brown. They were small. The area all around his eyes was bluish-grey and shadowed, as though he had been

punched. He had eyes that would just stare at you. Like he was hyper focused or something. His eyes would follow your every move, and if you didn't know him, you would be a little bit spooked. He was a poster child for lack of sleep and depression. He looked and dressed like a homeless man. However, one could just faintly make out the handsome teenager that he once was, covered in premature aging and lack of taking care of himself. He gave off a sort of ghostly, haunted vibe.

During the day, the orange sunlight coming through the big dining room windows would light half of his face, revealing his coarse and dark features. At night, he would hover in the darker parts of the room, when the chandelier was on, and his eyes would peer out from the shadows, solemn, wide, yet small. He wore a depressed poker face. His voice was soft, unsure, with an occasional stutter. It was warm and comforting. It suited him.

He was always dressed in ragged clothing, disgusting shoes. His New Balance shoes were brown and gray. They were old and crusty. The toe of one shoe was broken through, and the sides were starting to rip. His Nirvana shirt was a mustardy color, and a little bit too large for him. He loved Nirvana. There were little holes around the collar and edges, as though it had sat in a treehouse filled with moths. In fact, all his shirts had those little holes. His t-shirts would always have a pocket on the left breast. His dirty white socks were always pulled up past his calves. I wouldn't be surprised if there were holes in those too.

His khaki shorts were also a bit raunchy. There was dirt and odd stains. They were heavy with overloaded pockets, filled with, I assume, junk.

I remember clearly how he would stand in the corner of our dining room, holding a glass of water in one hand and the other hand in his pocket. Most of the time, both hands were in his pockets, and he would sort of stand in a slouch. He would often shift his weight from one leg to the other, sort of uncomfortably. Then he would reach down and place his glass on the dining room table, and shove his hands into his pockets, shifting weight again. He would turn to his left, and take a few steps forward, and wander aimlessly a few feet away, then return to his original place. He was a hoverer. He would stand and just observe, and stare around at everybody, just listening. He would clear his throat, and shift weight once more.

For my twelfth birthday he gave me a metal Jimi Hendrix poster, because I was into old stuff. I would have kept it if I had known that that was the last thing that he would ever give me. The last thing that I ever gave him was a hug. I would have hugged him tighter if I had known.

I repeatedly asked mom where Ivan was. She didn't know. I could see the worry in her eyes. I started to get really scared. I started telling myself that everything was going to be okay, and that Ivan was okay, and that we are all just nice and peachy. But I knew that wasn't the truth. I knew that I was just lying to myself.

I knew that Ivan was dead.

As weeks went by, I began to get more and more insistent. Then, for two weeks' time, my asking began to die down. On the last Friday of my silence, during a salmon dinner, I vividly remember, I asked again.

“Mom,” I said sternly. “Where’s Ivan?”

A silence fell across the room. No one moved. The rest of the family (my dad and little sister, Pearl,) excluding my brother Quentin, who was off in Iowa attending Grinnell College, looked at mom, waiting for an answer.

“Do you want me to tell you now? Are you ready?” she asked, monotone.

“Is...is it about death?” I asked, voice wavering.

Silence.

“Yes.”

I shook my head. I didn't want to hear it. I wasn't ready.

That night, I imagined that Ivan's ghost was in my bedroom, sitting on my bunk bed, silent and comforting.

When I fell asleep, I dreamed of his coarse face, his New Balance Shoes, his worn Nirvana t-shirt, his khaki cargo shorts. I dreamed of his laugh, wavering, deep, nasally. I dreamed of his hug, awkward and clumsy. I dreamed of his brown and gray hair, straight, parted, and stiff. His smell, musty and old lady like. I dreamed of his smile, wide and crooked. I dreamed of his walk, slightly swaggering without meaning to, and large confident steps.

I dreamed of my brother, Ivan. I dreamed of the many conversations I had with him.

When I woke up the next morning, I knew that it was the day. I had to hear the words, make it official.

We were sitting in the City Bakery, a colorful blue, white and silver-themed diner, on West 18th Street and 5th Avenue, eating a Baker's muffin, bagels, and my parents drinking coffee.

The cafe was very open and spacious. The front of the cafe was made almost completely of glass and windows. It made the cafe more bright and sunny. Well... as sunny as the building could get. It was smack in the middle of West 18th Street, on an upscale low-rise block with wall-to-wall buildings on each side. The block had storefronts on the ground level of stone buildings with no space in between them. The stone buildings were large, with pillars and decorations carved into them. It was reminiscent of Roman architecture. On a hot day there was a faint smell of pee and garbage, but as you passed storefronts it smelled of cool, crisp air conditioning. They had painted fire escapes, and flags billowing off the walls, barely grappling to the wall. They had slices in them so they wouldn't wave around so much, but that didn't really help. The fire escapes were basically lightning bolts down the surface of the building. They would zigzag back and forth, dropping a level by ladder as they went along. They were only just too high to be able to grab from the ground, and just low enough to be able to jump down harmlessly. It honestly looked as though they would give way if you grabbed on, however. They looked crusty and rusty.

The cafe itself was right beneath an apartment or office building. Everything was gray. The sidewalk, the gutter. The street. The street should have been called "Fifty Shades of Gray." The biggest feature was in fact the windows. Why? Because you had a full view of the street. It was as though you were sitting outside. It had the charm of an urban setting: Folks hopping in and out of yellow cabs. The guys in the bookstore across the street carrying boxes in and out. The *cuh-clunk* of cars driving

over manholes. There always seemed to be dirty, murky water flowing into the gutter, the echoing sounds of welders and hammers against metal, along with their wielders' conversing shouts. The slight rub of peoples' voices. You could watch all the exquisite and eccentric New Yorkers pass by, people dressed in costumes, kids coming back from karate class in their cute little outfits and holding on to their mommy's and daddy's hands, chattering away. People of all shapes, sizes, people of every race and ethnicity. People cursing at their boyfriends on the phone. Homeless people moaning, "Couldja spare some change? Wouldja help me out?" Mentally ill folks talking openly to Jesus and Moses, and their dead dog. We always sought a window seat.

The coffee smelled strong and was thick with cream. The Baker's muffin was the specialty muffin; it tasted more like a cake. It was pretty big, the size of a dinner bowl, and it had a lumpy, coffee cake-like top, sprinkled with powdered sugar. It looked like a big, brown-and-white mushroom. The City Bakery was a pretty big cafe. It was a mix of modern and old-fashioned. The air smelled of homemade marshmallow. It smelled upscale, and chocolatey and sweet. It reeked of caffeine. You could tell when the air conditioning was broken, or when it was a really hot day; the place smelled like wet brick and drywall. You could almost smell the rusty metal scaffolding within the walls of the remodeled building. It smelled like what cracked paint on heating pipes looked like. The air was thicker and more overwhelming when it was hot. It made you feel more sluggish and fatigued, sort of like doing laps in a warm pool.

The place where you ordered and received your food was in the center of the cafe. That's also where they prepared the food. It was like a little factory in the middle of a large room. It was literally a rectangle. The workers worked in the middle of the rectangle, cooking, baking, and pouring, and the food was displayed around that, the cakes, muffins, bagels, and bacon. There were no waiters. People would line up around the perimeter of the rectangle and order their food, which the cooks grabbed and served cafeteria style. Around that were couches, tables and chairs around the main floor and the loft. There were huge columns inside the building, painted silver, but the rectangle itself was smooth, white and brown, and the countertop was stainless steel. The tables were not scattered about the place like your average cafe or Starbucks; they were lined along the perimeter of the room up against the window. One half of the seats was benches up against the walls and windows and the other half was normal cafe chairs. The tables were like any NYC diner/cafe table: clean on top, gum stuck on the bottom. I made the occasional mistake of fingering a HUGE lump of Dubble Bubble and jerking my hand back suddenly only to find it stuck to my finger. I didn't let that distract me. I decided that this was the right place to talk about Ivan. It was a private place, yet it was also free from isolation and depression. This space was a comfortable place to hear about tragedy. Everyone around us was having their own conversations, some laughing, some crying, some deadpanning. But in that space, everything seemed far away. It was like a Cone of Silence. I would get to hear as all the crazy New Yorkers passed by the giant windows. I

would get to listen underneath the massive pillars. I would get to hear as I smelled the marshmallow and caffeine. I would get to hear about Ivan in the eccentricities of the City Bakery. The feeling of being outside yet inside comforted me. The feeling of being in such an upscale, modern, yet old and wooden place comforted me. For all those reasons, it was our favorite place to go.

“I’m ready to hear what happened to Ivan,” I announced.

And mom and dad told me.

Ivan was dead.

He had had colon cancer. It could have been treated easily. But he refused to get it treated. He let it spread to his liver before getting help. But he was already dying. He was dying, but he refused to tell mom. My mom found out through an obituary online, posted by his birth mom. She hated my mom. She was upset with how much Ivan loved us. He refused to tell me.

I never got to say goodbye to Ivan.

That is the hardest part for me.

I felt like screaming.

What did you do to me, you goddamn bastard? What the hell did I do? Why didn't you tell me goodbye? Why didn't you tell me that you love me? Please come back to me. Please be waiting for me at home, waiting to chill with me over a bowl of fresh pretzels and pesto.

But I didn't scream. I didn't do anything. My whole body went numb. I simply sat quietly. I didn't cry. I never got around to crying for my brother's death. Even to this day. It's too painful to cry about.

Ivan may have died, but to me in my heart he's still alive.

I think that my brain still has to be convinced of one thing: nighttime does not mean that the sun disappears, only that it's shining on the rest of the planet. Even so, its rays still peek out through the heavens, and shine on the planet Earth. Ivan was my sun. He may have disappeared, but he will never be gone for good. He will always peek down from the heavens and shine on my world. My mind, and my imagination. He will always be there to guide me through my time on our sunlit planet, Earth.

Rosalia Reyes

Lost Valkyrie

I have this innate feeling--
The apprehension of impending doom.
Fear and anxiousness
Have become commonplace
And have festered inside my head,
Burrowed themselves deep within me.
In the place
Where my heart used to be
They lie dormant
And at the first sign of kindness
I retract like I am avoiding the plague.
I have become used to being the dog
That everyone kicks
So much so
That once someone tries to give me affection
I snarl and cower.
Sometimes I wonder what happened to the person
The one I used to see in the mirror's reflection
Before she let her heart be smashed into a million pieces,
Before she was left to wipe her own tears,
Before they took advantage of her kindness in a thousand ways.
She used to be a strong warrior
Who fought, swore, and drank like a Valkyrie
And now
She is just a shell of a person.
Going through the motions
Unsure of how to react or respond
Because the warrior she was has been long gone.
She exchanged her sword and shield
For a domesticated existence

That was always one sided
For loves that were always one sided
For a life wherein she could only look out the window and
wonder,
“What more is there?”
And now that she is free from her emotional captors,
Now that freedom isn't simply a memory nor a wish
But a reality,
She has no idea what to do with herself.
I continue walking around with my chains
Tragic memories I must let go
But when I left my wretched prisoners
I had forgotten to ask for the keys.

Rosalia Reyes

12:45am

I wonder
What kind of person you need to be
To sit back idly
And watch as someone you said you loved
Walks away from you
To think 5 years transpired between us
To think we used to be so close physically
How was it we were emotionally
Eons away from each other
Perhaps it was only illusions I created
After all
Figments of my imagination
Bits and pieces I chose to sift through
All the other soiled memories
Were conveniently left out
Subconsciously extracted
To make sure I always saw you in the best light
Now I am clean
A bittersweetness, I won't know
What exactly was going on
In that paracosm paradise
That I once saw in you
When in reality it was an ignis fatuus
A desolate and arid land
where the ashes that fell from the sky
Came from all our memories you burned
To the ground
It feels good being cleansed from your world
As I stepped away from you
I stepped away from a specter of myself
Covered in soot and dead eyed

Cleansed with the light of a spring sun
Cool waters of spring rain
I am born anew

Levi Barich

Moon Envy

Just hurry up and bury me
Choke soft my throat with lilac dusk
Wild sun collapsing to the sea
Just hurry up and bury me
I'm aching harsh just to be free
And echo moonrise ivory husk
Just hurry up and bury me
Choke soft my throat with lilac dusk

Levi Barich

engraulidae

Pressed against impenetrable glass
Alluring world of wet divine
Kelp jungle shifting chartreuse
Architecture of drowning vine

There is magic in the dappled light
That filters down through strata deep
Tiny prisms intimate
Kaleidoscope of scales, languid leap

Mesmerizing chain mail armor
Pirouetting through the brine
Connection ensuring protection
Glinting effervescent shine

Like a wild lead resin painting
Seeping through currents Infiniti
Acrylic spilled steel 3 dimension
Bouncing magnetically off debris

Illuminating silence against dense eternity. Seeping through
currents Infiniti
Acrylic spilled steel 3 dimension
Bouncing magnetically off debris

Illuminating silence against dense eternity.

John O'Leary

The Choice

When does a child first learn to hate?
Innocence gone, innocence lost
Now an adult with all that weight,
When does a child first learn to hate?
How can we help him miss this fate?
A grown man now, is this the cost?
When does a child first learn to hate?
Innocence gone, innocence lost

Think of how much the world would gain
With a loving heart, peaceful soul,
If only we could stop the pain.
Think of how much the world would gain
Innocence found and more humane.
A mother's wish, her deepest goal
With a loving heart, peaceful soul

The choice is ours, it's plain to see.
Where do we stand? What kind of life?
Anger and hate, you'll not be free
The choice is ours, it's plain to see.
Peace and love are really the key.
Say no to rage, avoid the strife.
The choice is ours, it's plain to see.
Where do we stand? What kind of life?

Jeff Barnard

FERAL

I had a dream this morning, *opened* it
And tears more silver than my hair ran down
My fingers to the sheets, *my socks crossed black* As I sat up
And failed again to save the ones I mourn.

Some nights *I run and run*. Sometimes at dawn I run for help.
There's none. At dawn
I sit and try to calm my ragged gasps.
The dreams of night are red, azure and white-- stars
That shred the indigo while sirens scream.

Those kids I knew who turned to meat, then dirt:
I'm here to tell our tales, as much as I
Can stand. But how to speak for ether, blown
Between those ice chips spun through moonless skies?

I do not beg your understanding or
Your pity. Coyotes would more likely seek
Your praise. We raised each other. Who else would?
We laughed too loud. We cried when we could hide.

We did not fit. We loved us. Who else could?
We hurt too much. We didn't stop when told.
It's no surprise *that some did not get old*. we did not all
grow old.

Jeff Barnard

Late Night Memoirs of a Bodyguard

In fighting school they taught you to be fast,
Forgot to tell you just how long it lasts--
That crunch of bone in your so skillful fight,
The sound that robs you of your sleep at night.

And later when your son goes off to war,
You wonder if that's how you're paying for
Your tiger skills and how you know you smiled
When you broke other men with graceful style.

Yes, you protected others, that is true.
They told you it was very fine to do.
You never asked why they aroused the hate
Of those they stepped on; now it's much too late.

And now you're older, joints all stiff and scarred.
Your kids proud you're a badass, think you're hard.
But all you wish is that you'd had more time
To hold them, teach them nursery rhymes.
You wonder why if your side was so right,
It feels so bad, remembered, late at night.

Windsor Buzza

Werewolf's Woes

Beneath bloodthirsty beauty of fattened moon,
Loin-spawn of curse and God alike,
Forsake rocking-chair and fireplace;
Fulfill true nature in the blackened hunt.

Beware pitchfork, torch, and musket;
Shun man, woman, and noble.
Death rottens the air this night;
Who dies, remains celestial secret.

Lament acceptance, which never came!
Proclaim your rage in daunting howl!
Stretch your plea for help
Across the canvas of the fattened moon,

And tell me which you fear most:
The duality, or the solitude?

Levi Barich

Sea Salt Story

We disembark down Highway 1, a corridor that winds your heavy house to mine.

How many years did we intend to do this drive, never finding the time?

We set out surely on a quest, leaving behind your grieving, forested town.

A road too bashful to let go of shore, hugging whitewater the whole way down.

Still North but moving south on brutal winds with herds of waltzing waterfowl.

Tortured January squalls are swelling with potent gusts that boom and howl.

Forsaken sea lion caves and weathered lighthouses blemish the withering coast.

Relentless waves hurtling themselves at serrated cliffs, beckoning your ghost.

The rough and regal mountains splinter the frozen landscape blistered.

All my might to hold my head up high, but my abilities severely hindered.

I invite the eerie Oregon fog; hypnotize me into eternal sleep.

For then I might see that this is just a dream, and this promise I would not have to keep.

We have memories buried in all these hostile crevices and cracks.

Lifetimes of exquisite stories that we carry on our broken, bitter backs.

But there are no more stories to be made, all our moments have been written.

And it's my duty to ensure that no precious piece of you is hidden.

"Set me free into this world," you said, "send my many pieces to be scattered."

And with every honored breath, I consent, my soggy spirit shattered.

For these fragments are all I have, this pitiful pile of ashen dust. It would be cruel to keep you from this wild, so as I promised, you will be thrust.

With every dampened highway mile, every kink and vicious curve,

I bite my lip, hold back swarming tears and try not to lose my nerve.

It will be unendurable to say goodbye a second time, disperse you into elements.

But you are strength and love and grace and awe, of which there are endless testaments.

The empty sun begins to drop as we withstand this despondent journey

Spilling glinted sorrow from a pale core, and I can feel it burn me.

My sullen soul connected to that scald, and to you, an infinite tether.

Exquisite bond began at birth, so utterly profound and impossible to measure.

But beyond my heartache is your imminent abandon, uninhibited, unrestrained.

Constellations rearranging, heaven's most resplendent star reclaimed.

Creating space for one more sea salt story, where the thick sky meets the sea,

And although your essence will infuse this world, you, mom, will always be with me.

Then we reach our terminus, that sturdy cypress tree upon the bluff,
The deep marine waters engorged, anticipatory and rough.
Firmament obsidian illuminated by the flushed opalescent moon.
Returning you not to your tomb, but to your original and sacred womb.

And as my fingers grasp your particles, I hear your voice inside my head:

“There is no point to suffering, my dear; please do not relish in the dread.”

Holding all that you have come to be in the shallow palm of my hesitant hand.

How to continue without you on this earth, I will never understand.

And so with a fragile splintered heart and a bleak and muddied mind,

I let the pieces of you drift away, no longer to be confined.

You mingle within the zephyr that carries feathers far and wide,
You fuse with sands and shores and seaside sprays, and with the brackish tide.

But I am too weak, to bear the anguish of your succinct evaporation.

I ache to be enveloped by you again, complete and utter saturation.

And so I step off of that bluff, in search of a way to you,
I am absorbed by the sinister sea this night, forever embedded in the blue.

Jeff Barnard

Forsythia

Who knows how it grew?
Yellow blooms burst turquoise sky,
Somehow it just knew.
If I could love just like that--
Flowers flying into blue.

Wave on Wave of the Violent and Insane

The world is a door
wherein GLORY
underneath seeps.

Man discerns
meager shadows.

Before the door lie
cramped men aspiring
in multitude;
horde of men,
myriad of men,
throng of men,
report, distort, invent!

Before them, others
fantasize, masturbate, like children
infatuated with ignorance,
as though embarked on a
trackless vale of well-wrought distortion

behind bulwarked libraries,
cultured men spit
at others hidden by
earth and grime,
like frightened soldiers
in foxholes.

Abaft, bewildered men
in tarnished coronets,
on hallucinatory quests.

like adolescent
dementia praecox

on these men, not an
iota of light
claims space on their
skinned skulls of varying
hues, their incarcerated
desires of liberation
remain unsatisfied.

And there,
looming, the door
like a monolith of horror,
past things fraught with despair,
with the wear of humanity,
beyond things corrupt,
remains glory
unencumbered by men,
remains glory
from which nothing
but rumor escaped.

Not all is shrouded,
not all is grotesque,
alas, the fragility
of sight, trembles
at the door of truth,
as though God's residual impact
causes the invisible
effervescent structures
of bodies and buildings,
fields and rivers,
valleys and deserts,
women and flowers,
etc.,

as though truth resided
in Entirety,
just beyond
where our sight,
our sense,
our knowledge
fear to tread.
as distant ranges,
mountains propose the possibility
of endlessness,
as our sight and senses
a rampart to an
unimaginable majesty.

“Flesh of the world,” cries the prophet, “dare ye claim knowledge
of Glory? Ye man claim knowledge of God, thou art an idiot!”

One man,
among men,
answered the prophet:
*“I alone,
among men
alone, witnessed
pandemonium
as it colonized
the inner reaches
of our hearts,
as one loathsome figure,
corrupted image of God,
flailed wildly like
a mad conductor
orchestrating a
macabre ensemble
bent on hegemony
of the dying world
and its flesh.*”

*I alone,
among men
alone, witnessed
the eyes of him
that looked on
one and all,
with eyes
like flies,
compounded
with death
and despair.*

*I alone,
among men
alone, witnessed
hell, and knew
that the world
is a door and
that door is death.”*

Levi Barich

Heavy Afternoon A Poem in the Style of Sara Teasdale

Sitting sprawled across sleepy grasses,
I can hardly remember why.
Eager oranges and blushes
chase each other through the sky.

It is the tortured delicate that I will miss,
Such as this bitter bloom that bellows.
Under this heavy afternoon,
She will seduce you as she mellows.

And I revel warm air autumn true,
Mixed mulled spicing of the earth,
But this proud petal soon will see
She has spent all that she is worth.

Gilded globe hung high above the mountains,
Melting loudly tired drops of honey.
And I realize, as this petal does,
That life, though sweet, is not so funny.

And the rest of us will wither,
Our days numbered by the sun.
Must make sure to hear that blossom,
A song not sung for just anyone.

Rebecca Shiraev

Handprints

A blue velvet ball
Covered in stars and
A yellow
Rubber dragon.
A soft monkey waits, face down
By chewed books
And wooden blocks.

When my memories of this
First year

Blur

Your toys discarded,
Torn and faded.
Your laugh will remain

Unforgettable

As you spotted chickens and
Cats through
The glass door

Smeared heavily
By tiny, ecstatic

Handprints.

The Moon-Colored-Skin Man

The *moon-colored-skin-man*
Dances through empty streets at night
Makes yard dogs bark, dreamers stir
And sleepless fellows perch at their windows for a sight
Of the skipping jig, arms flung high
With grinning naked skin
Feet take flight, hair floats on wind
Tendons stretch over old bones tight
The shuffling gust and quiet panting tune
Give clue to his passing by
With dawn too late and dusk too soon
To glimpse him with your eye
For shadows hide what children fear
And what every knowing hound can hear
Oh, one shouldn't stare across the yard
Through shrubs and fences, over gravel or tar
For if the dancing man is seen by you...
Then he will be dancing *in your room*

Emilie Bufford

Fire Witch

Anca awoke to screams and smoke. She bolted upright. Her head throbbed from too much drink, and her mind was muddled. Anguished cries and shouts filled the air.

She crept to the window and peered just over the top of the sill. Her entire village was engulfed in lurching, roiling fire. Every house, every outbuilding. She felt the heat on her face. Bodies littered the ground like broken dolls. People rushed through the streets. Orange-clad soldiers hacked at anyone close enough with swords. Bergmen. Rolf's soldiers. Anca saw a man cornered and stabbed from all sides. One soldier glanced up towards her window, laughing, and she ducked down. Her legs felt as wobbly as a newborn colt's, and her head buzzed as though they too, were running for their lives. Where were Tahir and the guards?

She crawled to her door, and gingerly moving the metal covering away from a small hole, she peered through. The shoulders of her guards were visible just outside her door. She opened her mouth to call to them, when a hysterical woman passed, followed by a man. The guards murmured something to one another and laughed. A cold chill settled into her gut. Those could not be her

guards. Since Rolf's men were already inside Hilltop, they would have surely gone for her father first.

With bated breath she closed the latch and backed away. She looked around for a weapon and remembered the old hunting knife Tahir had used as a young boy. The chest by her bed creaked slightly when she opened it and she squeezed her eyes shut. She listened. The guards were silent. Her blood pounding in her ears, she retrieved the knife. There came an unfamiliar voice at the door.

“Your Majesty?”

Anca's breath rasped in her throat. How could she escape? The leap from her window would kill her. A heavy fist banged on the door. She crouched on the tips of her toes and hung her head between the space between her two knees, trying to gain composure. She tasted bile on her tongue. The gentle tinkling of her headdress sounded so loud next to her ears she was sure whoever was outside her door could hear it. She tried to take it off, but Runa had fastened it in place with too many pins. Where was Blue? She tried to think back to where everyone had been when she had left the celebration, but her thoughts were evading her like seeds on the wind.

The banging on her door grew more forceful.

“Your Majesty, open the door.”

Suddenly the edge of an axe-head split through the door. Anca unsheathed her knife; hands shaking. Someone screamed outside. Anca saw her reflection in the blade

along with the lurching firelight shining through her window. More of the axe bit through the wood. The door burst open in a shower of splinters and metal. Torchlight and footsteps filled the room.

“Where is she?” a man said.

“She couldn’t have escaped.”

Anca shut her eyes in her hiding place behind the corner wardrobe. A third voice spoke.

“Search everything.”

Terror threatened to overcome her in the form of a scream. She pulled her knees in closer. The wardrobe opened and she saw clothes fall to the floor around sandaled feet. The wardrobe uttered a drawn-out groan and light washed over her. Three Bergmen towered over her, brandishing glinting swords.

“Well looky what we found,” the tallest of the three said in a rough accent, a gappy grin creasing his sweaty face. He held up his lantern to get a better look at her. They were silent while they eyed her like dogs that had sniffed out a rat. Anca’s heart pounded so hard it hurt.

“She’s so sparkly!” The small, bird-like one said with a bob of his head.

“What a beauty, lads. Shame to let it go to waste on just one man.”

“Get out,” Anca ordered, her voice cracking. Her own voice startled her. The tall one snickered and stepped towards her. Anca lashed out with her knife. He jumped

back, clutching his forearm. Blood seeped through his fingers.

“Little vixen’s got claws,” he said with a grin. A fourth voice filled the room.

“Step away from your queen.”

The men turned, and Anca imagined being fast enough to bolt out of the room. Anca peered through the torchlight shining in her eyes, shock surging through her. Standing before her was Rolf. He still wearing the betrothal chain her father had given him earlier that night. Anca felt dizzy. Rolf smiled.

“Join me, dearest,” he said. “Join your husband.”

“What...” she said icily. “Are you doing?”

Rolf laughed and offered his hand. His new gold wedding band glimmered coldly. Anca raised the knife. Rolf clicked his tongue.

“No more of that if you wish to leave this room without blood on that pretty face,” he said.

Placidly, Rolf stared at her. Anca began to shiver. This was the man she had married just hours ago, the man who was now King of Kalaheo...And he was burning it down.

There was no trace of humor on his smooth, handsome face. He held his hand out again. She spat on it. He snarled and dragged her up by the hair.

Anca tripped over something in the corridor just outside her door. It was her maid, Fifna, staring up through

unseeing eyes; body crumpled with one arm under her back. Anca balked, unable to breathe. Rolf's men gathered her up and carried her out into the great hall. Their hands were as rough as pine bark and their grips only tightened further the more she struggled.

The great hall was empty and dim. One of the men kicked a goblet across the floor. The sound echoed bluntly. They put her in her father's favorite chair facing the massive hearth. Anca stared at the dying embers in the dense blackness while her chest heaved unsteadily. She did not feel real and thought she would probably not feel pain if she touched the coals.

"You may leave us," Rolf told the men. He crouched before her and brushed strands of hair away from her face that had stuck to her tears and snot. She realized she was still wearing her ridiculous headdress and wondered why she was not trying to escape.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," Rolf said gently. He cradled her hands in his and rubbed the wedding band on her finger.

"It will all be over soon, my queen," he said. Anca found herself lulling into his soothing tone, her eyes glazing over as she stared at nothing.

The great doors of the hall burst open and in rushed a screaming woman, half on fire. Thick smoke hit Anca's eyes and nose. The fires outside were blinding. A

Bergman dragged the woman back outside. Someone with arrows sticking out of them limped past the doors.

Something deep within Anca tore apart, and she realized she was screaming. Rolf's hand clamped over her mouth. She bit his hand and tasted blood. He grunted and smacked her. Her vision clouded and snapped back into focus. She kicked him in the shoulder, and he grabbed her ankle to keep from falling into the hearth. She threw herself at him, and he toppled backwards into the embers. Anca tried to dig her thumbs into his eyes. He grabbed her wrists and pulled her arms behind her back; pinning her on the floor with his knee. She could not move.

"You will," he said breathily in her ear. "Behave yourself."

Fury welled up in her chest; hot and smoldering. Her cheek, pressed against the cold floor, felt very hot. She felt a tugging within her chest as though there were strings connected to each of her ribs being plucked.

Rolf pulled her up to her feet and pushed her back into the chair. The stretching in her chest became painful, like the sensation of holding one's hand in water that is too hot. Rolf smoothed his hair and straightened his jerkin.

"You will learn to obey your king," he said.

Anca kicked him between his legs, sending him to the floor. She raced down the steps and into the burning village. People pushed past her, wide-eyed and unblinking, keeping to the very center of the street away from the

flames roiling out of each and every house. They were scrambling towards East Gate - the only way out. She passed Fifna's mother and father.

"Have you seen Fifna?" they cried.

"I..." Anca stammered. Her father grabbed her shoulders.

"Have you seen her?"

She ran in the direction of the stables where she had last seen Tahir tending to Blue. Someone knocked into her, sending her into a wall. Fire poured out of the roof of the house. She shielded her face with her arms against the unbearable heat. Heavy black smoke spilled out of open doors and into the streets.

The people running past had dwindled to none and the stables were finally in sight at the top of the hill. Runa, tears streaming down her face, rushed around the corner of the smithy. She grabbed Anca and started running with her.

"Don't go back there!" Runa shrieked.

Anca struggled against her hold. "I have to find Tahir and Blue!" she yelled. The smoke burned her eyes, and she was becoming breathless. Runa coughed and held her, her fingers digging into her arms.

"Get to safety, Runa, please!" Anca yelled. The roar and heat of the fires was overwhelming.

"Promise me," Runa said, pulling her by her arms. "Promise me you'll stay alive." Anca stared into her big,

dark eyes and nodded. She strained to see past her but Runa pushed her ahead of her.

“Go!” Runa shrieked. “Get away from here, you stupid girl!”

“I’m sorry,” Anca managed to choke out. She veered out of reach and sprinted up the hill. The inferno that was the stables lurched into view. Horses bolted through the doors, their manes tinged with fire.

“Tahir!” Anca screeched, looking around wildly.

“Blue!”

Everything was ablaze; the heat intolerable. Fire wailed through the holes in the stable roof and cinders whipped around her like angry wasps. A massive tower of smoke stretched into the sky. She could go no closer. Taking one last look at the burning stables, she imagined that Tahir had been able to let Blue out.

She turned and ran back down the hill in search of Runa who was nowhere to be seen. Rounding the corner of the barracks where the guards slept, Anca saw a group of Bergmen soldiers standing around someone kneeling on the ground. Wrenching their swords from the person’s body, they stepped away, and she saw who it was.

The world seemed to become bereft of sound and time seemed to slow to an agonizing pace. His face was blank. He slumped to the ground. Ashes coated his robes like snow.

“Father...” Anca said.

She felt the strings in her chest pull so tightly it felt like they would break her bones. The approaching soldier was so close she could see the whites of his eyes. She gripped his face and the strings snapped. Something shifted inside her like a heavy stone, and flames shot out of his nose and eyes. His flesh began to melt, and smoke seeped out his mouth and nostrils. She pulled her hands away, and he fell to the ground and writhed like a dying snake before becoming very still. She looked at her hands, shock pounding through her veins.

One Bergman staggered away into a run while the rest looked on and made hand gestures to ward off evil. Anca stared at them, the pressure in her chest pulsing with each of her breaths. She looked again at what she had done to the soldier on the ground and felt a surge of raw, visceral power. Her fingertips throbbed. She reached out to the place in her chest that was filled with the delicious warmth. Fire bloomed from her fingers, and it felt like a cold, forgotten place in her soul had finally been remembered.

The men backed away. Anca's chest grew hotter. She grabbed the next one she could and filled him with fire. The foul, burnt smell hit her nose, making her gag, but she felt wild and unstoppable. He screamed and scratched wildly at the fire inside his chest. She felt as though a gentle fire smoldered within her bones, and wanted to keep speaking to it; wanted it to continue burning. The

warmth spread to her gut, down to her toes, and still she poured fire into him.

Something hiccupped inside her like a cough, and she felt as if the fire in her bones had been squelched with water. She was too tired to stand. The man writhed on the ground beside her and became still. She sat quietly staring at nothing while tufts of grass smoldered around her. The stench of burning flesh filled her nose. She looked over at her father's motionless form and longed for the warmth in her bones to return. Everything began to darken and she felt overwhelmingly tired.

Shadowy forms appeared at the corners of her vision. Bergmen soldiers began dragging her away. The world snapped back into focus, but there were too many of them pressing around her; binding her limbs with scratchy ropes. She pushed against them. Rolf's right-hand man, Halle, stepped out of the throng. He pressed a bottle to her lips.

"Drink, my queen," he whispered. His eyes were glazed over, slick with tears. Anca squeezed her lips together. Where was her fire now? She reached out within herself, searching fiercely. She could not remember how she had found it before.

"Please drink, Your Majesty," Halle said.

He pinched her nose shut until she gasped for air. Thick, bitter liquid slid down her throat. She coughed and spat, but it had already made it to her stomach. Her limbs

began to feel too heavy to move and her head lolled back. Her body was lifted off the ground. She felt the poison lurking in her stomach and her eyes glazed over.

Kalaheo drowned in a fiery sea.

Sheannah Guillemette

Secrets of the Blackbird

Chapter 1

The ancient forest smelled damp, with the scent of eucalyptus trees permeating the air. The redwood trees were over 300 feet tall covering the sky, making it dark and dreary. The sound of a treacherous encounter could be heard by other creatures through the gaps betwixt the trees. With a thud, Lonan fell to the ground, the creature clawing at her leg, she kicked back with all her might; she flew up abruptly and turned around sending a gust of wind that threw the creature back to hit its head against a tree. The cry of the creature pierced the air, she ran without looking back.

Blood dripped down her right arm, legs covered in gashes. The snapping of branches on the moss-covered ground awoke a panic within her; the creature was fast. She ran deeper into the forest, where the redwoods provided good hiding spots. She hid behind a large tree, her left arm outstretched onto the rough uneven bark. Her right arm dropped to her side, still bleeding. She could hear it growling almost as clearly as the sound each drop of blood made as it hit the ground. Her heart was pounding and her chest was tight. Gasping for breath, she fell to her knees.

Running was an arduous task; flight would have been easier, but she was injured and the possibility of it spotting her would be more likely. The gust she sent held him back only a little; her power was weakened and she couldn't recover fast enough. Her spine tingled. He was near.

"Come on sweetie, I'm not gonna hurt you.... I just want to play," he said.

She could hear his claws dragging in the dirt, feeling the vibrations within her body. With each step he took, the vibrations became stronger and stronger. Still shaking, she ran again, her speed rapidly decreasing each second. She could feel her muscles giving way. She tripped on a tree root, and saw a man, a human. An odd looking fellow, with long wavy black hair, green eyes, and a large grin on his face. He wore a tan vest with what seemed to have hundreds of pockets, his shirt was plaid, red. He carried a green backpack over his shoulders.

"Holy shit, are you ok?"

"You need to get out of here!" Lonan said. A mere human, he would be... He disregarded her and unslung an Albini rifle from his shoulder. Spotting the creature rushing towards them, he shot at it. Wailing ensued, the sounds bloodcurdling, like a pack of coyotes making a kill.

"We need to get out of here, quickly. Can you run?" he asked.

“I...I, wait.” “Who the hell are you and how do you know about the Lycanthrope?” Lonan shouted.

“Uh...how’s ‘bout we talk about this later. I only had one silver bullet and I don’t think I got a great shot, it’s only gonna slow him down.”

“Dammit, okay. I can’t run, I think I sprained my ankle, help me up,” she muttered.

He grabbed her by the arm. Her whole body ached. He put his arm under her shoulder to support her weight. They walked, constantly looking over their shoulders. Light shone through the trees - they were almost there, almost in the sunlight. They walked a little faster, and came out of the trees onto a dirt road. A sign said. “Welcome to Big Sur”.

“We made it!” she exclaimed. “Thank you.” She took his arm off of her and spun around to face him, falling on her ass. She clambered back up and brushed the dirt off her pants. She took a deep breath and proceeded to yell at him.

“Now what the fuck is your deal and how do you know about this shit?”

“Quiet down my dude, I’m Dave.” He looked around and motioned for her to follow him down the road. As he explained, he pulled his backpack off his shoulders and opened the top revealing what was inside. He had everything; there was a canteen of holy water, and he had

garlic, ropes, knives, and random things like band-aids, granola bars, and vitamin C packets.

“I have run into this before plenty of times.” He walked briskly, kicking up dust as he went along. She struggled to keep up. Dave seemed clueless about his surroundings once he started to talk. Well it was more of a long ramble.

“I am in the forest a lot.” “Strange things have always seemed to happen around here, but no one else ever seems to notice it.” He sighed in frustration and pulled out a granola bar and began eating. Still talking...

“So I started doing some research, and by research I mean, I read way too many books, watched a few shows, some really awful movies, but anyways you get the point.” He turned around, granola bar hanging from his mouth, to see that she was back a few feet and not really paying attention to him. He was slightly offended, then realized that he had been speed walking and forgetting that his new companion had been injured. He stopped in his tracks and finished his bar. “Whoops!”

Lonan caught up to him, and was about to interject, when he continued on with his story as if nothing happened. “I found out that there really are supernatural things happening here, and not just werewolves.” Lonan was starting to wish that she had a gun of her own so she could just nick him in the leg; maybe then he’d understand

how she was feeling, or at least he would slow the fuck down. Once he stopped rambling Lonan replied.

“Yes, there are many things out there, but I did not take in over half of what you said. Are you really this clueless?” He gasped, then thought about her question for a second.

“I guess I tend to lose myself in thought at times, I’m sorry.”

She sighed. “It’s fine. I think you could be useful. Let’s get somewhere warm and we can go over what you know in detail. I could use some bandages and a cup of coffee.” Lonan was the kind of woman to push through any pain; no matter how bad it looked, bandages would be enough for now. She would start to feel better after some rest and some caffeine; and she really needed that coffee.

“Alrighty then, I have a cabin not too far from here, plenty of coffee and I have so many bandages! I have large ones, small ones, and the kind that comes in rolls that you cut!” He pointed in the general direction of the cabin. “It is about one kilometer from here. You’re going to love it,” he exclaimed, she thought he seemed happy to finally have company that may understand him.

“Sounds good to me, let’s go, Dave...” She rolled her eyes.

They headed down a small twisted dirt road, her body still aching but her heart now settled. She could breathe again. She had hope that things might take a turn

for the better, but she knew things weren't always that easy.

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