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*Winners of the 2019-2020
English Department Awards*

*Libbie Keeton LaPrade Creative Writing Award
C. Hiatt O'Connor*

*Charles H. Barrett Creative Writing Award
Trinity Byerly, Allie Jones*

*Belle M. Hill Creative Poetry Award
Holly Peterson, Marley Peterson*

*Floyd H. and Rowe M. Crews Memorial Award
Barbara Yauss*

What If We Bled Ink?

What if we bled ink
instead of blood?
How many hands
would be stained black,
not red?
Our bodies would
bleed stories,
drip, drip, drip
onto paper,
ink splattering,
blobs forming
into shapes
forming
into words
forming
into images.

What if we bled ink
instead of blood?

Why not a cut here,
or there?

Stories will
readily flow.

Maybe
just maybe,
people will notice
you
unlike when
there's blood
when they just
declare
you
crazy
and
with
no
self-respect

What if we bled ink
instead of blood?

Unformed words

would make up bodies,
making us all potential
stories,
but would
everyone have
the strength
to bleed theirs out?
It would just take a quick
cut,
a dip of your finger
into the ink.
The words will come
if you let them.

What if we bled ink
instead of blood?
Stories would be made
out of people,
not artificial ink.
We would be
touched by these
stories,
their blood
stained on our hands.

Everywhere
ink would leak,
absorbing into
every pore,
a comma
in the bathroom tile,
a fragment
in the highest
tree branch,
a participial phrase
in the corner
of your bedroom.

Everywhere
words would be stained
black and blue,
but there will
never be
enough ink-blood
to satisfy.

Brass Woman, Black Light

I am a brass woman,
And not brass for this season only-
Because I'll never be dark enough in the summer to be
considered
Black gold, and I don't care because I never wanted to be.
But I still love my black gold sisters
Because brass isn't as far away as you think.
Light skin is dark but- many ways light.

I am hot chocolate light
I am beige painted office door light
I am sawdust light
I am the breeze against colorism,
But doesn't blow hard enough to blow it away,
Light.
But my roots are not.

My roots are black sand on an island rare
My roots are rich dark liquor
My roots are rose that grew in the concrete,
Strong,
Branded across this page, permanent.
And I voice it like not like delicate sketches,
But like black paint splatters-
Across white blindness.
I am black light.

A Kindly Kidnapping

Autumn sat on the hill above her town, nibbling the end of her paintbrush. None of the colors were quite right to catch the way the sun glinted on the pond. A shadow passed overhead, darkening her canvas a moment, then a breeze rustled her unruly orange hair. There was a dull thud behind her.

“Excuse me, Miss.”

Autumn turned around to come face to face with a red dragon. She swallowed, waiting for his fiery breath, his talons.

“That is quite a beautiful rendition of the countryside, I must say.” He looked over her shoulder, squinting at her canvas.

“Uh, thank you,” she managed.

The dragon turned his gaze back to her for a moment before looking down at his feet.

“Is there a reason you stopped by?” Autumn asked, perplexed by his strange behavior.

“Well, I, um,” her shuffled his feet, then muttered, “Might as well get this over with.”

Autumn waited patiently.

“You,” the dragon cleared his throat. “You wouldn’t happen to be a princess, would you?”

Autumn snorted. “No.” Her, a princess?

“Do you know of any in the nearby area?”

“Princesses?” Autumn raised an eyebrow.

The dragon nodded.

Autumn shrugged. “The nearest castle’s a hundred miles to the East.” Not that she was even sure the fort counted, let alone had a princess in it.

“That won’t do,” the dragon sighed, shuffling his feet. “Hmm. What to do, what to do.”

Autumn tucked her paintbrush behind her ear, smiling.

He muttered under his breath for a few minutes before looking back at her. “This is so awkward,” he groaned. “Listen, would you mind, and only if your completely okay with it, but is it alright if,” he paused, took a deep breath, then finished, “If I kidnap you?”

Autumn blinked. “You’re asking my permission?”

“Of course!” the dragon answered. “And I’ll provide you your own private quarters, a nice bed. It’s only just halfway up the mountain by your town, so your parents could stop by any time to see you, and...” He trailed off, looking away. “You don’t want to, do you?”

“I,” Autumn just stared at him. What kind of dragon asked permission to kidnap someone? All the stories she heard involved swooping in and carrying poor girls off in their talons. “Why are you asking?”

The dragon blinked. “It would be awfully rude to just swoop in and take you. And I simply couldn’t abide the idea that I was keeping someone against their will.”

“Then,” Autumn tried to puzzle this strange dragon out. “Why kidnap someone in the first place?”

The dragon shuffled his wings and looked anywhere but her. “My parents,” he finally muttered.

“Your, parents?”

He nodded. “They keep insisting that I need to become a better dragon, and step one in the is to kidnap a princess.”

“So you want to kidnap me to keep your parents happy?” Autumn never thought a sentence like that would ever come out of her mouth. Then again, she’d never planned on talking to a dragon in her life either.

The dragon nodded. “They threatened to send me to Uncle Leroy if I don’t get better.” He shuddered.

For a moment, Autumn almost pitied him. She looked up the mountain he had pointed to. She could definitely get some good landscapes from up there.

“Let me ask my mom first,” she said.

“You mean you’ll do it?” the dragon brightened considerably. Autumn shrugged. “As long as Mom and Dad are okay with it.”

“Could I meet them?”

“I guess,” Autumn replied. “Let me go get them.” This was going to be one of the strangest conversations she’d had with her parents. But given the one she’d just finished...

...

“Autumn dear, you’re back early.” Her mother straightened from the laundry she was doing.

“Where’s dad?” Autumn asked.

“At the shop,” her mother frowned. “Why?”

“Someone wants to talk with you guys,”

“Talk with us?” her mother crossed her arms. “Autumn, what is going on?”

“A dragon want to know if he can kidnap me,” she shrugged. “But I didn’t want to agree without asking you guys. Now he wants to meet you.”

“I don’t think that’s how kidnappings work.”

“I didn’t either,” Autumn answered. “But he’s not your normal dragon.”

Her mother sighed. “Let me go get your father.”

A little while later, Iris led her parents up the hill where her easel was to meet the dragon. He was still sitting there admiring her painting.

“Mr. Dragon?” she called when he didn’t seem to notice them.

“Oh! Goodness me, I am sorry,” her jumped up, then bowed his neck down so his head dipped. “A pleasure to meet the two of you. I do hope you are alright with me kidnapping your daughter.”

“We have a choice?” her father asked, despite the fact she’d assured him the dragon had asked her if it was alright.

“Of course!” the dragon responded. “There should always be a choice. And I assure you, I will take splendid care of her. Unless my parents stop by for a weekend. Then she might have to do a bit of cleaning and cowering.”

Autumn grinned at her parents expressions. “I told you he wasn’t normal.”

“And you’ll be able to stop by as well,” the dragon continued. “I’m only halfway up the mountain.”

“I,” her father stuttered. Her mother just stared.

“Can I please?” she asked.

“Oh, and one last thing. Don’t worry about losing income. I’ll ensure you’re paid for your daughter’s services.”

“Paid?” her mother gasped.

Autumn raised an eyebrow. He hadn’t mentioned that before.

“You really thought I’d deprive you of income?” the dragon sighed. “I suppose you do. Oh the reputation I have to deal with. Of course I’ll pay you. One gold coin a week.”

Both her parents stared. Even Autumn was shocked. That was enough to live on. Her father’s store barely brought that in.

“Is that enough?” the dragon arched his scaly eyebrows.

“Plenty,” her father managed.

“So we’re in agreement then?”

“As long as Autumn’s okay with it,” her mother looked over at her.

“Good,” the dragon sighed as Autumn grinned, bouncing slightly. “Will tomorrow morning work?”

“Why not now?” Autumn asked.

“Well, I figured you might want to pack,” the dragon answered. “And also, I’d like to play it up a bit so it looks like a kidnapping. To impress the parents.”

“So screaming and flailing?” Autumn grinned.

“Lots please.”

“Would an angry horde of farmers with pitchforks help too?” her father smiled.

“Could you truly arrange that?” the dragon looked excited.

“I’ll see what we can work out,” her father chuckled.

“Will the fields to the South of town work?” the dragon asked. “That’s the best place to see from my cave.”

“It should work fine,” her father nodded.

“Sounds like a plan,” the dragon smiled. “See you tomorrow, Miss,” he hesitated.

“Autumn,” she supplied.

“Autumn,” he nodded. “Mine’s Harold, by the way.”

“See you tomorrow, Mr. Harold,” Autumn grinned. This was going to be so much fun.

...

The next morning, Autumn worked alongside several of the men of the village in the fields. She glanced towards the mountain, tightening the straps of her knapsack. This was going to be so much fun. She saw a glint of red flash in the sunlight, then Harold’s form.

“Get ready,” she called. “Here he comes.”

The men around her nodded, but kept working, not glancing up at the sky. She followed their example. It wouldn’t be long now. She wondered where his parents were. Still in the cave? Would they believe the spectacle?

A roar shattered the stillness of the morning. Harold swooped over the houses of the village, bellowing.

Autumn let out a high pitch scream as she ran across the field. A set of talons latched around her waist, lifting her off the ground. Twisting this way and that, she screamed louder. The men in the field were doing a marvelous job of running in circles, throwing their pitchforks wide of Harold’s flight path, and yelling indecipherable words.

In fact, most of the town was running towards them, her father leading the charge. Harold circled a few times to allow them ample opportunity to throw things, then winged off towards where Autumn assumed the cave was.

After a few more screams, she slumped in his grip, closing her eyes and feigning unconsciousness.

Not too much later, Autumn heard the sound of clapping. A moment later, there was the sound of the clicking of talons as she assumed Harold landed.

“Good job, son,” a deep voice rang out. “And not even a scratch. Now, was it that hard?”

“I suppose not,” Harold sighed. Autumn felt herself set down on a cold stone floor. “Do you think I killed her?” He actually sounded concerned.

“Nonsense, my boy,” another voice answered. “You simply did a fine job scaring her.”

“If she did die,” the rumbling voice added, “Just roast and eat her.”

“Anyway,” the second voice continued, “Your father simply must get back to his job. We have yet another of those pesky knights jabbering about the princess your father ate last week, and his whining is beginning to wear on my forty-third nerve.”

“You really should try roast princesses, son,” the deep voice again. “They’re simply exquisite.”

“Yes,” the other voice continued, “And I’m glad everything worked out well, but we simply must be going.”

“Bye, Mom.” Harold sounded weary. Not that Autumn blamed him with the fast paced conversation.

“Goodbye son.”

There was silence, then another nudge. “Are you quite alright, Autumn?”

She opened her eyes to see Harold frowning.

“I’m terribly sorry if I hurt you. Did I? I tried to be gentle.”

Autumn looked around. “Where’d your parents go?”

“Oh, they were on the mirror,” Harold nodded at a ten foot mirror that stood in a wooden frame facing out the cave entrance. He shivered from head to toe. “I don’t know how father can abide eating people.”

“The mirror?” Autumn didn’t see any dragons on the mirror.

“It’s magical. That way they can check up on me without leaving their cave. And I don’t have to worry about them frightening anyone.”

“Oh.” She looked around. There were indeed halfway up the mountain. The view was incredible. Looking into the cave, she saw a massive mountain of gold. Cups, vases, coins, brick, and jewelry mounded nearly to the ceiling in several places. “Is that,” she couldn’t seem to find her voice.

“That?” Harold turned, glaring at the mound. He snorted, a burst of flame shot out of his nostrils, casting an orange glow over the gold. “That is a conundrum. I’ve been half tempted to push it all down the mountainside for the space it...” he stopped as Autumn half choked, half laughed.

She tried to image the reaction of the village should he ever do it.

“But,” he continued. “I heard that it’s valuable and apparently all good dragons are supposed to collect it, so when I found it here when I moved in, I just shoved it all aside for later.”

She realized now why he was willing to give up a gold coin a week for her to stay there. “So if you don’t like gold,” she said, standing. “What do you like?” Or was he so strange that he didn’t even hoard things.? Not that that would surprise her.

“Paintings,” he sighed wistfully. “Unfortunately, most of them already have owners.” He sighed again. “Would you like a tour?” he raised a scaly eyebrow at her.

“Sure.”

Harold turned and started into the torch-lit cave. Autumn followed beside him. As they continued on, the floor was littered with gold coins. Autumn tried to keep her balance the best she could, but then Harold’s tail brushed one of the massive piles, setting off an avalanche of gold that buried her to her waist.

He sighed, looking up at the ceiling. “See what a bother it can be?”

Autumn never thought she’d seen enough gold to cover her feet, let alone bury her to her waist. She shifted, trying to get out, but found she couldn’t move against the weight.

“Here,” Harold reached out and gently pulled her out, all the while glaring at the gold. “Why don’t you ride on my back?” he suggested.

“I, if you don’t mind,” she sputtered. *Ride a dragon. This was just getting crazier and crazier.*

“Right,” he said once she had settled on his back. “Let me show you around the place.”

Sunflowers

Bright and beautiful when they bloom and dark when they die baby that's you and I. We came from nothing and grew together though pain and pride. We collided through the night and through the rain we rose like sunflowers on a dark paved road. We always thought we were alone but we were together even when it was hard. There's nothing else like the warmth of the one you love even if it's cold at first. The first push through the hard ground hurts the most but it's worth all the bruises and bumps. I know it hurts this time but we're still fighting and that's the point. Hush dear I know it's been a difficult year but trust me darling we're gonna bloom this year. I've planted my roots in you and I'm gonna water them till the day you water me. I'm growing on you the way you grew in me, my heart is full of your petals and stems. There's no one else I'd rather grow inside me. The world's not perfect and the world's not kind but we have each other so well be fine.

The Neighborhood Named After the Woods That Were Once There.

The cul-de-sac is now empty.
Lone basketball hoops on opposite sides;
They haven't been touched in years.

It makes me reminisce on the days and nights
we spent outside, not caring on how many
games of Sharks and Minnows we played
or the layers of sunburn we collected.

The summer days that evolved into nights.
Mosquito bites scraped into scabs, then into scars,
that made constellations on my pale legs.
Big Dipper, Orion's Belt, Cancer.

Looking up, my chlorine-scented hair
dribbles down my back.
The crackling simmer of Fourth-of-July
fireworks made us squeal and giggle.

The sidewalk chalk bike roads we made
staining our palms and knees pastel pinks and blues
and drove our scooters and rollerblades on until they were
destroyed by the afternoon thunderstorms.

Trees start growing and throwing acorns at us
while we sat below, eating the afternoon watermelon my dad cut
for us.

Green grass turned into burnt and brown tissue paper
crunching underneath our naked feet.

Razor scooters that are rusted and weathered
craved pathways on the
sidewalks that never washed away.

We brought our dogs out onto the street,

and ran with them, not caring about the rocks that were stuck
to the calluses on our heels.

The few barks caused the rest of the dogs our neighbors had
to serenade and howl at us, it seemed to make us run faster.

But now, instead of my friends crowding the streets,

it is now hand-me-down Camrys.

No one's outside anymore. Yet, sometimes

I hear the street calling for me to

strip off my shoes and run.

Traveling Pages

The fifth fiction shelf of the Mt. Hermon Branch Library has been my home for twenty-five years. The bright lights flickering, the air conditioner's hum, the shelving of my peers, and the high pitched beep signaling that a book has been checked out or returned has been the melody of my time here. I have sat idle on this same self ever since the last date stamped on my passport in broken up ink: November 18, 2000.

So you can imagine my surprise when I feel the rough hands of a human pick me up. It takes me a while to settle after they flip me over to look at my back. I hope my bio entices them. I hear their sigh before they stretch me out. My spine cracks when they bend back my front cover. My surprise is followed by my pages vibrating faster. Will this be the day? Will this be the day that I finally get to leave the library again?

I clench my teeth and hold my breath as the human examines my scars. They see the water damaged pages from that lake day or when I was dropped in the steaming bath of a patron. My page that has been taped back together by a particularly stressed human catches their attention for a few moments. I see their eyebrows shoot up, but they continue examining me. They see the page with a yellow blob and quickly turn it with a disgusted face. I want to scream that this is just mustard from a careless human one day in July, but they keep going. They look at the writing in my margins that hadn't been erased. I still remember the way the graphite pressed into my skin. It didn't hurt as bad as I had heard from the other books. Their skin was permanently marked by words written in ink.

These are all my physical flaws caused by previous humans. Now they are flipping through and seeing my yellowed skin flashing by. Slamming me closed, they look back at my cover and I see them shake their head slowly. All I can hear is my own pages rustling as I wait for the human to decide. They don't look happy as they throw me in a box with other books. I look around and mostly see books that I have never seen before. Some books look like me, but some look shiny and new. Their library binding isn't scuffed up and they don't have coffee stains on their faces. They don't have mysterious stains on them or dog-eared pages. The smell of different patrons' houses doesn't cling to them.

When I look to my left I am met with immense relief. There is *Wicked* with his yellowed pages and torn cover. He traveled with me during the trip with the stressed human. We were shoved in their book-bag for a month before they decided it was time to finally give up on being able to read us. *Wicked* is a floppy, oversized paperback. His creator's face takes up most of his back and there is green detailing all over him. He got this from the machine though, not by a human.

Wicked looks over at me and I see him jump before he composes himself. His cover is wet with tears coming from his title and with his author's name quivering he says, "Hello, *American Psycho*. It's been a while since we have talked."

"Yes, it's been about fifteen years. How has your shelf been? Have you been out of the library lately?"

"Oh, it's been okay. A bit cold because of the vents but lately the shelf has been so full that the body heat of one another has helped. Sadly, I haven't been out of the library since that day that the human brought us back with the rips. It still hurts at times and I can't smile as freely. What about you?"

"My shelf has been okay. There hasn't been much change, but they added another clone of me the other week. The clone is crisp and has already been checked out twice. He told me about his travels the other day after hours. I haven't left since 2000."

"The clones always freak me out. There are three clones of *Me Before You* on my shelf and they always talk about their adventures at night. Each of their passports has had to be replaced because they were so full. I only know this because they constantly brag about it."

“Do you know what is happening?”

“Oh no, I was hoping you would know.”

I don't get to reply because the human that picked me up a few moments ago lifts the box from the ground. I hear them grunt as they hold me and all the other books. I'm starting to get whiplash as I keep sliding all over the place. They shift us as the door is opened and I feel the sweet, crisp air on my face for the first time in years. After more turbulence, the human opens the trunk of their vehicle. I hear birds chirping as we are lowered down on more boxes of books. As soon as the human closes the door, the quietness of the trunk erupts with frantic whispers.

I can't focus on one voice because everyone is yelling at the same time. I do hear one statement that sends chills down my spine: “Do you think we are being thrown away?”

My pages start racing again, but then I try to stay calm. I try to communicate with Bret Easton Ellis, but sadly I have not had a clear line of communication for years. I know that I have new siblings that have been made over the years. *The Rules of Attraction* told me that just the other day she had been at someone's house that had the news on. There was an interview with our creator on the TV about his new book. However, I have to hold out hope that he will help me. He created me, so he has to be able to save me. I send through one more plea for help before I think “What Would Bret Easton Ellis Do” (WWBEED)?

Well, he wouldn't be so scared that his pages were shaking. I think he would stay calm and examine his surroundings. I try to breathe in and out slowly and look around. As I start to calm down, my eyes adjust to the darkness of the trunk. I see “BOOKS” written in black sharpie on boxes I can see. I hear the faint hum of the radio as a rough voice sings, “Pour some sugar on me.” I've never heard the song, but I don't understand why the human wants sugar on them. Getting food on you is the worst. I've been blessed to only have the mustard altercation, but I have heard my peers shudder as they told me about their ketchup-stained or Cheeto-dusted skin. I even heard a horror story of one book that ended up back at the library with its face torn off because their patron had spilled sloppy joe meat on them. I still cringe about that.

I always get off track. I swear it is the way he made me. Ellis'

writing style lives out through me.

Okay, so looking to my left I see a sliver of a window. The outside is flashing by the window. Blurs of green and light gray flood my vision. The smell of the car is interesting. It's a mixture of funky body odor and acidic oranges. My body is pressed up against others on all sides. We are still sliding around in the box, but not nearly as much as when the human was carrying us.

After about twenty minutes the sun finishes rising and we come to a halting stop. I can't tell where we are. Are we at the dumpster? The human opens the trunk and I smell the dampness of an early morning. What is important is that I don't smell the rank smell of trash. The boxes to my right are unloaded first. One on top of the other: it's a good thing that the sides of the boxes have holes to breathe. Whoa, the up and down again is giving me motion sickness. My box is finally put on top of another and I hear the slam of the car trunk. I take a moment to look at my handler. They have light blue eyes, a scruffy dark brown beard, and a beaded necklace around their dark neck. Their frayed shirt is a nice blue that enhances the color of their eyes. As my eyes travel down, they turn away from me.

"Hello, is anybody there? I need help with these boxes."

A softer, silkier voice answers, "Hello, John. I'm glad you're here. The other librarian assistants haven't arrived and we need to fill up the shelves before we open at nine."

The new human picks up my box first. The ride with them is void of turbulence and soon I hear the ring of a bell and feel the shift of their body. The smell of lavender meets me as my box is placed on a table. "Brian, you can start shelving these."

Brian starts shuffling through the books around me. Each book is taken out of the box and set in a particular order. Brian's cold hands pick me up and we quickly head to their right. Where could I be going now?

I hear soft music in the background as we make it to a shelf labeled "Fiction E." Brian slides me into place on the scratched up wooden bookcase. Luckily, Brian placed me on the shelf so that I can see out. As I look out, I see a blue laminated sign that reads, "**FRIENDS OF THE LIBRARY BOOK SALE: \$1 Hardbacks and \$.25 Paperbacks.**"

A Place Still Here Without You

Knees tucked, curled in my sick bed
Or pallet as Papa called it

A dandelion-yellow blanket, folded in half
Picked and worn, its fabric running thin
Carefully laid on the living room couch, with a cream pillow
Whose purpose is excess
Stored on the shelf in the closet, with the towels.

The heater glows beside me, humming orange and hot amber
The side of my thigh and back warming.
The smell of tomato soup lingers from the kitchen,
Soon to be followed by the crinkling of a Ritz cracker pack
Intricately placed on a plate, in a circle around a bowl.
Tom and Jerry flicker on the TV
Pots banging, glass shattering, Tom gasping for breath as Jerry
escapes into his hole.

I glance at my grandma, sitting on the couch diagonal to me
She fingers the fabric of a blouse
Delicately weaving the needle and thread, pausing for no mistakes
With her perfectly filed, rose-colored nails

At the time, I didn't know I wasn't the only one who was sick
Yours unlike mine of strep-throat, occasionally the flu

Most often a “stomach-ache,” that kept me home from school
So that I could come to this place
A place that is still here
Just without you and your gentle hands
That once placed my Ritz crackers in a circle, around my tomato
soup.

Evening Flight

A bat juts out into the early evening sky
Its journey is ever tinged with mystery

Its path appears disorganized, but the destination must be clear
This winged creature ventures out in the ephemeral daylight with
all purpose

It changes course, turning loops, dipping down, and twisting about
Nevertheless, it advances

The steady fluttering of this small midnight bird commands
fascination
For, the rhythm of one's wings is like no other

IHOP's Secret Ingredient

“Anything else you guys would like with that?” I ask while unloading table 11's scorching plates off the tray I am balancing with my left hand.

“JESUS! You didn't even bring us silverware!”

“Sorry, ma'am.” In my head, I sigh . . . here we go again. If it wasn't the silverware (the hostess' job), it would have been the imaginary hair in the food or the coffee not being fresh.

Practically cutting me off she says: “well the first thing you need to do is check if guests have silverware. My God IHOP doesn't know how to train. If they keep hiring like this . . .”

I think on one of my college applications I said I had a passion for serving people; that was obviously before I worked at a restaurant.

In the heat of embarrassment, my thoughts scatter and I'm sure my face matches the red of my ironed shirt. They say red is used by restaurants as psychological manipulation to tempt customers into eating more. I say red is used to cover the blood stains. I race to grab two silverware rolls. I turn to the oversized man (sitting with the silverware lady) as he quietly asks for mayonnaise and a Diet Pepsi. While expecting to quickly retreat, I am summoned by the unoriginal “Where is your manager?”

With a knot in my throat, the words clump out like thick pancake batter when I tell Mr. Randy. Now I have to figure out how to tell my drunk customers that their food will not be done for over 30 minutes because we're down to one cook. They never do

understand. Table 11 and the drunk rogues are now allies, laughing as I pretend to not notice. I avoid 11 until my conscience makes me drop off the mayo. While cleaning 51, I overhear the woman telling Mr. Randy he should have never hired me and going on to say that his managing will lead to the closing of this IHOP. His lanky arm sleeved in blue slams a cup on the table and he yells with a furrowed brow until the silverware woman laughs: “Oh look, now I hurt him.” In my two weeks working there, I have never seen Mr. Randy get upset before. What an honor.

At the end of my shift at 7AM, Mr. Randy helps me clock out, his frail white fingers fighting with the touch-screen computer screen. I normally only work 5PM to 1AM, but one of the graveyard-shift servers did not come in. I had no choice but to stay: there was only one other server. Mr. Randy couldn't have wiped all the tables himself, or filled all the syrups, or taken the front-line bullets. Mr. Randy's lanky arched back, glasses, and tired, thinning hairs tell me he has seen his fair share of double-shifts, too. I found out later that he hadn't had a day off in a month and in his whole career only called out three times. I don't understand. I already have multiple burns on my hands, an aching tray arm, and more anxiety than I started with. I can't imagine his battle scars from a lifetime of this

...

Most employees use ranting or smoking as a coping mechanism; some use rumors: “I know you think Randy is great an' all, but,” a server leans in and whispers, “he aint nothan more than a crack-head who wants his end-of-year bonus, ya know. That coworker,” she points, “said he saw him covering up his tracks on the bathroom sink. That's why he always actin' goofy and shit. And if you saw his wife...” The girl with yellow teeth, and two kids by different fathers, who believes two hours late is early and who later confessed to me that she's addicted to drugs, proceeds to fire away at Mr. Randy.

In addition to using ranting, smoking, and rumoring, some also use balloons. The latter is, of course, more effective. Our IHOP's

cameras are used to spying on newly-inflated Kid's Night balloons being tied secretly onto the back of a server's apron. We embarrass ourselves, walking our erratic circles, until a customer notifies us or the laughter gives it away. The latest time, four red balloons were snuck onto Mr. Randy's belt loop and mocked his quick propulsive gait around the restaurant. The laughter did not give it away because the sound is commonplace for him. I'm surprised he hasn't fired all of us, yet.

Mr. Randy doesn't just use balloons to cope; he uses a balloon approach to manage. For example, on a lovely Friday evening around 7PM, a lower-ranked manager cut a third of my section to give to a new worker (a 30-year-old woman who complains about not having enough money). Jokingly I told that manager, "Oh that's because you like her more," and she snapped back, in her Moroccan accent, "NO, ho-ney, it's because you can't handle it," and then didn't sit any customers in my section the whole night.

I zoned out and rolled silverware a little too carefully. As soon as Mr. Randy walked in, I felt safe. Our 10PM rush began as expected, but I noticed Mr. Randy hunched over a table (that was colonized from me) desperately trying to stack the dishes on a tray to take them to the dish pit. Actually, now that I was not scribbling the events of the day on an order pad (titled "Why today sucked ☹"), I saw that the whole left side of the restaurant had dirty plates and cups on the tables, pancake pieces and crayons littering the floor. The "new server" took her tips and ran. I could not bear to watch Randy take on this disaster alone, so I grabbed a tray and started wiping. At the end of the shift, when the knot in my throat was reduced to a pebble, he let me rant to him in his office. After I narrated the horrors of the day, using the "Why today sucked ☹" list, another server came in the office to ask Randy for something.

Randy smirked and replied, "I can help you in a minute. Don't ask Barbara, though. She won't be able to handle it."

He pointed out the red balloon of the situation, somewhere I wasn't used to looking. The same way a strategically placed balloon breaks up the routine of the day and reminds customers that

their server is human, Randy's joke broke the closed-loop of my thoughts, giving me a freeing perspective. I laughed along with him.

It seems as if, to him, there is no inappropriate time to make a joke. Once, a couple came in and they smelled so bad that our hostess sat them at the farthest end of the restaurant (so that only the server had to suffer). Another server Jeremy and a hostess played Rock-Paper-Scissors, the loser having to stand next to that table for 30 seconds. Randy was asked why they smell so bad and he remorsefully told the employee that it is due to a disease. The employee felt slightly ashamed and asked sincerely which disease it was.

"The disease is called not showering," Mr. Randy responded, all the while grinning.

Another time, Randy told Jeremy to hold a box for him. Randy continued with his general manager duties, or so he pretended. After minutes of Jeremy awkwardly holding the box and glancing around, Randy appeared around the corner smirking. Of course, Randy would abuse his managerial power by making an employee hold a box for no reason: a small punishment for Jeremy sneaking balloons onto his belt loops.

Or once Jeremy and I surprised our fellow-troops with some donuts, which we left in the office. Later, Randy flagged me down, so I pranced over to the front to meet him. I asked, smiling, if he saw the donuts. Mr. Randy responded, his smile giving away the wit that is to come: "I just took one. . .

. . . but I am diabetic, so if I go into shock it is your fault."

. . .

In my first sleep-deprived delirium of the summer, I ask him why table 11 wanted to talk to him. He pauses. The thin, lopsided smirk of his confirms that I am not in trouble. In his usual low mumble he replies: "The guy said he spread mayo on his pancakes thinking it was the butter he asked for. He just wanted new pancakes." Randy leaves out the woman's harsh remarks. We tear up laughing and he says "remind me, I have to tell you a story" and then gives me mistake chicken wings, in a to-go box, as a silent thank you.

...

But I don't have the wound-mending humor that he has. That is the difference. I cannot see right, and the failures of the day begin to permeate my tired, defenseless mind. The whole 15-minute drive home, while trying to keep my eyes open, I reflect on the day and sob. I do not open my windows or turn the radio on. How does Randy do this? His whole life dedicated to a restaurant that will never be clean and to people who will never be happy.

The IHOP to-go box falls off the passenger seat, and my chicken wings take one last fly onto the dirty car floor. I laugh.

Persephone, Reimagined

A young goddess sat alone in an daisy field,
Plucked flowers adorning her earthly crown.

The story goes that she was taken;
Forced kicking and screaming from a life of comfort and
growth.

Persephone disappeared far beneath the surface;
She desperately didn't want to be found.

Oh mother, the child cried with anger bubbling through her,
Don't you know me? Don't you know I prayed for rescue?
Don't you know my power, Mother?

Life sat side by side with death and welcomed his embrace warmly.

Persephone commandeered the chariot,
the horses of fire bowing to her will and strength,
the ropes not daring to hold her back,
her husband to be finally allowing her freedom.

Oh Mother, the queen giggled with teeth bared,
You will know my will soon enough.
I am hailed as royalty, not protected as an innocent maiden.

Do you still think I was *forced* to eat the fruit of my people, Mother?

Your World

Red bougainvillea
crackles its fiery
colors against pure
white.

Like newlyweds,
the church has
been prepared.

You, by Picasso, a Cubist's
dream: tattoos, bare
shoulders, red lips and
flowered hair.

Aztec *morena* in an
old, cracked mirror:
curving cheekbone
meets your gaze.

Evening's dance
floor, sways with
the stars, whiskey
flows through blood
and veins.

Sirens wail of death
in streets, jagged
bottles broken in the
rain.

The Truth

On the day you realize the truth, the crows in the trees are cackling with glee.
Your eyes still burn from the sleepless nights you spent waiting on that creature that has haunted your being for months.
You knew (you thought) you must kill the that creature, stop its nightly prowling, its constant dragging existence.
That creature that always sneaks through your barriers, leaving tufts of blood-blacken fur
amid the metal teeth of the fences, finding every weakness in the armor, every weakness you thought only you knew existed.
That creature that left its jagged footprints pacing to your door and then slinking back away into the midnight-blackened forest (with edges gilded by the full moon).
And so, you decided. You decided to find the creature.
And so, you waited.
Night after night, you watched Orion slither across the sky, leading his hounds down an endless path that brings him nowhere.
And you wondered if immortality in the stars isn't really a punishment.
And so, you waited.
And night after night, you saw nothing.
But this night, this night you think will be the same quiet fear as the others, you make a mistake.
The sun appears in the hills and you have seen nothing.

For days, you continue your nightly vigil, sitting the cold, silent rooms of your fortress like an animal too tired to vie for freedom. As you watch the heavens wheel over the trees, you notice with horror and frantic understanding that the hounds of Orion have bounded far ahead of where they stood mere seconds before. You have been asleep. And you can feel in your hands and in the way the air moves, that the creature visited while your vigil was broken. Held in the pale fingers of the dawn, you trace the tracks left by the beast. And you notice something, perhaps something you should have noticed long ago. The ragged claw marks disappearing into the forest are below those that are returning. And you understand that the beast was inside all along.

A Warhorse Does Not Ride

A warhorse does not ride without her knight
A gallant steed may be love's truest form
As you rush into battle, let me fight.
And hand in hand we'll take the world by storm

Or I can be the silver blade you thrust
Right at your hip I'll stay until you call
When enemies have destroyed all your trust
I'll fend them off and never let you fall

If not your sword, then let me be your shield
When someone strikes you, let me take that blow.
I'll stand up tall and strong, I will not yield.
My love for you is all I've come to know

No matter what, I'm loyal to the bone
You do not have to fight this war alone

Barbara Yauss



Overcast

Jacklyn Harris



Colored Light

Kristopher Forren



The Manor, 2019

Anthony Ayers



Male Leafcutter Bee on Goldenrod Leaf

Melinda Wheeler



Shadows

Holly Peterson



Interaction (8/10)

excerpt from *FERRA*

Part One: Teeth

As Ray carried the last of the cardboard boxes from the truck into Caspian's apartment, he growled in pain. "Ah!" He stumbled to keep a grip on the light box as he shook his right hand loose, and looked down to notice the three small pricks in his ring finger that began to slowly seep with blood. "What the hell is in here, man?" Ray cursed, tripping through the front door as he glared at the side of the cardboard where his hand had been. Just like the holes poked in his skin, there were a number of punctured holes in the box, where points of slender metal were sticking out. As if moving all this crap wasn't annoying enough for him.

"I don't really know," Caspian replied to his brother as he started to tear open some of the containers that were already scattered over his front room floor.

"Dammit." Throwing down the box with everything else, Ray grumbled to himself as he popped his finger in his mouth and sucked the blood off.

Having heard the annoyance in Ray's voice, Caspian rolled his eyes. "Yeah, sorry Grandma didn't have the decency to label her shit before she died," he murmured back sarcastically, though he didn't speak loud enough for Ray to hear.

Ray disappeared into the bathroom for a moment, returning with a small bandaid on.

"You don't have to stay. I can go through everything myself." It was obvious that Ray was impatient for this to be over, so Caspian graced him with dismissal.

"Cool," Ray mumbled back, immediately turning to leave.

Just before he did, Caspian stopped him by asking, “Are you sure you don’t want any of it? She might have some interesting --”

“Nah, I’m good,” Ray interrupted, glancing at the time. “Grandma and I were never close like you were, so... nah. You know Mom doesn’t want any of it either, right?” Caspian knew that well, but Ray seemed to make a point of it. “Just throw away what you don’t keep yourself.” With one hand already on the doorknob, he waved with his back to his brother. “I’ll drop by tomorrow to pick up the truck. See ya.”

“Okay. Bye,” Caspian muttered before rolling his eyes again.

Alone, as usual, Caspian resumed picking through the boxes one by one. His grandmother was ostracized from most of the family except for him, which explained how he ended up with the rest of her belongings.

Most of it was just normal stuff that he had seen his grandma use and enjoy in the past. Her tarot cards, incense, and amulets were all items that he had no personal use for, but he couldn’t bring himself to throw any of it away. They all played a significant part in his childhood with his grandma and every bizarre ritual she liked to demonstrate for him. Even if he never used any of it himself, he would treasure it in the years to come without her.

Riffling through a stack of worn books, Caspian frowned as he thought back on a memory of his mother when he was only a boy. He recalled being at his grandmother’s house and wandering around her study. Simple-minded and beyond inquisitive back then, Caspian had reached up and pulled a book off her shelf entitled *Writing Shadows* that he attempted to read. When his mother saw him, she dragged him into the bathroom and spanked him until it hurt to sit down. Caspian remembered crying for hours. Later that night when his mother went out to run errands, his grandmother comforted him and held him in her arms as she quietly read a passage from the book aloud to him. He couldn’t recall anything significant about the snippet she read to him, but he never forgot the cruelty of his mother and the sweet nature of his grandmother that day. *Writing Shadows* was among the collection of books he had inherited from her after her death. He’d have to sit down and read it one day. For now, he set it off to the side with everything else he couldn’t bear to throw away.

The last box he came to reflected a hobby that she'd picked up in the last years she was alive: making crochet dolls. Caspian smiled as he reached inside and lifted out the small handheld figures made of yarn. He relived the time when his grandma invited him over to teach him how to crochet. His brother certainly made fun of him for it, but he found that it was a relaxing pastime, not that he ever did it without his grandma's company.

Each doll he pulled out of the box was quite unique to the others. The yarn colors and patterns varied from each skin tone to the clothes they were wearing to the hairstyle they were given. Some were clearly more aged than others as there were pieces of yarn that were torn or falling off the older ones. Caspian imagined his grandmother, sitting alone in her rocking chair, creating these dolls as if they replaced her missing family members. It was sad.

In total, there were about fifteen human dolls with soft facial expressions. Each doll came with a handwritten tag tied to their back that gave their chosen name and a short line of description; as if each had their own personality. Caspian laughed as he read them to himself. One was of a pale girl with small black eyes and long yellow hair, braided down her back, tied off with a bow. Her tag said: *Lilly - She enjoys tennis on the weekends. The bow in her hair is her favorite.*

With each doll, Caspian read their tag with interest. What a fun imagination his grandma had, to come up with fake hobbies and interests for each of them.

At the very bottom of the box, however, there was one extreme outlier. The only animal of the bunch; this was a bear. Made from blue yarn, it was only slightly larger in mass than the other dolls, and still fit in Caspian's hand.

"What the..." Caspian furrowed his eyebrows as he attempted to pick it up. With a slight jerk, he realized that part of it was caught on the cardboard. At that realization, he carefully slid the pieces of metal out of their fitted holes and lifted the bear up where he could see it better.

Sitting on its legs with its short nub-like tail keeping it upright, it sat rigidly in his hand. Besides the fact that this was a blue animal, the most glaring difference was its mouth. Unlike all the other dolls who merely had a few strings of yarn curved into a smile, this

creature had its mouth propped open, with spikes for teeth, which were what had gotten stuck on the side of the box. There was a row of five short spikes on the top and the bottom of the mouth which were fastened to a black piece of plastic that kept them in place. Hanging from a few of the metal teeth on the right side of its face were a handful of strands of burgundy yarn with a couple of strands of bright red yarn as well. While every other doll had yarn for eyes, this bear was given two button eyes of different colors. A light gray and an off pink, sewn all the way into the back of its head, where the tied off pieces of thread were visible. With a soft black nose and an oval snout, it had perfectly round ears atop its head with three threads of light blue yarn in front of each for hair. For clothes, all it had was a clip-on bow tie. More noticeably, a small burgundy crocheted heart was sewed to its left hand.

Out of curiosity, Caspian reached into its mouth and gently touched the tip of his finger against one of its teeth. “Ow.” He winced, drawing his hand back. Looking down, he observed the tiny drop of blood oozing from the prick. He figured the ends might have been rounded or dull like the ends of a paperclip, but they were obviously needles.

Why on earth would his grandmother ever make something so violent and terrifying?

Its tag read, *Ferra - She accidentally ripped someone's heart out with her teeth, which she now holds in her hand. She doesn't know any better. The burgundy color represents dried blood that has dripped from her mouth.*

Caspian laughed apprehensively. It was a pretty dark joke. If the burgundy represented old blood, then the bright red yarn that was also stuck in her teeth must have been meant to represent fresh blood. What a strange sense of humor his grandmother had about this...

Ferra: she was clearly something out of a nightmare. Caspian thought on the creation of this doll as a cruel representation of God, creating people. God Almighty, with his perfect judgment, sewing human skin together, stuffing it with blood and organs, then taking a needle and sewing eyes into skulls. Why even bother with the addition of sharp teeth that can be used as weapons of apparent murder? Why was this the only animal monster in the box, mixed with seemingly normal human dolls? Some things are just cursed that way...

Unlike the small yarn eyes that were given to the others, the button eyes with the X's of thread in the middle made it appear as though Ferra had pupils and was looking at Caspian, just as he was looking at her. Maybe he was thinking about it too much, but staring back at Ferra felt like a metaphor for Caspian's own life. *What a fucking outcast.*

Though Caspian wasn't sure what he was going to do with Ferra, he reached his hand around her mouth and attempted to pull loose the black plastic lining, that was holding all her teeth in. He didn't want to accidentally prick himself over and over, so he figured removing the teeth all together was the best way to handle it. But he found that the lining wouldn't budge because it was glued in. His hand slipped attempting to pull it out, and he ended up with two more tiny holes in the flesh between his thumb and index finger because of it. "Son of a -!" he barked in surprise, shaking his hand frantically in distress.

Caspian licked the drops of blood from his hand before he set Ferra down and stood up. It took a moment of searching around his unorganized apartment to find what he was scavenging for: a yarn needle and some scissors. If he couldn't remove Ferra's teeth, he was just going to have to sew her mouth closed.

After cutting a long gray piece of yarn off the head of a different doll, he tied one end through a yarn needle, made a knot with the opposite end, then took Ferra back in his hands. Meticulously, he inserted the needle in the left side of her upper lip, then the bottom, pulling the yarn down tight to force her jaw shut, repeating the process across her mouth. When he reached the right side of her face, he debated whether or not to remove the 'blood' hanging out of her mouth. Ultimately, he decided that he would leave the strands of yarn to keep the meaning of her tag, and the character that his grandma created the same. He only wanted to take away her teeth, not her soul. He finished by leaving five crooked vertical stitches, then looped the gray yarn back under them to make a line where her lips were.

When he finished, he tied off the end and tucked the loose pieces yarn back into her snout. Peering at her mouth, Caspian couldn't help but imagine his own lips being sewn together: the sharp end of

a needle bursting through his upper lip, the screeching tug of the rest of the metal moving through a hole in his skin, followed by the thick yarn, scraping against the inner walls of the hole. Then his bottom lip, and back again. Each time, having to hammer the needlepoint through his tough outer layer of flesh and drill through to the other side, left with only five stitches where he was once able to speak, eat and *breathe*. Caspian blinked hard and shook his head to make himself stop envisioning it in such great detail, but for some reason, the idea stuck with him.

Without realizing it, he blurted out, “Sorry, Ferra.” Why he took pity on an inanimate doll for his own actions, he couldn’t be sure.

His slight fascination with why this thing existed is what led him to place Ferra on a shelf in his bedroom, where he would be able to see her from his bed.

He mostly forgot about her as he carried on organizing what he did and didn’t want to keep of what he had gotten from his grandmother. The rest of the dolls, he left in the box in a corner. He certainly had no use for them either. He was less confident about whether or not he would keep any of them besides the one in his bedroom, so he concluded that he would decide later.

When nightfall came, Caspian caught Ferra’s button eyes staring at him as he entered his bedroom. Walking over to her, he looked at her tag once more before getting into bed.

Ferra - She accidentally ripped someone’s heart out with her teeth, which she now holds in her hand. She doesn’t know any better. The burgundy color represents dried blood that has dripped from her mouth.

“How can you accidentally rip someone’s heart out?” Caspian asked aloud, to no one, really. He laughed again, that anxious laugh of his.

‘She doesn’t know any better,’ were the last words his grandmother ever spoke. Not that anyone was around to hear it.

That night, after Caspian had laid down and fallen asleep, the quiet sound of yarn tearing could be heard in his apartment, and one of Ferra’s stitches popped open.

Raymond Smith

RIVER ROLL

River roll and never cease.
Golden sands cascade against the lines
Seeping lower into the tides
Boulders once, now pebbles
Polished on the base

River roll and never cease.
Boats do sail upon your waters
Ducks do glide along
Painters paint thee
And nature stares.

Why does the river roll?
It rolls for me.
For as long as it does roll
One day I may reach
The sea.

What the Sand Left Untold

They both sink their chairs into the sand
Metal sliding through the grit, close enough their knees can touch

Mom spreads sunscreen across Dad's back
Smearing white until the paste matches the color of his skin

Dad places a hush puppy in Mom's hand at dinner
Before grabbing his own, melting butter into the crevices

Your head sinks into your pillow at night
Your mind a sea of rolling waves, fluttering with sea birds' wings.

What you didn't notice was the silence
Of the car rides, as you slept soundly in the back

Or their offers to take the bedroom with twin beds
The light-blue wallpaper with anchors the reason in your mind

Or holding hands to simply satisfy the motions
Of strolling along the beach, the sun nestling itself behind rooftops.

Mirages waver above this sand, blurring your vision
Creating hope that breaks as soon as the next Saturday comes
Like waves, crashing into the shore
Only to return to the sea, sweeping away the things it brought with it

Hello, Beautiful

The twinkle in your eyes matches the stars. Your hazel eyes resemble the landscape of the mountains with the prominent browns and hints of olive green. I'm standing on the balcony of the hotel that the school paid for. . . right before the brink of sunrise breaking through with fiery light of the new day. Feeling the chill of the ocean breeze, I'm thinking of you when I see the shining sun. This day while on the balcony, I thought of you because mom had just called the day before telling me you weren't doing so well. I look at the bright orange star known as the sun differently, breathe in air with poise, and feel the gentle kiss of the wind on my skin and I touch my face. All I could imagine was you sitting in the kitchen, in your favorite chair, greeting me with a smile, hug, and maybe some tears because it had been a while since I last saw you. These memories are like yesterday and there were more to come but these were my favorite days of the year. Your smile was so bright, with a mischievous glimmer in your eye. You always had the greatest impact on me, I loved being around the spirit that matched mine; I am Grandma. We always meshed, like mashed potatoes and gravy, I was the plain potatoes and you were the flavor filled gravy. You were waiting to see me this day I stood on the balcony but today, I'm waiting to see you.

I'm waiting to hear your laugh, I'm waiting to wipe your tears away, and I'm waiting for your pain to no longer hurt you.

The whistling wind sound in my ears led me to reminisce on another Grandma and Grandma memory of when you taught me

how to whistle. I remember it as if it was yesterday, we sat outside the house on the concrete stump in the driveway. At this time you had a huge tree in front of your house, with shamrock green leaves. The tree was in front of us to our far right and behind us, also on our right, was an evergreen bush, which at that time was the same height as you. I was about four or so around this time. I don't think I was in school yet and it was probably summer because it was a pretty hot day. You began to whistle and I asked excitedly how to do it. You then began to show me how to put my lips in the perfect way to get the flow of air from my mouth. After sitting and trying for sometime I finally gotten it. It took me one day to learn how to whistle, but a second for it to become a lifelong memory. As a kid I didn't realize that whistling was something that everyone couldn't do. But after that day I begin to hear whistling in everything: the wind, a swing, the birds song in the morning, and surely through sports. A sound so faint had become a part of me. One of the many memories that we shared during your lifetime. The sound never left my heart; because it was always giving me the opportunity to reminisce on a moment that will forever be cherished.

Although I know my anticipation no longer matters, I still wait to see you in your morning glory. Your elegance will no longer draw the people that love you together, nor will your gentle laugh ever brighten up our days the same. Before this time had come, you were fighting off your illness to make it through, but while you did this I knew our time was coming to an end. I knew how I would miss you but would cherish deeply each moment we shared. Even though your were struggling, you were still excited to see me every time I came home. It was hard to see you lay in the hospital bed in so much pain, Even through it all you always reminded me about how much you knew I loved you before I left from our visits. I remembered you telling me not to cry, I still did, but I also smiled because I always knew I would see you again. You taught me in the summer of 2018 that I am stronger than I think and more resilient than I ever thought. We spent the 2018 summer together not knowing this would be our last. Yet in some way, it's

like you knew your time was near, because you had a talk with me about when you pass. You told me to stay strong and be there for my mom. Most of all, you told me to continue accomplishing my dreams because you were proud of who I was becoming and how much I had transformed over time while in college. I will never forget the talks we had about life, nor will I ever forget the way you used to call me “Grandma.”

This has been one of the hardest things in life I have had to face, your passing is not something I wanted to see, but I was there for it all. I made sure that any time I was with you, that you were taken care of. Whether that meant bathing you, clipping your nails, rubbing your feet, or putting ointment on your scars. I did everything I could to make sure you were comfortable and okay. You were truly my mother, soul mate, and best friend. Loving you was easy and you made love seem so easy. You always shared your heart and soul with whoever you came in contact with. You were the most beautiful person I knew and I knew that you always saw yourself in me. You called me an old soul, which was why you called me Grandma. Judgement free and open-minded to any idea, you never tried to answer questions that did not pertain to you, nor did you ever base your decisions off bias. I’m waiting to see you so we can continue our conversations and I’m waiting to get your embrace. I know that may not happen anymore but my mind still lingers in thought that you’re still here, sitting in your chair, crocheting, cooking, or watching *Jeopardy*. I could always count on you to hold my secrets and wipe my tears in the hardest of times. You were pretty much there when anything bad happened to me; like a guardian angel, you always showed your face. I won’t forget you and the love you showed me, nor will I ever forget how you showed me how to love.

Death is a scary thing to witness, but even at the time of it, your brain denies what your heart wants to feel. It’s a speechless action that occurs. A surreal moment that continuously plays in your head. I still haven’t coped with the loss of you and, if I’m honest with myself -- I don’t think I ever will. You raised me, showing

me things that no other siblings truly got to see. We were best friends and you told me things that no one may never know and that I will never share. Our secrets with a lost loved one always seem to become memorialized. No one holds them but you and that person. No one understands but you. Left alone, in a world that misunderstands me, you told me not to listen. Follow your heart Grandma; keep your Faith. Your death Grandma is the worst heartbreak in my life -- and I know that more will come. For now, in this moment of loss, the only thing that hurts is that I'm still waiting -- as if you will reappear. As if time could rewind, or I find the magic genie in the lamp and ask to be given more time. Sadly, that's not how life works, neither does death. It's hard waiting, but I know that's what I'm willing to do. Until next time beautiful, I love you a bushel and a peck.

Part 1: Swim

As we jumped through the water together
Comfortable,
I feel as if my heart will never dry out.
I sing along to the tune of your song,
Hypnotized by your voice.
Such a voice would make a dolphin drown
In its own waves
For your pleasure.
Drown when I know how to swim,
Just you hear you sing your song in my ear again.

Part 2: Nothing but Sand

The way our oasis of love dried up
Reminds me of the desert.
The driest desert.
You wrung out the towel
Soaked with my affection,
Dried your hands with it
And then you took off.
Leaving me with nothing but sand.
You left me with only sand, in the desert.
I am no camel,
I cannot survive with such little water.

Part 3: Water

I found my way to the water again,

Only without you this time.

So I swam.

Swam without you.

Sang without your song.

Imagined the tune of your voice as I sang.

But you're not here,

And I cannot fathom the water without your tune.

So I started to drown.

Husk

“Without taking any credit away from it, I’d say it’s best described as metal for people who don’t like metal. It’s heavier than dad-rock but you don’t have to worry about screams in the vocals.”

“What’s their best album?”

With a grin, the clerk places her hands on the countertop and leans forward. “Well since you asked, a lot of people thought their debut album is the undisputed greatest, but...”

“They’re wrong, aren’t they?”

“Oh, absolutely.”

Absolutely, she says. I love it when she gets like this. No matter how harsh her day has been, she always perks up when I ask her about her music. The way her hair seems to glow, and her eyes, Christ, her eyes. They were the palest blue I’ve ever seen, gleaming in the harsh light of the fluorescents above. My heart aches just thinking about them, a pair of bright lights, shining in darkness.

“Their third and latest studio album is *gorgeous*. It completely blows *Opus Eponymous* out of the water,” she said while pushing a few wayward strands of hair out of her face.

I nod, pushing aside several imaginary hairs of my own. She continues to gush about her love for the album from across the till, but in truth, I wasn’t listening. Her voice, though golden, carries only worthless words. It doesn’t matter, they’re not what I’m after.

“It’s relatively short as well, only about forty minutes long, you should give it listen.”

“I’ll check it out,” I reply as I sling my bag over my shoulder and brace myself for the burning question.

“So...”

There was a twitch, barely perceptible. Her grin falters, the glow dims.

“You got any plans tonight?” I ask, eyeing her carefully.

She looks aside and offers a tight-lipped smile, “I’m cat-sitting for a friend tonight.”

“Are you?”

“Yeah.”

I stare at her, hoping to elicit more out of her, but she refuses to meet my gaze. Seconds pass, and she occupies herself by rearranging a perfectly set album display on the countertop.

“Good luck with that.”

“Thanks...”

Her words were hollow, more worthless than before. I flash a wry smile, walk away from the counter, and leave the store.

She was lying, of course. She always lied. Sometimes her friend is sick, sometimes there’s a birthday, maybe a funeral. Other times there wasn’t a reason, and she’d act like she didn’t even need one. So many worthless words, so much wasted time. She’s lucky I’m patient. She’s afraid, afraid of a good thing waiting to happen to her.

I step out onto the sidewalk and into the rain, pulling up my jacket’s hood as soon as I feel droplets splashing against my head. The sun was already on its way down, and dusk brought about a terrible chill. It was going to be an unpleasant night, but it won’t be anything I haven’t seen before. Looking both ways, I walk across the street and duck beneath the awning of an adjacent storefront that’d closed just hours before. I peer in through the glass-paned facade and saw two eyes peering back. Tired eyes, weary eyes, ugly eyes. Eyes that’d seen very little but knew too much. I sneer at them, drawing my face into a long scowl and to my surprise, it sneers back. I cup my hands around my eyes and press my face up against the glass and was greeted by a strange sight. Rows upon rows of mirrors lined the front display of the store. I frown, and my reflection follows. I was a tired misshapen disaster. My pallid skin,

stretched thinly over my bones, contrasted with the mess draped over my scalp that I have known to call hair. I knew I was hideous, but this sight was something else. A bitter reminder of what could have been, what *should* have been. A seed I planted that never grew. A failure.

The reflection smiles. I do not.

It was her smile bearing down on me, warming me to my core. I look deeper, saw her eyes and promptly lost myself in them. Lost myself in the sea of blue. She was perfect, I could never hate her. I wish she would listen so I could help her. So that she could help *me*. If only I could have a sliver of her beauty, maybe I would be whole. I try to reach out and touch her face, her perfect complexion, but she remains just beyond my reach. I try again but to no avail. The closer I get, the farther she runs. I pursue her with all my strength. For a brief moment, I can almost graze her, feel her skin beneath my finger. But the smile began to wane. The sea dries to sand. Then -- nothing.

It was dark when I came to.

I step away from the glass and look around. The rain had slowed to a drizzle but the air was silent. I turn around and look back to her store. The lights were out and customers and clerks alike had all gone home. It was late, so I follow suit. I take the usual route, walking through rain-soaked sidewalks as I path out of the city and into the suburbs. I take comfort in the familiarity of the crackle of the broken glass underfoot, of the flickering lamp posts, and the low drone of cars off in the distance. I edge across the overpass, drop down into a parking lot and cross over into the grass, tapping the lone stop sign like I always did when I approach the lonesome neighborhood. The road was long and the way was winding but like always, I find myself right where I need to be. I pass by row-after-row of identical houses harboring the ugly dreams of ugly people. The whole neighborhood was tired, weary -- ugly. It was filled to the brim with squat ranch-style homes straight from the 70s, spattered with kitsch colors and awful decorations. The whole stretched reeked of ugliness, save for one house: my favorite house. I hopped a rusted chain-link fence and crouch in a nearby bush

right in front of it. Through the window, the blinds of which she never bothered to close, I could see her. She wasn't cat-sitting of course. She was alone on a weekday evening, watching television alone. Even from here, I could see the glow of her hair. I could see her skin, perfect and smooth. I could see her eyes, but they would never see mine.

I wait in the bushes as she goes about her night, watching until the lights go out. She seems happy. Who could blame her? If I had what she had, I'd be happy. I look down at my hands. Long, spiderlike, deformed. Why don't I have what she has? Must I bear the burden of the world because of my disfigurement? I look away and begin separating myself from the bushes when I feel a peculiar sensation. I stop, look down, and see that my hands are flexed and trembling, as if they're reaching out for something. I struggle to close them and grit my teeth as I feel my fingernails dig into the palms of my hands. Am I really to bear this burden forever?

I know my answer the second this thought crosses my mind.

Prying free from the close-set branches of the bushes, I creep to her bedroom window. I know she keeps it unlocked in case she ever got locked out. With palms pressed against the pane, I lift up the window and step into her room, my footsteps muted by her plush carpet. Her bed was pressed up against the far corner of the room. She stirs in her sleep, but does not wake. I creep over to the foot of her bed and watch her in her gentle rest. She really was perfect. Perfect in every single way. I love her, but just looking at her fills me with... *anger*. She didn't have to fight for this beauty, it was given to her. She didn't deserve it. She's never been subject to scorn.

"Maybe they wouldn't keep ignoring me if I was as perfect," I say as I loom over her in the dark.

She opens her eyes.

"Maybe... *you* wouldn't ignore me if I was as perfect."

Before she has a chance to scream, I am upon her. I cover her mouth with my hand and force her to look at me. Those pale blue eyes, wide with terror. She was wasting them. I could do better.

I would do better.

The sinew beneath my limbs shudder and wriggle beneath the

skin like masses of pale worms. My gums begin to bleed, and one by one, my teeth fall out onto her bed sheets, followed by thick clumps of my hair. There's a series of cracks as the bones in my skull begin to break and reform in her image. I can feel her hair sprouting from my head, my mouth filling with her teeth. I grin at her as she struggles against my grip. Her body has become my own, but there's one thing I never could copy. I'd have to take it myself. I feel my fingers twitch as they grew longer, thinner, *sharper*. With one hand I held her still, the other I drag across her face and circle a single digit around her eyes. She shuts them tight, but it won't help her. In a single motion, I drive my fingers into her eye and take what is mine. I repeat, and finally reach for the worthless eyes of my own. I grind them into dust, as should've been done long ago. In their place goes my prize. Through this, I have been made whole. I am she, and she is no-one.

Trailing blood, I leave it in the bedroom in a sobbing heap and lumber over to my bathroom. The defining moment. I stand in front of the mirror and turn on the light. The flash blinds me, but as my new eyes adjust, I finally catch a glimpse of it, of...

... of nothing. I frown, much to my reflection's delight. I'm still ugly -- staggeringly ugly. Even more so than before.

The mop upon my head bore no glow. My eyes were faded, weathered, ugly. They held no light whatsoever. I was just as ugly as the rest.

I ball my hands into fists, and begin beating them against the mirror. There's a splinter, a crack, a shattering. My fists are bleeding. All around me, I see the ugliness, a dull-haired bitch with glassy eyes and a crooked smile. She's cackling, I am not.

No matter. I will try again.

Parental Advisory

“Watch your *fucking* language,
young lady.” A dad swings back
her F-bomb with more power

before she has a chance to explain
that she just needed someone
to catch it and feel the weight
of her grievance.

The rare fuck-flare fizzles
above the fiery frenzy
of neurons in his head.
He mistakes the cry for help for
a gun and takes off running to beat her
to the finished line.

It leaves a bad taste in her mouth—
not *the* word, that is, but the reminder
of all the soap they wasted
scrubbing her tongue into obedience.

Is there any soap left
for the real problem?

If only they knew how much she
does watch her language
being ignored,
maybe they'd hear her
when she says the word
fuck.

WAKEUPWAKEUPWAKEUP

Year 7

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.

Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again

by a yoke of slavery.

The church was nothing extraordinary to look at. With the little money they collected, they could not afford many renovations. At some point, they had constructed a breezeway in between the chapel and the fellowship hall, upheld by rounded stone pillars and bricks. Over the years, it became encrusted with the remnants of children's lunches and the blood from their knees. The chapel had been the same as long as I had been a member there: dingy blue carpeting matched the itchy blue fabric that covered the seats. It was a clumsy attempt at masking the brokenness underneath. The glass podium where Pastor Reeves set his Bible every day had fingerprint smudges from children who came to say "hello." He stood in front of a band kit with only the bare essentials: drums, guitar, and keyboard. There, the band would play the same twenty songs week after week. The congregation would raise their hands and closed their eyes like they'd never heard it before, like they were having an out-of-body experience. I never quite understood how that must have felt.

The fellowship hall was a wide open space with a grey concrete floor covered in colored tape for playing different kinds of games. A few picnic-style tables lined the walls where kids would have their

snacks in between Sunday school classes. I made the mistake of walking through the room barefoot once or twice, and my feet turned grey. I don't believe it had ever been cleaned. Off to the side was the kitchen, where a clergyman named Matt liked to make chili for the congregation every month. It was a kind gesture. He paid for it all himself. He simply liked the company of others. I went with my mother once, but as soon as we stepped into the room, the wafting smell of the chili mimicking body odor hit us like a truck, and we never went again. On the way out, mom leading me out by the hand, I gave him a smile both of pity and of gratitude.

Much to my delight, they church had used their limited funds to give us a new playground, and despite the fact that I was twelve now and my peers had taken to more serious modes of entertainment, I happily partook in the slides and swing sets. And I found, often, others would join in once I did. Leslie was always happy to. We'd come to youth group early on Sunday nights just to get in some extra time on the swings. Since mom had begun to work more, it was nice for me to get away from a house without her, just once a week. I would sit on the plastic swing, grasp the chains, and walk backwards as far as I could. Kicking off and soaring high into the air, I felt only peace.

"Let's have a contest," Leslie said.

"You're on."

We both kicked off and pumped our legs back and forth, gaining momentum and altitude, until we reached the apex, and then, just at the right moment, we leapt out of the seats and touched down on the crunchy mulch below.

"Got you this time!" Leslie exclaimed, having landed a few inches in front of me, an unusual feat, as I was significantly taller.

I rolled my eyes and smiled, sweating from the pre-summer sun. Suddenly, I felt the sharp smack of elastic against my shoulder blade. I whirled around to see the culprit, Nathan, laughing. I grimaced.

"Hey," he said, turning to walk away, "You shouldn't have your bra strap out if you don't want it to get pulled."

My face turned hot red as I tucked the strap back under my tank. I had just begun to wear bras, and I didn't want *anyone* to know,

least of all a boy. His blatant acknowledgement of its existence made me want to hide in the bathroom for the rest of the night, but just as I began to seriously consider the idea, the middle schoolers began filing inside for youth group.

“Come on,” Leslie beckoned, grabbing me gently by the shoulders, and I reluctantly let her lead me inside.

We took our seats among the others in rows of those carpeted, blue-covered chairs that they also have in the sanctuary. We faced front, to the slightly elevated platform where the youth pastor, Pastor James, stood. He was middle-aged with no hair on his head but a full beard. He wore brown cargo shorts and no shoes, dirt visible between his toes and on the soles of his feet. He smiled kindly, but generally addressed us only as a group rather than as individuals. I felt both comforted and intimidated by his presence. After greetings, worship, and prayers, he announced,

“Let’s break up into small groups.”

My heart sank. Small groups took me away from the only people in the room who made me feel comfortable - Leslie and Peter. Peter was the only person I had met at youth group who had taken on the initiative to take me in as his friend. He made me laugh and put me at ease. But now we would be separated into four designated groups: two groups of girls and two groups of boys. This was an indicator that some gender-specific secrets would be shared, and the mystery of the differences in our bodies and spirits would become further veiled by vague declarations.

I waved a dreadful goodbye to Leslie who smiled back at me and we broke off into groups. Each group took a different side room. In my group was Pastor James’ daughter, Loren. Loren was best friends with everyone else in the room. They had grown up together, had gone to the same school and the same church since they were little. I had not. We were all painfully aware of the fact. Nora, Pastor James’ wife, would be leading our group in discussion.

“Today’s topic is going to be modesty,” she said, “Open your Bibles to 1 Timothy.”

I fingered through the velvety childhood Bible, creased with dog-ears and scribbled on with notes and underlinings.

“Would somebody read chapter two verse nine, please?”

Marjorie volunteered, “*Women should adorn themselves modestly and appropriately and sensibly in seemly apparel, not with elaborate hair arrangement or gold or pearls or expensive clothing.*”

“Now let’s read another. Can anyone read Romans 14:13 for me?”

Olivia read, “*Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.*”

“What do you all think these passages mean?”

We all looked down at our Bibles, pretending like we had an answer.

“You are all growing up,” she continued, “Your bodies are changing and you’re beginning to experience new feelings. Some of you might notice yourself being attracted to boys more than you used to be.”

Isn’t that obvious? I thought. Half of these girls have boyfriends.

“Boys are also experiencing these kinds of changes,” she said, “But in an even more intense way. Their desire for...” she trailed off and whispered, “sex,” then resumed in a normal tone, “might cause them to look at you in a sinful way. They might wonder what you look like without your clothes on. Some girls like this, and so they encourage it by dressing immodestly. Do you know what I mean by immodest?”

I raised my hand.

“Yes, Rosie?”

“People who show off their expensive clothes and jewelry,” I stated in reference to the verse we had just read.

“Well, that wasn’t exactly what I had in mind.”

What could she have in mind then, that was not written in that verse?

“I mean girls who show off their legs, stomachs, and breasts by wearing revealing clothing. These kinds of outfits may seem fun and trendy, but crop tops, booty shorts, and spaghetti straps cause our brothers to stumble because they make them look at us with lust. One of the biggest problems I’ve noticed is girls showing their bra straps. Have you all seen girls dressed like that?”

Everyone nodded except for me. I blushed and started sweating again, even in the cool air conditioning.

“Now a bra is underwear, right? And you don’t want anyone to look at your panties, so why would you want them to see your bra? When a boy sees your bra strap, he’s going to trace it down to your chest. So it’s our responsibility to keep their eyes in their heads by covering ourselves up.”

The girls nodded in unthinking righteous approval as I shifted my ever-sliding bra strap back into my shirt. I knew I should adjust it to be tighter, but I was still not used to wearing it, and it was so itchy.

I didn't know that I was sinning.

I quietly excused myself from the group and stepped outside, only letting my building tears fall when I was out of sight. I curled up with my head in my knees against the wall on the breezeway and prayed,

Dear God, forgive me for causing Nathan to stumble.

The Sun on Her Back

If you were to ask me how
my mother died
I would hesitate to say.
Not from shyness
or a spasm of melancholy,
but something similar.
I keep those memories
somewhere else. I keep
those memories of my mother
drunk or dirty or dead beside her bed
in a kitchen cabinet
beside kaleidoscopic bottles.
I'd rather see her as a horse
out of pasture
grazing with the sun on her back.

A Dream from Mid-March

I am where the wind sings hymns
in the voice of a long-gone woman
beneath clouds of sapphire
wrapped in wool;

the throat
of the world hums and my body
murmurs from tip to toe.
Clint Eastwood comes to me
and I am confused. He speaks of horses

in gallop on the iris of the eye
of God, I say
there is no such thing as horses.

Homecoming

Your friend, Apple, comes over and asks you if you're having a good time and you say yes, because if you say no, it'll be awkward and if you say yes you'll both know you're lying but let it slide. The house is overly warm from the party and you feel bloated from sipping too much water. Too good for the cheap stuff they bought -- you'd rather be sober than drink that, you said. You were really just too scared that you wouldn't be able to hold it well. A cabin in the woods, a lot of people who graduated high school and never left their hometown, one friend who invited you, a sense of obligation, a sense of self-importance because you went away for school. It's all here. A couple other acquaintances have tried talking to you and you sense resentment. As much as you think you love to be better than people, you don't like it when they are shy around you, because then no one talks. You say you're studying philosophy and they say they are working at the supermarket. A guy who once asked you out in ninth grade throws his hands up when you mention it. "We've got ourselves a genius over here!" he says this with sarcasm.

The lights and lamps are golden-yellow in the homely living room; cheap light glinting off cheap finished wood and beer spilled not only on the kitchen tiles, but also on the kitchen counter and on all the coffee tables. The girls look at you, and you think, *Oh. They're whispering about me.* Outside the large windows and through the sliding glass door all you can see is blackness. The surrounding trees have blocked out all the light from the moon. You wish you'd stayed home with an art documentary that made you feel smart and content instead of coming to this party which made you feel smart and sad.

The guests suddenly start shouting louder than they originally were, the girls giggle in a shrieky way that cuts through the music (old pop songs that these people still think are cool). Suddenly people are filing out the door. Apple grabs your arm, drunk, and says that everyone is going up to the old abandoned house in the woods. What else do you have to do? It's nicer outside tonight than it is inside; it's a cool June night—strange but welcome. You walk slowly down the stairs, quietly beside Apple, surrounded by hooting people. The crickets are deafening.

The hike to the house in the woods is not as pleasant as you had wanted. The path is narrow and incredibly dark; people are using their cellphones to light the trail but it is almost midnight and batteries are dying. Finally, the brush thins out and there's the house, moonlight filtering down around the roof, framing it in deep watercolor blues. The girls cling to the boys, the boys push everyone. Apple stays near you for some reason, and you think that maybe she senses your maturity in the midst of the party.

The boy who threw the party breaks away from the group, moves confidently towards the house, stepping up the rotten steps. The guests break off sticks from the undergrowth and whip at the tree trunks, at little brushy plants. On the steps, the boy wrenches the door open and waves the others forward.

You and Apple slowly explore the dark rooms on the first floor — it's creepy but you won't let it show that you are forcing yourself to take every step forward. The rest of the group crashes down the basement steps, hopeful for a wine cellar or at least an abandoned six-pack. Every so often, you glance around to make sure Apple is still with you. Things are muffled in the house, the shouts from the basement, the loud crickets. The creaks of your footsteps are suddenly the loudest sounds.

You find a bedroom, complete with a skeletal, rusty bedframe and a shelf that, under a thin layer of dirt and leaves, holds a few wrinkled books. You take them to the window, which has no glass left, to try and read them by the bright moonlight and then realize that they are, disappointingly, just *Harry Potter* paperbacks. You stack them back on the shelf and find that boozy Apple is no longer traipsing behind you. She's gone. There's a drop in your stomach;

everything is quiet, then everything makes noise. Creaks and rustles. Your eyes, suddenly used to the moonlight of the window, strain against the blackness of the room, the void of the door. There is a loud thump in the hall and you jerk and then freeze because a pale hand reaches for the door knob and then slams the door shut, locking you in the room. A scream erupts unsolicited from your lips, tearing through the air. There is again silence, and then the noise of your blood in your ears and then-- it's not really a surprise-- shrieky laughter. *They* locked you in. The crowd. The group. The people who couldn't stand your pompous persona at the party. *Let's leave this wet towel where it belongs*, the girls probably said, *in the garbage*.

You hear footsteps retreating. There is commotion and laughter from some other part of the house and then you can hear the laughter through the broken window; they've left you here. Had Apple been in on this the whole time?

After a ragged, painful breath you decide that you will just go back to the house, get in your car and head home. You rip at the door knob; the door isn't even locked, just slammed shut. You walk down the hall. They left the door open when they ran back to the house. The woods are still loud from the crickets, but the air is good to breathe and you calm yourself by drawing deep breaths of it. Your annoyance has tamed the fear of being alone in the woods. What else had you expected from these people? This was a "welcome back" from people who were immature in high school and who are immature now. You are interrupted from your thoughts by a sound that makes you sweat with fear: a crunch. And then another. There are footsteps in the woods that aren't being made by you. Shaking, you stop walking. The sound draws closer. You think: this is not someone I know. They are not laughing. Everyone is back at the house.

Crouching, instinctively off the side of the path, you quiet your breath. If you heard them, this stranger, then they surely heard you. They get closer, passing by on your left off the path in the underbrush. They don't sound too close; you furtively glance over but see no movement. The person has passed; they are going in the direction from which you came. After waiting for the crunching

to fade, you stand slowly, legs shaking, and then you start to run. Warm water sloshes in your stomach as you hurtle down towards the house.

You end up going in because it seems safe. No one is paying attention to you because for some reason, everyone is leaving. “What’s going on?!” you snap at a passing girl. She tells you that one of the neighbors had told everyone to clear out or they would call the cops.

People stream by you, but none of them are Apple. She hasn’t shown her face yet. You call to another passing girl and ask about Apple.

“Uh...she was with you?”

You ask the guy who is ushering people out the door if he’s seen Apple around.

“Nah man, I thought she was with you.”

“She’s not.” Worry creeps in at the edges of your thoughts. “She didn’t come back with you guys after you locked me in the house?”

The guy laughs. “Oh yeah, sorry about that. Hunter told me he did that when we were all walking back. Just a little prank, you know. He didn’t lock the door!”

“And Apple?” I inquire. You had been planning to leave, but now this.

“She didn’t come back with us. Hunter said she was in that room with you...she was pretty wasted.”

Cold fear rinses your veins. Thin spit seeps from under your tongue like it does when you’re about to vomit. “So she’s still up at the house? Passed out somewhere, maybe?”

“Oh man. Yeah, I guess. God. Okay, once everyone leaves we’ll go up and look for her. Stay here, okay?” The last of the party guests trickle out and the boy goes into the kitchen and returns with two flashlights. “Here ya go.” You don’t say thank you. Your train of thought goes like: *I AM SO SELF-CENTERED! I THOUGHT THAT APPLE STUCK NEAR ME BECAUSE I WAS SMART BUT SHE WAS REALLY THERE BECAUSE SHE TRUSTED THAT I WOULD TAKE CARE OF HER. AND NOW SHE’S OUT THERE, ALONE.*

Well, not alone. Because there was someone else, someone else out in the woods.

You don't mention this to the boy.

The two of you bound down the front steps and head into the trees. Through the trunks you can see lights retreating down the long winding driveway.

"I'm sure she's fine," he says, unaware. Then, "I'm Jim by the way; we were in Chemistry together for a few classes."

"Oh. Yeah, sorry it's been a while." You are distracted, and you do not remember Jim at all; he had faded into the crowd of local boys in your mind. The leaves are slippery beneath your feet and the woods look darker than ever outside of the flashlight beams. You pay attention to the sounds you make, and listen for anything else out in the woods. There is nothing but the crickets.

"Is it weird being back here?" Jim asks me, tromping ahead.

"Yeah, I mean a little." You try to keep up. "It's like, all the same, because it's 'the hometown', but then stuff's, uh, a little, like, different." You are still listening as hard as you can but you hear and see nothing at all.

"Yeah," says Jim, and you've suddenly tuned into the conversation, irritated, because how would he know that the town had become a small place when he had never actually seen it from afar. "I'm saving up right now," Jim says, "I'm trying to go to school next fall." He continues his heavy steps through the woods, not looking at you for a response. You listen for any other sounds out in the woods. "I've wanted to go to college since... I don't know, the first day of high school? But I knew I'd have to work a lot because my folks never really put anything away for me."

You think of how your parents had sent applications for you, let you go out of state. "Oh. Well that's really good. College is good. I mean, it's a lot better than high school." Then the crumbling house appears in front of you, sliced by the flashlight beams.

You and Jim enter; you should have told him about what you heard. But you don't say anything -- the house is quiet. Together you search the big front rooms, and then find her a minute later, slumped against the wall by the bedroom door. You walked right past her on your way out. As you crouch down and find that Apple is still breathing, just sound asleep, you call over to Jim: "She's here!" But Jim is right behind you, slapping a hand over your mouth and telling you to be quiet.

Your heart nearly stops. “*There’s someone else here,*” whispers Jim, “*I heard someone talking in the basement. He was yelling and like, growling. We need to get out of here and call the cops or something.*” Jim scoops Apple easily off the floor and makes his way down the hall. You follow, straining your ears. And sure enough, there are sounds from the basement: a muffled crash, a shout. Then silence. As soon as you and Jim are out the door, he starts running and you follow, a teary breath escaping your mouth. Down through the woods again but this time your breath comes less easily and your legs are numb. Jim is running surprisingly fast with Apple limp in his arms, and you can just make out that he has her head resting in the crook of his elbow so her neck isn’t snapped.

Back at the house, Jim locks the doors. Apple hasn’t opened her eyes. You are sitting near her on the couch, just watching her. Jim gets off the phone, raking his hands through his hair. “Cops’ll be here soon. You should get Apple to the ER, just in case. She doesn’t usually get this bad.”

...

Hours later, in the hospital waiting room, you glance up towards the muted TV. Jim came to sit with you; he’s talking quietly to his dad on the phone. Apple’s parents are on their way. She’s fine—the nurses didn’t even seem worried at all. On the TV in the corner there is a local report, an arrest that just took place. In the background you see the familiar shape of the house and you touch Jim’s arm—there’s cops at his place. The captions on the TV relay this: man arrested. Identified as a convict who had escaped earlier in the evening. He’d bolted from the prison in the next county and had stayed in the woods, creeping through pastures as the sun went down. He was dangerous, said the cop on the TV, convicted almost thirty years earlier for a series of killings. It was lucky that no one ran into him. “Could’ve been killed,” the cop said, stiffly. It didn’t matter who you were.

Jim is off the phone. The two of you exchange a look, eyes meeting and then breaking away.

Mistakes of Your Home

What knowledge do you have of my home?
Have you taken a walk through the cemetery?
Walking on my tracks, footprints of eternity.
Have you read about the deserts,
the roar, the blow of filth?
Have you met the survivors?
Have you seen our struggles?

You believe in the reporter,
who experienced little of a quarter,
of the life he broadcasts,
letting the film fool you.
Have you walked a fine line
from Somalia to Kenya?
Have you let hunger define you?
I did, oh I did sweat in the dust,
praying that food was near.
I breathed within a twister of dust,
but you wonder not what my eyes carry,
the memories of the old struggle,
and wonder not of my skin either,
as it bears the manuscript of my old life.
Yes I look immaculate, but do you know of my heart?

Let you not be fooled by my slenderness,
my strength far flows beyond my weight,
so I lift a whole continent with my pride,
and if I have to, I will put my life aside,
just to fix a smile on mama Africa's face.

Mama is beautiful, yet you only see
as far as her horn and the slums,
where the strongest among us might've been born.
Yes Mama is beautiful, yet you neglect to see her heart.

How could you go to my house,
to only document the cracks on my walls?
Couldn't you walk in to my living room
and maybe peek in to my kitchen?
Then you might see the beauty that is my home.
How long will you only look at
just the color of this book's exterior?
Will you ever walk in it,
to see the beautiful illustrations within?