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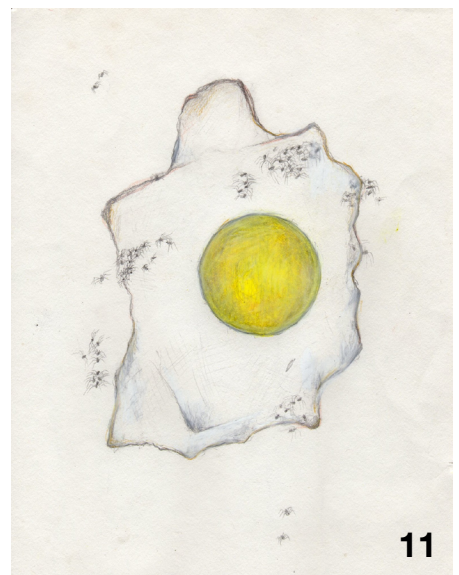
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"What Happened in Georgia's Garden"

Anna Chelsky
Watercolor

*Anna Chelsky is a Junior majoring in Comparative Literature.
She has been previously published by the Oregon Voice,
Ephemera, and Unbound in 2011 and 2012.*



Hands of the Fates

Haydn Cieri

By the time we had word that it was shifting back West, it was too late. We'd have needed to leave at least two hours ago. More, probably. We needed to be around 150 miles East by now, or something like 350 miles North. At this point though, the numbers mean nothing. They may as well read 'Too far,' or 'You're fucked.'

The screen door kicks quickly open and slams shut from the picking up of the wind. Through the door I watch her standing motionless on the deck, small against the blackening horizon, eyes up to the graying sky, blonde hair pulled back in the wind. She wears washed-out blue overalls over a dirty white shirt. The overalls are her mother's. They are much too big on her.

He is curled asleep beside me on the couch with a red knit blanket and a plate with sandwich crumbs and peanut butter smears at his foot. I suppose I'll just hand wash it, the plate, so it won't take up room in the dishwasher. Well. That's what I'd do before. There's not much point in it now, is there? Funny how things like that are. How you miss the little things, like washing peanut butter from a plate. Or fresh laundry. The smell of a newly-opened bar of soap. A smile on the lips of a lover. It would be so nice to just wash dishes again.

She looks back inside through one sand-fogged window pane with her wide blue eyes at me. Her eyes are her mother's as well, though they fit her far better than the overalls.

I smile. My default initial reassuring measure. Always has been. I think it's worked in the past. Mostly at least. I still remember using it when I sat the both of them down to explain that I was all the parent that they had left. That their mother had finally found that sleep she'd been praying for all those nights we heard her crying in her hospital room. That our prayers were perhaps not quite so urgent in God's heavenly inbox. Cue the handsome smile as I tell them that as long as we have each other, we'd be fine through anything. Anything. No matter what. Turns out I lied.

She smirks weakly back at me before wiping her eyes along the back of her arm and turning again to the sky. I wipe my face and slowly run my fingers along the long worry lines grown deep beneath my eyes. The quivering lips curled thin in what I mistook as a smile. I realize how my hands are shaking and how much I am sweating and how long my facial hair has grown and how much I need a good meal and a warm bath. I realize how really I'm the one who needs the smile.

In the corner of the room, the television tosses a hail of white static. We left it on in case news somehow comes through. A flash bulletin. A presidential address. An act of God. It's desperate, I know, but it's better than nothing. Or maybe it's not. It's getting hard to tell what's better than what and what is pointless and what really matters anymore. On top of the television sits an empty frame, coated in the same layer of dust as the rest of the TV. I feel the picture that was once inside of it in my pocket. I finger

its seams, folded in half, then half again. It may be selfish to have taken it, but I wanted her picture with me in the end. Maybe that still matters.

I turn and almost ask what it was, but I see it immediately.

Quickly, I say, gather your brother and the plate and anything else and go down into the cellar.

She nods and pushes the screen door in, revealing behind her a small, distant cloud of kicked-up dust.

Jonathan. Hey. C'mon, wake up, she prods his side. The boy's eyes peel open slowly as he moans and spreads groggily as a cat into the cushions of the couch as he rises.

Must be a hell of a truck to kick up dust like that. Enough to see it from here. They're fucking moving too. Why even drive this way? Even holding on to the fool-hearted idea that you could somehow outrun this thing, you'd have to be driving in the other direction. And a helluva lot faster than that.

What's going on? the boy asks, rubbing his eyes and pulling his red blanket behind him as the girl drags him and his plate quickly into the basement.

Looters? Maybe. This is the way to the nearest town. Few miles south. They'd have to drive right by us to get there. Beside the fridge I take up an axe I found in the shed the day before and follow the boy and the girl into the cellar.

I'm sure they'll just drive by. No need to stop at a shit little house like this. I close the door behind me and pull the extra long, newly-installed deadbolt into the doorjamb with a satisfying clunk.

No, sir. Way they're moving, they've more important places to be.

It's near completely dark in the basement. A small oil lamp traces a frail golden outline of my two children in the far corner, like they were painted there with strands of blond hair against a sable canvas. It's damp here. Cold too. I forgot how damn creepy the cellar was.

We'll only be here for a little while, I tell my youngest, hiding beneath his blanket all the way up to his nose.

My daughter has him wrapped around her arms, and as I kneel to join them I feel the wilting edges of the photo press against my pocket. Of your photo. God, she's just like you, Rachel. Same eyes. It's incredible. Same giant blue eyes. She'll be a great mother one day. Or. Fuck. Well, she would have been. She would have been just like you. She deserves so much better.

Dad, she says, you turned off the TV, right?

My face is numb. If they stop, they'll know there's a generator. And where there's generators, there's people. And they're headed South. Into town. So they're looking for people. For what? Why the fuck look for people? Sadistic fucks. Probably looking for easy prey. People who've given up. Looters or rapists. Must be. No other explanation. Must be.

Dad? she says, still holding her frightened brother.

Stay here. Don't you go upstairs, no matter what. You hear? She nods. And watch your brother. I'll be right back.

Axe in hand, I jog up the steps and slowly pull open the deadbolt from the door, peeking through a crack to make sure I'm alone. I see nothing other than the long empty corridor beyond the doorway and millions of dancing specks of dust glowing bright orange like dying embers in the setting sun. I open the door finally and peek out the front window to see the road stretching far over the horizon, dry and brown and empty.

Making my way into the front room I bend to pull the plug of the television before there comes a quiet rattling. The TV's screen fills black with a click. Then there's voices. I fall clumsily to the floor and shimmy into the kitchen to see through a half-opened window, in the back yard, a giant black truck parked beside the shed. It's tires the size of my girl. Mud kicked high all along its flank. The driver's side window broken in. Stolen. Looters. Rapists. Both? Could be.

Then, from the shed's broken-in door, a massive human stumbles violently out to lean heavily on the truck and holler something to someone still fumbling about inside. A woman's voice responds. She sounds angry.

Fuck. Do I take them now? The axe all of a sudden feels heavier in my dithering hands. Can I? No. That one monster alone would rip me in two. And my kids. Jesus, make them orphans just before the goddamn apocalypse. Right? I peek back up to get one more look at the man leaning against the truck. Still immense. Right.

Back across the floor, I shimmy uncomfortably into the cellar, quietly shutting the door and wishing I had spent more time fixing the deadbolt to it. It'll have to do now.

Are people here? she asks from the dark far side of the cellar.

I hush her and join them both, huddled beneath a cob web on the cold cement floor.

No screaming, I whisper. No matter what we hear. Absolutely quiet. Yahear? The boy is wholly beneath the blanket now, no part of him peeking from its top. I can feel his trembling in my side. She holds him in both of her thin arms and stares blankly into the blackness, her eyes shimmering in the small oil light like bluegreen gems found deep in some forgotten cave. She might be crying. Honestly, I can't tell. In this dark I couldn't tell if I were crying. I put my arm firmly about the both of them.

There is then a loud crack. The front door. Slow footsteps above send loose puffs of dust from the ceiling to settle into the darkness below. They're heavy, the footsteps. Lumbering seems like the appropriate word. It's him. The giant.

We'll be okay, I whisper, half to myself, as I turn the knob on the oil lamp, plunging us into complete black.

Thud. Thud. I can feel the dust settle in a thin layer on the strands of my hair. Thud. He is making his way slowly through the main room. His steps are sluggish, but long, crossing a quarter-length of the room with each stride. Thud. Thud. Then a shimmy, a moment of hesitation, and three short thuds stammering backwards, followed finally by a loud crack landing somewhere just before the basement door. I feel my daughter snort in a silent laugh. The whole cellar rattles, full of old rusted pots and bins. Even the oil lamp spirals slightly from the impact around its copper base.

Did he just fall? she whispers.

Shh.

She might be right though. Did he really just fall?

Tripped over his own feet turning around from how it sounded. Well, shit, from how it sounded someone cut a redwood and it landed in our parlor. I hear him struggling against his weight to stand back up, like gravity suddenly pulled doubly. Drunk. Probably drunk. Then there is the familiar ringing of the cellar door's loose handle jostling in its rusted old fixings and I feel acutely the air suddenly abandon my lungs. Must be using it to pull himself up. The jingling continues. Stability, that's all. He'll pull himself up and leave it.

It sounds something like a bell almost, the jingling. Small and distant and pretty in the blackness. Something like a funeral bell maybe. Or, no. Not a funeral bell. Quit that death talk. Quit it. Quit it before you build it up in your head like some fucking great poetic elegy that you write for yourself that no one will ever read but you in your own sad and splattered skull. The boy shivers slightly and sinks deeper into his tomb of a blanket and my arm is falling asleep around him and the girl but I hold them even tighter now because no matter what I've done in the past if I fuck this all up now then every second of what's come before will be forgot and all they'll know in their last few moments on earth is how miserably I failed them. In the end, this is the one thing that matters. Just here. I hold them tighter. I won't let them take my children.

In a slur of curses the giant finally regains his balance and abandons the door for the kitchen. I inhale. More thuds follow, a new set of footprints sending smaller puffs of dust from the wooden paneling. I hear vaguely the same angry woman from the shed call out to the giant in the kitchen. He hollers something back in the kind of throaty grumble that you can feel reverberate in the cavity of your chest. They talked for a while and nothing at all good came of it from the sound and then there was a third voice, smaller than the first two - but still, a third. Not good. Fuck. Not good. A third hurts the odds. Small or no. A third hurts the odds.

There is a great deal of jostling and pawing at the few shelves and cabinets and closets and vanities that remain intact on the floor above. Tin cans and pots, wooden doors or chairs or pillows or plates or any other loose oddities crash and clang about in the only noises that can be made out above the back and forth chatter of the frenzied scavengers. From the mostly empty front room, through the narrow hall's scattered closets, finally to the kitchen and bathroom, I can trace their movement as they slowly and carefully case each and every corner of my house. As if they're looking for something specific, like a secret diamond cabinet beside the silverware. Or maybe my stacks-of-money drawer only half-hidden beside the toiletries. If it's riches they're after, this place should sure disappoint them. But besides, what wealth is wealth before the end? No wealth at all, I'd say. People are funny that way about money, though.

Each time they pass it they give it a good jostle, the basement handle, just to make sure it's still locked. Each time my breath catches in my throat.

This locked? the woman's voice hollers into the kitchen. It's the first actual words of theirs I can make out. The man grumbles something back and from the woman's response it wasn't altogether kind. With a final shake she abandons the door to join him in the kitchen.

For a while there is silence. They've either found or not found what they were looking for and left or they've gone back to search the shed. Sun has to be close to set by now, which means there's hardly any light to be had at all in the shed what with the shadow of the house falling over the shed door.

Have they left? the girl asks.

Could be.

I hope they did.

Me too.

Wind whistles through loose paneling just along the back wall. It's good to know some things will be the same, in the end. Things I failed to fix. Cars and houses and bikes and people. He's asleep, she says.

What?

She nods down to her brother, a motion I could only hardly make out as my eyes still slowly adjust to the dark.

Let him sleep, I say.

I plan to.

Good.

Daddy?

Hm?

Why are they here?

I don't know, sweetheart. But if they come back we should be quiet.

If we're just gonna die anyways, why are we hiding from them?

Because it's what's safest.

Safest?

Most safe.

Safe from what?

From them. From whatever they want.

Oh. What do you think they want?

I'm not sure.

Are you going to kill them?

I don't want to.

But will you?

I do not answer. The boy snores quietly beneath his red knitting.

We could give them money, she says after a while.

I don't think they're looking for money.

Then what do they want?

I don't know. Now be quiet.

I think it's stupid that they're here.

So do I, darling.

Just then several thuds stumble along the floor above and settle before the basement door. NOT A REAL MAN? I hear the giant bark. THAT'S WHAT YOU THINK? Even from down here his voice is terrifying, like a man possessed. I DID EVERYTHING FOR YOU TWO. FOR HER. GODDAMNIT I DID EVERYTHING FOR HER. The woman across the house almost says something, but not before the giant hollers back, WELL FUCK IT ALL. WE COULDN'T FIND IT. I FAILED. BUT GUESS WHAT? YOU DID TOO. WE BOTH FAILED, AND NOW SHE'S GONNA DIE. SHE'S GONNA DIE, MARIE. HAPPY? HER. US. We're all gonna die. WHAT'S IT FOR? We're all gonna die.

He seems to sober up as his voice trails off at the end.

There is a bump against the door, like he's rested his head against it.

So fuck it all, Marie. He's nearly a whisper now. Fuck it all. There is a silence, then a loud crack.

Stop that! the woman screams. Another crack. In my head I can feel the door bend against the giant's blows.

Stop that, Robert, you're bleeding! Your forehead, it's bleeding Robert, enough!

The girl tenses under my arm with each crack, as if she could feel every strike. Crack. The sound of splitting wood. A final solid knock and there is a glimmering of light from the stairs leading to the cellar. The door slowly ebbs against his weight and finally it gives and breaks from its hinges and rattles stiffly in an avalanche of door and hinge and knob and splinter down the stairs leaving in its place a silhouette nearly as large as the door itself framed against the dying light of the late evening's half-set sun.

His black torso grows and shrinks and grows as he sucks in air and stares blindly into the blackness before him. The boy is awake now and shivering but still wholly beneath the blanket. She is crying, silently. I can feel her quake trying not to make noise - a kettle with a cork stop in its spout, full of hot, full of terror.

At the top of the steps the figure begins its descent. Slow with long, alcohol-impaired steps. Black droplets of blood drip from his black head. Each board creaks along his way down, the old stairs struggling to hold him. His eyes are not adjusted. In time he'll see better. Soon he'll see the red of the blanket. An outline of the back wall. He'll see my little girl. The blue in her eyes. I can't let him have them. Whatever happens it'll have to be quick. Firm. Right. Decisive.

As I slide it free, I notice my right arm is completely numb from having it wrapped around them. She looks at me as she feels my touch disappear, as if to make sure the rest of me hadn't vanished as well. She seems pleased that I haven't. He was nearing the base of the steps when I had finally shaken life back into my arm.

Hello? the giant says finally in his deep smoker's bass. I take my daughter's hand and place it gently over her eyes and leave it there hovering as with some black magic before moving slowly to the side wall and feeling my way along it until I'm not five feet from him, standing like a blind and bloody tower in the middle of the room. I can smell him.

Anyone in there? the woman whisper-screams from the doorjamb.

He doesn't answer and squints hard directly in the direction of my kids. Both hands firm I raise the axe as high as I can above my head.

Oh God, he says softly. Marie. He squints harder. There's kids.

The giant turns and looks at me with a look so very terrified like a look that I'm sure I've never seen in a grown man and I lower the sharpened red metal edge of the axe down as he tries to dodge it but he's too big and too drunk and too slow besides to move quick enough and I will not let him take my children and the axe comes down hard and glances off the side of his head and sends his ear out flipping like a coin and finally it buries deep into the space between his shoulder and his neck with

a horrid THUD like when I would cut wood in the backyard.

The woman's thin silhouette in the frame above shrinks and shrieks and contorts awkwardly like she were sprayed with acid before she lunges down through the empty doorway. The axe is stuck deep inside him and I tug watching the woman fumble down the steps and over the bits remaining of the door and finally I put my boot against his chest and yank backwards hard enough to free the blade and the woman comes running and I ready the axe but she collapses just before me and cries out again and I see that several inches of splinter from the door have pierced her clean through the middle of her foot and she rolls along the concrete bleeding into her husband's glossy black puddle of blood.

The giant falls to a knee with red welling out of him frothy and bubbly and in a half-daze collapses into me and runs me back into the rear wall beside my daughter who looks like she might be screaming or has been screaming the whole time and crying with her hand still over her eyes and my boy still beneath the blanket probably crying but I can't hear a damned thing and blood is everywhere and making the floor slick and I struggle to get traction in the slickness of the blood as his weight has me pinned into the wall.

The axe slips from my hand trapped under his bearhug and I realize that some of the blood is my blood and my blood is the blood that made the axe so slick and slip from my hand. I feel my ribs bending in towards my spine. My heart pressed against my chest. My lungs forced empty. My throat. Convulsing. Breathless. Black. Then there is a burst of blinding white light and fire and glass bursts out in all directions and I feel it burn a layer of skin from my face and the giant falls beside me aflame and unconscious or more likely dead and I pat out my burning eyebrow and see my daughter with the shattered remains of the oil lamp in her hand and she is still crying but no longer with the hand over her eyes. I smile to her.

The woman gives one final howl and comes at me and my children again splintered foot and all and I sweep aside and see that the wooden paneling of the back wall of the cellar has caught aflame and full of adrenaline take her neck and throw her into it and she cries out and she will not take my children. I lunge to the heels of my feet and bury the axe so deep into the back of her neck that her whole head almost rolls off decapitated but as it is her head is held on only by a thin layer of neck skin and she is aflame and falls fiery and lifeless beside her husband.

The flames crawl hungrily along the damp cellar's walls. I kneel and with shaking hands take my daughter and my son by the backs of their necks and bring their heads into mine and say that it's over and that things will be okay now and I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm so very sorry they had to see that but we have to leave and we have to leave quickly. Each by one hand I pull them behind me carefully around the door's shattered pieces and up the stairs and just before the top my daughter says something that I could not hear and I ask her what it was and she squints up to me and asks: What about the third one?

What third one?

Weren't there three of them?

Before I can think I look behind her and see the fire swimming gracefully, terribly along the paneling to ceiling to the near wall and finally to the stairs.

Come on, we need to keep moving.

We go up and turn and hurry through the hall with my boy struggling to keep pace and his red blanket trailing behind him to the front room with the black-screened TV and out the door broken open resting on a single hinge pushing and squeaking with the rising winds and in the field I look back and see our home sitting there white and perfect just as it looked before and would never look again. We sit in a patch of dry grass and watch.

What about the third one?

I shake my head. Could be they left.

Just the one left?

Could be.

I don't think so.

Stranger things have happened, I say and wipe the blood from my hands to my shirt where there is more blood, finally into the dying grass and dirt of the field. I killed two people, I think I say out loud. My God.

Neither child answers.

My hands begin to tremble terribly. My eyes well and my jaw clicks and my ears ring and suddenly the drying blood that covers me burns like an acid against my skin and all the rest of me except the pain is gone numb. But what I did was right. That much I know. More right than anything I've ever done. The girl looks on to the house and the boy shivers in his red blanket, wet eyed, red faced. More right than anything I've ever done.

Behind us the wind blows hard and the sun has well set behind a great black lump of clouds and dust and sand and death and claps of white thunder stretching out like the long, thin fingers of the Fates come to cut our life-strands. In the wind and the dying of my adrenaline I can feel slightly a hole in the back of my right shoulder blade. Must be from when he threw me into the wall, loose nail or jutting wood splinter. Hell that hurts.

Before us, the house begins to change. White panels and red trim turn a faint yellow glow just before they catch finally, and lunge out with red and orange teeth from melted windows and blazing rafters. The wind helps fan the flames, and what started slow now has taken a feverish pace, the whole house being consumed as in one great infernal wave by the fire.

For a while we sit in silence and watch the last thing in this dying part of the world we care about burn slowly away into a great bonfire, destroying the only thing there was to tell of us just before our final hour.

Suddenly the girl sits up. Daddy. Daddy, look!

I follow her pointed finger and find peering out of the front window the third.

Stay here, I tell them, then go sprinting across the yard to the front door where flames spit out and ash and embers that were once parts of my home float like tiny fireflies escaping into the cold dark of their final beautiful night. I run back to where they sit in the field, so small, so innocent against the massive swirling black radiation cloud hovering like an anti-halo over the horizon.

Your blanket, I say to the boy.

My blanket?

I need it Jonathan, hurry.

He looks down at its red nylon stitching one last time before he hands it to me.

At the door I wrap myself in it and leap through the molten firewall into the front room where she sits with her hands over her head in the middle of the floor. Not much older than my boy. Eight. Maybe nine.

Here! I call to her, hand out.

She looks up at me, clearly in pain, sweat dotted all along her face. If she were crying I couldn't tell.

Quickly come here!

She shakes her head.

I look around. Every part of the room is ablaze except for where we stand. An oven. I try again my reassuring smile, like everything will be okay. Like death out there is better than death in here.

Were they your parents? In the basement? I scream over the roar of the flames.

She looks at me for an eternity and nods.

What were they looking for?

Medicine, her voice was a whisper.

Medicine? She nods. Medicine for what?

With her index finger she points at herself, at her heart.

The ceiling crackles like a campfire and even the synthetic plastic fibers of the blanket feel close to bursting into flames.

Please, I scream to her, we have to go. It's not safe.

She looks through me with her beautiful green eyes and those small black pupils and two dimples in her cheeks and with a creaking sound a flaming beam from the ceiling crushes her into nothing in an instant.

My God.

Another crack above and a molten panel crashes into the floor just beside me. I scramble backward through the doorway as the roof begins its collapse and the blanket catches on a wooden spike and I twist out of it and watch it melt into the blackened ash paneling under the fire. In the grass I vomit and wipe my mouth and stand to return to my children some ways off in the field but I fall to my knees and vomit again several more times before I can continue walking. Looking up I see the cloud is close, crackling and swirling and laughing.

When I reach them she has her thin arms around her brother and I sit shivering beside them and put my arm around the both of them and squint at the pain in my shoulder. None of us says a word. Each of us feels the tug of that final coming behind us. But we'll keep facing the wonderful burning pyre before us, dissolving away into nothing quite remarkable at all, our backs to the black swirling jaws of eternity.

“Moon Cow”



Tatiana Havill Affatati



“Wanting To Be Bianca”

Laura Figa

pencil, gouache, watercolor

Carlene(/)Water

Jordan Chesnut

*The light is honeyed and nacreous
and in the center of the water is a single wooden canoe:
it drifts, and the water slits around the bow in soft creases
as skin around an eyelid.*

*Last night we were in the longhouse.
I asked you about the white shell next to your clavicle,
which hung by a gold thread laced through a drilled hole.
A man by the river gifted it, you replied, as reminder.*

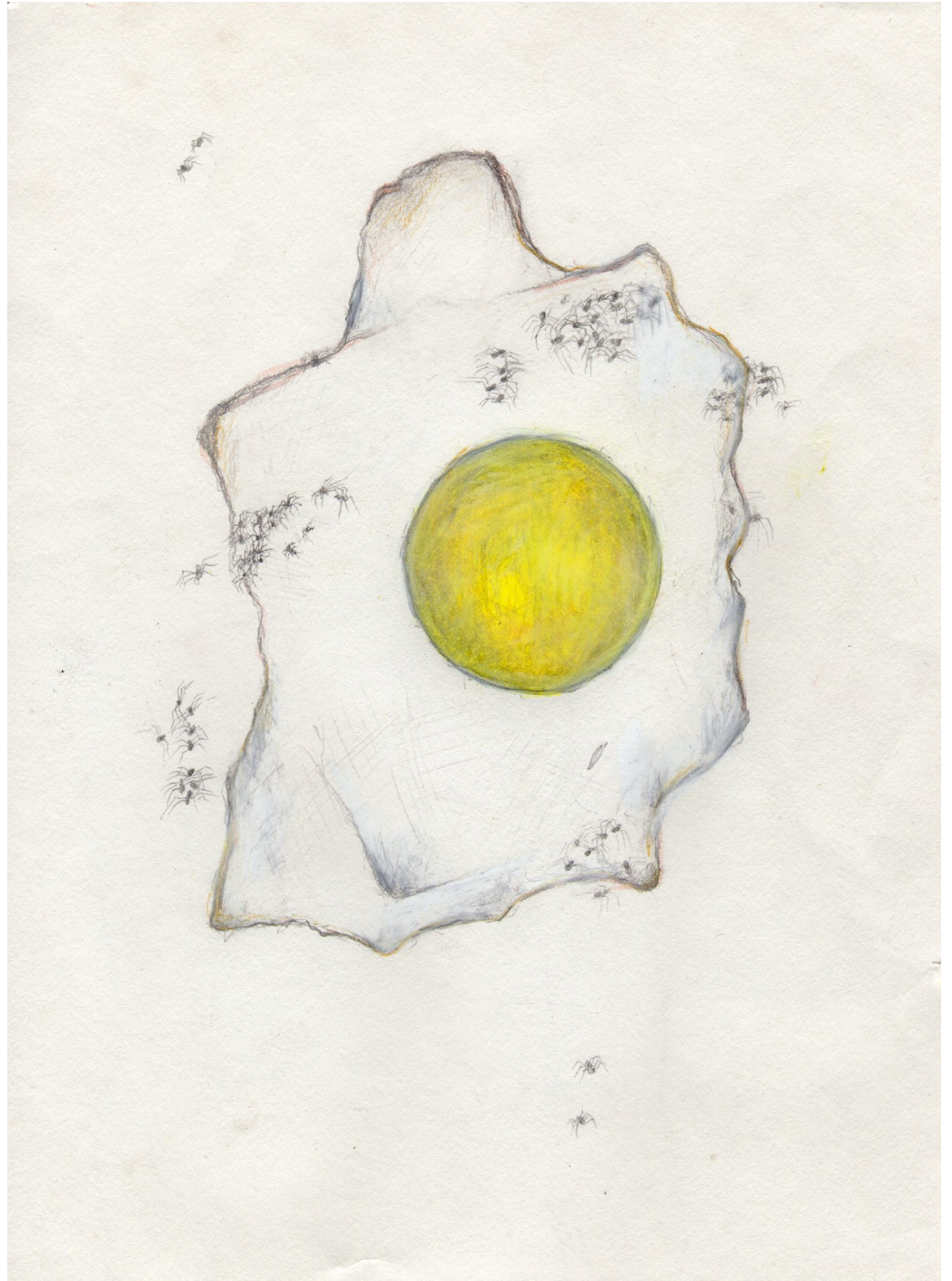
*The eye should be closed, and the canoe docked,
but a body lays on the bent bottom, a stiff figure rocking;
as oars push through the thick blossoms of algae,
and the clay of light molds to water ripples.*

*I lay on the grass at the bamboo park:
an owl, bright as a lantern, gives a warning cry and
makes transparent circles above the fir trees. Warm tea pours
faintly into a column of air next to my shoulder.*

*Earlier, by the water, a man wore hands as gloves, softly
as he helped. He had a speech impediment and
was always told he was slow. Around his head was a crown
of eggs, and he lowered her body into the canoe.*

*Under the owl call
a tree's bark is woven in flowers, shells, memoriam.
My synapses flicker on,off, on,off like a moth
as it touches a light and begs the bulb to break open, so it's not contained.*

*When the soul leaves, the body is suddenly smaller;
the pulped orange, the bottle uncorked and drained.
It is a visible instant, a naked departure, like a hand
unclasping a dragonfly.*



"Disagressable Breakfast"

Laura Figa

Laura Figa is a Junior majoring in English.. Her work has been previously featured in "First" magazine for the School of Art Institute of Chicago.



"Granite
Bathroom"

pencil, watercolor, pastels

Laura Figa

It's July 3rd, 2012 in Detroit, Michigan

Mary Killeen

*"It's a Thunderstorm Morning."
I wake up knowing it is different.
Dullness, a velvet blanket,
melts through the window,
covering everything in heaviness and dust.
Grey.
Have I slept at all?
My mind converses with itself,
my body is ancient.
I hear the ever-present hum of raindrops on
leaves.
The holiday approaches,
so the distant rumbles and cracks sound like
the fireworks,
exploding in young hands in this summer
heat wave.
It does not stop until it is satisfied.
A lion, roaming a barren land -
angry but terrified.
Rain louder and quicker now.
It is running from the infuriated beast.
The crack of a whip,
barreling yells sound in desperation.
Low vibrations,
the growling of its
empty stomach.
It does not stop until it is satisfied.*

*I have not opened my eyes yet,
I wonder if I'm in a movie,
cast in my dreams;
playing the part as soon as I lift eyelid curtains.
The weather is perfect for a cinematic scene -
a long goodbye,
(that is never really a goodbye in the end)
a kiss, a reunion,
a lost dog returns home.
I've seen it before,
but they will do it again.*

It does not stop until it is satisfied.

*I need to go about the day,
just not sure how.
Will I be struck?
Will I be eaten up,
disappear between weapons of enamel?
Do the clouds become my showerhead?
It is quieter now, muffled.
But I can always hear it in the distance,
roaming new lands.*

It does not stop.

*Mary Killeen is a senior majoring in English and
Women / Gender Studies. She has been previously published in The Siren.*

UNEVEN

Maddie Dunkelberg

S huffling feet and sizzling sounds nudged me out of sleep. Fuzzily smelling some sort of frying dough—the waffle iron?—I rolled over to find the blankets on her half-deflated air mattress had been discarded. Jamie was up.

Reluctantly, I slid out of the bed onto the cold wood floor, danced around the makeshift cot and grabbed an old sweatshirt. As I opened the door to the kitchen, I saw her sprinkling chocolate chips onto tiny pancakes. Seeing her uncharacteristically in just her t-shirt and underwear, vulnerable, surprised me. Apparently she hadn't felt the cold as much as I had. Or maybe she had, seeing the way she slowly shifted her weight back and forth, straightening her left leg, then her right, bouncing lightly and smoothly on the balls of her feet.

It was the same sort of athletic energy she had exuded in high school. She was blessed with the ability to harness her nervousness in an attractive way, a way that made her seem confident and excited. Something lurked permanently below the service, like she was taught and ready to pounce, or maybe flee. Her small, wiry gymnast frame only added to her springiness. Jealousy had always crept up on me when I saw my baby sister on the soccer field. Between calls, she'd bounce back and forth in a hyperactive version of what I saw now. She was a body in constant motion.

That boundless inertia helped the rumors roll off her smooth, tan skin. They came in stupid joke form, anyway—about how she was a little too jock-y, so attached to her warm-up sweats and not so attached to boys—but anyway, she was a bit too quick and toned and together for any of the words to really stick, and I don't think she was confident enough to prove them true.

So of course she never told any of her teammates or honor society members.

But it was rocking back and forth in this way of hers that I imagined she told mom. In this same unconscious sway, like a third-grade boy delivering lines in a class play. She shifted to her right foot. Mom. Left foot. I'm gay. Froze for the briefest moment

as Mom told her coldly that she could not be if she wanted to stay under her roof. Right foot. And then she left and came to me.

Her head jerked up in that controlled, taught way of hers, like a rabbit at the snap of a twig. One hand lay curled holding chips, the other poised dangling a few over the griddle. She was standing a little too far away from the stove top, more weight on the right foot. The tightness of her muscles told me she was not really comfortable, and unsurprisingly so. We were sisters, but not the kind so free with our feelings to air them like this. We had said little to each other since her rapid knock on my door last night. She revealed the reveal, I cobbled together a bed for her, and she crawled into it and squirmed around restlessly until feigning sleep. But I could hear her soft weep.

Now she straightened and returned to her seesawing, chocolate chips clutched loosely in both small fists, her thinly muscular arms bent slightly. Simultaneously relaxed and held tense, she looked like a puppet offering up a treat. And like a puppet, she was moving, but stuck. I approached, and she tried to laugh for some reason, her normally coarse voice coming out as a squeak. The laugh didn't shake her body, but jerked it. This scared me. Her intense energy rarely reached this harsh edge.

Long, tangled hair hung half knotted at the nape of her neck. One hand on her bony shoulder, I used the other to brush a mouse-brown strand behind her small round ear. I held her away from me, absorbing her familiar frame. Her straight torso and compact thighs, her flexing feet; they combined in an elegant tomboyishness.

I pulled her resistant, shifting body close to my own. As I held her tight she finally began to melt. Chips tumbled onto the floor as she relaxed, finally releasing into the arms of someone who saw her body as something foreign, yes, but not as a weapon. How could it be? How could such an expertly crafted bundle of nerves love wrongly? I could never see it as anything unbeautiful. Not something so powerfully fragile. I could never see it as anything other than innocent.

*Maddie Dunkelberg
Freshman at the University of Oregon*



“Action 3”

Kate F. McDowell
Freshman

pen, ink, permanent marker

Echoes

by Alexander Dang

*People are a continual break down
and rebuild with screws constantly
being readjusted: tightened and loosened,
the floorboards keep cracking and creaking and we keep
on thinking about the things that hurt us the most.*

*So what else are we supposed to do besides
write? To constantly obsess over what has pushed
us to the edge—and it'd be so easy to jump.
Jump, hero
Jump, coward
Keep feeling the bump, bump
of your chest and yet you imagine
monsters growing in the nightshade of our collective ribs.
You will sigh out every good memory you wished to
scrapbook, only left with scraps of books that she left
behind in the bookcase before she left,*

*And ever since she did
You have been afraid to write in hallways.
Because everything in those corridors
keep repeating themselves and
keep repeating themselves and
keep repeating themselves
and keep to themselves and
you keep repeating to yourself
that
This is getting old.*

*Be careful.
Be scared.*

*Because when you repeat something, you memorize it,
and what you are trying to commit to the backs of your eye-
lids
will eventually burn through those curtains until you finally
realize
what the past meant when it wrote
Love is Blind.*

*Because now I never see you but every
sense has been heightened,
and every time I catch your scent,
I catch cold in that same timespan
I can taste you right on the far side
of my tongue because the words from my mind
often try to jailbreak and escape but
the thoughts are always stopped before*

*they exit. And of course I hear you. Right here.
When anyone says anything, I feel your voice
singing sweet lyrics but I cannot evoke the words.*

*There are some things you cannot repeat.
No matter how hard you try
No matter how good you think you can remember
No matter how much you want to matter
You can never, ever
Recreate the cloud memorials that you and your goddess
Built out of the lists and wisps of
"I love you until the moon falls down."*

*Echoes are a reflection of sound
but the image projected back will always
allow distortion and are open for incorrect
interpretations and repetitions of:
I love you until the moon falls down,
Until the moon falls down,
the moon falls down*

*And the tides stop and roll
over your body as the salt water
drowns your eyes so
Love is blind
blinded,
blinding
And of course I still hear you.*

*I'm drenched in what I thought was sweat
But I keep forgetting I'm stuck on the other side
of the bedroom door and that the sprinklers
are going off, rusting my nails and screws into
something soft and too much looking like blood
as it mixes with the water and it's slowly filling up
and I'm just waiting for it all to burst from soggy
wooden panels. It sounds painful. It really does.
But at least
I don't have to hear the
creaking of the
cracking of the
typing of the
breaking of the
break, break, breakdown
of everything we made because now,*

Finally, I can hear my own thoughts.

Lenin's Army

Chas Cassidy

The girl arrived without notice.

She was undersized. Her eyebrows came together above her nose. The shirt she found fit strangely over her bony shoulders. Her hair, reddened by a childhood of poor nutrition, hung down her back in a braid. She was neither coming nor going—she washed the wall alongside the staircase, working in short, even strokes, pausing only to wring her once-white cloth into a metal bucket. She never looked up.

"I don't suppose you know who that is," said the housekeeper, craning her head to peer into the entryway of the communal apartment.

The witch who lived in the basement sucked on her teeth and squinted over her skewed reading glasses. Her blind eye flailed in its socket.

"I thought that was the Miroslavsky girl."

"No, they've got five boys."

The girl reached the top of the stairs shortly before suppertime. The upstairs tenant paused on his way down to inspect the work.

"I hope they aren't compensating you for this," he said. "You've only managed to wash the bottom half of the wall."

"I'm not yet very tall." But the girl had long suspected she would never grow taller. She stretched her arms above her head, and her joints cracked. A toothy smile spread over her face, much to the irritation of the upstairs tenant. "I don't suppose you'd be needing any sweeping done."

The man scowled. "What's your business here? We already have a housekeeper."

"I'm looking for my aunt," said the girl. "And I thought I might make myself useful while I wait."

"There's nothing useful about standing in the way," said the upstairs tenant. He had once been a factory worker, before a falling beam had gnarled his left leg, and now he wrote pamphlets for the Comintern. His eyes were so sunken into his head that their color was indistinguishable. "Who is your aunt?"

"Marfa Petrova, sir."

"I didn't know Marfa had any siblings. Well, you'd best see if you can find something to eat; she won't be back from the mountain until late in the night. You make me hungry just looking at you."

The girl smiled, and the tenant shook his head, murmuring.

When Marfa Petrova was a schoolgirl, she had a name-twin. They were both from the village of K, in the southern provinces. They were both born in July. Marfa Tikhonovna, the older of the two, grew up as the daughter of a former priest, and Marfa Makarevna, the younger, as the daughter of the poet Makar. They were both sun-dark and well-fed. They were both accepted at the institute beside the sea. They rode the train together, opposite each other in the stuffy compartment, balancing the lid

of a wooden crate on their knees. Beyond the barred windows, grasslands raced to keep up with them.

"Aren't you excited?" asked Marfa Tikhonovna, leaning across the improvised table. Even in the half-blackness, she was brilliant. Her hair was sheer and flaxen, and her eyebrows met in the middle. She wasn't very beautiful, but always well-scrubbed. "I've never left K."

"Me, neither." Marfa Makarevna's eyes caught on the silver berry trees planted along the road. The train smelled like fuel burning, and beyond the flimsy compartment door, boots fell heavy on the hall. She would remember being cold. She would remember the power of movement, of leaving, of promise. Her father would have been fascinated. "What do you think it will be like?"

"Big," laughed the other Marfa Petrova. Her amber eyes were huge and numinous. "I hope they teach French."

Marfa Makarevna laughed shortly. "All the institutes teach French." She preferred the shape of her own language, the language of the hardworking men and women who had built the revolution. What had the French accomplished for Communism? She could think of nothing. "I hope they teach us how to get more rations."

It was the other Marfa's turn to laugh. "You would say that."

Marfa Makarevna turned her head to look out the window, and for a while, they watched the darkness settle over the moving landscape. How grown up she had felt, sitting on that train with her counterpart. She imagined their walking down the hall of the new school, turning heads. Those two girls. Those two Marfa Petrovas. Always together, like shadows of each other.

She exhaled on the glass and wrote their name in the fog. "You're not my aunt."

Marfa Makarevna paused, her key halfway to its lock. The hallway was always empty when she came back from the factory. She turned slowly towards the voice—a girl with a fox-smile and an unraveling braid.

"I'm almost certainly not," said Marfa. "I have no sisters or brothers."

The girl took a step closer. She stood no taller than Marfa's chest. Her wristbones were like the wings of birds, delicate and pale. "Are you Marfa Petrova?"

"That's what they call me." Marfa put the key into the door and pushed it open. When the girl did not follow her into the room, she considered leaving her out there, but thought better of it and motioned her inside. "What do they call you?"

"Nothing," said the girl. "I've been alone for a while. My passport says Lenara Petrova. I don't know my father's name."

"Lenara Petrova? Maybe we are related." A cousin? She looked at the girl, whose hands were chapped and cheeks smeared with the industrial ash that permeated the settlement. It hadn't

yet settled into the creases around her eyes and mouth; she must have come from somewhere else. "But I'd like to think I would have remembered you."

"They haven't seen her in many years," she said. She opened the cupboard above her bed and found the last hunk of bread. She tore it in half. As the water began to boil in the samovar, she moved across the room to push a portion of her wages between the mattress and the floor. Belatedly, she hoped the girl would not steal it. "How did you come so far as the Magnetic Mountain?"

"They sent me here by mistake," she said. "I was certain it was a mistake, my aunt would never live so far north. The cold, I mean! Not that there is anything wrong with living here, it's quite lovely and—"

"But a mistake," interrupted Marfa. She detested polite chatter. The air was better spent building monuments and moving mountains. "I know someone at the Information Bureau. I'll ask them if they know anything."

The girl leaned against the folding card table until Marfa motioned for her to sit. "My mother was Alena Petrova. Have you met?"

Thought creased Marfa's brow. "She was my schoolmate," she said slowly. The haze of memory drifted over her, drawing the shapes of a lost life to the still surface of her mind. "My father's name was Makar. But your aunt, your mother's sister, I knew her. Marfa Tikhonovna. The other Marfa Petrova."

Light shot across the girl's face.

"Do you know where she is?"

Marfa's lip tightened and she shook her head no. The girl's face did not change.

"Thank you, Marfa Makarevna."

They shared their meal of broth and bread and just-hot coffee in the shapeless illumination of a lone, bare light bulb.

The institute did teach French. All institutes teach French.

Sheer, windowed cliffs jutted out of the ground, expertly hewn in the late romantic style. Marfa's dormitory cast a wide shadow over the yard, regardless of the time of day, and in the dark, gymnasts crushed imperialism with their bodies. Students filled the narrow hallways, pushing, murmuring in a tangle of native tongues, moving against one another as they made their way from auditorium to auditorium.

Marfa Tikhonovna went straight to work, brightening the walls with drawings and clippings, while Marfa Makarevna took her time in aligning her collection of well-read serials on the single allocated bookshelf.

Their first argument came the fifth day, maybe. Or the eleventh. The last day of the week. The Marfas sat in their dormitory, lying on their corresponding beds in chilly silence. Outside, a winter storm blurred the boundaries of the ice-grey sea into the contours of the land. The electricity had gone. Rain drowned out even the irrepressible chanting of Young Pioneers on the floor below.

"I can't believe you did that," said Marfa Tikhonovna, finally. Her throat was raw, swollen with salt. She clutched the image of their saint, Saint Martha, who had fled to Cyprus with her once-dead brother Lazarus and died there. "I just—I knew

you could be cold, but I know he meant well, and you must think he's all right to look at, too, with the way you let him touch your arms."

"He wasn't touching your arm." Marfa Makarevna felt along the edge of her single mattress for the place where the frame dented, but found that she had smoked the last of her cigarettes. She let her hand fall away. "You shouldn't let anyone put their hands on you like that."

"Says who? You?"

"Says me." Rain battered against the windows but could not penetrate the rickety frames. "We've got to keep together."

"Oi, well, maybe I don't like it like that." Marfa Tikhonovna sat up, letting the icon fall to the floor. Its wooden hinge struck the boards and splintered. "Maybe I want a certain young man to put his hands on me. Maybe I don't want to be your shadow."

Marfa Makarevna laughed, low in her dry throat. No one had ever accused hale, bosomy Marfushka of being anyone's shadow. She let her eyes curve over the lines of the other girl's body. No, the priest's daughter was prettier by far, and more so in the dark. "Maybe you don't know what's good for you."

The other Marfa sneered, but it was crippled with pain. Before she could form any kind of retort, the electric lights buzzed back to life, and the metallic voice of the dean swarmed around their heads.

"Students of the Institute," it chimed, sharp and bright as a fishing lure, severing the remainder of the argument. "Please proceed to Auditorium Three for a very special assembly." After discovering that her son had died in Lviv, the housekeeper drank an entire week's ration of vodka on her own.

"The woman can put it away," said the upstairs tenant, as he stepped over her. "Do you think you can help me get her to the divan? She can't just lie in front of the stairs like that. Someone will trip."

"Someone has already tripped." The witch leaned hard on her cane and scowled over the tops of her glasses. She had been almost impossibly beautiful in her youth, robust and strong as her Cossack brothers, and her aging had been bitter. She slouched over the unconscious housekeeper. "Won't you go find Marfenka?"

"I'm here." Marfa had hung up the telephone and gone to stand beside her. She bent, slung one sagging arm across the housekeeper's shoulders, and with the help of the upstairs tenant, managed the woman to the sofa. "When did she get the news?"

"An hour ago, maybe? She's only just had enough."

Marfa glanced reproachfully at the empty bottle. "I'll send her with my ration card tomorrow, if that was the last of it. I can't stand the stuff."

An expression of gratitude lifted the upstairs tenant's features. "You're a saint, Marfa Petrova. A Stakhanovite-saint." Marfa laughed, but it was dry in her mouth. "All the Stakhanovites are dead," she said.

It was true—the ones she had worked beside, breaking those impossible records of human accomplishment deep in the bowels of the earth, they were mostly dead, or disappeared, which was the same. Purged. Promised to a young war. She wondered if the other Marfa Petrova was among those who toiled in the

Siberian camps, or who lined the front in Karelia, or who taught the mothertongue in Moldavia. Maybe she was dead. Marfa had always thought she was dead.

The witch refolded the telegram bearing the mark of death and tucked it under the empty bottle.

"It was last May, you know," she said, adjusting her glasses, "that he was killed. They'd only just now identified his body. You would think she would have been prepared, after so much time."

"You're never prepared for something like that." The upstairs tenant let his hand come to rest on the indentation of his leg, where his muscles had once been supple and lean. "Even years later. Even if you've always known."

"At Institute of S, we want to impress the importance of honesty and complete cooperation with the Party."

Through the tinny speakers, the voice sounded mechanical and alien. Marfa Makarevna's knuckles went white around the strap of her string bag. She glanced around at the other students in the auditorium. None of them looked concerned. They stared straight ahead at that tiny woman on the stage, who continued: "Why, I was born the daughter of a Capitalist businessman, but when I joined the Party, I learned everything I needed to know about contributing to the foundation of a Socialist nation. You must all understand, you are the future of the Soviet Union!"

Others, proclaiming their bourgeoisie lineage, ascended to the stage. Their voices, too, sounded like those of machines, and they moved superfluously. Marfa Makarevna watched them with her utmost attention. Her father, the poet, had read to her from *War and Peace*, and she mistrusted the countess who could assume the mantle of the peasant without hesitation, just as she mistrusted the woman who claimed to have given her family fortune to the State.

"We'd like to invite everyone of non-proletarian origin to step forward and publicize their commitment to building a strong Communist nation." This woman, shaped like a wraith, motioned them forward. "Don't be shy, my young comrades! You are the future!"

The crowd undulated, murmuring. "I think we should go up there," said the other Marfa Petrova. Her face shone in the dim, flickering electric lighting. The anger from earlier had gone somewhere else. "Don't you think? If only everyone had the opportunity to renounce their origins and begin anew as citizens of Communism."

Everyone in K knew that Tikhon Petrov had met a bitter end in a concentration camp outside of Irkutsk. Or that he'd been thrown off on a train on the way to Manchuria. Or that he'd been shot in a prison underground.

And here his daughter stood, peering over the edge of redemption, ready to seize the opportunity he had not been afforded.

Marfa Makarevna opened her mouth. "I don't believe them," she whispered, although her voice was lost in the clamor for rebirth. "Don't give yourself up."

But already the other Marfa Petrova was climbing to her feet, raising her arms and her voice, moving with the others toward the stage. She stood in the rapidly-forming queue, and when it was her turn, she revealed every secret that was hers—

except that she had a name-twin, born in the same town in the same month, to the same precarious status, and Marfa Makarevna would never forget the value of that silence.

"I don't understand why we should keep her around," the housekeeper murmured, when the color had begun to return to her face, and the girl was still in the apartment.

The child had made her way through six years of kitchen clutter, combed every rug, and washed the outside of the windows. "She's making the rest of us look bad by comparison."

"Just you, I think." The upstairs tenant leaned back in the upright wooden chair, balancing with his good leg. "I suppose the bottom half of the wall cleaned twice is better than nothing. Of course, you're tall enough to reach the ceiling."

The housekeeper smacked the chair with her broom, sending the man toppling. "That's enough out of you, unless you intend to start paying her my wage."

Groaning, the upstairs tenant rolled about in protest. "Girl!" the housekeeper shouted, pounding the floor once, hard, with the broom. "Go make yourself useful and get us another loaf of bread."

The girl poked her head into the kitchen. "I don't have my own ration card," she said.

"Use mine." The housekeeper brushed her dark hair over one shoulder and straightened her spine, holding out the folded card to the girl. "And be quick about it. I don't want to have to wait one minute longer than I absolutely have to."

"Of course," said the girl, already on her way out.

By midnight, she had still not returned.

Marfa would later admit to worrying. She had spoken to the man from the Information Bureau earlier that evening, and even then, the housekeeper had been swaying side to side with impatience, glancing at the door that lead out onto the street, asking, "Where is that girl?" The question made Marfa uncomfortable. Even if the girl was not her niece, she still belonged to some familiar shadow-life, some other variant of herself that had been braver.

The upstairs tenant leaned back in his chair. His eyes followed Marfa as she moved from corner to corner. She was still wearing her workboots. "She's a smart one, that Lenara. Nothing she can get into that can't be got out of."

"I hope you're right." Marfa ran her hands through her hair. They came back soot-dark. She had meant to wash, but instead she stood in the hall, waiting, listening for some boots on the street or a call or a scream—

A knocking burst through the apartment. Marfa threw herself against the door and wrenched it open, revealing a militiaman in blue uniform. The officer that took up the doorway had the girl by the sleeve. Her body looked tiny, slumped against his bulk.

"Is this girl yours?" asked the officer. His pale hair covered his eyes, and Marfa strove vainly to read compassion in them. Without waiting for a reply, he heaved her across the threshold. "We caught her using a stolen ration card. I am willing to forgive the foolishness of a little girl for one hundred twenty rubles."

Caught off guard by the lack of subtlety, Marfa's mouth fell open, but her hands were already searching her pockets for kopeks. There were none, of course. "Just a minute," she said. She turned and sprinted up the stairs, fumbling for the key to her

Drink Anymore

Sarah Richards

*I imagine drinking the
world up in one big
gulp
a swoosh of angst
and all of time would
fade away
diminish into
little hopes
and dreams.*

*Then I remember stars
and the blackest
blacks with
purple
flickering and
the
gold flecks
in your eyes.*

*The sun!
A charcoal shadow
of a cave
beneath
the plateau where
you plucked a
yellow flower and
you pinned it in my
hair.*

*I'm too full to
the top
to drink anymore.*

room. Her wages had been accumulating beneath the mattress for some time, and she had imagined a trip back to S or K or to the frozen sea, but those places seemed suddenly, impossibly distant. The light wouldn't turn on, so she fumbled along the seam of the bed until she could crumple the near-worthless notes in her clammy hand and rush back to the foyer. "Of course, sir. We understand the severity of her actions. She's a bit touched, in the head, as you can—"

The officer reached across the threshold again, seized the notes, and slammed the door.

Marfa picked the girl up from the floor and urged her up the stairs. "Come on, it's all right. You're not hurt, are you? Do you still have the ration card?"

The girl shook her head. "No, no," she murmured. "They took it from me, I didn't mean to—"

"Don't worry about it." Marfa ran her fingers through the girl's hair. The braid had come completely undone. Her face was dark with iron dust, and it had settled into the parts of her face that crease when she smiles. "She shouldn't have given you hers. They shouldn't have noticed you at all."

Deliriously, the girl let herself be pushed into Marfa's tiny room. "I shouldn't have drawn attention to myself," she whispered, her mouth mashed against Marfa's guiding shoulder. "I asked them about my aunt, and they said they couldn't answer any questions and then that someone had been looking for me and—"

Her breath broke off. Maybe sobbing, coughing. Industry does that to a person. Marfa propped her against the corner where the icons would have gone and lit the gas lamp. The room flooded with oily orange light.

Marfa opens her mouth to speak -- to say she has found out the fate of the other Marfa Petrova; that the woman this girl had hoped to find is somewhere in the Kyrgyz heartland, maybe living or maybe buried; that the electric trains that promise passage would return the girl just as readily as they would spirit her away — but what comes out is just a name, over and over: Lenara. Lenara. Lenara.

Lenin's Army.

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Two-Story Buildings

Molly Ponkevitch

*Even on church days,
when I thought everybody
ate jelly donuts and went on family walks,
my dad was at the site.
I'd walk by his building on the way to catch the bus, screaming,
"Hey!" over the grind of jackhammers
till my throat was hot.
Usually his head stayed down,
but I liked when he saw me
and others knew my dad
labored.*

*Our home was an apartment stuffed
with unpacked boxes, greasy magazines.
You could barely squeeze through the hallway into the kitchen
where dirty dishes were scattered over the counter
and dad's boots were thrown across the stiff carpet.
I didn't care much, though,
only when my friends came.
I'd meet them in the apartment lobby
and tell them my dad didn't like company,
or my brother had a fever.*

*Plus dad bought sugar cereal,
and on his days off let us watch
TV all day with him,
except during football season
when I would marvel for hours,
cross-legged on the grubby floor,
running my fingers through vinyl cases,
paying special attention to Marcus Garvey's spear
and Jimi's unburdened eyes,
digging out even
the records that fell behind
the record shelf,
sketching, a curve in my lip,
the blueprints of my future.*

*One Thursday after school
I trekked through the site,
kicking gravel to distract others
from my not wearing a hard hat,
and asked the black guy Quinn
if he knew where my dad was.
He was high
up on the seventh floor of the new building frame,
and I knew he hated going down and up
the stair case for the extra effort
and because of his smoker's cough.
I wanted to tell him of my guitar performance,
that I played "Old Man,"
his Neil Young favorite.*

*My bad timing was drawn on Quinn's face
so I went back to the apartment,
crossed the Portland cement,
jumped the ditches,
and stood in the daylight
of the 3rd floor balcony*

*where the clutter was behind me,
the glass, the freebase pipe,
the exotic porn girls with crystal lined
over their bellies,
the pantries infested with sugar ants,
the broken record player,
everything like shit,
piled and obliterated.*

*I stood and thought about
who built this building.*

*Molly Ponkevitch is a majoring in English. Her work has been previously
published by Unbound in Fall 2010 and Fall 2012.*





“Still Motion”

Megan Bruun

the Jumping Fence

Terek Hopkins

This is how you hold a hit in,” he said, taking a drag of the joint and sucking in a deep breath. His lungs filled with smoke and his chest rose.

“This is how to blow an O,” his lips puckered, like he was getting ready to kiss the cool, night air, and he blew a thick ring of smoke.

“This is how you take a swig.” He let the joint sit between his pointer and middle finger, and brought the water bottle full of whiskey to his lips.

His face was tight for a moment as he squeezed his eyes shut. “And that’s how you keep one down.” He reached the bottle out to me and gestured for me to drink. He watched as I threw my head back, took a gulp, and swallowed. The burn took my breath away and I mumbled for him to hand me the soda sitting between us. “Men don’t chase their drinks,” he said with a smile as he picked up the can and chucked it into the field at his back.

I coughed and felt some of the dark liquor come back up my throat. A mixture of the liquid spirit and my vomit pressed against the inside of my lips, but I sucked it back down and forced a grin. Elliott reached over and patted me on the shoulder before pulling down his shirt slightly from the neckline.

“Puts hair on your chest,” he said, running his fingers through the scraggly, blonde hair on his chest as though it were a lion’s mane. We both laughed at this, and then he reached over and took the whiskey back.

Elliott had moved to Cambria about five years ago, halfway through my 6th grade year. He was only a few months older than me, but his birthday landed on the cut-off, so he was placed in the grade above. The only class I had with him was D.A.R.E. Every day he wore a thick black beanie down to his eyes, and every day Ms. Johnson, our teacher, would ask him to take it off. He would always spend more time matting his thin blonde hair back down than taking any kind of notes.

The day we became friends was when we both had to stay after school because our parents couldn’t pick us up right at 3 o’clock. My parents had told me they’d be a little late, and had given me a pack of Skittles to make up for it. When Ms. Johnson asked us both how late they’d be, I could tell Elliott’s “no more than a half hour” was a lie. So we sat together and ate my Skittles.

When I asked Elliott about his name, he said it came from his grandfather, “I’m actually Elliott the third,” he said, and laughed. When my mom showed up some time later, Ms. Johnson

hesitantly let him get a ride home with us instead of waiting.

“And keep the hat at home next time, Elliott!” she yelled as the car door slammed shut. My mother leaned over me in the passenger seat and waved at Ms. Johnson as we drove away.

“Just point me in the right direction, honey,” Mom said to Elliott as she smiled into the rear-view mirror. He mumbled thanks, and nudged the back of my seat,

“Yo, Jared, you guys know where the old rodeo grounds are?” A concerned look came over my mom’s face that she quickly pushed away with a forced smile and a nod.

Tonight, as we walked out to the cemetery, he stuffed that same black beanie into his back pocket, saying “Doesn’t that cold air feel good against the back of your neck?” A few steps later, he reached back for it and noticed that it was gone—fallen out somewhere along the way, disappearing into the black night we walked through.

“Good thing, too,” I said, “With that thing on your head you look like someone the cops should be called for, you fucking hoodlum.” He’d only burnt two matches and a couple minutes looking for it.

“You got to learn how to give a good handshake too,” he said as he set the bottle down and reached his hand out to me. I eyed it hanging there between us. The baggy sleeve of his sweatshirt reached past his wrist and up to the blood on his knuckles. He pulled it back to his elbow and stared at me unsmiling.

“Well,” he said, “grab my hand.”

We liked going to the cemetery on weekends. It was always quiet, and the only light came from a flickering street lamp that marked the entrance to the graveyard. Just enough light to find the end of a joint with a match. We liked using matches.

I finally reached my hand out and put it in his waiting palm. He grabbed it and squeezed. “You gotta’ look someone in the eyes when you shake their hand,” he said, looking at me. His eyes were a soft green—sunlight pressing through pine needles. His pupils were large and black like the bottom of a bucket. He fixed me with his stare. It was Elliott who finally let go of my hand; he stuffed his right palm into the pocket of his black sweatshirt, and with his left he took another swig.

I nodded at him to pass it my way. He put his finger up as if he was on the phone, and brought the bottle quickly back to his lips. I could smell the ache in his breath—it bit like the whiskey we’d steal from his father’s liquor cabinet.

"He's got plenty," Elliott said proudly, "it's not like he'll ever notice." He must have been right, because we got away with doing it almost every weekend.

Elliott sipped on the whiskey again before passing it back. The brown liquor felt warm pressed against my palms. I could hear it slosh back and forth between my knitted fingers. I bent my head slightly and pressed my forehead against the plastic cap of the bottle. Elliott chuckled, "Praying isn't gonna' make it taste any better."

I smiled and wondered what exactly it was that made a prayer work. I thought about being a kid and going to church with my parents on Easter Sunday. I remembered watching the multi-colored sun spill through the huge stained glass and onto the rows of pews and people in prayer; my mom nudging me in the side with her elbow when she caught my eyes wandering, and the grin my dad got when he saw her do it. I remembered how focused they looked, with their eyes shut and fingers crisscrossed—especially after something bad had happened, like 9/11, or when Grandma's Alzheimer's kept getting worse.

Sometimes they'd ask me to pray for certain people and I would. I'd try to imagine a face, and then if that face had a family. But, eventually that face would always turn into someone I knew, like Mom, or Dad, or Grandma. Sometimes even my dog, Althea, would become the heart of my prayers. I asked my parents if you could feel someone's prayers and they said you could. "Then why don't I ever feel yours?" I'd said.

My dad's glasses had thick black frames that rested on a long nose. They slipped down as he leaned over,

"Well..." he said, whispering in my ear, "I pray every single day that you stay safe and healthy so that I can keep my fishing partner for the weekends. Because that's the beauty of it, kiddo, you feel it just by breathing." I remembered him smiling and pretending to cast a line into the pews ahead of us with his invisible fishing rod, Mom rolling her eyes and trying to keep from laughing.

A soft breeze kicked through the cemetery as I tried to quiet the chatter growing in my teeth. After a moment of dead silence, Elliott sighed and let his head fall backwards, kicking his feet out in front of him. I adjusted myself on the bench meant for mourners and threw my head back just like Elliott had. He stared at the far-off stars as I closed my eyes and felt the gurgle of whiskey drain down my throat.

"You're getting better at it," he said, bringing his eyes back to mine. I nodded and tried to calm the sense of pride his words made me feel. I breathed into my cupped hands and tried to rub heat into my ears.

"You know there's different ways of smiling at people," he said, sitting back up, "This is how you smile at someone you like," he said with a big, toothy grin. "And this is how you smile at someone you don't." The muscles in his jaw knotted and his lips became tight. I couldn't help but laugh as he tried his best to look mean. He wiped the back of his hand against his lips, as if

smearing the scowl from his features.

"This is how you treat someone who talks shit behind your back, and this is how to look bigger than you are when you need to." He puffed out his chest, glared, and squinted his eyes, as if there, hanging in the sky above us, was a big, round sun instead of a moon's last sliver.

"You gotta' learn how to pick up a woman too, and how to drop her the next day like she meant nothing. This is how you pretend not to care even when you do." He slowly moved his hand down the length of his face, like his open palm was a curtain and his features, the performance. He squeezed one of his fists and rubbed his bloody knuckles against the palm of his other hand. He stared at me with empty eyes. "But you also have to learn to act like you care when you don't."

I nodded.

Elliott stopped and took a deep breath. I wanted to tell him to chill; I'd figure stuff out on my own. I wanted to tell him *You aren't going anywhere, you have all night, and the night after that*. I wanted him to take a pull and settle down. *Don't get so riled up over this shit*.

I looked down at his hand and noticed his fingers quickly, and quietly tapping on his knee. They bounced up and down over a hole in his jeans that revealed a cold, purple scar. He seemed only to grow more and more anxious, like he had to get something off his chest—like he was wearing weights under that baggy, black sweatshirt, instead of a white tee.

"You gotta' learn how to get a girl into bed, and how to make her want to stay, how to make her leave when you're done, and how to make her come back when you're ready," Elliott said with a grin that quickly faded.

He was standing now. He stood with his feet shoulder width apart and raised his fists in the air like a boxer preparing to fight: "This is how to hit a man in the jaw, and this is how you don't miss." He threw a jab and ducked his head.

"This is what happens when you do miss," he cringed and keeled over, as if taking a punch in the gut. He raised himself and quickly danced to the right and threw an upper-cut, his knuckles brushed against the bark of a tree. "You'll miss sometimes. Don't ever think you won't."

I wanted to yell *Stop, already! Your knuckles are bloody enough; No need to hit another pine tree*. I wanted to say *Sit down, tell me the rest later*. But I knew Eliot wouldn't listen. So I sat there and nodded.

He looked over at me, saw that I was still watching, and continued: "You have to know how to take a hit. You'll take more than a few. This is how you get back up afterwards." Elliott spat and brushed a layer of dirt off each shoulder. "And what do you think you do if a cop stops you after you get into some shit?" Elliott asked. And before I could answer, he blurted out, "You run. You always run from pigs. And if you're dumbass is too slow and you get caught, then you have to know how to look sober even when you're not. You have to know how to stand straight and look a cop in the eyes. Never squint too much—drunk people squint."

If they happen to breathalyze you, stick a penny in your mouth when they're not looking. My dad said the copper soaks up the alcohol." He paused for a moment, catching his breath, "You have to get used to the feel of a loose penny in your pocket." He seemed frantic as the advice poured from him, "And you gotta' know how to deceive people, you know, how to look someone in the eyes and lie. But you also gotta' learn how to tell when someone's lying to you."

Elliott stared at a spot on the ground as I pried my eyes from him to look around for the whiskey. Before I could find it, he began speaking again. This time his voice was softer and the words were said with more distance between them.

"This is how you hold tears back, and how to keep your chin up when your heart's dragging on the floor. This is how you lift your heart above your head when you need it there." He made a heart shape with his fingers and placed it above his forehead. He turned towards me, his face was bare and his eyes were flat—they looked deep and sunken, like a hollow well. "This is how to look past someone like they don't exist. This is how to hold everything in, and this is how to let it all go—how to forget. This is how you pretend to forget when you can't find the strength to. This is how you convince yourself you've forgotten—how to trick yourself into being happy." He quickly threw a punch at the young pine tree in front of him. He was panting now. His breaths were short and quick. He jabbed at the air, he ducked, he crossed, he stopped. He ran his fingers through his hair; I could see a bite of pain form in a crease on his cheek.

What's wrong? I wanted to ask.

When I was nine all I wished for Christmas was a skateboard, like all my friends had. Instead I got a suit, a little miniature suit that I ended up wearing only once—to my grandmother's funeral—before I outgrew it and it became worthless.

Elliott's face looked like what I imagine mine did that Christmas morning. His eyes looked like those of a kid trying to convince himself to love something. I wanted to ask *What are those tears in the corners of your eyes? Who are they for?* But I didn't ask and Elliott continued: "This is how you breathe. This is how to hold your breath so long it hurts. This is how you learn to not need anybody. This is how you learn to be alone and this is how to enjoy being lonely." I could see the rise and fall of his chest even under the too-baggy sweatshirt he wore. His breaths were heavy as he put his hands down to his side and sat back down across from me. He took a seat on a familiar grave right near us. He crossed his legs and leaned back against the tombstone. The whites of his eyes fell prey to the ever growing black of his pupils.

Elliot looked at me hard for the first that night, like he was more sad than he was riled up. The quiet of the cemetery seemed overwhelming. The glow of the one street lamp cascaded over the bridge of his nose and onto his cheek. "This is how you drive drunk," he said. Then he looked down at his lap and rubbed at a dark smudge on his pants, as if ashamed by what he'd said. A memory of shattered windshield glass, a bloody hood ornament,

ambulance sirens rushed through my mind. In a gentle whisper, as he closed his eyes he said, "This is how you get angry instead of sad. This is how you accept it when someone dies."

"And Jared," he said, turning to look at me. The joint had long gone out and the whiskey was all gone. The world had an odd tilt to it—a sway.

"This is how you go on living when I leave you behind," he said, getting up slow and staring at the space just above my head. He didn't look at me before he turned and walked away. I heard the tall grass rustle against his step, the chain-link shake as he climbed up it, the thud as he landed on the other side.

My last memory of Elliott—of him jumping the fence without so much as a prayer from me—happened so fast, too fast for me to stop him. The sound of his footsteps receded as he walked away into the woods.

I wanted to say, *Why'd you have to leave when we were so young?* I wanted to scream at him, pull him out of that car—yank him from the passenger seat. I looked down at his grave and then at the bruising of my knuckles.

Elliott's tombstone had fresh flowers placed on the soft dirt around it. Their petals had collected dew from the night. Next to them sat two empty bags of Skittles, their bright colors had bled into the ground.

I wanted to say, *I love you*, like I never had. But instead struggled to get to my feet—I felt the earth tremble under the whiskey in my knees. Instead I nodded my head as I walked home, as if agreeing with some friend who stood there in the dark, just a few feet away, on the other side of the fence.

There are times when I want to cry, but I don't. Instead I just squeeze something that feels dead, like my own fist, until I can feel the ache of blood pulsing through my hand again—until I can feel the life revived under my grip.

"This is how you put one foot in front of the other," I can hear you whisper at my back from some far-off place.

Terek Hopkins is a Senior majoring in English with a Creative Writing minor. He is a Kidd Tutorial participant, and has been previously published in Unbound in the Spring 2012 edition.

Bottles

Sierra Noelle

*No one has been here
for quite some time.
There has been a stillness,
steady and unchanging.*

*This is what's left
after a heavy tome
hits the ground—
the hollowness
after the sound.*

*These spiders have crawled
where your hands once were,
and cobwebs have sprung
up from the wait.*

*I can feel the dust sigh
as well.
A soft giving up,
like a widow who has finally
left her perch,
too tired to watch
the sea anymore.*

*The webs are weaved,
the ivy grows through the cracks
and the bottles break,
having shed their color
out of yearning.*

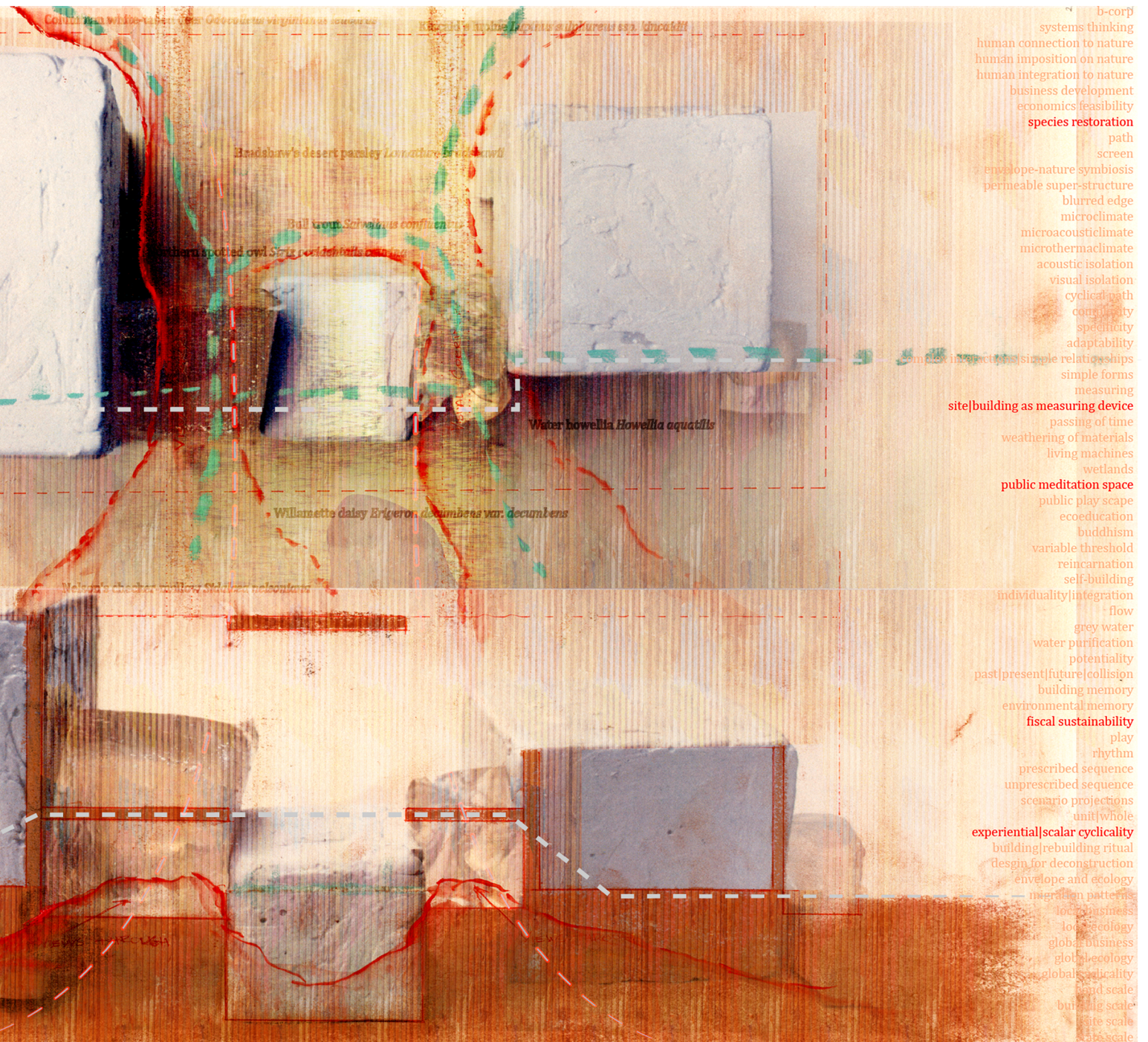
*Sierra Noelle
Junior, major in English
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“Value Transpositions”

Ben Prager

Media used: Rhino, Grasshopper, Adobe Illustrator, Photoshop, Plaster, Gelatin, Chipboard, Watercolor, Ink.





A Walk in the Woods

Ethan Arlt

Russel sat at the kitchen table and watched as the logs of the fire popped and crumbled under their own weight. He sipped from the Bud Light that he held in his hand.

"Your progress report came today, Aiden. It says your not doing your work. Is that true?" Charlotte asked. Aiden dropped his silverware on his plate and Russel turned his attention back to the dinner-table.

"Mom, it's too hard."

"No TV tonight, you'll go straight to your room and get some work done."

"Charlotte, let the boy watch TV. He's tired," Russel said. Charlotte shot him a glare before turning back to Aiden.

"See? Dad says I can watch TV."

"You'll do some work tonight," Charlotte said. "Now, clear your plate, go up to your room and do some of those assignments."

Aiden looked towards his father before clearing his plates and heading upstairs. Charlotte rinsed the dirty dishes while Russel took another sip from the can in his hand.

"Why'd you tell him he could watch TV?" Charlotte spoke without taking her eyes off the washing.

"He looked tired is all."

"You need to stop doing that. It's not good for him."

"Alright, I'll try to stop."

Charlotte scrubbed one of the plates harder than before, trying to rid it of crusted food.

"Principal Collins called. She said that Aiden was waiting on the curb for forty minutes today after the practice for the play."

Charlotte put the last of the dishes in the dishwasher, wiped her hands on the dish towel and threw the towel on the counter. She started putting leftovers into plastic containers.

"She said she was about to take him home herself again."

"She's a worrier. She'd damn near have a heart attack if her socks didn't match." Russel smiled. Charlotte's face remained still. "I fell asleep. I'm sorry."

Charlotte shook her head and placed the leftovers in the fridge. "Sorry doesn't cut it. We've talked about this. Since you can't find work, you need to help me around the house, and

at least be a father. You haven't done either." Charlotte looked at the beer can that Russel still held in his hand. "I'm giving up drinking," She exhaled from her nose in mocking amusement, "I can't believe I bought that."

It was true. He'd vowed to give up drinking when Aiden was born. But his drinking now was nothing like before. It was much more moderate and he had control, except for the times when he argued with Charlotte about how to raise Aiden. Those arguments weren't too bad though, even with the alcohol.

"I'm in control. It's fine."

Charlotte raised her voice, "It's not fine. Please, stop saying it is." She crossed her arms and stared into the floor as if trying to find some kind of truth in the patterns of the tile. "What happened? This isn't how I pictured things."

"Things will work themselves out, don't worry."

"You've said that for the last five years, and for five years I believed you. Things won't get better on their own, Russ. Being a father takes dedication, and effort. Something I haven't seen from you in a while."

Russel stood up.

"I go and pick him up and I'm here every day with him. Sometimes, I even help him with his homework—What more do you want from me?"

"You talk like you do these things as if you have to. This is what you wanted, you told me you were on board with this."

He'd said he was on board with having Aiden, so he was on board with having Aiden. He had to be on board with it.

"I am." Russel made an effort to strengthen his voice, but he could see by Charlotte's wide eyes that it hadn't worked.

"I'm going to lay down in our room." She looked at him and he noticed the water in her eyes reflected the dim kitchen light above. Her green eyes were beautiful and the tears made them shimmer. "I'll put Aiden to bed. I want to be alone tonight."

Russel wanted to respond, but he couldn't think of anything to say to make her change her mind. Effort? He gave effort every day. Every day he picked up Aiden or made his lunch—that was effort right there. He told Charlotte "I love you" at least once a day. What more could he do?

Russel threw his can of empty Bud Light in the recycle bin and opened the cupboard to get something to eat. As he reached for a bag of tortilla chips, he thought about the bottle of Jack Daniels that he kept hidden behind the cereal boxes. Russel took the bottle, opened the screen door, and sat down on a lawn chair in his backyard, facing the edges of the pine forest that bordered his property.

The forest was dark beyond where Russel's backyard light touched it. He took a swig from the bottle of whiskey and listened to the trickle from the small stream that ran around his house. The soft trickle was the only sound. It was quite a lonely sound. Russel took another drink.

The forest was where it all began. Him and Charlotte. Russel stood up from the lawn chair, bottle of whiskey in hand, and walked underneath the large pines. He looked up. The silhouettes of the large branches crossed across the sky like the web of some large spider. He could see a few stars, but most were caught in the web. Russel walked further into the forest.

As he walked, the light behind him faded. He took another drink and his head felt light. His eyelids were heavy and he rested his weight upon a tree. I do love him, he thought. I love him. Russel remembered the drive home that day.

"Have a good day at school?" Russel asked.

"Yeah. How come you were late?" said Aiden.

"Sorry, I was busy. I came as quick as I could. What'd you do at school?"

"We played with Henry's Ninja Turtles Lego Set. How come I can't get the Ninja Turtle set?"

"Do your chores and you can buy it with your allowance."

"Chores are boring."

"Sometimes you gotta do the boring stuff in life so you can have the good stuff. It can't be all good, then the good stuff wouldn't be good anymore."

"If it was all bad, would the bad stuff not be bad anymore?"

Russel paused. He thought about him and Charlotte.

"It's never all bad, so don't worry about that. There's always something good worth holding on to."

Russel continued to walk deeper into the forest. He enjoyed those talks with Aiden. Aiden had lots of questions and Russel liked being able to give the answers. Aiden was always smart, not in a book-smart kind of way; he seemed curious about everything.

Russel thought about what life would be like if they didn't have him. It would be a lot more simple. He and Charlotte would grow old together and do whatever they wanted. There wouldn't be any complications over who would take him to school or whether or not to punish him for doing something bad. Things would be simple.

Russel took another swig from the bottle of Jack. He sat down beneath one of the trees and closed his eyes. In the darkness of the forest, he felt secure, as if nothing could reach him. The trees didn't care if he drank. The cool wind that rustled the

branches gave no opposition. This is how it should be, he thought. Russel fell asleep.

Russel woke when the sun was overhead and the shadows of the trees were short. The surrounding forest was quiet except for a woodpecker in some faraway tree. Why the forest? Russel stood on his second attempt and brushed pine needles from his jacket. When he stood, he felt nauseated and leaned upon a tree. His eyes felt like they wanted to escape his skull.

He scanned his surroundings and spotted the mostly empty bottle of whiskey lying amidst the pine needles. He thought about the fight that he had with Charlotte last night. Why was she was being like this? Didn't she remember the night in the forest twelve years ago?

Russel pressed his eyes with his thumb and pointer finger. He remembered the night that she told him she wanted a baby. They had sat outside at Pepe's in the winter because he was hungry and couldn't wait for an indoor table. He should have waited a little longer for her.

"I want to have a baby," she said.

"Let's talk about this later."

"Let's talk now, Russ. I want to be a mother. Don't you want to be a father?"

"I don't know. I want to be with you. I'll think about it."

Eventually, he agreed to have a child because she seemed to want it so much. Now that he thought about it, she'd given hints. She'd told him how she envied the mothers that they saw when they did their errands. Even though the kids always seemed to be crying, she said she envied them. He shouldn't have ignored her. He should have guessed that this was coming.

Russel tried to remember where along the line Charlotte had changed when Aiden was born. That was when things got complicated. He remembered one night in particular, Aiden was still a baby, and was crying in the other room. Russel sat in the living room watching videos of the honeymoon in Hawaii when Charlotte came in from the kitchen.

"Don't you hear him crying?" He tried to tell her that Aiden would be fine, but that made her even more mad. "Jesus, Russ, you can't leave him crying like that. He's probably hungry or something. You look like you don't even care." This was their son. Of course he cared. How could he not care?

Russel's mouth was dry and the stream nearby was the perfect solution. He walked over to the water, being careful not to slip on the wet dirt that gave way beneath his feet, and took a drink. The numbing water was soothing for him, but with a dripping face, he felt the chill of the wind for the first time that day.

Russel clambered out of the stream-bed and thought about which way to go to get himself home. He needed to be back before Charlotte. "I wandered off drunk into the forest and missed Aiden's play." He could imagine how that would go over.

The stream slithered across the forest floor. The stream: it led back to his house. Russel walked downstream, his head pounding with each step.

The shadows had grown a bit by the time the house was in sight. His body was tired and yet he felt a strange reluctance to

return. Russel stopped walking for a moment and took another look at the trees around him. They were like two different worlds, the forest and his house. They were so close and yet so different. Russel smelled the earthy scent of the pine. The forest was when he knew he wanted to be with her. He let the memory consume his thoughts.

He and Charlotte had been coming home from a party. She was a little buzzed and he'd had a little too much to drink as well. They walked back to his apartment on the edge of the woods. The dim street light was in front of them, the woods a curtain of black behind.

"Let's go get lost," Charlotte said.

She walked into the woods and he stood in the street, staring into the unknown before him. She came back out of the darkness, took his hand, and led him into the woods. How far they went, he couldn't tell. Russel looked back and could only faintly make out the street light. He tried to keep track of the direction that they came from.

"Where are we going?" he said.

Charlotte stopped and looked at a large pine tree.

"Here," she said.

Charlotte sat with her back against the tree and Russel sat next to her. They were both silent. The forest was silent too.

"What do you —"

She placed a finger over his lips. "Shhh. Listen." Russel listened, but he couldn't hear a thing. He heard nothing. The nothingness echoed and bounced off the trees.

He placed his arm over her shoulders and she leaned her head on his chest. He could hear the nothingness now. It was the sound of Charlotte's breathing, the trees growing and reaching up into the sky. At that moment, he wished he could hear the sound of nothing forever.

"I'm glad I met you," she whispered.

Her hand was soft and warm. He kissed her and she smiled, inches away from his face. Russel used his pocket-knife to carve their initials in a nearby log. C + R. She said it was perfect. Her smile blurred as the memory faded.

Why couldn't she see this? She's been too uptight the last few years. Things have gotten too complicated. They didn't have to be. This was one of the best moments of their lives. If she saw this she'd feel better, she'd realize she was stressing for nothing. The simple times, the times when she looked at him with love—not disappointment—those weren't gone, they had been hiding. The forest was still here, the place by his old apartment was only fifteen minutes away. The initials, they'd remind her how much effort he gives—how much he loves her.

Russel walked out of the forest and into his backyard. He opened the screen door and checked the time. One o'clock. Still a while before Charlotte got home. Too long. He picked up the land line and dialed. Charlotte picked up.

"Charlotte, can you come home?" Russel paced around the living room.

"No, Russ, I need to finish these deals. Where were you this morning? Did you take out the trash?"

"Charlotte, come home. I need to show you something."

Charlotte was silent on the other end of the line. Russel

sat down on the couch and waited. Seconds felt like minutes.

"I'll be home in time to see the play," she said. "Please, take out the trash." Charlotte hung up.

He'd take her there and she'd remember. Russel showered, changed into clean clothes, made himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich from the fridge, went back to the living room and sat down. He tried to watch TV, but couldn't focus on the screen in front of him.

Russel looked over at the fireplace. The fire from last night had burnt out, only gray ash and a few logs remained. He walked over and when he prodded the logs they broke and joined the ash below. Russel put the metal prod back and inspected the pictures on the mantle, two of them larger than the rest.

He looked at the one on the left, a picture of Russel and Charlotte at their wedding. Russel had worn a traditional black suit with a white undershirt and a purple tie and Charlotte had an all-white wedding gown. In the picture pieces of her dress were flowing upward in the wind. Charlotte had her arms around him and they both smiled at the camera. This was happiness. Charlotte had her real smile, not the 'picture' smile that she wore at block parties. The real one made ripples in her cheeks. From what he could see, he'd even combed his hair. Russel tried to remember the wedding day, but he couldn't. It was like trying to catch a lizard—every time he got close, the memory scurried away, leaving him empty-handed. He wanted more than the photo, but that was all he had.

He turned his attention to the other picture: Russel, Charlotte, and Aiden at Easter. Charlotte's smile looked forced, probably because he'd forgotten to get the "paint-your-own-eggs" kit and they had to buy Wal-Mart eggs. He should have gotten the kit. Russel held the photo in his hand and shifted his thumb to cover Aiden, just to see what it would be like. He stared at Charlotte and smiled. She was so beautiful. He put the picture back down on the mantle.

Russel sat back down on the couch and forced himself to watch some kind of bowling tournament on TV. The bowling turned into a NASCAR race and when he checked the time again it was five o'clock. Charlotte's car pulled into the driveway. He combed his hair with his hands as best he could. He stood and felt the blood rush from his head. Russel swayed, leaned on the couch and stood upright, facing the door. The Jack was still giving him a headache. He'd ease up on that from now on, maybe it was time to stop. Probably not good for Aiden to see him drunk. Charlotte opened the door and looked at Russel. She raised an eyebrow when she saw his hair.

"Hey," she said. She looked back at the street. "The trash still isn't out. Aiden's play starts in an hour, you told me you'd get it out before then."

"Let's go."

Charlotte raised her arms and dropped them back to her sides.

"Go where? What is this?"

"You'll see. Trust me."

Russel grabbed his keys and walked Charlotte to the car. He opened the car door for her and got in on the driver's side. Charlotte stared out the window and Russel grinned as he drove.

He pulled into a parking spot that was covered by a long shadow cast by a pine tree.

"Why are we at your old apartment?"

"You'll see."

The two got out and Russel grabbed her by the hand and led her into the forest until he could no longer see the car.

"Let's sit." He watched Charlotte's face for any sort of change. None yet. He sat down against a large pine and she sat next to him.

"What are — "

"Shhh. Listen." Russel put his arm around her shoulder and listened. The wind crashed through the trees. He looked over at Charlotte and saw that she had taken out her phone. Russel felt his face get hot.

"Put that away," he said. She wasn't trying to remember at all. She gave no effort.

"We should go soon if we want to get decent seats."

"You don't remember?" Russel's voice rose. "We were here before, the night after the party. You took me here."

"What?"

Russel searched the forest floor and found the log with the initials. They still looked fresh.

"C' plus 'R'. This was it. This is what we did. Back when we didn't have Aiden and you didn't have your job, and you still loved the forest."

"I don't remember. Look," Charlotte stood up, "I'm sure that was nice, but I need you right now. I need a husband, a father." She looked around at the trees, "And I still love the forest. We should go now."

Russel stood and grabbed her arm. "No." He held on to her hard. He refused to let her walk away. "Just stay here a little longer, please. Just stay here. Let's just stay here."

Charlotte shot him a gaze he'd never seen before. She looked at him and she flared her nostrils. Her eyes were fire, almost hot enough to torch the green color in her iris.

"Let go of my fucking arm." Her voice was quiet and strong. Russel let her go. "I'm going to Aiden's play. Give me the keys." Russel obliged and shrank down against the large pine tree. With teary eyes he watched Charlotte walk away. He heard the car start.

She didn't remember. That memory was only his. Why did he have to be alone in his mind? It was so lonely there. The wind made the trees shiver.

By the time Russel stood up, the sun had already set. He walked back to the parking lot, feeling his way past hanging branches.

If she didn't remember that night, what did she remember? What did she think about when she saw me this afternoon? Maybe she remembered the nights that he couldn't because he had blacked out. Maybe she remembered the arguments. She deserved better.

Russel returned to the spot where the car used to be. He knocked on one of the nearby apartments and when a man opened the door he asked to borrow his phone. The man agreed and soon after the call was made a taxi pulled up. Russel slipped into the backseat of the car and the driver asked where he would like to go. Home. The car pulled out.

Russel looked out at the pines that seemed to stretch on endlessly in front of the car. The headlights tinged the edges of the forest and lit up certain trees before leaving them in darkness. He kept his eyes on the road ahead.

Charlotte must think I'm insane, bringing her out here, he thought. She'll have to work even harder to close those deals. She always worked hard. He'd try to give her a break once in a while—maybe make dinner for her and Aiden tomorrow.

Russel slapped his knee. Aiden. The play.

"I changed my mind," said Russel. "Take me to Bradley Elementary, please." The driver nodded. Hopefully he wasn't going to be too late.

According to what Aiden had told him, the play was called "A Walk in the Woods" and had Goldilocks, the Three Bears, Little Red Riding Hood, and Hansel and Gretel all get up on stage and give their opinions on what went on in the stories. It was an interesting concept, fresh takes on old tales. Russel wanted to hear them all.

When You're Eight

*On the day they were to move out of the house
for good,
you frantically ran to the end of the driveway
and wrote:
"We were here"
in multi-colored sidewalk chalk on the ground
before you.
When you're eight, everything lasts forever.*

*In order to preserve the memories that lingered
in the walls
of a home that never really belonged to you,
you pressed harder than you ever had before...*

*Bits of broken chalk came crumbling down onto
the pavement,
and circles of powdery dust swirled near the
place where your tiny hands scrawled:*

"We were here"

*You wrote it, and you said it out loud.
You had been there, and you had lived.*

*You were so afraid that the world was going to
forget that this had once been your home.*

Emma Moss

It had been your place to exist, and now you were leaving it.

It was then that the impermanence of life sunk into your bones.

The chalk probably disappeared after a few hours in a town like that.

A town that's seen more rain than Noah ever did.

But, the rain couldn't wash away the places where

you learned to ride a bike,

to play the piano,

and also, to be afraid of the hands on a clock.

Years later, standing at a chalkboard,

you wrote in front of the faces of 25 doe-eyed children:

"Nothing lasts forever"

For someone who's so afraid of change, you wonder, why do you keep writing

everything in

chalk?

Emma Moss is a sophomore majoring in English.

“The Actress”

Claire McElroy



CISCO

Samantha Saldivar

They brought him home from the hospital when it was time for him to die. The family all came. There were probably thirty or forty of us around. They filled him with morphine and we watched him die. I didn't really understand that.

I sat and stared at him for awhile. Everyone took turns coming in and talking to him and holding his hand. They said he could still hear us. I thought I should talk to him but I had nothing to say. While my sister and cousins and aunts and uncles and parents all had something to say, I was quiet. The weird part is I still don't have anything to say. It makes me feel guilty.

I met a stranger once.

"Where are you from?" I asked.

"Down south," he answered.

He lacked a Southern accent—or at least the one I associated with the states of Alabama and Georgia and Texas. He was rather slight in size, but sturdy. His eyes were glass bulbs of cerulean.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm lost," he said.

"Well, where are you going?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Oh," I nod. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No."

The funeral was well attended. When my dad and his brothers brought the coffin, the Knights of Columbus lined the aisle with their swords and feathers and suits. The ceremony was Catholic. We took communion and prayed. The service was fast and smooth and distant. It was the first funeral I went to and my grandfather was the first person I've seen die. There were a lot of firsts that week in April.

I remember I couldn't understand.

"What's your name?" I asked the stranger.

"Cisco," he answered. Before I could say more he continued. "He was an old television character. A caballero."

"What's a caballero?"

"A knight."

"Is that your real name?"

"Do you think it is my real name?"

"What does that have to do with it?" His answer was a shrug.

"So it isn't?" He refused to comment.

"Why won't you answer?"

"Because it doesn't matter."

He died on Good Friday. It seemed appropriate. He was a religious man. He and my grandmother went to church almost every day. When my sister and I spent summers with them we went to church too. He was a Knight of Columbus.

I drove my dad home after we said goodbye. We both kissed my grandfather on the forehead. And that was it. A few days later he was dead.

"Why are you here?" Cisco asked me.

"My grandfather died," I told him.

"Were you close?"

"I guess."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"Sometimes death is hard," he said. "But you can't let it slow you down."

I thought his comment was insensitive but opted to not voice my opinion to avoid confrontation.

"Have you lost anyone?"

"Yes." He didn't elaborate on whom he had lost but spoke again. "I moved on."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"How?"

"I had to."

"Why?"

"I had too many other things to worry about for one. You know, where I was going to get my next meal and my next job. Where I was going to live," he said. "Aside from that, the ones I lost weren't really lost anyway."

"I don't know what you mean."

After my cousin and uncle eulogized my grandfather, a Latino woman approached the podium with poise. She was one of many in the large crowd of Hispanics who came to the funeral. I didn't know any of them. I don't even think that many of my uncles or my grandmother knew all of them either.

When the woman spoke, I couldn't understand. She praised my grandfather in a language I could not understand. I picked up a few words here and there thanks to a couple years in Spanish class, but other than that I just stared in awe. My father, and grandmother, and uncles, and aunt, nodded occasionally and smiled. They understood what the rest of us couldn't. When the woman finished there was a peaceful silence. I was struck again by all that I couldn't understand. All I knew was that he must have been great.

"Are you afraid of dying?" I asked Cisco.

"No," he replied.

He was confident and part of me envied him. I couldn't decide why he was confident. It wasn't because of his clothes or standing or even his knowledge. He just was. He was sure of himself, even if he had no reason to be.

"Why not?"

"I'm not afraid of anything."

"You have to be afraid of something."

"Probably."

"So you lied?" He shrugged.

"You're familiar," I told him. "Why won't you tell me you're real name?"

"Because it is useless for you to know me by a name."

The funeral continued into the cemetery, where we all followed the coffin and the priest gave a last blessing. Every child, in-law, grandchild, and great-grandchild of my grandfather was given a flower. Each of us took a turn placing one on the coffin and when everyone had taken their turn, there was a pile of roses that seemed ready to topple over.

When the service was over, I asked my father what the woman had said up at the podium. He told me that my grandfather had been a large help to the Hispanic community in the small town. He had spent time helping people fill out forms, translated in court, and volunteered at the church— in essence he helped pave the way for those who desired to be U.S. citizens much like he had. He was their champion. He was a man of service and giving. I told my dad I didn't know he did all that. He said he didn't either.

"Do you have a family?" I asked him.

"Yes."

"Aren't they looking for you?" He nodded. "Do you not want them to find you?"

"They know where I am," he assured.

Sometimes I let myself believe that it wasn't him.

Sometimes I think he must have been switched. After all, the man in the box did not resemble him—the man in the box was emotionless and frozen. His skin was cold and hard and stiff. His lips were pale. He looked like he was smiling but it was so artificial that it brought little comfort.

It couldn't have been him.

"You never asked me my name," I realized.

"I already know you."

"I don't think so," I replied. "We've only just met."

"You've only just met me."

"I don't understand."

"But you're not afraid of me."

"No," I nod.

"It's amazing you can know so little."

Perhaps he's still out there somewhere. Maybe that's why I still don't feel anything. Subconsciously I'm invested in the notion that it wasn't really him in the casket. Perhaps it wasn't.

I still do not understand.

"I should go," he told me.

"Go? Where?"

"Just go."

"But I just met you."

"No you haven't," he said. "You've met me before; you just haven't known me before."

"Are you . . ."

"I have to go."

"No, I want you to stay."

"I'm not going far."

"I want to know more though," I replied. "There was so much you never told me."

"I didn't need to tell you," he said. I watched as he turned to leave and frowned at a bitter notion.

"Does it take death to really know someone?"

"No," Cisco said. "It just makes you want to know the truth."

I'm sure they switched my grandfather. I say this because the man we buried was a man I was only just starting to know. That day at the funeral I watched the casket close on a grandfather I grew up with, one of little dimension. I came away with a new grandfather—a knight they once called Cisco.

That day we closed the casket I met a stranger.



“Pink Streak”

Claire McElroy

FLOCKS

John Fuller

A weathered school bus ground to a halt where the paved country road met a gravel driveway. The bus shuddered and blew exhaust across potholes sealed with muddy ice. The ice was cracked from that morning when Martin, a fifth grader, had stomped it until the bus driver honked the air-horn and yelled at him to get on the bus. It had snowed the night before and on the morning route, usually quiet, the children had been so worked up they sweated in their coats.

To Martin, who sat in his assigned seat behind the driver, the morning felt like forever ago. He had unkempt brown hair and wore a jean jacket with a wool lining. Hot air blew from a vent near his legs and warmed his damp pants and boots. There was snow in the fields, ice in the bird feeders, and icicle beards on the mailboxes. Fred bobbed in the driver's seat and talked about how he had once been a golden glove boxer but got hurt.

"Leaving the ring was the hardest thing I ever had to do. Except maybe quitting smoking," he said. His arms were huge and, between his muscles, gut and grin, he dwarfed the steering wheel. The story over, he reached out and put a hand on the door lever, then looked at his only passenger. Martin squeezed the green padded seat and crinkled a pink carbon copy of an office referral.

"Don't forget to give that to your parents," said Fred. "Look, I've seen the others you've tossed in the trash. That shit will catch up with you."

Martin jammed the referral into his pants pocket and looked beyond the closed doors of the bus at to the two-acre pasture. It was different, more exciting, all covered in snow. Out there it was easy to forget about the referrals, about everything. Or not so much forget about everything as think about anything else. There had been snow covering the field at school, too. It all looked the same and, for a while, he had forgotten where he was, and enjoyed it. Then he got a referral and was told to listen.

The driveway to his house was an obstacle course of puddle pitfalls and rocky traps. Rhododendrons, thinned by winter, lined the driveway. He could use them as protection against any assaults from the landlord's yard. Snow capped the fence posts and offered quick-and-easy ammunition. The pasture was the promised land.

"Did you hear what I said?" said Fred.

"I'll be careful."

The accordion doors clacked open and Martin headed toward them. Normally, he would have bolted for the doors, wanting to see his dogs and make the most of each minute until his parents got home from work. Today, when he reached the top of the steps and looked down, it was as if the slush melting on the black rubber was an undertow, ready to pull him into the cold to drown.

Fred put his hand on Martin's shoulder. The fingers were large and Martin could feel through his jacket how they bent at odd angles after the first joint. They didn't bother him anymore, not after Fred taught him to shake hands last year. There was a different story behind each broken finger but they all had the same ending: Fred lost a fight he should have walked away from.

"Things get better, kid. Trust me," said Fred.

When Fred took his hand away, Martin ran down the steps. His book bag pounded his back, forcing the air out of his lungs as he dodged potholes. The laces of his boots were soaked with mud by the time the bus pulled away.

"Reinforcements! Reinforcements!" Martin shouted and cut between the last two bushes and headed across the yard. The house was in sight, a one-story building made almost entirely of concrete. It used to be a slaughterhouse. It wasn't a safe place, more like a way station. When he reached the porch, Martin raised his arms in victory but slipped on the icy cement.

The back of his head smacked against black ice and he jerked upright, hissing. He cried softly and gripped fistfuls of hair. Two dogs ran around the corner of the house; Haley, a black Rottweiler-Mastiff, was three times the height of Maia, a golden Dachshund-Chihuahua. Maia's head was too small and eyes too large, her body was an even mixture of long and toy. Drenched and grinning madly, they bowled into Martin and leaned against him, tails wagging.

"Oh, yeah? Some reinforcements you are," Martin said and hugged Haley before pushing her away. He had a few hours before his mother, Diane, got off work at the insurance agency and pulled his step-father's truck into the driveway. She always parked the truck at an angle and got out in a hurry. Sometimes, she yanked the parking brake hard enough that Martin could hear it ratchet from beyond the pasture.

Things were tense at home since Martin's step-father, Reed, had been laid off from his job as a boiler-maker at the mill. When Martin thought about what a boiler-maker did, he imagined men wearing welder's visors standing on iron scaffolding above a huge vat full of boiling metal.

The light would be all fiery orange and shadow as the liquid bubbled. Once, when Reed went to pick up his last check, Martin had come along. From the truck he tried to see inside but his step-father had quickly opened and closed the door mark 'Foreman.'

He left his book bag to soak on the porch, turned from the door of the house, and ran to the pasture gate; his two dogs followed. When he reached the gate, Haley grinned and squirmed in anticipation. Her tail threw rocks that splashed in the puddles. Maia was excited because Haley was excited.

Martin's jacket was open to the elements but the chill didn't reach him until he pulled the heavy chain from the gate. Hands stinging, he dragged it open. The bottom scraped against the gravel. The dogs charged past.

Haley and Maia flew in great circles and tossed up clumps of snow. It covered Maia completely and she hopped to keep up. Martin pulled the gate closed, yanked the chain through a hole in the corrugated metal and hung the end link on a nail in the fence post. He laughed as he took a pair of dirty socks from his pocket and put them on his hands. He ran forward, fists pumping at his sides, and made his own path.

The grass of the field was hidden and beaten low by the weight of the snow. Martin flew with the dogs over rippled clouds. A barn drooped in the center of the field and he did a fly-by that shook the frozen moss and briars that ran down its sides. A bale of fencing wire was a jet engine and, ignoring the cold, he rode it to break the sound barrier.

A great V of geese broke through the mist, honking slowly. He rocked on the bale and twisted to watch until they were too small to see in the southern sky.

"See girls? They stick with the one in the middle. She's the one that knows which way to go," said Martin.

Haley barked from the wetland that lay beyond the pasture and Martin dismounted. He tromped along her trail, a giant kicking mountains.

A wire fence was stapled to rotting posts that lined the back of the field. They stood, crooked, above the snow line and Martin's hands were soaked by the time he dug down under the strand of barbed wire. He stretched the barbs high and pressed the fence into the earth with his boot then slid underneath. Flecks of rust stained the socks on his hands and he wiped the rust off on his jeans; then he remembered the jeans had been a gift from his grandparents.

Martin frantically rubbed the rusty socks, then pants, against the wood of a fence post but it just fell to pieces under the pressure. The reddish tint was replaced with a dark brown smear. He gritted his teeth and balled his fists, then pressed them against his eyes.

Whether he made up an excuse or told the truth about the stains, the result would be the same. In Reed's book, one, or sometimes both, of two punishments would fix any problem: grounding or spanking. Martin lowered his hands and, while waiting for the specks to clear from his vision, opted not to give it much more thought. It just didn't matter. Maybe today he would choose to be spanked.

"Is it frozen?" he shouted.

The trees were cramped and their branches tangled into a brittle canopy. The crunchy undergrowth gave way to water while

the trees spread out. The trunks and branches were white and bled brown. Through them the dogs skittered across the surface of the frozen pond. Layers of twigs and leaves reached up from beneath the surface.

"Haley! Maia! Come!" he shouted and pulled a battered Swiss Army knife from his inside jacket pocket. The rust from the stained sock on his hand left ruddy streaks on his white shirt. He had found the knife a year before in the ditch on the way to school. The red plastic sides of the handle had broken off and the blades were always exposed, even when closed. He jabbed the knife into the ice until the three inch blade disappeared. He blew out his breath, closed the knife, and put it back into his inner jacket pocket.

Branches weighed with snow bent deeply, caught by the frozen water. He scooted from tree to tree, embracing each. By the time he reached the dogs, the day had changed to the grey and whites of a colorless dusk.

The dogs were in the center of a clearing, barking at a duck. It circled slowly in a small pool of water, barely wide enough for it to fit. Martin approached it and dropped to his knees to get a better look.

"It's okay girls, leave it be," he said. "Go find something else to do."

Maia growled and bit at the underside of Haley's neck before they settled on a clump of leaves and moss.

"Where's your flock, duck?" Martin asked. Webbed feet rippled the water. Its feathers were browns and whites, feet bright yellow against the swamp. The duck paddled in its circle. "Why don't you go? You have to sleep sometime, you'll freeze."

The dogs sprung from where they lay and charged back across the ice, skating and falling in the rush. Martin jumped to his feet then heard the sound of his name being shouted. Shivering, he looked at the duck then knelt as close to the hole as he dared.

Martin struck the edge of the hole with his fists and elbows but the ice wouldn't give. The duck hissed and flapped its wings when he reached his arm, up to the elbow, in the water. He tugged twice then pulled his hand back out and shook off the chill.

"Is this really better than heading south?" he asked. The duck circled with its bill open and feathers ruffled. Martin pulled the soggy remains of the referral from his pocket and placed it near the edge of the hole. The duck picked it up only to drop it into the water, where it sank.

A truck horn blared across the snowy field when Martin reached the barbed wire fence. He left the wet socks hanging from it when they snagged and peeled from his hands. The high motion light outside the barn was on and shadows made it hard to find his giant footprints. A pickup truck covered with rust spots was parked inside the open gate and in its headlights stood Martin's

step-father. Reed was a tall man and Haley, shifting next to him on the snow, looked tiny. He held Haley's collar.

"When I call, you run. Got it?" he said when Martin squinted against the headlights. He wore untied boots, sweatpants and his hair was in a braid down his back. "My father would've busted my lip for walkin' when he called."

Martin believed him and walked through a cloud of exhaust, past the idling truck. As bad as things ever seemed to get in their household, things were always put in perspective of the reign of Grandpa.

"It was a good day," Reed's story went, "when Grandpa took a swing at me while I was peeling potatoes in the sink. I was seventeen and he was too old to catch me off guard anymore. BAM. Socked him with a potato in my fist; it worked better than a roll of quarters. His head snapped back and hit the refrigerator so hard the magnets fell."

Somehow, being a boiler-maker had ruined Reed's knees. He wobbled so badly that it was tough to imagine him getting a punch anywhere near Grandpa. But there was truth in the way Reed talked about that day. His cold eyes would catch fire with pride and then fade to glowering embers in a way that can only happen to someone past the climax of their life. That was how Martin heard Fred describe some of his mean friends, the ones who opted to stay tough when they should have let themselves go soft.

Martin picked up his backpack from the porch and stopped inside the house when he saw his mother sitting quietly on the couch. Diane's hair was wet and she wore pink bath slippers and a matching robe. A ring of tarnished keys, a pack of cigarettes and a short glass pipe were scattered on a low coffee table. The smell of marijuana mingled with that of her lemon grass shampoo.

There were dark circles under her eyes, which flickered against TV glare. Martin hadn't seen her much since she started working full time at two insurance agencies. When she brought him mugs or key chains from work, Martin always got two. He knew she typed in green letters on a computer with a black screen. When a commercial came on, he hurried around the coffee table, squeezed her tightly, and continued across the living room.

"You're all wet," she said to his back.

He turned into the hallway past the aluminum TV stand. It was unlit and lined with pictures of distant family. There wasn't a light in the hallway, but they had put up the family pictures there anyway. Martin could never see their faces, only the contrast between sunny backgrounds and widespread arms.

Martin passed them and opened the door to his room. He threw the backpack on the empty top bunk. The wet jacket, shoes and socks disappeared into the hamper before the wet slaps of Reed's bare feet made their way to Martin's room. The stained jeans were halfway off when Reed pushed Martin. Martin caught himself from falling then pulled the jeans up and buttoned them.

"What is wrong with you? Your grandparents, bless their hearts, get you nice clothes and you go ruin them?" he said. Martin fell when Reed pushed him again.

"There was a duck," Martin said.

"Bullshit. Did the duck stop you from changing into work jeans?" Reed said and leaned in close. He pointed a

calloused finger in Martin's face. "Guess where we were just now?"

When Martin sat up but didn't answer, Reed yelled, "Guess!"

From the doorway came,

"Honey, maybe ..."

"I'll tell you where we just were," he continued. Spittle fell from his shaking lips. "We went to your goddamn parent teacher conference. Have anything to tell us?"

Martin pulled his knees to his chest and rocked back, leaning against the bed. He looked past the man to his mother. She was holding the doorframe and looking at the carpet. It wouldn't have mattered if he still had the referral or if he admitted the truth: he had told Mrs. Valry he didn't want to go back to class because he was busy being the Red Baron.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. Now we're on the same page, you and me." Reed smiled and went to stand but couldn't make it past halfway. He held his right knee with one arm and groped for aid with the other. His hand stopped just shy of resting on Martin's shoulder for support. It hung in the air for a moment before Martin's mother took it, and helped Reed upright.

"What'll it be this time? A spanking or being grounded?" said Reed.

Martin stood and then climbed aboard the bed. His wet jeans soaked the green blanket and he looked out the window to see what was ahead. Night had fallen without a moon and he could see himself, his mother and Reed framed in the glare of the black glass. Even though he couldn't see it, he could feel the pasture pulling at him. Nothing had to be what it was; it could be a storm at sea. Like any storm, the rough wind would inevitably calm. Martin tried to see it as an adventure, as fun, but for some reason he couldn't stop thinking about the duck circling in its pool.

"Spanked." Martin said.

"I knew you'd say that. Six months of being grounded and now you want to man up. You don't get off easy this time. I would've been beaten bloody if I pulled a stunt like that," Reed continued, "Here's what I think, I'm thinking of a twofer. One month for the lying to your mother about school and another for ruining your jeans."

In the morning, Martin woke to the roar of the pickup truck starting. There was a knock at the door and Diane poked her head inside. Her hair was done up in brown curls and she wore a thick layer of makeup on her face.

"We're headed to the disability office, here's to hoping!" she said and bobbed her head while holding up two crossed fingers. "Your grandparents will be here in an hour. Be good."

"Which?" Martin said before she could disappear.

Her smile cracked the makeup around her eyes.

"His. I'm sure you'll be fine."

The truck creaked as it bucked along the drive then turned onto the paved street. When the sound of the engine faded, Martin threw off his blankets.

It had been cold that night and, as he ran across the pasture, the glistening snow cracked under his feet. Haley and Maia ran with him, heads low and eyes on the back fence. The sky was cloudless and the sun shone on the fence, grass and barn.

Ice covered the pond and, in the light that came twisting through the leafless branches, patches of blue shown through the fallen leaves. With his first step the ice cracked deep under the surface. Martin widened his stance and kept moving. Haley and Maia whined and paced on the frozen grass of the shore. He left them behind and walked, sliding forward a boot at a time, deeper into the swamp.

The morning sun lit the duck's clearing and a low mist crawled along the ice. He saw the duck lying down with its head and neck stretched out on the ice. Tufts of down stuck up along its back and shifted in the wind. The sunlight had yet to reach it but,

as the boy watched, it moved closer. He kept to the stable ice of the shadows and made his way closer.

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He arrived with the light and saw it motionless. Nudging it with his foot, the duck's body rolled then stopped where its legs, frozen in the ice, held it in place. He let it come to rest.



“Cabochon”



“Cabochon 2”

Matthew Moyano

Home Is Sad

Stephen Summers

*Home is
Sad,
 either
Sad because it's actually
Sad, or
Sad because it's happy and you left, or
Sad because it's happy and it left you, or
Sad because it's supposed to be happy and it's not, or
Sad because he told you it was
Sad, or
Sad despite the yellow on the walls, or
Sad because the roof is on the floor, or
Sad because she was under the roof, or
Sad because you wished she'd been under the roof, or*

*Sad because it's not your home at all, or
Sad because it's no one's home, or
Sad because it's not the home you wanted, or
Sad because
 ten thousand bologna sandwiches,
 ten thousand bud lights,
 ten thousand bad dreams,
 ten thousand hours sweating into the couch
cushions
 cannot fill one damned word with the
meaning it should have always
Had.*

Happy Birthday, Pop

Ethan Arlt

Birthdays are a bitch. I can't remember a good one. There was one that was almost good, when Margaret took me to the Dodgers game, but it was ruined because she forgot to fill up the gas tank. We ran out of gas and we had to use her Jitterbug doohicky to call the operator and have him connect us to someone that could help. Then, there was the one where Walter and I went to the bars, after we had come back from the war, and got fucked up, but the next day I spent tossing my cookies over the toilet and I can't remember what we did. So that birthday amounted to jack shit.

Why do we even celebrate it? "Remember that day you were ripped, bloody and screaming from your mother's womb? Wasn't that great?" Yeah, a fucking blast. I'll tell you why we celebrate it: because some suit-and-tie richie, living off his father's money, decided one day that he could make a quick buck off it. People want to buy shit like cards with pictures of dogs and monkeys on the front that are blank inside. They want to buy a crease, and people want to get a crease. Not me, I'll take my morning paper and my coffee. Black coffee.

And if birthdays weren't bad enough before, now my son, Scott, has another excuse to come over and treat me like a child. "Pop, you should look into adult diapers", or "Pop, why don't you get a dog?" Each time it's something new that he'll try to force on me. He'll come over once a week and treat me like I'm a dead man walking, like I can't do shit on my own, no matter how many times I tell him that I'm fine.

For some reason, the big old grandfather clock's ticking too loudly—louder than normal—and the little Mexican neighbor-girl that was playing outside earlier was loud too, screaming and what not. It's been a noisy day so far. I get up to check the clock and my hip stabs at me, but it's nothing. I open it up to check the pendulum, and it looks okay. It's an old clock, large and brown, and it's always been reliable, not like the clocks they have these days, the ones that are all digitized and are dependent on electricity. This one runs all by itself and it's normally fine, but today it's busted. I go into the garage to get a screwdriver and when I open up my toolkit, I see Walter's old hammer, the one that he let me borrow the day before he died in his bed ten years ago.

It was weird to see him like that. I go into his house to return the hammer and he's lying in his bed, and he's cold as a popsicle, looking stupidly up at the ceiling. It's kind of funny actually, not in a ha-ha way, but the kind of way that's funny to think about. The guy survives bullets in Germany, a drug addiction, ingesting rat poison, and then he dies in his bed. Like his body just said "I'm done." But he wasn't done; he had more in him, a little more.

Margaret had asked me about it that day when I came home. I had gotten out of my old truck that I used for painting houses and I still had the hammer in my hand. She knew right away that something had gone wrong.

"What happened?" she asked.

"We can keep this," I said, pointing at the hammer.

I'd seen people, friends, blown to bits by artillery, but there was something about Walter's body. It was so quiet. At least with an artillery blast, you got a boom and an explosion to take you out, but he got none of that. That was ten years ago, and I don't think about it too much. Sad to lose a good man is all.

I don't need the hammer right now, so I get the screwdriver and take it to the clock. I twist some of the bolts at the top of the pendulum to tighten them, but that doesn't seem to work. Now that I think about it, I should have seen this coming with the clock. It was a gift from Margaret's family after all—gave it to us at our wedding. Just like something from her family to break on me all of a sudden. She didn't even want to take it after the divorce, and when she was walking out the door, she tried to make me feel bad for keeping it.

"I don't care," she said. "You can keep it. You always liked it more than I did." And then she left. That was typical Margaret, though. She'd always get bundled up in little things and then try to make me feel guilty. But that was five years ago that she left, and it's been good ever since—the peace and quiet. The quiet's good when you get used to it.

The doorbell rings and I can see by the short ginger hair poking out of the glass in the door that it's Scott, and he must have his wife and kids next to him. And the kids are probably playing on their gaming things, not looking at anything around them. I can hear them talking outside. One of the kids, probably Ronald, asking how long they have to stay, and Scott telling him that he'll have to see—a flimsy answer. I'll give the kid a better answer: they can leave now.

I get up and make my way to the door and the bell rings again and Catherine tells Robby not to do that because it's rude. When I open the door, I see Ronald throw his little brother a punch and tell him to shut up, and Scott's there with his little salesman smirk. Next to him is Catherine, with her eyes that are too far apart, like a bug. Sometimes I wonder if she can see on both sides of her. Always thought my son would do better.

"Happy Birthday," Scott says to me as he forces himself onto me with a hug. He hugs me softly like I'm some ancient relic, not a human being. The rest of the family says "Happy Birthday" again with less enthusiasm. The bug has a big box in her hand that looks like a cake—maybe chocolate, cause that's my favorite, but

they wouldn't know that. They don't really care how much I like it. They care that they brought it and they can say they brought it. They can feel good about bringing it. Next to Ronald on the doorstep, Robby is a shrimp, and he's grabbing his crotch.

"Kid has to piss," I tell Scott. "Go to the bathroom. Don't want you pissing all over the carpet."

Robby looks at me with his signature blank stare from underneath his spiked-up brown hair, and then bolts through the door. Kid never was all there. Last week when they all came over, I went to go get something from the garage and caught the little fucker licking Elmer's glue. It was a big scene, but he saved my ass 'cause the bug convinced Scott to take him to the doctor right away and they left. They tell me he's "artsy," but when people call kids artsy they really mean "sucks at sports" or "crazy." Margaret used to call Scott "artsy" all the time. He was the "sucked at sports" kind. Maybe some of the other kind too.

"He needs a haircut," I say. Scott gives one of his fake nods. The ones that you give to people when you want them to think you're listening, but you're actually not. Typical salesman.

I let them in and get them all seated on the couch, while I sit in my normal chair. Ronald takes out his games again. For a moment, the only sound in the room is the damn clock. The one that's still ticking too loudly. Does Scott know about clocks? Did I ever teach him?

"How are you, Pop?" Scott asks.

"Fine."

"So," he says. He takes out a folded piece of paper from his pocket and shoves it in my face. He tells me about how he did some searching for me and he thinks that a Shit Zoo would be a good dog for me, even though last time I told him I didn't want one. He tells me about how they're great companions and they're easy to take care of. He tries to sell me on it, like I'm another sucker customer. Talk, talk, talk—that's everything for Scott. He gets paid for running his mouth, by selling people cars that they don't want and gouging them out of their hard-earned money. The first Anderson to not be a doer.

"Why would I want some little fucker running around breaking things?" The bug covers Ronald's ears and he takes her hands off. Good for him.

Scott does a small half-laugh, which makes the sorry excuse for facial hair under his bottom lip go up and down. I wonder how long it took him to grow that B-list porn star look.

"It'd be company for you," he tells me.

"I don't need company."

"Don't you get lonely?"

"No." Everyone dies alone anyways. Just like Walter when I found him dead in his bed. Some little dog won't change that—nothing will change that.

"What are you up to these days, Pop?" he asks.

"Same thing I been up to last time you asked me."

"You get out at all this week?"

"I needed food, so I went to the store."

I can't take the interrogation so I get up to grab a beer, and my hip stabs at me again. Scott jumps up and tells me not to stand quickly because the doctor said not to because of my new hip. I tell him to sit down and that I got it. I'm not dead yet.

Just like Scott to say that. He always trusts those professionals. He gets it from Margaret. Like the time he missed

a whole week of school with some sickness, where the doc prescribed him these pills for his lungs, because apparently he had mucus in there.

"Can you walk?" I asked him after watching him rot his brain away in bed for three days. He said yes, and I told him to get his ass up out of bed, but he didn't. It was Margaret who convinced him to stay. She's the one who brought him soup and blankets—coddled him.

I get over to the kitchen and I can hear Scott talking to Ronald, asking what game he's playing. Ronald ignores him and Scott doesn't make him say anything to him. Pathetic. If there's one thing I taught Scott it's this: "Don't be a bitch." Even after all these years, he still disobeys me. And he's ruining this kid.

"Drinks?" I ask them. They say in the most polite tones what they want.

Oh please, sir, if it's not too much trouble, could I please, if you don't mind... Don't give me this Oliver Twist bullshit. Tell me what you want, dammit. Two waters? Okay.

I open up the fridge and grab my Bud and then reach for a water glass and my hip goes again, but the pain is nothing compared to getting shot in the leg in the dirt of Wesel and having an eighteen year old virgin take the bullet out with a rusty pair of tongs. Now that is pain.

I can hear them all talking about me in the living room. Scott's talking about my limp and the bug says that she sees it too. He says that I look weaker than the last time he saw me, leaner, and my face is more sunken. I can tell they're about to steal glances at me out the corners of their eyes. When I turn my back, they'll look at me like I'm some charity case.

Thought I had taught Scott some respect, but I guess he didn't pick it up. No, no respect, even for the man that started it all. If it hadn't been for me, picking up Margaret in that bar sixty-eight years ago, Scott wouldn't be alive. I just walked up to her with my charm and I told her she was beautiful, because she was.

I take the drinks in the living room and put them on the little coffee table in the middle. The bug reaches for her glass, but her face goes sour. She makes a little "hmm" noise. Scott asks her what's wrong and she tells him that her glass is dirty, pointing at some piece of food that is stuck on the lip.

"I'll get you a new glass, honey," Scott says and stands. She can get it herself, but he goes and gets it and comes back, and at least if he can't be a parent, then he's being a bit of a man. I hear Scott shuffling around in the kitchen and I'm sitting there with the bug. I can't tell if she's looking at me, but she's squirming on the couch, nervous that she'll have to talk to me. She yawns into her hand and takes out her cell phone and moves her finger over the screen, and next to her, Ronald is still playing on his game device. She looks up. She's getting desperate now, made uncomfortable by the silence. She doesn't enjoy it yet. It takes practice to get used to.

"Honey," she wails, "how's it going in there?"

Scott bails her out and calls back to her that he's coming. He brings her the drink and she grabs it immediately and sips it, giving her something to do. Scott sits back down, but his attention is toward a picture in his hand, probably the one of Margaret in front of the pool at the old house that I keep forgetting to throw out.

"You still got this picture." Scott turns the picture towards me, and I lean in close to see it. It's the one of Margaret at

the pool, laying in a lounge chair and raising a drink. Her brown hair is falling gently over her shoulders.

"Keep forgetting to throw it out," I say.

"Want me to take care of it? You probably don't want this here anymore," he says. He stands up and has got the picture in his hand and he's heading towards the trashcan.

"Sit down. I'll do it later." He asks me if I'm sure and I tell him that I am and he shouldn't have to throw my shit away for me. Scott sits back down and drops the picture on the coffee table.

"We went to visit her yesterday at her new place. It's called Sunset Living."

"The geezer lives."

"Pop, it's a really great place. There are a lot of places like this. A whole community of 'experienced' people. They go to concerts and play games."

Oh, games! Maybe we could play bingo. G-36. F-10. Bingo. Nope, just some old bag with a faulty hearing aid. Thrilling. Scott looks at me like he expects me to be excited, but I don't give him the satisfaction.

"You might be happier with other people."

"I'm happy how I am."

"If you change your mind, you can call me."

Sorry to disappoint you, Scott, but don't hold your breath. Scott starts talking to the bug about things that don't concern me, so I try to tune it out, but all I can hear is the damn clock. I wonder if Scott still remembers anything I taught him.

"Now, you see here how the pendulum works?" I had asked him when he was a kid. He hadn't looked at me when I was talking to him. He was somewhere else in his head. "Pay attention," I said. "Look at me when I'm talking. I'm trying to teach you something." He looked at me then, his ginger hair covering his tired eyes.

"I don't care about clocks, Pop. My phone tells time."

"Well, you should."

"Why?"

"Because I said so." Then, I went through the whole shepel about how the parts work, and he gave me blank stares and he didn't listen to anything I tried to teach him about it.

The sound of Robby washing his hands comes through the walls and he's singing to himself, some kind of Christmas song. Catherine's wide-set eyes get big.

"Is there any glue upstairs?" she asks. I tell her no, and then when Robby stomps his way downstairs, whistling to himself, I look up and pretend like I'm forgetting something.

"Or maybe there is," I say, hoping for a good reaction. Scott doesn't think it's funny, and he grabs her and reassures her that I'm just joking. Ronald, who I thought wasn't listening, laughs from over his game device.

"What's that?" I point at his game device.

"A DS." He turns it towards me for a moment to show. It's just a bunch of nonsense and it hurts my eyes. He turns it back and continues playing.

"You're going to kill your eyes." He just shrugs at me like some punk. "Your grandpa is talking to you, so pay attention." Ronald looks over at his father, who doesn't give him any response, so he looks at me. Good, I'll teach this kid some manners even if Scott can't. "I've lived more life than you could imagine, so you

listen."

"Okay," he says quietly.

"How old are you?" I ask him. I tip my beer bottle at the scrawny kid and wish he had one of his own. We could sit and talk shit about our wives, and shit that we've done that would make any dame go for us. Walter never got any dames though. He wasn't ever good at that.

"Ten," he says.

"You play sports?"

"Football. I'm a quarterback," he says.

Football? Wouldn't have pegged him as a kid good with a pigskin. Not with his frame. Maybe the kid can throw. Where would he have learned to throw? Not from Scott, cause Scott would never listen to me when I tried to teach him. Scott could never throw.

"Bet I can throw harder than you," I tell him. He looks up at me confused at first, but then puts his game down.

"Bet you can't," he says. I put my beer down and go get my pigskin from the closet and head outside and he follows me out there. Scott warns me not to go out and I close the door behind me.

Ronald tosses me the ball in a pretty good spiral. He's got a cannon like his grandpa. I toss it back to him and I can see him reeling from the sheer force. Did Scott play catch with him? He must have taught him. Playing outside with his kid—like I tried to do with him.

"Catch it like this," I tell him. I show him the perfect form, how you make your hands like a triangle. He does it next time and catches it clean.

"I was a quarterback too," I say.

I can see this kid doing good things, running down the sidelines with ANDERSON in big bold letters on his back. He'd do the dirty work; he'd fight for his team to get the win, and he'd have respect. And the name Anderson would be known for greatness.

I throw again and my hip flares, like when I was shot in Wesel. Ronald tosses it back, so I put my hands up in front of me, but I can't grab the ball in time so it slips through and hits me in the face and then rolls into the street. My nose is bleeding so I stop it with my hanky.

"You okay, Grandpop?" the kid asks. The black hanky's getting soggy in my hand, so I readjust it.

"What'd you do that for? Threw it right in the sun."

"Grandpop, the sun's behind you." The little brat's just staring up at the sky.

"Get the ball out of the street before we crash a car."

He grabs the ball and runs inside before I can stop him and soon after he does, Scott comes running out of the house with gauze and cotton balls like some fancy nurse. He tries to stuff one of the cotton balls up my nose, but I slip past him before he can reach me.

"Don't touch me," I tell him through the dripping hanky. "I didn't ask for help."

I walk inside, past the bug's wide-set eyes and go into the bathroom where I can clean myself up. I turn on the faucet and wait for it to get hot, and remove the hanky from my nose. The blood's slowed a little.

Besides the dripping blood and the redness my nose is still strong. It's suffered worse. But the creases near my eyes are bigger than I remember and I have a turkey gobble that could stretch to my waist. Walter had a big gobble too and I'd always given him shit for it. I guess he's giving me shit now from somewhere else.

I take my shirt off 'cause some of the blood had gotten on it. I look, and my chest is small, like a bear still, but a smaller bear—a bear that might get beat in a fight with a bigger bear.

The water's hot now. Couldn't get water this hot so quickly before, wasn't so easy. Pull a lever and in seconds out comes your water like magic. Had to wait a while before.

Like when me and Margaret were standing by the sink and brushing our teeth. She was waiting for hot water. Was she washing her face? No, like when I was brushing my teeth and Margaret, well, Maggie, was about to wash her face and I told her about how while me and Walter were painting some richie's house, Walter had fallen off the ladder and smeared a few stripes of blue paint over a white wall and when the richie came back and saw it, he nearly passed out because his precious house wasn't perfect anymore. I told the story like a real showman and she laughed.

Boy, her laugh was something that could make a cancer patient smile. And when she'd snort, it'd be funny cause she'd have this shocked look on her face like did I do that? Yeah, Maggie, you did.

But it wasn't worth it, she'd said. She told me that she didn't know when it happened, but I didn't love her like I used to, and she was right. I was happier when she wasn't around, because she had a habit of being a real annoyance, so the whole thing didn't seem worth it anymore.

And each night, for a long time before we divorced five years ago, we could feel that we were growing apart. It was in the few words we had before we each went to sleep. It'd be goodnight Hank, and then I'd say, goodnight Maggie, and that would be it and we'd go to sleep. It was in the arguments too. Like when she'd be a bitch over stupid shit like whether or not to go camping or how to arrange the furniture, and that might have been when I decided that she was right that it wasn't worth it. It was all an obligation, almost like we were trying to get something back but couldn't because it'd been lost for good. So she hit the road, and I'm much happier now.

But the hot water's just different now and that's what I'm trying to say.

Robby's voice comes in through the walls.

"Is Grandpop dead?" He must be talking real loud. I hear Scott shush him and Ronald mentions how he guesses he won the bet of who could throw harder and maybe he did. And the clock that still needs to be fixed is ticking through the walls.

"Dear, I'm tired and the dogs need to be fed. Can we go?" says the bug. The boys chime in too. Go ahead Scott, go home, and go sell a few more cars.

"I want to go," Robby whines. "It's boring here." Scott shushes him once more.

"You can take the kids home," he says. "I'm going to spend more time with my Dad." The bug urges him to come home and tells him that I don't want them here and that I want to be alone and she's right. But he doesn't give in, and this time, he's not a bitch. He's got some fight in him this time. Stupid fight, but still a fight.

"Why do we come here?" she asks.

"Your dad doesn't want us. You've said yourself he wasn't good to you."

"He's still my dad. He helped raise me."

That shuts the bug up for now. Guess Scott learned some of the respect I taught him after all. I get a new shirt and come back out of the bathroom and, besides the clock, it's quiet. I sit down in my chair and pick up my Bud and sip. Ronald flicks his brother's ear.

"How's the nose?" Scott asks me.

"Fine. How's work?" I ask him. He asks me what I said and I repeat myself, slower this time like our roles are reversed, like he's the old man and I'm the young one with the family.

"Good," he says, "it's real good, Pop. Thanks for asking." I nod at him and finish off my beer in a big swig.

Nobody's talking, but the clock's loud.

"Clock's broken, can you hear it?" I say. Scott looks over at the clock and asks me how it's broken. "It's too loud."

He says he doesn't hear it, says that it sounds like a normal clock. I get up to check it and he follows me over to the backside of the clock. I try to move the clock away from the wall, but it's heavy. Scott goes on the other side of the clock to push.

"I got it," I tell him.

"Let me help you," he says. He starts pushing, and I pull, and he's surprisingly strong for his skinny frame. The clock moves easy away from the wall and the back is exposed.

I open up the door of the back and look inside at the parts. It's probably the main wheel that's getting caught. Might need to be oiled up.

"You know where I keep the oil?" I ask him. Scott crosses his arms over his chest and nods. The bug has closed her eyes to sleep.

"Yeah. You want circulating or spindle oil?"

He knows the difference between the two?

"We're going on just the gear here, so circulating."

He goes into the garage and gets the right kind of oil and hands it to me. I take the gear away from the system carefully.

"You study clocks or somethin'?" I ask him. I apply the oil onto the gear.

"You taught me, remember?"

"Of course I remember." Guess he took in some of what I was saying after all. I put the gear back into its place and let it run, but it didn't fix it.

"You say it's too loud?" he asks me. "Louder than normal? It sounds okay to me."

"No, no it's too loud. Maybe it's the weight."

"Let's check the escape wheel."

I hadn't thought of that—good idea. I use my screwdriver to unscrew the screws that hold it in place and take it out and we examine it. He asks if I see anything wrong with it. My eyes aren't as good as they used to be, so I hand it to him for a look.

"Looks fine," he says.

I wonder what's wrong. I oil up this gear too, like I did with the other.

"Dodgers are doing well," I say. Some of the oil seeps onto my hand so I wipe it on my jeans.

"How well are they doing?" he says.

"Playoffs," I say. "Got a good bullpen this year. Yep. They're always selling out now," I turn over to him. "You should see it when they hit a home run now. Everyone goes nuts in the ravine there, and they set off fireworks. I don't remember them doing that before. You still have your hat? The one I got you when we went to a game some time ago?"

"Somewhere," he says. "Don't think it'll fit now, though."

"I suppose not. Maybe you can give it to your boys."

"Yeah. Maybe I could." Scott puts his hands in his pockets and steps in closer to see how I'm oiling the gear. "Careful with how much you're using." His voice is loud in my ear when he's close.

"Don't yell in my ear like that." I turn around and tell him to stand back.

"I wasn't yelling," he says. He looks at me and he raises one of his eyebrows, the way he used to do when he did his math homework up by the window in the den. "Have you checked your hearing aid?"

"No. No, it's not the aid, it's the clock," I say. He grabs at my ear and I swat his hand away. "Don't touch me. Look at the clock."

"Pop, it's not the clock. You must have messed up your aid somehow."

"I didn't mess up shit."

Scott closes in on me and holds down my arms down and tries to grab it, but I get free and push him back a few feet before he can get it. He stumbles back from the push and trips over my chair. He looks up at me like some abandoned puppy.

"Pop," he pleads, "I'm trying to help you fix this."

"I don't need your help," I say. The whole group is looking now. The bug's wide eyes are back open and Robby and Ronald have put down their games. "I don't need you to be here at all." Scott picks himself up off the ground and straightens his sweater.

"Do you want us here?"

"No."

"We want to spend time with you."

Bullshit. They don't even like me—not one. Not even Scott.

"You don't want to spend time with me," I say. "You all know I'm going to croak soon, so you come here and you pay your dues, and then when I die, you can all go home feeling good about yourselves. 'At least I made an effort,' you'll say. 'I'm glad we were there with him in his final days.' Those are the kind of lies you'll say to yourselves. I'm not buying it."

"Dad, there's nothing to buy," he says. "We love you."

Like how me and Maggie loved each other before we split. Ain't nothing but obligation.

"Why don't you take your family home?"

"It's your family too."

"I don't want any part of it."

"Fine," Scott says. He tells his family that it's time to go.

"We won't come from now on then, if that's what you want."

"Fine."

The bug picks up the cake and card, and Scott tells her that she can leave them. The boys close their games and look at me for a moment, then return their eyes to the ground, as if they're scared that I might yell. Scott leads them out the door, and

before he leaves, he looks back at me.

"Happy Birthday, Pop," he says. And then he closes the door, and I hear some car doors open and close. Their car drives away and finally they're gone—I've got the house to myself again.

I walk back to my chair and readjust it towards the TV. Have to fix it because Scott bumped it out of place. Scott's probably driving in the car right now, with the kids in the back seat, and the bug in the passenger seat. She's staring out both side windows at the same time. He's probably saying something about how he's sorry that the kids had to hear that and saying how he doesn't know what's gotten into me.

The cake is still sitting on the coffee table, so I open it up and inside is one of those cakes with the faces printed on it. My face, my old-ass face. I grab a knife from the kitchen and cut into it—into the part with my eye—and put a piece on a plate. Turns out the cake is chocolate. Scott must have picked it out. He's the only one that would know.

Taped to the top of the box is a card. One of those cards with a stupid monkey on the front with a party hat, doing a toothy smile. Inside it's a little better because there's a hand-drawn picture. It's of an elephant with a party hat and it's from Robby and it's pretty well drawn. In the squiggles, I can see the trunk and there's a cake that the elephant's holding. Maybe the kid's artsy after all. He's signed it: "Happy Birthday, Grandpop!" On the other side of the card, Catherine said "Happy Birthday" too and Ronald wrote his name under that and below, Scott wrote: "Love you, Pop."

My hip flares again, pretty bad this time, as I get up to throw the card out, so I set it down on the coffee table next to the birthday cake and the picture of Maggie. I'll throw them out later.

I take another bite of cake and some of it falls on the ground, so I get up slowly and grab a paper towel to clean it up. A dog would at least it'd be good for this—cleaning up spills so I don't have to reach down every time. Not a Shit Zoo, though. A big dog, one that looks tough. I could name it Walter cause that'd be a good name for a dog and it'd be in my buddy's honor. And I could talk so much shit to it and it wouldn't be able to say anything back to me. Walt, you fatass, you look like shit this morning. And it might have a big gobble like mine.

I finish the rest of my piece of cake and pack up the rest and put it in the fridge, then I grab the paper from the dining room and sit back in my chair and read. There are some things about a movie that I've never heard of. "Great fun for the whole family," it says. Bill Rochester from the New York Times gave it two thumbs up. Now I have to see it.

Thinking back on it, there was one birthday that wasn't a total shit show. It was when Scott turned nine. Maggie and I brought out a tarp and a hose and made a slip and slide in our backyard. Scott and his friends jumped on it for hours and I got to watch them zip across the tarp like little hockey pucks and then get up all muddy and then go do it again. Scott had a big smile when he blew out the candles and the whole day he laughed a lot with his friends.

Tick. Tick. Tick. Over and over and it's in my head so I can't barely think. The clock won't let me have any peace, so I get up to check it again. I open up the back and check the gears and they all seem to be in their right place, the same place they were before. They're running fluidly, rolling past one another

with ease. The screws are tightened as far as they can go, but it's still too loud in my ear.

I know I didn't mess up my hearing aid, but I take it out anyways, just in case, and check the dial. It turns out it's pushed a little farther than where it's supposed to be. I turn it back, and the ticking goes back to normal volume. It turns out that Scott was right about how to fix it, and it was so simple —the turn of a dial.

Now, it's back to the silence I'm used to. Quiet. So quiet. It's about as quiet as it was when I found Walter in his house, and as quiet as it was right after Maggie left me. It's the same silence. I know I said I'd gotten used to it, but I think I'm still adjusting. I go and turn on the TV. It's on a news show, and the pretty-boy anchor is reading about something or other.

"Yesterday, the Dodgers clinched the division with Andre Ethier's grand slam." Blah, blah, blah. Old news.

I look back over at the grandfather clock that's still sticking out from the wall. It's such a nice old clock, with its curves up on the top, the sharp carvings on the front, all purposeful in the mahogany. The numbers on the face are bold and clear. There's so much effort that went into making it. And it still has that old smell, the same smell it had when Maggie and I got it. It's hard to describe—some finish, and some earth. Doesn't seem right to

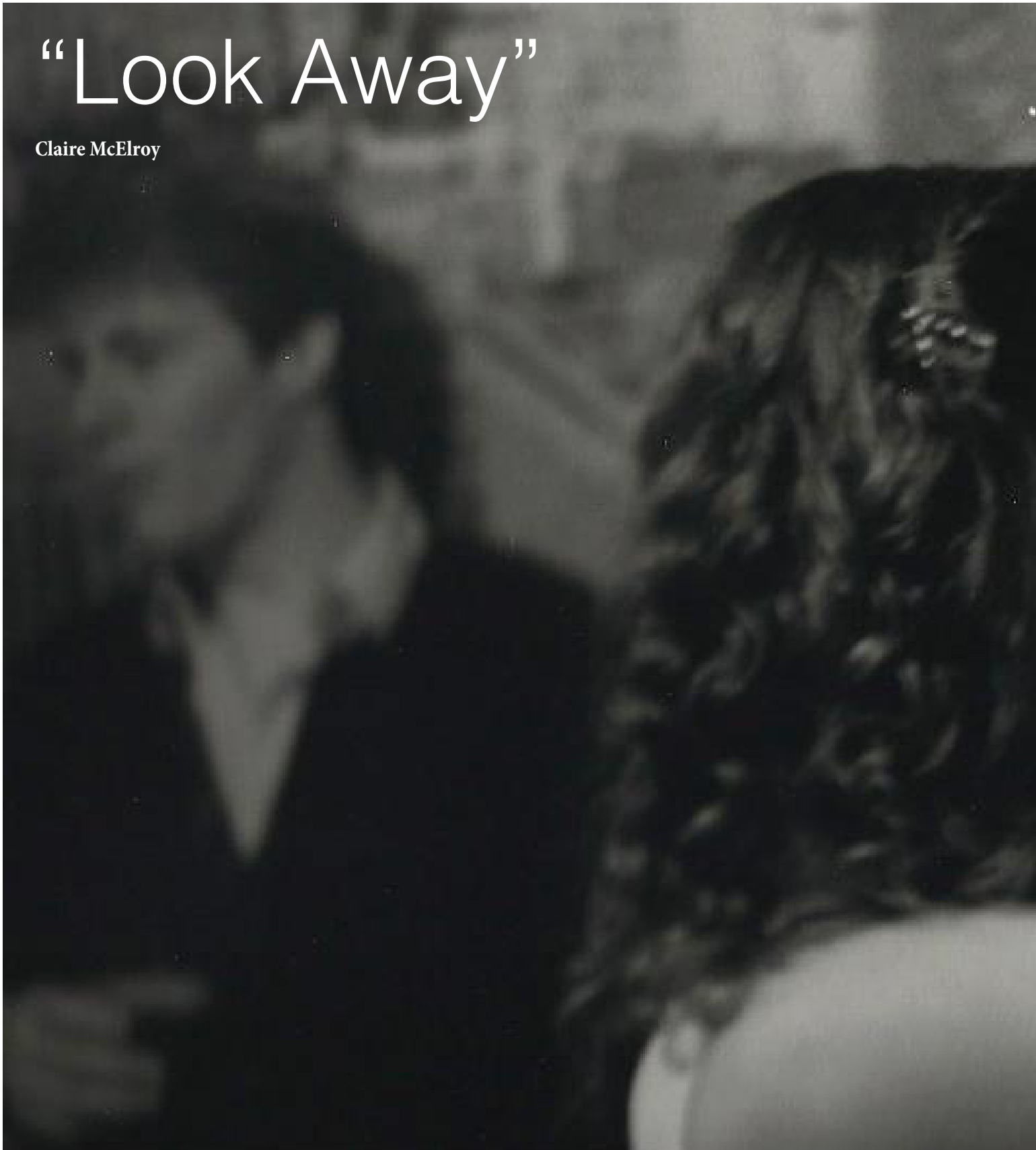
leave it sticking out from the damn wall like that. No, it doesn't do it justice, not after all its years of service. I get up to try to push it back into place, but I don't have the strength I used to. I drive my legs as hard as they can go, but they don't go hard enough anymore and the clock doesn't budge. So I go grab the phone and make a call. It rings a few times, and then Scott picks up.

"Pop?" he says.

"Son," I say, "I'm going to need your help again with this fuckin' clock."

“Look Away”

Claire McElroy





Zombie Stories: The Genre That Just Won't Die Zombie Love

John Prather

"Honey, I'm home," said Ruth.

"Did you pick up some brains? Did you get my text?"

said Neil.

"Shoot, no, I haven't looked at my phone all day...but I think we might have a couple legs in the fridge if you're starving. Besides I hate the brains at Safeway...They are so unhealthy. They farm the humans in little cages. They breathe in their own shit their whole lives, and by the time they slaughter them, their brains are like eleven percent fecal matter or something awful like that," said Ruth.

"Wow! Eleven percent?" said Neil.

"Why don't we go out to eat? It's been a while, I don't feel like cooking anyway. I have been wanting to try this new restaurant called Cerebellums. It's a new place downtown. I read an article about it in the Undead Weekly. They source their brains from local farmers that give their humans plots of land and books. I have a friend from New York—"

Neil looked up from the television screen and gave Ruth a scornful sidelong glance she mistook for confusion.

She went on, "You know, the one who I went to art school with, she's really into the local brains movement. She says you can really taste the difference. And I believe it. The lower quality brains are always so mushy. It is more expensive but we can afford it and it's worth the extra money just for the piece of mind that the humans' lives weren't so horrid."

"Pff...piece of mind. I just want a piece of brain! And yea, I remember her. She is the reason you went through that eating raw brains phase for a few weeks until you got food poisoning. Cooking might destroy some of the vitamins and "micronutrients" but it also destroys the infectious diseases that sent you to the hospital. I tried to warn you, but oh no, 'My friend from New York says it's healthy so I am only going to eat raw brains,' " said Neil, flapping the imaginary mouth he had made with his right hand and nodding his head side to side mockingly.

"Anyway, you shouldn't think that way. They are just humans; they don't really know what is going on. The smartest humans, their IQs are still hundreds of points less than even a below-average Zombie. They only discovered farming and electricity through the clandestine intervention of zombies. They would still be climbing around in trees throwing their shit at each other if we hadn't stepped in. Good thing too—really increased our food supply. Although, that anarchist zombie who introduced them to the atomic bomb almost screwed it all up. They haven't even contacted the Snamuh and they are only a few light-years away. The Snamuh have been sending them signal beacons for

thousands of years but the Snamuh don't have any technology primitive enough to transmit to earth.

Ruth put her purse on the kitchen table and threw down her keys next to it. She yawned and walked over to stand in front of Neil between him and the 6 o'clock news report. Neil leaned to the side and peered around Ruth's hips to continue watching the television.

"Even if they are stupid, it doesn't mean they can't feel pain. I mean, I have looked into the eyes of a live human and it really seemed intelligent. I mean, it couldn't communicate with me telepathically, and its ego didn't seem very well defined, but it still seemed to have free will. Morality aside, the brains from free-home humans that have actually read a book or two in their lives are probably healthier. The studies aren't out yet but I am sure that eventually they will start suggesting that all the genetic engineering and antibiotics that go into the production of human brains these days causes Zombie Cancer," said Ruth.

"Jeeze, if you love humans so much why don't you go and marry one."

"Eww! I am a lady ,you know! I don't think that's funny."

"Could you move please? I am trying to watch this story about a zombie that was found living in the woods of Maine all by himself for twenty years. He would periodically go break into zombies' houses nearby the land he was squatting on to steal food and supplies. Apparently the cop that arrested him was the only other Zombie he had talked to for 20 years. Anyway, you're probably right, about the health thing I mean. But what you were saying about them having free will, you're starting to sound like a ZETH member. They definitely don't have free will like we do. You were just zombothromorphising. They think that they are making choices but really they are just reacting to environmental stimuli and responding to the arbitrary commands of their hormones and neurotransmitters."

"That's not freewill. Sure, they have more complex emotions than our pet tarantula, Peter, but they can't truly feel love for people outside of their families. When they feel fear, it is only for themselves, and their personalities are totally malleable and change depending on what they experience."

He continued, "Also, instead of taking care of their parents when they get old, they just send them to what is basically a prison and pay people to watch them and stuff them full of drugs until they die. Their brains haven't developed enough yet to lose mirror neurons like us Zombies. Our mirror neurons were gradually replaced over hundreds of thousands of years by

window neurons that help us perceive the true nature of reality and make our senses many times more acute. The fact is that humans are herd animals and only occasionally have original ideas. And when one of them does finally have an original idea, the other ones just copy it and never question it. Humans seem zombie-like because they perceive themselves and have a concept of self but that is really where the similarities end. Zombies feel love for all zombies, only have original thoughts and don't fear death. Zombies are telepathic, and humans can barely communicate with each other unless they use their fists. But the really big difference is our free will. We aren't governed by pituitary excretions or the action of neurotransmitters... Are you even listening to me?" said Neil.

"Yes honey, pituitary transmitters and neuroexcretions... sounds nothing like freewill," she said, rolling her head slowly over her chest, shoulders and back to stretch her neck.

Neil's left eye squinted slightly with vexation but he continued, "Using genetic sequencing, hormonal graphs, and neurotransmitter maps Zombie scientists have done tests where they modeled live human brains in a computer simulator, then inserted them into human bodies and found that they could predict the behavior of humans in the lab with 95 percent accuracy for the full duration of their lifespans. That reminds me, I read an article recently that said scientists in Zombie-Japan are close to being able to grow brains independently in labs. They just take some cloned cells and throw 'em in some nutrient goop and they grow like Chia pets or some shit."

"But...who would want to eat that?" She paused and arched her back in a stretch. "Honey?"

"Fine," said Neil as he repositioned himself to give Ruth a massage. "Maybe I wouldn't have to do this every day. You wouldn't get these enormous knots at least, if you'd keep your damn back straight at work. Sitting in a chair all day is bad enough for your back but if you're going to do it slouching, you might as well just let me hit you in the back a couple times with a baseball bat. It would be a much quicker way to ruin your back."

"I know, honey," she said, closing her eyes and straightening her posture as Neil's hands gradually worked their way down her back.

"Honestly, I kinda like mass produced brains. They are sooo tender. Free-home human brains are too chewy and gamey. It's all those books and the thinking they do. Though it really is sad how they are made. When I was a kid I drove through east Texas with my family and saw a feedlot. The smell was unreal. It hit us when we were still ten miles away. When we got closer I could see all the humans shoulder-to-shoulder ankle deep in their own shit with flies swarming around them and everything. A couple of them seemed to be staring out at the highway, with their head sticking out of the fence, all forlorn like and it really gave me the creeps."

"Honey, maybe we could talk about this after the massage?"

Ignoring her, Neil went on, "Each cage had a big flat screen TV and I asked my zombie-dad about it and he said they have two channels: porn and Spongebob. I guess it's inhumane but I think all that porn and Spongebob must be what makes their brains so damn soft. I know it's wrong but I love it! I just try

not to think about where it comes from. They have handcuffs to prevent them from fighting and hurting each other and they cut off their lips so they don't spread diseases. Disease and neurosis is so ubiquitous that they mix high doses of antibiotics and anti-depressants into their feed so they stay alive long enough to make it to the slaughterhouse."

"Neil." Ruth interrupted again.

"Some of them refuse to eat because they figure out somehow that the feed is composed of the byproducts of human processing. These ones just get their teeth knocked out and are force-fed. I do think about it sometimes. Yea, I heard once that since the devices that initially kill humans in slaughterhouses are automated, a lot of times the humans don't actually die with the first pass of the saw. Sometimes it just nicks their neck and they end up going to the gutting station completely conscious."

"Neil!" said Ruth, turning around this time.

"Sorry, it's just an interesting subject to me." Ruth turned back around and Neil continued with her massage. "Buying brains in grocery stores and restaurants is too easy. Not knowing where it comes from or having to kill the human yourself. It still blows my mind that our ancestors really had to hunt for all their brains in the wild. I have gone hunting with Chuck and I honestly couldn't get into it. Chuck loves it. He even makes jerky, but I just hate the face humans make when they are getting bitten and watching them flop around and scream. Really, I am a coward. though. At least Chuck kills humans himself to eat while I just let some corporation do it."

"I wouldn't feel too bad honey," said Ruth, smiling at the thought. "I don't think what Chuck does is really hunting... Doesn't he just go out to the Las Vegas Human Preserve and put a pile of gold and cocaine on a street corner and jump on the first one that is unlucky enough to find it?"

"Usually, but sometimes he actually goes out into the woods completely naked before sunrise, doesn't even use a call and just stalks them like an animal. He is way more in touch with his senses than I am. He says he can smell them. When I go out with him the only thing I smell is air...Anyway, I am up for going out but I really don't feel like going to an actual restaurant. We should just get some brain-burgers somewhere. How about BrainyQueen? or Brain-Burger King? Then after that maybe we could have some kinky zombie sex?" said Neil before he started lightly kissing Ruth's neck while his hands massaged her lower back. "Maybe we could use some of those toys I showed you," he added.

"I should slap you," Ruth said, She turned her head to the side and stared at Neil out of the corner of her eye.

"I like where this is going, one second, let me put these on... Oh my god, fuzzy handcuffs? Are you serious? Where did you... How long have you had... Never mind. You need to stop pulling this shit, honey. I thought I made myself pretty clear when I returned the bull-whip you got me for Valentine's Day. I love you but I am not going to be your zominatrix." Neil wasn't listening while he fumbled to attach a pair of fuzzy handcuffs to his wrists.

"Alright, I'm ready! Slap me!" Neil said with his eyes closed.

"Oh, that's cute, maybe if you'd remember to take the trash out every now and then. Until that happens, take those off

and keep dreaming.” Neil looked opened his eyes and looked at the ground solemnly and sighed.

“Ugh...okay. I’ll drive. Let’s go. I want to make it back in time for the new episode of Human Society. I can’t believe you don’t watch that show with me. It’s pretty—”

“It’s pretty boring. That’s why I don’t watch that awful show with you. It’s so bad you can tell all the humans are just zombies in tons of makeup. Why would I want to watch dramatizations of past human societies trying to annihilate each other?”

“Not all the episodes are about war, just almost all of them; human culture had a few redeemable qualities. Like tonight is going to be a section about Cathedrals and Frescos of the Renaissance. Also, last week there was one about classical

human music that was pretty cool.”

“Ha! Sure, those cathedrals and paintings are pretty impressive, but guess how they were paid for?”



“Freckles” Claire McElroy

A Bow Tie and Sandals

by Nick Borges-Silva

Snow fell as Gerald stepped onto the plane, walked to the second row of paired seats, and sat himself by the window. Gerald thought back several minutes to the horrendous crone that screamed, “Your end is nigh!” at him, among numerous other passengers, as he waited to board the aircraft. He chose to ignore the recollection and avoid paranoia by turning his thoughts to his wife, seven sons, and two daughters who awaited him in Iceland just hours away. Gerald thumbed through his wallet, packed with photos of his family. He placed a white pill in his mouth, told himself everything would be fine, and waited.

After approximately twenty minutes, a man appeared in the entryway, approached Gerald at a hasty pace, and took up the vacant seat. Gerald found himself trying not to look directly at him or say a single word. His anxiety was bad enough; he didn’t think speaking to a stranger would help.

The man was mumbling into his cell phone and concluded with, “No, I’m in the middle of something. See you soon, honey.” The stranger closed his phone, turned, and grasped Gerald by the shoulder. “How are you, Gerald?” he asked exuberantly. The fingers groping Gerald’s shoulders were extraordinarily bony. The hand remained firm even as the engines caused the plane to tremble.

Gerald was shocked by the stranger grabbing his shoulder like they were old friends, but that didn’t amount to much in comparison to the man knowing his name. Gerald quickly smacked the man’s hand off of his shoulder and asked, “Excuse me? Who are you?” His voice was demanding but subtly shook along with the engine’s vibrations.

The plane was moving and began to accelerate. Gerald turned to look at the stranger, and what he saw astounded him more than the man’s previous gesture. Gerald’s eyes widened. The man was practically a skeleton aside from the bits of dried, blood-crusting flesh that clung to his skull. His torso was draped in a loose-fitting suit, left open but secured at the neck by a bow tie. His shirt was tucked in to a pair of blue swim trunks adorned with a variety of flowers. On his feet were leather sandals. “Come on, Gerald,” he said as the plane left the ground. “It’s your old pal, Death!”

Gerald paused momentarily before speaking. How the man got past security in that ridiculous costume, Gerald could not say. “What do you mean you’re Death?” He was laughing in his head but presented only a mocking chuckle to the man. Gerald wasn’t sure if the joke or the pill was easing his paranoia, but he decided to play along. “If you’re Death, what are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be off having a cup of tea with the Lord of the Underworld or something?”

“A terrible misconception,” the man replied. “I’m here to escort you and the rest of these suckers back to my place.”

“Your place?” Gerald asked. How long could he keep this act up?

“Yes, my place, Gerald. It’s a wonderful little complex in a resort right on Afterlife Bay. You’re going to love it. But I do warn you. If you’re traveling there at night, do not ever take Rigor Mortis Alley. I know some bad folks that hang around there.”

“Okay, okay, I get it. Are you going to lose the mask?” Gerald’s sense of humor was wearing away, and his anxiety was returning.

“Mask? I’ll have you know it takes a lot of work to keep this beauty in such presentable condition.”

“That’s it.” Gerald had had enough. He reached for the man’s face, intending to tear the plastic mask off his head, only to stroke the solid skull that rested upon the man’s shoulders. His internal laughter had perished by then. Gerald realized he was in a lot of trouble. Sweat began to gather on his forehead. He tried to yell, to stand up and call for help, but he found himself stuck to his seat, petrified. Gerald slowly faced forward, took two deep breaths in a feeble attempt to calm himself as much as he possibly could, then turned back to the man. “A bow tie and sandals?” he asked Death. It was all he could manage to say.

“Yes,” Death said, “I get so many humans that expect some epic battle over their souls between the clashing forces of ‘Good’ and ‘Evil’. What they don’t realize is there’s only one place to go! I wear this ridiculous wardrobe to make up for the lack of opposition. You’d be surprised at the degree of fuss I hear from people. But in the end, after the whole dying thing sets in, I always get thank you cards.” Gerald’s heart pounded under his ribs, and the casual way in which Death spoke made the situation all the more uncomfortable.

“So I’m going to die, is what you’re telling me? You’re here to take me to the afterlife?” said Gerald. He was trying not to sound frantic but his words were accompanied by frequent stutters and leaps in pitch. He couldn’t control himself.

“Oh, don’t make it sound so horrid!” Death brought his smelly skull close to Gerald’s face and whispered, “I hear they’re bringing in a rollercoaster.” His voice felt like an icy claw tearing its way through Gerald’s ear canal.

The shaking and stuttering in Gerald’s voice temporarily ceased as his fear turned to anger. “You’re telling me I’m going to die, and you’re going off about some rollercoaster?”

“You need to quit worrying so much.” Death took on a somber tone. “I know you have many fears, Gerald. And I know I’m at the top of your list, but you can’t spend your life hiding under a blanket every time something troubles you. You knew we would meet eventually. That’s just how it works.” Death stared downward at nothing specific. “If it’s any consolation, I have fears too.” Death’s voice quivered. “I don’t think anyone likes me.” There was a long silence. Death’s attempt at comfort didn’t help. That’s just how it works. Eventually Gerald spoke through heavy breaths.

“So just like that? No warning or anything?”

"I always give a warning, but no one paid much attention to the hag. Actually, people often arrange their own warnings."

Death took on a sarcastic tone. "Oh, let's build a bunch of nuclear weapons. That's a great idea." Death crossed his legs and sighed. "You're not alone, Gerald. Look around you."

Gerald forced himself to turn his head to look around the plane. Every single passenger wore a terrified expression similar to Gerald's and was accompanied by the same strange-dressed fellow. Behind Gerald, the same man with his bow tie and sandals was pulling out a tissue for an elderly man who insisted that his life was just getting started, and in the back corner Death was kneeling beside a couple telling them they didn't have to break up just because they were going to make a living adjustment. This was becoming more disturbing by the second. "You've got to be kidding me. How are you all over the place at the same time? Is this some sort of sick game?"

"Not a game, just a job. And don't get me started on Time." The word was dripping disdain. "Time is always trying to argue about which one of us is the most absolute. Well, look around. When your time runs out, who is always there to greet you?" There was a brief moment of silence. Death drummed his fingers on the arm rest. "Would you like a hint?"

"I get it!" Gerald attempted to hold back tears as anxiety prickled the back of his neck. "I don't get to speak to my family, do I?"

"Oh, you can send them messages from the afterlife,

but only if they're vague enough to be mistaken for common coincidences.

Gerald was completely lost for words. "I'm going to take a quick trip to the little boy's room, but we'll head out after I'm back," Death said. Gerald noticed Death rise and turn back towards him. "It's going to be okay, Gerald." Death strode off and entered the restroom at the back of the plane, closing the door behind him. Gerald prayed to no one in particular that his escort wouldn't return. He wished for nothing else that Death would fade away in that restroom as he woke up during the plane's landing in Iceland.

Gerald's clothes were sticky with sweat. He attempted to steady his breath as he held onto his wallet of pictures. Gerald faced forward and closed his eyes as the captain's voice, riddled with apprehension, came onto a set of speakers. "Sorry, ladies and gentlemen. We're going to be experiencing some light turbulence. Please stay seated and keep your seatbelts fastened until further instruction. Thank you." The plane shook. Gerald heard the restroom door open.

