

# BAR·TLE·BY

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**BAR  
TLE  
BY**

**UMBC'S CREATIVE  
ARTS JOURNAL**

**BAR  
TLE  
BY**

# BARTLEBY STAFF

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**UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND, BALTIMORE COUNTY, UMBC**

An Honors University In Maryland

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**UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND, BALTIMORE COUNTY, UMBC**

**ENGLISH DEPARTMENT**

1000 Hilltop Circle, Baltimore, MD 21250

*Book and Cover Design:* Sonia Pivovarov

*Art Director:* Guenet Abraham

*Printed:* Mount Royal Publishing

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## EDITOR'S PREFACE

The purpose of Bartleby has always been to share the creative work of UMBC students. For the past 3 years, one person has dedicated themselves to realizing this purpose, so in return, this edition of Bartleby is dedicated to them. As once described by Bartleby's Media and Promotion Officer, Noa Myers, this person is no less than "the backbone of Bartleby, and a pillar of the UMBC creative community. Her enthusiasm and warmth make her an absolute joy to work with. Seeing her around the English department would always brighten my day, no matter how bad it was going." I know she is too humble—or at least she pretends to be—to want this kind of attention. But when the news of her retirement broke among her fans, it was devastating to say the least. Last year's Senior Managing Editor, Sean McNutt, had this to say:

"Toward the end of my time as Senior Managing Editor, Sally Shivan gave me the best compliment that I can't personally pronounce: *indefatigable*. While I never had the opportunity to take one of her classes, I am beyond glad that I had the chance to get to know such a wonderful person through Bartleby." Now I, unlike Sean, took three classes with Sally, one out of the country, and in all that time, my pen could never write fast enough to capture every impactful lesson and vocabulary word that came out of her mouth. But if there is one thing she taught me, and one thing that changed the way I perceive myself as a writer, it is that writing has an *-ing* on the end for a reason: unlike science or math, writing is a process that does not stop when you put down the pen. When you walk

between classes, daydream during class, and fall asleep at night, you are always writing something, whether it is a to-do list or an escapist fantasy or a wishful second draft of how an awkward conversation could have gone better. What makes a writer is whether you decide to pick up the pen.

As this chapter of Sally's Bartleby comes to a close and the pen of tradition is passed down to another, I want to leave you, reader, with a promise. Whatever is in store, the spirit of Bartleby will remain *indefatigable*. To the academic pressure-cooker that is UMBC, Bartleby is its vital outlet, its impulse, its odd cousin, its beloved cryptid: with an office tucked in the far corner of the top of PAHB, a deep archive of student works that defy accepted norms, and a namesake that most people don't understand (including myself, until I entered this position). It has seemed that the rule for finding Bartleby, which has now become part of its identity, is that one will never happen upon a copy under conventional circumstances: under a park bench, behind a napkin dispenser, or in the bathroom in Meyerhoff, to name a few. By holding this book in your hands, you have entered the Bartleby mythos. As you begin your journey through these pages, you may find a reality that challenges you, or invites you to enter its world; you may find connection in one of the authors' shared experiences; you may find the inspiration you have been seeking; or maybe, you'll write it yourself for us to publish next year.

Thanks for reading and keep on writing!

Liz Weir  
Senior Managing Editor

**FICT  
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# LE LIVRE DU VILLAGE

## DES DEUX DAMES

SECTION WINNER

EILAH B. GOLDBERG

With every minute that passed, Annalise paid less attention to her father rambling off about her suitor and more attention to the tiny figures out the window, moving like ants in the village at the bottom of the hill. She'd always been curious about the peculiar village in their corner of Germany, visible from her home's west-facing window, but the townspeople of Verstätten only spoke of it in hushed whispers, if they did at all. Her older brother, Alexander, even told her that those who visit never return, as in the little village lived evil, evil people.

Annalise thought, from her birds-eye view, that the village looked far from dangerous, but maybe she was too swept up in curiosities and the prospect of adventure from all the books she read.

"Of course, you will relocate to Venice after the betrothal—"

"What?" Annalise was pulled out of her thoughts and snapped her head to her father, standing in the middle of the main room.

Her father raised his eyebrows in disapproval. Her mother was never quite able to shake her fiery sharp personality.

"The Rosiers have a lovely home in Venice. You will fare nicely there. And it's not far from your brother's university," he said.

"But I don't want to move to Italy."

Her mother, sitting at the wooden table she'd set with four plates for supper, sighed and shook her head. "Annalise, listen to your father. A union of this prestige is an honor, and a rare one, too, in Verstätten."

Annalise resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Her mother always spoke as if they were like the other peasant families in Verstätten,

living in one room and rationing just enough food to keep the hunger away. Her parents may have started that way, but her father spent years traveling to craft a successful enough career as a merchant that their house had three rooms: the main hall, the kitchen; and a bedroom. Her little brother, Thomas, never worried about his insatiable appetite, and her older brother, Alexander, had even been sent to university in Venice to study medicine. She loved Alexander, but she blamed him for getting her into this forced union in the first place.

In university, Alexander's dearest friend, August Rosier, came from a long line of trained physicians, and he'd taken such a strong liking to her when he visited that he offered her a courtship she could not turn down. Not that she liked him much, or at all, but her father was keen on the marriage for their family's economic sake, and her mother reminded her of their Christian values, "*If any man offer thee courtship, and would marry thee, look that thou scorn him not, whatsoever he be.*"

It was an incredible opportunity, truly, but Annalise never liked the idea of marrying. She learned to read as a child and wished to spend her life collecting books and writing them, too.

"I don't want to move to Italy. I don't want to be wed!" she exclaimed. "Alexander can have him if you care so much about the Rosiers—"

Her mother gasped and crossed herself, while her father crossed the room in two strides to reel her out of her chair by the forearm. She met his furious gaze boldly, slightly amused by the anger which her comment flared.

"Don't you *dare* bring such *blasphemy* into this house," he seethed. "You will marry August, and he will shape you into a good wife. And if this is the attitude you get from reading, I'll take your books away, as well."

Threats against her books roiled Annalise like nothing else, and she ripped herself from her father's grasp to storm out of the house.

"Annalise, wait—" her mother reached for her hand as she passed, but Annalise pulled her arm to her chest and carried away without another word.

She stepped outside into winter air that she was not dressed for. Fortunately, her thick, blonde hair covered her ears to keep them warm, but the sun reflecting on the white snow was harsh on her sensitive blue eyes. She wrapped her arms around her small frame to keep warm, as she was too angry to go back inside for a coat.

Thomas approached the house from the direction of the town square and waved brightly. He was a sweet boy of ten with her same eyes and hair that could never quite sit straight. The sight of him made her anger dissipate, if only a little bit.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

She hadn't thought that far ahead, really. There were two paths she could stroll down: the church garden, where she often wandered to clear her mind, or down the cobblestone street to the lonely bookshop, where she could occupy her mind with literature instead of boys.

"Hm..." She twisted her lips in thought. "I think I'm going to the bookshop."

"The bookshop. Got it." Thomas smiled lopsidedly and pretended to lock his mouth with a key and toss it away. Annalise grinned and mussed his hair. Her excursions to the bookshop were their little secret. Her parents knew about her love of literature, and she was permitted to roam the church gardens, but they did not like her walking into shops unaccompanied as a seventeen-year-old girl.

"Go tell Mother I'm at the gardens and I'll be home later, you little rascal," she said fondly.

"Have fun you—erm, big rascal!" Thomas replied. He hadn't quite gotten the hand of wit yet.

Annalise laughed and pressed a kiss to the top of his head before letting him run off to the house. The only boy she would ever truly love was her little brother.

The familiar bell chimed as she entered the crammed shop and breathed in its earthy, old scent.

"Ah, Annalise! Is it Sunday already?" Barty the bookkeeper greeted as he stocked a shelf. He was an eccentric sort of person. They were the same age, and Annalise had befriended him quickly when they were young. She spent every Sunday in the shop with him from when he apprenticed for his father to when he took the store over. He was married only to his books, and he lived a quiet, hidden life in Verstätten.

"Not for another two days. I'm just so sick of betrothals this, marriage that—I just needed to escape home for a bit," Annalise replied.

"Did you?" Barty said, sounding suspicious. He pushed the last book onto the shelf and picked up the empty box he'd been stocking from.

"I don't want to talk about it. You know I hate talking about it."

"Alright, then." He shrugged. "I have to take care of business in the back, but feel free to look around. How's your French, by the way?"

"My French...? Oh! She didn't!" Annalise exclaimed, dashing into the alphabetically ordered aisles for the *P* section. Christine de Pizan's work first found its way onto Barty's worldly bookshelves in 1402, and Annalise quickly grew fond of the author. Her father had brought home a French language book from one of his merchant endeavors when she was twelve, and Annalise learned it cover-to-cover, so she sought Pizan's French writing like a miner looking for diamonds.

"*Parker, Peters, Peirce...* Pizan!" Annalise was so focused on sifting through the shelf that she didn't notice she wasn't alone in the shop until two hands reached for a copy of *The Book of the City of Ladies* at the same time.

"Oh!" both girls exclaimed, pulling their hands back quickly.

"Sorry, I didn't—" Annalise began.

"No, no. Don't worry about it," the cloaked girl said. Her face was concealed by a dark hood in the already dim aisle, and she gestured to the book for Annalise to take. "You got to it first. It's all yours," she said.

Annalise was struck by the sound of the girl's voice; she spoke in German with an unfamiliar accent. She wanted to hear more.

"You were here before me. You can take it."

"It's better I don't."

"Oh. Okay." Annalise reached for the book and withdrew it from the shelf, and the girl suddenly faced her and withdrew her hood.

"Wait. You're actually going to take it?" she said, framing her hazel eyes with thick, raised brows.

"Well, you offered." Annalise shrugged. Barely any light broke through the shelves, yet Annalise swore bits of gold glittered in the surprised eyes staring back at her. She'd never seen anything like them. "Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm not from here," she answered passively, running a hand through her dark, curly ringlets with a nonplussed expression that suddenly made it hard to think.

"Okay, well that's still not an answer to who you are." Annalise crossed her arms and looked up at the taller girl.

"Okay, well, you know it's common courtesy not to actually take the book after I said you could have it, right?"

Annalise felt her cheeks glow—though not self-consciously, it felt like something else she couldn't quite name.

"I guess I'm not one for common courtesy, then. Are you passing through Verstätten? I haven't seen you here before."

"Is that why you're staring at me like I'm a freshly bound book?" The girl smirked. It made Annalise's heart do something funny in her chest.

She blushed deeper and stammered, "Sorry, I've, erm—" *I've never seen someone who looked like they belonged in a painting here before.* She couldn't say that. She brushed her cool knuckles over her warm cheek in an attempt to calm her face down. *What was it about this girl?*

"Don't worry about it," the girl replied with a warm gaze that shot right through her. "I live in a neighboring village. And I'm not supposed to wander, but I'm also a book collector, so I couldn't just let this place pass by. Some risks are worth taking, you know?"

"Yeah," Annalise replied. Their conversation should have probably stopped there, but something about this girl loosened her tongue and inspired insatiable curiosity. "I'm a book collector, as well. And my family also hates when I wander, but those four walls don't provide much scope for a girl's imagination."

A tacit understanding of *'I've been searching for someone who understands me'* passed between them, and the girl gave a small but genuine smile for the first time. Annalise felt a bit like she needed to sit down.

"I'm Esther, by the way."

"*Esther.*" Annalise rolled the name on her tongue like a sweet. "I've never heard that name before—or your accent. Why doesn't it sound like mine if you're from so nearby?" Esther seemed to recede into herself as she considered her answer, and Annalise wanted to draw her back out. "You don't have to answer, I don't mean to intrude—I'm just curious is all. It's nice, your voice is."

Esther ducked her head a bit, and when she looked back up, Annalise's breath caught at the sight of her pink cheeks and slanted grin.

"You'll be here again on Sunday, right? Not that I was eavesdropping, but you have quite a loud voice. It's bold."

"Oh, thank you." Annalise blushed. "Yeah, I'll be here."

"Great. I'll see you then." Esther pulled her hood back over her head and brushed past Annalise. She turned back, halfway down the aisle, and looked between her and the Pizan book she clutched tightly in her arms. "Wait. You aren't *really* going to buy that now, are you?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah. I don't even have money on me. I was just looking."

"Good, eh..."

"Annalise."

"Good, Annalise. Save it for me, will you?" She flashed a grin before disappearing under her cloak and out from between the books before Annalise could reply.

Barty suddenly poked his head into the aisle and nodded in the direction Esther had gone off.

"You think she's one of us?" he said.

"One of us? What do you mean?"

He shrugged and ducked out of sight again.

"That's for you to figure out, and for me to pretend I'm oblivious to. Anyway, I think I'm going to close up, so either you can help me roll the manuscripts or you can run along."

"I think... I think I'm going to take a stroll through the church gardens... Clear my head."

"Suit yourself. See you on Sunday, yeah?"

The thought of Sunday now made her stomach flutter in a way she'd never felt before, but it wasn't an unpleasant feeling.

"Yeah, Sunday..."

Time never passed so slowly in Verstätten. Annalise had spent the rest of her Thursday wandering about the whole perimeter of her town, replaying her interaction in the bookshop from every angle. *The angles of Esther's cheekbones, her jawline...* Annalise tried not to think about the other girl's beauty, but her character was just as curiously magnetic.

*Isn't that how August describes me to Alexander?* No. She couldn't think that way, but she couldn't stop thinking either. The days lugged on, weighed down by her longing to speak to the other girl. A pit in her stomach told her that these progressively fantastical thoughts were sinful, antithetical to the teachings of the Church, but religion was so passive in Annalise's life that she began to wonder if she could call herself Christian at all. She'd learned some prayers from her mother when she was young, and her family threw large feasts for the less fortunate members of their town on Easter...

Religion had been more of a natural phenomena than a conscious thought until now. There hadn't been anything to question, because she wasn't aware there was anything outside the church. Now there was a girl whose eyes held a little bit of everything—colors, questions, possibilities. And Annalise had always been nothing if not stubborn and eager to learn.

"You came," Annalise said, brightening up when a familiar, cloaked figure stepped into the tucked-away aisle of Barty's shop.

"I always hold to my word." Esther's lips quirked upwards as she withdrew her hood and flashed Annalise a serene smile.

It made her stomach flutter.

Esther reached for Pizan's book on the shelf and nodded toward the end of the aisle. "Do you want to sit and read together? Since we both want the book?"

"Oh. Yes, I'd like that," Annalise agreed.

She followed Esther to the back of the aisle, feeling quite cozy between the walls, and they slid down to the floor together. Esther appeared incredibly nonchalant as she flipped open the cover, but Annalise could barely hear her start to read over the sound of her heart thumping in her ears.

"You're very mysterious, you know," she blurted out when she couldn't focus any longer. "Am I?" Esther chuckled to herself, still looking at the book.

"Absolutely. Like a geode."

"Are you calling me a rock?" Esther turned to her and quirked a brow.

"Oh—no, no, I mean, you move in the dark but really have so much light. Like a geode: a glittering treasure cloaked in obscurity."

"You think so?"

"Yeah," Annalise said, feeling a bit breathless from the grin that broke across Esther's face.

"Well... I think you're a bit of the opposite."



"You think I'm plain and dark on the inside?"

"No, Annalise, I think you're the sun."

Esther's eyes stared back into hers, lighting up their dark corner. It was like looking into the sun and knowing your eyes were going to get burnt.

The two of them met in the bookshop most days—Barty kept himself out of the way—for a month after that. Sometimes, they read. Mostly, they talked.

"I'd like to know everything about you," Annalise said, laying her head in Esther's lap while the girl ran a warm hand through her hair. Their stolen touches had quickly become ever-lingering, much like Annalise's desire.

Esther looked down at her with serenity, leaning in like the air between them whispered a secret only for them.

"What do you want to know?" she asked.

"Everything," Annalise answered.

These were some of the many geodes they cracked open. Esther was from the little village at the bottom of the hill, where her parents, four sisters, and three brothers spoke the language of Yiddish and ran a dairy farm. Annalise learned the Jewish village of Korczak was nothing like the people of Verstätten claimed it to be. There was nothing dangerous, like Alexander had said, and the more Esther described, the more Annalise realized the evil that people spoke of lived not in Esther's town but the villages around it. If people could twist Korczak's beauty into such lies, so too was it a twisted lie that it was wrong to see the beauty in how their girlish souls intertwined.

"I've never met anyone like you," Annalise said one Thursday.

They were sitting side-by-side in their corner, resting their heads against one another, with Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies*

flipped open to the end of Part III. They could finish it tomorrow, should Esther sneak out after her chores and Annalise avoid another conversation about her impending proposal. She tried not to think of August much, and it wasn't difficult, as Esther occupied all her thoughts.

"No one's ever cared to know me besides you—not that many people are allowed to. I don't know who'd murder me first—my family if I left Korczak, or the other townspeople if they found out I'm a Jew."

"Well, yes, that." Annalise chuckled and lifted her head to meet Esther's gaze. "But I mean I've never met someone who rivals the moon like you—no, not rivals. The moon would be foolish to challenge someone like you. I think, rather, you hung the moon. Esther, you *hung* the damn moon."

Annalise felt like a star watching the moon rise as Esther glowed before her and took her face between her hands.

"What would your God say if I kissed you?"

"Nothing the church says he would, I think," Annalise replied breathlessly. Esther grinned and closed the distance between them.

Annalise's very soul was flushed anew under Esther's lips' touch. She wondered if spring came early when they parted for breath, as she inhaled not the suffocating, winter air that surrounded them but a warm, tranquil breeze that dizzied her with contentment.

They stayed tangled in one another for eternity and no time at all. Annalise reluctantly pulled back to start her journey home before her parents began to worry that she'd finally run away. Sometimes she wished she did.

"Can we do this again tomorrow?" Annalise asked, offering a hand to pull Esther up from the floor.

"Do what? Read?"

Annalise scoffed light-heartedly and swiped at Esther's shoulder.

"Hey! I'm kidding, I'm kidding." She laughed. "Yes, tomorrow."

She intertwined her hand with Annalise's and leaned forward to kiss her again. Esther often called her the sun, and Annalise felt like it with the warmth that spread through her chest.

"And the day after?" Annalise asked.

"I have to be home for the first night of Passover, but I'll be back on Sunday." "Ugh, how am I supposed to sit through Church when I know you're waiting for me after?"

Esther laughed and shook her head fondly as she slipped on her cloak. "You'll survive."

"Not without *you*," she whinged.

"You're something else, *mein neshumelah*," Esther replied with a term of endearment, but Annalise had learned it meant more.

My Neshame—*my soul. You, the inextricable half of me*, Esther had really said.

"I think I love you," Annalise suddenly blurted.

The gold flakes of Esther's eyes glittered beneath her hood, and she reeled Annalise in for a last kiss that expressed more than words could capture.

"Me too," Esther said. "Thank you for everything."

Before Annalise could reply, Esther blended into the shadows and left her standing amongst the shelves with a dopey grin on lips that still felt the press of their kiss.

She took the long way home to relive the evening in her head, but as Annalise approached her house, she was overtaken by a feeling that something was not right. Neighbors were bustling about the front stoop, despite the late hour, and when she reached the door, the air was pierced by her mother's cries.

"Annalise!" Barty called from behind her. She spun around to find her friend standing anxiously with his arms wrapped around himself. He gestured her over with a jerk of his head.

"Barty, what's going on? Why are all these people here?" she asked.

"It's your brother, Thomas. He—" Barty cut himself off with a shaky breath and moved his hands to her forearms as if to steady her. "He was found dead. *Murdered*, they think." Annalise laughed. It was impossible. He had to be mistaken. "No, really. What happened?"

"Annalise..." he whispered, his tired, sad eyes piercing right through her. He wasn't joking. Annalise could have sworn her ears rang with the clanking sound of her heart hitting each individual rib as it tumbled to her stomach.

"No," she forced out through her tight lungs, her eyes welling up with tears. "You're lying. *All people do is lie*."

"Not this time," he said.

Annalise felt her knees grow weak under the weight of her heavy heart and cried out. Barty pulled her into his chest and held her tightly.

"Annalise, you have to listen to me," he said quietly into her ear. "They say it was the Jews and seek revenge. You have to find Esther and run. I've left the bookshop open, and my horse is in the barn behind the shop. Take the bag I've left on the counter and leave."

"What do you mean?" Annalise sniffled, confused by the gravity of his directions. But Barty didn't need to explain, she understood when the men of Verstatten poured out of her house, their expressions bloodthirsty and their hands gripping fiery weapons. Her father stood at the front, leading the group of men. Annalise barely recognized his gray eyes when they spotted her.

"Annalise," he boomed, "get in the house."

"Please, Father, don't do this!" she implored. "Violence won't bring Thomas back." "No, but it will bring us one step closer to wiping these bloodthirsty, satanic *Jews* from the earth for good."

"It wasn't them! Why would it be them?" she cried.

Her father's eyes blazed with fury. "You ask why they would murder your brother in cold blood? Do you not know of how these Jews seek the good blood of our Christian children for their Pass-



over matzos? How they tortured your brother with all the torture by which they tortured our Lord?"

*Lies. Lies. All people do is lie*, Annalise thought, but she could not say as much, as the men cried their agreement and began to march down the tall hill toward Korczak. Annalise tried to charge forward and stop her father, but he pushed her backward to the ground.

"Annalise, be a lady for once in your *life* and stay silent at home with your mother," he snapped, leaving her on the road, muddy from the melted snow. He marched forth with the village men. She watched helplessly as the dozens of blazing pitchforks and sharp knives grew smaller in the distance.

She had to find Esther, and there had to be another way to Korczak. *How did Esther get to the bookshop every day?* There had to be a back route, and she had to find it quick. Annalise found strength she did not have to pull herself off the ground and grabbed Barty's hand to pull him with her back to the bookshop.

"Grab the horse, and I'll grab the bag. We're finding another way to Korczak," she ordered.

Barty gave her a hand onto the horse saddle, and they rode into the woods, looking for any sign of a trail.

"Barty! *Look!* Her footprints!" Annalise gasped, pointing to the shoe imprints in the mud. Barty flicked the horse's reins and charged forth in their race against time. They followed the footprints through the woods until the blazing village glowed through the trees. Annalise tightened her grasp around Barty's middle and closed her eyes in prayer. She'd always heard how those who stray from the Church find piety in peril. When they broke through the clearing and brought the horse to a stop, they were met with eerie silence. Only the crackling of dying flames filled the air.

"Annalise... I think we're too late..." Barty whispered.

"No, *no*, we can't be. She must be hiding," Annalise protested, dismounting the horse and beginning to search for a dairy farm amidst the rubble.

If Esther was truly gone, Annalise would have known. The world would stop, A star would die, and the moon would not rise, and *she would have felt it*.

"Esther!" Annalise called out, thinking maybe she couldn't hear Esther's reply from the sound of her heart beating in her ears. "Barty, help me. *Esther*—! Esther, it's me!" She walked through the silent center of town searching for the other half of her soul when she saw the first body.

A young boy with red hair who could be older than Thomas lay motionless on the ground, impaled by a knife Esther recognized from a neighbor's kitchen. Not far ahead of him were three more slain. Annalise was overcome with dizziness and felt like she was going to be sick.

Her tunnel vision from her determination to find Esther widened, and she became aware of the mass grave she was standing in. A whole village was viciously wiped out by her own in the name of her gentle, sweet brother. She stumbled into a wall to catch herself as she turned out her stomach.

"Annalise! Come quick!" Barty shouted from somewhere behind her.

She followed the sound of his voice through the town square, weaving through the carnage.

The first thing she noticed was the slain dairy cows in the front yard, the second thing was the heavy silence. It crushed her in every direction and whisked the air out of her lungs as she pulled herself through the gates to the little house.

The door dangled from its hinges like a cruel invitation, and Annalise stepped inside to find Barty pale as the girl on the floor. There was sorry life behind his eyes, unlike the blank hazel gazing up at nothing.

Esther's eyes still had a bit of everything—colors, questions, and possibilities. Only the questions would never be answered and the possibilities would never be known. Esther was dead, and Annalise fell to her knees as her whole world fell apart.

Annalise couldn't remember anything but Esther's cold hands that night in the following weeks. She didn't know how she got home from Korczak, but she didn't care much either. She didn't care about anything anymore.

Annalise stood blankly by her mother as Alexander and her father lowered Thomas' casket into the ground, and yet she still set his seat at the table like he'd burst through the door and whinge about when supper was.

Alexander had returned from university with August, and Annalise had no fight left to give when her mother packed her books in her trunk and her father sent them off to Italy with wedding bands.

"She'd want you to have this," Barty had said at her handoff as he placed her and Esther's copy of Pizan's book in her tired arms.

Annalise had hugged it the whole way to Venice.

August procured a house as luxurious as his lineage and physician status permitted. They had a waterfront view, but Annalise had stopped looking out windows a long time ago. In the Spring, they married, where she'd told the priest yes with her voice but not with her heart.

Sometimes she wondered if August noticed, but he never seemed to look deeper than her beauty.

Annalise bore five sons over a decade. She named her oldest Thomas, and her youngest Mordecai. She'd barely clung to life during Mordecai's delivery, and the midwives told her husband it was due to her lack of will.

She lived perpetually prone to illness after that, and the children became used to the city's beguines frequenting their house to care for her.

*The Book of the City of Ladies* piled twenty-five years of dust on a shelf until a buoyant beguine named Mary—who reminded Annalise of her young, late self—plucked the book curiously off her bedroom shelf.

"*Christine de Pizan*—That's a woman's name, isn't it?" she asked.

Annalise smiled with melancholy from where she was sitting

up in bed. "It is. A published author of our sex—who would have thought? I often dreamed of writing like her in my youth."

"It's never too late to start," Mary said, like ambition came naturally, like Annalise might have said, too, at seventeen.

"No, no. I don't think I could." Annalise lightly turned her down, despite a piqued curiosity she hadn't felt in years bubbling within her.

Mary must have noticed, because she lit up and said, "Wait here!"—as if Annalise could go anywhere—and ran out of the room.

She returned a few minutes later with a quill, ink, and parchment, and organized it all on a bed tray for her.

"What's your story, Mrs. Rosier?" she asked.

When Annalise dipped her quill and drew the first words across the page, she felt as though she existed beyond measure. She felt as though Esther's lips still lingered on hers in the bookshop between eternity and no time at all.

*With every minute that passed, I paid less attention to my father rambling off about my suitor and more attention to the tiny figures out the window, moving like ants in the village at the bottom of the hill...*

# FERTILITY: THE GREATEST EVIL

AVA BARNES

The predictable pit-a-pat against an acrylic floor does little to calm my nerves as I sit, goosebumps pulling at my skin. They rise from my knees and travel outward at a constant speed. Soon prickling up through the hair on my shins and over my shoulders. I shiver, unmoved by the steam creeping through the curtain, while my left leg bounces up and down to a rhythm I cannot place. Frozen icicles, I somehow recall as arms, wrap tight around my body and fingers prod at my torso. Nails press crescents into the fat of my back while thumbs rub soothing circles that do not fulfill their purpose. I close my eyes and push my head to my chest, feeling how the skin bunches under my chin—it's uncomfortable and restricts my breathing. My head tilts upward in complete opposition as my eyes flutter open. The room is in a fog and the water's too hot to touch. (I find it hard to regret my waste when I don't pay bills.) My mother always told me steam could clear your sinuses, but the humidity does nothing for my seasonal allergies; instead, forming beads of sweat on my scalp to keep company my trembles and sighs. I cross and uncross my legs, feeling the unbearable crushing weight of my thighs as they stick against themselves and the seat of the latrine. I can't tell whether the pooling is my perspiration or a collection of moisture from the hot shower.

I decide to get up, but the familiar pit at the bottom of my stomach forces me down. Forces my legs to buckle beneath, and my body to land with an unsatisfying *thump* back down onto the grungy seat. I feel unusually vulnerable even if I am alone. Sitting,

completely exposed. My modesty only preserved by the fact that my legs expand when I sit and hide my vulva from prying eyes. I arch my feet to coax myself into a more comfortable position—forepaws pushing deep into the ground as a stable, rootlike base. One that might help release the lump beneath my naval and thrust it into the still water. I lean forward, gently rocking to conjure happy memories of boats. Of sleeping above my sister on a bunk bed, comforted by the gentle rocking of the Caribbean sea. I move slowly, singing to myself. Rather than gentle hymns, I sing melodies often repeated over acoustic guitars: of gardenias and masochists and red right ankles. I self-soothe and breathe deeply, in through my nose and out through whichever orifice feels most comfortable. Still rocking and sighing and praying for a release. The bubble grows larger and larger until I'm sure it's visible to the naked eye. But my eyes remain shut as I lull it to bed with my song. Sleep, my darling. Let me bathe in peace. Let me refresh and cleanse myself of worldly troubles. Remain calm. I am calm.

My bubble does not calm. It expands and deflates persistently and with alarming speed. Keeping me guessing with its unpredictability. I cease my rocking, feeling the pain take control of my body. It keeps me upright and claws at my spine until pale scratches form on skin no one will ever see. My voice gives out, filling the hollow room with quiet only interrupted by a continuous fall of water droplets. I want to give up. *I want this stupid thing out of my body!* Though I no longer shiver and hairs no longer rise with pimples, I beg for the sweet release of the rain. The symbology of rinsing my body and literally wiping away everything dirty and freakish. I will be a new woman. A better woman.

So I open my eyes. My hand meets my leg with a soft tap that echoes for more seconds than intended and blood rushes to the recipient of my blow. Pins and needles dance through my ankle and up the back of my calf. I crush my lip between teeth in pain, knowing I inflicted this upon myself. Bouncing my limb up and down so the blood moves faster, silently invoking spirits to put me out of my

misery. It eventually abates, and I muster the strength to stand. My arms untangle from the space below my ribs, and the muscles in my legs ache as they labor. Soft, red marks surround the skin where I sat. Collecting on the backs of my thighs as proof of my sedentary stint.

I take a turn around my body as a drop of liquid touches my knee. Though no one sees, I blush like a schoolchild and instinctively want my mother. The muscles in my face more than relax, as they practically fall off my face and drip sadly down my skull like chocolate in the sun. I know exactly what has happened, what with my utter lack of self-control. My lack of awareness from my body. During yoga nidra, they advise you to scan your body and relax each muscle individually. In coercing the bubble from within, I obviously and accidentally relaxed my bladder as well. Whoops. I look down at the linoleum, envisioning an endless puddle that spreads until it has contaminated every surface on the bathroom floor. But the ground is dry, pristine even. So perhaps I imagined it. Perhaps water leaped from the small space between the curtain and the wall and landed on my inner thigh at the perfect time... or perhaps not.

I really love eggs. And, especially, I love cracking eggs. I love pressing my thumbs into the shell and feeling the whites slide between my fingertips; the fluidity forcing them apart. No matter how hard I press, there is always something to prevent skin from touching skin, and I am mesmerized. Playing with egg white remnants as kids play with slime. Squishing and pulling and stretching to its absolute limit. At least, until it eventually snaps and leaves goo dripping down my hand and onto the kitchen counter.

There are egg whites on me. A long string stretching from between my legs to the top of my bruised knees. Defying gravity in all of its trickling glory. I want to touch it, but more so, I want to remain still. So still that I may admire the functions of my body as art. The bubble no longer exists. I've located the bubble. I'm staring at the bubble. It's pale white and smooth. Resembling Spider-Man's webs with a similar stretch, similar stick, and similar scent, I imag-

ine. I blink a few times before dipping my finger down to press against the tail. To swipe a bit for myself and regain control. It releases easily and sticks to my hand like it needs me to survive. I pull toward my face, testing for elasticity and typical feminine pliability. The substance increases in translucidity the more I tug. Perfect scores across the board.

But within seconds, I change from fascinated to abhorred. Now feeling its texture, I jump. Ashamed, though not sure why. I am not the first woman, nor am I the last, to expel egg whites from between their legs. Still, I feel the shame. Menstruation is old hat. Where a bit of blood on the sofa or a red spot on my skirt means nothing, the cottage cheese on my towel sparks revulsion. I cup my hand beneath myself and waddle, cheeks and forehead burning with the rush of embarrassed blood. My hand reaches for soft, white paper and anxiously grasps until I've enough to dress a mummy for Halloween. I fold it six or seven times into a rectangle and wipe. Taking care of my womanly problems and forcing the egg whites down pipes for eternity. Before I flush, I lean close and peer into the watery basin. That's mine. My unfertilized child, encased in milky white and floating to the top. There is nothing but disgust as I flush. And I suddenly remember I am destroying the environment as the drain in the shower gurgles for more.

I step through the curtains and feel red-hot liquid hit the back of my neck. It stings in a way that I believe will burn off my top layer of skin and create a new person. I stare forward at the institutional white walls faintly reflecting the shadows of my body. Water slides down my back and legs. My shoulders slowly lose their tension as the thought of eggs leave my mind. My arms snake around my body and find familiar resting places in the collections of fat along my sides. I wrap around myself a security blanket from the storm of ovulation. My eyelids fall and the ever-present body aches rear their ugly heads. I want to sleep. If the space was bigger, I'd lay my body across the floor and press my shoulder muscles deeply into the earth. Feeling the bones crack out of place, ready for hibernation.

But the water continues to spill over me and turn my skin colors I'd fear seeing on others. I remain eerily still and the songs come back to me. The senseless lullabies that coaxed out my baby the first time around. My voice reverberates in the space around me and, for a moment, I am the light of the world. My tongue tells stories of love and loss and other things I have never experienced for myself. And the universe turns on my whims.

But I struggle to keep composure between notes. I am attacked by the familiar rasp of my throat giving up, the succumbing to embarrassment as I cry out with no sound. My body spasms from the fact of my overreaction, and I turn my face toward the stream. Letting its endless beating drown any tears or snot I may expel. I run my palms over my face, fingertips touching the mucus released from my nostril. Rubbing fingers together but refusing to let the water take it. I squeeze and shift and slide and think: egg whites, egg whites, egg whites. Everything reminds me of my body and its functions. Functions that force me to scream and cry and laugh and sing at odd intervals of my month without explanation.

From this moment on, I shall only converse with other women. They will see my tired eyes and weakened appearance, bloated stomach, and rancid skin. They will ask me what is wrong... but know the answer without an utterance from me. For all roads lead back to egg whites.

## RUINED BY THE PURPLE HOUSE

ISRAEL SIQUEIRA

It had been two days since he stole my cap. Engraved on my mind was a sharp sting and his bitter words, "Lost it, partner," as he stepped off the bus. The cap was a gift: a deep, worn-leather brown, handmade by my grandfather and given to me when I turned eighteen last year. Stitched on the inside of the brim were my grandfather's initials; at least that's what my dad and I believed. It was hard to tell since, by now, it looked more like a Chinese character.

I knew the thief's routine well from taking the bus to work each week. I expected him to enter the A22 on Frederick Avenue at 4:15 and get off near the watch shop on Edgewood Road that Friday. Afraid he might recognize me, I took a seat at the very back of the half-full bus, pulling my hoodie low over my face. Around me, old men leaned on the windows, their heads nodding with the sway of the bus, oblivious to the world outside. Then, he appeared. The stranger climbed onto the bus, tall and skinny, with a faded concert shirt from the '90s, black jeans, worn boots, and oversized sunglasses that obscured his eyes. He glanced over the seats and, seeing none empty, turned back towards the door and gripped the bar above him. His freckled hands, squared nose, and scruffy beard made my blood simmer. I sank lower in my seat, tightening my grip on the hard plastic armrest, willing myself to memorize his every detail. Where did he live? How did he open his doors? How did he eat his meals? I wanted to know so I could burn it down.

I followed him that foggy afternoon, each step filling me with smoldering resentment. I trailed behind him, blending into the



haze, as he led me through a desolate, quiet neighborhood. The sky was a bleak, washed-out gray, casting the scattered houses in a sickly light, except for the concrete walls and metal gates that had sizes proportional to the size of the houses: tall for the large ones, short for the small ones. Most of the houses had an electric fence of some kind. That was not the case for his house. A purple shack or it used to be. Much of the paint had faded off, exposing the dark, rotting hardwood that made up the exterior walls and, as I would find out the next day, the internal walls, too. A short gate barely guarded the driveway. I wondered how a man so poor could be bold enough to take something that didn't belong to him. I watched from behind a tree as he pushed the gate open, fumbled for a single key, and disappeared inside. For a moment, my anger ebbed, replaced by something heavier. I wanted him to feel what I had felt when he stole from me—the sharp sting of injustice.

The following morning, my chest was in flames, feeding on my anticipation, leaving behind only ashes of resentment. My dad's voice drifted up from the kitchen, singing as he fried eggs. I went downstairs quickly, my mind somewhere else entirely.

"Where are you going?" he asked, his voice soft over the sound of the sizzling pan.

"I forgot my textbook at the store," I mumbled.

"Can't you get it after breakfast?"

I hesitated, then put my shoes back and stretched out in a patch of sunlight on the living room carpet, feigning patience. The smell of fresh bacon almost made me forget the burning in my chest. My dad placed two plates on the table. My empty stomach curled in on itself like a dying slug, his slow smile a small comfort.

"It's ready, John," he said.

I got up, losing my balance as my eyes adjusted to the orange sunrise that warmed the floor, sparkling through the window and onto my plate. I sat in front of him. His eyes danced around the room, an innocent smile on his face and still moving his shoulders as if the song in his head had never stopped playing. He took a bite

of his bagel and gazed towards the shiny orange light, squinting his eyes.

"I have to see my doctor Monday morning, and I need you to open the shop for me. Can you do that?" he said, going for his second bite.

"Sure, Dad," I said.

"I hope to be there before noon," he said. "There is a new box of watches that needs to be displayed, Hamilton, I think."

"Okay," I said without looking up.

The food, the light, his unconscious smile was a kind of mirage, thin like paper, unfolding before me like an origami. What was real was somewhere else entirely, somewhere my chest wished to be, somewhere in that purple house. My dad was still halfway through his meal when I finished mine. He had always been slow. I took my plate to the sink and washed the bacon grease off my fingers.

"Are you going to church today?" he said after a while.

"I don't know," I said, avoiding his eyes.

"Some of your friends are being baptized."

"I know," I said, pulling on my backpack and heading for the door.

Outside, the sky was a clear, endless blue, as vivid as the ocean. In our yard stood a gray shed, where my dad liked to spend weekends organizing screws and tools. I unlocked it, grabbing a two-liter Coke bottle filled with gasoline. I stuffed it into my backpack, rearranging my books to balance the weight, and headed back to the bus stop.

Forty minutes later, I found myself on that dirt road again; the houses clearer now in the daylight. The air was silent, save for the crunch of gravel under my feet and distant laughter from two kids playing soccer. As I passed them, they paused, watching me with an odd intensity. Their awareness penetrated me, as though every aspect of myself was handed to them, exposing way beyond what could possibly be known to me. I kept walking with my head down, hands inside my front pockets, feeling paradoxically vulnerable.

Five gates later, I stood beside the tree where I once saw the stranger enter their house. The front windows were shut, thin curtains drawn tightly. The lock on the gate was flimsy—just a bicycle lock. I glanced back at the kids, then hauled myself over the gate, landing silently in the tall, itchy grass. The wooden planks of the house were worse up close, splintering and warped. Moving toward the back, I hugged the narrow space along the concrete wall, the smell of gasoline heavy in my bag.

Finally, hidden from sight, I lowered my backpack and took out the Coke bottle. My fingers trembled as I unscrewed the cap. I poured gasoline along the base of the wall, watching as the dark liquid soaked into the wood. The pungent smell filled the air, intoxicating and foreboding. My hand hovered over the lighter in my pocket, my heartbeat echoing in my ears.

But then—a cry: faint, muffled, from somewhere inside.

I froze, lighter in hand, my chest tightening as the sound sliced through the haze of my anger. It was the cry of a baby. I stood there, paralyzed, as another sound joined it: a woman's soft voice, quieting and comforting.

I backed away, feeling sick, glancing up at a window where thin white sheets fluttered in the breeze. Inside, I caught a glimpse of a small, bare room. No toys, no colorful decorations. Just a broken, wooden crib. A photo hung crookedly on the wall: the thief, his wife, their child.

I couldn't move. At that moment, the flimsy walls of the purple house became more than just wood and nails. I couldn't go through with it. I turned and ran, scaling the gate and landing on the other side, gasping for breath.

As I straightened, I heard a shout, "Hey! Who are you?"

A man was running towards me, bags forgotten on the curb, eyes wild with confusion. I didn't wait to find out if it was him. I sprinted down the road, heart pounding until the sound of his footsteps faded. That night, I lay in my room, staring at the ceiling, my body still vibrating with adrenaline. I couldn't face him again. I couldn't go through with my plan. The cap wasn't worth it.

The next morning, I woke to an empty house. My dad had left a note with a key on the table.

*Son, please don't forget to lock the door.*

*Here are the keys to the shop. Be on time.*

*I'm curious how you got in without them yesterday.*

I felt a pang of guilt, pushing my bike out the door. It was 10:20 when I turned the corner of Edgewood Road. Red and blue lights flashed and spun about half a mile away. I could see police cars and an ambulance not far from our store. As always, tragedy still seemed so far away. As the lights grew, so did my curiosity. A crowd stood behind cones, and officers in black suits told everyone to leave. I leaned my bike on a light pole by a man who stood smoking a cigarette.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Heart attack, I think. Right outside the shop."

A chill ran through me. I spotted an officer removing some cones on the sidewalk.

"Are you John?" he asked.

"Yes sir," I whispered.

"Your father was holding this tight when we found him. I'm very sorry."

It was my brown cap. The leather felt rough under my thumb as I held it by the brim. The sky opened up. The ocean blue poured down, blurred by my charged tears, washing away everything—all the flames that had once burned so brightly inside me.

# THE ORCHARD

MADLYNN ROWE

“What’s your favorite fruit?”

“Hmm. Well, I think it’s got to be peaches. There is just something about that fuzzy flesh and sweet, juicy pulp.” Aaron’s mouth waters at the very thought of it. “I could eat a truck full of them in one sitting. Honest.”

A lyrical giggle escapes Juniper, “You’re a funny one. I have never met a human with such silly words.” She pauses for a moment, gazing out over the crystal lake. She nods her head, a silent affirmation to herself and turns towards Aaron with an excited look. “Well, if you love peaches so much, I can get you some. Follow me!” She takes off running towards the forest with incredible grace, as if she were gliding through the tall grass. Her short, slender form quickly gains distance, and her flowing, gauzy, white dress trails behind her along with her silky auburn hair.

A great smile splays across Aaron’s face. Her beauty is something he never could have dreamed of. Her big round eyes, the color of the warmest ale, are surrounded by long lashes that kiss her cheeks. Her pink, plump lips form the most breathtaking smile anyone has ever seen. She looks human, but an impossibly perfect version. The only thing that reminds him that she is far from mortal, is her heart. It shines ablaze in a golden hue through her chest, illuminating her features with an ethereal glow.

“Wait up!” he shouts playfully as he takes off after her. He pumps his strong legs, sending each bare foot into the pillowy grass to close the distance. Great, swaying willow trees and fragrant flowers of every kind blur past him in bursts of color as he catches up.

Juniper comes to a smooth stop at the tree line, turning around to face Aaron with a beaming, toothy grin. He finally meets her, coming to a skidding stop as he sucks in deep breaths.

“My god you’re quick,” he breathes out, brushing his sweaty brown hair away from his face.

For a moment, they are quiet. Only the sounds of rustling nature and Aaron’s slowing breaths can be heard. Juniper bounces back and forth on the balls of her feet, switching her gaze between Aaron and the forest. “Come! It is just through here,” she says as she grabs his hand and pulls him into the brush.

Her cool, slender fingers entwined in his send soothing waves up his arm and through the rest of his body. Euphoria grasps him, and a hearty laugh bubbles up out of him. He lets her lead. She navigates easily between the dense thickets. She swiftly avoids upturned roots and hidden holes and guides Aaron as he clumsily follows behind. They reach a clearing quickly, revealing an endless orchard. Rows and rows of great fruit trees of every kind imaginable fill the clearing with color. Juicy purple figs, bursting shiny pomegranates, perfectly round red apples, and soft, pink peaches litter the canopy of intertwined branches. It was as if the trees were all connected, breathing and sighing with one another.

Juniper gently drops Aaron’s hand and skips over to a peach tree. She reaches a cupped hand towards the lush plant, and a branch full of ripe fruit dips down to meet her. She carefully plucks a peach, and the fruit gives away with a soft pop. She walks back over to Aaron, cradling it towards her blazing heart gently in her hands.

“Here is your peach,” she says sweetly as she takes his hand and places the plump fruit in his palm. The glow of her heart extends its radiance into the peach. Even in Aaron’s mortal hands, the fruit emanates the loving shine of Juniper’s heart.

Aaron looks at the peach, then to her glowing heart, and then finally rests his eyes upon her welcoming face. Breathless, he says, “I don’t even know what to say.” He looks incredulously at his surroundings, then back to her. “Thank you.”



Juniper doubles over in a fit of flitting giggles, “You are most welcome, funny human!”

Aaron scrunches his features in confusion. “Funny? How was I funny just then?”

Juniper plops down on the soft grass and peers up at him. “You were simply raving about peaches earlier, and now, you seem to have lost your words.” She leans over and pats the grass beside his feet. “Here, sit. It looks like you’re about to fall over.”

Aaron obeys. Still holding the glowing peach, he comes to a seated position across from Juniper. “You know, I’m still trying to get used to the fact that this land is actually magic,” he says as he rolls the peach from palm to palm. “I am sitting across from the most beautiful woman I have ever met, in a magical oasis on a mountain, in an orchard with fruit that has no business looking so perfect. This is a lot to take in.”

Juniper leans over and rests a cool hand on his knee. “You will come to know my magic very well, human.” Gesturing towards the orchard she says, “I have been carefully cultivating and collecting seeds for this orchard for hundreds of years. Every blade of grass, every bumbling bee, and every piece of fruit in this land is kept alive by my magic.”

Aaron looks down to the fuzzy fruit in his hands, shivering at the thought of how just days ago he was fumbling through a chilling blizzard before he stumbled into her land full of spring. Clearing his throat he says, “What even is this place? I’ve been so wrapped up in the impossibility of it all that I never thought to ask.”

Juniper runs her hands through the grass as she looks towards the orchard. “There are very few who dare to climb this mountain. My land is a refuge to anyone with the strength and bravery to make it this far up.” She turns to look at Aaron’s strong features. “Before I came here, so many young lives were lost to the endless winter here. I just could not stand seeing all those wasted souls.”

Aaron could not shake the feeling of being chilled to the bone in the whiteout conditions that had suddenly rolled in on the mountain. He thought he was prepared enough to make it to the

summit. He was sure he was going to come back home, bragging to his friends how he summited the mountain without any trouble. A deep, ugly feeling seeps into his bones as his failure courses through him. Gravely, Aaron says, “Well, I was half dead when I came stumbling in. That damn storm came out of nowhere. I mean, yeah it was snowy before, but it was nothing I couldn’t handle.” He shakes his head as bitterness nestles deep into his chest. “I guess I’m glad you saved me from that shit show.”

Juniper smiles sadly, “As am I. A nice human such as yourself did not deserve to perish in such a youthful state.” She pauses as she inspects his troubled features. “Now, enough of the past. Please accept a piece of my heart and eat your peach. It would be a shame to let such a fruit go to waste.”

Aaron is pulled from his self-loathing as he shifts his focus to the plump fruit in his palm. He looks to Juniper’s heart, then down to the fruit in his hands. “A piece of your heart?”

“Any fruit I pick receives a tiny sliver of my heart. They are greedy little things. The life I gave them is never enough, I suppose.”

The normalcy in which she speaks throws Aaron, “I see.” He pauses. “Wait. So, I’m eating some of your heart? I don’t know if that’s a good idea.” He extends the peach towards her.

Hurt flashes in her eyes, and she gently pushes his hand away. “No, no. You aren’t eating a chunk of muscle and valves like your human heart,” she says as she places one hand on his chest, and the other on her own. “You see, my heart is magic itself. I am offering it to you as a custom to welcome you officially to my land. Once eaten you will feel the very beat of nature. Each breath it takes. Each exhale will resonate within you.”

“So, I will feel all of your nature, and you? Will we be connected?”

“Yes! It is a wonderful feeling, connection.”

Smiling, he brings the peach to his nose, and the fragrant, fruity scent fills his lungs. His failure to climb the mountain fades into the depths of his mind as he exhales. “This must be some peach if it does all of the things you say it does. Thank you. I’ll do my best to savor it.”

Juniper watches his mouth eagerly as he sinks his teeth into the soft, glowing skin. The flesh hits his tongue with an explosion of sweetness and tartness. Juice spills over the side of his mouth, dripping onto his pants. He gulps down the juice, flesh and all, and quickly devours the peach bite after bite. Warmth spreads throughout him as the fruit hits his stomach. Too soon, only a pulpy, glowing pit remains, which he eagerly gnaws on to get every last bit.

Wiping his mouth he says, "That is undoubtedly the best peach I've ever had. Back home, the peaches might as well be mushy cardboard."

A quizzical expression falls on Juniper's soft features. "Cardboard? I have never heard of such a thing."

"Oh, uh, it's basically really thick paper? Anyways it's not important. That peach was ridiculously good."

A beaming, perfect smile consumes the immortal's face. "I am so pleased to hear this. Now, place your hand upon my heart, close your eyes, and feel."

Glancing towards her glowing chest, moving his hand towards her, he hesitates. "Are you sure?"

Taking his hand and placing it over her heart she says, "Yes. Now feel the land."

Closing his eyes, he focuses on the gentle beat of her heart. Slowly, the ground starts to buzz and hum beneath him. He notices the wind start to breathe with the two of them. The rustle of the trees practically sing in an orchestra of leaves. Everything around him comes to life. His very being swells with love for this land and for Juniper, and any negative thought became a mere whisper in his mind. He removes his hand from her heart and opens his eyes. Her lovely brown orbs meet his watery blues.

"You are beyond beautiful, Juniper!" Aaron jumps up, looking at the beauty of the orchard. Everything around him is shimmering and moving in an explosion of vibrant color. He whirls around, trying to take in everything. "I can feel your heart everywhere around us!"

A soft laugh escapes her, "There go your funny words, human." Abruptly, she stands up and steadies Aaron with a firm grip on his shoulders. "Now, give me the pit so that I might plant it and grow another."

In his drunken haze, he obediently hands it over and watches as she expertly digs a hole with her hands in the soft dirt next to the peach tree, continuing the neat row. She places the glowing pit in the hole, leaving it uncovered, and walks back over to Aaron.

"Let's start heading back, it will be dark soon."

"Wait, but can't we walk the orchards for a bit longer? It's just that everything is sparkling and perfect and I would love another peach and you're so beautiful and—"

Juniper cups his face in her slender palm. "No, sweet human. You can only eat one fruit a full moon. Although such a small piece was taken, my heart needs recovery before I can pick another."

"What if I just pick one instead?" He moves expectantly towards the peach tree. "That way your heart will not be affected, and everything will be okay!"

"That is not possible," she says sternly as she catches his arm before he can walk away. "Only I, the maker of this land, can pick the fruit from those trees. The balance of this land is a fragile thing. Now, come. It is time to head back." With a tone of finality, Juniper takes his hand and leads him back towards the lake, where her dwelling is situated.

Aaron looks back towards the fruit trees in his blissful state, still tasting the vibrant peach on his sticky lips. An itching desire for more fruit presses down on his chest. Reluctantly accepting her words, he follows her back. Hand in hand they walk home along to the beat of the land.

Back in her dwelling, a cozy hole in the side of a grassy hill, Juniper and Aaron turn in for the night. Her home has two main rooms, where warm, glowing berry vines illuminate the room in a soft light. Small sachets, stuffed with clove and cinnamon, are stashed throughout the place, filling the air with spicy warmth. The softly

packed dirt is littered with weaved, colorful carpets. And there is a round, soft-looking bed piled with pillows situated towards the back of the room. Off to the side, a small hole in the wall leads to another room where Aaron is staying.

Freshly bathed, clothed, and fed, Aaron lays on his bed, restlessly reminiscing on the day's events. With Juniper turned in for the night, he is left alone in his small room. His connection with the land has dulled; now it is only a faint pulse within him. In its place, ugly hatred for himself infects every thought. He feels himself back in the blizzard—his toes numb from frostbite, hunger ripping at his insides, and the cold, dark dread of death looming with every step. His pride did not allow him to turn back. He couldn't. Turning back without reaching the summit would be as good as being dead.

He could not stop thinking about how stumbling upon this land was a blessing and a curse. He was lucky that the owner was a beautiful immortal woman with a blazing and kind heart, but by being saved by Juniper, he had failed to accomplish surviving on his own. His swirling shame mingled with the itching need to get another taste of the peach. The vibrance of the world and complete bliss he felt as he sat with Juniper is now only a distant memory. It tugs on his bones, leaving a deep ache in his resting form.

He turns restlessly in bed, unable to find comfort in the pillowy linens. Quieting his mind seems a near impossibility as thoughts of Juniper's power overwhelm him, and the summit of the mountain taunts him. The longing for the fruit and for the forgetful bliss becomes too much. He slowly tiptoes out of Juniper's dwelling, pausing to watch her beautiful form rise and fall with her breathing peacefully asleep in her bed. He meets the crisp, night air and is greeted with a strong gust of wind. A chill runs through him, but that does not stop him from running off towards the forest.

By the time he reaches the clearing to the orchard, he is a dirty, leafy mess. His knees are bruised and covered in mud from his falls, and his palms are scraped and red. Aaron brushes off as much grime as he can from his clothes and inspects the cuts on his hands for any

debris. Satisfied, he heads towards the orchard, but with only the light of the moon to guide him, finding a peach tree is difficult.

He walks up to the tree closest to him touching the bark with a firm grip in greeting. The trees seem to shake in unison at his touch, and fruity scents fill the air. Looking up, he can only discern round blobs. The moonlight cannot reach under the leaves, and all the fruits are in shadow. "Dammit. Where are the peach trees?" He quickly walks from tree to tree, trying to tell the difference between each one.

The shaking of the trees seems to intensify, and a strong wind sends fragrant air swirling around him. He catches the scent of the delightful fruit, which sends his heart into a pounding frenzy. He runs blindly toward the direction of the smell within the maze of shivering trees until he comes upon one sitting still as stone. The ground is vibrating under his bare feet, and the blood in his veins is coursing so strongly he feels faint. Looking up at the still tree in the sea of moving ones, he cannot tell which fruit it is by sight. However, it has a strange pull, and he knows this has to be a peach tree.

Remembering how Juniper stretched a hand out to the tree and how it met her with fruit, he does the same. He waits impatiently for one, but it never comes. Frustrated, he begins to climb, finding whatever purchase he can in the form of small branches and knots. The bark digs into his skin, but he can find little care with the distance closing. Finally reaching the lowest hanging fruit, he braces himself between a split in the thick trunk and reaches for a peach. With the plump fruit cradled in his hand, he pulls with a great amount of strength. The tree seems to be holding on to the fruit as hard as it can. His muscles tense as he wrestles with the tree. The branch bends towards him, as the stem holds fast to the fruit. Realizing brawn will not win this battle, Aaron holds onto the branch, and in his other hand he twists the peach until the stem can no longer hold on. It releases with a snap and in response, the tree starts to shudder. He painstakingly climbs and twists four more peaches from their branches and cradles them in his shirt.

A giddy laugh bubbles up from his chest as he desperately climbs back down the shaking tree to the soft ground. He quickly inspects the fruit as his heart pounds in anticipation. They are indeed as plump and fragrant as the last one he had. Although, the beautiful glow Juniper imparted on his first peach is absent with these. Slightly disappointed, but not surprised, he eagerly bites down into the soft fruit, ready to fall into ignorant bliss. He is completely absorbed by the peach. Each bite sends him further into euphoria, and each swallow surrounds his senses in the cloying scent and taste. He devours every last bite until the pit is completely bare of any pulp. He quickly moves on to the other peaches, barely breathing until every pit is clean. The aftermath of his binging leaves his stomach distended and achy with fruit, and his fingers and face sticky with juice.

A deep pang in his stomach removes him from his euphoric, drunken haze. A sharp throb begins to spread throughout his whole body. It consumes his limbs, his head, his heart, and everything in between until he is a writhing, screaming mess on the ground. It is as if he is being eaten from the inside out. He roils and turns, trying to quell the pain for what seems like hours, until a lyrical voice greets him.

"I told you not to eat anymore until the next moon, Aaron." She crouches down with a sorrowful expression and rests a cool hand upon his sweaty forehead. "I thought maybe you would listen. You seemed different. Kinder."

The cold hand distracts him a little from the pain. With labored breathing he says, "I couldn't resist. You gave me a taste of fruit and life so beyond anything I've ever known. The beating of your land in my bones and the taste of that fruit was better than anything good in life I've ever had." He weakly reaches up and places his hand upon her glowing heart. "Denying me that is worse than death."

Juniper dryly laughs, while a resigned expression falls onto her face, "Yes, that is what most of you say, although not so eloquently spoken." She removes his hand from her heart. "But that fruit was not yours to take."

Panic floods his system at her response. "Most of us?"

"Yes. Everyone always ends up stealing my fruit," she says as she stands up. "If only you had waited patiently. You know, I did tell you my heart needed to heal before picking another fruit. Did I not?"

A brick of shame sinks into his pained stomach. "I'm sorry. I was an idiot." Aaron weakly tries to sit up, but another wave of knives assaults his body. Through gritted teeth he says, "Please just make this pain stop. I can't take it anymore."

With that, Juniper picks up Aaron as if he were a feather. "You lot always moan and complain. Yes, yes, hush. I will make you all better."

Aaron weakly rests in Juniper's arms as they walk underneath the shaking trees in the orchard. The night breeze is a small reprieve to the hot pain coursing through him, and her cool arms send soothing waves through his body. Juniper slows and gently places him on the soft dirt next to the glowing hole she dug earlier in the day. She gently removes the shimmering pit from the hole and brushes off any clinging dirt.

"Here. You must swallow this pit. It will take all the pain away, and you will be healthier than you have ever been." She gently presses the pit to his lips.

Tears sting the corner of Aaron's eyes. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean—I didn't think. I just wanted to feel good again. How could you be so kind to me after this?"

She gently blots the tears away and soothes him, "I know you didn't mean to. You neglected to consider your actions. I understand. I just will not let that happen again. Come now, swallow the pit and we can talk when you are better."

"Alright," he says as he snuffles. "Thank you." Aaron opens his mouth and accepts the pit. Juniper conjures water into her palms and slowly funnels it into his mouth. He gulps down the pit and quickly the pain in his body silences, and he is flooded with a gentle numbness that releases a contented sigh from him.

"There you go. That's better, isn't it?"

Aaron hoists himself up on his elbows, coming face to face with Juniper. "Yes. Thank you so much. I couldn't take that pain anymore. I'm so—"

A buzzing warmth suddenly begins to spread throughout his body, starting in his chest. They both look down to his heart where, through his shirt, a warm glow is brightening.

"What the hell? What is this?"

"Just wait. It will be over soon," Juniper smiles and places a gentle kiss on his cheek. "Thank you for all you will provide."

"Wait, wh—"

With that, Aaron's limbs seize, and he painlessly shrinks and squeezes down into a peach pit. He can do nothing as Juniper picks him up and places him back down into the hole she dug earlier. And he can still do nothing as she places and packs dirt over him, finally watering him. He grows impossibly fast. He sprouts from the earth, bulging and expanding as his trunk thickens and his branches stretch out around him. Pink buds burst from the wood, blossoming into delicate petals, and then into lush leaves. Small, green peaches swell and ripen into soft, pink and fuzzy fruit. His branches, heavy with produce, intertwine with the surrounding trees to lessen the burden.

"You did not know how to be respectful in your human form. So, I turned you into something that is selfless in providing. Maybe one day another human will come along, and their favorite fruit will be that of a peach. Maybe then you will be fortunate enough that I will pluck your fruit, and you will take a piece of my heart. For now, though, your fellow trees will be here to keep you company."

Pure despair courses through Aaron, and it takes a massive effort to outwardly express his panic and melancholy. He shudders and shakes from his roots deep in the ground, all the way to the tips of his highest branches, rustling fiercely in the cool night air.

In response, Juniper places a hand on his bark and whispers softly, "Do not be afraid. You will soon come to find great comfort in this new life I have brought for you. The others will be here for

you in your time of adjustment." She warmly smiles up into the canopy, touches her glowing heart, as if in prayer, and turns away back into the forest towards her dwelling.

Aaron shudders, trying to lift himself from the ground, but he is as firmly rooted as if he has lived there forever. He thinks of the delicious peaches and their forgetful properties, Juniper's immortal beauty, and her devastatingly wonderful heart. He longs for the day when he can feel her heart again. Utterly defeated, he resigns to a gentle swaying. The other trees in the orchard followed suit, and soon they are all swaying in unison. They are gently rocking each other to sleep, finding that the only comfort they have was with each other. Like the others, Aaron, slowly falling into a slumber, wishes so deeply that he could've grown up not much liking the taste of fruit.



# ANGEL'S REST

ALEXANDER PAUL

My feet feel like lead, and they're attached to legs made of jelly, a less-than-ideal way of walking the boardwalk. But such is the life of one who's been re-born. In fact, the Government mandates all re-births get three hours of exercise a day for one month, lest they end up bedridden and waste their new bodies in a coma. Lucky for me, I had the foresight of being productive and frugal with money in my first life. What that means, beyond affording the exorbitant cost of the procedure itself, is that I had my pick of where I would like to do my *reintroduction*, as well as being permitted for an extended stay. I didn't think I'd particularly require a full-service reintroduction or the three-month extension I requested. Most re-births are satisfied to save the money and simply be placed in an exercise-cube for their one-month stint, I desired more.

My destination of choice may raise a few eyebrows. It's nothing fancy, but the reasons for choosing it go beyond any fancy, it's just familiar. It's the quaint and mostly uninhabited Angel's Rest boardwalk and beach. Its silence was what I needed a lifetime ago, but the time in this life will do to make up for it.

There's not a single soul that I can see in any direction, so I stop for a moment to let my legs stop shaking and take in the scenery. To my left are buildings, I struggle to describe them in any greater detail since they no longer serve a purpose and lack any color or facing. This boardwalk once provided a kitschy getaway for all the people living in nearby cities. Now the boardwalk no longer serves those surrounding slum cities, since they too are empty. The aban-

donment came all at once a few years past; now time is all that leads this place to ruin.

To my right is the beach, something that hasn't lost its way in millions of years, but certainly has taken on some of the boardwalk's lifelessness—what with its brown, granular sand and slow-moving tide. There's hardly what I would call a horizon. The sea is the same color as the sky and the sand, lifeless grey like those yet uninhabited shells. There are absolutely no chairs, nor towels, nor umbrellas for as far as I can see, and even fewer people. But I am made to know this place once had thousands of untidily arranged chairs with bright pink and orange stripes, towels with polka dots, and umbrellas boasting every color of the rainbow. And part of me can see so clearly this place bustling with people looking for respite, but their joy is so marred by what awaits them so soon. The rest of me doesn't want to see that so I close my eyes and smell the air, stale and salty with the hint of a long-extinguished fire.

My simple euphoria is broken by a sound: creaking floorboards emanating from a short building with its windows still intact. As is standard for all the other buildings, this one's exterior paint has long since been stripped away, but its sign still hangs proudly. Though faded, it clearly reads "Toys & Dreams" and is written atop a landscape of clouds. Some memory of the wonder that was inspired in *it* so long ago creeps into my imagination, but I don't imagine, not I.

I consult with the legs of this body and find them mostly back under my control. I consider the excursion of going into this familiar place to be a worthwhile distraction. Though the government does advise against delving into fancies that you feel originate from outside yourself, the consequences of which I can hardly imagine, I'd be remiss not to incur at least a little danger. New experiences are part of my resolutions for this new life, after all.

Despite the intact windows, the toy store lacks a door, long since ripped from its hinges in the confusion of that savage uproar and leaving behind an open invitation to enter. Discolored sunlight

pours in from the front, revealing glistening dust motes upon every surface and space. They dance, lending a modicum of motion to this scene that would otherwise be correctly devoid of life. The interior seems so alien to me, at least the current state of it, such that it can hardly recall what it used to look like. I realize I've once again zoned out. I'm standing in the doorway of an abandoned toy store, unwilling to fully enter. Thoughts come and go in passing, but they aren't mine. Another creak of the floorboards breaks my trance completely, and I step in.

With my first step, the floorboards almost give way under my weight. They make a terrible moan in tension and scream as they friction against one another. I quickly tune out such obnoxious sounds as I continue. With every step I take, the dust motes in front of me part, and they close up behind me as I continue further and further into stiller and stiller air. The light from outside does not reach the back of the store, only illuminating the front and its many toys. Those who are bathed in sunlight have been decayed or destroyed by something no longer here, now only blanketed in dust like a shroud. Those of them that sit in the dark, at least those I can make out, are pristine. However, I cannot place what any of them are. I can tell inherently which I like and dislike, but beyond the simplest feelings, they might as well be masses of trash.

The front half of the store is expansive. There are many short shelves placed at regular intervals in a grid formation; *it* recalls, as a child, these would block one's ability to see the entirety of the store all at once and made every corner turned a mystery. Now, in the body of an adult, though I did have other options, I can see the whole of the store clearly, it seems so small now. I again have come to realize I've zoned out and let it take it back. My legs are in control of themselves, tracing a particular path around the store. My legs go in a zigzag pattern through all the aisles, like a methodical child not wanting to miss a thing. Before I can even begin to regain control over my body, my legs finally stop at their final destination: the back wall.

It is featureless, darkly colored, and seems to emanate shadow from itself. An unfamiliar fear reaches into me, but my attention is grabbed by the sight of a door.

The door is not special by any stretch of the imagination, but its mere presence is a fixture of that elsewhere's memory. The door was always here, before here was what it was and is now. This brain hurts trying to see reality, as I am trying to push away the memories, but to walk away now is not what happens in either. I see *it* with a hand upon the door, and I do the same.

Opening the door unleashes a vacuum and those hanging dust mote rush in from behind me and enter the room before I can even look inside. I am able to easily open the door a mere few inches before I encounter resistance. The door intrudes upon the warped floorboards beneath my feet, and I must command this body to pull with all its strength to open the door. The door and the floor scream, and splinters of wood shoot in all directions. I command the body to pull with yet more strength, as I command the mind to allay its fear. Only I remain, and I desire this door to open. It submits to my force, and the door is freed from its feeble resistance. Finally, with the door wrested open, peering inside reveals...

Nothing.

Nothing but the dust which now occupies the empty room. I can't say precisely what I expected, something magical perhaps. The empty room still transfixes me somehow, seeing what would have never been seen conjures feelings that feel wrong. I am lost in a growing sea of terror, a mind not mine.

"Hey."

Reflecting back, this was hardly as shocking as I'd made it out to be. But this snap back to reality makes me realize all at once just how weak these legs of mine really are. The shock is too much, and I fall on my ass.

"Now, Gemma, wait a moment," a second voice speaks up, this one of an older man. "I suppose you'll need help getting to your feet."

The man moves to my side. I reach my hand out first for him to help me up, but he does not extend his hand immediately, instead staring down at me for a moment. His hand does come eventually, and as he helps me up, I get a good look at him. His voice would characterize him as an old man, but he still has the vestiges of youthfulness. His features are all downturned, marring him with a perpetually sad-looking face. His eyes are dark and sink deep into his face, still though, I always feel the intensity of his gaze.

"You're quite strong for a re-birth, eh?" I say, but he says nothing in return.

As I turn around, I am yet again caught off guard by *her*, staring me down. Gemma, he called her. No older than ten years, children are a rare sight these days. Her eyes have a piercing intensity to them as well but different, by sheer force of will alone. Her gaze seems to encircle me, then I realize she really is moving around me.

I am at a bit of a loss for words. Partly from not being given time to recuperate after delving into those memories and losing sight of self; and partly from now being encircled by unknowns. To speak is all I've relied upon before, so now should be no different. I look to the man to see if he has any conversation, clearly not. So, I resort to a bit of small talk.

"What brings you two to Angel's Rest?" I ask them. Neither of them seems like tourists. At least not the sort that came to this place now.

The man doesn't seem in any hurry to respond, and Gemma is still encircling me.

"Oh! Where are my manners?" I say with mock friendliness. "What is your name? I'd give you mine, but I've yet to choose a new one. I'm keen myself to utilize the benefits offered by this new shell after all, a whole new start. Haha. Though maybe you would have recognized me. I'd done quite a lot for helping re-birth to reach the market."

"Ward."

"Pardon? Oh, your name. Is that your first or last?"

No response, but he holds his hand out in greeting, and I take it eagerly. His hand is icy cold like a man already dead. I'm not aware when he first helped me up. After the handshake is done, Gemma too holds her hand out to me. I take it jokingly. Her hand seems to burn my palm in comparison. I nearly want to pull my hand away as she smiles earnestly upon me.

With our pleasantries completed, silence comes upon the room again, and I take the opportunity to re-evaluate my surroundings. The dust has indeed evacuated the front room, lending it a whole new identity. Without the dancing of the dust in the light, everything really is dead still. I can't hear the sloshing of the waves. I can't smell the stale air. My senses are abandoned. The exit feels impossibly far away, marked only by the blinding intensity of the sun that pours through that open doorframe. I want so badly to leave, but *it* stays with this strange company.

"You're shaking, Mister Stanger. Are you feeling okay?" Gemma says.

"Ah, well. I suppose I am. It's just a little memory sickness. Don't you worry about me. I'll get over it, Miss Gemma. Beautiful name, by the way," I say. As soon as she begins conversing with me, Gemma resumes circling around me slowly. I find it rather endearing. Perhaps she is shy, yet also curious about me, wanting to know every detail about myself.

"Who were they?" she says. As she speaks, I feel a ringing in my ears getting progressively louder or digging deeper into my brain.

"W-what do you mean?"

"They talk to you, right?"

"Who are you referring to?" I say. I believe I understand her meaning perfectly well, but I just can't believe it is a girl as young as her asking me. Such details, she should have no idea about.

"Oh, never mind," she says cheerily. "Say, do you like my dress?"

She does a little twirl. The dress is fine enough. Bright reds and oranges with multicolored plastic sequins which glimmer in the dim light. Its colorfulness is a bit too much for my overwhelmed mind, but it suits her perfectly well.



"Heh, you look a bit like a campfire but very pretty."

"It's just like the kind that Mommy used to wear."

"That's very sweet, Miss Gemma. And are you meeting your mother here?"

Her demeanor shifts as I ask this question, I'm not quite sure to what. All I know is that, at this moment, Gemma ceases to look at me like a child. And yet she still smiles.

"We're here because this is where we went with Mother. What are you doing here?" Gemma says. She speaks with determination, as one who speaks their mind and expects others to do the same.

The answer shakes me in a way I don't understand. I think the answer is obvious, but I can't muster the words to answer her. The ringing in my ears develops into a throbbing headache. Even if I want to answer her, I can not. My brain does not permit it, and I can't seem to speak at all.

"He's just a tourist, Gemma," Ward says, his words catching me off-guard. He has been standing by silently all this time, just out of my view.

A small part of my brain still remains to me, and within it, confusion is mounting, giving way to a terrible thought. I am unlike these people, but I am in a body that belongs to them. What's so wrong with that? My appraisal is just as fair as theirs. I could have *chosen* to die or live again at a small expense. He would have done the same. But he didn't, for they are the subhuman trash, the wretched, soulful *it* that writhe in my mind; their shells mine for new eternity.

Gemma circles back to my front and our eyes meet. At once *I* cease and see it reflected in her eyes. FLAMES! It sees the fires of an uproar for the lesser many. A blessing for lost souls and a death to necrophiles. I fall to my knees as Gemma continues that sick, earnest smile down upon me.

"You're boring," Gemma says, "I'm going back to the boardwalk."

That just leaves me and the man, and the dead silence seems only to increase. I can't look at him, but I know he is seeing me.

A hand falls gently on my shoulder. It is bony, yet beast-like and large. Frigid cold pierces at the point of contact and wraps around

my neck, embracing me in a ghostly strangulation. I sense his breath on my back, labored and finite, and he stoops just behind my ear, whispering. His words are barely audible amid the piercing noise that screams in my mind, but the venomous hatred with which he speaks, I'll never forget.

"My wife was killed by you a few years ago. Maybe not you, but you are all the same. You took her corpse, shells, you sick bastards call them, and gave it to who? They're a movie star now, my wife was beautiful to me, and now I see her face everywhere. I'm sure you'd know her name, but her real name was Gemma, the same as my daughter. Funny, right? I've only a few more months before I'm up for final evaluation, but I already know the outcome. I'll die, that I accept, but Gemma, no. You body-stealing demons won't rig the system against her. How smart she is, it frightens even me sometimes. She is beyond your game. I'll never see what she does with her life, but I know you'll feel all of it."

He finishes speaking and raises his hand, but I still feel the cold upon me. I still do not look at him, feeling like my skin would peel away like an onion until there was nothing left of me if I did. My body, sensing I suppose that I'd seen enough, relinquishes itself to me, and I know I have to leave. I stand up clumsily and stumble towards the exit. The floorboards moan and scream underneath me as I run out. Just before crossing the threshold of the door, I spot Gemma sitting on the railing with her back to the beach. In the next moment, I am blinded by the intensity of the sun hanging just above her head. My retinas burn but I keep going regardless.

I can not see Gemma as I stumble onwards, and yet I know she is looking at me, and smiling all the while. Smiling that earnest smile that sickens me so, terrifies me so.

"What's re-birth?" she says cruelly. From the sound of her voice alone, I see the other side of her. The childlike innocence that Gemma fronts gives way, and I see her cold and mournful, crawling from the shadows of my burned retinas.

These legs hurt me like hell, but I just can't stop till I am away.

# PAELLA

ZACHARY LYONS

"So you don't really gotta do anything," Martin said, "Just sit there and watch."

"True," said Ferran.

"And don't say anything." He turned suddenly into an alley and took four plastic baggies of weed out of his bag that absolutely reeked.

"I've got a couple deals lined up tonight. I figured I'd just slide you like ten if you help me tonight." Ferran leaned against the bronze brick at the side of the alley and looked at the light in the distance, digging his fingers into the crevices between the stones.

"How long have you been dealing?"

"A few months. I've made good money from it. You could too."

"So this is the security job you got. You've just been dealing this whole time," he said. "You didn't tell me?"

A few weeks ago, Martin was keeping Ferran company while he washed. To make ends meet, Ferran regularly washed his neighbors' clothes. With each load, he carried clothes down multiple floors to the shaded part of the courtyard outside the shitty concrete complex where he lived and threw them into a large kiddie pool filled with water and dish soap. Each day, the water quickly turned from clear to a murky, bubbly brown, creating a dirty-citrusy scent that liked to waft into the noses of anyone who passed by. Ferran usually did four loads per day, or twenty-four a week. He never works Sundays. Charging five euros per load, Ferran earned 120 euros in revenue per week from his laundry business and gives a hundred of

those to his mother to help pay for rent, food, and other unexpected expenses.

That day, Martin wore a large diamond stud on each ear that looked out of place in such a neighborhood. It was a hot place filled with junk and litter and anything or anyone else worth throwing away. But, no one threw away diamonds. Martin told him he found a job working in private security. Ferran couldn't help but notice that the diamonds shined to match his eyes and shimmered in the light. He smiled.

The sweat fell from their faces like bodies and turned their olive skin an oily sheen, adding extra curls to Martin's long, flowy hair. Ferran didn't sweat as much as Martin. Ferran was only five-eight and maybe a buck fifty if he weighed himself in the period after he ate and before he shit. And if he didn't look small already, he certainly did next to his six-two, broad-shouldered friend.

Present day, the two sat there like usual, soaking in the humidity as they listened to the sound of the clothes washing and squishing against the board. Ferran dared Martin to jump in the ugly brown water, and Martin was so hot that he actually contemplated it for a few minutes before ultimately deciding not to. After sitting there a while, Martin interrupted the silence to ask Ferran for a favor and to meet him back there later that night. Ferran nodded and shortly after Martin left.

As Ferran finally finished washing, the sun lowered, pausing its assault and creating a golden hue in the sky. Watching the sunset, Ferran took in a deep breath of the washing chemicals to try and relax. In the golden hour, the courtyard didn't seem as dirty and dry. Ferran paused to listen to the children playing soccer in the distance. Ferran found peace in these moments, often entering a second consciousness. It was as if he was watching someone else that happened to look just like him. Except it didn't really look like him, or at least it wasn't how he thought he looked, or maybe how he wanted to. Ferran couldn't afford siestas, but this was the closest he could get—a break from the burden of having to force himself to keep going.

He liked to recall the times when he and his parents could afford siestas before they moved. Ferran's father, Pedro, used to own a bodega on the corner of a block by the Sagrada Familia but had to close shop when a hotel company bought the property from their renters. Ferran mostly remembered his father when he saw his mother. Everything was quieter since the move. His father used to take his mother on dates every Saturday night, never coming home before one in the morning. And when they did arrive home, they would dance together in the kitchen in each other's arms. They would keep Ferran awake with their laughter. The next morning, Ferran always cooked. He would make waffles or Spanish omelets for the family before going to mass. When they returned, he took the evenings to cook something special, experimenting and learning different dishes. On most special occasions like birthdays and anniversaries, Ferran would make his favorite dish—paella. Then they would eat, drink, and celebrate their lives. But nothing was worth celebrating anymore. His friend had lied to him and now Ferran was in the thick of it.

"I didn't think you would get it," said Martin. "My cousin put me on and I didn't have a choice. Not like you do."

"Why do I have any more of a choice than you?" said Ferran.

"Because you have other outs. You can cook. You can run a business by yourself. You have a mom," he said.

"But this?" said Ferran. "Why this?" Martin turned and looked at Ferran with big eyes.

"Because I was dying," he said, "and people don't die in Barcelona—they live. It's not like other places. And I watched you today. I watched you clean for hours in the hot fucking sun. You're dying too. You're sixteen and your whole life is ahead of you, Ferran, but sitting in the sun washing clothes isn't living." Martin looked at Ferran as Ferran looked at the ground. Martin gestured toward the exit of the alley, and again the two were walking to the deal location.

They arrived at the spot first. It was at the corner of a block two streets down from a bar that the locals like to go to because the

owner forbids tourists. Martin told him that he knew the guy coming and to just not say anything. A few minutes after the sun went down two guys about their age came around the corner.

The bigger one shouted, "Yo Martin," dragging the second syllable. When they were in range they exchanged flesh in a dap up.

"Long time no see, homie," Martin said. Ferran stood there unsure if he should put his hands in his pockets or by his sides. So, he opted to do both. "I got your half right here." He took out a large plastic ziplock bag full of weed and opened it for the two of them to smell.

"Yeah that's that good shit," the smaller one said. Ferran thought it smelled closer to a rotting tomato than a candle. Martin told him before that good weed makes your lungs horny, but Ferran never understood it. He reiterated that good weed makes your lungs horny in the same way that good food makes your stomach horny and that Ferran just never had the chance to make sweet love to good weed yet.

"It's gonna be ninety this time," Martin said. The two looked at each other before reaching for their pockets and pulling out the cash. The bigger one had eighty euros while the smaller one had twenty. Martin had no cash to split the twenty into two tens so he took one hundred for the bag. Ferran watched the whole thing closely. Martin handed Ferran the money and told him to count it. Ferran nodded and just like that they were gone and onto the next.

"Do the deals always go that smoothly?" Ferran said.

"Almost every time," Martin said.

"Almost?"

"I mean sometimes there are," he paused, "disagreements over the amount I'm charging or whether it's as much as I say it is."

As the two walked to the next spot, they passed by a group of tourists on their way to a nightclub. There was one in a black and white striped button down with overflowing blonde hair that couldn't stop slurring English curse words like "fuck" and "shit." They all laughed every single time he spoke. Ferran scoffed.

"You ever sell to a Yankee?"

"Not really."

"It's kind of a yes or no question," said Ferran. The two looked at each other and laughed just loud enough that no one could hear them from across the street.

"I may have scammed one or two," said Martin. "They all deserve it anyway." Ferran discussed the tourist issue with his father once. He explained how the city changed after Spain hosted the Summer Olympics in the eighties and the city started to target tourists. He told Ferran that you shouldn't blame them for wanting to come. After all, it was a city worth seeing. But he also said that it wasn't right what was happening to them and that it was wrong that they and so many others should lose their livelihood for it. In theory, Ferran never had any personal issues with tourists, but it felt wrong to like them.

"It's like manslaughter almost," said Ferran. "They don't mean to hurt us, but it doesn't change the fact that we get hurt."

"You're right. It doesn't change the fact."

They arrived at the second spot: a split-level entrance that led to a deli below and housing up top. On the stairs down to the deli stood a man in a black hoodie lighting a cigarette the wrong way. He held both the cigarette and lighter away from his body, flicking the light on one end but not pulling from the other so it wouldn't light.

"Emilio?" Martin said, raising his pitch at the end of the name.

"Yeah," he said. The cigarette fell from his hand onto the concrete stairs.

"It's gonna be eighty for the Q." The man quickly looked around like a sitcom character trying to find the hidden camera. "Something wrong?"

"Yeah man, who charges eighty for a Q? T-man told me he got it off you for sixty."

"So what, you don't got twenty extra euros? And tell T that he didn't get shit off me; this is just a better batch. It's Skywalker man, this shit is a straight American-grown product."

"Alright, alright, here man."

"Word. We're out." Martin handed Ferran the money to count, and they began walking home.

"So where did you get American weed from?" said Ferran.

"I don't have no American weed. This isn't even good by Spanish standards, my friend," said Martin.

"Do you not feel bad when you lie?"

"Yeah, until I buy something with their money." He looked to Ferran, and they laughed.

"So what are you buying tonight big man, with all your hard scammed cash?"

"You."

As they were walking back, Ferran saw a diner that he used to go to with his family on the weekends before Barcelona would play.

"You know that place?" said Martin. "Want to go?"

"Can't really justify that right now. But yeah, I know it."

"Is it good?"

"I'd say so."

"My treat brother."

The two were greeted at the entrance by a hostess who seated them at a booth with red leather seats and a stained dark wood table. The hostess handed them two menus and left.

"What's good here?" Martin said. Ferran scanned the menu—all three pages—twice before responding. It was a completely new menu since the last time he had gone with his family.

"The espinacas with garbanzos looks good," said Ferran.

"You don't have to order the cheapest thing on the menu. I think the shrimp and scallops look good, no?" Citrus zest mixed with slow-roasted shellfish made Ferran's mouth warm. He nodded to Martin, and when the waitress came, they ordered two servings of shellfish with pasta that was rich, soft, and lubricated with warm butter—everything melting together into a single juicy palpitating extremity of taste and experience. The two sat at the table talking and enjoying their food until it was well into the night and the

clubs were beginning to let out. On the walk home, they ran into several mobs.

"Listen, man, have you been thinking about whether you really want to get caught up in this? 'Cause if you're gonna do it then do it, you know. Don't half send anything."

"I think I'm ready." The streetlights painted the buildings onto a strange canvas. It was a beautiful city at its heart. It really was. It was the kind of place that you couldn't imagine in truth. The way the gothic buildings crashed and collaged against each other to create the smooth seamless octagons that it was so famous for was magic. Ferran felt it that night especially: the magic.

From behind them, there was a loud bang followed by a shout. Ferran turned to see the man from before: the Yankee with the blonde hair. When he looked at Martin, Martin was already staring. Suddenly, Martin walked toward the man, who was now sitting next to a knocked-over trashcan struggling to return to his feet.

"How do you like the nightlife, my friend," Martin said in broken English.

"Fuck off," the man said. He pushed away Martin with a long flimsy arm like a child trying to open a heavy steel door.

"You looking for a good time?" Martin said, snorting after. From his jacket pocket, he pulled out a vial of a white powder that flashed like diamonds under the streetlights. The man looked at the vial like one of Pavlov's dogs. The two began walking off in the opposite direction of where Ferran and Martin were headed. Ferran chased them to catch up.

"What are you doing with this guy?" Ferran said in Spanish, so the man would not follow.

"Who the fuck is this," the man slurred. Martin pushed Ferran off the pavement.

"A beggar," Martin said, "don't mind." The two continued to walk as Martin stood there in the street, fire leaving his mouth every time he breathed. A few seconds after the push, Martin peered behind and gestured for Ferran to follow. He stayed just within ear-

shot of the American, until quickly, they took a corner and were gone. Ferran moved as fast as he could to catch up without making noise, similar to a teenager trying to not wake their parents when sneaking out, and turned into an alleyway to find them. The American was pressed against a brick wall, his entire torso eclipsed by Martin who was holding a blade with his right hand.

"Man I told you I don't got nothing man," he whimpered, "Oh you, you kid. Help me, he's tryna rob me." Martin turned around, his eyes enlarged and shaking. The knife vibrated in his hand. He showed no teeth.

"Look out for any cops, man," Martin said. Ferran froze there in the middle of the alley and before he could stop himself, he spoke.

"Man, what are you doing?" Ferran said, the last syllable rising too high for a man's voice.

"Man, what does it look like," Martin said, "I'm robbing his yankee ass."

"Why?"

"Why? These tourists are the reason you and I got fucked over. They come and they take and they take and they take until there's nothing left for us. It's why there's rallies and shit. It's their fault." Martin pointed the knife at the man.

"Yeah, but he didn't do anything." The man had fallen from a stance to a seat against the wall now. His eyes were red from the crying. "He's just an idiot."

"You're right," Martin said, "He is an idiot. And it's just like what you said before. It's a slaughter." Martin pressed the knife closer to the Yankee's throat. "Empty your pockets." The man reached around to his back pocket and came up with a brown Louis Vuitton wallet. Martin took it out of his hands and slowly backed out of the alley until he was in the street, and then he ran.

"Sorry," said Ferran to the man, and joining his friend, was gone in the streets.

By the time they reached the park where Martin stopped, Ferran's lungs were vacuumed out of their air. He laid down on the



grass as Martin took inventory of the wallet. There were over two hundred euros and another three hundred dollars, not to mention the cards and value of the wallet itself. It was a hell of a scam. Martin was thrilled and began to sing and dance, turning the park into his own nightclub. He looked down at Ferran, who was still trying to catch his breath, and laughed before handing him a hundred-dollar bill.

"You can go to one of those conversion places and get like ninety euros for that, man," Martin said, "Go buy something for your mom." Ferran let the words resonate in his ears when he was on the ground. Unsure if it was due to the lack of oxygen or the high of the crime, the words sounded sweeter. He looked at the man on the hundred dollar bill, clueless of who he was or what he did to be there. He imagined all the things he could buy with ninety euros. It was the most money he had ever held at once. He could buy a nicer mattress for ninety euros and probably a good blanket to go along with it. Or maybe a fan for his room that he could move outside for when he washed clothes. And then he realized that maybe he wouldn't have to wash clothes in the heat anymore. And then he cried, on the ground, in front of Martin. And as he cried, he let out a fit of laughs. He was alive.

When he arrived home later that evening, he brought groceries from one of the 24-hour shops near their home. He bought the good rice that didn't burn and shrimp and cheeses and freshly baked bread. He broke the good news to his mother that Martin found him a job working security and that he could quit doing laundry. To celebrate, he made paella, and the two stayed up most of the night eating and talking in a celebration of their lives.

## MEN OF RENOWN

BOBBY SMITH

### I. CALL AND RESPONSE

It all started with a call.

It was Halloween, and I wanted to do something special that night. After all, Halloween night only comes once a year. I spent all October looking for something, but my search came up empty handed. I was too old to go trick or treating, and what Halloween parties I was able to find I couldn't get into. I was about to give up my search on the day before Halloween when, while shopping for big bags of candy for my mother to hand out to trick-or-treaters, my eyes fell upon an Ouija board for sale. I've had a fascination with the supernatural and the otherworldly for as long as I can remember. I couldn't tell you how many shows I've watched revolving around ghosts, cryptids, monsters, and the like. I have more knowledge on ghosts and other spirits from mythology and folklore than everyone I know. I've even gone to reputedly haunted locations just to see if I would find anything. My searches always came up empty, much to my dismay. Now I had a means to reach out to the other side and actually get a response. All my life I had been told cautionary tales about these things, how they invited malevolent spirits into your home and how people would get possessed, but I got impatient in my search for the supernatural and decided to throw caution to the wind. October was coming to a close and I was itching to see something, anything.

I bought the board along with the candy, hiding it from my mother's sight when I got home. Once I got it in my room and found a good hiding spot for it, I got my phone and called every friend I had asking if they were doing anything that night and, if they were free, wanted to hold a seance at my place. Only two said they were interested, two guys named Josh and Toby. Come Halloween night, the two of them came by just as the sun was halfway below the western horizon, staining the western sky orange like juice and leaving it black like ink in the east. Trick-or-treaters were wandering the neighborhood in costume, and my mother sat out on the driveway handing out candy. I told her that the three of us were going to watch a horror movie, and she seemed content with that. The three of us went into the house and descended into the basement, where I had set up a table for the seance.

In the middle of the table was the Ouija board, the planchette sitting idly atop it. Littering the table were electric candles that one could flip with a switch to turn on, creating the illusion that it was lit with a flame. Josh and Toby sat down across from one another. I flipped the switches on all the candles, turning them on, then hit the lightswitch on the wall so that the only source of light in the room were the electric candles. Once a sufficient atmosphere for the seance was created, I sat down at the head of the table, between Josh and Toby. The three of us placed our hands on the planchette, and I called out, "Are there any spirits here with us right now?"

For around fifteen seconds or so there was nothing. Then, suddenly, the planchette started to shift under our fingers. It started moving, and it moved up to the word "Yes." I felt chills. It was something surreal. After all this time of searching for the supernatural, I was now in direct contact with it.

"Who is here with us right now?" I asked.

The planchette shifted over to the letter M, then to the letter E, then the letter N, then to O, then F, then R, then E, then N, then O, then W, then N.

*M-E-N-O-F-R-E-N-O-W-N*

"What does that mean?" a curious and confused Josh asked.

The planchette then spelled out a name, one almost everyone would know.

*M-I-C-H-A-E-L-J-A-C-K-S-O-N*

"No way!" Josh exclaimed, "Michael Jackson?!"

Josh was a huge Michael Jackson fan. He was ever since his childhood when his father introduced him to Jackson's music. There was a sort of sentimental value in it to him; it reminded him of "the good old days." The idea of being in contact with the spirit of this famous musician was exhilarating to him. He could barely contain his excitement.

"Quick, what's something you always wanted to ask him?" Toby interjected.

"Wait a minute," I said, interrupting him at the realization of something the others didn't notice, "The planchette spelled out 'Men of Renown,' as in plural." I then asked out loud, "Are there multiple spirits here with us?"

Yes

"Who else is here with us?" I asked the spirits.

The planchette then lists off a couple more names: George Washington, Albert Einstein, Aristotle, Satoru Iwata, William Shakespeare, and Mozart. All deceased famous figures from history; all names the three of us had heard before.

"Well, we have a lot of famous people here tonight," Josh said nervously.

Out of curiosity, I asked our spectral guests "What's the afterlife like?" After getting confirmation that some form of it existed, I figured I should learn more about it. After all, I would be joining the spirits when the time came, so why not learn about it early?

*B-O-R-I-N-G*

"Wait, ghosts can see the future from the other side, right?" Toby asked me.

"As far as I'm aware, folklore says they can," I replied. "People have often called on them asking about the future, so they probably believed they could see the future. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I've got something that's been bugging me lately," Toby told me. He then asked the spirits, "Spirits, will Sarah take me back?"

Sarah: Toby's ex-girlfriend. She dumped him a few weeks before, and it wrecked him. Evidently he still hasn't gotten over her.

The planchette moved over to the word "Yes."

Toby became as exhilarated as Josh was when he was told that he was talking with the spirit of Michael Jackson. He stood up from his chair and exclaimed "Yes! Hell yeah, baby!"

Suddenly, the basement door opened and the lightswitch flicked on. We all heard footsteps descend the stairs as my mother asked "What is going on down here?" Her eyes fell upon the three of us sitting down at a table, surrounded by electric candles with our hands on a planchette over a Ouija board.

"Oh no! No, no, no!" she scolded us. "No Ouija boards in this house! Put all this away right now!"

"Come on! It's harmless!" I pleaded.

"No it's not," she retorted. "And I said to put it away right now, and send your friends home when you're done."

"Why?!" I exclaimed.

"Because I said so," she replied.

I huffed in indignation, knowing that this was an argument I couldn't win. The three of us took our hands off the planchette, and I flicked the switches on the electric candles to turn them off. I packed up the board and the planchette in the box as my friends walked up the stairs leading out of the basement.

"I want you to get rid of that thing tomorrow," she uttered as soon as Josh and Toby were gone.

"I know, I know," I said, eager for this conversation to be over as soon as possible.

"I mean it," my mother said in turn, drawing out this conversation longer than it needed to go.

"I know," I said, placing more emphasis on it to try and communicate that I heard her the first time and just wanted this conversation to end. I then told her what I figured she wanted to hear, "I'll get rid of it tomorrow," hoping that after that she would finally leave me alone.

Later that night, as I rested half asleep in my bed, my ears picked up on a faint but peculiar sound down the hall out in the living room. I perked up and listened for it, trying to figure out just what it may have been. There it was again, a little louder and more discernible this time but just barely. I listened for it a third time. Squish. Squish? It sounded wet. I was confused, and so I listened for the sound again. Again came the squish sound, only slightly louder this time. It sounded as though someone was submerged in water, then got out of the water and started walking around out there. The wet footstep sound happened again, only louder. I then realized that these wet footsteps were walking down the hall, getting closer to my bedroom door. I was unsure of whether to pass this off as some prank or worry that someone had broken into the house. I still listened carefully, my heart beating faster by the second. The squish of wet footsteps got louder and louder, closer and closer to my bedroom door, until the source of the noise was just outside my bedroom. Then the noises just stopped. I didn't hear any more wet footsteps for the rest of the night after that.

## II. THE CHURCH

When I woke up the next morning and went out into the hallway, I was half-expecting to see a trail of puddles leading down the hall toward my bedroom door, but, to my relief, there was no water in the hallway. The fact that I heard wet squishing sounds at all was bizarre. We don't have a pool in our backyard. It's possible that someone took a bath or shower, got out, and walked around the house, but the bathroom is around halfway down the hall and the sounds started up in the kitchen. If someone were to have gotten



out of the bath, the sounds would have started halfway down the hall, not all the way at the end of the hallway. Besides, I would have heard the sound of water running in the bathroom if someone took a bath or shower. I immediately thought back to the spirits Josh, Toby, and I spoke with the night before. If they truly were who they said they were, why the wet footsteps? Why the squishing as though someone who was just submerged in water had gotten out and was walking around? As far as I was aware, none of the seven famous figures that the spirits claimed to be met their deaths by drowning or had their bodies thrown into bodies of water or anything like that. Something wasn't adding up.

Going out into the kitchen to fix myself something to eat, I saw my mother preparing breakfast for herself. She greeted me with "Good morning."

I replied by repeating "Good morning."

"Are you going to get rid of that Ouija board like I told you to?" she asked.

*Still on about this?* I thought to myself. "Yeah, yeah, I will," I dismissively reassured her.

Before she or I could say anything else, the oven started beeping repeatedly and in quick succession, as though it were sending out morse code.

"What the hell?" my mother asked nobody in particular as she went over to the oven and started tinkering with it. I too was slightly caught off guard by it. Something like this had never happened with our oven before. I tried to ignore it and toasted myself a bagel.

After eating my breakfast, I grabbed the Ouija board from the closet I put it in last night, along with the receipt, putting the former in my backpack and the latter in my pocket, and made a show of going out to the car to go back to the store I bought it at and return it. I drove up to the store, but I didn't return the board. I didn't want to. Instead I wandered around the store for a bit, browsing through items on sale to see if I wanted anything there. Nothing caught my eye, and so I went back home with the board still in my backpack.

When I got inside, I could still hear the oven beeping what might as well have been morse code.

"This is so weird," my mother commented. "I keep rebooting it but it keeps beeping like crazy."

I didn't really know what to make of it, so I continued to ignore it and went about my day. Once I was in my room, out of my mother's sight, I took the Ouija board out of my backpack and hid it in my closet. Despite the oven occasionally beeping like crazy, my day was normal. When the sun had set, however, another strange thing occurred. I was in my room watching YouTube on my phone when YouTube suddenly closed on its own. Before I could react, Google Maps opened up on its own in the place of YouTube. In an instant, some location had been marked and Google Maps was now giving me directions to that location. I heard a robotic, feminine voice utter the first step in the directions toward this place, "Head south on Lightning Court, then turn left on Helens Forest Road."

I closed Google Maps and opened YouTube again, only for YouTube to close and Google Maps to re-open. Once again, the automated voice instructed me to "Head south on Lightning Court, then turn left on Helens Forest Road."

I closed Google Maps, and this time, I didn't open YouTube again. This time I waited to see what happened. Sure enough, Google Maps opened a third time, and the robotic voice said "Head south on Lightning Court, then turn left on Helens Forest Road."

With a shaky hand, I turned my phone off and set it down on my desk.

For the next few days I was haunted. During the daylight hours the oven would beep like crazy at random intervals, at dusk Google Maps would continually give me directions to this undisclosed location, and in the dead of night, while I tried to sleep, I would hear the sound of wet, squishy footsteps in the hallway outside my bedroom door. One night, as I was driving home from work, my phone went off giving me directions to that place. In that moment I was overcome with temptation. This was obviously the work of the spirits,

and they were trying to lead me to this location for some reason. That night I followed the directions they gave me through Google Maps, until finally I ended up in a secluded parking lot by some forest. The asphalt road ended, but there was a dirt trail leading further on into the woods themselves. I sat there in my car, doors locked, waiting. I waited for some time, but nothing happened. I got bored, and I started to wonder if I was in the right location. I reached for my phone and looked at it. The blue line marking the path I had to go led down this dirt path in the forest, and the automated voice told me to go down it.

I drove back home without giving it a second thought.

All the way back home and inside my house Google Maps kept instructing me to turn back, to go back to that parking lot and down the dirt trail in the woods. I understood that the spirits were going to continue nagging me until I did what they asked and went to the location they were leading me. The only way to make them shut up was to go there. However, I wanted to be smart about this. I took a screenshot of the path Google Maps had marked for me, then opened up my laptop and looked up a map of my area. I downloaded the map and printed it out, then marked the path the spirits had marked for me on Google Map on paper. I turned my phone off and went to bed, still hearing the wet footsteps out in the hallway. The next day, I reached out to Toby and Josh.

The phone rang for a few seconds. I anxiously paced back and forth around my room as I waited for Toby to pick up the phone. Finally, I heard the phone pick up and my friend's voice as he asked, "Percy?"

"Hey Toby," I exhaled, still a bit anxious. "Remember when we had that seance?"

"How could I forget?" Toby huffed, a little more than a hint of aggression in his voice. "Speaking of which, those ghosts we talked to are a bunch of assholes!"

"What do you mean?" I asked him, not knowing what he was referring to.

"Remember when they said Sarah would take me back? Well, I just saw her holding hands with some jerk-off at the mall today!"

Trying to calm him down, I said to him, "Well... maybe they weren't talking about the immediate future. Maybe she'll take you back later down the line."

"You'd think they'd be a bit more specific, then," Toby said in a disgruntled manner.

Remembering why I called him, I abruptly changed the trajectory of the conversation. "Look, we can debate this later," I told him. "Right now I need your help with something. My phone's GPS keeps telling me to head off somewhere I've never been before. I think the spirits are trying to communicate and want me to go there." "You're not secretly thinking of going there, are you?" Toby asked. "I mean, who knows what they're gonna do if you go there."

"I was thinking you, me, and Josh would go there together in broad daylight. I'll bring the Ouija board if they want to communicate there."

"I don't know, man. It seems pretty suspicious."

"If it gets too creepy, we dip," I reassured him.

There was a bit of silence on the other end of the line, likely Toby debating whether or not he should go. Finally, he responded with a yes.

"How does tomorrow morning, eleven o'clock sound?" I asked him.

"Works for me," he said.

Once that call was over, I called Josh and told him largely the same things I told Toby. He was reluctant at first, and it took quite a bit of convincing on my part to get him to agree to come. The next day, I grabbed the map leading to the unknown place in the woods, the Ouija board, and planchette, placing the latter two items in my backpack. In the foyer I grabbed the car keys from off a hook on the wall and headed out to the car, telling my mom I was going to hang out with Josh and Toby. Technically I wasn't lying. Driving up to their houses, I picked them up, and once both of them were with

me I used the map to make my way back to the trail leading into the woods. I parked the car, the three of us hopped out, and we started walking down the trail.

Walking along the trail, we were surrounded on all sides by the ambiance of the forest: birds perched up in trees chirped and cawed, the wind whistled from between the trees, water from nearby creeks trickled by, and crumpled leaves colored red, orange, yellow, and brown crunched under our feet as we walked. Finally, we came upon the crumbling ruins of a small church hidden among the trees. All that remained were the four walls and concrete floor. Above the front entrance was what looked like the remains of a bell tower, only there was no bell in the tower and the cross that was supposed to go atop the bell tower was nowhere in sight. Setting foot within the church's four walls, we took a look around. The interior, if you could even call it that, was completely empty save for the warm colored leaves that had fallen in from above and now rested on the cold concrete floor. The walls were supposed to be white, but vibrant illustrations, messages like "Phil was here," and every slur known to man were spray-painted upon them in every color known to man.

"I don't like the look of this place," Josh said uneasily.

"Well the spirits really wanted me to come out here," I said irritably, wanting to get this over with. "They must have something really important waiting here."

Josh burst out, "It's just this place! There's just something so *wrong* about it! Why would the spirits ask you to come all the way out here?!"

"I don't know," I retorted. "But you're right, it's suspicious. That's why I came during the day, and why I brought you two with me."

I pulled the Ouija board out of my backpack and set it down on the floor. I sat down on the floor as well. It sent a chill up my spine, and I started to regret doing this. Josh and Toby sat down as well, and we formed a sort of circle or triangle around the board. Placing our hands on the planchette, I initiated the conversation by

asking whoever might be listening, "Is there anyone here with us right now?"

Nothing. The planchette remained where it sat for a minute.

Toby said "I don't think anyone's here."

"Sh!" I hissed before reiterating the question for any unseen listeners. "Is there anyone here with us right now?"

Again nothing. Josh was growing jumpy and impatient, and he blurted, "Look, nobody's answering! Can we go home now?"

"No!" I exclaimed. "They clearly want something, and that something is here!"

I kept them there for another twenty minutes or so, continually calling out and receiving no response. Finally, I relented and said we could go home. We got up, I put the Ouija board back in my backpack, and we made our way back to the car.

That night, just shortly after the sun had set, I was on my phone in my room when some unseen force interrupted my YouTube video and closed the app. Google Maps suddenly opened on its own and once more gave me directions to the church's ruins in the woods, the robotic voice saying "Head south on Lightning Court, then turn left on Helens Forest Road."

It was clear what the spirits wanted.

No way in hell was I going back there.

### III. BROTHERS

The haunting continued for another month or so. The oven kept beeping. Google Maps kept telling me to go back to the church. I kept hearing wet footsteps outside my bedroom door. Having to drive somewhere I wasn't familiar with after the sun had set was a nightmare, since Google Maps wouldn't tell me how to get to the location I wanted to go. Hell, driving anywhere after sunset was a nightmare. I always take my phone with me in case I need to call someone while I'm gone, and with it on me after hours the robotic

voice of Google Maps kept telling me to go back to the church. I just wanted it to be over. I wanted the spirits I had recklessly invited into my home, into my life, to finally shut up and leave me be.

Now I sit on the cold concrete floor of the church ruins as I did before, only now I am alone and my only source of light are some lit candles. I came here at night like the spirits wanted. The trees that surround me on all sides barely have any leaves left on their branches. The sky is like an empty void, for neither the moon nor the stars can be seen shining. The chirping of crickets takes the place of the chirping of birds that I heard during the day when I came here with Josh and Toby, accompanied by the occasional hoot of an owl off in the distance. The wind blows like it did on that day, but it's more unnerving at night when I'm all by myself. The branches of trees, skeletal now that they have been stripped bare of leaves, rustle and crackle in the wind.

The Ouija board sits in front of me, the planchette sitting atop it and the lit candles surrounding it. I nervously place my hands upon the planchette, my stomach in knots.

"Are there any spirits here with me?" I ask, the sound of my voice echoing into the night.

At first there is no sign of response from the spirits. Then, out of nowhere, everything goes quiet. The crickets chirping, the hooting of owls, the whistling of the wind, the rustling of branches, all of it suddenly ceases. I jump a little, and when I regain my composure I feel the planchette moving beneath my fingers. I look down and watch as it moves to the word "Yes."

They are here, and they want to talk.

I cut right to the chase. "What do you want? What's this big secret you want to tell me? Why call me all the way out here all by myself at night? I know you aren't the celebrities you claimed to be on Halloween night, so explain yourselves."

The planchette moves to the letter B, then over to the letter R, then to O, then T, then H, then E, finally resting on the letter R.

B-R-O-T-H-E-R

"What the hell are you talking about?!" I quietly ask in bewilderment, irritation, and slight unease. These entities, whatever they were, had dragged me all the way out into the woods in the middle of the night for some answers and still aren't giving me anything I can work with.

O-N-E-O-F-U-S

"One of us? One of you?" I ask my invisible company. I still don't know what to make of their cryptic responses. I try to guess what they're saying. "You're looking for someone? Is that it? You're trying to find him, this brother of yours?"

F-O-U-N-D-H-I-M

"If you really did find him, why drag me out here to talk? Why don't you go and haunt him?"

W-E-A-R-E

They probably thought I wouldn't catch on right away. I bet they were hoping it would have to be spelled out for me so they could continue to toy with me, drawing out this game for as long as they could and laughing giddily during every moment of it. The meaning of their answer wasn't lost on me. It was me they were talking about. Me. They were looking for me, and now that they had found me they are haunting me. I am one of them, their brother. This makes no sense. They have to be lying, messing with me for their own twisted amusement. "I have no siblings," I gruffly exhale. "I am my mom's only child. She had no others."

F-A-T-H-E-R

I get what they're trying to say. *You may be your mother's only child, but you're not your father's only child!* I've never met my father, and my mother doesn't talk about him. In a way, it feels like he doesn't even

exist, but I know he has to be out there somewhere in the world since I wouldn't exist if he didn't. I ask the obvious; "So that's it, then? You're my half-brothers? We have the same father?"

The planchette stays still for a minute or two. Silence from the spirits. They aren't answering my question. Maybe they're debating amongst themselves whether or not they should tell me. If they are, I can't hear their conversation. It's dead silence out here, and the silence irritates me.

"You know what? Toby was right about you!" I irately exclaim. "You're all a bunch of assholes!"

Y-O-U-D-O-N-T-K-N-O-W-W-H-A-T-W-E-A-R-E

"Oh yeah?! Well what are you, then?!"

N-E-P-H-I-L-I-M

The Nephilim. The enigmatic beings mentioned a couple of times in the Bible and said to be the offspring of fallen angels and humans. According to Genesis, they were on the earth prior to the Great Flood, though they also appear after the fact. According to legend, after the deaths of their physical bodies their disembodied spirits remained in this world, continuing to walk the earth as demons. Great in size and strength, the word was sometimes translated as "giants." They were great warriors of old, men of renown.

I am communicating with the disembodied spirits of dead Nephilim, wandering unseen over the face of the earth for God knows how long. I am like them, a Nephilim, only the corporeal body clothing my Nephilim spirit has not yet rotted away. I sit there in silence for a minute or two, processing what I've just been told. The revelation is a shock to the system. My entire life is now recontextualized with this new detail, and I now find myself re-evaluating it to see if it makes any sense. Much to my discomfort, not only does it fit within the wider context of my life, but I now understand the things about myself which I didn't before. It seems unreal, like something out of a nightmare.

Trembling, I ask, "What do you want with me?"

## THE FLIES FOLLOWED US HOME

WILL TAYLOR

Papa said this wouldn't take too long. Drag 'em out, one click, and we're off.

The dirt was dry and coarse where we stood, and the air was sweltering, swarming with flies and mosquitos. The sky was an ocean of deep grey clouds rolling into themselves; their insides blackened by raging thunder. The grass field that surrounded us was a burley yellow, muttering as the terrible winds blew past.

Buster was an old dog. He'd been around with us for fifteen or so years, running free 'round the farmland we owned. But Buster wasn't like how he once was. He couldn't run like he used to. He walked slowly and with a limp. He had lost his hearing and wouldn't notice when we called his name.

The shotgun was trembling in my hand. Its pieces rattled like a snake.

*"Come on son, take the damn shot."*

The shotgun slowly rose.

One foot away,  
half a foot away,  
a quarter,  
an eighth,  
dead-on.

The gun was rattling more than ever; the thing was possessed.

Buster was sitting so patiently. You'd think he knew what was coming and had made his peace.



*"You wanna be a man? Shoot the damn shot already."*

I tried my hardest to keep my tears back. I closed my eyes, and let my hand slowly tense up.

*BANG!*

The blast lingered in the air. The winds stilled, the clouds laid dormant, the bugs stopped their buzzing. The world, for a brief moment, was in mourning. Then, as quick as it came, things moved on. The winds picked back up and took the grass with it, the brooding clouds roared once more, the bugs resumed their ever-present din, and the world returned to its daily routine.

Buster was splattered all over the dirt. His blood was seeping into the soil. His guts were crawling away from his body. His face was the only recognizable part of him left. Still and sleeping. You never understand what death is until you see something turn dead. And even though it was a fresh body, I could still smell the stench: that biting smell of guilt, of life no longer living. A smell that barges into your nose and sticks around like a guest well past due. And the flies, those damn flies. They wasted no time at all, swarming what was formerly a cherished life, laying eggs and feeding with their disgusting mouths.

*"Cheer up boy, we put him out of his misery."*

I was staring at Buster's lifeless head when he said that.

*"Alright, let's head home."*

We climbed into our rust-red truck. I threw the shotgun in the back, where Buster once slept. I was so worried we would run over him when we made our U-turn. The clouds continued to cackle. The winds were still wailing.

I wanted to take my Papa's advice. I wanted, so badly, to shove this deep within the back of my mind and forget the entire thing. I wanted to pretend that Buster ran away or got adopted by some other, kind family or was lifted to Heaven on direct orders from God himself. I wanted to ignore everything I did and everything that happened because of that. But on this putrid summer evening, the flies followed us home.

# THE HOLY GRAIL

AYOMIDE AKINYEMI

The Holy Grail was no cup nor object. In fact, it was a woman. Stuck in a hellish limbo of eternal agony as golden ichor seeped from her flesh, lips open in a silent scream for who knew how long. Nailed to a reflective, smooth stone at her back, just like her supposed Creator. How many years had you spent searching for it—*her*? Almost decades; since you were a child listening to the story of the Last Supper before Jesus was betrayed and crucified, how His holy lips sanctified the wine in His chalice, making it one with His body and blood. Sealing the new covenant with God. You remembered evenings as a high schooler spent beneath the sheets, flashlight in hand shining upon images of the Crusade. You'd spent most of your life waiting for this very moment, but not once had you thought that the most treasured and sought-out item upon the surface of the Earth was in fact, not an item, but a woman.

It was hard to tell her age from her ashen gray skin, like settled dust from the now-dormant volcano in the surrounding area. Crackled and veined, weathered down from years of age and erosion, portions of her skin occasionally cracked and caved in like shattered porcelain, showing the red, blistered underneath. As you move closer from the entrance, you begin to notice the black gunk dried by the edges of the bodily cracks, and you couldn't help but swallow the bile beginning to rise up your throat. Her head was shaped oddly with patches of stringy, blackened hair while the rest was left naked much like her body. What was the most unnatural part of her was the fact that golden ichor was seeping from her eyes, nose, and gaping mouth with the same consistency of blood.

She didn't appear real at all—more like a doll if anything—but the second you moved from the cavern entrance, her wide, empty eyes snapped onto yours, grasping at your soul. You knew without a doubt she was very much alive. Her arms were shackled behind her to the rock that shined more like a crystal and molted, withered vines wrapped around her legs and torso like she had become one with the ground beneath her. She sat on a small island of her own in the midst of the cavern, bodies of liquid surrounding the area with volcanic rock formations floating like stepping stones. The body of liquid wasn't normal though. No, the water was red. *Blood* red.

Tales of the Grail being surrounded by rivers of the Blood of Jesus came flooding back to your mind, but it was far too thin to be blood. With all the volcanic rock around, you wouldn't be surprised if there was a deposit of red iron oxide lying around by the bay of an overflowing river, tinting the water, but it didn't make the sight any less chilling than it already was. The water didn't consist only of the Blood of Jesus but the same golden ichor that still seeped from the woman, forming its own stream in the red but didn't mix as though they were oil and water; together but separate.

There were so many questions on your tongue, but you could not find the words to speak. And the woman, if she had questions, did not say a word either. Though you doubt it was possible with the gold churning out from her lips like a broken faucet. It didn't make any sense. Then, all this speak of drinking from the Son of God's chalice—tasting happiness, contentment, and immortality—all at once was for naught. Your eyes kept drifting back to the golden ichor. *Unless...*

You couldn't stand there forever, so you took a leap onto the closest volcanic rocks, trying to keep yourself balanced because you couldn't be too sure of whether or not the blood-tinted water-ichor was safe. The woman's look of despair was still unwavering as you neared, all her imperfections and oddities only increasing in detail, and it was hard to stomach looking at her for too long. It didn't take long until you were finally on her island. Sure enough, she looked

as though she hadn't moved in centuries, but you couldn't stop the irrational thought that she would jump onto you at any second.

Still, she did not move.

You climbed up the rather rocky island-shaped volcanic rock and, unlike the others, this one inhabited life; fuzzy fungus and shoots of green. You took slow deliberate movements around her, still maintaining distance as you observed her naked body covered in grime and from the caved-in skin grew mushrooms and other strange fungi—you wouldn't be surprised if a worm crawled out. The golden ichor that

*drip,*

*drip,*

*dripped,*

steadily from her mouth and down her body to fill the lake. On your way in, you had been following a stream of the blood-tinted water, but not once had you seen the gold so perhaps it was contained just to the inside of this cavern. This... *blood* was obviously important. During the Last Supper, Jesus had transferred the wine into his body and his blood into the Chalice so perhaps that was what it was supposed to represent: His blood. Though you were trying to find ways to disprove her being the Grail, perhaps you were half correct; she was the Grail. Or rather, less the physical Chalice but the actual power of the Grail.

Eyes followed the stream of blood from her lips to the water, and sure enough, there was the flat end of a goblet sticking out. You were hesitant before but slid your glove further up your hand before dipping your hand into the lake. It was much cooler than you had thought but no bad reaction so far. The goblet was lodged into the cavern ground—must have been some time since the last finder of the Grail—but it didn't take much effort until you were able to pull it out. It wasn't anything fancy, surprisingly, and the engravings, though worn, dated further than 4 B.C. by your expertise, which popped a question since Jesus wasn't born until around then.

That meant she had been there even longer than the existence of Jesus.

If so, then were the miracles of the acclaimed Son of God truly coming from a higher power? Could they, in fact, have been the abilities of the Grail? You toss the chalice between your hands, surprised by its durability. The rim was the cleanest side with the amount of lips that have kissed upon it. You didn't plan on drinking from the Chalice, not yet anyway, but you wanted to imagine, for a second, that you were someone from the past, who just like you had discovered the Grail. You imagined, similar to you, you found yourself unconcerned with the woman, surprised by her existence and terrible condition but made no effort to help her. Why? Because you came here with only one thought in mind: finding the Grail.

You imagined someone jumping upon the volcanic rock, finding the chalice lodged in the water, wondering why the liquid gold consistency of blood was never-ending, and thought of God's never-ending agape love; how your portion could never run over.

And so you brought the Chalice to the woman's lips as liquid gold dripped into it. And as a single droplet fell, you blacked out.

An onslaught of memories and knowledge forced their way into your mind like the lotus of the Plague, all whirring at sonic speeds but somehow you understood all of it. All of the world's greatest mysteries, from the truth behind the destruction of Alexander's Library and the secrets it held to the disappearance of the settlement of Roanoke, the reason for the Easter Island Heads. All the lies and follies of man, thoughts and notions that had been solidified as fact when they couldn't be any further from the truth. You knew it all. One memory lingered longer than the others; of a child stumbling upon the cavern and even without seeing his face, you knew it was Jesus.

You were right. The Grail was older than Jesus, but the thought didn't settle as well as you thought it would. It tasted bitter, metallic. If Jesus was in fact just any normal boy, granted powers from a creation of a higher power, then what did his legacy mean? The

memory was snatched just as quickly as it was thrown at you, the world crumbling beneath your feet only to find yourself in utter darkness. In the distant corner of your mind was the woman though she looked different, 'lively' if that was the correct term for it. Knees pulled into her chest and a paranoid look in her eyes.

It was only then you noticed this distant buzz in the background, and as you walked closer to the woman, the buzz loudened only to find that it wasn't a buzzing sound but rather barely coherent screaming that only when you neared could you tell the words being said.

*KILL ME. KILL ME. KILL ME. KILL ME. KILL ME. KILL ME.  
KILL ME. KILL ME. KILL ME. KILL ME. KILL ME. KILL ME.  
KILL ME. KILL ME. KILL ME. KILL ME. KILL ME. KILL ME.*

Her voice, raspy and tired, begged and sobbed over and over. The voices overlapped, growing louder by the second. It's terrible to the point that it sounded like the screams were coming from both the inside of your head and out. You blocked your ears in hope of getting the noise out before you're brought back to reality.

You stumbled backwards, pulled back to reality and out of breath, heart pounding just as loudly as the screams were. Your mouth felt dry and scratchy as though it was your voice that was screaming and there's this terrible throbbing between your eyes and by your forehead that made the world spin. Not to mention the buzzing hadn't left, the world dipping in and out of clarity as you try to regain yourself. You glanced back at her, still bound and frozen, those empty dark eyes staring down at you and her voice rang in your head once more.

*KILL ME.*

This felt wrong on so many levels. You could barely catch your own breath, much less kill someone. But you couldn't make a straight decision either. The Holy Grail was the only thing that had been on your mind for decades and now you had to let them go, not like you

could keep her alive to display in a museum. You hadn't even taken a sip but simply being in contact with the liquid was enough to give you information on everything. You knew the beginning and the end of all, watched the surface of the earth grow and collapse upon itself. Those memories weren't things any mortal, any finite creation could know. Who was to say this woman wasn't God?

But the main concern shouldn't be the practicality of it, it should be whether you have it in you to kill her, to take a life. There was no malicious intent behind the action if it was to end the suffering of another, but the taking of a life was still the taking of a life. But there was this overwhelming pain and suffering in her dull, emptied eyes. You could only imagine how many wishes she had granted over the years, the selfish and selfless, with nothing to see other than this cavern. Didn't she deserve her own wish to be granted just this once?

It was sickening, the thought. She was obviously trapped here, chained so she could never escape. But why? Who would trap her here? What exactly is she? How does she have the ability to grant said wishes? They were all good questions, but you couldn't get answers from her. And if you couldn't, then no one should.

Your pocket knife slipped from your belt sheath. You'd never killed anyone, but this wasn't with malicious intent; you're helping her, aren't you? Your hands moved in autodrive. It's in your blood: the desire to sin. Your ancestor Cain, wherever he was, would be proud. The knife pulled up in front of where her heart should be, the buzzing in your ear growing louder and louder like the flaps of a million locus wings. It's a quick tap as you drove the knife down, her skin around the wound flakes open like a blooming flower and there's a disgusting *shunk* as your knife slid between decayed ribs. Your palm tapped the knife deeper and there's a *splunk*!

The combustion of a heart.

For that very second her eyes brightened, and you saw the face of the woman trapped behind the porcelain mask, but as fast as the life was revealed, it was taken away. Her body fell upon your shoul-

der and though you would have thought yourself to be panicked, you felt nothing. You held her slumped body, pieces of skin breaking off, revealing shriveled muscle. At least she wasn't alone in her last moments.

"*Sorry.*"

Her voice, so hoarse and low, you barely heard it before she shattered completely, a cloud of dust. You coughed and sneezed, stumbling backwards as you tried to brush off the dirt. *Sorry?* For asking such a request? But it's too late to question it any longer when you're hit by a migraine; this time thrice the effect of the one before. To the point that your eyelids burned and your head began to spin. It felt like Death was knocking at the entrance to your mind, constantly teasing that they were ready to take you but not yet, not now.

Your eyes hurt, but you tried to focus on a singular thing—your shirt—when a droplet of gold fell onto it. Which shouldn't be right since you had dropped the chalice a while ago. Then there was another droplet

and another

and another

until it was a steady stream.

You wiped at your nose furiously, fear catching at your throat like a lump that could not be swallowed before you gagged as something lodged itself in your throat and you coughed up fluid from your chest at your side. And it's the same golden ichor. Your stomach churned but not unlike any stomach trouble you'd felt before. *No*, your insides were burning. Your nostrils were dry and scratchy as though you had been sick for days. Your blood boiled to temperatures not meant for the human body. You fell back, body spasming with pain as you clawed at your throat, the lump growing with size and your head seized with fear, eyes widened.

*Sorry.*

It was making sense now: her tortured words. Though you thought you had never made your wish, the Grail knew what you wanted. How the only thing you had ever dreamed of was to find

the Holy Grail, to learn all you could from it. The Grail had granted your wish, though it was never your intention. You tried to pull your burning, weakened body towards the exit, but each move felt like a thousand needles lodging themselves into your skin. This wasn't what you wanted. Had you known the costs that came with finding the Grail, you never would have started this foolish journey in the first place. Even if it meant losing its power and knowledge.

*There was a reason the Holy Grail was never meant to be found.*



# THE FIRE TOWER

SREYAS ANIL

It's three in the afternoon when I wake up to the sound of droning bees. It takes a second or two of fruitless hand-swatting to realize the buzzing is actually just my phone vibrating atop my bedside table. Feeling stupid, I grab the phone and instinctively press what should be the snooze button on the screen. But it isn't the snooze button; it's the decline call button. The revelation shocks me awake and before the call screen disappears I make out the contact:

Erin.

*Shit. Shit. Shit.*

I literally just rejected a call from Erin Walsh. Panicked, I fumble through unlocking my phone, waste time debating whether to open the phone or contacts app, and finally find Erin's contact and call her back. The three seconds of ringing are excruciating until she picks up.

"Hey! Zak?"

"Yea Hello—Hi—Hey! Sorry I accidentally pressed the wrong button. Um, what's up?"

"Ha, no big deal! I'm just waiting outside on the porch. Rang the doorbell but I guess it wasn't working? Decided to call ya instead."

Waiting outside? On my porch? I pull the phone away and quickly swipe the screen to check the date.

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

"Right! Yeah that's okay. Cool! I—Um... yea okay so I was just finishing my shower and I'm getting dressed right now. I'll be down right away!"

"Awesome! No rush... or maybe rush a bit. I wanna make it in time for golden hour."

"Yeah of course! Alright bye—uh see ya!"

*Shit. Fuck.*

Who needs coffee when anxiety gives me the kick I need to start the day? I frantically search my room for the cleanest button-up, but the only good one I find is too tight on me now. So I slap on a t-shirt, dark enough to hide my belly fat, and snatch an old sweatshirt jacket off my chair to hang over it.

My hand hovers for a second over the orange cylinder I so very hilariously labeled "anti-despresso," but I pull away and decide I probably don't need it. I won't be lonely today so I should be fine.

I finally grab my camera tripod from the corner of my room and then head out into the hall, making a mental note to chug some mouthwash and spray some Axe on before I leave the house.

Erin is still waiting patiently on the porch, leaning against the railing, when I open the front door. She's rocking her usual lumberjack look she hasn't moved on from since the high school days: a plaid button-up draping a white top and denim jeans hanging over a pair of chunky boots. Not a particularly unique look, yet the way she wears it you'd think it was a fashion statement. Though I figure her auburn hair, green eyes, and freckle-speckled nose are doing most of the work as always. Just approaching her with my pill-ridden sweatshirt, dark-circled eyes, and my long past five o'clock neckbeard, I instantly feel I'm ruining her aura. And if I am, then she should really consider a career in acting because she shows no repulsion at the sight of me. Just her bright smile.

"Hey!" she greets me.

"Hi. Uh, really sorry for making it late. Got, uh... *real* busy and lost track of time, y'know?" I say back. I should not consider a career in acting.

"Nah, you're good! *Totally* understandable." She seems to check me out and my heart flutters a bit. "I like the pajamas."

The flutter flounders when I look down and see I completely forgot to change out of my checkered sleepwear.

"Oh yeah... it's... comfortable?" I try to save myself. "But I can go change—"

"No no! It's cool! It gives 'I don't give a fuck.' I wish I could pull that off."

I don't think she realizes how underhanded that forced compliment is, but she starts heading down the porch steps and I can tell she just wants to get going.

"This your car?" Erin reaches the gross '98 Corolla in my driveway.

"Unfortunately." I dejectedly reply as I fish through my pockets for the keys. I find them in my left jacket pocket, but I'm thrown when I feel some thick paper on my right. I pull the slip out and find a crumpled envelope.

URGENT NOTICE FOR ZAKARIA JAFARI  
OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY OFFICE OF THE REGISTRAR

I shove the envelope back into its hiding place, hard.

The car ride to the Fire Tower is awkwardly silent. Erin is fully invested in fiddling with her camera settings while I'm hyper-focused on making sure I stick to the right route. We're essentially going off the beaten path, and I'm not sure my lemon of a steed will make it, especially up the final ascent up a hillside dirt road. But we pull through and eventually enter a clearing at the top of the hill. A patch of dead earth advertises itself as a parking space so I pull in, earning the Corolla its well-deserved rest.

"So, this is it."

Erin doesn't immediately react for some reason. Instead she just looks out the side window for a solid few seconds before unleashing a heavy sigh. She finally turns back to me.

"Ready?" she asks.

"Sure... you?"

She searches for a response. "I have to be."

A makeshift path leads to an old fire lookout tower that stands at the edge of the hill. Back when Windfall Woods was just a village smack dab in the valley of the eponymous forest, the fire watchtower was used to do exactly what it's named for: watch for fires. After the town expanded and the forest thinned out, new towers were built further out, leaving the original few abandoned. In the decades since, this one, which we locals simply call The Fire Tower, became a beacon for druggies, runaways, virginity-losers, etc. But in the past several years, the elements took their toll and its structural stability became questionable. Now no one dares venture up this tower anymore.

Save for us.

Walking up to the tower, the shabby, near dilapidated state of it is made explicit by the creepy shrieking emanating from the structure as even the lightest of breezes passes through it. The installation is made up of an exposed framework of metal, kind of like a tower crane. It starts at the base and rises up maybe three or four stories alongside a series of wooden staircases ascending the perimeter of the structure. The stairs lead to an observation deck at the top which we could only see the underside of from where we were, having reached the base of the tower.

"We're going all the way to the top?" I ask.

"Yeah that's the plan. The view of the town is completely unobstructed up there. It's beautiful."

"Right."

Erin definitely senses my hesitation. "I know it looks pretty bad, but it was literally in the same state years ago when I last climbed it and it was honestly fine."

"I dunno..."

Probably to keep me from questioning things any further, Erin makes for the staircase. She steps over a lazy chain barrier doing nothing to keep people away. It would be incredibly embarrassing to back out now, so I have no choice but to follow and live up to my “Don’t give a fuck” pajama pants.

Every step up feels like the last I’ll ever take. Every wood step lets out the most pained creak, the next more aggrieved than the last. The handrail is just as decayed as the steps, so I switch to clutching the metal framework of the tower instead as I try to remember the date of my last tetanus shot. All I’m thankful for is Erin taking the lead, unable to see me at my most pathetic. Though, her relatively carefree steps are making me increasingly nervous, and I have to frequently stop myself from telling her to be more careful.

“So... you said this is for a photojournalism class?” I ask, breaking the ice.

“Internship application for a pretty big news site. Need to put together a piece about my hometown and if I get accepted I can start right after graduation.

“Oh wow, that’d be amazing. You better tell them you risked my life climbing a collapsing watchtower just to get one shot of the town.”

“I’ll be sure to work it in somehow,” Erin laughs. “What about you? Got anything planned after graduation? You’re majoring in art, right?

“Oh... no. I mean yeah I’m, uh, graduating soon,” I shamefully lie, “but I’m doing... engineering. At Oregon State.”

“Oh yeah OSU! I remember you were so excited you got in. But I could’ve sworn you wanted to do art. You were always drawing in Ms. Sliwinski’s class.”

“Yeah, well the doodling-in-notebooks industry isn’t doing too well these days.” I feel better with every small chuckle I get out of her.

“Maybe, but those were not just doodles. I get it though. Hopefully the engineering is going well then?”

“Uh... yea. It’s... been good.”

“Shit.”

Erin stops dead in her tracks and I nearly walk right into her. I look over her shoulder and see the issue: a whole stretch of staircase is just gone, leaving a twelve-foot gap between us and the next set of steps.

We just stare at it for a while.

“You think we could make that jump?” Erin finally asks.

I can’t tell if she’s joking, but with a small laugh I answer, “Nah, I don’t think that’s happening. Unless you’ve taken up parkour. Long jumping maybe.”

I patiently wait as Erin takes way too long to realize this whole thing is a bust and we should just turn back. But she keeps analyzing the gap. I get a bad feeling when she reaches for the metal of the tower next to us.

“Erin, this thing isn’t safe. I’m sure one of the other fire towers will work.”

Erin pulls at the metal, testing its stability. “It has to be this one, Zak.”

“Wha... What do you mean? This isn’t the only tower overlooking town.”

“No it’s not just for the view. It’s... this is *my* tower.”

“*Your* tower?”

I don’t have time to process what the hell that means because Erin has already hoisted herself up onto the steel framework of the tower and has begun climbing the structure towards the next set of stairs.

“Erin!”

She lets out a frustrated sigh, “Zak, I’m sorry I asked you to come for this but I have to do it. Maybe you can go back to the car. I won’t take long.”

That hurt, but I’m more concerned about what she means by “*I have to do this*.” I’m unable to build up the courage to firmly tell her to come back. I turn to look back towards the car, now a long ways away, and think of how humiliating the walk of shame back will be.

We've already climbed three stories up and the top is so close. Turning back to Erin, she's actually made some decent progress scaling the structure, and I get a sense that I could probably do it too. I have no clue why Erin invited me to do this, but at this point I don't want to let her down. And more importantly, I don't want anything to happen to her.

Following Erin's example, I test the set of metal girders next to me before pulling myself onto them. To get to the next set of stairs, I have to shimmy up an inclined girder that forms the bottom half of the 'X' of this section's segment while tightly holding onto whatever random beam is within reach, occasionally scanning for the next one to reach out to. I do my best to memorize Erin's strategy, but she's already a decent distance away and moving fast like she's already done this before.

*This is my tower*, she said.

Erin makes it to the other side and safely lands on the final flight of steps. She turns back, looking down expecting to find me walking to the car, but then sees me scuffling up the side of the tower like her. The smile she shows seeing this gives me the last bit of adrenaline I need to make it to her.

Reaching the other side myself, I carefully climb down and Erin reaches out to guide me. It's a little embarrassing to have her help me like I'm a child, but the fact she even cares to do so outweighs that feeling.

"See?" Erin simply says, beaming at me.

"Save the gloating for when we get back down," I remind her.

She playfully hits my shoulder and rushes up the final flight of stairs. I follow suit, a little less carefully than before.

I instantly realize scaling this tower was worth all the trouble the moment we arrive on the observation deck. The sky has become a gorgeous pink gradient dotted with lavender clouds, leading the eye towards the descending sun. Erin hurries towards the other

side of the deck to get as close to the sun as possible and is already snapping her camera. I quickly set the tripod up behind her before walking over beside Erin. The town of Windfall has transformed into El Dorado, glowing bright and gold.

I chuckle in astonishment and turn to Erin, but she's not holding her camera up anymore.

Her hand is held over her mouth.

Tears are forming in her eyes.

At first I assume it's her own reaction to the stunning view, but I look closer and realize she's shaking. After a sharp inhale, she lets out scattered breaths as her shoulders bounce.

She's genuinely crying.

"Hey are you okay?" I step closer, worried.

The question breaks the dam. Her hand drops from her face, her tears roll down her cheeks, and her knees collapse to the floor. I lunge for her, worried she may fall off the edge, but she rests on her knees and continues to sob. I have no clue what to do, so I just put a hand on her shoulder, expecting her to nudge it off. She doesn't. It just allows her to cry harder.

She leans towards me and I move my arm around both her shoulders, holding her tighter. I want to say something to comfort her. To end her hurt. But I decide not to. Deep down I recognize that she just needs to get it all out.

I don't know what's going on, but I feel a sense of familiarity. I know what kind of cry this is.

The sun has hidden behind the mountainous horizon when Erin starts to sniffle and rub her nose, signaling an end to the episode. I let go of her to give her the range to wipe her eyes with her sleeves. She finally turns to me with her flushed eyes and reddened nose. She efforts a small smile.

"Sorry," she exhales.

"No, it's okay." I'm not sure what to say. "C-Can I ask what happened?"

Erin looks back down, but this time she's looking over the edge of the deck to the ground below. It takes her a beat to decide what to say.

"It's been four years since I tried to jump off this thing."

My heart drops, and my face burns.

"To the day. This exact spot. This exact time. This exact view." Erin's voice occasionally breaks, but she fights to keep talking. "It— It seems so stupid looking back on it 'cause it was only high school. How bad could it have been? But, god was it bad. So fucking bad. The kind of 'bad' that is so hard to explain that you can't even tell anyone you're suffering 'cause what would you say when they asked why? No one died. No one hurt me. Nothing happened. Everything just hurt and there was no reason. No excuse. And holding all that pointless pain in just made it worse. So, so much worse. So I came up here, determined to set myself free of it. Couldn't do it of course... The view was just too good."

I want to turn and look at the view that saved her, but I'm stuck staring at her, taking her all in. I spent my entire senior year of high school having a crush on this girl, and she was suffering that whole time. Track star, photography prodigy, out-of-my-league Erin Walsh almost killed herself.

The world almost lost her.

"Are you... how are you now?" I cringe, unsure if that was the right question.

"I'm better now," she sniffs and waits to continue. "But the thought that I ever even considered jumping has always... haunted me. I was so afraid to even think about this fire tower, but I couldn't get that view of the town out of my head. So, recently I just figured, if I face this cursed place once more with who I am now, I'll be able to dominate that horrible memory and... maybe replace it with a better one. Maybe capture it on camera while I'm at it."

It all makes so much sense now. I understand her ten times more than I ever did.

"Did it work?" I ask.

"I don't know. I can't tell," she replies with disappointment.

Erin shakes herself out of her state and turns to me again. "God, I'm so sorry for all this. I shouldn't have made you do all this just to trap you into hearing my trauma dump."

I don't like her apologizing for inviting me. For being this vulnerable. The whole time I was questioning why I was invited to this, and maybe even Erin didn't really know herself. But I think she just didn't want to be alone. She could've asked anyone. Maybe I was the only old friend of hers in town this week.

But she didn't realize I was also maybe the perfect one to bring along.

"Found this envelope in my sweatshirt when I stepped out today." I pull back out the crumpled envelope from my sweatshirt. "It's my notice of academic dismissal from OSU. I got kicked out... a little more than a year ago actually."

It's Erin's turn to stare at me in surprise.

"I know that pointless pain you were just talking about," I continue, "I got it pretty bad sophomore year. Procrastinated assignments, slept through whole school days, fucked up my GPA, failed two semesters back to back... before I knew it I was packing up my dorm trying to figure out how to tell my parents. Was not fun. Haven't done anything since but a few random community college courses here and there. But nothing has changed cuz that hurt is as worse as ever. And you're right. I can't tell anyone about it because there just isn't any reason. It just hurts."

Erin probably didn't know this, but she's wanted to hear that her whole life. Acknowledgement that her pain was real and not just hers.

"But right now," I finish, "It doesn't really hurt all that much at all. So thank you for bringing me here. I needed it, too."

Erin lunges at me and embraces me hard. She's quietly crying again so I hug her back and hold back tears of my own.

"You know," Erin says, "I think *now* it's worked."

The sun was long gone, Windfall Woods now enveloped in a damp, dark soup. Yet there we stayed at the top of the world, glowing bright and gold.



# THE TREACHEROUS TALE OF BABAR THE TURNCOAT

MYRA HASAN

“Mama, you’re leaving again.”

A young girl climbed onto the unfocused man’s lap. The man snapped out of his thoughts and looked down at the girl surprisingly. He then held the toddler close.

“I’m sorry, *gudai*,” he whispered sweetly.

“Where did you go?” the girl asked as she peered at her uncle with large, curious brown eyes.

Her uncle gave a weak smile. The child was still learning words, so she often equated her uncle’s dissociation with him “leaving.”

“Nowhere, *ma bache*. I’m here, right with you,” he consoled her, pressing a kiss to her temple.

“You’re lying.”

The girl furrowed her brows cutely. The man couldn’t help but chuckle.

“I lie a lot,” he said, mirthfully watching his niece’s reaction to his deflective response. His smile faded slightly. “I’m just thinking of the past, that’s all,” he said softly, before taking the toddler off his lap and nudging her to the door. “Now, go wash your hands. Roshina auntie brought us *mithai* to eat after dinner. She just had a baby boy!”

“Really?!” the baby exclaimed, her eyes lighting up as she dashed out of the room. The man watched fondly.

The young girl, who was able to live in a time of peace, was blissfully unaware of the world’s dangers in time of war. The man wished

to protect his niece from all the hardships that he had to experience himself. Though it may be seen as a projection, he couldn’t help but want the best life for his niece, since he and his family were not able to live it themselves. But no matter how hard he tried to amend his actions, his past was always there, haunting him from being happy.

A traitor is unworthy of joy, after all.

“Layla!” Babar called out to his younger sister who was engrossed in a large, dusty book she found in their father’s room.

“Hah?” she shouted back.

“Ji!” Babar corrected her casual response. He was four years older, yet his sister was always blunt in her tone. Babar found it more amusing than it was offensive. “What are you reading?” he asked as he took a seat next to the girl.

“This book.” Layla closed the cover to show her brother the title. “*Memories of the Warriors of Haraiva*.”

“*Memoirs of the Warriors of Haraiva*, Layla, read the whole word out,” Babar corrected her miscue.

Despite their port village being a bustling cosmopolitan hub for the Jelists, Layla still struggled with their language.

“Be glad I was able to read it at all,” Layla retorted, huffing as she opened the book back to the page she was reading. “It’s a compilation of various stories written by the first Jelist settlers about the Harai,” she explained as she showed Babar the page.

“The Jelists commended their bravery. Look, this part says that the Harai’s strength is second to none...I think,” she spoke boastfully as she pointed at the sentence.

“Yet the entirety of east Haraiva was overtaken in the blink of an eye,” Babar remarked.

“Hey! Aslan *Kakaji* is going to kick their butts out of our country soon!” Layla leaped up and spread her arms out, trying to mimic a battle stance.

“Don’t let anyone hear you say that,” Babar sighed.

He brushed his hand against the book that Layla recklessly threw on the *toshak*. Their uncle, Aslan, *Khan* of their village, Ghantazar, hadn't been home for nearly a month. Usually, one of his subordinates governed the village while he was away, but with the whole board following him along, the responsibility of ruling and protecting had fallen on the elders. Babar couldn't help but think that his uncle went on a suicide mission to spontaneously confront the Jelist imperialism, judging by his character. Babar always begged his uncle to bring him along since he hated being kept in the dark, but with his uncle's "You are too young!" lectures and his sister's "I can't take care of myself!" complaints, he instead poured his rising patriotism into history books and study of battle tactics.

"Hey, *Lala*?" Layla's voice snapped him out of his thoughts. His sister was staring out the window. "Who are they?"

Babar pushed himself up to see what made Layla agape. There, near the entrance of the village, stood a tall, bulky man speaking with one of the village elders. The unrecognizable man exuded confidence and power, which was reinforced by the multiple men standing behind him. The most distinctive features of the men were their pale skin and lighter hair.

"They must be traveling back to New Jelistland," Babar speculated. Many Jelists used their ports to sail through the Great Rukhi River that separated Haraiva and New Jelistland, formerly known as eastern Haraiva. "Don't worry about them and worry more about learning how to read properly."

"*Lala*!" Layla whined. "Whatever, I'm going to go visit Roshina!"

She stormed off. All Babar could do was sigh before taking another look at the unexpected guests. Babar recognized the navy blue outfits the men donned; they were soldiers to the king of New Jelistland. The ribbons hanging from the leading man's breast pocket meant that he held the title of general. They're routinely tasked with patrolling villages they controlled and ensuring there were no signs of rebellion in Haraiva. Babar's intuition screamed at him, but he foolishly chose to ignore his gut.

One trait that the Harai were renowned for, aside from their bravery, was their hospitality. Whenever Jelists arrived in Ghantazar, the council would prepare lavish banquets in honor of their weary guests after a long journey.

A large campfire burned in the middle of the gathering, illuminating the dark field where the banquet was held.

As Babar walked by the Jelist soldiers, he heard vulgar banter and profanities from the rowdy group.

"Those damn savages from that village need to be dealt with," a lanky man, whose lack of hygiene was evident, slurred as he poured the General a glass.

The pompous General laid with one foot propped to the ground, one hand resting on his knee and the other holding a cup of alcohol. The soldiers all tended to his needs earnestly and conversed in unfunny jokes and forced laughter to appease the man.

Babar dropped a pot filled with tea leaves from the tray he was holding. "The chief pissed me off by refusing our entry," the General sneered, lifting his cup for his subordinate to refill. "They need to be taught a lesson."

"The Zabdos tribe is part of the Confederation, sir," another man interjected, painfully butchering the pronunciation of *Zabduz*. His ribbons indicated that he was the General's lieutenant. "It would cause an uproar if we were to provoke them."

Babar internally sighed in relief. His little dock village was not part of the Confederation, so they were out of the question. He prolonged cleaning his mess up, meticulously picking up every tea leaf scattered all over the floor.

"They're at the bottom, Bell," the General said dismissively.

The men danced with swords, all choreographed to spin and move at perfected timing. They gallantly swung their blades and sliced the air in artistic patterns. The stupendous performance, however, did not entertain the General. Something else had caught his eye. Babar followed the General's gaze. On the segregated side where all the women sat, young girls danced playfully in a circle

to the strumming of the *rubab* and the singing of *tappa*. One of the women hurriedly reprimanded the girls to sit down, but they all defiantly continued to flick their wrists gracefully and bounce their heels on beat. Layla, who was part of the circle, hopped in the center of the *attan*. All the girls surrounding her giggled and squealed as they continued to dance.

Catching the glint in the man's eyes, Babar reminded himself to have a talk with Layla afterward.

The night went on with endless food, drinks, and performances to please the guests. Many craftsmen and tailors waited in line to present weapons and tools to gift the General, in hopes of partnership with the Jelists. After some time, the General slammed his cup on the table, silencing everybody and seizing the music.

"Never have I felt such hospitality since we settled in Haraiva." The General's articulate voice rumbled through the gathering. "I am sure to give a good word to the king when I return to New Jelistland."

Some tribesmen and women exchanged confused glances, but seeing the relieved expressions on the others reassured them that the man's foreign words were not life-threatening.

"The king will surely be ecstatic with all these offerings this amiable tribe has presented. However, I believe it would impress the king even further if we were to have one more thing."

The General raised his arm and pointed his finger. It landed in the women's section.

"Bring that girl to me," the General ordered.

The girl at the end of his finger was none other than the beauty of the village, Layla. Her eyes widened in confusion, and everybody stilled as they turned their heads at Layla.

"I will not repeat myself."

The General's voice was laced with anger. The women rushedly urged Layla to get up and go to the General. She hesitantly trudged to the men's side, wrapping her shawl around her head timidly due to the scrutinizing gazes upon her.

The young girl stood in front of the General, keeping a cautious distance, and clasped her hands nervously.

"Bring her closer."

One of the General's men roughly grabbed her arm and yanked her closer. He threw her right before the red Persian carpet on which the General lay. Her jet-black, wavy hair was sprawled all over her face, prompting the General to pull the hair behind her ear. The man closely observed the delicate face of the girl. With thick eyebrows, full lips, and long eyelashes shaping her round brown eyes, her beauty was comparable to none. Her deer-like face was contorted in fear, yet he found such an expression alluring.

"You'll be a gift to the King. It's a very respectable position," the General stated.

Layla, not understanding the man's words, could only look fear-stricken at the craggy man. He raised his hand to hold up her chin, but the action was unexpectedly interrupted by Babar, who pushed his sister behind him and held his arm out to block the General's hand.

"Oh?" the General mused.

His soldiers immediately took action, yelling and cursing at the boy while pointing their weapons at him and attempting to pull him away. The General authoritatively lifted his hand, signaling for his men to stop, and so they did.

"Who are you?" the man asked in a flat tone.

Babar gulped. "I-I am Babar, nephew of the *Khan*, Aslan. I beg of you to reconsider. My sister is ill with a disease—I would not want to put the great King of New Jelistland in harm's way," Babar pleaded, hoping he would not slip up in his speech.

"That is unfortunate to hear." The General rested his cheek on his fist. "What type of disease is it?"

"Syphilis," Babar whispered so that only the General could hear. This area had suffered many diseases that the Jelists brought from their home continent, syphilis being one of them.

"Syphilis?" The General straightened up. "There has been not one reported case of syphilis from this village. Have you lied to the soldiers who came for documentation?"

Babar's shoulders tensed. "She was recently contracted, Sir," he reasoned.

"We are the first to visit here since spring," the General skeptically said, raising an eyebrow.

Babar could only curse the white men who had strict control over this village. They had to, given that this area was under their control.

"Unless you suspect that she contracted the disease from one of my men, which I find highly offensive, I'd say you are lying."

Babar gritted his teeth.

"I apologize. I am not too knowledgeable about the disease, so I had assumed she had it," Babar spoke through his clenched teeth.

"You Harais are not quite the brightest, after all." The General raised his glass for his subordinate to refill again. "I am bringing your sister to New Jelistland to present to the King. Think of it as an honor."

Babar balled his fists. His eyes scanned all the men around him. He then hesitantly opened his mouth, unsure if he should speak his mind.

"I can provide you with something more promising than my pesky sister," Babar proposed.

The General raised his eyebrow but kept quiet, urging him to continue.

"Information about the Zabduz tribe," Babar announced, somewhat reluctantly.

The General's men became rowdy, but once again, one hand from their superior silenced them instantly.

"You think you're clever, boy, eavesdropping on our conversation from earlier, but that village is part of the Confederation. The King would be greatly displeased if we were to incur his wrath prematurely," the man explained.

"I know how to make it seem like they've broken the code of our people. One word to the Confederation and all the Zabduz soldiers will be gone by sunrise."

"And why should I believe you?"

"You must know that the previous *Khan* was killed by one of their tribesmen. They killed my father," Babar spoke unwaveringly, though his trembling hands would say otherwise. "I want them dead just as much as you do."

Babar, of course, cared less for the vengeance of his dead family member and more for the protection of his living one. In fact, his father's murder was an accident. Babar was selfishly betraying a tribe they had close relations with for decades for his own benefit. He went on to tell the white men the weaknesses that he had observed from the Zabduz and the plans he strategized for that tribe to go down. He prayed the General would back off his sister after all this.

The next morning, numerous wagons wheeled their way through Ghantazar. The white men trotted in pretentiously as they brought in piles of gold, jewelry, and other valuables beyond Babar's imagination. Blood stained their uniforms; Babar knew it wasn't their own. Women and children, with muddy clothes and nasty bruises all over their bodies, walked in lines with ropes tied to their hands and connected to the next.

Babar could only stand in the distance as he watched the remnants of the carnage that had just occurred. A carnage that *he* caused.

A large hand slapped Babar's back. "You've done well, boy," the deep voice said.

Babar looked up to see the General resting his hand on Babar's shoulder, leaving a print of blood on his cream-colored *ka-mis*. Babar, unable to show his displeasure, slightly turned to face the man.

"I helped you, so you'll leave my sister as promised," Babar said firmly as he directly looked into the General's eyes.

With an expression so resolute, the older man couldn't help but roar in laughter.

"Your expression is as fierce as a lion, boy," he sniggered.

He fully turned Babar around from both of his shoulders to face him and then leaned down. With such a close distance, Babar could

see slight wrinkles around his eyes and an unshaven stubble beard. Piercing blue eyes made contact with brown.

"As a reward, I will present your sister to the King."

The suave face contorted to a devilish expression. Babar's heart dropped.

"Who knows, maybe your sister will please the King enough that you won't have to worry about us obliterating your little village."

Babar watched helplessly as the man walked away— the same man who ruined his life with a single sentence.

He should've just listened to his gut.

The streets were filled with neighbors and old family friends. They wept and wailed for the mercy of *Allah* as they clung to Layla lamently. The shaken girl walked to the wagon that would take her to her dreaded fate. Her expression was thankfully covered with a large red *lopata*.

With covered eyes on the brim of tears, she climbed onto the wagon and curled herself on the wooden floor scattered with alcohol bottles and bloodied sheets. Trying her best to make herself comfortable, she splintered her palm with the wood. She brought her palm to her mouth to clean the blood, but a hand quickly stopped her from doing so.

"*Lala!*" Layla cried out but quickly quieted when she saw her brother bring his finger to his lips. Babar swiftly removed the splinter from his sister's hand with the tip of his knife and began applying pressure to her wound to stop the bleeding.

"I need you to listen to me carefully." Babar's tone was solemn. "I'm going to create a distraction. I want you to take the chance to run away as fast as possible."

Before Layla could respond, Babar quickly began sharply hitting the back of his knife against a piece of flint. As soon as a fire sparked, Babar threw the flint onto the carriage and grabbed onto Layla.

"Layla! Come on!"

Babar turned to run, however, he noticed that his sister was resisting his pull.

"I can't, *Lala*. If I go now, what's going to happen to the rest of the village?" she protested, not budging from her place.

"Aslan *Kakaji* will deal with it!"

"He's been gone for more than a month now! They're going to kill us just like how they unmercifully killed the Zabduz! I can't leave!" the girl cried.

"Layla, you do not know what awaits a girl like you." He gripped her shoulders. "They'll strip you of your dignity in ways you cannot imagine. You need to go."

"*Lala—*"

"Just listen to me, you stubborn girl!"

The fire made contact with the spilled alcohol, and the cart instantly went ablaze. The roaring flames grew in size, towering over all the men and their treasures.

"Put the fire down! The girl's in there!" the General roared.

The soldiers threw blankets, sheets, and water in an attempt to subdue the surging flame. The villagers watched in terror knowing that the *Khan's* niece was in the midst of it all. Finally, with great effort, the fire finally died down.

"Check if the girl's alive," the General commanded. The men moved the sheets to see the state of the cart,

"She's gone," his right-hand man announced.

The women cried upon hearing the news. The General clicked his tongue in irritation.

"That damn girl was supposed to get us on the King's good side," he spat, enraged by his plans going amiss.

Before he could take his anger out on any nearby object, the glistening of a *shisha* caught his eye.

The General instructed his men to check under the cart, and to their luck, laid Layla, curled up and shivering. Though the *lopata* that still covered her was slightly burnt, she, overall, was unaffected.



ed by the fire. The General grabbed the young girl by her arm and roughly pulled her out.

"Did you do this?" the General barked, pulling the girl close to him.

Layla could smell alcohol reeking from his breath. She did not reply.

"This stupid girl can't even understand what we are saying," the General grumbled before throwing her to Bell, his lieutenant. "We will waste no more time. Begin heading out now!" he ordered.

His men began moving their luggage in an orderly fashion. The General's right-hand man tightly grabbed Layla by her wrist and dragged her onto the wagon. As the horses guided them away, Layla looked back through her *lopata* and desolately watched her home village become smaller and smaller. The chatter and cries of concern from the townsfolk faded until it was completely diminished. The unfamiliarity of her situation and surroundings made her stomach churn.

Quickly after reaching the docks, they began unloading all the contents in the carts onto the ship. The captured women and children were forced to huddle in a corner of the deck. None of them dared to say a peep when the men pushed and yelled.

At least we're in this together, Layla couldn't help but think to herself.

One of the Jelist soldiers muttered to the lieutenant, who very much still had a tight grip around Layla's wrist.

"Sir, one of them whores is not complying," she heard the soldier say. Layla looked upon the deck and saw a woman desperately begging for the freedom of the child in her arms.

Bell momentarily glanced at the commotion.

"Kill her," he unmercifully instructed the soldier.

Layla flinched. The soldier nodded his head before turning to carry on his order. In the spur of the moment, Layla jumped in front of the soldier.

"She has a child-!" she protested, but the soldier only shoved her to the side.

Bell's bony fingers ferociously squeezed Layla's wrist before dragging her into a cabin. The right-hand man threw her into the room, causing her to painfully fall onto the ground, and he slammed the cabin door with such force that shook the room.

Layla stayed put, shocked about what had just occurred. It was not that she was unaware of how cruel the Jelists were. She had read countless books on the brutality of the Jelists. They came from a far-away land and settled in Haraiva passively just to kill tens of thousands of Harai like wolves in sheep's clothing. Yet, the expression of the woman holding onto her child with her dear life lingered in her mind. The woman, whose body was probably already a hundred feet underwater.

After close to two hours, the ship set sail. Layla watched as the boat swam away from her homeland with a pit of anxiety in her stomach. Not only was this the first time she was on a boat, but this was also the first time she had ever left Haraiva, let alone Ghantazar.

The door abruptly swung open, startling Layla. She jumped up from the bed and quickly readjusted the *lopata* over her head as the General walked in. The man pulled a chair in front of Layla and sat down. He motioned Layla to do so as well, which she so hesitantly did.

He observed Layla for what seemed like an eternity before he opened his mouth.

"You know, it's quite heroic, what you did. I almost find it tear-jerking," the General propped his leg on his knee and leaned back. "I'm not referring to that little fuss you made on deck."

Layla remained quiet.

"Don't understand what I'm saying?" the General mocked as he uncrossed his legs and leaned forward. "It seemed you understood what Bell was saying perfectly fine. You even spoke to one of my soldiers! It must be a miracle, right?"

He brought his face so close that their noses nearly touched.

"Why don't you take that red scarf off your head?" the General asked.

Layla continued to not speak. The General snatched the *lopata* from her head to reveal not Layla's face, but instead Babar's.

"You made no effort to even dress up as your sister!" the General howled in laughter as he looked up and down at Babar who wore the same clothes that he wore to the banquet. "You think just putting a red scarf on your head would fool me?"

"I'm here, though," the boy muttered.

"You are here because I find you amusing," the General chuckled. "Nothing is stopping me from turning this ship around and massacring your whole village."

"Then you would have cut my throat the moment you found me under that cart," Babar spat.

The General's grin widened as he leaned back.

"How old are you, boy?"

"Seventeen."

"Well boy, what would a kid like you have to offer? Humor me." The man crossed his arms and pleasingly watched Babar scramble.

"What I know of the Zabduz is just a small fraction of what I know about the Confederation. They are stronger than you think. Do not underestimate us Harai," Babar said defiantly.

The General chortled.

"If you think my words are just a bluff and find me useless, feel free to execute me. However, please leave my village be."

The General smirked.

"We'll see if you uphold your words, Babar."

Babar did not sleep that night. His mind raced with regrets from his past and suspense for his future. Soon, Sunlight began shining through the windows, touching his eyes softly. Babar promptly looked out the window. There, he saw a coastline. *New Jelistland*. As they approached the land, Babar began to see highly dense housing and great amounts of pollution. Babar assumed, by the urban setting so foreign to him, that they were docking at the port in the capital.

The door slammed open, and the General's lieutenant walked in.

"Get out," Bell spat before stomping out.

Babar collected himself and held the folded red *lopata* close to his chest as he crept out of the cabin and followed Bell. The taller man glanced back at the shorter man and cackled.

"You Harai are sly, huh?"

Words that sounded like a compliment were filled with ridicule. The slouching lieutenant led Babar to a carriage stationed on the boardwalk. Babar briefly looked back at the distressed women and children on deck before stepping into the carriage.

Inside, he met eyes with the already seated General and internally cursed. He carefully sat himself and tried his best to seem as small and insignificant as possible to not incur the wrath of the man sitting in front of him.

The carriage started moving, and the General, with crossed arms and legs, rested his eyes. Babar took the opportunity to curiously peek out the window where he was and was finally able to see the essence of the capital. It was more industrialized than the rural villages in Haraiva, and the culture definitely was overwhelming, especially when it came to clothing. The streets were filled with women with bare arms and exposed collarbones and men barely dressed at all. He watched as both men and women intermingled with chatter and casual touches. Babar could only shiver.

"Close the curtain," the General ordered.

Babar immediately complied. The rest of the ride consisted of complete silence. Babar felt awkward, but he knew that anything that he would say would be deflected by the grumpy man. After what seemed to be an hour, the carriage finally came to a halt. The General threw Babar a brown shawl and instructed him to wrap it to hide himself. With his vision partially blocked, he could only see the General's legs, so he followed the older man's legs out of the carriage and into an unspecified building. The polished white stone tiles already gave Babar an idea of where he was. Large double doors opened and they both entered.

"General William!" he heard a youthful male voice cheer. "I'm glad you've come back safe."

"Your Majesty," the General greeted formally.

Babar internally gasped at the presence of the King. He watched as a new pair of shorter legs strode to the General. The quality of his pointed-toe shoes reaffirmed his vast wealth. The King hugged the General tenderly.

"You must tell me all the stories of your journey!" he said joyfully.

Babar watched as the King's feet turned to him.

"Who have you brought?" the King asked.

"I've brought a Harai boy," the General explained while giving Babar a slight nudge.

Babar unraveled the shawl covering himself and clutched both the shawl and his sister's *lopata* while looking down timidly.

"He is knowledgeable about the Confederation. I thought he could help us with our plan."

Babar noted the word "plan." The King approached Babar and lifted his chin up. There, Babar was able to take in his appearance. He always envisioned the King to be a repulsive old glutton, however, the man in front of him was completely different from his imagination. Appearing to be in his mid-thirties, the King had luscious platinum blonde hair, bright blue eyes, and a lean figure. He wore white clothing which gave the illusion of being bright and holy; Babar was captivated by the angelic sight.

Most importantly, the King seemed docile.

He noticed a young girl, similar to his age, standing behind the King.

'She must be the princess,' Babar assumed.

"What's your name, child?" the King asked in a sweet tone.

"I am Babar," the boy introduced himself nervously as he stared back at the smiling eyes.

"I welcome you, Babar!"

The older man wrapped his arms around him. Babar froze in his embrace.

"If only you could help me with this little problem I'm having..." The King pulled away with a sorrowful expression. "Could you help me?"

And so Babar did. For a whole week, he lived in luxury.

A month later, the Jelists celebrated the capture of one of Haraiva's trading posts. There were 437 casualties and 201 deaths—all Harai.

Babar watched in horror as groups of Harai were rounded up like sheep. They cried for mercy, but the soldiers instilled fear with methods crueler than what he saw when he was with the General's squad. Babar ran to the King, hoping that he would put a stop to the savageness of the soldiers, but looking at the King's face, all he could see was joy. Genuine joy.

He first saw the King as an angel, but what stood before him was not holy at all. It was the devil himself.

"Babar!" the King proudly called out.

Babar's heart beat out of his chest.

"You're our hero!"

His breath became short.

"Everyone! Here is our hero!"

Babar stepped back in an attempt to get away but the King locked him in his arms.

He felt all the scrutinizing gazes fall upon him. Shame washed over him as all the Harai wore a betrayed expression. One of the boys, resisting the soldier's hold, screamed.

"You traitor!"

Babar really wished for his *Kaka* to be here.

Since that day, a few of the captured Harai were assigned to work in the Palace, one of them being the boy who called him a traitor. Babar felt a great gravitation towards the boy. He was reluctant at first due to his embarrassment, but knowing that there were

other Harai in the palace, Babar couldn't help but approach him. He would follow him wherever he went, whether it was the kitchen or the horse stables. He would even trail behind him from a distance whenever he walked down the corridors. He knew he was acting childish, but he could not stop. At first, the boy would turn his face in anger or curse at him, but as the visits became more frequent, the boy grew quieter. Soon, the boys began to exchange words.

They became inseparable. Whenever Babar had a chance away from the General or the King and their never-ending questions, Babar would rush to the boy, who would do the same.

"Why are you helping them?" the boy asked one day.

They sat atop the roof of the stables, gazing at the stars in the middle of the night. The boy, Ayan, turned his head to look at Babar, awaiting his answer.

"They were going to take my sister as a gift to the King," Babar said as he continued to watch the stars. He didn't want to admit that he was downright terrified of the Jelists. "So I secretly came in place of my sister."

"You must be close with your sister."

"I am," Babar smiled. "My mother died from childbirth, and my father was killed by a neighboring tribe. Our uncle took us in, however, he was out of the house most of the time. So really, it had just been me and her."

Babar shrugged his shoulders. Ayan's gaze lingered on Babar, before looking back at the sky.

"I had a younger sister as well," Ayan said. "We were born twelve years apart, so I treated her like my child." He giggled as he reminisced about the past. "We were separated after the Jelists attacked. I need to find her." He whispered.

This time, Babar looked at Ayan.

Ayan spoke about his times with his sister in their village. He told Babar many stories; of how his sister's first word was "Ayan," of how he and his friends used to play in the river near their house,

and so on. Seeing hope twinkle in the other boy's eyes, Babar began to wonder how someone could be so optimistic and pure. Babar knew Ayan was aware that his sister could possibly be dead, but he let him talk as much as he wanted.

They both spent the entire night exchanging stories from their childhood. They laughed and cried. Ever since Babar left Ghantazar, he finally found someone he could confide in. That night caused some introspection on Babar's part, and so the night after, Babar attempted to escape.

The General plunged a knife into Ayan's chest.

The young boy shrieked in pain, before collapsing after William drew the knife back out fiercely.

"Ayan!" Babar cried out as he rushed to the injured boy's side. "Sir! Why would you—"

"Babar," The ice-cold voice silenced Babar immediately. "You may have betrayed your people, but you can never be treacherous to us."

Babar looked up at the vicious man that loomed over him. The man's blue eyes were blood-red, resembling that of a monster's.

"Pull something like that again, and I'll personally drive a sword right through your sister's heart and wipe your small village off the map," he threatened.

Babar trembled violently as he watched the man walk away.

"Babar," Ayan groaned.

Putting his attention back on Ayan, Babar began applying pressure to the injured boy's wound.

"It's okay," Babar reassured. "Everything will be okay."

"Babar *Jaan*."

"After you heal from this wound, we'll go out to find your sister!"

"Babar *Jaan*, don't cry," Ayan smiled.

Babar did not notice that tears were streaming down his face. Ayan raised a shaky hand to wipe his cheeks.

"We'll reunite soon, *InshaAllah*," he whispered.

The smile persisted on his face as his hand dropped and became limp. All Babar could do was hold him tightly. Tears would not stop falling as he looked down on his dear friend, so much so that the cold face in front of him was all blurry.

"Ayan, please don't leave me," he choked, "I have no one here, Ayan, please wake up."

No response from the boy.

"Ayan *Jaan*, I am so sorry, please forgive me," he sobbed through his words. "This is my fault, I admit this is all my fault, so please, open your eyes?"

"What about your baby sister? We have to find her!"

He did not know why he looked expectantly at his friend's face. He was destroying his own country for his selfishness. He ruined innocent people's lives because of his cowardice.

He killed his own dear friend because of his naivety.

He did not deserve the peace he confided in when he was with Ayan. He did not deserve it at all.

William entered a dimly lit chamber. The refined intrinsic interior of the walls was overshadowed by the mess. Books, clothes, and wine bottles were scattered all over, along with shards of broken vases and various other ornaments. In the middle of the room were two couches facing each other and a table in between. The table had candles illuminating the room and stacks of papers with illegible writing. There were also numerous types of bottles, both empty and full, standing on the table.

The General approached the couches and watched as a lounged man brought a bottle above his chin. His unkempt long curly hair covered his unshaven face, and his brown eyes were haggard. The General repulsed at the man's disheveled appearance.

"You're acting like an animal, Babar," William grabbed the whiskey bottle from the man's frail hands.

"Is that not what Harai are?" Babar slurred his words as he leaned back, resting his throbbing eyes.

The General went silent for a moment, leering at the state of the younger man, before letting out a loud sigh.

"You need to stop whatever you are doing with the princess," the General said as he plopped himself down on the other couch.

"And what am I doing?" Babar narrowed his eyes.

"You may fool that little girl, but you cannot fool me. If the King were to find out that you seduced his precious daughter to get intel on his activities, I'm sure he will find another Harai to extort."

"He won't. No other Harai is as back-stabbing and cowardice as I am," Babar grabbed the bottle back from the General and took a large gulp. "And I am not 'seducing' the princess, what can I do if the girl fancies me? Don't know what she sees," he muttered through his pale, chapped lips. "And anyway, there is nothing I can do about knowing the King's plans. I am still stuck here."

"You continue this and your head will be presented on a stake in front of the whole kingdom!"

"Do you worry for me, William?" Babar teased.

In less than a second, William was hovering on top of Babar with a knife resting on his neck. The speed of his movements caused the candles on the table to sway, leaving a moment of darkness in the room.

"Do not play with me, Harai boy. Don't forget I'm the reason you are here in the first place."

"And I am forever grateful to you, for ruining my life entirely and ensuring my path to Hell."

"You've grown haughty," William sneered.

Babar poured the bottle of alcohol over William's head.

"Just learning it from you," Babar grinned.

They glared at each other for some time, before William retracted his knife and placed it back into its sheath. He furiously wiped his face with his hand.

"Listen, Sir General," Babar sighed. "I hold loyalties to no one, even if they are devoted to me. I do everything for my own benefit, I do not give a damn about anybody else. Why do you think I still



follow the King? Whether the princess finds out and feels wronged, how she feels is of no concern for me,” Babar preached.

“You say that as if you are not here for the protection of your sister.” William plopped back on the couch.

“If I were truly a good person as you think, I would’ve killed myself the night I entered this palace. But here I am, continuing to live and kill thousands of my own people to preserve my own life because I am too much of a coward to die.”

Babar popped another bottle open.

Suddenly, double doors swung open. The King rushed in giddily as if he were a child on their birthday.

“Your Majesty.” The General stood up.

Ignoring the General’s greeting, the King grabbed Babar’s arm harshly. He pulled him up from his seat and dragged him out of the room. Whether it was the strength of his arm or the strength of his position, Babar made little effort to lessen the painful grip on his arm. He decided instead to protest audibly.

“Your Majesty, you are hurting me,” Babar spoke calmly, but the hold only became more firm.

“Babar, it’s finally time!” the King exclaimed. “You must be there when we finally destroy Haraiva and make it part of New Jelistland!”

He rushed through the corridors, leading him to a balcony that overlooked the whole capital.

“We’ll expand the capital,” he raised his arm towards the sea. “Make more farmland, and enslave all Harai so that even the low class will live in luxury.” The King turned back to grasp Babar’s arms. “We’ll place a large statue for you to honor your name. We’ll name it ‘Babar the Turncoat!’”

Babar clenched his fist.

“Your name will go down in history!”

The King then cheerily turned to sentimentally watch over his capital.

“We’ve got the confederation surrounded. Tomorrow, we set off at dawn.” the King said.

Babar was helpless.

Babar watched the terrain of Haraiva. The terrain that he was so familiar with. The wind soothingly brushed against his skin as he relished in the warmth. He was physically made for Haraiva. The abundance of lush forests and rivers juxtaposed the crowded and grimy streets of New Jelistland. He had the audacity to choose that over this serene verdant home of his. But this place was no longer his home, it hadn’t been for years—New Jelistland was.

He slightly leaned towards William, causing their shoulders to barely touch. William raised his eyebrow at the man, before focusing on rearing the horses. The General then grabbed the bottle out of Babar’s hand and took a large gulp, despite Babar’s protests. He shoved the drink back into Babar’s hands and whipped his mouth with his sleeve. Babar gave a look of disgust before letting out a chuckle.

“What are you giggling like a girl about?” William glared.

“I was just thinking about the first time I was on a carriage.”

He was downright petrified of William and wouldn’t dare to utter a word to him. Now, he couldn’t help but argue with the man every second of the day.

Suddenly, the carriage flipped to its side. William swiftly grabbed Babar and covered him from the debris, but that did not spare him completely from being embedded with glass that shattered from the windows. Bandits began surrounding the carriage.

The Jelist guards hopped off their carts and got into position to defend the carriage that the King resided in. Babar crouched down to hide himself as the battle commenced. His worry seemed to increase as he noticed that the bandit’s strength was on par with the Jelist soldiers. They were formidable opponents.

“What’s going on?” the defenseless King asked as he foolishly climbed out of the carriage.

One of the bandits crept their way behind the unguarded monarch and took the opportunity to strike. His plan ceased, however, when Babar slammed the whiskey bottle that he protected so dearly against the enemy’s head and used the broken glass to stab into the man’s neck. He placed his foot on the fallen body. The bottle

dripped with blood and whiskey, but Babar raised the bottle above his head and licked it in hopes of getting those few drops of alcohol. Finding no luck, he flung the broken bottle to the side and kicked the body to release his anger.

"Babar!" the King cried out. Babar raised his arm protectively in front of the King.

"These are not bandits, Your Majesty," Babar said. "They're the remaining of the Confederation."

The King gave him a bewildering look before letting out a laugh.

"The last members, huh? This is perfect!" the King exclaimed. "William!" he called out to the General. "Finish them and make sure to leave not a single body with a head!"

Babar could not understand the delusion of the King. There was no clear winning side in this battle as both sides were losing soldiers at an alarming rate.

"Halt,"

An authoritative voice was heard. The still-standing Harai immediately put their weapons down and jumped back from the Jelists. A tall, broad-shouldered man, with a mehndi-dyed beard and sharp features, walked to the center and stood in front of the King. Babar stared dumbfounded at the man in front of him. He couldn't move, he couldn't talk, he couldn't *breathe*.

"Babar," the man said.

"Aslan *Kakaji*," Babar could barely utter.

His uncle looked down at him with contempt.

"I knew that my missing nephew was involved when those savages predicted every one of our moves," Aslan spat out.

Babar wished that his uncle was saying it in jest, but his uncle's face indicated not a single bit of humor.

"You may have protected your sister, but you exchanged all the Harai for it. Your father named you Babar in hope that you grow up with courage and triumph equal to that of a lion. But, just as lions are known for their pride, they are also notorious for their cowardice," Aslan said as he pointed his sword at his nephew. "You, Babar,

are a coward. You are a traitor to Haraiva. You've lived as one, you will die as one, and you will be known as one."

He raised his sword to strike at Babar, but instead of clashing with the traitor, he clashed with the General instead. William managed to jump in between the two and strike his sword down at Aslan, but Aslan swiftly evaded the attack.

"Your opponent is me," William declared.

And so they fought to the point of exhaustion, yet they still persevered to be the last person standing. Though William would admit that Aslan was a worthy battle partner, he was not strong enough for him.

"*Kaka!*" Babar screamed out as he ran to his unvictorious uncle.

Aslan fell to the ground, clutching his fatal wound inflicted by William's blade. With hazy eyes, Aslan looked up at his nephew.

"You are no child of mine," his voice rasped. "May *Allah* forgive you."

The older man's body stilled. Babar looked down at the lifeless body of his uncle lying in front of him. He could not take his eyes off his uncle's open ones. He noticed every wrinkle his uncle gained throughout the years Babar was gone, from age and from stress. He missed so much of his precious uncle's life, as his uncle his own. They were supposed to be together, with Layla, in their excessively embellished yet cozy home back in *Ghantazar*.

Aslan *Kakaji*, the man who benevolently took him and Layla in after their parents died. Who would pat his back and laugh loudly whenever he was proud of him. Who would throw Layla up in the air whenever she looked cute in her new *kamis*. Who loved them like his own. The same man who was staring up in the sky with bloodshot eyes and a non-rising chest. Babar itched for his spilled alcohol.

"*Kaka*," Babar whined, just like when he would beg him to tell him a story.

He curled forward to place his forehead on the older man's chest and clenched the man's shirt tightly.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," he sniveled softly.

The calls from William brought Babar back to a composed state. He slowly parted from his uncle and got up.

The King ran to him and gave him a hug.

"We did it!" the King cheered.

His arms were tightly wrapped around the younger man, but Babar left his own arms hanging. He slowly reached for his belt and grabbed the hidden knife. He did not care if the remaining soldiers were to stop him. The younger man raised the knife behind the King's back.

His hands trembled as he held the knife still. He wanted to kill him, he needed to, but he could not.

Babar, the man who had no loyalty to anyone, could not even kill the man who took his family away from him. Who put his people in chains and treated them as livestock. He just killed a Harai as easily as finishing a bottle of whisky, yet he could not drive a knife into the tyrant's heart.

Because he was scared.

He was a coward.

All of a sudden, the King's body jerked. Bewildered, Babar gawked as the King gasped out loud and slumped down out of Babar's hands.

"Ba...bar?" the King muttered.

Babar was dumbstruck, watching the King choke for air. He slowly raised his head and saw the man, with a navy blue uniform and ribbons on his breast pocket, pointing a gun at him.

"Go, Babar," William ordered. "Go, and never look back."

"William—"

"Go, before I change my mind and shoot you right here!" he roared.

Babar looked back at William's furrowed brows. He looked so much older than the first time he properly saw his face on that ship. The General's eyes grew soft and he laughed less. Babar could tell he lost his drive. Baba pursed his lips before saying his last words to the white man, his only friend, he thought he would die together with.

"William, shall we reunite in Hell."

And so Babar left and never met William again.

"Lala!" his sister yelled out, calling him for some unknown reason.

Babar, too absorbed in his book of the battle of Fort Ralang, chose to ignore his sister's calls.

"Babar!"

"What did you just call me?!" Babar jumped up from his seat and ran downstairs to chase his sister around the house until their uncle came home.

They both jumped into their uncle's large bear-like arms and relished in his warmth. They told him how their days were as he walked them, hand in hand, back to their living room.

"Aslan *Kakaji*! Roshina said that I don't look good in blue," Layla said woefully.

"You look good in every color, *gudai*," Aslan reassured his niece as he used his free hand to smoothen her hair.

"Aslan *Kakaji*, could you tell me about the battle of Fort Ralang?"

Babar, with sparkling eyes, sat in front of his uncle.

"Of course, *bacha*. Sit closer."

And so they spent the whole night with laughter and warm milk.

When did everything go so wrong?

Babar trudged along the path. He could hear music coming from the villages he passed by, all celebrating their independence from the Jelists.

After some time, his surroundings began to become more familiar. Every step seemed heavier than its last. His track went to a stop as he began to admire the grand stone that he and the village children used to climb on top of.

"Babar?" he heard a woman's voice call from the side. "Babar, is that you?"

He turned to the voice and recognized the small lady immediately.

"Roshina," he said, remembering his sister's best friend.

She lost the baby fat on her face and became taller. She definitely grew to be a beauty. Seeing how different Roshina became, Babar began to imagine how his sister would look.

"My goodness, Babar! It's been years! We all assumed you wouldn't come back!" she cried out as she pushed her basket to her hip. "Where have you been?"

"Roshina, I...I'd like to meet my sister first," he said.

Though the reunion was sentimental, the only thought in his mind was to see his sister.

Roshina hesitated before she began walking.

"Follow me, I'll take you to Layla," she spoke softly.

Babar quickly followed.

They walked silently, however, Babar's mind was nowhere near silent. He looked around at the familiar yet not-so-familiar village. He reminisced about the houses and stores that were still in the same spots, especially the candy shop that he and Layla would secretly visit every night. He noticed new structures that were built along streets that they would skip down upon. His anticipation was already loud enough for him. All he wanted was his baby sister.

The houses became fields, then the fields became trees.

"Roshina," Babar couldn't help but call out, confused about where the woman was leading him. Before he could say another word, the woman abruptly stopped. Babar looked forward and what came in his vision was an entrance to a cemetery. Roshina continued to walk into the graveyard and stopped at a small grave. Gorgeous vibrant flowers flourished around the stone and the name 'Layla Ghantazar Khan' was engraved into it.

He dropped down to his knees in front of his baby sister's grave.

"A year after you had left, she was married to a merchant," Roshina explained as Babar wept. "She died during childbirth."

"Childbirth?" Babar swung his head at Roshina.

He opened his mouth but could not find the correct words to say.

"Is...is the baby alive?" Babar finally was able to mutter, wishing that Roshina could not hear to give him an undesired answer.

Before she could open her mouth, the soft crunching of leaves was heard from the entrance.

"Auntie! *Zarsha, zarsha!*" a small soft voice came.

"Slow down, *ma bache*, you'll trip!"

Babar quickly stood up as a little girl looking to be the age of three skipped to Layla's grave. Abruptly stopping in front of Babar, she looked up curiously at the mysterious man.

"She looks exactly like Layla," Babar whispered as he crouched down to meet eye level with the toddler.

He remembered how Layla looked when she was this age, so he knew it would be an understatement to say that the child was a carbon copy.

"*Ya Rabb*," Babar called out to God, which he hadn't done in years.

He held the confused child delicately. Feeling the drops of tears falling on her shoulder, the baby girl steadily raised her arms and patted Babar's shoulder, causing Babar to let out a more violent sob.

"I will protect you to atone for my failure to protect your dear mother," Babar said through his tears as he tightened his hold around his niece.

Babar couldn't help but think that this must be a chance given by *Allah* to amend all his wrongs. Babar reached for his pocket to grab a small tattered red piece of cloth to hand to the girl.

"I will protect you," Babar voiced softly. "Even if I have to betray the world to do it."

## PASHTO GLOSSARY

*Attan* – A traditional dance that is performed in a circle

*Bache* – child; *ma bache* would be *my child*

*Gudai* – doll

*InshaAllah* – God willing (Arabic)

*Jaan* – Term of endearment

*Ji* – Has multiple meanings: yes in a respectful tone

*Khan* – Ruler

*Kaka/Kakaji* – Paternal Uncle

*Lala* – Older brother

*Lopata* – A scarf

*Mama/Mamaji* – Maternal Uncle

*Mithai* – sweets, usually given out on celebratory occasions

*Rubab* – A string instrument commonly used in Afghanistan

*Shisha* – Small mirrors embroidered in fabric

*Tappa* – Pashto poetry

*Toshak* – Floor cushion or narrow mattress

*Ya Rabb* – O God (Arabic)

*Zarsha* – hurry

## SPAGHETTI

CAROLYN HIBBS

As he stared across the kitchen into the dining room, the spaghetti grew cool and flaccid underneath the weight of the meatballs. It seemed to call out to him, and he merely stood there, unsure of what to do next. The spaghetti was incredibly moist, pleading to be mixed in with the sauce beneath its shiny surface.

As he looked around, he forgot why he was in the kitchen to begin with. The spaghetti sat alone, cold and silent. He tried preparing a side dish, but his mind grew weary. He reached for a fork, hoping that it would be what he was looking for, but it was petty and getting sweaty, as he had one at the table already. His gaze pierced the table, neatly set. He sat near his dying creation, the plate of spaghetti. The sticky, sloppy chill neared its core.

As he stalled, he slowly and deliberately put it back in the microwave. He closed his eyes, his vision covered by a pensive blanket of darkness.

As he drifted through the depths of his mind, his questions were an abyss of confusion. His purpose in the kitchen was clear, yet he chose to delve deeper; a memory from his first day wistfully surfaced.

*“Are you okay?” his roommate asked, voice filled with genuine shock. He was crying in his dorm room, wiping his eyes until they nearly bled. “I know it’s hard living away from your parents like this. Is there anything else you need help with?”*

*“Who am I?” he blubbered.*

*“That’s for you to decide. There must be something you like.”*



*After several minutes of dead silence, he spoke up.*

*"I don't know much about myself. I would watch cartoons and read comics when I was sad."*

*"It sounds like you'd like animation."*

*"My mom said I draw like a lobotomized gorilla, so I never drew."*

*"You won't know until you try it."*

Against all odds, he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in animation. The best house that he could afford afterwards was a small apartment, but he had truly made it his home.

As he pondered, a phone call woke him up from his thoughts. The phone rang, but he continued ogling at the microwave's buttons, their sheen worn down by years of abuse.

"Hello, this is a reminder for Paul Higgins. Your interview with Walt Disney Animation Studios starts in ten minutes."

As panic set in, the answers to his questions drifted further away. Anxiety crumbled the trenches of his subconscious. The unease was nearly hypnotic, sending him into a nervous trance. He took his dinner out of the microwave. He sat down with his piping plate of pasta and tried to savor what little time he had left to himself. If he didn't pick up the phone on time for the interview, his countless hours studying would be for naught. He was soon overcome by such thick confusion that he forgot about even forgetting about his spaghetti.

CREATIVE  
NONFICTION

NONFICTION

NONFICTION

CREATIVE

## MILES WILLIAMS

I see myself in the world. Like echoes of my ancestors, the fabric of my being is woven into the textures, colors, and smells of everything I interact with. And in those echoes, I find love. My skin black as rich dirt after morning rain; my sinews activate to raise me from my comfort. As my pupils wrestle with the first light of the day, I begin the work. *They* watch me work. They being the collective millions of microorganisms latched onto my body to sustain a life that will last far shorter than mine. I wonder, did our ancestors interact? The shared symbiotic lineage of our kind supports each other and maintains life like my great great great grandfather did when beginning our family tree at the Lovick Family Plantation.

I grab a well-worn steel shovel from the garage. Its wooden shaft absorbs the sun's loving warmth as I exit. I am not sun-kissed. My black skin is carved from the hearty oak, meant to endure our star's attempts at fond pursuit. My body changes, the fibers in my arm straining as the shovel is plunged into the dirt. Upon my breast lies an unwanted mosquito, nonconsensually taking and giving fluids. My ancestors know this watcher. The plague bringer, the deadly, the end of days, the pale wisps on the breeze demolishing homes. And to exact my ancestral justice, I do what was done to us. I slap it and continue my work. As I labor, I know I have been changed. Ever so slightly, I am not who I was minutes ago, becoming new with every pump of my heart. The "bite" will be irritating, and will eventually go away. I think of the ways they changed, *were changed*, by their work.

I displace rich dirt, moving its community of particles from its ancestral home to a pile on the side of our garden. The birds chirp incessantly, and my lower back hurts. I continue working. In the dirt, I see my mother. Her strong cheekbones and slightly yellow-tinged sclera highlight her deep, dirt-brown eyes. Her rich, textured skin glows with her favorite moisturizer. Her freckle-like skin tags mounds of soil that my body has begun to emulate. The sun's persistent touch reminds her of home; Accra Ghana where he pesters the closest potential lovers first, and the most. Slowly my skin will darken to emulate the dirt, my mother, my cousins, and the grandfather I never met. As the hole gains depth, I rest the shovel against the side of the house. The aches along my tailbone are stronger now, and my exposed arms and forehead uncomfortably push salty sweat from my pores.

In my hands, I hold a pot. By now, the sun has moved towards the center of the sky, the birds continue to chirp, and the sun's prodding has become more incessant. Again I have been changed, now something more than I was. I feel it on my skin, the air I breathe, the stories whispered in the light voices of the sparrow. I deshell compacted soil from its black plastic, a texture held together by skinned veins weaving through its body. I place a frail, almost bare tree into the hole. A displacement. A rehoming. Its roots twitch for old soil, agitated by the light cooling breeze. Its muddy green trunk reaches and fragments into small, eager leaves spread wide to accept the star substance. The plant's anxious reaching reminds me of my father setting roots into the soil of Howard University, leaving his mother in Kinston, North Carolina to weave tendrils through a new soil. A rich, fruitful blackness vaguely reminiscent of his sparse home. I imagine the roots spiraling into the ground, splintering into offshoots of arms, searching for nutrients, connections, and establishment.

I have to sit now. My back's aching mocks the vagrant lover as if the stars' burn penetrated my skin to ignite a fire in my muscles. My asthmatic lungs ache for breath, pause, and expansion. I rest and

watch the product of my labor. The tree, like a foal or a lamb, shivers with the wind and acclimates to its new home. Its arms have not yet turned furnished with the products of its transition. I find myself, there. I hear myself in the oscillating buzz of curious wasps as they near and flee my ear. I feel myself in the skittering of small bugs, uprooted by the same hands that compulsively steal hairs from the follicles of my scalp.

*A future of ours*

*A love crafted by Their work*

*Tend your flames, our Love*

We transitioned—no—*were transitioned* by the world built around us. I will soon be more than I was, a future ordained by the struggle woven into the world. My breast is aflame, and my fat moves with the sway of the leaves. My glands ooze a new groove, a trumpeting siren song of my immutable transformation. I will watch the tree grow, as the plant watches my mother age, while my mother watches my body slowly, subtly change. And there, in the grass of my home, I take my first pill of estradiol.

## BLAKE

### ANONYMOUS

Blake's exactly what you'd expect from a Midwesterner. Their long, blonde hair rivaled the color of the burning Illinois sun, their bright eyes as blue as the country skies. They have seven siblings, grew up in the middle of nowhere, Illinois, and were an avid Republican when they were twelve. I was the first Indian person they ever met. Well, we never met in person. They'll never get to see my brown skin and eyes, as dull as the Maryland suburbs I grew up in.

But let's rewind back to August 2016, when I was eleven. I just got into playing Minecraft, and I found quite a few friends in the different Minecraft communities I've explored—but Blake stood out to me the most. We met by bumping into each other on a Harry Potter server, and after that, quick greetings were exchanged. I got their phone number, and we began to FaceTime every day, usually when they were hunched over their desk, painting cards for their many friends' birthdays or drawing cartoon characters from the new show they started hyper-fixating on. I'd just watch them and their creativity in awe. I always felt like an average eleven-year-old, maybe even below average compared to my peers in my talented and gifted program. But Blake always reassured me that I was amazing and perfect, just the way I was. It helped boost what little confidence I had at the time, so I wanted to help them, too. Blake was the talker, and I was the listener.

*saroja, can we talk?*

*always*

I'd listen to their rants about being one of the eldest in their family and having all the responsibility, about their terrible friends, and how much they missed their Mom when she was in prison.

But September came, and I was about to start middle school. My parents always wanted me to excel in school, so they told me to stop playing "pointless computer games." School became my sole purpose in life, so I stopped making time for fun. I stopped talking to Blake. I don't think Blake tried to reach out, either. I don't know why. Maybe they got busy with school, too.

I've thought about Blake a lot over the course of my teenage years, wondering what my life would've been like if I kept them in it. We didn't know each other that long, only for a month, but they left a lasting impact on me. I even got into art because of them, secretly scrawling away in math and science notebooks so my parents wouldn't see me "distracting myself." But eventually, the hole that Blake left in me was filled by the other friends I made over the years, and the hurt I had after leaving them became less and less.

However, we reunited when I was fifteen. I was bored out of my mind, and locked in my house in April of 2020. I scrolled through my contacts and found them again. I didn't expect an answer, but they responded: *who's this?*

Loaded question. I barely even remembered this kid from my youth. Would they remember what we did together? After all, we only talked to each other online for a month. But I decided to respond anyway with, *we used to play all those games together, remember? wanna play again?*

So it started.

Playing Minecraft didn't give us the same thrill we had when we were twelve, so we quickly outgrew it and began talking to each other about everything and anything.

Blake changed a lot. They knew Spanish, English, and Korean; were invited to participate in a summer program at Harvard; they were still a skilled artist; they were no longer a Republican; and they always knew how to make me blush.

*i like you, saroja*

*lol*

*no i do say it back*

*i like you too, blake*

Blake made me feel different—none of my crushes had me blushing and fumbling for words like they did. Every selfie I'd sent was met with a *gorgeous*, and every insecurity I felt was immediately washed away with a, *you're beautiful just how you are*. Their confidence was infectious, addictive, and I was my best self, my true self, with them. They made me feel beautiful, something I was struggling with as a teenager. And my insecurities were made larger by my family. Being stuck with them in the house didn't help much, either. Constantly rubbing Fair and Lovely cream into my pores to make me look lighter because my grandmother told me to, skipping out on meals because my grandmother thought I was fat, Blake was all I had for reconciliation.

I don't think I realized until it was too late that they were flirting with me because of my insecurities. How could someone actually like me? Half the time, I just assumed they were drunk, sipping red wine while they responded lovingly to whatever I said. They were an alcoholic.

They never said it outright, but I could tell on the days they'd spend hours without talking to me, only to say, *i was drinking a lot today*. Blake's family wasn't the best. Their parents were divorced, their Mom went to prison, and they had to take care of their seven siblings.

They had to release all that pent-up anger and sadness somehow.

On the day we stopped talking for good, they mentioned that they didn't drink that day so that they could actually be present for me. These were the last texts we shared.

*blake we're screwed*

*hey what's wrong? i didn't drink today if it helps. talk to me.*

Blake and I had to be kept a secret. My strict, Christian parents would never accept me talking to anyone online, let alone a nonbinary kid who flirts with me in every sentence.

I should've been smarter; I should've deleted my messages.

My parents checked my phone every once in a while when I was a teenager. I always hated it; it was the most intense form of invasion to me. I felt like I was constantly under surveillance. So, one night, they called me over to my room. Dad grabbed my phone out of my hands, and I watched him anxiously, praying he wouldn't see the messages. I sighed in relief as he handed my phone back to me, finding nothing out of the ordinary.

"Wait, let me see," Mom says, holding her hand out. Some days, she could be so caring and loving. Other days, I hated her.

I gave her my phone.

She quickly went to the iMessage app and found Blake, under a pseudonym, and found the number. The area code was definitely not from Maryland, and my parents immediately began grilling me for who they were. I made up a bad lie on the spot, "An old friend that moved to Illinois."

"Who?"

"Blake."

"Who's that? We never even heard of a Blake—"

"You don't know them, okay!"

"Them?" My Dad asked.

How could I even explain what nonbinary meant to my parents, who never even met a gay person? How could I explain that Blake went by different pronouns? I couldn't.

I managed a "They're nonbinary."

Dad looked up the meaning with a frown and told Mom. Mom pushed me down to the floor, slapping her palms all over my body, screaming, "Are you gay too?!" That day, I hated her. So much.

My phone was taken for a week, and I was ordered not to eat meals with my family. No one spoke a word to me, just eyeing me with disdain.

But after that week, they slowly "forgave" me, and I was welcomed back to the dinner table. Light conversation was made until we started laughing hard at something funny Mom experienced at work.

I wish I was more forward, brave enough to tell them that I was bisexual and Blake being nonbinary wasn't a bad thing. But I just wanted to be accepted again. Their straight, normal daughter was back. To this day, they still never bring it up, and I still haven't come out to them. I don't know if I ever will.

I lost Blake's phone number after my parents deleted it. I never bothered to memorize it, and I wish I did. I can never find them now—all I had was their first name and that they lived somewhere in Illinois. We didn't even have a proper goodbye. But I tell myself I moved on. After all, our romance only lasted two weeks.

I'm worried I'll never find a spark, the sparks I felt with Blake, with another person. I always imagine what it'd be like if I still had their number, if I saw them again.

So many what-ifs.

I'm worried I'll never move on, that their jokes will be the only ones that'll make me laugh, their smile will be the only one I yearn for, their voice the only one that can console me.

Maybe it would have ended badly anyways since they were an alcoholic. My friends never really liked that.

I just wish I had the chance to figure it out on my own. Do they still think of me?

But I hope Blake can find love, wherever they are. And I want them to know I'm sorry for leaving so abruptly.

I loved you.



# THE HYPOCRITE OATH

AUDREY GRUTZIK

The day I was born, I almost died. My mom's pregnancy had little complications up until she went into labor. As a first-time parent, she could be called overly cautious. For instance, she wouldn't go near the microwave and often listened to classical music while pregnant. My dad was extremely excited to have a daughter; he practiced swaddling until he was perfect and painted my room pink in anticipation. Both my parents did everything they could to have a healthy baby girl. On a warm spring day, my mom started experiencing what she thought to be labor pains. My dad, even more anxious than her, rushed her to the hospital—although not before he thoroughly packed some bags to my mom's annoyance. In a daunting hospital room, my mom was examined by doctors in crisp white coats, who then sent her home because it wasn't time yet. Back at home, she suffered. The pains were debilitating, and took away her ability to sleep or even think properly. My mom managed to hold out for two more days before she couldn't take it anymore. In the middle of the night, my dad drove my mom back to the hospital, where the doctors reluctantly induced her labor.

Several hours later, my mom rested in a standard hospital room. The room was warm, cream-colored, and seemed too small for the new family of three. My dad, as scared as ever, hovered over the nurse while she checked on me. I was a small, wrinkly six-pound baby born with a head full of dark hair, despite my current light hair. I was also...blue? Feeling like he was just being a nervous parent, my dad asked the nurse, "I think she looks blue?" Realizing that

he wasn't exaggerating, the nurse rushed me to the neonatal intensive care unit, the NICU. It was pneumonia and I had to stay in the NICU for a week before I could finally leave the hospital. Every day, the doctors in white coats would touch me while my parents were only allowed to look. The hospital had let them stay, giving them a new room. The room was cold and white, and although it was smaller than the previous room, it felt too big without their new baby. My mom still likes to complain to me about how she was unable to hold me until I was better, "I had to wait a whole week before I could hold you, you know!"

A week after I was born, my parents finally brought me home to our townhouse, dressed in a little purple dress full of tactile embroidered flowers. Although the start of my life had been rough, I didn't get sick again for an entire year, prompting my parents to brag to everyone that I would be a very healthy girl.

I was healthy for the most part, save for the yearly cold. Soon enough, I was nine years old and as rambunctious as ever. I was tall for my age and always covered in scrapes and bruises from roughhousing, so my mom tended to enroll me in sports camps during school breaks. That summer, my mom put me into a week-long indoor soccer camp to keep me out of trouble. The camp building was huge, fitting multiple soccer fields inside, with the musty smell of old turf overwhelming my nose as soon as I walked in. The vast ceilings concealed the fact that there were no windows, making the dimly lit place seem less like a prison for energetic children. Most memorably, the building was stifling hot—the camp counselors seemed to think that a single fan could cool the entire place off.

On my first day of camp, I arrived with my soccer ball in hand and was slammed with a tsunami of heat when I walked in. We had barely made it through introductions when my skin started to turn red, blistering into a painful rash running across my body. The panicked teenage counselors rushed me into their break room and called my mom, not knowing what to do. It seemed like I was having an allergic reaction; my skin was swollen and covered in scarlet hives

that itched and burned like hot embers on my skin. My mom came as fast as she could with medicine; I remember freaking out when I learned that Benadryl was a liquid and not a cream. The taste of the saccharine-sweet bubble gum-flavored medicine became a common factor in my life, so much so that anything resembling it still makes me want to throw up.

My never-ending journey to and from doctor's appointments started with that moment. I had never had an allergic reaction before, so my parents, as careful as ever, made an appointment with the best allergist they could find in our area, and soccer camp was put on a never-ending hiatus. The allergist scared me. Despite her name being "Dr. Sunshine," the only thing sunny about her was her frizzy red hair which stood out against her starched-stiff white coat. When I cried at the mention of having to do an allergy test, she told my mom to "fix my behavior." In my defense, I was only nine. Dr. Sunshine concluded that my skin was just sensitive and that I should continue to take antihistamines every day indefinitely. She switched me over from Benadryl to Zyrtec, trading in pink bubble-gum for artificial grape. What she didn't know was that I actually had a rare genetic condition causing my problems—a condition that hadn't even been discovered yet. Almost ten years later, I would be diagnosed.

The daily dose of artificial grape worked for a bit, but when I was fourteen, I had some new developments in my health. Out of nowhere, I would get sudden, sharp pains in my limbs that prevented me from doing anything until the pain went away. It felt as though someone were pouring boiling water through my veins. I would get dizzy often, my vision fading into a black static similar to an old television that had lost its signal. I passed out a few times. The hives returned, seemingly caused by a plethora of unrelated factors. At first, my parents didn't know what to do other than make an appointment with my pediatrician. She recommended that my parents make me an appointment with a pain management specialist who could help me with my debilitating pains. The specialist

was a short, bald man who kept bringing up the fact that he was an ex-ballet dancer. As of this day, he still holds the record for being the rudest doctor I have ever gone to—coming from someone who has visited dozens of doctors. He didn't examine me or even test me for any health problems. He just commented that it was "probably just anxiety" and that "chronic illnesses are trending with teenage girls online." After that incident, I became much more cautious around doctors; they were supposed to help me but very few did. The Hippocratic Oath? It was more like the Hypocrite Oath.

My mom was, and still is, the foundation of my healthcare journey. When we realized that there wouldn't be a quick fix to my illnesses, she jumped into action. My mom researched doctors and made appointments with those she thought were the best. She negotiated with my school to secure accommodations and to get me into the Home-Hospital Program when going to school became too difficult. My mom kept track of all the paperwork and doctor's notes in labeled file folders stuffed into an overflowing cabinet drawer. Her cautious nature and tendency to micromanage helped me; without my mom, I might have never gone to the doctors that ended up solving my mysterious illnesses.

I visited cardiologists, neurologists, endocrinologists, rheumatologists, pain management specialists, and allergists for years; however, most didn't have a clue as to what was wrong. Finally, when I was sixteen, I went to a cardiologist who decided to actually run some tests on me. He was a very old man with wispy white hair and had a very distinctive voice that sounded as if he was constantly nervous. I am very grateful that he decided to run some tests, because that day I received my first diagnosis. I was diagnosed with postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome (POTS), a chronic illness related to the heart. The key symptom of POTS is a significant jump in heart rate when standing or sitting up, at least 40 BPM in adolescents. This jump in heart rate can cause symptoms such as chest pain, dizziness, and even fainting. It had taken years, when all it really should have taken was one appointment. Getting diagnosed

was a relief, but I despised all the doctors who had chosen to skip a simple test. The test that diagnosed me was a tilt-table test; where a doctor measures your heart rate when lying down and then when standing up. This solved the mystery of my dizziness. However, I was still experiencing my other symptoms. Even when I did nothing, the pains would come and the hives were triggered by random things which didn't make sense to me.

The next two years were filled with trips to doctors and I was forced to learn to get used to my body. I was no longer playing sports because, no matter how short I played for, it would always leave me bedridden. Being stuck in bed was the worst feeling, since the world moved on while I just lay there. All I could do was close my eyes and try to sleep or stare at my blank white ceiling for hours. It felt like I was being left behind in life while my friends and family could experience theirs to the fullest. When I was eighteen, we ran out of options in Maryland, so my mom drove me a few hours to go to an allergist in Virginia. The allergist was a short blonde lady who opted to wear regular clothes instead of the trademark doctor's white coat.

When my mom mentioned that my grandmother had the same symptoms as me, the doctor ordered a genetic test. Throughout my grandmother's life, she struggled with extreme chronic pain and would have unexplained allergic reactions, just like me. My mom once told me that my grandmother felt like she was allergic to water because of all the unusual allergic reactions she had. Unfortunately, she would never be diagnosed; the condition she had wasn't discovered yet, so the doctors dismissed it as "just anxiety" and treated her with antidepressants. The genetic condition the allergist tested me for was hereditary alpha tryptasemia (HAT), and the test came back positive. A person with HAT has extra copies of the gene that encodes for the protein tryptase, causing the levels of tryptase in the body to be abnormal. High levels of tryptase can cause inflammation, chronic pain, and allergic reactions. What causes the allergic reactions is different for each person, but with the help of my allergist, I was able to figure out what causes mine. Some common

triggers are food items like chocolate, tomatoes, and caffeine, while others are more comical such as heat and exercise. After so many years, all of my problems were finally diagnosed. I actually started to cry when I read the test result. I let all my emotions flow out with my tears: the relief from finally having an answer, the fear of what's to come, and the anger I had at every single doctor who didn't solve my problems. I had spent years of my life chasing answers and now I finally had them. My problems were finally diagnosed.

But being diagnosed doesn't mean my problems went away—they are incurable after all. My visits to doctors are now mainly focused on managing my illnesses. The management method my doctors have settled on is medication. Every morning and night, I take a multi-course meal of pills, staring at them before I struggle to swallow them all. Despite the difficulties I have swallowing them, the pills I take have improved my situation tremendously. I have learned to pace myself when doing any physical activity. I walk slower than the average person, much to everyone's annoyance. However, management doesn't always work, and I never know how I'll feel when I wake up. Some days I'm energetic and ready to take on the world; other days it feels like a hundred weights are pulling my body down to the ground. I manage, but it's so hard to juggle my health with attending classes, completing assignments, and keeping up with extracurriculars. I wish I could get better, but at this rate, I'll probably be going to doctors my whole life, trying to fix my body.

# LEARNING TO BREATHE

PIPER FAIR

## AFTER

After a panic attack, my bedroom becomes Ground Zero, and I, the explosion. Crumpled tissues pepper the carpet like downed soldiers, my weighted blanket left twisted on the floor from the war against my lungs. The lights out, my noise machine dominates the space as I breathe carefully, cautiously; I do not yet trust that my body is real. Coming out of a panic attack is like someone returning oxygen to the world after bottling it all out of greed, and I must adjust to their change of heart. My cats pick their way across the floor, green-as-can-be EMTs assessing the damage. My heart sinks at the sight of their terror-sized pupils as the feeling in my limbs begins to return, a long-lost friend nearly forgotten. The tears always dry the slowest, leaving tiny salt trails down my cheeks. I let myself sink into the mattress, the world falling away as I drift off, time marching on, oblivious to my open wounds that sting against the air.

## DURING

During a panic attack, I am not myself. My lungs are balloons with heavy, wet sand at the bottom; there is only so far that I can inflate them before it hurts to breathe. There is a too-familiar burning that rises in my chest as I gasp for the air that was stolen, this self-

ish human who decided to keep it all for themselves. I cannot snuff out the fire, and it licks at the ceiling as embers fall around me, burning invisible holes into my skin the way clothes moths go after a beloved cashmere sweater. Someone has used my ribs for matches, snapping them from my sternum and spine, using them to stoke this fire that fiercely burns, striking the tiny red ends on my collarbone until they erupt in an orange glow. After a while, numbness begins to prickle in my chest, spreading down into my stomach until I cannot feel a thing. Where has the air gone, and when will it return? Patience was never a strength of mine.

## BEFORE

“Before” is quite the word, signaling an unalterable change that something—or someone—undergoes, something that cannot be undone. Life before the war. The energy of the dog before the cancer diagnosis. The way someone’s eyes lit up before they lost everything, poverty’s knock heavy on their door. Her laugh before the crash happened, the glass on the pavement like tiny icicles. This “before” narrative leaves nothing untouched, becoming more familiar as the years pass and reality settles like an old house with good bones. Before a panic attack, I am alive, vibrant as a butterfly against flowers of the brightest colors. Suffice it to say, Panic Disorder does not care about what I am doing. It has crashed lectures, concerts, dinners, and the party that is my life. It is merciless and strikes with little warning.

## THE FUTURE

Panic Disorder is not without its costs, and it does not ebb and flow from my life like the tide; it is always there below the surface like a coin at the bottom of a fountain, sunlight playing across the

water. Most people with Panic Disorder end up developing Agoraphobia, which is when the fear of having a panic attack outside the home is so strong that lives are contorted around this looming anxiety. As a result, many people do not leave their homes for any reason. I refuse to become another statistic, and this resolution comes at a price; I am stared at like a sideshow when I have a panic attack in public, and no amount of experience is going to lessen the blow. Rebuilding after a disaster is never easy, but I fight every day for my life and am committed to my future.

## BRAVE

PIPER FAIR

Truth: advocacy is hard.

It's my first in-person class of the semester, and I'm beyond nervous. It's a forty-five-minute drive to a campus that I haven't been to before, but my professor seemed really nice when we met online, so I'm optimistic. Immediately, I feel out-of-place; everyone looks significantly older than me, and definitely more confident. They travel in packs and look at me sideways on the staircase. I sit by myself in the cafeteria and eat a sandwich in a hurry, crumbs sticking to my face which I don't notice until some lady smiles at me like she thinks I'm ten. That's always how I know something is off. I rush to wipe them away.

Then, I struggle to find my classroom because it's tucked into a corner on the other side of an elevator at a dead-end hallway. But I digress.

Class begins and I find a seat, ready and eager. She welcomes questions, and I ask. She clarifies, and I feel good about myself. I understand. This won't be so bad. I'm going to be just fine.

And then.

And then.

She rearranges some of the marbles in a dish that she's using as a visual aid, and says that she has to do something because she's "a little OCD."

My heart sinks. Heat rises on my cheeks. I want to excuse myself and drive home, leave early and never come back.

And then.



My “and then” is stronger than the pain that builds inside me.

You can’t leave, I tell myself. I mean, technically you could, but would that really help? Education is the key to dismantling any stigma, and this is an opportunity. They are precious, even if they are terrifying.

I start planning. There’s about forty-five kids in the class, and I’ll have to wait for them all to leave. One by one, showtime inches closer, and as it does, the doubts erupt—a torrential downpour bent on eroding my confidence.

What am I doing? She knows so much! I’m just a student who wants to “call her out!” This is not going to end well. What if she gets angry or defensive? Will this one small act make any impact at all?

And then.

What if it does make a difference? What if she apologizes? What if it ends well? What if everything that could go wrong does, but I walk away proud? Could I accept that, too?

And then.

I take a breath and approach her desk. I don’t hide my emotions, and her face falls. I get choked up and start crying and tell her why. This is my disability, I say. This is real and serious, but it’s not an adjective. I am not my OCD.

She softens, apologizes profusely, and thanks me. More than once.

I’m a little shaky as I walk out of class, but the drive home is glorious.

A few hours earlier, I told my psychiatrist that I was determined to have something positive come of my pain.

And then.

POETRY

POETRY

# A QUIET NIGHT

SECTION WINNER

ISRAEL SIQUEIRA

On the coast  
There exists a man who never sleeps.  
He lights a candle on his bedside table—  
Pumpkin spice smoke,  
His bare feet turned to the side of  
A hole in the wall.

With an open eye, he leans  
Towards the silver moon.  
Diamonds dancing to the rhythm of the tides,  
Joyfully serving platters upon platters  
Of dreams.  
He sees men drowning deeply,  
Arms reaching up to the stars—  
A quiet night.

The man from the coast  
Awakened,  
Leans back from the wall,  
Blows the candle,  
And on a gentle stroke of hope,  
Gets off his dirty sheets  
And dances.

# INNOCENTS ABROAD BLACKOUT POEM

LAYANNE KHASKIA

*A poem of love for my home  
found in The Innocents Abroad, by Mark Twain,  
who visited Palestine and had little good to say.*

Traversed miles of country whose soil is rich,  
given wholly to silent expanse.  
Arabs like the summer,  
shepherds and their flocks,  
the reed exquisitely in echo.  
The forefathers of Bethlehem.

Angels sang, “peace.”

# SESTINA FOR THE WINTER DAFFODILS

LAYANNE KHASKIA

My mother loves this photograph, daffodil  
smushed in my pudgy hand, winter  
gone but nipping at my cheeks with the last wild  
chill; spring of my infant years, scent  
of cradled flowers and dreams too sweet  
to yet be spoken, impossible

to understand, but likewise impossible  
to subdue, for every time I find a daffodil  
it stands not as a bringer of sweet  
springtime, but rather a reminder of a winter  
far removed. I long for the scent  
of rooms I never sat in. I live off a wild

imagination spun from the thread of wild  
stories about a home my genome finds impossible  
to forget; the orange and yellow winter scent  
beckoning me, *find me where I am*. A daffodil  
hidden amongst cloudy plumes of winter  
in green hills, sweet

with rainy dew. Flowers bursting, sweet  
bodies of color taking shape freely, wild  
with life in the land of no freedom; winter  
blessings for the people who never knew impossible  
to mean forever. A single daffodil  
enough to fill a room with the scent

of sweet Palestine. A scent  
that lies protected in the breath of sweet  
stories. Bitter days made palatable by daffodil  
blooms, tiny bringers of the land's many wild  
miracles; days my mother found impossible  
to forget. There is no spring after the long winter

but I hear her stories. Do the winter  
daffodils remember the warm scent  
of my mother too? Is it impossible  
that they remember the sweet  
melody of her laughter? The wild  
patter of her shoes? I implore every daffodil,

know me too. As you burst through the winter, sweet  
with the scent of a thing wild and unruly,  
let it not be impossible, let me find where the daffodils bloom.

## A LETTER TO THE PILOT OF THE ENOLA GAY

ANDREW COULBOURNE

*-August 6th, 1945-*

Was it pretty?

I can only fathom the wonder, and your heartbeat,  
and the thunder, and the smile of awe  
that was carved into your cheeks.

In my country, there is little glory in victory.

I imagine the monolith of smoke and ash  
translates to “peace” in your young, borrowed tongue,  
but in ours, peace was a mother.

In ours, peace was a field.

And you, were you ready  
to drop the bomb slow and steady  
on my mother, her mother,  
their tomb soon to be sealed?

They looked the sun in the eyes  
as the wind cut its name on their faces.

They feared for their children:

a mother’s daughter, a daughter’s son.

They feared for each other, as any mother would’ve done,  
as kilometers above, drowned out by the sound of your glory  
you laughed, “Another!  
Another one!”

## TO THE PERSON WHO DELAYED MY TRAIN

ANDREW COULBOURNE

I don’t know if I ever spoke to you, but I wanted to.

I was frustrated at first, which is odd, because

I had all the time in the world. I remember the jolt  
of the emergency brakes. Every passenger gasped in  
a breath of the overly-heated air, just to sigh it out softly.

As always, surly men in suits shot dirty looks at their wristwatches,  
sour-smelling drunks wiped the foggy glass of the windows with  
stained sleeves,

old ladies clutched their laced umbrellas and muttered under their  
breath,

and sleep-deprived students strained to lift their heads.

You wormed your way into so many lives at once, subtly,  
and no one will remember you. They never saw you.

When the intercom told them that “something”

had fallen onto the tracks, they were content not to question it.

They never do. The train was late in taking them where they had to go,  
but I imagine the train took you too early, too far.

They never saw you, and neither did I. I see only

your absence. The empty seat at a business meeting,

the sealed bottle of wine. The spotlessness

of an old lady’s doormat and the suspended silence after your name  
when attendance was being taken and

the places that train could have taken you.

It could’ve been anywhere,

anywhere but away.

# A DREAM IS NOT FOR SHARING

ANDREW COULBOURNE

Even the whisper of a petal to my touch  
quiets down. Its pollen-caked kisses layered

deep into the seams of my fingerprints,  
and we loved each other in moments.

Unweaving a wicker basket while blades of grass  
test their mettle on our bare ankles.

Stray hairs and bugs in the water.  
Perhaps the sight of you was so much

that to offer a breath for you to cradle  
between entangled teeth,

the jealous ants contented themselves with distance.  
Oh, but I suppose I understand.

Gladly will I flatten with the flowers  
to be a patch in your quilted dream.

The echo to your brittle afterthoughts  
in perfect time with the beat of the sun,

moored to moss over under the tense  
tribute of a memory. Nothing more,

for me. I'll be just a moment, I swear,  
and the clouds will be shaped like clouds.



SECTION WINNER

*One of Us Was  
Supposed to be Isaac*

SARA HUMPHRIES

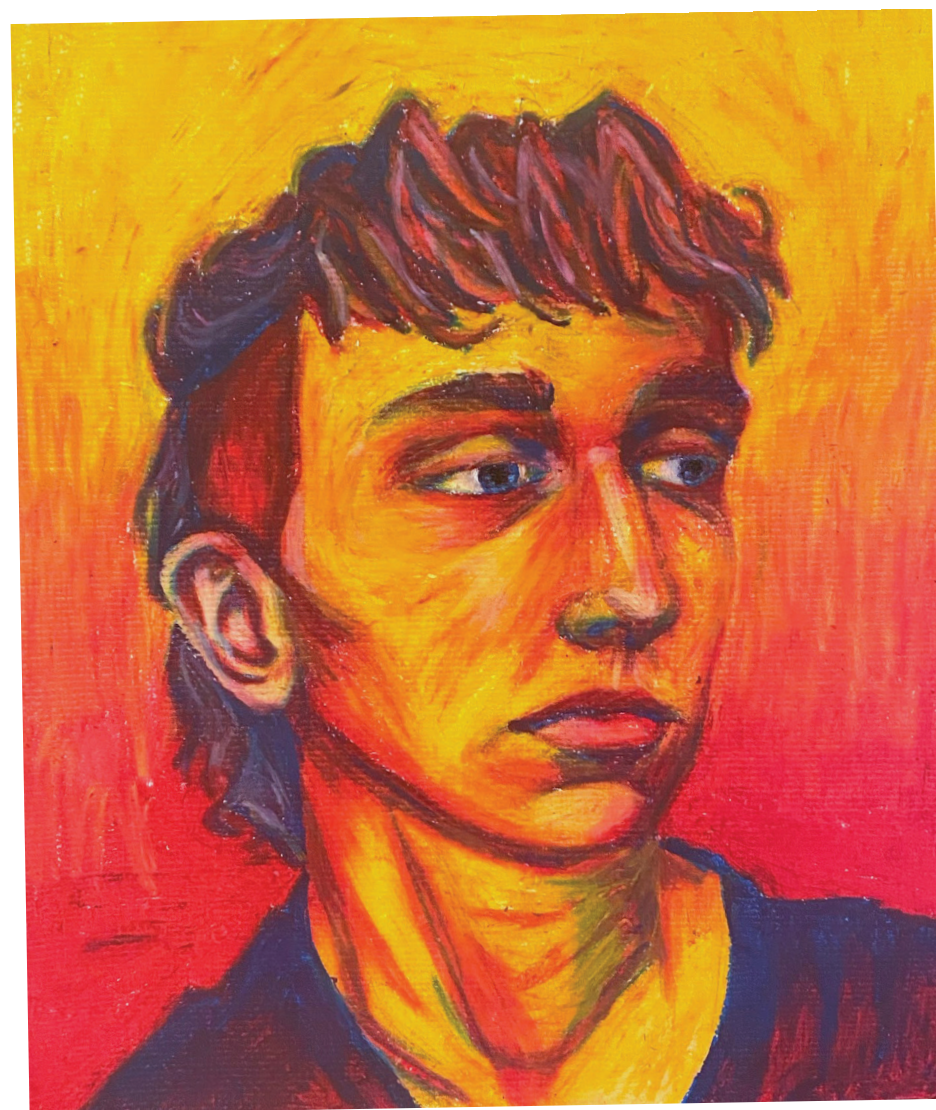




*This is Your Brain on  
Depersonalization*  
SARA HUMPHRIES

*captivity*  
SPENCER SEERGAE





*C-PTSD*  
SARA HUMPHRIES

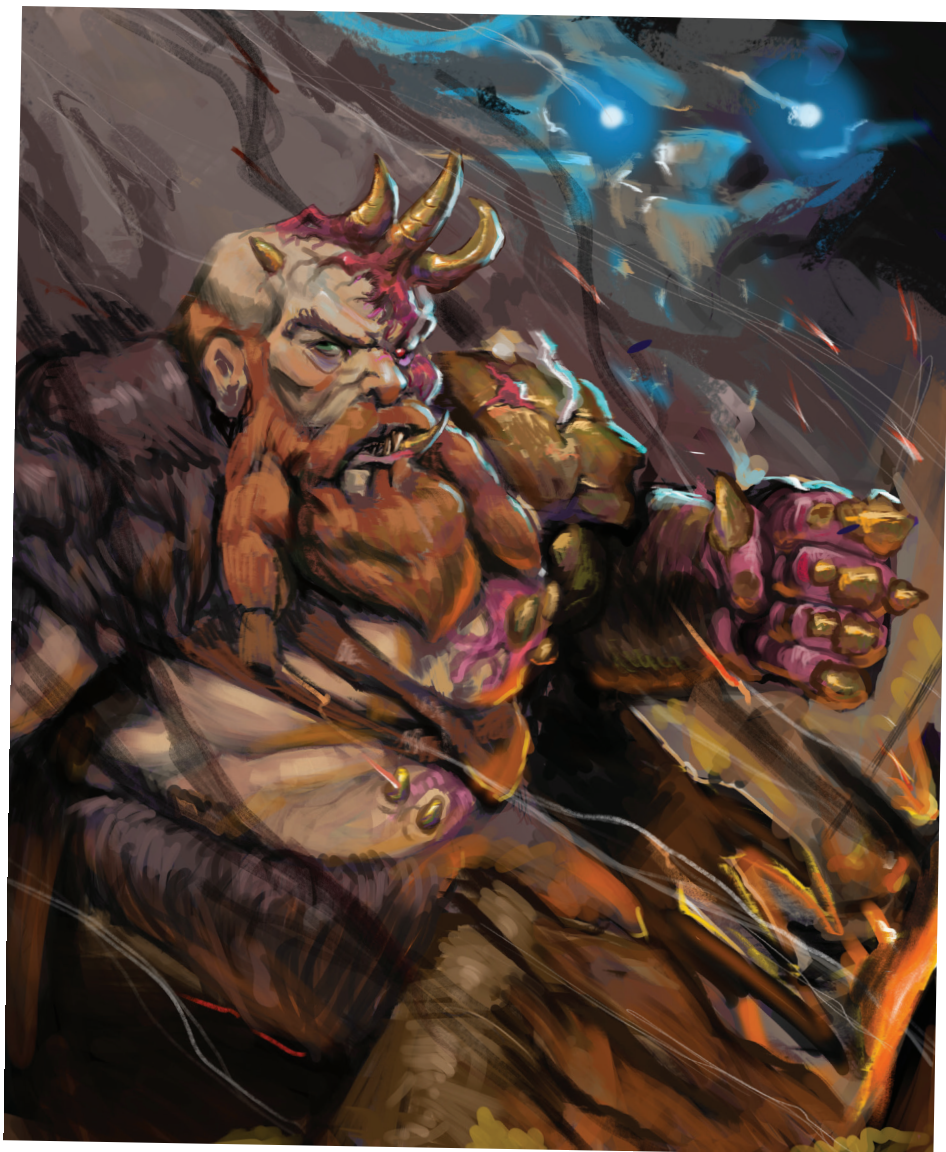
*Portrait of the Artist as a  
Nervous Young Inhuman*  
TIMOTHY CLARK





*Rapunzel*  
TIMOTHY CLARK

*City of Light*  
ISRAEL SIQUEIRA



*ASF\_transformation\_1*  
ANTHONY BONILLA DURON

*Knight and Bear*  
ANTHONY BONILLA DURON



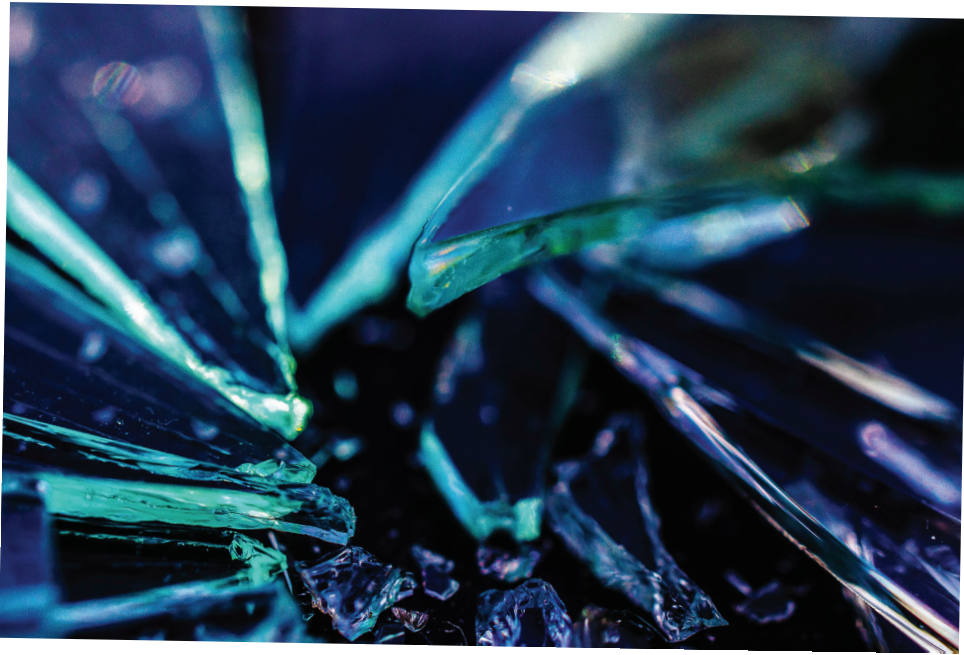


*Mysterious Desires*  
PRIYA LATCHANA

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*New Lens*  
DANIELLE CLARK

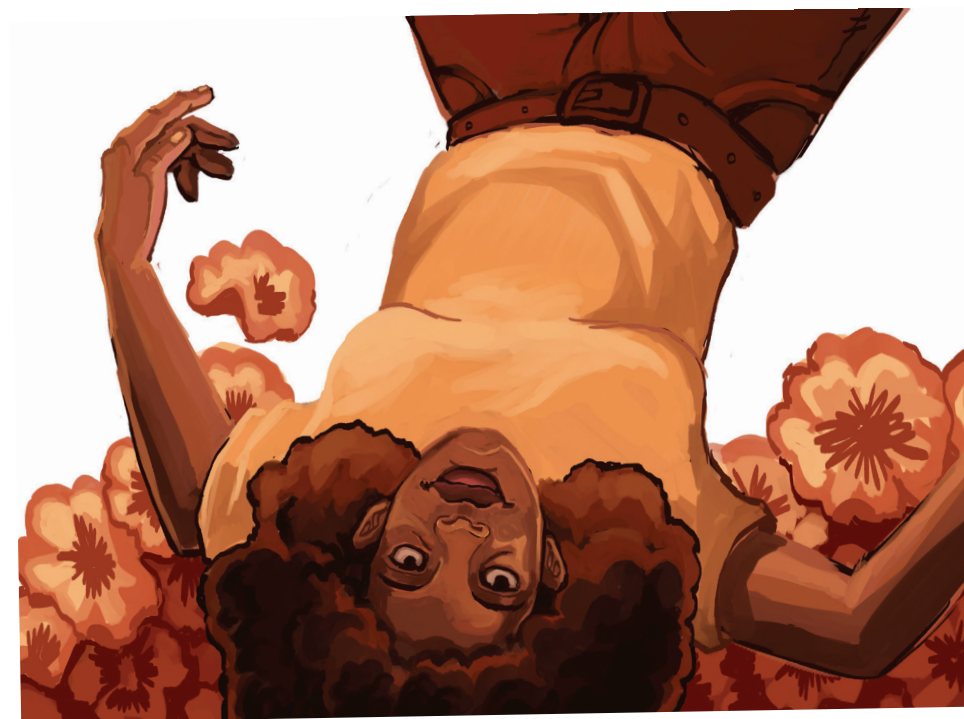




*Shatter Me*  
JOSHUA ABLE

---

*Why Gods Die*  
MEGAN MCCAMMON



*A Friend. (Purple  
Sandpiper, Reykjavik)*

**BEN HARING**

*Warm Dreams*

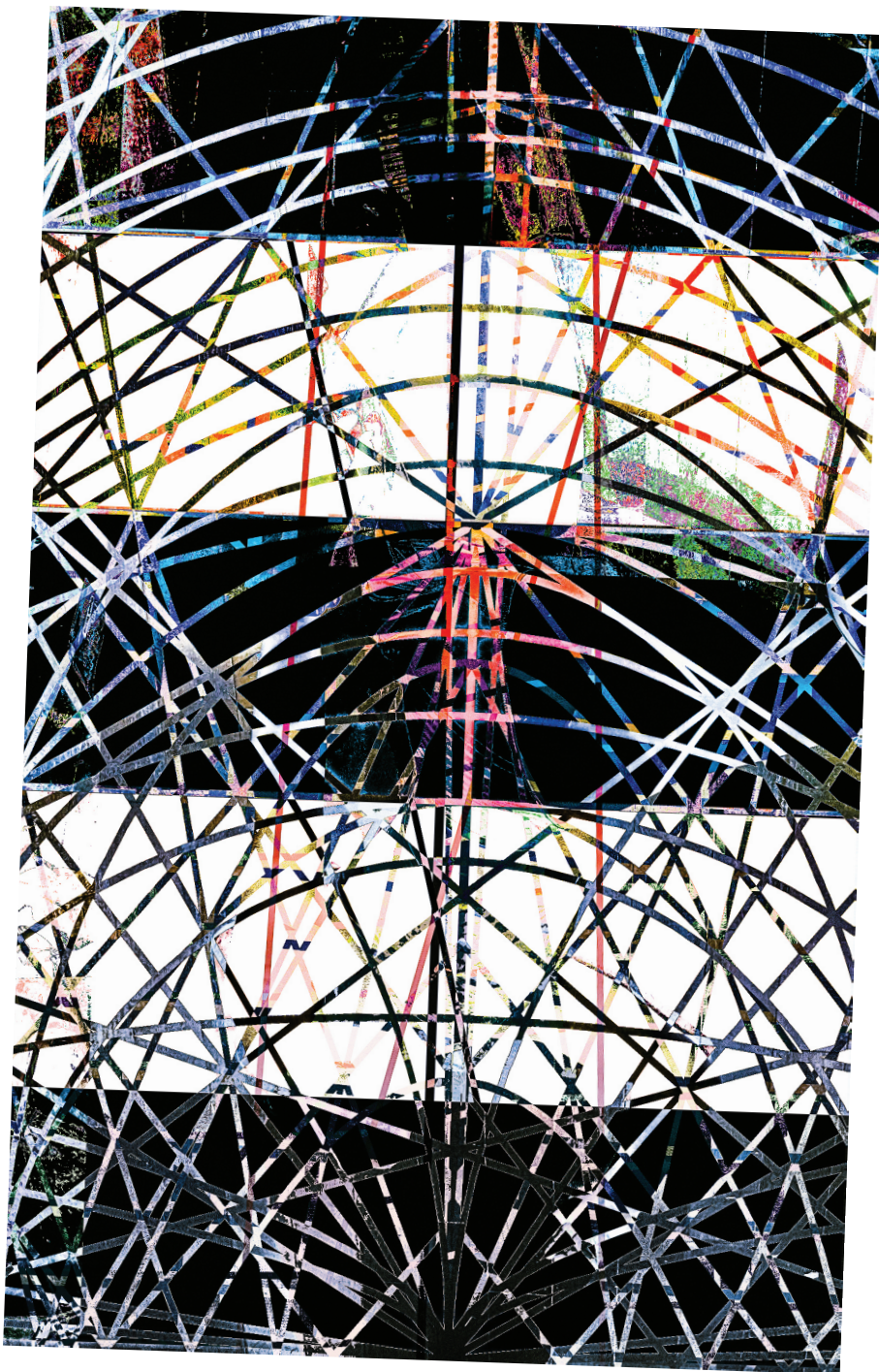
**ANONYMOUS**

NEXT PAGE

*spiders spiders spiders  
spiders*

**ADELINE RHALL**





## A BRIEF, PEACEFUL MOMENT

ANDREW COULBOURNE

Mothered by the chiding rain, cleaned like a kitten,  
I perched one last pebble at the pinnacle of my tower.  
I have joined the club. I have made my mark.  
The countless peaks of hikers' cairns craned their necks  
to look me in the eye. My listing gaze halted on the tiny stone  
atop my own. Speckled black by lazy rainfall,  
it watched me like a baby robin anticipating the worm.  
Mourning the loss of the shy warmth it had treasured  
before I pulled it from the womb of wet dirt,  
all so it could mark the grave of a brief, peaceful moment.  
A moment that I lived, a testimony entombed,  
each author swearing through stacked stones,  
*I was here. I learned to love, I built and broke,*  
*and I lived.* Each cobbled tower, another voice: *I lived. I lived.*  
It wouldn't matter if the cairns stopped standing,  
nor if the wind would interfere;  
the same stones would rebuild them.  
So I buried my immortality, wiped my hands dry, and trusted  
that time might make it grow.

## BLUEBIRD

LIZ WEIR

Pretty little bluebird, on a swinging branch so high,  
I could never see the way you do the wonders of the sky.  
I wonder if you ever dream of life down on the ground?  
Come nestle in my pocket and I'll take you into town.

A birdhouse from the carpenter is sturdier than sticks.  
A hankie from the quilter will protect your baby chicks.  
The farmer and his wife will gather all the extra seeds  
and toss them to the wind—it will be a feathered feast!

Tell me, little bluebird, have you ever asked the sun  
why he sets before man says the working day is done?  
Tell me why the elm tree sighs or why not all clouds cry.  
Why am I not satisfied with sedentary life?

If I was small like you, I could ride upon your wings  
and learn the song of every bird that lonesomely sings:  
the robin and the blackbird and the goldfinch and her brood,  
the owl and the nightjar and the vulture in the moon.

But alas, I find my feet weigh heavy on the ground;  
your hollow bones are much too soft to carry you around.  
Just know, little one, that as long as lovebirds fly,  
I'll leave my window open to hear your blue reprise.

## TRACES

LIZ WEIR

Does the rook know that it is an arrow shot across the landscape sky,  
caught in its tailwind the rapt attention of all below?  
Ten thousand nets, twenty thousand ears pinch its line from the  
sky and swallow it whole.  
Does the lamb know that its white trail is traced by the hawk's shadow?  
Does the snake know that its skin is stomped into the dirt, or the  
crab that its shell is kicked over with sand?

Know me by my footprints,  
by my fingernails in the carpet,  
by my eyelashes in the breeze.  
Condemn me to an honest legacy  
to love the impermanence of love,  
as foam dissolving in the sea.

## QUIET FUNCTION

ISRAEL SIQUEIRA

There are days I spend cozy,  
rapt in my melancholy.  
The blue outside invites me:

slow down,  
drink tea,  
clean the house.

## IN THE LIGHT

CONNOR WHITE

The fawn was brushed in amniotic fluid,  
As the drenched grasses cushioned its fall.

The moisture splashed  
As the fawn stumbled,  
Trembled from the love,  
Of the world, holding  
It close to its core.

Deer, it lays there, drying with the morning dew.  
I would watch it wake up in my backyard.  
Born again in the muck, flies kissing its eyes.



# MUSE

ISRAEL SIQUEIRA

When I look into her eyes,  
I don't see my life—  
I see a dark room, memories,  
trays of fading negatives.

She was looking for a friend  
on cedar wood benches,  
good moccasin, short steps  
down Baker Park.

Let's not complicate this:  
a gentle touch of hands  
inside a large can of  
fresh popcorn.

What's the chemistry?

A shrug.

Not a date, she said.

Every scoop of ice cream felt like our last,  
enough to feed my entire family.

They don't know you like I do—  
too many barriers.

And the cigarettes,

I told you to do you.

When I look into your eyes,  
I see poems, lines  
yet to be discovered—  
a treasure for pirates,  
a lighthouse for those who need  
to recover.

When I look into your eyes,  
I see the life of a muse.

# NAN AND JAMES IN BED

SHOMAPTI HUSSAIN

I am sleeping with James Dean.

Except he's nowhere near James Dean  
His teeth are crooked  
His face sags

In this amber light I'm catching him in now  
A similar light from which I first caught him in  
And from this side of his face  
He looks like my Dean

I thought it would be exciting to see him naked  
To watch him light his cigarette at the edge of the bed

Amber light and cigarettes are all facades  
Lighting and props of movie magic  
Too many smoke rings have clouded my reality  
He caves away from me but his smoke lingers towards me

His smoke  
Pollutant to my lungs  
I can't help but to inhale

Our first kiss tasted like cigarettes  
I didn't mind  
Maybe I'd feel rebellious kissing him  
Older, like I knew what I was doing  
Like I had a choice

I thought I was too much trouble for him to trouble me  
I am no match  
I wouldn't be able to light his cigarette  
I know I'm not safe from his flame

His flames could spread into a million kisses  
Or erupt into wine-colored bruises  
You could never expect which one it was going to be  
I was stuck looking at the side that he would show me  
Anticipating the move he would make when he showed me his  
whole self

I don't know much about James Dean  
But I imagined him to be better  
I'd imagine he touches me softly everytime he touches me  
His breath, a much sweeter breath, even if he smoked as much  
That he'd be a bad boy, not a bad man

Right now, I pretend  
Like making a small little film through my glazed eyes  
I pretend enough to make all those things true  
At least until the sun rises and shines light on my fake  
construction.

# PANDEMIC

CONNOR WHITE

Laden is a dead bird in springtime  
Uprooted from the grave.

Trees bear white flowers before the green,  
And I'd made sure that no curtain covered the light,  
Again.

Again,  
I walk into my mother's bedroom with a mask on  
Seeing her asleep by my side, pale. Pale  
Like the bones of blackbirds outside my window.  
Pale, like the bodies.

# WHEN WE LOOK TO THE SKY

CONNOR WHITE

I like to think about the time when I made friends with the trees.  
They spoke through the soft breeze that slithered through their bark,  
And I replied by storing nuts in their trunks. For we are now

Squirrels.

My mother bought a birdfeeder that prevents them from stealing  
Any of our seed. We became noble that day, as we prevented them  
From taking their fair share of first come first serve. For we will never  
Support the idea of handouts to the common folk. But we gladly  
like the birds.

They are what we strive to be.

But the trees told me that I am much closer to fall as a squirrel  
Then to gain any wings to fly.  
And yet, the birds chirp saying, "It's a lie!  
The trees are telling you lies!"

# I WOULDN'T BE

ZACHARY LYONS

From a crowd of darkness,  
A still light emerges sheathed and whole  
And ready for everything.

Dad was a marine, he is.  
His hands are cracked and calloused  
From the weight of backpacks and rifles.  
He spoke like a soldier, always loud  
And direct with his words.

Dad drank by the handle. Glass  
And brown bags buried in the trash, not  
Forgotten, but found, broken and shredded.

Yet, dad's was always warm and on  
Weekends I would wake up to creme donuts  
Waiting for me, warm to the touch, all without  
Me asking, and I never thanked him.

Dad was a marine  
So I wouldn't be.

# STRANGER

ANONYMOUS

The ridges of your fingerprint trace the seams of my face  
Leaving a gentle stream I can still feel  
Rivers running across my collarbone  
Waterfalls gushing down

Reaching, falling, tracing, in the puddles of flesh  
That hold my body together  
And your hands covering and holding  
As if you are shaping and molding the mountains and valleys  
That are home to my being

And in the moments you are here  
I leave.

How does it feel?  
To walk into an empty house  
It's silent. I left it that way.

I watch as you tread tentatively                      At first.  
Then you make yourself at home  
You sit on my couch and kick your legs up onto my table  
Hell, you turn on the TV and plan to stay a while

Why not? It's quiet, it's clean  
It's here, i left it that way, I left and now I'm outside  
In the silence    i wait

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I'm ordered from a magazine,  
I'll take care of that for you, let me take care of you,  
I'm a bad omen.

I'm the perfume lingering in your bed,  
I'm the lipstick you wipe away,  
I'm the hair washing down the drain,  
I'm the dream replaying in your head,  
Don't worry, I won't stay,  
I'm the glistening crimson sins you scour, because you couldn't live  
with a stain.

I'm a tour to take,  
I can be your striptease,  
I can be your Virgin Mary,  
Arrange me to your liking—I'm entirely posable,  
I'm ever-changing, yet make the same mistakes,  
I'm your blank canvas to paint as you please,  
But I'm not the type you'd marry,  
I'm entirely disposable.