
Guestbook
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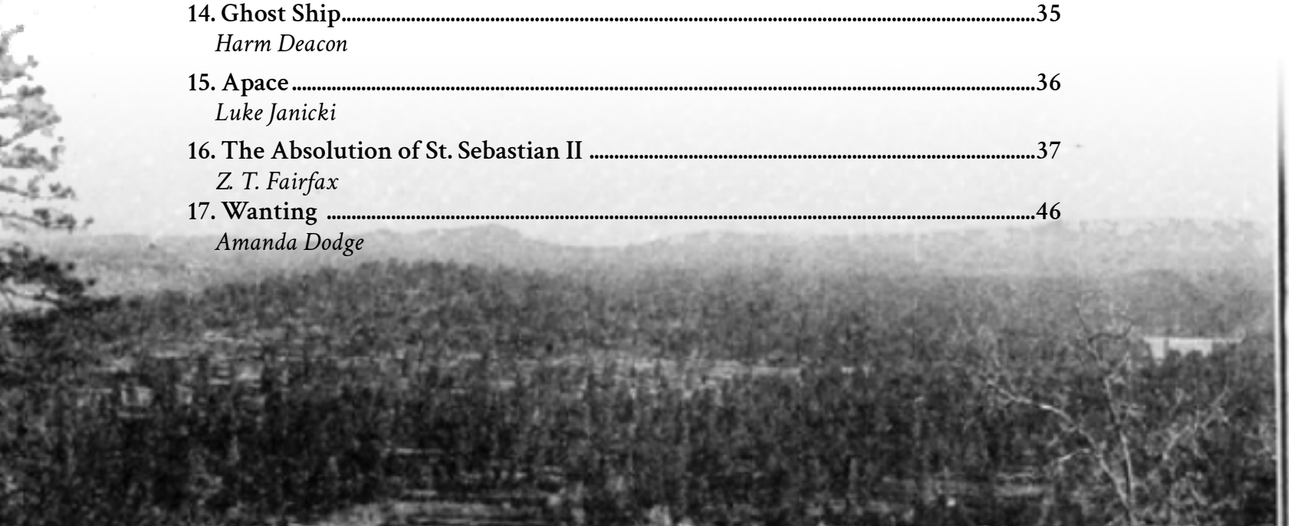
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Silting the Cold Sea[1]

On Landsat 8's observations

Nora Rawn

Like a bulldozer, says NASA,
But no, more just than a bulldozer,
More impartial, stately, majestic,
Term glacial flour doing them insult,
Perhaps instead the flowing blood of Earth,
Ice rivers, rivers of time,
Folly of naming an outpost on Greenland Frederikshåb,
Paamiut that was and will be,
Kalaallisut language that too will be ground down,
And for now: short-term rise in arable land,
Sale of silt to sand-deprived coasts,
To fertilizer companies. Step 3: profit.

Perhaps the dust of scripture is merely this fine particulate,
Glacial flour, glacial silt, rock pulverized to nearly nothing,
Arrogance of human history,
Geologic time acting moment by moment,
Accruing, sending its long tail essaying out,
Something so small that can yet be seen from space,
Finer by far than sand,
Fit to pass through the needle's eye where none of us may,
Passing from one state to another,
Snaking into the Atlantic by way of the Labrador Sea,
Under a hurricane's eye visible.

Always we are being observed from space,
Always until not,
Intrusion of timelines beyond the Anthropocene,
Silty plumes accelerating,
Intrusions of humans on the face of the earth,
Its orbit, its deep-sea crevices,
24 new species of amphipod taxonomized,
Proverbial tip of the iceberg species-wise
Cataloged in rush to mine even this deep unknown.
Imagine the satellites orbiting
And no one to receive their messages. Finally, peace.

It makes sense to me, that a golem would come from mud,
Potency of what is disdained,
Tint of turquoise in alpine lakes,
The top cause of death in Glacier National Park being drowning,
Meltwater unsafe to drink and containing microbes,
Life, unfrozen, waiting us out.

[1] https://science.nasa.gov/earth/earth-observatory/silting-the-cold-sea-149135/

If You're Keen on Bein' Nosy, I'm Talkin' to Kyle

Leah M. Skay

I know we never talked 'bout it, but when we stopped growing up and started sitting down, I decided I'd put it in my will for someone to put a bench here. Nothing special, just iron or concrete or a slab of wood with some cinderblocks if that's cheapest, so that whenever somebody sat here that knew me—or didn't know me, I ain't picky—it would summon me from wherever I was back to this spot. Thought it would sit here forever, through all the weather, like an open invitation through the weird cycle of time we got. I imagined you and your wife, your kids if you had 'em, coming out here with a cooler and some fishin' poles, after I managed to do myself in with some stupid ladder accident or cancer or something, and I imagined y'all leavin' a grilled hotdog out for me like ghosts could eat. I just assumed I'd die first. You were meant for more than here, ridin' off to Nashville or Hollywood or even New York City since you got a taste for the grime. Even when we sat here as kids flying kites, you had this look in your eye like you knew the sky was meant to take you somewhere. Idea of dyin' wasn't one you concerned yourself with.

Now look at you. All you got is a bench, idiot.

I think it was the first thing I did for you; your parents took care of the headstone, your sister handled the funeral so they wouldn't have to, and I had this bench put in. Just a wooden addition, same as the others, no plaque or nothin'. Not your style. I did sign the bottom with your name in sharpie so you could hang out with the neighborhood graffiti artists again. I hope you're not disappointed. I hope when they sat out here smoking joints, it made seventeen years feel like a million.

Speakin' of your family, they're doin' alright now, if you're wonderin'. Sara's got a kid now, named Kyle, go figure. Your pa is still landscaping but hasn't taken Allencourt Road since the day the cops called. Your ma took up mosaics. Said it helps her make sense of broken glass. I don't know what that means, or maybe I do, but she gave me one last time I visited, of seagulls. Never understood why you liked 'em so much. All those buggers ever do is take fries, loiter in parking lots, and try to fly out to sea when the winds just blow them back. Trottin' on the sand, cawing loud enough to cut through the surf, makin' their issues everybody else's problem. They shat all over your bench. I used to scrub it off, but since this whole thing's coming down, I figured you'd like it better if the ocean cleaned it for you.

You know that, right? They're gutting this thing. The pier. I'm not even supposed to be out here. Had to sneak under some tape and squeeze my fat ass through the chain-link fence. Gonna blow up the supports and let it tumble into the water. Would be easier if I could talk to you at the graveyard like everybody else, but I ain't never felt you there. You ain't a dirt guy. You cried when you got mud on your shoes as a kid, but I think that had more to do with your ma than anything else. I need to be cold to feel you.

The ghostly outline of the pier stretches like a sundial out towards the rapidly purpling horizon. Sun's comin' up too quick nowadays, ain't it?

"Hey guy. I've let you have your time. My boss'll be here in a few."

The construction guy's been real nice about this whole thing. Found me sittin' out here a little while ago with some cuts from the fence on my arms. Instead of callin' the cops, he heard me out. Nice kid. Even offered to cut the bench out and help me load it in my truck before his boss gets here. Told him don't bother. This bench ain't nothin' but an empty bench. I'll never know if you're sittin' next to me, and I ain't never told anybody this was yours to start with. I'm talkin' to a ghost. I know that. But it was nice for a while, wasn't it?

Dead smack in the middle of the view from your bench a crisp white seagull spreads its wings against the incomin' winds. Not flapping, just gliding straight into the breeze like its content on not goin' anywhere.

I take back what I said about the seagulls earlier. I think I get it now.

Never Again the Same or Still

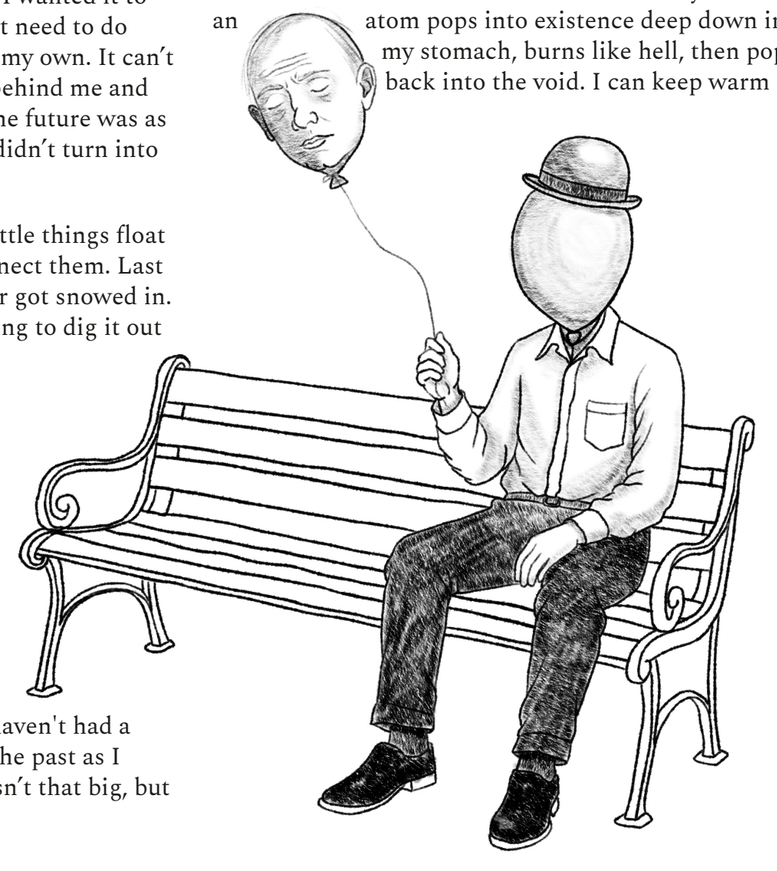
A. Vilmos

It's all over. I know it is because I was wearing all black. All the days and the hours still exist, as in they happened. They are still fact as long as I remember them correctly. Do I remember them correctly now? One day I'll think of them with complete certainty and know that I must be wrong. Something will still exist even then, a fiction of all my mistakes. What's left and feels so real will only have parts of me still genuine in it. Memories are lonely once they get there. It always seems like maybe there's a way to keep them. What if I taped it, or wrote it down with as many details the ink in a pen would last. I can't say it wouldn't help, but the feeling is gone and there's no way to get it back. Am I a phony for thinking I really am who I say I am. I try never to lie, even a little bit, but I can't help but be made up of falsehood. At least I try, and I try even harder now. When I was younger I would lie in my diary ever so slightly. I knew when I got old it would become the truth and I wanted it to be more beautiful. Now I know I didn't need to do that. I will make them beautiful all on my own. It can't help but be ugly around me now, but behind me and ahead is full of potential. I wish that the future was as easy as the past and I wish the future didn't turn into the past so constantly.

Everytime I think it's of the past. Little things float around big things and I can never connect them. Last winter I was stuck at her house, my car got snowed in. I called into work and spent hours trying to dig it out while she was off at school studying. She spent a lot of everyday like that. That same winter we built a giant snowman in front of her porch. As our gloves got wet we switched them for new pairs. We did not stop until it was as big and perfect as we could manage. We used blueberries for eyes that we couldn't put on without squishing them and gave it my new hat I didn't know if I liked yet. I could not tell you which memory came first, they are in the soup and I haven't had a spoon in a very long time. But that is the past as I remember it. Maybe the snowman wasn't that big, but that would change who I am.

When I look ahead now I can't seem to fill it in. There are empty spaces where someone should be but they aren't. I can see work tomorrow. That's easy to see. I see myself picking up a potted flower for my roommate; I see myself drinking the rest of the chamomile tea, I'm sorry that I did that; I see myself freezing outside, smoking a cigarette as quickly as I can. Between these there's this blankness I once filled so easily. When I go back to try to make it beautiful it's all hazy, like I didn't really exist back then. Well, I guess I didn't if I don't remember it. In the woods I don't even hear myself fall, there's simply nothing there.

Sometimes I fill the blankness with what once was. I think what if I see her again and it's just normal. What if we didn't bike through the golf course that night but we were going to tonight, instead. Sometimes for a second or two I convince myself and an atom pops into existence deep down in my stomach, burns like hell, then pops back into the void. I can keep warm



on that for a minute or two before my stomach is only chamomile tea again.

Around me now there's yellow snow, not from piss but from the street lights. I'm sure it's white in the dark. I walked to the park thinking it might help with the cold I've been going through. Little things here and there make me happy, like all the rabbits I scared, even though I think I'm not that scary. I think that helps with my cold too. On my way here I walked to the corner where we parted. After I handed her things back from my bag and got on my bicycle we kissed. She stood astride her bike and cried as she watched my ride away. I know because I looked back. She never moved. For all I know she could have left only a few hours ago and stayed this whole time crying. It's hard to leave love when you still love. But she's gone now and I sat next to the spot where it happened. As I walked up to it I expected something to be different. Something on the ground, a mark, a scar, anything. The clean pavement looked back at me as if nothing ever happened here. I felt invisible, like I don't exist, like I change around the world and the world doesn't even know my name. The anger brought stupid ideas on how to take my voice back. It's not fair all the pains of my love go un-tallied. I walked away, and when I looked back she was still gone.

Now it's tomorrow, my hands are warm again, and yesterday feels so far away. Days and hours have happened since then, and I've lived through them, but it's never quite tomorrow anymore. Before, when I woke up I felt new, like something had changed and I wasn't the same any longer. I had evolved and the counter went back down to zero. Yesterday was performed by someone else who the little details of slip away by the time I've locked my front door and walked down the stairs. No matter how hard I strain my memory I could not get him back. I used to never think about it, but now I'm holding on to something I'm not willing to give up. I still sleep at night for the most part, but it isn't the way it was before.

When I wake up now it's as if I was only laying in bed. Like how a short nap doesn't change the day over. How far the sun has moved has nothing to do with me. I like it better this way. After everything has passed there isn't any reason to accept, and to sleep is to accept. But sleep doesn't work anymore, that problem is gone. Now I sleep just to dream. Dream of the time we walked through the tall grass in the heat and sun of someone's strange field. She cried when there were ticks on her socks and wouldn't hold still while I got them all off of her. It's still cold when I get up, but it's the cold that hits you when you first walk outside. I was warm only a moment ago.

Often I think of times where sleep meant something and I never even noticed. I think of myself when I was seventeen. The boy that's no more. He drove and drove around and never liked to be home. He now lives solely through what I haven't completely forgotten. We share not a single cell in common and the rewritten memories distort what's left of his apparition. No matter how hard I try I cannot think of him as anything but dead. When I'm older I will think the same thing about myself now and that makes me scared to die. What day will it be that we are not the same any longer. My replacement will never know what it feels like to feel how I feel now. I'll be left somewhere, forgotten and eventually slip away, never knowing when I'm supposed to say goodbye.

When I die she will be gone too, after I wake up as someone else. Then I will take off my black clothes because I will have forgotten I have anything to mourn. Maybe I'll wear that blue shirt I like so much again. Maybe I'll meet someone new and maybe I'll be happy. I'd like to be there now, in the future, if I wasn't so afraid of being left behind. But it can be today forever as long as I keep tomorrow back. Suffering is life too and I don't want to go. I'll forget how it felt to smoke a cigarette on her porch after all her roommates had gone to bed. I'll forget what it was like to read while she studies or bike with her to where there's flowers. Later I might still know that those things happened but I'll lose the most important part, the part that holds her, the part I'm holding on too. Not much ever stays that's really true.

But there is something in me that's permanent, and it treasons. It secretly prays at night that when I wake it will be Monday, the day that usually follows Sunday. When I lay in my bed and it's cold because I'm sweating for some reason, I hear it whispering to me to never again be the same or still. That's the part that I'm fighting against, but lead is wilting now. I'm starting to exhaust. All these thoughts and memories I'm staying awake for, they still keep me warm. But, when the warm weather comes I won't need them anymore. I think I can make it until then.

INTERFACE

Elif Sinem Erdem

The surface below is hard and rough. Lumps of flesh beneath, lumps of flesh all around. There's so much light it burns, up here, it is dry and itchy. Below, a cave, a little one, one originally split apart but now it's clumped together, stuck without water. A brief blackness. A brief wetness where it was dry. The world is white and grey, a little greyer ahead, very white to the right. A yank, running to the side, to the left, down to the flesh. Tightness at the center, bulges someplace he can't see, pressure from below. Wet from somewhere, close to the flesh, coming from the flesh. The world remains the same. White and grey and white again.

Then the yank spreads, and Arda gasps, loud. He's wet everywhere, from top to bottom. Slick with something that makes him shiver, especially up on his spine, a gel that sticks on his fingers and toes, but most strongly on his back. Stuck with something, up there, but his hands won't move. He's lying on the ground, pure white tiles. He's come, apparently. He's naked, too. This is a room with a high ceiling, and it is sunny out. The longer he looks at it, the brighter the window becomes, until it takes up his whole vision, burning at his cornea.

He swallows and, with some difficulty, manages to move his tongue, the way somebody might rescue a cat from a tree, but he can't move his tongue so he could form words. Ah, oh, eurgh — this is all he manages, and his voice is all hoarse. With some difficulty, he manages to turn his neck, finding his entirely unresponsive lower half of his body, legs slick and hairy and bone wrapped around with loose skin. On his behind, he sees something stick out, something silver and black. He can't move his arm to it. He can roll his shoulder and he can move his arm, even his hand, anywhere except there. He can move his leg forward, but not back; he can stretch his knee but not bend it.

He used to be able to say something to this. Call it a specific state. What was it?

A fire grasps him, beginning from his hands and then spreading out to the soles of his feet and his belly and the spine and the space below his chin. As soon as he can move his right elbow, he falls back down to the ground again. He gets up. He touches the black thing at his buttock. It is firm, and, though it is his skin, is fused with it. Pulling it out sends a spike of pain, a red-hot alarm bell. Red, thick– the thought alone sends a shock through Arda's body. He moves his hand away, focuses, instead, on standing up.

He used to… there was something, there, and still is there, in the back of his mind. The shining sun: it is, at once, familiar and off. His body, at once, is familiar and not. The world wobbles a little as he stands on two feet, and this, too, feels off. There's just hair, rather long in fact, longer than it should be. But he can feel it, a sort of pressure, as if one of these black things was stuck in his brain, and this one he had to reach. This he experiences as an urge, one that competes with another, renders him immobile, like it did earlier. His palm is covered with all that white-blue slick. This can't be come. He reaches it to his nose, licks at it with his tongue. It burns the tip of it. It smells minty. He smells it on his chest, too. He can see right down to his navel, all his ribs. This feels wrong. He feels not quite real, though the question of what real is sends a spike of heat, then cold through his body.

The grey spot turns out to be another room bearing only strange little inclinations that hug the walls. Here, too, is another window; this one doesn't burn as bright, at least not right away, and then the blue becomes unbearable to look at, dark spots rapidly blooming and disappearing. Worst of all are the white little bits that appear out of nowhere. Looking away makes them disappear, but the world still wobbles a little. He has the sense that, if he were to step down, he would slip and fall. This image comes to his mind: that of a much older person, somebody with no face, suffering the exact same problem at a spot similar to this one, slipping and falling, landing on the platform with a thump. Who is that? What is this? It's gone when he shakes his head. He manages to breathe through his mouth, so dry that a swallow barely helps wetting it again. There, that's a little wall erected on the right side of the inclinations. He holds onto them, the smooth and firm surface of it, and lets himself fall one inclination. It's not too deep of a fall. He didn't fall like that other person did, whoever it was. He falls one, two, three of these inclinations before the soles of his feet begin to burn, ever so slightly, at the force of it. His right hand, meanwhile, throbs at his palm, his knuckles that brushed the little wall.

Something in Arda feels apprehension at moving. The inclinations seem so tall from here. So tall that, if he were to climb them, just one of them, the fate of that person in his mind's eye would become him. The

slickness of his body has now dried up, and he feels rather cold, rather itchy. Something in the middle of his body feels stirred, an invisible hand stirring there and only meeting the empty contents of a box. This, too, feels unfamiliar. That same feeling tells him that not moving is wrong, off.

He manages to the first platform when he hears a voice say, "So you up and got yourself one anyway."

Arda turns his head to see all angles of the room, the corners in the ceiling, the corners on the ground. The sound comes from below, but there is nothing there, no… human, he realizes, only more light spots. Another series of inclinations await him. He mouths after it: one. Yourself.

"It was that or shooting it dead," says a different voice, this one higher. "You know how statistically unlikely that is? Like… we don't even have a warrant for that kind of thing."

"Well, does it work? Hybrid interfaces are worse than quantum computers, I hear…"

"Yeah… yeah, no issue. It's just… well…"

"What?"

A long pause. "He… that's a human. Every time I'm done, he, like…"

Arda feels a twinge of recognition at the word, that he. Soon, he feels the dismissal in his own body, and he hears a sound of dismissal from the other person. "Come on."

His nose picks up a warm smell that turns the rummaging invisible hand into overdrive, almost clawing at his insides.

"No, but—"

"You know men rape these things if they're female-looking? Deplete them and then fuck a damn corpse."

"Oh my God. Do you have to make this about men? What the fuck?"

"You called him *he*! I'm playing by your rules."

Arda falls to the ground with a thump and the voices stop. The only sound he hears are his feet against the concrete until his feet touch something softer and much warmer that lies in the middle of the surface. The light has taken up most of his vision, but when he peers to the place that contains all the white, nothing crawls over his vision. There are no spots. Instead, there are objects that are slightly darker. The smell is strong here. It smells familiar, something he has eaten before. Food. He starts to heave again, his strength rapidly leaving him. And he feels his body not only as a tall tower of bone and blood, but also a stomach so hungry that it swallows up all the other organs, leaving him groaning, emitting a high-pitched voice that is not quite sound and not quite speech.

They're two humans that, upon his noise, turn to look at him. Both sitting, one of them stands up. The thing she sits on emits a screech, in tandem with the other human, a sound that is slightly more sonorous but equally loud. Both reverberate on his chest, sends a jolt not painful but altogether uncomfortable, and he finds himself falling, gravity pulling not at his feet but at his bottom, just above the spot he couldn't reach. He feels strangely relieved, lying down like this, being seen this way, recognized some way, even if he doesn't know anything besides his name, Arda, that's all that's been left of him.

The person approaching him, now, he's seen her before. He finds himself in another place now, one where he stands, one where his body isn't half black hole and half bone jutting out, but supple and strong and desirable, this is the word that comes to his mind now, a body that could use words and used his body like a word, a motion, a suggestion. One that this woman responded to, one that he wanted her to respond to. He was Arda, lying down on a bed, about to be… uploaded? Bound? Hooked? What are these words he's thinking of? What is this strange twist in his stomach, this exhaustion that comes over him? That's not real. That is not happening now. Again, he shakes his head. The darkness takes over, and her face is there, no other image, just her.

"Hook him up!" the other person shouts. "Are you crazy?"

Her mouth is open again. Her eyes are a beautiful brown, dark like a food he used to think of every now and then. Her touch, as she runs a finger across his jaw and then further back, is soft and gentle. This he remembers. This is the most familiar of all, though perhaps not as dry as now. Most familiar is when she touches him at the back. Yes, like this. It relaxes his body and he forgets about his stomach, the endlessness of his body, all that flesh. His body is washed over by a wave. All is white and all around him is the pleasant noise of nothing.

The next time he awakens, he realizes that there was a first. That he is asleep, naked, always just after he's come. He smells it now. His tongue wanders freely around his mouth, running over his teeth almost protectively. His limbs aren't as dead as before. Night has fallen, and he is once again all alone in this room, upstairs. To his right the sky is a lush dark blue. This used to be his favorite time. Just the beginning, the beginning of something. He finds himself heaving at the thought again. The thought of knowing so little that he once was familiar with sends a spike to his chest. He was once a person. He was someone, before.

Before… he runs a hand across his chest, his legs, but it isn't the same sensation as with the woman. Even touching his back, his neck, the spots where he has the black juts of plastic, bring nothing. That had been pleasurable. Why can't he have it again?

The room he wakes up in bears no bed, only a desk, a chair, and two shelves filled with books. It is a rather narrow space overall, sweaty and acrid but also stuffy and dusty. He can't find a light switch in the dark, but the spines are thick. He runs a finger over the shelves; dust clings onto him. The fall from last time seems forgotten by his body now. At least, it doesn't hurt. Breathing, though, cuts at him in a way he has never felt before. He feels his ribs, all of them, as he breathes in and out.

He walks down the stairs; there was food down there. The place is higher than it is wide, dominated by concrete, making the place colder than it should be. There is nothing on the walls. There are no cupboards, no vitrines, just that one rug that he's walked on the last time. It is not particularly soft, though more comfortable than the grainy concrete. He hasn't been here before, in this house, this he knows for certain. It doesn't hurt him to say it, at least. Her, he's seen before.

Are they connected somehow?

He feels his heart quicken again. He breathes out, feels the spikes of pain, white, slight, insistent, his fingers brushing one another, brushing his slick palm, and he feels back in the present. He feels simultaneously compressed to nothing and stretched out to his real height.

He voices it: connected, connect, connection. His mouth can form that word, albeit without sound. It presses at the back of his tongue. It's not a long word, more of a sneeze than a real sound. He pushes it, the dam inside of his mouth. Then it floods. "Connection," he says. He feels a twinge between his legs. His mouth has gotten dry; as he licks it, lower first then the lower caressing the upper one. He feels the twinge again. His whole body is seized by a spark, as though he was meant to be bent and cracked in two so his chest could glow. It takes him a moment, one where he forces himself to be separated from this sensation, to look down and check. It is the same dark blue that it always was.

If he breathes like this, it doesn't hurt at all.

A light turns on. This one is farther away than the room where he has last seen her; the light is a cold white that spills onto the floor, spilling into greens and violets as though his eyes refuse to see anything in pure white. He glances at the archway to his left, but the warmth from last time is gone, and so he follows the light, its source. It is so bright that it burns his eyes, and even when he closes them, he sees the red warmth of blood.

When was the last time he felt warm? It was all he wanted, that warmth. To drink it like it was juice. To possess it like a second set of veins. Instead he was cold and wet, or cold and dry, or cold and all by himself.

It amplifies the hurt in his ribs. The black hole in his stomach is back. His entire body now rearing up, the fear seizing him, he steps back, not too far, just half of a step. Eyes wide open, he searches for something, anything dark. There on the ground, a place his the end of his toes found refuge in. He stands there, focusing on it, breathing as shallowly as he can. He feels her presence, or rather, feels her not dare to make a move.

Then the light is gone. He can look at her. It takes a few moments, but he can see her face. This, he feels, is partially because he is used to moving in the dark, the pitch black. This is something his body is willing to confide in him.

"You're used to… you're sensitive to lights." Her big, brown eyes search for his, and she offers him a tentative smile. Her lips seem wider than her face. He remembers that from before; here, it is not as practiced and flickers away as soon as it came. She shakes her head. "Sorry, I didn't… think you would be…"

He used to know the word for this, but his mouth offers another: "Up."

She nods. Her eyes are still looking for something in him. Where was this the last time, he wonders. Not the time she called that other person over; the one before that, when he wanted this sort of reaction, a nervousness, its own sort of current, an electricity both would share, or that he could perhaps transmit to her, if he was so particularly inclined. Connection. They were not connected right now.

The twinge comes with a phrase: Connect me. The more he thinks it, the tenser he becomes. The tension makes him sweat, and he is wet all over again, slick. He needs her to connect to him. Plug. Plug and play, he thinks.

Her hands, large and thin, hide behind her back as soon as she sees him look at them. She bites her lip when they meet eyes.

"Sorry," she says. "I don't want to deplete you."

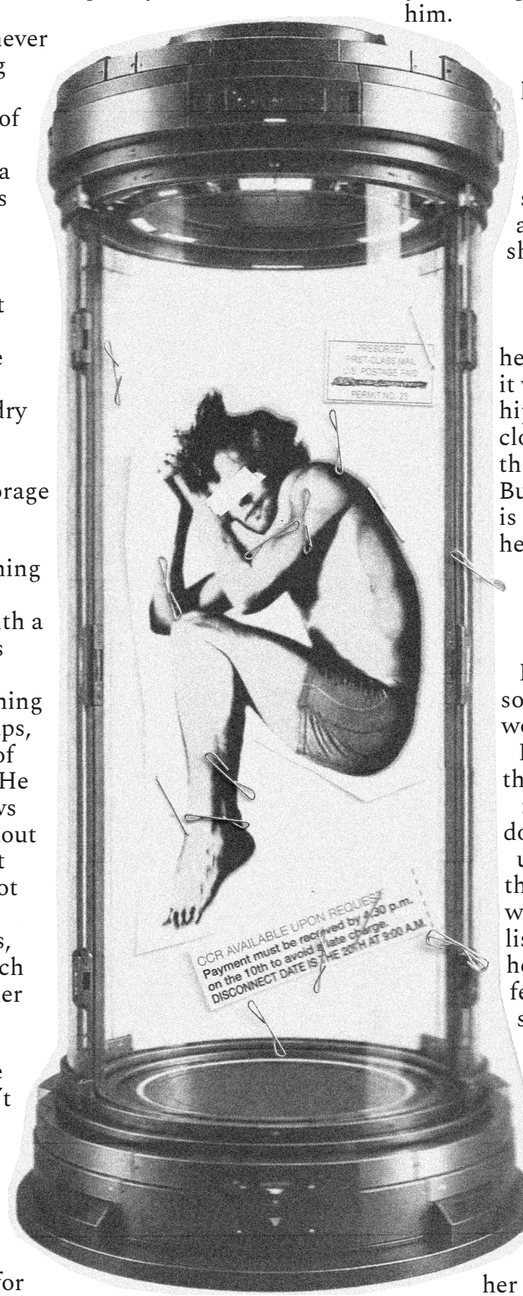
She takes him by his hand, never traveling up, never connecting him, nor plugging him in. She drags him to a bed. The Arda of his memories, one that still found pride in that name and a far more supple body than this one, he would have jumped at the sight or thrown her to the mattress, they would have connected, but now he doesn't have that body nor that strength and he still needs the connection still needs to be connected plugged in played dry hardware formatted and partitioned and used. Used, accessed, filled up until no storage is left on device.

He is lying down but everything is too dry. She is no longer touching him, only looking with a gaze he's never liked. Her eyes shimmer. He used to feel something at this, too. Something that twists his stomach, perhaps, but is closer to the sensation of eating something sour. Food. He hasn't had any since god knows when. He could go hours without it, close to a day sometimes, at least, before. Food was fuel, not much more. He doesn't want to eat her when she is like this, mopey and distant. His stomach twinges, now. It is an altogether unenjoyable sensation.

"This isn't who you are," she says with a whisper. "This isn't what you want."

He can't know who he is. But he knows her touch is what he wants, requires like breathing and coming and respirating. All this hurt just for her hands on him. Here, the way she does it, to run it over his face, it's wrong, the wrong spot, the wrong pressure. He wants it in his mouth. He wants them slid over his tongue. Just the thought sends a spike through his body. The darkness that covers his eyes now is darker now. His tongue emulates the motion, but it's not the same, not as wet, not as fleshy, not as solid.

His body is cold again. She is no longer touching him.



He opens his eyes and his chest has already risen back up. His chest heaves as he tries to breathe. It's dark and no time has passed. He feels her, here, somewhere, but where? At the archway, it's darker now. It has the shape of her. She looks so short from this distance. He remembers thinking that the last time he had seen her that her body was as supple as his, that it would be glorious to hold her hips, right there, and pull her closer. He used to be pleasured with this. Even now he feels a twinge. But to hell with that old memory. It is not real. He's so cold he's certain he's frosted over.

"Arda?" she asks. "Go lie back down, please?"

But that old him could say something, here, now. He had words at his disposal. Muscles. Height. Hair. He has none of these things, sans the height, and most of the time, he is lying down. Not that he wants to stand up. Right here is good. It's softer than the room upstairs. Better to do what needs to be done. When he listens to that twinge in his body, he can think of more words. He feels stronger in his body, and the strength that floods back into him makes him even more aware as to how much he's lost, how this vessel is not enough to contain all that he feels, all that he wants. In front of his eyes, he sees one of these unreal images again. They're in a green-lit room. He's on a bed, harder than this one, and he looks into her brown eyes and thinks he wants to be whisked away by her, thinks he wants to whisk away her into a bed that is huge enough to swallow up the both of them, and he says something to her in that moment. It makes her blush. What was it that he said? Back then, all his sentences used to begin with an I.

"I need you," he says now.

She turns to him in full. As she approaches him again, her brown eyes still shimmer. "I know," she says. "It's what you're designed for."

She glances at his penis, currently flaccid. Both times he's woken up, it was right after he had come. Design. The word means nothing to him, and the echo in his head following the word makes him believe that it never did. Not in the same way that connection does.

The other person had said rape.

"Are you raping me?" he asks.

She licks her lips and shakes her head no, but her shoulders are raised, a defense that she's mounted against her friend before. "You are not human anymore," she says. "Not… not in the legal sense anyway."

These words don't mean much to him. It's dry when he touches his penis there. It gets a little itchy, too, which is not pleasant but not entirely unpleasant either but in either case it is far away from the sensation he feels when he's touched by her. She looks away.

"I don't want to deplete you," she says again. "Just lie down. This was a mistake. We'll talk about it tomorrow, and—"

"Connect," he says.

"No."

She kneels down in front of him. His stomach curls in disgust; he doesn't even want to know the name of this emotion, he wants it to go, that or she takes his hand, touches him on his palm, the tip of his finger, anything, anywhere, so long as she does it, he'll take anything as a start.

"I don't want to do that anymore. You're right. It's kind of rapey and it's disgusting to keep you like this. Just to get online, it seems so… You… you have to be naked all the time. You can't really wear clothes anymore, you're too sensitive for it." She laughs nervously. "They don't think anymore, you know. They can't say sentences. They don't think. Medically, they're dead."

He understands that. You do not need sentences when you're connected. You do not need anything besides that. It explains his body. Him, to some degree. It does not explain her. If he is not person, he is property; hers; that thought feels better than the word connection. To be somebody's. To be owned. He wants to reach for her hand, but again it is as though a part of his brain refuses to comply. There is a wall there, between him and the space he wants to reach, an invisible one that he cannot climb over, no matter how hard he tries.

She shakes her head. "Please just go to sleep. Please."

His tongue feels heavy, heavier under the weight of her eyes, the endless churn that she sends his stomach's way, but he manages to say it: "Lead me."

It is not an immediate motion. When she does touch him, it is with a cloth, flimsy but too sturdy for Arda to really feel her human touch. But he lies down, and his eyes are closed again. She waits for a moment, a moment in which he lies down and feels the frost take up his body again, when he hears her leave. Possibly she is in another room, sleeping. She does not seem interested in touching him or herself or something else.

He opens his eyes again and looks around, trying to feel the inclination of it on his skin. He finds it on his right side, just below his ribs. He feels each inclination, and though he can't read it that way, he tries to imagine the words as they appear on his body. The screen. The loading page. That is what he died for. He was born again to attain it.

He pauses at the thought. His thoughts stop. No image is conjured. His body ceases to have names to parts, becomes flesh again, long slabs of it.

He reaches down there. He is wet. It no longer itches. All is white and all around him is the pleasant noise of nothing.

Trying 2a00:1450:4016:80b:80...

GET / HTTP 5.0

ACCEPT *

200 OK

EXPIRES -1

CONNECTED

User-Agent: HUPAD A41524441/0.99.0

CONNECTION LEFT INTACT

This Dust of Thoughts

Dan Berick

The few good things
That still could happen

Cower in the shadow
Of all the bad ones

That definitely will.

I'm Going to a Third World Country

Robert Wooten

There was a good monster in the closet.
This monster had no eye.
It ate pillow.
I also didn't like little boy.

The spring was wet, the fall was dry,
the winter was winter, and summer
went by.

I ate that monster in the closet with Oreo crumbs and glacial club ice cream.
The monster vanished into fat
like a dream.

If I grew up again,
if I grew up again, and I got tired, if I got tired again:
If I grew up friendless, alone and
without understanding, again:
If I had to go to your doctor's office again:
If I had to have surgery on my mind again:

Well, I guess I'd have to eat the monster.
It was always a part of me anyway.



WE FOLLOW THE RIVER

Shannon Weston

On the cusp on winter, the woods behind our house was all fallen leaves and swollen water. Sodden and barren, stripped down to lonely tree trunks and naked trees. My sister and I were looking for her dolly she left out in the summer and forgot about, somewhere between the makeshift bridge and the tree mom cut down because it was rotted and hollow on the inside.

She's wearing her pink dress, my sister said.

They matched for the reunion. Pink tutu and yellow rain boots. Yellow, like the fungus growing between the layers of leaves we trudged over. Yellow, like the bruise on her knee from her tumble on the driveway.

I threw out my boots because they were printed with happy ducks. I was too old for them—too cool—but not mature enough for mom's. Black and glittery and grown-up, but my feet bobbed in them with too much room. They were up to my knees. When my foot sunk into muck, it threatened to swallow me whole.

Don't walk too far without me, I warned my sister. My foot was stuck. I pulled it loose and the shoe stayed. My sock, wet and dirty. A happy sun smattered in dirt. Childlike laughter, her cherubic face pulled into an expression of delight. She gave me her hand to help me balance as I wriggled it free to a chorus of half-giggles and the squelch of the earth giving way.

I wanted to be older than I was, but her little palm curled into mine and it wasn't so much smaller than my own.

We searched for hours, kicking leaf piles and laughing at large, oozy mushrooms. The stream behind us swelled in warning before the storm came, but we were still too late to avoid it. Soggy, cold. Tomato soup portioned into coffee mugs.

For the second time, Dolly was forgotten about.

It wasn't raining. My sister was at a ballet recital, my mom watching her wiry limbs and wobbly turns with admiration from the audience.

Decay wove throughout the woods. It wasn't animal decay, or or the sweet-wet scent of molded fruit in the fridge when apple skin went from red to soft brown. Leaves and water, crumbling wood.

A little plastic hand stuck up from the border of the creek. It nestled into my palm, like my sister but not my sister. I pulled it free from the sludge and the half-liquid leaves and the water. Her brown hair interspersed with twigs, nicks in the paint of her blue eyes.

I washed her in the stream until she smelled cold, but not like rot. Brought her home and tried lemony hand soap, then blue soap. I dried her off with one of our good towels.

They matched for the reunion. Pink tutu and yellow rain boots.

Excited squeals. Spinning in the center of the living room.

A hug. She was smaller than me, but not so much smaller. Warm, and dry, and lovely.

Zagagulyn

Alexei Raymond

“In the desert
I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
Who, squatting upon the ground,

Held his heart in his hands,
And ate of it.
I said, “Is it good, friend?”
“It is bitter—bitter,” he answered;

“But I like it
“Because it is bitter,
“And because it is my heart.”

- Stephen Crane, “In the Desert”

Zag the chort, or self-consciously Za-ga-gu-lyn, peers into opaque water. His thoughtless mind drips into it, drop by melodic drop. He lingers by the pool, having just bathed. He periodically disturbs the surface with a finger, in boredom and innocence. His charcoal skin, in this cave, erases the borders within and without, and he feels safely enfolded. The acoustics please his sharpened, sensitive ears. They are bat-like and now slack. But something below the water, or from his dripping mind, causes him to exclaim—
“Kill me.”

Not understanding, though freed from blank reverie, he rises to crooked, moderate height, and skulks to the nook he’s made into a home, to dry off. His nocturnal sight is well accustomed to the dark, but is dulled in one eye by some malformation, or by youth’s butting of horns. If the need arises to see sharply into the distance, he squints. Or, he makes his clawed left hand into a fist with a narrow tunnel by which the left eye is sharpened to clarity. He feels clever for it, though doesn’t employ the trick ‘round others.

He’s already learned every twist and corner of the cave, so the way back hardly requires vision. He can simply drift until he is crouched and going through hides and stolen fabrics. He picks out a woolen blanket and scrubs himself, forgetting his horns and snagging it on them. Once he’s sufficiently dry and his goat-beard wrung out, he tosses the punctured blanket into a shadow and puts on his belt, his leather satchel. He hopes to remember where the blanket landed, and in the testing of his memory, he is beset by the compulsion to touch a trinket he’d found long ago—to affirm its location as he tenuously remembers it. He descends upon his sentimentally filled crates and rummages, rummages, his search growing frantic. With each failure to find, or his hands coming across irrelevant, inscribed birch bark sheets, a desperate exhalation of breath can be heard in the otherwise silent cave. And then—

His testing fingers find it sightlessly, folded into a torn piece of pinkish cloth. He holds it and remembers that when sunlit, it appears to be a gilt thing, depicting a human princeling carrying a maiden on a gray wolf. A faraway treasure. In relief, he moves the textured brooch, its details, against his fingers. It’s utterly purposeless—the way many things are, these days.

Zag, directionless these autumn days, supposes he should be doing what his kin do—living far away where they do—but, having seen exiled chorts before and lived with some, he knows he is none too similar, at least not in ways that matter. Yes, they do speak the same chortish tongue, and sometimes chorts mistake him for one of their own, but before too long his peculiar way of expressing himself exposes the fact that he is something other and in-between. Still, he’d been accepted and tolerated by all sorts. Goblin tribes had been known to allow him to linger among them once he’d grown older, some not even minding his courting of their women. The misbegotten half-breed suspects that the freedom had been afforded him because none were too sure about his nature, and each liked to claim him as his own, or to overlook the incongruous elements in an aversion to tension. With his horns filed down, he’d even been taken for a kind of ambiguous goblin, an impression he was never quick to dispel. And so, no one had been able to decide one way or another, which resulted in Zag’s life in the gray.

He gets up, pocketing the brooch in his satchel, making sure his trusty kinzhal and a line of rope are there too, and looks to the cave’s exit, attempting to muster up the will to go scavenge, hunt, or simply wander, for sanity’s sake. Life has been harsh and more definitively solitary in the years since his largely self-imposed, partly expected exile. He’d transgressed against his goblinsha mate, Kika, a kindly one that had warmed up to him over the years. They’d attempted a life together in the territory kept by her tribe, with his claim to chortishness growing ever weaker the longer he stayed. Though something, whether his stubborn ancestral blood, or an underlying inability to bond truly with goblins, which is to say, with goblinism, compelled him to… transgress. It is all he allows himself to think, much less express, if there’d been anyone to express it to. Following the rupture came the wounded shrieks, irreparable silence, and guarded animosity. Her return to territoriality. In a way, it was as if he had been cast back to an earlier age, prior to his initiation into the tribe, when she was still a far-off, unfamiliar scout, and he, a foreboding, though alluring, dark-eyed stranger. He decides, again, that he cannot afford to linger in these lands any longer, despite the initial shock having worn off, and tentative peace having been offered.

He emerges from the hideout. He is sure that none who’d ever known him are aware of it. Outside, thankfully, is still night. His nose twitches and a shiver runs across his exposed back. His rough black hair stands on end, giving him a mean, underworldly look. Adding to his silhouette are the chort horns he’s been allowing to become more pronounced since he’d given up ingratiating himself with goblins. It does not bother him to appear—and, for all intents and purposes, behave—more chort-like. Besides, it’s a relief to not have to grind them on hard rock surfaces, or to explain the still-visible stumps.

Surveying the horizon, he considers where his search will be fruitful. The wildgrass hills roll down from where he stands, and to the east are the goblin forests, where he goes not, except on the rarest occasions of unavoidable, hungry necessity. His occasional return shames him and proves that not all is absolute, not even vows made in heartbreak. Чёрт возьми. But perhaps her tribe migrated away by now or had been called to one of their gruesome wars—ones they’d tried convincing him to join, in whatever capacity, knowing that they were not his to fight, and therefore not being too disappointed when he refused. If they’re gone from these lands, his apprehension of the forests is needless and ghostly. What does he fear, really? For they’d never try to kill or enact any vengeance on him. If anything, Kika seemed afraid of him, and her father—the warlike chieftain Zag was never quite fond of—expressed surprising pity over Zag’s exile.

He walks west, down the slope, at the bottom of which he’ll turn north along the jagged coast, in search of fishing camps, far enough from the forests further inland and the danger of the main roads. As he picks up the pace, he notices a small wonder—a brown hare inexplicably caught off guard, perhaps due to the tall grass and Zag’s habitually soft step. He freezes up before lunging at it. In the scramble he realizes he’s got a hold of a bony, jerking hind leg, so he pulls viciously to bring the rest of the hare toward him and exerts lethal pressure, more than necessary, to crush the prey’s windpipe. The moment is over too quickly and he ties the hare to his belt. With it softly swaying from the hip, he continues downhill and emits a chitter, tk tk tk tk, his hand absentmindedly going to the hare’s stomach, ruffling the fur there, to make sure it is secure. He recalls methods of preparation; foggy recipes haughtily passed down by a larger, vaguely fatherly chort he’d lived with in his youth—Sivokh, his silver name.

Although simple recipes do come to mind, Zag can barely suppress the urge to simply rip into the furry thing once he’s by the shore, where he’ll be able to quickly rinse his hands and face from viscera. How it embarrassed him when he’d indulge in the impulse around Sivokh, who’d issue admonishments for his

beastly ways, in high chortish, no less, and compare his behavior to that of goblins. Then, appraising Zag's bloodied mouth, crookedly growing horns, and bloody hands, Sivokh would snort and sagely conclude that perhaps the dominant blood coursing through his veins—determining him—is green. Тебе придётся выбрать—you will have to choose. Thinking of the elder's judgment, Zag notices he's been biting the insides of his lips raw and tries to stop. Seawind from the shore blows toward him, tickling his ears with unintelligible whispers, and his calm returns. Sivokh had taught him a lot, after all, and never meant harm, even if harm was done. The marbled kinzhal he carries had once been Sivokh's—legacy far more tangible than he had of whatever absent halfchort sired him.

Once Zag distinguishes the silhouettes of the rocks dividing land from sea, he scans in each direction of the shoreline for campfires. Not seeing any, he advances toward a nook sheltering him from sea spray and from potential sight. There he rips into the hare in a near-blind feast fueled by an aroma of blood and butchery. The faintest thought, that he should perhaps refrain from gorging himself and slice up morsels for later, is dismissed all too readily. Once there's almost nothing left to pick from the hare's carcass, he marvels at his own ability to devour more and more in a single feeding. The kinzhal never leaves the satchel. He sits crouched, his claws dripping blood onto the brutalized hare. Turning to a nearby puddle of saltwater, he thrashes his hands and wipes off blood from his face, his beard. In another violent impulse, he takes the hare by a foot and hurls it to be taken by waves. Regretting his gorging already, he looks along the coast to the north, and decides to make his way toward the distant, looming cliffs he sees jutting out to sea in earthly arrogance. Local humans have been known to camp there; armed ones, patrolling borders whose importance is observed only by them and their foes.

He makes his way through the rocks, instinctively relying on his dark complexion and its shrouding effect at night, paying attention to any noise that would stand out against the surf's metronome. The moon's reluctance, or inability, to claim a piece of unobstructed sky to shine down from, is Zag's advantage, which preserves the prerogative to choose whether to be seen. So, he halts and lies low when he hears galloping hooves coming from the north, on the path near the rocky beach—patrol or messenger in the night. Had the rider stopped, Zag's calculation would be more complex than the current decision to merely wait out the passage. He doesn't mind, although in the pause, doubts ambush and stab him. You couldn't overpower anyone—not by claw or knife, дурак. Had anyone looked at him then, it'd be possible to note a scowl becoming increasingly pronounced.

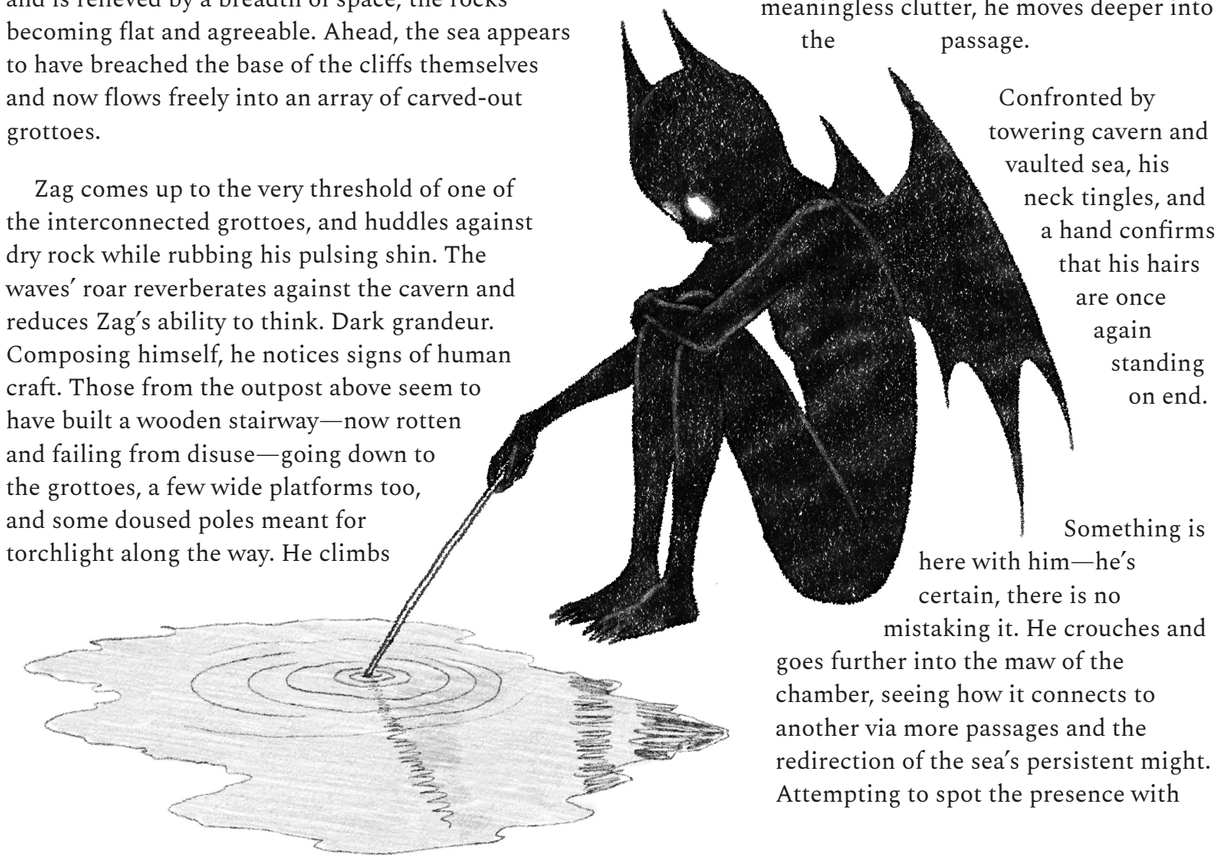
Growing restless and not bothering to wait until the horse could be heard no longer, he continues to scamper and make way among shades, avoiding treacherous pools from past mighty waves. Some winters ago, Kika had dropped an important trinket of hers into one such pool and lamented its loss, refusing to move on. They lingered then, eying the pool, Kika cowering in his embrace against the sea's crashing waves. Would he be able to recover it now?

The strenuous effort of hurrying with an engorged stomach makes him huff and curse in the human tongue, using stolen, bitter phrases that had imprinted themselves on his mind. Until he reaches—is thankful for reaching—the point where he might choose to ascend to the guarded cliffs or continue along the waterline to whatever lies under them. He considers the ascent and the permanent camp stationed there, its hearth-like glow, and fishes out the brooch for tactile consultation. His fingers trace gold and he discovers honesty, which is never too far. He's never attempted a nightly raid of so guarded a place. The most he's ever allowed himself was looting unsuspecting fishing and hunting camps of simple folk, or, when he'd been accompanied by those who'd guide and help, was part of attempts made in more dangerous constellations. Now though, alone as he is, cruelty rings through his mind for time wasted on folly. He clenches his jaw, then exhales silent, grimaced laughter.

Before turning back, he walks to the water, just outside the waves' frothing reach. Miscalculation aside, he does feel free. It is one of the few, if not the only, comforts in exile. And as if to use this freedom, to see it as boon rather than aimless void, he walks onward to the place below the foreboding border cliffs. If nothing else, he'll see what lies below and satisfy his explorer's curiosity.

As he approaches the rock faces hammered by waves, he plans a path where he won't be forced to test whether he can still swim. So, tentatively, he skips from rock to rock, clinging to the rock face lest a rogue wave picks him off, noticing how soulwhite crustaceans scurry from his approach, vanishing into crevices and the seafroth below. The waves, for now, behave and are content with simply spraying the half-breed's back without attempting to pull him under. Too focused on how his hands grip various nooks for support, he missteps and slips on a rock made slippery by gelatinous moss. His shin cracks against another rock and he is shocked into a pause, clinging fiercely to the wall, his horns scraping against it. He regains balance, thinking to assess the injury, though from his awkward position there's not much to see. Moving on, he rounds a bend in the sheer cliff wall and is relieved by a breadth of space; the rocks becoming flat and agreeable. Ahead, the sea appears to have breached the base of the cliffs themselves and now flows freely into an array of carved-out grottoes.

Zag comes up to the very threshold of one of the interconnected grottoes, and huddles against dry rock while rubbing his pulsing shin. The waves' roar reverberates against the cavern and reduces Zag's ability to think. Dark grandeur. Composing himself, he notices signs of human craft. Those from the outpost above seem to have built a wooden stairway—now rotten and failing from disuse—going down to the grottoes, a few wide platforms too, and some doused poles meant for torchlight along the way. He climbs



past missing railing and decaying rope, assured that no sensible human would come down and catch him off guard. Once on the creaking platform, punctuated by rust spots where nails have corroded into flakes, he already looks for something to jump onto in case the wood fails and begins sliding down into sea. It's about then that he is struck by the night exhaling lunar light, if only for a moment from between heavy clouds, which—admitted beauty aside—robs Zag of the shroud he relies on. His charcoal skin is revealed harshly against sodden wood and light rock, chasing him further down the platform toward the grotto proper. There, in a narrow passage reminding him of his own cave, full of abandoned fishing gear and broken-down barrels smelling faintly of old liquor, he finds shelter and shadow and once again feels safe. Listening to the echo and wind playing off the walls, rushing deeper into the grotto, a vague impression scratches against his mind. Had he been here before? It's not possible, not unless he was brought here during infancy. Unable to either ground the impression in certainty or dismiss it as the mind's meaningless clutter, he moves deeper into the passage.

Confronted by towering cavern and vaulted sea, his neck tingles, and a hand confirms that his hairs are once again standing on end.

Something is here with him—he's certain, there is no mistaking it. He crouches and goes further into the maw of the chamber, seeing how it connects to another via more passages and the redirection of the sea's persistent might. Attempting to spot the presence with

him, he eyes the rocks across the water, the shadows pooling there. He sees nothing. Having grown somewhat accustomed to the roar of the place, he notes a new element in the soundscape: a high, thin melody. Far too sweet. Thinking it can mean only one thing, Zag immediately looks at the water below—is this why humans abandoned the place?—though he can see no rusalka stalking him there, nor on any of the rocks by the water. Where, then?

Sensing uncharacteristic panic in a place that'd feel like home under any other circumstance, he doubles back, deciding to abandon the exploration, giving the open cavern one final glance when he spots it—definitively spots it. It hangs from above, as some doused chandelier. A dark, leathery bundle. It coos there angelically, heavenly. And in a shifting of its wings, a glinting set of upside-down eyes spot and arrest him, belaying all further motion. In the unexpected eye-to-eye, Zag is convinced that he will come to know it—her.

"I was enjoying your song," he hazards in the common tongue of the borderlands, thinking it pointless to hide once he's already been spotted.
"Who are you?" Her melody, now spoken, carries to him effortlessly, in the same tongue, embowered by wave and wind. He cannot see her hidden mouth. Her question, though. Bone in his throat.
"Just—Zag."

"Zag…? I am Isaiah."

"I," he takes a step back, "I think I've been here before. Maybe."

"Have you? I've never laid eyes on you."
While she seems to answer conversationally, he senses guardedness about her. Her wings remain folded. He converses with eyes.
"I came here to hide. It seemed safe. The moon is out, and the humans above… So."

"These grottoes are safe. You are welcome."

"Thank you. I almost walked out before I heard your song."
"I felt your presence. That is no coincidence. Not many can hear me, and you can. I am searching for kindred spirits."

Compelled to sit down and rest against the wall behind him, Zag gives in.

"That is beautiful. I understand the need."

"Horns. You are…?"
"Chort, chort. Well. I lived with a goblin tribe for nearly a decade. I'm not very used to these." His hand goes to one of the horns but falls before touch. Too much spills from his mouth, too readily, but he cannot stop. It feels good.

"Lived?" The tight wrap about her loosens. She appears to be swaying.
"Lived. You earn a place if you have a mate, and I have my goblinsha no more. I live in a cave by myself—further inland, in the hills."

"A decade. What happened?"
"I," he clearly thinks of those days. His memories overtake his expectation for Isaiah to divulge in equal measure.
"I couldn't live among them any more. And she—I believe she understood something."

Isaiah unfurls herself, in response to what he doesn't know, and he can see luminescent coloration, the color of lavender petals. Tendon and vein designs on the inside of her wings. In few flutters the diminutive, thin creature perches—upright now—on a nearer outcrop, and her wings fold again. They are a coat giving protective volume. Zag's awe lingers. He speaks it.
"Боже, I have never seen a winged being such as you. You are not a rusalka, are you?"
She looks past him, then at him once more.

"I come from the Lowlands, past Kalinov Bridge. I feel safe around you."
"Калинов Мост? Surely, you're—"

As if to ward off what he'd ask, she demonstrates a chortish lullaby of childhood, and he is stunned. *How* is the only word he can utter as he hears her delicately chittering at the fading of the song. Laughter?

"I have long been curious about your tongue, chortik friend. So, I decided to study it."

"How—Why chortish?"

"Why not? You are very fortunate to know it. Will you be returning to your tribe?"
"Not my tribe. And no…" Imagined scenery of Калинов Мост floods his mind. She must've used a figure of speech, she—
She skips off the perch and flutters closer, worryingly quick, landing on his side of the cavern. He knows her proximity and swiftness should alert, motivate retreat, but if he were to do so, would it wound her? End the conversation he craves?

"I think you should go. Yours must miss you. And she, chiefly. She will take you back into the fold. A decade together—that means something."

A flicker of anger tenses him, and his brows narrow as he looks at her pale face, noticing scales going up the slender neck. A soft glint there.
"I told you. There is no going back. I am cast out."

"Oh, you are so quick to anger; I am merely hopeful. I have not the fortune of staying with a mate for longer than a cycle or two. The bond you must have had…"
"Xa," he exclaims, bitter, bitter, "long years together do not build unbreakable bonds. You are naïve."
Regretting the remark, he asks about that which he no longer cares about.
"Say, have you seen humans come here? I used their platforms, but their equipment appears long abandoned and rotten."
"Not in a while, no," she answers as if swatting at a fly, then refocusing, "you look very curious, from this close. I do see your resemblance to goblinkind, if it weren't for these horns, your ears."
He doesn't shy away from her sight, flattery.

"You said your search is for… kindred spirits?"
"I sang it. If I'm to be so bold and unrestrained in desire, then yes. I long for true company, for the good that seems to have passed from this world, though I still hold out hope. I had a companion here, a rusalka you seem to expect. But she has betrayed me and abandoned these grottoes. A mere fortnight has passed. But I am glad for it. I dare not think of how she would have treated you."

The mention forms a knot in Zag's stomach, and he looks to the churning water below. Isaiah follows his glance, before turning back and asking melodiously, as she rests on a rock with her wings looking less a great coat—now a dark dress. Coy.
"Zag, wayward chort, do you think me mad? Are you, in all honesty, afraid?"

"I don't. I'm not. What's there to be afraid of?"

She smiles, and he thinks nothing of her sharpened teeth. They are like his own.
"Tell me more of your plight, if you'd like. You seem true and are hurt. I have a wealth of time."

Sensing the rest of the night will be spent in the grotto, Zag sketches a picture of his past, as if that had been his intention all along. Though he does so partially, skirting the central transgression. As he navigates half-truths, lavender-winged Isaiah comes closer, expressing sensitive understanding, probing questions to complete whatever he cuts short, and most pleasantly—surprisingly—her glinting black eyes make him feel seen, make him interesting. And he does, in turn, take a step or two to sit closer, already forgetting the initial panic in the grotto, his coarse hair alerting to danger, her oblique answers. And suddenly, the nature of finding a soul to speak to in so foreboding—perhaps dangerous—a place, simply falls from his mind. He decides that he has been here before, and so the recollected childhood visit must sanctify the present one. And oh, to hear more of her voice.

"Here, Isaiah, look." He unlatches his satchel, retrieving the trinket—careful not to reveal the kinzhal. He presents the brooch and she plucks it from his fingers. The soft brush of hers against his.
"A pretty little thing. What is it?" she asks as her eyes briefly linger on his satchel. Innocently, he decides.

"I found it in an abandoned camp, and I carry it with me since. It's a curious piece. I can never tell whether the princeling is rescuing or abducting her. And don't humans boast heroics through steeds? So why the wolf?"
She turns it this way and that, as if appraising its worth rather than meaning.

"He seems to be cradling her against his chest. It is common human romance. And the noble wolf need not be an ill omen."
"I suppose, but… Isn't there something resigned? In her face. An acceptance of a terrible fate. I must be overthinking. It's our chortish тоска."

"Mm, тоска." She hands it back.

He worries it bores her and drops it into his satchel. He looks to the entrance of the grotto, where dawn is gradually diffusing into the dark space, bestowing blue translucence onto deadblack water.

"I apologize. I'd best leave. If I wait any longer the way back will become dangerous. I could still hide, even if it's bright outside, but I cannot hope to outrun galloping patrols if spotted."

He gets up, checks that his belt and satchel are securely attached, and looks to the passage he'd come from.
"But Zag, I'd like to be in water with you."
She remains seated, looking at him, then to the bluing water absorbing illumination by which shapes of submerged rocks reveal themselves.
"Won't you join me? For a mere moment. It will soothe you for the journey ahead, if you are set on leaving."
She rises and comes closer, closer still, until her head rests against Zag's shoulder. Her scent is intimacy. From up close, he looks at how the sea breeze softly wimples her folded, leathery wings. Or else, is she the source of the tremor.

"I suppose a moment wouldn't hurt."

She avoids his eyes as she leads down stony, somewhat forgiving steps to the sea. She enters the water without word, her wings unfurling, half-buoying her. And he, hesitating although committed, stows away his belt and satchel into a dry, secure hollow, and follows her in—one hand rigid at his hip.

The water is calm and not as icy as he thought. Looking down, he tries to subdue bubbling worry that he has never swum in such depths; shallow lakes and rivers were all he ever braved in necessity. For whatever reason, the present moment, too, is necessity. He steels himself and swims closer, before calling her to stop. She turns, looking guileless in the blue. It seems to take her a fraction of a moment to recognize his difficulty in the water, and then, she lightly—as if swimming is second nature despite her aerial limbs—floats back, allowing him to remain close to the steps.

"Please, do not worry."
"I just—it's pleasant here, but I cannot stay longer. I can come back again tonight."
He watches how the water about them makes her bob ever so slightly. She appears to be gauging him. In a movement he doesn't quite expect, she surges toward him. Wings enfold them and a chill creeps along his back at the uncanny sensation. Her close whisper is mellifluous.
"Your eyes. I believe you, Zag. You do not lie and you are true with me."

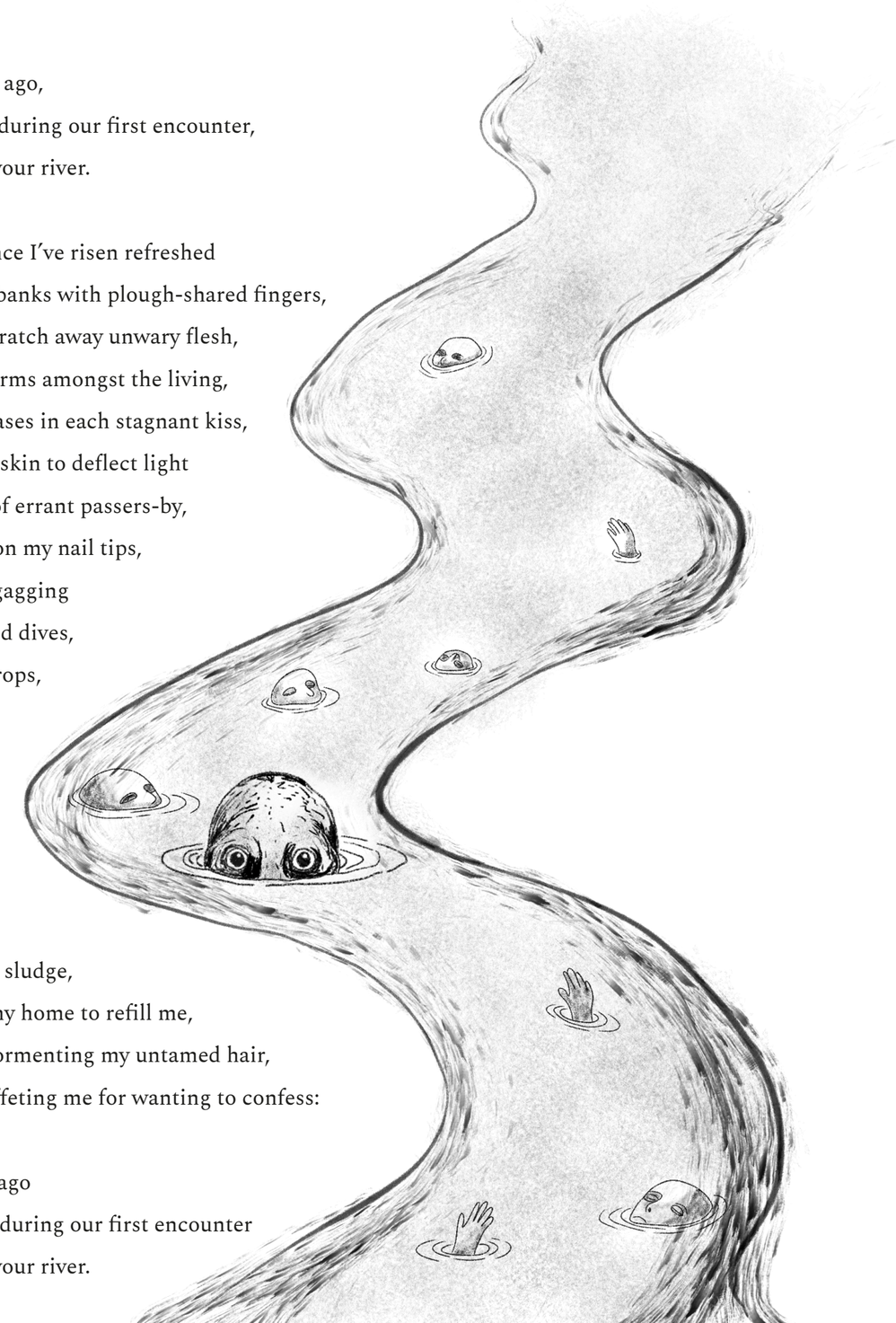
A droplet trickles down his face, gathering hareblood, before joining the seawater in a reddish misting. Then, he, too, decides he must've truly meant to return, wasn't planning on duplicity, on running and never coming back to this woman about whom he knows nothing. Nothing. In the affirmation, she draws nearer, arms joining wings, and he is doubly embraced, her skin against his, chest to chest. Never truer a lock. His breath constricts and arousal is near though love—for it must be love—is nearer, until grasp is light and the sensation is neither dream nor real.

And either Zagagulyn, or Isaiah, initiates a kiss, and with each caress, their lips, their tongues—her forked, his black—myriad possibilities sink discarded and unseen about them. Until one remains afloat, transmuting into aim into fate. In bliss he allows his head to limply recline as her face knowingly, lithely, and lovingly, moves from liplock to nuzzle near his ear, then neck. And though it would still be possible to at least wring her neck, despite the slip and sink of the kinzhal from his now-slack hand, pity stays his claws as something heavier ensures complicity. He must love his fate, if nothing else. So guided by overdue vengeance, emptied hand comes up and presses Fate into him, aiding her, and it is red again, and dark again.

It is morning. He is no longer drowning.

Your River

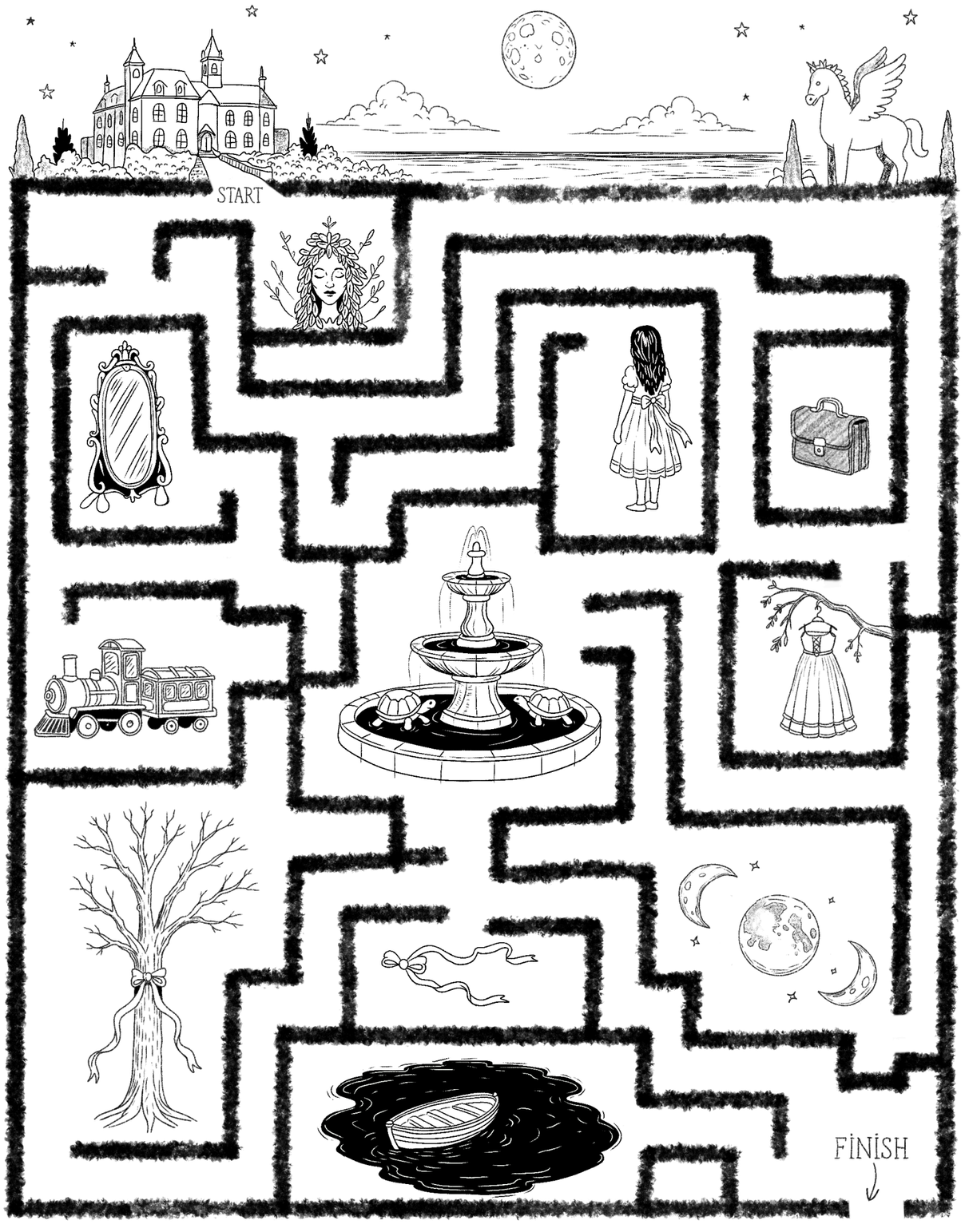
Paul Allatson



Three months ago,
at some stage during our first encounter,
I drowned in your river.

Each dawn since I've risen refreshed
to furrow the banks with plough-shared fingers,
my wish, to scratch away unwary flesh,
to scythe my arms amongst the living,
to leak slow gases in each stagnant kiss,
my burnished skin to deflect light
into the eyes of errant passers-by,
to snag them on my nail tips,
to flick them gagging
in my delighted dives,
deep algaed drops,
my mouth
open to
fish,
the cold
gravity
of my drink
to pin me into sludge,
the liquid of my home to refill me,
the currents tormenting my untamed hair,
the waters buffeting me for wanting to confess:

three months ago
at some point during our first encounter
I drowned in your river.



Forgetting

Camille Singer

The first memory you gave me was the worst.

You were in your room on the second floor of Colly Manor, playing with a wooden train your father brought home from his travels. Though it was an apology gift, you didn't mind; it was the most you ever got from your father, and something corporeal was better than nothing at all.

You whistled, your small hand on the conductor car. You ran the sanded wheels over clefts in the floorboards, content in the small world you made for yourself; until you heard his voice.

Even seeing your memory from the outside, I could feel your skin go cold, coat in sweat, your body stiffen. Your tiny hand and crooked fingers trembled on the conductor car. You cringed as the footsteps grew heavier, closer.

Your father's hand circled the collar of your shirt before you could blink. He hoisted you up by the thin fabric and your treasured train clattered to the floor.

"What is this?" His breath came hot against your sweat-stained cheeks, thick and rancid. He thrust the tarnished button-down shirt between his face and your own.

You pressed your eyes closed, but you could still smell the grape juice you accidentally spilled on your father's fine shirt.

His voice came low, wet, almost diseased. "What good are you?"

You fell to the ground beside your damaged train, but you didn't dare cry out. Your father slammed the door and for once, the familiar sound of locks being driven home sent an icy air of relief through you.

Only then did you cry.

You gave that memory to me days later. You flew into my arms outside the hedge maze and begged me to take it from you. "Don't let me be like him," you said. "Don't let me."

1

The boy I came to call Winter circled my maze on the dusk of his ninth birthday. The Gray's had arrived at Colly Estate days before, and though the boy stole glimpses of the hedge maze from his bedroom window, his feet had not yet taken him to me.

He circled several times, as the newcomers tend to do, and found the space much smaller than he initially surmised. But, of course, he found no entrance. I sensed him, running small hands along the twisted vines and curled leaves that never needed tending. I watched him study the inlaid hedge that loomed in the shape of a great elephant, as well as the small creatures, made to look like cats chasing dogs, or horses with wings. But still, no entrance did he find.

Soon enough, however, the sun set beyond the tiding ocean and the chill of night air brought songs from birds and salt from the sea. The moonlight offered me an ever-fond hello, and I was permitted to step free from my hedge.

I untangled the vines from my antlers, unknotted the leaves from my gown of green flowers, I even picked the twigs and small bugs from my long, white hair, just as Winter rounded the corner.

A warm light crossed my vision, Winter himself a small silhouette against his headlamp. I clicked two of my long fingers and the light winked out. Winter didn't seem to notice.

He stared at me, with big, frosted eyes. The cold had bitten into his nose, his cheeks, and they shone red despite the pale moonlight overhead.

"Who is he that comes before a Lady in green?" I spoke in no authoritative fashion, but like all those before him, Winter hesitantly came closer.

He spoke for me his true name and I tucked it behind the walls of my palace mind.

"Are you a hedge-person?" he asked, easing closer still.

"One could say, yet another not dare."

Winter showed no puzzlement, only curiosity. "Do you live here?" He gestured at Colly Maze but kept his eyes on me. They moved over my gown of green flowers, my long, thin hands, my tapered ears and pointed antlers. I nodded for his comfort.

"Is there a way in?" he asked. "I've looked and looked but can't find one."

I smiled at the small boy; a reverent smile. "You must first pay the toll."

"But…I don't have any money."

I shook my head. "Not something so fleeting as that. A gift, freely given, of no value to yourself."

"I have a shell I found just this morning," Winter said.

"Not a thing, as things are often thought; but the memory of a thing, left and forgot."

Winter tapped his chin. "I had peas for dinner," he said with a small grimace. "I can still taste the mushiness of it."

I smiled. "Recall for me your time at dinner. Do not speak it aloud, but in your thoughts. See the room, the table. Feel the texture of the cloth as a draft swept you by. Remember the smell of the space, the way light danced and pushed at encroaching shadows. Remember the words that were spoken."

Winter's memory came to me in perfect detail, from the tall windows in the dining room, to the subtle hint of lemon and alcohol beneath the savory roast. Although, no words had been exchanged between Mr. and Mrs. Gray, nor with Winter and either of his parents.

I tucked the silent memory away in a new room of my mind.

Winter opened his eyes. "Can I go in now?"

Between him and me, a column of vines and leaves curled away from each other, leaving behind a narrow pass. A warm light, reminiscent of the sun, spilled between the parted shrubs and Winter made his way inside.

2

Inside the maze live more like me, though there are also others not quite like myself at all. Where I am banished and bound to my one hedge outside the labyrinth of mystery, others are allowed more freedoms; ones who once gave me a name.

There are the men who dueled by my fountain and lost. There is the land-washed pirate, the twins, the crone. There is a girl in a red dress.

Winter saw her first, the girl. He watched as she climbed a nearby hedge and disappeared through a silver-framed mirror. The glass did not shatter or give, it simply appeared like a sheet of ice, through which the girl vanished.

Winter followed.

The mirror glass kissed his skin like a veil of mist as his body moved from one side to the other. He dropped onto a patch of soft grass and found a dozen, dozen, more mirrors, hung like canvas on the surrounding hedges.

He saw no opening, no other corridors, only frames and glass. In one, he glimpsed a trail of red ribbon.

Winter pursued the girl in the red dress, climbing in and out of mirrors, until his body grew heavy, and a terrible yawn split his face. His pounding heart slowed, his excitement eased, his eyes called to be closed.

Winter did not remember falling asleep, but when he woke the next morning, he was back in his room on the second floor, in his bed beneath the covers. He thought perhaps he had dreamt it, that magnificent things weren't real. He thought about the girl.

The girl in the red dress cannot leave the maze.

Winter returned the following night, carrying with him a readied memory.

"You are real," he said. "Mother said that such as you belong in books and dreams."

Mrs. Gray could not see me, though often enough, I saw her. A thin woman, ever pale and small as a bird. She kept her nose in books and out of her husband's affairs. She rarely left her room and would read to Winter from her bed once he bothered her enough.

"I have a memory," he said.

"Show me."

Winter stood with his shoulders hunched in the doorway of his father's study.

His father stood over a large desk, littered with large rolls of paper. He had one eye pressed to a magnifying glass above one such page.

Winter remained in the doorway. "Are you busy?"

His father leaned back and let one of the large plans roll into a long tube. Winter watched it teeter on the edge of the desk.

"What is it?" Mr. Gray asked.

Winter dropped his eyes and cleared his throat. "I…I wanted to ask you something."

"Well, say it. I'm working."

"Have you been in the hedge maze?"

"I thought I told you not to go in there."

"I…I…"

Mr. Gray narrowed his eyes. "Go up to your room. We'll talk about this no more."

Winter sulked up the large, winding staircase and down the hall. On the way to his room, he passed by his mother's open door. She seemed asleep in her large bed, hair frazzled, afternoon sunlight awash over her calm face. Winter reached out and pulled her door closed.

I opened my eyes to a renewed smile on Winter's face. "May I go in?"

I had taken that simple memory from the small boy, but I wondered briefly what other memories he held behind his easy smile. I gestured him inside.

4

Winter moved to step over the threshold and into the hedge maze, when he paused. What had just the night before been green grass, tall hedges, clipped figures and archways was now a great and open lake of still, black water, the surrounding hedges nowhere in sight. Winter could not even smell the ocean tiding nearby.

He looked left to the Green Woman but found that I was no longer there. Out on the surface, leaving not a ripple, nor a wake, sailed a single, small boat with one red-clad occupant.

The girl in the red dress inched her small boat to the edge of the maze where grass met water. She scooted to one side on the only wooden bench. "Are you coming?"

Winter smiled and stepped into the boat.

The two sailed across the glassy surface. The air smelled of mulling spices, apples, and citrus. The sky held too many stars and three moons. The light of the stars reflected in the water and rose off its surface like fireflies in a marsh.

"Did you do this?" Winter asked, his eyes trying to capture every bit of reflected star hanging above the water.

The girl shrugged. "I can have whatever I want here."

They sat close on the bench, but Winter kept his hands folded and his smile down. "What's your name?"

"I don't know," she said. "I can't remember."

"How could you forget your own name?"

"What's yours then?"

Winter opened his mouth, but not a sound escaped.

"See," the girl said.

Winter tried to reach into the back of his mind, to retrieve a memory that was simply no longer there. He cleared his throat. "Well, if you don't know your name, what do I call you?"

She scrunched her lips to one corner and glanced up at the stars, her dark hair falling over one shoulder. "What season is it? Outside?"

"It's summer now, but it'll be autumn soon."

"Autumn," she said reverently. "I like it."

Their small boat circled a black, stone fountain, lined with glistening turtles of hedge green and bumblebee yellow. One leaped from the fountain into the lake of black water without making a splash.

"I thought I'd have to chase you again," Winter said.

Autumn glanced at him, smiling. "Did you like the mirror maze? I made it myself."

"You did? How?"

"Like this." Autumn moved her hands in a cupping circle. In them appeared a steaming cup of pear cider. She handed it to Winter, and he took a sip.

"It's good," he said.

Autumn grinned. "I know." She turned back towards the stars and water, sighing. "I can make anything here."

"Can I?" Winter asked.

Autumn appeared a second cup of cider and sipped it quietly. "Not yet."

5

Winter ran from the front door of Colly Manor and threw his arms around my waist. "They're sending me away."

I crossed my hands around his shoulders and hushed him gently. "Show me."

After a dozen dinners without a word of conversation, the command in his father's voice drove Winter to almost drop his fork.

Winter had been watching the fading daylight, eager to sneak back to the maze, when his father spoke.

"I'll be going away soon," Mr. Gray said between bites. "We're starting construction on the bridge at the end of the month. Late in the season if you ask me, but I don't make the schedule."

Winter blinked. "How long will you be gone?"

"A few months," his father said. "I'll be back for the holidays."

"I don't know why you can't just stay home," Mrs. Gray muttered.

"And what? Drive four hours every day?" Mr. Gray stopped eating and eyed his wife.

"It's okay, Mom," Winter assured. "I can take the bus and…"

"Actually," Mr. Gray cut in. "We talked about it," he said, stressing the word and narrowing on Mrs. Gray, "and we think it's best to send you to a boarding school."

Winter paled. "But…"

"No. None of that."

"Not forever, dear," Mrs. Gray said, a forced smile wrinkling her tired eyes. "Just for a couple years, while your father is constructing the bridge."

Mr. Gray nodded. "I have a place in the city, but we'll all come home for the holidays and for a month or so every summer. Some weekends."

Winter's lip twitched. "Can't I just stay with mom?"

Mr. Gray cleared his throat and looked at his wife. "I don't know…can he?" It wasn't an honest question, Winter thought, but his mother answered anyway.

Mrs. Gray kneaded her hands beneath the table. "I'm not…well right now. But I will be soon. I promise."

"Yes." Mr. Gray went back to eating. "You start in three weeks."

Winter's grip around me loosened and he took a step back. He blinked a few times, brushing at his tears, as if trying to reason why he'd been crying. "I…is something wrong?"

I smiled and gestured Winter into the maze. "No. Everything is wonderful."

6

The following day, Mrs. Gray reminded her son that he would be sent off at the close of the season, adamantly pressing the issue of how he could have forgotten when they had spoken of it just the night before. For the following weeks, Winter spent every night in the maze with Autumn.

They rode winged horses and circled the moon with a band of a hundred masked companions. They listened to soft music while turning 'round and 'round on a carousel of flowered, hedge animals that spoke various languages. They swung their legs from the branch of a tree, so tall that it stretched above the cloud line, though not above the hedge walls themselves.

They even danced, on a stage made of paper-thin stone, lit by candlelight in the shapes of tea cups.

"I don't want to leave," Winter said.

"I know."

Winter spun Autumn in a twirl, and he wondered absently if she worked her magic to make him a good dancer. He had no memory of having danced before.

"But you'll be back."

7

Winter remained away for a season and a day. A season does not account for much time to something such as me, but to Winter, it changed much.

He returned taller, his skin tan and freckled. He hugged me and told me a dozen stories.

"I made friends," he said. "Will and Penny and Mauve. They're great."

I forced a smile.

"I never had friends at my old schools before. The kids back east were…"

"Cruel?"

Winter nodded.

"Would you like me to…"

"No," Winter said. "I think I want to keep those memories. I liked my old house, and I don't want to forget any of it."

I nodded. "Well, is there another memory that weighs too heavy?"

Winter closed his eyes.

He stood in the hall at his boarding school. The lights above were too bright, the passing voices too loud, the air thick with cleaning chemicals.

The phone pressed to his ear rang thrice and Winter tugged at the cord.

"Hello?" came his father's voice.

Winter heard a low buzzing and shouts on the other end. "Dad?"

"Son. What is it?"

"I thought you were coming to visit this weekend."

Mr. Gray shouted something to someone Winter did not know and could not see. He kept his eyes down as the other children passed him in the hall.

"Sorry, can't this weekend. Busy. Maybe next weekend."

"But…"

The line went dead.

Winter held the phone for a long moment, staring at the receiver. He hung up the phone and spent his weekend alone at his deserted boarding school.

I opened my eyes, but Winter wasn't smiling this time. I supposed that a great many similar memories still hung in his thoughts.

8

Winter told Autumn about Will, Penny, and Mauve. He spoke of them with delight and zeal, uttering a culmination of half-true stories and amusing tales.

Good memories are different from bad, in that they are handled often. Over time and use, they are worn, warped, and otherwise changed until the truth of things is but a pane of fogged glass through which the facts of the event can only be glimpsed.

Still, Winter recalled how he and Will had met and came to share a room. He spoke of the time the four of them spent a weekend afternoon on the beach and shared a dozen different flavors of shaved ice. He told her about the comics Will liked, and about the book Mauve got him for his birthday.

Autumn frowned during the whole of this telling.

"Are you all right?" Winter asked.

They sat on a stone bench and ate sweet fruit that Autumn had made appear from nowhere.

She flashed him a smile. "I missed you is all."

"Me too," Winter said.

"Do you still want to stay here? If you could?"

"Yes." Winter swallowed. "But…I'd also like to bring Will here. I'd love to show him this place."

"I don't think it works that way," Autumn said. She went to picking a leaf apart. "I think people have to find this place on their own. If they need it."

They fell asleep in a hastily fashioned meadow, and as always, Winter woke in his own bed.

9

Winter's father went back to work, and his mother was sent to a hospital.

"I'm just tired," Mrs. Gray said. "I'm fine. Just tired."

But the nurses took her away, and with the Grays departure, Winter was sent back to school. No one occupied the estate for a year.

10

Winter sat on his bed in their small room of beige, peeling wallpaper and recycled furniture. Will sat across, thumbing through a comic. Winter cleared his throat. "Say, what do you know about magic?"

"Like…superpowers?"

"No," Winter said. "Like, making stuff appear and disappear."

Will cocked a brow at him, his hand mid-turn on a page. "Like…telekinesis?"

Winter shook his head and stumbled over his words. "No. Nothing. Forget it."

"What's this about?" Will set his comic aside and sat up straight. He seemed more at ease in their small room, Winter thought, with tousled hair and baggy night clothes.

Winter smirked a little and spoke softly. "A girl…sort of."

Will paled. "Not Penny, right?"

"What?" Winter said. "No. I call…her name is Autumn."

"That's a relief," Will said, the tension in his shoulders gone.

"Why?" Winter asked, a bit confused. "You have a thing for Penny?"

Will threw his hands. "I've only told you a thousand times."

Winter cleared his throat. "Right…" He racked his brain, delved, and searched the far corners of his mind. It gnawed at the boy, but for all his efforts, Winter could not remember such an exchange ever happening. "Well," he said, "it's not Penny."

Will pressed a hand over his heart. "All right then. Tell me about your girl."

"She's…uhh," Winter began, then took a moment.

"Mysterious sort, eh?"

Winter let out a soft chuckle. "You have no idea. She has the most beautiful dark hair and eyes. She's sweet and funny. She always wears this red dress…"

"That's weird," Will said. "Sounds like the woman in that old news article Mauve was talking about last week. Remember? From years ago?"

Winter didn't remember.

Will tapped his chin, his eyes up and away. "What was it…fell through a mirror or out a window or something."

"A window?"

"No," Will blurted, his eyes wide. "She hung herself. Out on the old Colly property. Remember?"

Winter swallowed and turned his eyes down. His heart drummed in his ears.

11

Winter stepped into the maze.

Everything had gone desolate and grey. The hedges were pushed back by rolling clouds, broken castles, and wrecked ships. The dirt beneath his shoes felt hard and sent up clouds of dry dust, but in the center of it all, sat Autumn.

She heard him approach and stood. A smile took hold of her face. "You're back."

Winter pulled her into a hug and spun her around like a dancer. He set her on her feet with a gentle grace and when he opened his eyes, he saw the familiar color bleeding back into their surroundings. The castle pieced itself back together. The ship set sail.

"I'm sorry," Winter said. "I tried to come sooner." He studied her face for a moment. It was young, like his, though older than she had been when they'd met.

"No, it's all right," Autumn said. "You're here now."

"I wanted to ask you something."

She smiled and waited politely.

"Do you remember how you got here? Do you know why you can't leave?"

Autumn's eyes turned down and her forehead wrinkled. "No," she said simply. "But it doesn't matter, I don't think. I'm happy now."

Now? Winter wanted to ask, but he kept his mouth closed.

Autumn smiled again, wide and delighted. "Come," she tugged on his hand, "I want to show you the peonies I made."

They sat in a vast, rolling meadow of open, pink flowers beneath a brighter than usual moon. Winter opened a book and read to her.

"I have a story too," Autumn said. "I've just remembered it, I think. Would you like to hear it?"

Winter closed his book and sat attentive.

"On a small piece of land lived a husband and wife. The husband built a house for his new wife out of wood and stone. But soon, the wood and stone all ran out, so he went to using metal; tall metal, hard metal, that kept everything in place.

"But the husband had no shingles for the roof, so it rained and stormed in their little house every morning and every night. The wife asked her husband for a roof but instead he spent his money on wheat so they could eat."

"But the wife wasn't hungry, nor was she thirsty, for they lived near a great lake. One morning, while it rained and stormed inside their house with no roof, the wife tried to leave, to go down to the lake and fill her pockets with small treasures from the shore. The wife found, however, that she couldn't get out, because the house had been closed and sealed with metal."

"What did she do?" Winter asked.

"The only thing she could do. She climbed the walls and looked out at the night sky. She asked the

moon for a small favor, a simple favor, and the moon agreed; but the wife slipped before the wish could be fulfilled."

Autumn held up a finger. "The wife, though a little hurt from her fall, was otherwise fine. And when she blinked up at the sky, she found the storm and rains had gone, and there were more stars than she'd ever seen before."

12

Winter sat alone to a cold birthday dinner. His father had forgotten. His mother was asleep.

"Can you take all my memories?" Winter asked me. "Can I start over?"

"Not yet."

13

Winter sat with Will, Penny, and Mauve on their usual bench in the late afternoon. They spoke of small things and played a few rounds of cards.

"Can you walk me to my room?"

Winter looked up from the comic Will had pulled out to see Penny, smiling shyly. The wind caught at her curly hair and the departing sun left a glint in her eyes.

"Sure."

Winter offered his arm and Penny took it. They walked through the halls together in a sort of silence that left Winter unnerved.

She stopped at her door and without preamble, placed a kiss on Winter's stunned lips.

"Goodnight," she said, then flounced inside.

14

"You what?" Will asked, on his feet.

"What?" Winter said, leveling his hands. "I didn't know she…"

"That she what? Was into you? What's wrong with you? I told you that I liked her." Will turned away, dropping his head in his hand, and rubbing at the skin there.

Winter rose slowly, cold and confused. "No…you didn't…"

"Yes, I did!" Will exclaimed. "A thousand times. Do you listen when I talk?"

"Will…I…"

"No." Will shook his head. "Don't."

"But I…"

"I'm serious." Will pointed an accusatory finger. "I thought we were friends. I really did."

15

Winter came to the maze, fidgety, his eyes ringed in dark circles.

"I don't know what's real," he said. "I keep forgetting and screwing everything up. Make me remember. Please. I need my memories back."

"I cannot," I said. "I am as bound by these laws as you."

Winter crossed his arms and rubbed at them. "Then, make me forget." His eyes were red, his shoulders hunched. He looked like his mother. "Please."

Winter gave me a dozen, dozen memories. Those of his friends, his father, and one of his mother.

"It's good to see you, dear," Mrs. Gray said.

"Hi, Mom." Winter sat beside her bed on the second floor of Colly Manor. A resident nurse sat in the opposite chair, flipping through the paper. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, sweetheart. Just tired."

Her hair fell feathered across her forehead. She wore her night clothes, though it was the middle of the day.

He wanted to tell her about Will, Penny, and Mauve. He wanted to tell her what had happened; why Will was so angry. He needed to know what to do and how to fix it.

Mrs. Gray forced a smile that churned Winter's stomach.

"Are you sick?" he asked.

Mrs. Gray looked to her nurse. The nurse flipped another page. "That's what they tell me. Now go on. I need to rest."

"But…I need your help with something."

A single tear escaped her flooding eyes and rolled down her pale cheek. "I can't…not right now. Maybe later."

16

Winter met Autumn by the black, stone fountain. She wore her customary red dress and her dark hair hung down her back. She glanced over her shoulder as Winter approached and smiled.

"I remember now," she said, the moonlight in her eyes.

He forced a smile. "I'm glad."

"Are you all right?"

Winter wasn't sure. "I feel…heavy." It may have not been the best word, but the right word.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

Winter nodded.

17

Winter did not wake in his bed the following morning.

The following morning, Winter did not wake.

I made the walls of my hedge thin and the way open. Mr. Gray saw the body in the fountain before the first morning bird sang.

18

Mrs. Gray was taken away again. Her sobs stayed with me until long after her departure.

Mr. Gray, however, remained on a stone bench, just outside my maze. He stared, unseeing, directly at me through the long afternoon. He did not rise to get a drink; he did not rise to eat or to go inside. He simply remained and stared and saw nothing. Not until the sun fell and full night dawned.

I watched as his blank stare focused. It came slow, waned, then recognition took hold.

"The Green Woman?" he mumbled. "No. You aren't real." And more softly. "What's real?"

I stepped free from my hedge, untangled my hair and my skirts, then moved easily across the lawn to sit by Mr. Gray.

The shock he should have felt seemed muted, numbed by the long day of silent, pained reflection. "It is you."

"Hello again, old friend."

Mr. Gray forced a smirk. "You knew him too, then? My boy?"

"I did."

"Did." He made the word sound like an illness. "Why did he do this?"

Mr. Gray dropped his head into his hands.

"My parents fought constantly; about me, about money. He was an angry, cruel drunk. I swore I'd never be like him. I promised…" Mr. Gray took a long, shaky breath, then looked at me. "No, not a promise. I asked you, didn't I? I…I don't remember."

I placed a long-fingered hand on his shoulder. "Your boy is happy," I told him. "He's in my maze."

"I don't remember…"

I hushed him gently. "My dear, Mr. Gray. I know you don't remember. It's been decades, after all. But, if it's all right, I'd like to tell you a story."

Mr. Gray turned to me with eyes that glistened. He nodded.

"The first memory you gave me was the worst."

AQUARIUM LIFE

Shrutidhora P Mohor

You hope this neighbourhood will work out for you, after having shifted thrice in the last fourteen months but once the blue light hits you in the head, shredding your eyes, you know he is back home, and there is no hope of getting any sleep, for he will keep attending to the fish and the blue light of the aquarium will stay on the whole night and you, already down with a headache from using the screen way over usual limits and swirling in your head are those jazzy profiles on the dating apps, will only shift and turn, sigh and curse, until it's dawn and the eastern sky is losing its darkness, a pale whitish yellow threading its way through the emptiness, and you prop yourself up on the double pillow and you think you would watch the daylight march in, but there is a nagging siren through your forehead, there is someone grinding his giant teeth at you through the back of your head, and you swear at that neighbour of yours, who you believe is snoring on his unkempt bed, or that's what you imagine, while your room stinks but then, you couldn't care less and you sink into a sleep that brings you no rest.

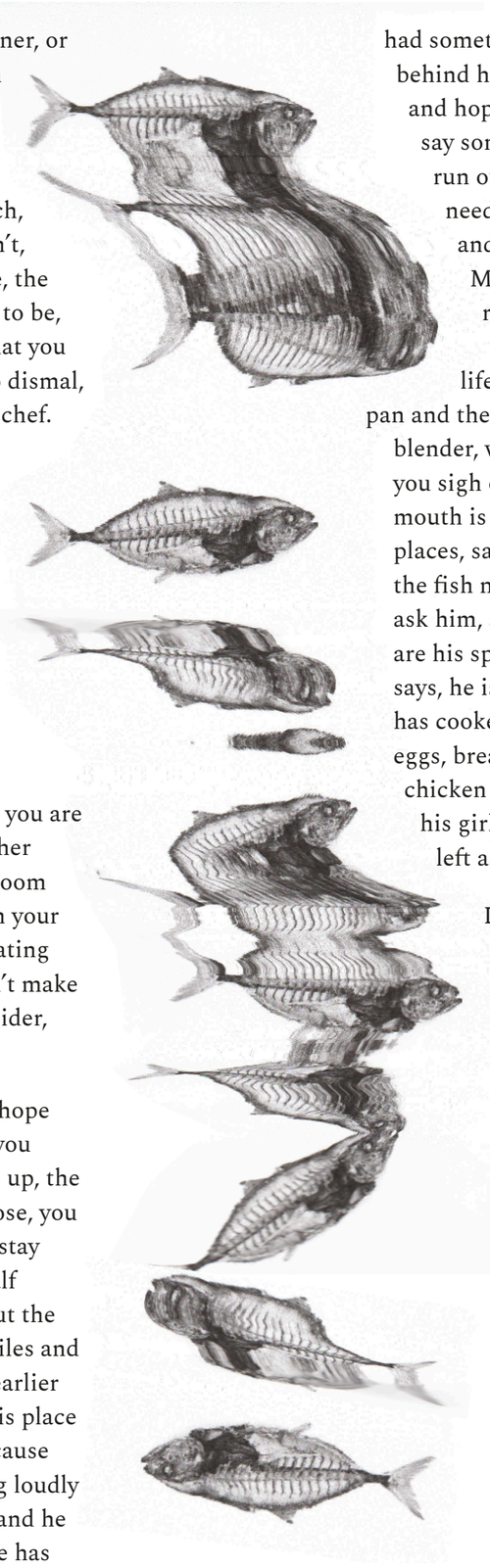
During the day, you meet her on campus, not that she is interested to talk to you but you are determined to have a normal conversation today, not one where you whine and moan her absence from your life, blah blah blah, how you want her to come back, zap zap zap, how much you miss her, hoot hoot hoot, what you can do to bring her back, swu swu swu, you zip your thoughts and you pretend to smile at her, she pretends to smile back, or so you think, so you tell her about your neighbour and his late night habits, and when she looks past you, and you fear she will be gone any moment from the spot, and you won't see her for the next one week at least, you stutter and add that the neighbour is a chef.

She has done a cooking course, or that's what she told you about why she can't meet during the weekends when you were together, but all that she has ever cooked for the two of you over eight months is roast chicken in red wine sauce, eggs on breads, and pasta in white sauce, and you are, frankly speaking, not impressed, you wanted to suggest bakes and grills, fries and steams, but then, where's the time, she would ask, and you would nod and agree, and by that time, she would already be on her phone, grinning while reading texts, pouting, frowning, sending a hurried voice note to someone on useless things like where she has kept the keys or from where it's best to buy a woollen coat, and all you could do was to wait for her to notice you again, which she wouldn't.

You often plan murder, but you can't decide whom to target, the chef seems an obvious choice but by the time he returns, you are too tired and you have almost passed out, almost, until the blue light hits you, so you focus on the fish instead, but Mrs Nina D'Souza in her high pitch voice, with her maroon lipstick sticking out of the corners of her lips, her glasses crooked on her nose, has lectured you for years in school "taking a life is a sin, children" and you had to repeat after her, not just that one lesson, but a whole series of don'ts, and you are mad at her for holding you back, but you have now run out of patience and you figure out that you would like to murder your school teacher instead of the chef, but then, you have no idea where she lives while you know where the chef is, so you are back to the chef as your target, until you are groggy and insane and it's almost morning and you have fallen asleep with your mouth open.

In your sleep, you see her cooking steamed fish in mustard and you ask her where she has got the fish from, and she says, it's Basa, and you yell at her and say that you want to know from where she has got it and not what it is, at which she stops cooking midway, bangs the nonstick pan on the gas oven and she is gone in an instant, and your drunken head tells you

that if you want breakfast, or dinner, or whatever, then you have to finish the task yourself, which you can't do, not because it's impossible to learn how to cook, not because you are stupid as such, which you are confident you aren't, and it's only your ex, not this one, the one before her, who thought you to be, but you aren't, but the thing is that you are too distracted, too drunk, too dismal, to finish cooking, so you call the chef.



You call the chef over to your place to salvage the dish, to which he agrees and he lets you know he'll be late but he'll come over, and you toy with the idea of telling him to switch off the blue light before he comes, but you keep your mouth shut, because number one, he is about to do you a favour, and number two, as long as he is cooking and you are eating, the blue light doesn't bother you, not until you are in the bedroom and the aquarium light is right in your eyes and all the profiles on the dating app are looking blue and you can't make out whom to ping, whom to consider, whom to discard.

He is done cooking, or so you hope because he's taking hours, or so you think, and when he finally shows up, the smell of mustard tickling your nose, you offer him a chair and ask him to stay back, half out of courtesy, and half because you plan to tell him about the blue light, request, that is, he smiles and asks what was wrong with your earlier place which made you shift to this place and you tell him it was shitty because the neighbours there used to sing loudly at night, and you couldn't sleep, and he sympathises with you and says he has had something similar here, the apartment behind his, and you slice through the fish and hope it tastes good, and you want to say something about how people have run out of civic sense and how they need to be retaught school lessons, and you crack a useless joke about Mrs Nina, to which he doesn't respond and you say to yourself that he must be having a hard life, the gas and the oven and the pan and the pot and the mixer and the blender, what else, no life, after all, and you sigh on his behalf and the fish in your mouth is tangy and sticky, unduly soft in places, salt not distributed, or whatever, the fish not cleaned, god knows, and you ask him, a tad annoyed, which cuisines are his speciality, he looks surprised and says, he isn't a chef at all, and all that he has cooked ever for himself are pasta, eggs, breads, and only once a roast chicken which got overdone and which his girlfriend smashed on his face, and left and never came back.

Days later, you are still pushing that steamed fish down your throat while your neighbour is singing a western solo at a five star's speciality restaurant to guests who can't be bothered to put down their cutlery to clap every time he finishes one.

Once he wraps up and comes home, he will switch on the blue light.

Meanwhile, your ex, the latest one, is telling her roommate how she hates Basa.

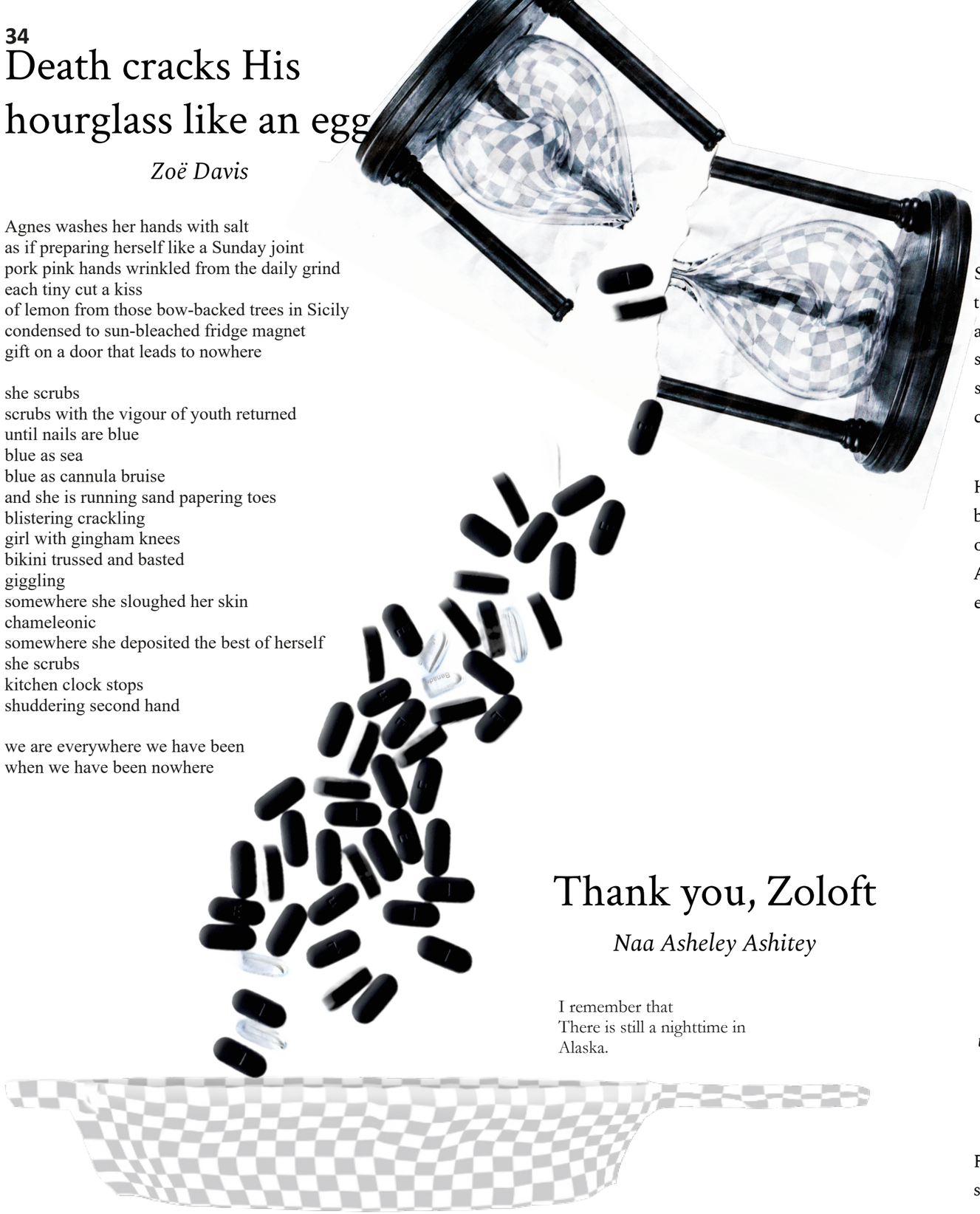
Death cracks His hourglass like an egg

Zoë Davis

Agnes washes her hands with salt
as if preparing herself like a Sunday joint
pork pink hands wrinkled from the daily grind
each tiny cut a kiss
of lemon from those bow-backed trees in Sicily
condensed to sun-bleached fridge magnet
gift on a door that leads to nowhere

she scrubs
scrubs with the vigour of youth returned
until nails are blue
blue as sea
blue as cannula bruise
and she is running sand papering toes
blistering crackling
girl with gingham knees
bikini trussed and basted
giggling
somewhere she sloughed her skin
chameleonic
somewhere she deposited the best of herself
she scrubs
kitchen clock stops
shuddering second hand

we are everywhere we have been
when we have been nowhere



Thank you, Zoloft

Naa Asheley Ashitey

I remember that
There is still a nighttime in
Alaska.

Ghost Ship

Harm Deacon

- for Jennifer Kiyomi Tanouye

Strange trenches spawn in scant seconds:
tectonic violence, cruel canyons,
a separation of Before and After into belligerent
states
split by an event horizon
computed in degrees or seconds
—spacetime a single thing, it's claimed

Hands gripping ten and two, inches
between routine and wreckage:
often safe passage, sometimes death.
A difference measured in blood on pavement,
easy to parse. So it goes, in spacetime
—degrees clockwise, or minutes passed

But with an origin and cause report,
there is no understanding—only ashen
fistfuls and fear, desiccated
diagnostics

the estimated dollar loss
fire resulted in

Nonchalant patter, jargon rigged to cover
the stench of charred bodies, discounting
darkened minutes before morning sun
and degrees rising after fallen dusk—

the roof, a wooden gable built—
the ridgeline, running north to south—

First on a list of thirty-six, trapped by words that
slandered your flesh and mocked the mystery that
was your soft breath on my neck. First means
nothing, Kiyo—you were one. We melded into a
non-Euclidean together, real and imaginary at once.

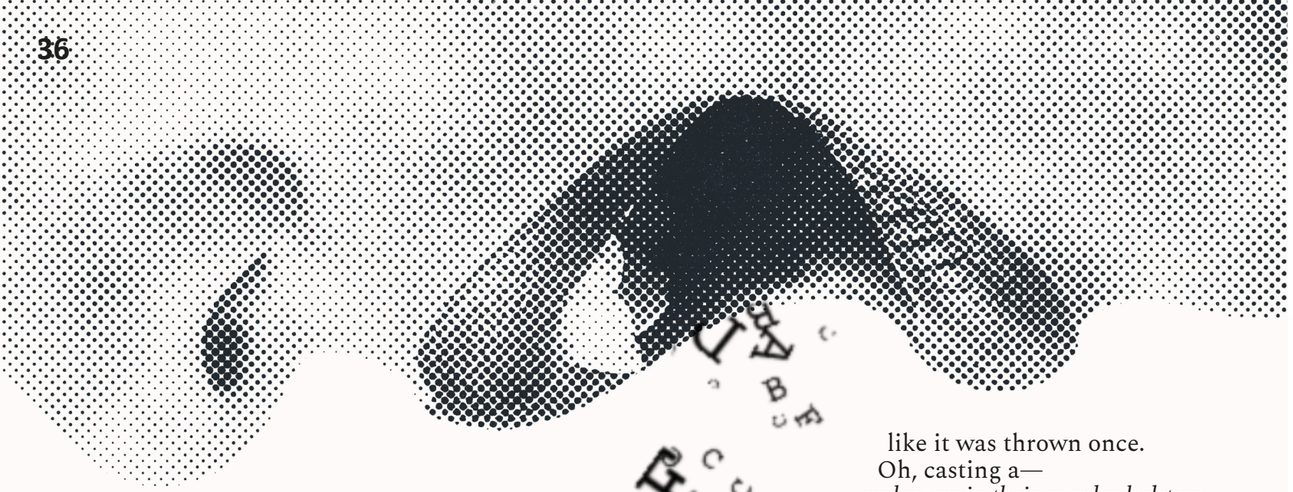
soot in the upper and
lower system
carboxyhemoglobin levels
CAUSE OF DEATH

A decade apart, and too many miles,
spacetime twisted our first time scorching
into betrayal. Oakland a fitful Judas—
burning, burning, burning

Earplugs in, we trampled Indio fields together,
young and stupid. Six passed out in a single room,
I fumbled with your sweat-pressed hair, well past
midnight, watching your pupils twitching mid-
dream.

fire classification:
UNDETERMINED

No origin and cause report can hint at you, my
gone Kiyo—
the summer-sweet cherry that you gifted
a vernal hunger in our stumbling limbs
our minutes and degrees in tandem
you tasted of surrender
and smelled like first time
you whispered yes
become mine
you aren't
anymore
only the flutter of your closed
eyes lingers
under my own lids



Apace

Luke Janicki

I had kept apace
of my own reading.

My pace was too slow.
Namely, I had nowhere
to go, every place

having been removed
by a year, or so. Any of
several voracious seabirds
were cormorants unbecoming;

vitiated had nothing to do
with being vital,
but rather impaired,

weakened. The weekend
was apace of me, part of it
remaining parallel
while broken apart,

plastic not hard, not fast
in the way we had thought: rhino
-plasty, plaster of Paris,

oh, Paris.
Oh, blast from the—
what was once objectively solid
became specks infinitesimally
small. Oh, the fall,

offal from the sky for all
time, and we think them snow: killamanjaro, rhino,
you know,
something leastways natural,

like it was thrown once.
Oh, casting a—
rods were in their angular holsters,
and we stood and rocked, had
chatted for an hour when

two, no three, took at the same
time. Michael was happy to do
most of the reeling in, and I
kept house, got some video,
though not much.

My pace was never coho,
noreasters, nor had been
salmon before, north

or south. Oh, the salmon,
oh, to touch out—
as from a cast, for a spell; I had
passed my plight well,
my will at last, like salt,
dissolving.

The Absolution of St. Sebastian II

Z. T. Fairfax

It was always going to be me dangling from the 12-foot wall. A wall so overgrown you'd swear it was made of ivy instead of brick. The tapestry of leaves and vines swallowed the front gate so that none of the boys could pull them free.

Up and over was my only choice.

A punishment that had been designed specifically for me, months in advance. Though the boys from my dorm would never admit it to my face, I caught on after the first couple of years of coming in dead last at fantasy football—a game played entirely on our phones, but one they took more seriously than their studies. The loser each season was punished, and I was always the loser.

They noticed my blank expression when they mentioned players by name, or that my draft picks were whoever the app suggested. By the third year, they didn't even make me pay the entry fee. The guaranteed punishment was enough to cover my spot in the league.

The league.

It consumed them for half of the school year. All I had to do was endure their rambling and accept their trade offers so they wouldn't forget me when the season was over.

But dangling from that wall, I questioned whether it was worth it. There must have been others at the school who would take me in. A quieter group that didn't spend their weekends wrestling in the yard or their summers fantasizing about how they'd punish you for not sharing their interests.

That fire was snuffed out immediately by 'what ifs.' What if there were no other boys? I'd rather be expelled for entering the woods and climbing the wall than spend my final year at the academy alone.

"You gonna pull yourself up or are you too chicken!" a boy squawked from below. The rest of the group chuckled.

He was the boy I'd lost against to earn last place. Mind you, it was only by a fraction of a point. If any of my players had run just a few more yards, he'd have been the one hoisting himself on top of the overgrown wall. But the way he shouted, you would have thought he'd won first place.

"That's right. Now go swipe us something good." More chuckles.

The forest was dense and damp, though it hadn't rained for days. My heart pounded as I straddled the wall. The air was thin and cool, unlike the thick humidity on our trek here. Sweat bled through my undershirt, and the sleeves of my white button-up clung to my skin.

It was nice, up there. I could just barely see the campus of the all-boys school through the trees.

The other side of the wall was a different world entirely. Where decaying leaves suffocated the forest floor, the yard below was a pristine green carpet with blades appearing so soft that I almost let myself fall into them. It didn't make sense. The all-girls campus had been abandoned well before my time at the academy, the students and faculty relocated to a nicer campus some miles away. Yet the grounds were in better condition than our own.

"You going or what?" The boy's shout startled me.

I steadied myself, straddling the top of the wall. A sensible boy would have wondered how I was going to climb back over. The vines that smothered the side the boys were on stopped before crawling over the other. If I got stuck, I'd be expelled for sure.

The boys exchanged grumbled whispers. I couldn't tell what they were saying, but I had no doubt they were growing impatient, wondering if I would actually follow through or if I'd finally chicken out.

I planted my hands on the bare stone and, in one swift motion, hoisted myself onto the forbidden campus. The moment my shoes touched the grass, the reality of what I'd already done crept in. Every dare before this one had a safety net.

The gas station run freshman year was mortifying—nudie mags shoved under my jacket for the entire mile trek back to campus. The front page grabbed at my sweaty torso. But porn wasn't worth expulsion. Swiping the golden tube of Ms. Cunningham's lipstick last year was bolder, though her softness made it doubtful she'd have punished me if she'd found out. But this...

The absence of females had driven these boys mad, sadistic at their most creative. They may as well have put the lipstick on me and had their way. Perhaps they would have if we had another year to play.

What they planned to do with the lipstick, I didn't want to know. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't like magazines and that I didn't have a few pages shoved under my mattress. But the boys were animals, clawing at the pictures of women laid bare. I swooned for mine, longing to touch and be touched.

"Is he dead?"

"Hey, are you dead!"

"N-no," I called back to the disembodied voices.

"He ain't dead." The boy from before needlessly announced. "We'll be waiting here. Don't come back empty-handed."

He spoke as if expecting me to return with a trove of lace.

But the rest of the boys made it clear they didn't care what I returned with as long as it was from the dorms. A scrap of paper with handwriting would do, though I knew something more impressive might help me stick in their minds.

The boys' voices faded behind me as I crossed the lawn. Each step loosened the tightness I carried around them. The grass bent silently under my shoes, as soft as it seemed from the top of the wall. None of the boys had ever set foot on this campus, but my body moved as though it remembered the way.

The towering doors were left wide open, polished brass handles catching the sun. Inside, the floors sparkled. The windows were clean. There was no sign that this place had been empty for years, which made the absence of voices and clacking heels turn something in my stomach.

I fought back the urge to call out 'hello.'

The black-and-white checkerboard tiles led me past the front office into the atrium, which branched into the four cardinal directions. Wooden benches dotted the gallery. Potted ficus trees stretched toward a domed ceiling. And in the center of the room, a bronze statue of Joan of Arc, her sword pointing North.

I stopped.

The campus was a mirror image of the boys' school. Same layout, same bones. But our atrium housed a depiction of St. Sebastian — barely clothed and beautiful, looking up to the heavens with an arrow in his neck.

Joan was armored, staring intently. Her mouth curved slightly downward to reflect the empathy tucked inside her furrowed brow.

I touched the place on my neck where the arrow had pierced Sebastian. She looked as if she could have put it there.

A pair of giggles echoed down the hall to my left, and my neck snapped in their direction. I stood as still as Joan, straining to listen over the pounding of my heart. But all I heard was the faint sound of wind slipping through an unseen window.

I was relieved to be heading in the opposite direction. Joan's eyes followed me as I slipped past her toward the West hall.

Suddenly, I didn't feel the need to search the dorms as thoroughly as I had intended. Anything would do, even if the first thing I found was a gym sock.

The air sweetened as I neared the dorms, and it warmed my skin the way the sunset did when it shone through my bedroom window. I prayed that this version of my room held some treasure that would trigger the boys' Pavlovian response—a bit of elastic or satin.

The dorm halls felt cramped compared to the vast entryway. Wooden floors, green and beige patterned wallpaper, interrupted by dark brown door frames. My legs carried me by memory down each hallway, passing doors both shut and open, not bothering to peek inside.

Not until I reached the narrow corridor where my room sat on the opposite end. It looked identical to the hall I'd walked down several times every day, except my door had my nameplate on the right side.

None of the doors had nameplates. Only pale rectangles where they'd hung, the wallpaper beneath still holding its color like a scar.

A low buzzing came from behind a door to my left as I stepped into the hall. I should have run, but the door was cracked, like a smile inviting me to open it wider.

I peered through the gap, searching for the source of the buzz. I froze as a deer would, watching a car barrel straight toward me. Not out of fear, but confusion. What would happen if I let it hit me?

But there wasn't a car in the room. It was a girl, sitting on the floor with her back pressed against the wall. Her face was buried in her knees, jet-black hair cascading over her arms. A sob drowned out by the buzzing wracked her torso, and she convulsed, holding her knees so tightly to her chest it seemed like the only thing holding her together.

She wore a perfectly white... something. Somewhere in between a sundress and a night gown. The starchy fabric lay in stiff bunches on the floor.

I pressed the door open a bit more, ready to ask her what was wrong, when another girl stepped close to her, a pair of clippers vibrating in her hand. She gingerly placed her finger under the girl's chin to lift her face.

Her eyes were red, and tears rolled over the impressions left in her cheeks by the wrinkles of her dress.

The girl with the clippers knelt next to her and looked at her with an expression hard to name. Not quite sorrow, but wholly certain of her actions. She leaned in to plant a kiss on her forehead before grabbing the back of her head and running the clippers along her scalp. Clumps of pitch-black hair pooled around the crying girl, but she didn't fight back.

I didn't feel how violently my chest pounded until I backed away from the door. It thrashed against my ribs until I'd backed far enough away for the clippers

to fade into laughter.

Much louder than giggling, more maniacal than friendly.

It came from the end of the hall. From the room that was mine on the other side of the woods. I pressed my back against the doorframe and held my breath, tilting just enough to see inside, still curious as to what this version of my room held.

A girl sat in a folding chair in the center of the room. Her gown was the same white as the others, but the hem was streaked with grass stains, green and brown smeared up to her knees, as if she'd been dragged across a field. Her hair hung in tangles around her face, loose and knotted in ways the other girls' hair was not.

She grabbed a tuft and picked at its fraying edges.

And there were other girls. Five, maybe six, standing in a circle around her. Their gowns were immaculate. Their hair fell in clean lines, not a strand out of place. One of them pointed at the girl in the middle, and her mouth split open into a laugh so wide the top of her head almost fell backward.

She laughed alone at first.

Then the others joined.

Pointing inches from the girl, their laughter bounced off the walls and folded over itself until it sounded less like joy and more like animals fighting over food. The girl in the middle gripped the sides of the chair. Her shoulders hitched. She was crying—I could see the tears catching light on her cheeks before sliding into the forced smile she maintained—but the sound was swallowed whole by the noise around her.

Then she laughed.

It came out broken at first, hiccupping through the sobs, her mouth twisting between expressions until she was able to match theirs. Tears still streaming, face contorting, but laughing. It was a loud and desperate performance, but soon she looked just like them outside of her messy dress and bird’s nest hair.

A lump formed in my throat, and I couldn’t swallow the bitterness on my tongue. She chose this, and just like the girl before, she wasn’t fighting back.

One of the girls broke from the circle. She grabbed the crying girl's face with both hands, fingers pressing into her cheeks, pulling her from the chair and close until their noses nearly touched. Laughter swelled around them. She was shouting directly into the other girl's open mouth, their faces so close they were practically breathing for each other. Screaming until purple veins bulged from their darkening crimson skin.

Then, silence. The girl in the middle went limp, her eyes rolling as her body folded sideways, collapsing to the floor like a puppet with its strings cut.

Every laugh died at once.

The circle stood over her, staring tenderly at the crumpled pile of grass stains and tears. One smoothed her gown. Another tilted her head, admiring the mess on the floor.

After a long and silent pause, one of them turned toward the door.

I didn't think. My legs carried me down the hall and around a corner, past two doors, three, and I grabbed the first knob I could reach and slipped inside, easing the door shut behind me until only a sliver of hallway light remained.

A flock of girls strode past the door, and I squeezed my eyes shut, praying none of them would choose this room. My nerves calmed as their footsteps faded, and I released my stranglehold on the knob.

I just needed to grab something, anything, from this room and leave.

Scant light lit the room from the setting sun that slid through a singular window, my escape. I scanned its off-white walls, squares of sun-bleached hardwood from missing furniture, and white lacy curtains flapping against the open window. The smell of honeysuckles was almost overwhelming.

I took a deep breath and smiled at the thought of taking one of the curtains. I could bring the boys lace after all. A thought interrupted by the scraping of a brush through hair.

That's when I saw her.

A girl sat at the far end of the room in front of a vanity mirror, her back to me, pulling a brush through the ends of her hair before threading a red ribbon through. Long dark hair, the kind that couldn't decide if it wanted to wave or curl, falling well past her shoulders in thick strands. She gathered it with both hands, twisted it once, and looped the red ribbon around. Her fingers worked slowly, deliberately, like she'd done this a thousand times and was in no rush to finish.

She hadn't seen me. Or I thought she hadn't.

I should have slipped back through the door and run until I hit the wall and thrown myself over it and never looked back. But I stood there, watching her tie her hair in the mirror, and I couldn't move.

“Are you lost, little dove?” She said so calmly, so sweetly. She spoke in a way that each syllable fell on my ears like the notes of a song.

Her eyes found mine in the glass, her reflection peering at me over her shoulder.

Green. Or hazel. Something in between that shifted as her head tilted, catching the light from the window. Her hands finished the knot before relinquishing the ribbon. All the while, she looked at me the way you'd look at a bird that had flown in through an open window. Surprised, maybe, but not afraid. Like she was deciding whether to help it find its way out or watch it break itself against the walls.

I opened my mouth to say something—an apology, most likely—but she raised a finger to her lips.

I obeyed.

She crossed the room quietly, her bare feet silent on the hardwood, and she smelled like…

I didn't have a word for it then. Something sweet and heavy that thickened the air between us. Like spring air right before the rain, honeysuckles in bloom. Autumn leaves on hot, wet pavement. My lungs ached to breathe her in.

She reached past me and eased the door shut, her arm close enough that I could feel the warmth coming off it. Then she took my wrist the way you'd take someone's hand to lead them somewhere safe and pulled me toward the window.

"You wandered into the wrong nest."

Her voice was low, almost a whisper, and there was a softness in it that made my throat tighten. She’d brought me to the window to leave. She didn’t have to say it, but I wished she would.

She pulled back the curtain and looked up at me with a half-smile. Not much more than a grin, but it made her whole face shift into something I wasn't prepared for. She didn’t wear makeup, and her clothes were exactly the same as every girl I’d seen before. Her face was just her face, and it undid me. Every glossy page I'd ever smuggled under my jacket and the things they made me feel were dirty in comparison, because none of them had made me feel like the floor was vanishing beneath my feet.

If she were carved from bronze and placed on a pedestal, I’d have worshipped her all the same.

"You're from the other side," she said, still holding my wrist. Not a question.

I nodded.

Something in her expression flickered—pity, maybe. She gazed out the window, and her grip loosened.

"You should go," she said. "If they find you here—"

"What would they do?" I already had a decent idea.

She looked at the door. Then back at me. The ribbon was coming loose in her hair, and a half-curl had fallen across her forehead.

"They wouldn't do anything to you." The notes fell flat as her gaze fell to the windowsill.

I understood what she meant. The weight of it settled in my stomach like a stone. I wondered what the other girls must have done to earn their punishment. Or rather, what someone else had done that they had to pay for. Would they really punish her because I stumbled into her room?

A dreadfully sour thought. I didn’t want to picture her still body lying on the cold floor.

"Come with me," I said, and I meant it. I placed my hand over hers and offered a gentle squeeze.

She laughed—more breath than sound—and shook her head, loose curls sliding from the ribbon. That scent again, floral and natural, almost dizzying. It lived in her hair.

"Why would you want to stay here?" A genuine question, but also one I thought made my point. She should have known better how horrendous this place was.

She ignored me, the sunset reflecting in her hazel eyes. "It's better if you leave and forget you were here and never come back."

She said it as a matter of fact, leaving no room for question. It was undoubtedly the truth.

I should have listened, but her fingers still lingered on my wrist. A touch so slight, yet it anchored me to that moment.

She looked at me with those green-hazel eyes, and her hair kept slipping out of its ribbon, and she smelled like my favorite memories, and I thought if the boys held me down and ran clippers across my skull, I wouldn't care. I wouldn't fight back if she were the one holding my face.

I kissed her.

She went rigid. Her hand flew from my wrist to my chest, to push me away, I think, but it stayed there. Her fingers curled into the fabric of my shirt, and I felt her inhale sharply through her nose. Then she softened against me, her lips parting, and the hand on my chest stopped pushing and started pulling.

The floor dropped away.

Not like the feeling people describe when they talk about their first kiss. My eyes stayed shut, but my feet rose from the dust on the hardwood. My stomach lifted the way it does on a swing at the highest point, and for a moment I couldn't tell which direction was up or down. I breathed her in, all of her, pulling her closer to me and never wanting to let go.

The room could have been spinning, but I wouldn't have felt it, because I was flying.

When she pulled away, and my feet remembered the ground, the last of the sunlight painted the walls of the room with shadowy trees. She stepped back, cheeks flushed, and lips parted, as if someone had woken her from a dream she wasn't ready to leave.

"You have to go now," her voice wavered.

She was right. Footsteps marched down the hall, and something about the way they sounded told us they were headed here.

"I-I can't leave without… something."

She didn't ask questions. There was no time to explain anyway.

She reached behind her head and pulled the ribbon free. Her hair fell in a dark cascade around her shoulders, and the scent hit me again, so rich I could taste it.

She pressed the ribbon into my palm and closed my fingers around it.

"Don't come back," she hissed with urgency. "Swear you won't come back here."

"I swear."

She pushed against the small of my back before I could finish my promise. The curtains slid shut as I climbed onto the ledge. The drop was only a few feet, but when I jumped, the ground took longer to meet me than it should have. I half expected to see her lingering in the window when I looked back, but she was gone. The other girls must have arrived, and I would have felt miserable if it weren't for the piece of her I carried.

I ran across the courtyard, past the mahogany doors, and to the place where I'd climbed over. A simple wooden ladder leaned where it hadn't been before, but I was too high from the lingering feeling of that girl on my lips to question it. I climbed over again, landing in the woods.

The boys were gone, but I didn't care. The ribbon was clenched in my fist so tight it left a crease in my palm that lasted for hours.

I could still smell her on it.

***

The boys weren't impressed. I knew they wouldn't be. They didn't see the ribbon as anything more than a scrap of fabric—didn't understand why I couldn't let it go.

It stayed wrapped around my wrist. Every now and then, I'd get a whiff of her and would close my eyes to recall the feeling of her body pressed against mine. I ran my fingers through my sheets—the closest thing to how her dress felt.

The memory of her made the coldness some of the boys showed me sting a lot less. If I thought about the distance my lackluster find put between us, I could press the ribbon to my lips and breathe.

Unhealthy was an understatement for describing what she'd done to me. Poison was better. With each passing day, she consumed more and more of my thoughts. I wondered what had happened to her, if anything at all. If she thought of me as well. Attempting to find something hidden in her final words to me.

"Don't come back. Swear you won't come back here."

But as with every word she uttered, there was no room for question. I questioned it anyway.

Pieces of her faded. The scent on her ribbon wasn't as strong. Even still, the feeling of her fingers pressing into my wrist lingered. A ghost of the moment we shared, pulling me back to that window.

I swore to her I wouldn't return, but if she hurt as badly as I did, staying apart was torturing us both.

The glacier between the boys and me began to melt, despite the disappointing end to our final fantasy season. The me before her would have seen this as mercy—a second chance I wouldn't take lightly. But now I feared the thaw was washing away what was left of her.

"I can go back," I said during lunch. There was always a lull following a fantasy football season, as if there were no other topics to discuss, and the boys had to relearn one another despite living together for years.

But this year felt different, as if the lack of a last hurrah had expedited this slump, and I felt responsible.

"I can get something better. Something with lace…"

Their blank stares told me they'd already forgotten my punishment, then one of them shook his head and swallowed his bite of roll.

"Nah, it was a dumb punishment anyway." The rest of the boys grunted in agreement.

That should have been the end of it. The boys moved on. I should have, too.

And she was already fading. When I held the ribbon to my nose, there was nothing. Just fabric.

I passed through the atrium on my way back from lunch. Several boys hurried through the gallery, but it somehow felt emptier than the gallery in the woods. I stopped at the foot of St. Sebastian. He was barely clothed save for the white sheet draped around his waist, his face turned to the heavens. Arrow jutting from his neck.

I'd walked past him a hundred times and never read the plaque.

Condemned and left for dead, Sebastian survived his wounds. Rather than flee, he returned to face the empire that had tried to destroy him. He was martyred not for his defiance, but for his refusal to abandon what he loved.

I touched the ribbon on my wrist and kept walking.

She wasn't painted onto the back of my eyelids. There was no tingle on my lips. All that was left were the ghostly fingerprints pulling me to her dorm.

I went back alone.

The campus took a different form at night. The mahogany doors were closed this time, but not locked. Joan of Arc's disapproving glare caught on what little moonlight bled through the dome. I didn't linger.

My heart hammered against my ribs, and my palms were slick against the hem of my shirt. The feeling before opening a gift you've been waiting for your entire life, hoping what was inside was what you'd always wanted.

The dorm hall was dark and quiet, every door shut. But as I neared her wing, the air changed. That faint sweetness crept in, and my chest ached at the

recognition. I'd almost forgotten—honeysuckles and rain.

My pace quickened, shoes barely touching the hardwood as I retraced steps I'd walked a thousand times in my head.

I knew exactly which door was hers.

I turned the knob slowly, in case she was sleeping. The door swung inward, and the sweetness vanished. Something else replaced it—the metallic smell of wet copper so strong I could taste it.

She wasn't inside.

The window was open, curtains thrashing in the wind. The vanity sat where it had before, but the mirror was shattered. Glass littered the floor, and what remained in the frame was smeared with blood, almost black in the moonlight. A large piece was missing from the center.

The piece where her eyes had met mine.

I ran to the window and gripped the sill, searching the ground below for her body. The grass was empty. No blood on the curtains.

I almost jumped anyway, as if I could find her somewhere out there in the dark. Or maybe it was my instincts telling me to run. I swore I wouldn't come back. I shouldn't have come back.

"She isn't down there."

I spun around and found a girl standing in the doorway, her white gown spotless, her hair immaculate. I knew her voice, but the last time I'd heard it, she'd been laughing into another girl's mouth.

"What happened to her?" My voice cracked in a way that would have embarrassed me if I had room to feel anything other than dread.

"You happened to her." She stepped into the room, glass crunching under her bare feet. "You touched her. You kissed her. And now she has to answer for being impure."

"I didn't—she didn't do anything wrong!"

"Of course you would think that."

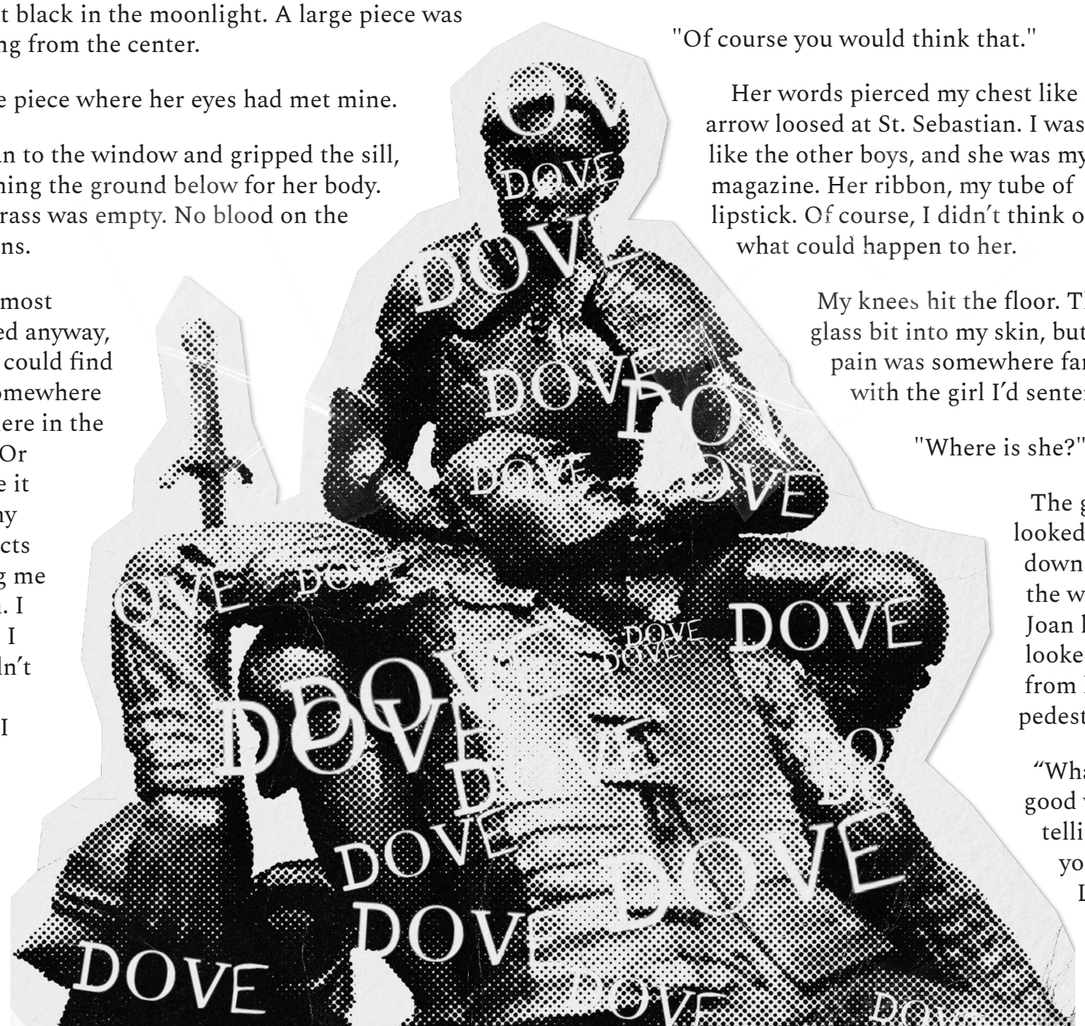
Her words pierced my chest like an arrow loosed at St. Sebastian. I was just like the other boys, and she was my magazine. Her ribbon, my tube of lipstick. Of course, I didn't think of what could happen to her.

My knees hit the floor. The glass bit into my skin, but the pain was somewhere far away with the girl I'd sentenced.

"Where is she?"

The girl looked down at me the way Joan had looked from her pedestal.

"What good would telling you do? Look at you… You're pathetic."



Another arrow of truth.

"Please. I'll do anything. She didn't do anything. It was me. I forced her to kiss me. It was my fault." I begged while holding back tears. For whom was I going to cry? Myself or for her? I wouldn't spill any tears unless I was certain it wasn't because of my loss.

The girl furrowed her brow as she lifted my chin with her finger.

"You can take her place," she said. "If you truly love her."

I'd never used that word. Not once, not even in the privacy of my own thoughts. But what else could this be? This thing that pulled me back over the wall, that made me hold a ribbon to my lips every night until I'd breathed every ounce of her essence into my lungs. If this wasn't love, then love didn't exist.

And I had kissed her. I had put my mouth on hers without asking, and whatever happened next was mine to carry.

Her sins were mine.

"Tell me what to do," I whimpered, sure now that any tears shed were of happiness knowing I could redeem her.

The girl nodded, and two more girls entered the room carrying a white sheet, which they spread across the floor.

"Take off your clothes," she demanded.

I didn't hesitate.

I pulled my shirt over my head and crawled on the sheet before removing my pants. One of the girls stood behind me and tied a strip of fabric over my eyes. It was loose, and a gap was open at the bottom, just big enough for me to peek through.

I lay down. The sheet was cold against my back and legs. Barely clothed by the cloth over my eyes, blocking my view of the heavens, I finally understood why Sebastian seemed so at peace.

Through the gap, I could see my bare body, and beyond my feet, the girl who stood where Joan might have—her eyes holding certainty and pity. The other two knelt beside me and placed their hands on my wrists, pressing their nails into the skin. Holding me in place the way you'd nail a martyr to a cross.

When the pain subsided, I started to feel light.

It began in the soles of my feet and spread upward, the same warmth, the same weightlessness. My stomach lifted. The floor fell away beneath me the way it had when she'd kissed me back, and I rose off the sheet. I hovered inches above the ground, suspended in the space between the living and whatever came next. I could feel her on my lips again, and I thought, I must be close to her now.

There wasn't a hint of fear in me. I was saving the person I loved.

A fourth girl entered the room. Bare feet pattered on the hardwood, and then the sweetness hit me. The full, heavy warmth of it flooded the room, honeysuckle and rain, autumn leaves on hot pavement. My lungs ached the way they had the first time, and my eyes burned behind the blindfold.

I wanted to rip my arms free and tear away the blindfold, but I couldn't move.

She was here. She came.

I'd saved her.

Her lips brushed my ear, and I could taste her again.

"I'm sorry, little dove."

Something sharp and cold pressed against my throat, and I looked down through the sliver beneath the blindfold. A piece of mirror, the missing piece, and in its reflection, hazel-green eyes.

They were the last thing I saw before the mirror shifted and dark red poured over the glass until darkness flooded my vision like a sunset sliding behind the trees.

The floor never came back.

Wanting

Amanda Dodge

Wallpaper yellowed and brittle, curling at the edges. Water dripping somewhere behind it where the mold had grown into the shape of his face. I pushed the bed next to him, needing to fill my lungs with his spores.

That is what I remember most about those days—the way The Wanting lived in the walls.

I fed it from time to time.

It had started innocently enough. I offered him scraps of songs and poems I liked. Ones that sparked something inside me that no one else ever seemed to feel. But love, lust, and longing are all fools and dust in the end.

The Wanting encouraged me with the odd tap, nails scraping on drywall, the breathy moans and creaking of mattress springs. Even now, the memory makes me giddy, but I'd hate for him to see the way time has thinned and crinkled my skin, the long lines of gravity mapping my body. Inside, I still feel like that woman, full of hunger and passion. Time only ages the flesh, I suppose.

Sometimes I shared conversations with him, from not entirely harmless flirtations with strangers on the phone. In those days, we didn't have dating apps or social media for idle distractions. We had the Lonely-Hearts Hotline. The mythic late-night commercial promising the lovesick and lonely that for just 99 cents a minute they could be matched with someone just like them—so full of wanting. Faceless on the phone, you could be anyone until you were both breathless.

Each time, the creature in the wall listened silently as the words of strangers patched the fissures inside me.

My husband never seemed to catch on that anything was amiss. Most of the time Darren slept in the living room, while I lay listening to his gurgling breaths and assumed that, as a man of little imagination, he dreamt of nothing.

We had married too young, though knowing that in my thirties was something I never could have convinced my twenty-something self of. Back when my identity was still half-baked, but I was so certain it was concrete like everything else I thought I knew about the world.

Which was nothing but felt like everything.

I didn't care about the house we were supposed to be buying. I liked our little apartment and the wall who wanted nothing but me.

One night, bored with watching the lightning outside my body in the dark, I dialed the hotline. The shame of answering the screening questions had long since left me. The line crackled, and then a shock rippled through me as creature's voice— his voice came through the phone. We laughed, embarrassed until he tapped on the plaster between us, his whisper slipping through the line and the wall.

Strange to have lived so close to someone and never really seen them. He'd heard too much of my brokenness, and yet his body rose for me, hungered for me through the distance. I constructed him out of imagined sensations until I could smell punky wood, soured from rain, all earthy silt left to rot in the sun long after the river ran dry.

Dampness lingered in the air and on my tongue, his spores blanketing my skin. But it wasn't enough. I pressed my palm to the wall, the paper rippling. I peeled back the wallpaper and passed my hand through the gelatinous drywall.

Come through.

I obeyed him, uncertain of how much of me went through and how much stayed pressed against the mattress as humid air swirled around, dust or spores enveloping me, I couldn't tell.

There was no room like I'd imagined, just the dark void of his voice and mine. I breathed him in and he filled every part of me. All the hungered, finally satisfied.

The sunlight slicing into my bedroom woke me. My fingers were tangled in the wallpaper, the shredded flesh of old pennies. My palms stained the green water. Desire was rancid like stagnant day, the magic of mouth never tasted the same during it craved darkness.

A knock on the door rang throughout the place, and Darren answered it. The small voices followed by footsteps. He murmur of into the room with men in white came

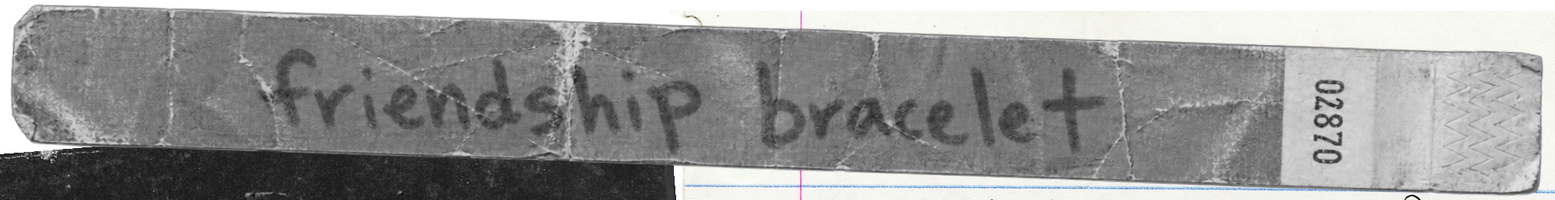
paper suits, not bothering to make sure I was decent first. If anyone noticed the black and green smears all over my face and body, they never gave it away.

The men murmured something about a mold problem on a load-bearing wall. I stood in the doorway wrapped in a bedsheet as they took a saw to my lover's face, black tears bleeding out as they ripped him apart.

They condemned the building and forced us out immediately. Darren was pleased to leave and never looked back. He's been dead now for ten years, and I've not once wanted him back.

But some nights when the cough keeps me awake, in the house we called ours, I press my palm flat against the clean white walls. Nothing answers.





The invention you gave me was just what I wanted!

Thank you so much!

From Stephanie Hodgson

It wouldn't hurt anything. But who wants to ~~the~~ start a 6 month Rehab when they've already been clean for 4 months on the outside. I know I can stay clean + sober. I just need my family + support.
Im so glad I have you now - to write + tell everything too.
And I want you to know I Love you like your my real sister + you can tell me anything.
And I trust you w/ my secrets.
I have to go for now.

Sorry so sloppy

I ♡ Joe
EJ
4 ever & Always
Right?

♡ Love you ♡ Amanda

P.S. What's the story with you fainting? - over a ciggy?

Write BACK ASAP! ♡ you♡

quit complain that its one of your last stamps! Im givin it Back!

JP! ♡y

Silt

silt /silt/ noun

1. Fine sediment deposited by water or wind, composed of particles smaller than sand and larger than clay

2. That which remains after the current has moved on

3. The accumulation of what was carried but never arrived