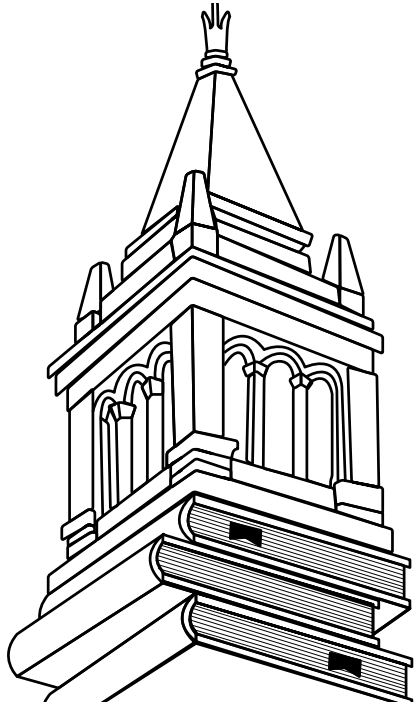
Berkeley Fiction Review



berkeley fiction review

ISSUE 45

Cover Art by Julia Jin

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ISSN: 1087-7053

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Printed by Piedmont Copy
Oakland, CA 94611

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Kiyoko Shiosaki
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Kiyoko Shiosaki
Melanie Abrams
Aileen Sandoval
Elise Fisher
Michelle Zielinskim

EDITORS' NOTE

Dear Readers,

We are beyond excited that this book has ended up in your hands. At *Berkeley Fiction Review*, we believe that reading should transcend reality and grant us access to new perspectives. After a year of reading, discussing, voting, and editing, the *Berkeley Fiction Review* staff and editors have selected ten stories that we loved both as critics and readers. These stories are not easy, and they ask readers to engage with difficult characters and uncomfortable ideas, but they also invite readers to spend a bit of time in another world.

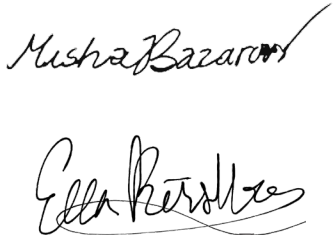
This year's stories revolve around suffering. Our publication does not select stories with a theme in mind, so it is perhaps a sign of the times that such a theme crystallizes in viewing the collection as a whole. Almost all of our stories approach this theme differently, be it through the horrors of war, the disorientation of moving to another country, the mourning of a loved one, jealousy, or cannibalism. But each story explores that suffering unapologetically, asking readers to look at it head-on. The world is not an easy place, but fiction provides a way for readers to interact with pain in a way that is productive and cathartic, and we are proud of how beautifully these stories do exactly that.

We would like to extend our sincerest gratitude to our authors, artists, and editors for the hard work they have put into this issue. Art is a tireless craft of the soul, and it is our honor to provide a home for

these stories. It's also our privilege to be a part of *Berkeley Fiction Review's* 45th year of publication.

Stories matter; stories will always matter. On behalf of the entire editorial staff at *Berkeley Fiction Review*, thank you for giving these pieces your time and attention. We hope you love them as much as we do.

With gratitude,
Misha Bazarov, Kate Hayashi,
Ella Kirshbaum, and Bianca Sandoval
Co-Editors in Chief



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SHE WHO HEARS THE SUFFERING OF THE WORLD

Jackie Lee Morrison

Mei recorded everything. She bundled cassette tapes and photos she printed at the pharmacy by the dozen, and couriered them back home to Hong Kong for her family to experience her life. It was so expensive to send; it was more expensive to call.

Here was Bo, being weighed by the nurse, a pink tangle of arms and legs. Here he was again, wide-eyed in his first bath, slick as a seal. He'd dangled in her grasp, fragile, threatening to slip through her fingers. Everything here was new, from this country to her husband to her baby. Everything except Mei.

The first time she'd turned on the television, she'd stared, white noise in her ears.

"I can't understand anything they're saying," she'd said, on the phone to her brother, the line crackling. "This isn't English—it sounds like gibberish!"

"It's just the accent, you'll get used to it."

"How?" Mei had clutched the handset tightly, her knuckles white.

"You'll find a way. It's your home now."

The words were a paper cut: sharp and unexpected. Mei missed home. She missed the busy, noisy streets; black-haired heads bobbing in a sea of people who looked just like her. She missed the loud bickering of her younger brothers as they fought for the last piece of *siu juk* on the table. She missed afternoon tea with her friends in a *ca caan teng*, sharing stuffed french toast oozing with peanut butter, thick globules of maple syrup and melted butter dripping down its sides. Most of all, though, she missed her mother.

•

Mei didn't know why her mother had been so eager to marry her off and ship her to a foreign country. Had it been purely because she'd been of age? She had two younger brothers, separated only by eighteen months, and a father long buried. Maybe her mother hadn't wanted the extra mouth to feed. Maybe she'd just grown tired of her. Despite Mei's misgivings, she hadn't questioned it—it would've been useless to argue. Her mother commanded respect, simply through the act of having birthed three children.

As a child, every experience had been a teaching opportunity. Once, Mei had slipped away while her mother had been shopping in Sogo. She'd rounded the clothes rack and found herself lost. She'd even reversed direction, as if that could somehow take her back to a time when she hadn't been lost. But when she'd re-emerged, her mother had still been nowhere to be seen.

"*If you get lost, you go to an adult and tell them your name.*" That had been the instruction she'd grown up with. So, standing in the busy mall, tugging on a loose thread at the hem of her pastel-yellow Chickeeduck cardigan, she'd looked for an adult. There had been plenty around, but had any of them looked like someone who'd help her? She'd been paralyzed.

Thankfully, a woman had approached her first.

"*Mui Mui*, are you okay? Where's your *mami*?"

Mei had blinked rapidly, the sting in her eyes and throat building. "My name is Mei," she'd said. "I'm lost."

The woman had taken Mei's paw in hers, leading her to the information desk. She'd hooked her hands under Mei's armpits and lifted her like a baby doll, placing her on the desk.

"What's your *mami*'s name?" the information girl had asked.

Mei had stared. There had been a stiffness in her jaw, invisible wires binding it shut.

"*Mui Mui*? Do you know your *mami*'s name?"

Mei had shook her head. She'd pulled at the thread on her cardigan, her scalp tingling. The woman who'd brought her over had said something to the information girl—something Mei couldn't hear—and they'd both laughed. They'd been laughing at her, she'd been sure. They'd probably thought she was such a stupid, little girl: she hadn't even known her *mami*'s name.

"Mei!"

She'd turned her head sharply to see her mother striding towards her. Mei hadn't been able to stop the tears as she'd reached out for her. Her mother's hands had pinched the flesh of Mei's armpits as she'd pulled her off the counter. Though Mei had tried to nuzzle into her neck, the familiar smell of perfume and mothballs in her lungs,

her mother had held her at an arm's length and then put her down.

"Why did you wander off like that?"

"*Wah*, lucky your *mami* found you," the information girl had said. "*Hou dak ji*—such a cutie."

Her mother had apologized on Mei's behalf and marched her away.

"I watched you," she'd said. "I watched to see what you'd do. I told you, if you ever get lost, you go to an adult. What if that girl had kidnapped you and given you to the *laap saap gung* to live in his rubbish cart? Would you like to live in a rubbish cart for the rest of your life?" She'd pulled wet wipes from her bag, tugged one from the plastic. "Wipe your hands—they're sticky."

Mei had understood she'd failed a test she hadn't realized she was taking, but that was her relationship with her mother: a constant push and pull, all the while being evaluated for reasons not quite clear to her. Her brothers had never had to endure these sorts of trials. Was it because they were boys? Or was it something else, something Mei could never quite put her finger on?

What, Mei wondered, was the life lesson this time? Was this arranged marriage another test? Should she turn it down to show loyalty to her family? Or would that bring shame upon them? As usual, there were more questions around what would make her mother happy than answers.

•

Mei's future mother-in-law came to inspect her a month prior to the wedding. Mei scrubbed herself until her skin smarted, squeezed into a stiff-necked *coeng saam*, and had her hair brushed, and pulled, and pinned until her eyes welled with tears.

"Don't cry," her mother said, her hand cupped over Mei's eyes. She shook the hairspray and sprayed it in a thick cloud. "It'll make your eyes puffy."

Don't speak unless spoken to, sit nicely—cross your ankles, not your legs. The instructions rolled over and over in her head as her two mothers exchanged pleasantries, barbs hidden within their words. Mei refilled teacup after teacup, gaze lowered and tongue still. The meeting was to finalize her dowry and wedding details. After some negotiation, it was decided to marry there in Hong Kong, honeymoon in Hawaii, and then fly Mei to her new home in London. Mei's stomach twisted at the mention of her "new home." It had all happened so fast.

At the conclusion of their negotiations, her new mother gifted her a necklace with a single large pearl. She clasped it around Mei's neck. "From the South China Sea. Just a small token."

"My sister, you are too kind. This is too generous a gift."

"It's nothing," her new mother said, flicking her wrist.

"What do you say, Mei?"

Her mother's fingers pinched the back of Mei's thigh. She bent forward quickly, biting her inner cheek. "Thank you, *Liu-tai.*"

"Of course, we'll have to send her to a Western cooking school. My son is very important, you know. She needs to learn how to entertain and be a proper wife."

Mei frowned. What did that mean—"a proper wife"?

"Of course." Her mother's smile was affable, accommodating. She pinched Mei again, and Mei dropped into another bow, the giant pearl pulling her into its orbit.

The night after her future mother-in-law's visit, Mei crept to the lounge where her mother's porcelain statue of the many-handed Goddess of Mercy lived. As a child, Mei had often counted the Goddess' hands, spread across her

back like peacock feathers, touching each minute finger, the glaze cool against her skin. The Goddess' name meant "*she who hears the suffering of the world*." Mei always thought the statue looked a little like her mother.

She placed an orange in front of the Goddess and knelt. Her knees pressed into the hard floor through her pajamas. She clasped her hands together and looked into its painted eyes. *I don't want to get married,* she prayed. *I don't want to leave home. Please, Guan Yin—don't let them send me away. Let the marriage fail.*

She stood, bowed, and tiptoed back to bed, yet by the time she finally fell asleep, the Myna birds were already screaming in the banyan trees.

•

The wedding had been in the Catholic church in Kowloon. Mei's white dress had been the color of the layer of fat that sat at the top of a milk bottle. The lace had bound her in place from throat to toe, and to her new husband. The pearl necklace had bounced against her chest every time she knelt or stood. After the ceremony, stinking of incense, she and her new husband had posed at the top of the steps. They'd stood stiffly next to each other, only moving closer at the photographer's behest.

"Put your arm around your lovely wife," he'd called, lens to his eye.

Past his shoulder, Mei had seen her mother: she was waiting to be photographed, too, and was watching Mei with a look she couldn't place. Her mother had tapped the bottom of her chin and tilted it up, like a turtle sunbathing. Mei had raised her own chin, straightening her back. Her husband's arm had held her around her waist, pulling her closer. She'd turned her head towards him, spotting flecks

of dandruff on his shoulders.

Later, when she got the wedding photos back, she peered closely to see if you could see the white dots on his suit. But the photo had been too grainy, and the photographer too far away. In the photos with her family, her mother wasn't smiling, the same blank look in every picture. Mei put all the photos in a shoebox and hid them at the back of a wardrobe.

•

Early on in her marriage Mei learned she needed to fit in better.

"You should wear more makeup," Mei's husband said.

"I'm sorry?"

Mei paused, fork to her mouth. She'd made roast leg of lamb, just like she'd been taught at the cooking school her mother-in-law sent her to. Her husband had told her to ask the butcher for the uphill leg, as it would be more tender, but the butcher had just looked at her like she'd had two heads and picked the closest leg of lamb in the cabinet.

"Makeup. You'll fit in more with the other work wives." He extracted his credit card from his wallet.

"I wasn't aware my appearance displeased you."

"Go to one of the department stores. Harrods or something. Get someone to doll you up a bit." He pushed the credit card over and got up.

"Aren't you going to finish your dinner?"

He'd barely touched it. At some point, a pea had rolled off his plate onto the table and hid between the salt and pepper shakers. Mei didn't look up at her husband, instead focusing on the one lonely pea.

"You overcooked it."

He left the room.

After a moment, she picked up the card.

•

Mei allowed a young, gum-chewing makeup girl to plaster her face with cosmetics.

"It's all the rage these days. You're going to love it." The girl held a mirror up.

The foundation was completely wrong, both far too pink and far too orange. The blue eyeshadow didn't suit at all, and the entire finished product reminded Mei of the cheap dolls you could buy at the Ladies' Market on Tung Choi Street.

She chose her words carefully. "I'm not sure the color suits me?"

There was a long pause. The girl lowered her mirror. "That's just the lighting on your skin tone because you're so…exotic. Look again when you get home—you'll see. It looks great."

Don't cry. It'll make your eyes puffy. Mei blinked rapidly.

"So…?" the girl said. "Did you want…?"

"Yes," said Mei.

"All of it?"

"Yes."

The girl grinned, all yellow teeth and pink Hubba Bubba. "I'll ring you up. Cash or card, Miss…?"

She pushed her husband's credit card across the counter. "Mrs. Liu."

At home, she shoved the makeup to the back of the bathroom cabinet—too expensive to throw away—and scrubbed her face with a bar of Lux soap until it was red and raw, foundation-orange soap suds dripping down her arms. It took another week before she ventured to a different department store, this time selecting carefully.

She still looked like Mei. Only now she looked a little more like the Mei her husband wanted her to be.

•

Mei called home once every few weeks to talk to her family, and her mother always reacted first with, "*What's wrong? Who died?*" then scolded her for wasting money on long-distance calls.

"Your accent is weird now," her middle brother, Feng, had said once.

She'd been spending more time at the tennis club with the other work wives, learning how to rally, and having "proper" afternoon tea. There was no stuffed french toast here, just floppy cucumber sandwiches on crustless white bread, and dry miniature scones.

"I can drive now, you know."

"Really?"

"I can even parallel park."

"*Wah.*"

There had been a scuffle as the receiver had switched hands. "You've been on the phone for five whole minutes. Do you know how much that costs?" her mother had yelled. Despite the fact that Mei had been in London for over a year now, her mother still hadn't quite got the hang of long-distance calls. "And why aren't you pregnant yet?" she'd tutted. "If you need herbal medicine, go to a good doctor in Chinatown. Ask your husband's mother. Okay, I'm going so you don't waste any more money."

There had been a click, and the dial tone had rung in Mei's ear.

Mei had prayed again to Guan Yin again that night, but with no statue of the deity to kneel in front of, she'd instead pictured her in her mind, thousand hands waving,

fingers wiggling like a field of worms standing upright in the dirt. Guan Yin's face had looked more and more like her mother's. Mei's husband had rolled over in his sleep, pulling the covers with him.

•

Mei's mother-in-law had given her a piece of hefty gold jewelry following Bo's birth. She'd felt like the prize cow at the fair.

"Well done," her husband had said, patting her shoulder.

Mei had wondered if she was, in fact, a piece of meat.

She knew her family wouldn't be able to come see her, so after a few months, she flew home with Bo. Her husband stayed in London. He was far too busy to travel to Hong Kong, he'd said. Besides, he barely knew her family. Better that she go with the baby, spend a few weeks out there. Come home whenever, he'd said, handing her his credit card again.

•

Mei's mother wouldn't hold Bo at first.

"He's so small," said Feng, Bo's tiny fist clutching his finger.

Mei played with the pearl around her neck, watching her family play Pass the Baby.

"He looks healthy," said her mother. "Does he sleep well?"

"Getting better. I only get up five or six times in the night."

"You should hire a wet nurse."

"I don't… I don't think they do that in London."

Her mother fiddled with her jade bracelet. "Western

life seems to suit you. You look—" she cast around for the right word "—rounder."

"Would you like to hold him?"

Mei had never seen her mother like this, so twitchy and unsure. Feng passed Bo over, arms and legs akimbo, face pressed into her mother's chest. He squirmed and mewed against her. Mei wondered how her mother had raised three children. She helped adjust him in her arms.

"Brian." Mei's mother tested the name. She frowned. "Brian."

Her youngest brother, Pong Pong, snorted. "That's a weird name."

"I call him Bo. My little treasure."

The baby gurgled.

"Bo." Her mother stared at him for a long time.

"*Mami*?"

Mei's mother looked up. Her expression was odd, and Mei didn't know how to read her. Her mother handed the baby back. "We should eat. Feng, Pong Pong, go get the table ready." She brushed her hands down her trousers.

Mei had one foot out of the room as her mother said, "Mei?"

She'd turned to see her mother looking at her, still with that strange expression.

Her mother opened her mouth to speak, paused, then closed it again. "Never mind," she said. "Come. Let's eat."

Mei paused. "I've always wondered," she said. "Why were you so eager for me to marry?" Her mouth was dry. She swallowed in the silence. "Why did you want to send me away?"

Her mother didn't say anything for a moment.

Bo gurgled again, and Mei shifted and bounced him lightly. "It's okay if—"

"Hong Kong is small," her mother said. Her gaze flicked to the baby in Mei's arms, then back again. "You needed a bigger life."

Bo reached towards Mei's face, tapping chubby little fingers against her chin.

"Come," her mother said. "Let's eat."

•

When Mei returned to London, she bought a modest tape recorder. She recorded herself telling Bo stories, his gurgles and first words. When her husband gifted her a Casio camera for Christmas, she took pictures of the growing baby. That had been when she began to collect the details of her life in earnest, sending them home in bulging monthly envelopes lined with bubble wrap and bound with brown parcel tape. A small ember burned in her heart. Maybe Bo would finally be the missing link between herself and her mother. But, though Mei's mother acknowledged receipt of the parcels, she said nothing of their contents.

Bo turned one. Two. Three. Four. Mei's English became more clipped. She spent every Sunday playing doubles at the tennis club. Her husband took up golf. She dressed in cashmere twin sets, her South China pearl necklace paired with every outfit. They went on holiday to Marseille. Venice. Mallorca. Mei promised to take her brothers to Paris next year.

Then, one night, there was a phone call. There had been a car accident. It was instant. Her mother was gone. There was so much left unsaid. Her husband pried the phone from her fingers and listened to her brothers' pleas on the other end. Mei closed her eyes. She hadn't prayed for a long time. She saw Guan Yin, palms outstretched

towards her. Her face was unmistakably her mother's, the same unsmiling face from Mei's wedding photographs.

She reached for her husband's hand. He looked down at her. "Tell them I'm coming home."

•

While clearing out her things, Mei would've missed the box under her mother's bed if not for the bottle of herbal pills, knocked off the bedside table and out of reach. Crouching, Mei found a large container filled with all the photos and cassettes she'd sent over the years. They were bundled together with rubber bands, labeled in her mother's precise handwriting. The photos held her mother's fingerprints at the edges, some of the cassettes hadn't been rewound.

There had still been a tape in the radio-cassette player her mother kept next to her bed. Mei sat on the bed, rewound it, pressed play, and closed her eyes.

Her own voice came back to her through the speakers. "Say hello to Po Po, Bo."

"Hello to Po Po," her little boy's voice chanted, like a rhyme.

"Silly boy!"

Static on the tape, then laughter and a four-year-old's high-pitched giggle shrieks.

"Okay, now, say it properly, like I taught you."

"*Zou san,* Po Po."

"Well done, Bo."

Mei reached over and clicked the recording off. She hugged her mother's pillow, smelling mothballs and her perfume. Mei could see a cardboard box by the door, her mother's porcelain statue of the Goddess of Mercy sticking out, a thousand hands reaching towards her.

"Sitting True" by Aileen Sandoval

ELLIOT

Joshua Dean

Nearly every night for the past two weeks, Joseph Hall has had the same dream. He's visiting a hospital room that is always a little too cold and a little too gray. He's sitting with Elliot, laughing over something that doesn't matter. The doctor comes in to say, *Actually, your results are looking much better than expected. You have a real shot of getting through this.* They have a chance.

This is always the part when Joseph realizes it's a dream. But he never tries to change it. In this dream, the boy he loves is still alive. In this dream, Elliot is still twenty-three. His birthday's next week. They talk about the kind of cake Joseph will bring. Chocolate, he promises. Elliot gasps, and makes him swear to bake it himself. Joseph nods his head, and this is always around where the dream fades away into the sound of his alarm clock. For the past two weeks now, Joseph greets every morning with tears, and Elliot is forever twenty-three.

Today is Elliot's funeral. It's a solemn affair, but

a vehement reminder that funerals are for the living. It's held in a stuffy funeral home, a cheap poster board front and center in the chapel with a photo of Elliot from six years ago, a pixie cut and gauges, grinning into the camera with the wrong name emblazoned in a flourish under his face. The urn is on display, but the bouquets of lilies that wreath it far dwarf it in size, their fat white blossoms hanging heavy, making the urn look smaller and duller. Among the lilies, relatives clad in semi-formal black attire wring emotion out of themselves over a boy they haven't seen in almost six years.

Uninvited to this event, Joseph only found out through a family member who felt bad about the whole thing: a kindly aunt who was sweet enough to secretly invite him but too afraid of what would happen to stand up for either of them.

Joseph looks down at the urn, then up at the bouquets of flowers, trying to not let the tears forming in his eyes drip onto the metal. "He hated lilies."

The family member next to him, some distant uncle, nods with a vague placating smile, and Joseph feels something turn and choke inside him, and this is the moment he resolves he needs to give Elliot a better way to be remembered. At least something without lilies.

"How could you do this to him?" he asks in the silence, and it wavers throughout the whole room. Elliot's family looks at him with confusion.

His mother strides forward. "You weren't invited, Joseph," she states plainly. He used to hate her for how she treated Elliot. Then, he put that hate aside to begrudgingly interact with her as Elliot got sicker. But now Elliot is dead. The hate comes back. "This is a family event. I'm sure you can put together a friend memorial later."

"Hello, Sarah. Any friends I'd invite would know

him better than any person here. Besides, what's with the photo of him as a kid? Do you not have any recent photos of him?"

"The photo is… older than we wanted, but it shows her as my daughter," Sarah pauses to dab at tears in her eyes. "Can you blame a mother for that?" Her voice is full of unearned grief, and Joseph frowns.

Joseph straightens his posture to meet her eyes even though she's still an inch taller, "He deserved better than this."

"What do you mean, *better* than a reunion with her family who loved her?"

"Are you releasing his ashes? At least?" he asks. He knows the answer, he just wants her to say it out loud.

"She's going to our mausoleum, where she belongs, *with family*."

This argument is pointless. Family, to her, is an inescapable tie. To Elliot, it was a noose. "You were never there for him." Not the way he was.

"I was there! I paid for every medical bill after she ignored me for six years, no questions asked. She didn't even let me in the hospital room. I stood in the hallway while she died holding *your* hand." Tears form in her eyes again, and she doesn't wipe them away. The funeral party turns to stare at Joseph.

Joseph thinks back to the week Elliot first knew he was going to die. His confession of love at the time was rushed—tinged with fear and already full of grief. Love and fear had always been connected for Elliot, the whole time Joseph had known him. Joseph had watched the person Elliot became when he was around his family. How their love meant pain. Elliot was in love with Joseph. Elliot was terrified of dying, not the death part so much as what came after. He was afraid of being erased. Joseph

looks at the lilies again, and finally decides to speak.

"You never understood him," he tries, looking only at Sarah. "I loved him, and it hurt him so much that you never tried to understand him. This isn't what he wanted, and you know it, even if no one else here does. He deserves to be free." He meets her gaze, holding firm despite both of their tears. Sarah's face wavers for a moment. She opens her mouth to speak, to give him an answer, but no words come out. It strikes him that she looks helpless, more like a little kid than a parent. In this moment, he forgives her.

He leaves the funeral home. He doesn't look back. He doesn't need to, to understand.

•

That night, it all comes to him in a series of steps, like he's known how to do this his whole life. He arrives early, his car tucked around the corner. He becomes part of the scenery. It's easy to disappear, he's learned. Night comes, and Joseph watches the ancient groundskeeper totter around like a man who will soon join the tombs he cares for, and waits until the last light goes out. Then he enters the cemetery, walking on the mossy cobblestone path littered with pebbles from the erosion of a near-neverending stream of grieving souls. It's dark, but the moon is full tonight as it lights his path, coating the ground in silver. Joseph walks for a while in silence, eyes squinting to read the etchings above each small stone building he comes across. The quiet hangs in the air like cold fog, and Joseph can feel it pressing into his lungs. This is a terrible place to stay, living or dead.

At last he finds it, parsing out the worn lettering above the archway. The mausoleum aches in the wind, a quiet cacophony of the many generations of Elliot's family

who have lived and died in this town. Joseph prepares the crowbar but the door swings open easily without even creaking. He doesn't think about what that could mean.

He turns on the flashlight, looking for the shiny but plain urn. "Found you," he whispers as he removes the urn from its shelf. The walk out of the cemetery is still quiet, but it's a lighter kind of quiet. Joseph takes a deep breath.

When he reaches his car, he pulls a piece of shiny plastic off of the dashboard where he had left it.

"Here," Joseph addresses the urn as he carefully sticks a nametag over the engraving, "For the ride." *Hi! My name is Elliot,* it reads. His car coughs awake, the headlights a dim and warm yellowish-orange. "There, that's better," he looks at the urn with a smile. "Baked you the cake you asked for," he gestures to the floor of the car, where a cake box rests. "Are you feeling the beach, or maybe the hill where we had that picnic? Don't worry, we can decide on the way." He places a hand reassuringly on the metal, and for a moment it feels warm.

“Sustenance“ by Hailey Dorritie

SUSTENANCE

Devin Caliboso

It first happened when we were seventeen.

"Please," Tyas whispered, voice breathy and whiny. That excited me, how desperate he sounded. He was usually so self-assured and composed. We had just finished having sex on his bed, the sheets were still damp with sweat, our bodies still naked.

"But won't it hurt."

"It'll only be a little. I promise."

I didn't know what to do so I stayed silent. Tyas scooted closer. He trailed a finger across the middle of my forearm, so softly it made me shiver. "It'll only be here. Just a little. It won't even hurt that bad." He looked up at me, with such longing. My stomach twisted. An overwhelming ache behind my chest. I hesitated; I nodded slowly. "Fine. Do it."

He took my arm and raised it to his full lips, kissed the delicate skin there, licked it and left a trail of warmth and saliva. My breath caught in my throat from the pleasure. He opened his mouth. He bit down.

A tearing, a shredding. I couldn't close my eyes. I watched as he pulled back, the skin and flesh caught between his teeth as it stretched and ripped. Agony. My entire consciousness concentrated on the pain of the bite, a blistering heat that swelled and lanced through my arm. Blood spurted out, fell with tiny patters to the sheets. "Ow. Ow, fuck," I whispered, tears welling. "Fuck, that hurts."

Tyas closed his eyes and chewed, ecstasy dancing like light across the features of his face. His thick eyelashes fluttered, his sensuous mouth bloodied, brown skin glistening, all unified in a single sensation: pleasure.

I clamped a hand down on the gash. It wasn't too deep, but it was excruciating. Tyas swallowed, Adam's apple bobbing along his throat. He opened his eyes and saw me clutching my arm, blood soaking through my fingers, tears streaking across my cheeks.

The pleasure evaporated from his face. For a moment, his eyes went dark and his face became unnaturally blank and he looked at me like I was a stranger. "I'm–I'm sorry," he said. He rubbed his mouth with the back of his arm, leaving a streak of red on it and smudging it on his face like lipstick. "Oh," he said, looking down at it. He rubbed his arm on the bed to get rid of the stain. "Oh, I'm sorry." His voice was nauseatingly loud. We had been whispering before and now his volume felt like a sacrilege against that silence. He heaved in a breath and shoved it out. He heaved in another. He kept gasping and gasping and heaving. His eyes became animalistic in their panic.

He got up, stumbled off the bed, and ran into the bathroom, a blur of limbs. I could hear him vomit, so loudly it nearly sounded like he was screaming. I trailed after him and stood in the doorway as my arm dripped blood. He was naked and shivering on the cold white tiles, clutching the toilet with one hand. The other was in his

mouth, his fingers in his throat. Over and over again he shoved his hand down his throat and retched, the grating, gurgling noise of it bouncing off porcelain. The veins in his forehead and neck were bulging. His face was red, the water was red, and the muscles of his back kept contorting and shifting with every slight movement. Like something was inside and trying to crawl out.

I walked over to him and rested a hand on his shoulder, then two on both shoulders, massaging him as he dry heaved until the contents of his stomach were spent completely. He seemed to calm at my touch, seemed to lean into it and in that moment I understood slightly: his need to devour. "Let's go back to bed," I said. He nodded and sniffled. I helped him as he rose shakily to his feet. I led him by the hand back to the bed and covered the sheets with a blanket so that he wouldn't see the blood.

After he settled in, I went back to the bathroom to bandage my arm and was confronted with my naked reflection. *Red handprints over damp pale skin.* I wrapped gauze tightly around the wound. *Hair matted with sweat.* Snipped the excess with scissors. *Ribs jutting out slightly.* Blood dripped into the porcelain sink. *Eyes bloodshot.* All of it hovering there, repulsing me.

My hand was shaking as it gripped the scissors. I dropped them, turned from the mirror, and left the bathroom.

I rejoined Tyas in the bed. "Can we cuddle?" I asked. Sleepily, Tyas shifted over and I laid down beside him, both of us still naked. His arm was wrapped around me. My head was on his chest, my hand roaming over his heart, drifting back and forth over the skin there. He buried his face into my hair and breathed deeply.

"I'm sorry," he said again, breath tickling my scalp.

Suddenly, despite the chill of the night, the entire

earth was made of warmth, delicate and soft. A feeling of content coalesced and covered me, like moisture gathering into dew drops on blades of grass. I would've let him tear me apart if he only asked.

•

It was 5 a.m. and the sun hadn't yet risen, just blueness and darkness and the gray of a fog that the car's headlights couldn't penetrate. I was on my way to Berkeley. It had been five months since I'd last seen Tyas. We only saw each other at irregular intervals ever since he moved away for university.

After five hours and forty minutes, I arrived. I parked my car in a garage and waited for Tyas to collect me. I looked at my reflection in the rearview mirror and sighed. My hair was a mess, light brown, frizzy, pointing in all the wrong directions. My face, gaunt as it was, somehow looked puffy and lopsided. Tyas would have to see me like this. I turned away from the mirror in frustration and took out a piece of gum.

Twenty minutes passed, all of which I spent desperately trying to fix my hair, before he arrived. I watched him walk toward me. He looked slightly different. His hair was cut shorter, nearly into a mullet. He looked a shade paler. His shirt was tucked in—a new development—and where once there were sneakers he now wore boots. I wondered, faintly, when these changes had occurred, but by now I had become used to him growing without me.

"Hi, Dew," Tyas said when he got closer. I had to look up at him, able only for a second to meet his nearly black eyes, narrowed slightly as he smiled at me.

"Hi," I said.

We stood there and looked at each other for a half

second. It was only slightly awkward. But after a few moments, that awkwardness was dispelled. I always worry that time has changed the both of us in different ways, and, when we meet on these rare occasions, we will find whatever had bound us together gone. But it was still there; present, alive, thrumming. It only took a few moments to find it. He took my bags and led me to his car.

I reached to open the passenger door. A girl's face stared at me from behind the glass, her features were obscured from the glare, but I could tell she was smiling. I retracted my hand as if it had been bitten and climbed into the back seat.

"Hey," she said once I was inside. She got up in the seat and turned around to face me, "My name's Amanda." She was still smiling as she said it, and I was struck at once by the warmth of her: how kind her eyes looked, how genuine and unguarded her smile was. Immediately, I disliked her.

It took me a second to respond. "Oh, hey. I'm Dew." The trunk slammed and Tyas walked around to the driver's seat.

"Everyone ready to go?" he asked.

•

We stepped through the doorway of his apartment. It was a mess. He shared it with two housemates. It was the middle of October and he had a few half-assed decorations: a skeleton sitting on top of the mini-fridge, purple and orange fairy lights, cotton spider webbing on a single wall. "This place is nicer than your last one," I said, meaning it, despite the chipped paint and scratched floors and walls; his last apartment was a hell-hole.

Tyas picked up a crushed solo cup and an empty

plastic bag from the floor and threw them away. “Sorry for the mess. But yeah, this place is sick. It’s way closer to campus and my rent’s only like a hundred more than that shitty old place on Dowling. Do you remember that place? How many times did you come over then, twice?”

“Once.” I rubbed at a scar I had along my side, feeling the outlines of the puckered gash through my t-shirt.

“Do you need help cleaning?” Amanda asked. I watched her as she moved through the apartment and tried to gauge how familiar she was with the place.

Tyas shook his head. “No it’s okay, you two just relax.” He turned back to me. “The only thing with this place is,” his voice dropped to a conspiratory whisper, “my housemates are sorta annoying sometimes. I swear to God one of them is eating my peanut butter.” He wrinkled his nose. “But at least they’re a lot better than my mom.”

I remembered the days in high school I used to spend in Tyas’s house. How sometimes he’d leave the room and a few minutes later I’d hear his mother’s voice, screaming, muffled, through the walls—walls that would on occasion rattle after a loud bang.

“What about you?” Tyas asked. “How’s home?” He ambled through the apartment cleaning as he talked. He cleaned in a sort of haphazard way, moving back and forth, switching between tasks without fully completing any of them. Despite the unorganized clumsiness of his cleaning, the way he moved, his quick grin, his voice and the way he’d sometimes stutter, all of it seemed so bright and clear, like spring water from snow melt.

I sat down on the couch I’d be sleeping on for the weekend. “The same. Boring. I’m just working, you know?”

“Are you still writing?”

The question stung. “No.”

"What? Why not?"

"Um, I don't know," I said. "I'm just not very good at it."

"That's not true," Tyas said, "I used to love reading what you wrote." My jaw clenched. Tyas had a bad habit of giving compliments that he didn't mean. "Oh, also, I have another friend coming with us to the concert. His name's Felix. You'll love him."

I smiled, almost genuinely. I had no idea Amanda or Felix would be coming with us. While we waited for Tyas to finish cleaning, Amanda and I talked nearly the entire time about different books we liked or hated. Right now she was reading *Pachinko*, but she thought it was awfully boring.

•

Crush of the crowd, crushing of sound. The singer screamed into the mic. The drummer's hands were a blur as he smashed his sticks against the toms. A mass of shifting bodies, jumping, swaying, shoving. Sweat gleamed off of Tyas's neck, reflecting the blue lights sweeping over the venue. The music was deafening, the heat omnipresent. We were at the edge of the mosh pit, shoving people back in who stumbled against the barrier.

A blur and then my vision flashed black. A strange buzzing in my nose, spreading to the rest of my head. Something wet and hot spilled over my lips and then my chin. Blood. Someone had hit me in the face with their elbow. My skull throbbed, my nose ached. I lifted my head up–the ceiling was a utilitarian lattice of metal bars, wires, and lights–and squeezed my nose to stop the blood. Tyas shouted into my ear, "Are you okay?" I shook my head at him. "Let's get you to the bathroom," he said,

every other word nearly drowned out by the music.

I held onto his shoulder as he led the way through the crowd, trying not to get blood on anyone.

The heat vanished as soon as we broke away and got to the bathroom. I went into a stall and Tyas followed me in, our sweat cooling. “Are you okay?” he asked again, handing me toilet paper so I could cover my nose. The stall was cramped and filthy and Tyas had to stand close.

I sat down on the closed lid of the toilet and looked up at him.“Yeah, the bleeding’s almost stopped.” Muffled music and far away cheering filtered in through the walls.

“Let me see,” he said. He took my wrist and pulled my hand away. Blood fell down my face again. Towering over me, he watched the drops as they spilled down, eyes pausing on my mouth. He touched the bridge of my nose softly, “It doesn’t look broken,” he said, voice barely above a whisper.

His eyes lifted up from my nose to meet mine, and when they did I felt this immense pull. He leaned down and licked my parted lips, blood staining his tongue. He lifted my head up, and licked from my neck to my chin, replacing the blood there with his spit. His breath shuddered against my skin, stubble scraping me. I wondered if he’d bite me.

He pulled away and stared at me, panting, his pupils dilated with want. He cleared his throat, wiped his mouth, and then he was gone. The stall door swung back and forth on its hinges. “Tyas?” I called out. No response. My heart was racing and adrenaline had made my knees shake. I wiped sweat from my palms onto my jeans. Alone, I lifted a hand and touched the tingling trail of warmth he’d left on my neck, wondering if I hadn’t imagined the whole thing.

•

We all got food together after the concert. Tacos at a stand that Amanda had recommended, not far from the venue.

"So your name's Dew?" Amanda said. "That's so pretty."

"My actual name is much less pretty," I said. "Dewey. Like Malcolm in the Middle." I took a bite of my taco.

"What do you think?" Amanda asked. She was beautiful: short lashes but artful eyeliner, full lips tinted a brickish red, two full heads shorter than me.

I ignored her question. "How do you and Tyas know each other?" I asked.

"We had a class together last semester," she said vaguely.

I nodded. "Are you guys close?"

"Um…" she hesitated. My heart swelled with hope. "Yeah," she finished. "I think I'd say so."

I smiled at her. "That's cool. Also, these tacos are so fucking good."

She smiled back, genuinely lighting up. I wished so desperately for her to be gone. I couldn't stand the sight of her.

•

Tyas and I got home exhausted. It was 3 a.m. and I had been awake for nearly 24 hours. "How the fuck did they manage to make the living room dirty while we were away?" Tyas groaned.

"It's okay, really," I said, "I don't mind."

"If you say so. You wanna use the shower first or me?"

"You go ahead," I said, "I'm gonna lie down a while."

I laid down on the couch and stared at the speckled ceiling, colored orange and purple from the twinkling lights. Exhaustion set in. My legs and feet ached. My head hurt. I listened to the shower running, water pattering to the

floor, the sound of his housemates snoring. *What am I doing here?* I thought. *Why did I come?* I ran back through every conversation that I observed between Tyas and Amanda. What was she to him? How close were they? They hadn't touched, or even talked much, but they gravitated towards each other almost subconsciously, drifting past people and objects until they were within proximity of each other. I thought of him and I in the bathroom, of how his lips and tongue felt against mine. I slammed my head back against the couch to dispel the thought.

The bathroom door opened and steam and light rushed through the doorway. "All yours," Tyas said, holding the towel together at his waist. I stopped for a second, my vision devoured by him. Those arms, the tattoos scattered across his torso, that chest, sleek with moisture. "I'm probably gonna sleep. Good night, dude. I'm really glad you came."

A lump formed in my throat. I swallowed it down. "Of course. Thanks for inviting me." As he walked past me I smelled that same coconut body wash he used to use, that same conditioner. At least that hadn't changed.

•

Forty minutes later I was on the couch, staring at the ceiling again, black now that the lights were off. 4 a.m. I couldn't sleep, despite the exhaustion. My phone buzzed beside me. A text from Tyas.

I can't sleep.

Me either.

Wanna watch a movie?

Sure

The door to his room opened. He was wrapped in a fluffy green blanket. He sat down on the couch. We couldn't use the TV because his roommates were asleep, so we watched on my phone. I leaned against his side. The phone played quietly, its screen the only light in the dark apartment. I was so sleepy. We spoke in whispers. We laughed under our clothes to muffle the sound. At times, I'd shift my head and rest it in his lap to look up at him. He'd smile down at me, so gently, the features of his face painted on by the soft pale screen-light. His tired, half-lidded eyes, his lazy, beautiful smile.

He took my arm and traced the scar there. He lifted up my shirt and traced the scars there. Bits of me he'd taken. I searched his face as his fingers explored my skin. Inscrutable. Was it guilt there? Sadness? We were so close on this couch. The movie had ended. It was so quiet I could hear him swallow, the unsteadiness in his breath as his hands trailed downward, so slightly, almost imperceptibly.

He pulled away, for the second time, and cleared his throat, and I knew then I had lost him.

•

The sky was cloaked in dirty clouds, the air blue and cold. The laundry spun in its machine, soap bubbles spattering against the glass. We sat on a bench, watching it, so close our arms were touching.

"Listen," Tyas said, shifting away from me. "I just thought you should know me and uh—me and Amanda have been seeing each other." He picked at the threads coming loose in a hole in his jeans, avoiding looking at me. "It's getting pretty serious. I know we're just friends and that me and you were never really serious, but um, I

just thought you should know."

"Okay," I said. The fluorescents in the laundromat were suddenly too bright, the bench suddenly too hard, as if it were cutting into my back.

"I'm sorry," he said. My clothes felt tight and scratchy. Everything was so itchy. I scratched so deep I left welts. I barely spoke another word while we waited for the clothes to finish their cycle.

We drove back to his apartment.

"I'm gonna take a shower," I told him.

Tyas nodded. He still wasn't looking directly at me. "For sure."

I went into the bathroom and closed the curtain. The aching in my chest, the itchiness in my skin, were driving me crazy. My nails resumed their search, beads of blood diluted as they were washed away. A sob escaped my mouth. My eyes and the back of my head had this terrible pressure. I leaned my hand against the wall to steady myself as I cried so thoroughly that I could barely breathe.

After a while I grew tired, so I sat down on the tile as the scalding water fell upon me. Dim light shone in softly through the cream curtain, water fell and fell from the ends of my hair, my eyelashes. I stared out past my naked body and thought of the first night I had met him. I thought of how easy it was, to be near him, to talk to him and touch him. I thought of us speaking on the phone late into the night after he had moved for university, separated by over 300 miles and yet unwilling to not communicate. I thought of the nights, in high school and after, when I'd go into his room, naked in the dark, we allowed to exist the physical manifestation of our feelings for each other, in tender kisses, in desperate touch.

I thought of these things and mourned them, grieved for them so desperately. I mourned the fact that no new

moments would be made. The relationship would plateau. These feelings, these memories, he, all of it would fade and fade like the color of things forgotten in the sun.

•

I had already left. I was three hours away when he called me. "What?" I kept saying. "What? Slow down. Tyas—Tyas slow down." I couldn't understand anything he was saying. It sounded like he was crying. It sounded like his mouth was full of spit or water. "Please," he sobbed, "just come back."

Without hesitation: "Okay. Okay, I'm on my way. I'll be there in a bit."

He sent me an address I didn't recognize. I exited the freeway to turn the car around.

•

It was night when I arrived. The door to the apartment the address led me to was unlocked. There were no lights on. Just blue moonlight filtering through pale curtains, just shadows and silhouettes, so still they unnerved me. "Tyas?" I called out. I found a light switch and turned it on.

There were splatters of blood all over the apartment. "Dew?" Tyas called out, sounding like a lost child. He was on the couch, staring at something on the floor, hidden from my view by the coffee table. He was covered in blood. I took a step forward. "No," Tyas said, "don't come closer."

I kept walking.

"Please," Tyas said. He got up to stand in front of me. I could barely make out his features through the blood, dried, crusted, and brown and flaking. "Please don't."

Even though he was taller and heavier than me, he looked so fragile. He was shivering, as if with cold. Tears cut lines through the blood coating his cheeks. Bits of meat were in his teeth. I pushed him aside gently and he obeyed like a puppy.

"I'm sorry, Dew," Tyas said. "I know I fucked up. I'm sorry."

There was something on the floor. I looked closer. It was an amalgamation of holes and mushed meat, scattered clumps of hair matted with blood, smeared flesh and scraps of cloth, brown and red and purple and pink. There was a smell rising from it like steam: the reek of shit and iron. Something, vague and amorphous, was spreading throughout me, multiplying in my gut like bacteria.

"Please don't hate me," Tyas said. With a feeling of revulsion, I recognized the thing within me: jealousy. I envied her. So many parts of her were now in Tyas's stomach. They were one. He had seen and tasted every inch of her, had explored her to a depth unfathomable. Everything she was and will be was in Tyas now.

"Dew?" Tyas pleaded when I didn't say anything for a long while.

I hit him. My knuckles smashed against his cheek bone. He took a step back and I hit him again. I hit him until my knuckles were split and my hands ached and until he was on the floor. I wrapped my hands around his throat and squeezed. He grabbed my wrists, buckled his hips, and then all at once he went still. He was staring at the ceiling, crying silently. I wanted to kill him. I wanted to hurt him until he looked as unrecognizable as her. But he kept crying, and I couldn't stand the sight of it.

I let go and he heaved in a breath, coughing, turning on his side. "I love you, Dew," Tyas said.

And I said: If you loved me, you wouldn't have done this.

And I said: Get that corner of the rug and help me roll her up.

"Atonic Clock" by Carella Keil

PAPER AND WINGS BURN BRIGHTEST AT 8:15

Romie Asplund

Hiroshima, Japan
August 6, 1945

THE CLASSROOM

"*Ohayou gozai masu.*"

Misao smushed the butt of her cigarette into an orange ashtray sat at the very center of a city of paper. Skyscrapers, like the ones in America, probably, of half-graded essays and sloping homes of redded-out chicken scratch mottled the grand blueprint of her rusting desk. Amidst the stomps and screeches of children filling up the empty seats before her, Misao set free the final smoke-ghost she'd been savoring under her tongue, surrendering to the *tick-tick-gong* of 8:00 a.m.

"*Ohayou gozai masu,* Koda-*sensei!*" said Junko

Honma, flushed and breathless.

"Good morning, Miss Honma. Long time no see. Have you been enjoying your summer vacation? I take it you've been getting in plenty of studying." She tucked in her chin to get a better look over the rims of her glasses.

It wasn't like Misao forgot about the funeral last weekend. Killed in action, Junko's father had been, on some godforsaken island in the Pacific—lost to the ferns and cicadas of a late-July skirmish. Still, she thought it was a good thing she was doing keeping the war outside of the classroom. School ought to feel like school for the students.

"*Eh! Unnn*," Junko swiped the back of her hand across a drenched hairline. "Of course!"

Misao imparted her student with a sharp nod before turning to the boy in the tight uniform seated in the back of the class away from the window. "What about you, Mr. Matsuoka? Studying hard, I hope?"

Akinobu Matsuoka shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, you know," continued Misao, "our chart says it's your turn to be *nitchoku* today. Don't burden your classmates with your lack of preparation."

Akinobu, groaning softly, kicked himself out of his chair and stood tall and stiff and straight like a soldier, fingers splayed and all. Misao made a note to call his mother up later to remind her, once again, that her son's trousers were two summers too short on him.

"Class up!" he yipped, making his voice gruff, and Misao grimaced. He sounded no different from the troops that marched past the school every afternoon. She hoped some of her old students were still amongst the ranks without yet qualifying to be shipped off in those one-way jets they'd begun strapping the boys into. Special attack unit her ass. Those goddamn liars were out of gasoline

and losing the war—so why on earth was it *her* job to recruit her own students to offer their bodies as fuel?

She lit another cigarette.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

"*Ohayou gozai masu!*" began Akinobu.

His call was answered by the faithful hardwood-shudder of thirty-eight sets of feet and chairs following suit. "*Ohayou gozai masu,*" droned the rest of the class.

"Today. Is. Monday, August 6, 1945! The weather is, uh, warm—very warm! And the sky is clear! We wish our soldiers good fortune and thank our Holy Emperor for granting us victory after victory in this great war. Now, we will begin our first period! Bow!"

Misao stood there chewing holes into her cigarette as thirty-eight tenth graders folded in half like paper dolls. You could hear sweat *plip-plopp*ing from their silken foreheads onto the old, wooden cheeks of their desks.

Plip-plop.

Tick-tock.

Tickety-tockety.

Misao looked over her shoulder to check the time. Tacked above the blackboard was a yellowing clock, a perpetually rising sun over a sea sullied with detritus, adjacent to which hung a framed photograph of their young emperor.

8:05 a.m.

Her eyes flickered to the photograph.

Not right now. There's still time 'till the end of class.

"Okay, children, take out your textbooks." Slowly, she spun back round to face thirty-eight sets of ruddy grimaces, their skin unrippled by evident disdain. "Today, we'll be covering the fall of the Edo period and the

relocation of our capital city from Kyoto to Edo, or as we've come to call it, Tokyo."

"*Eeehhhhh?*" came the cacophony of fulmination.

"*Sensei*, we already covered this last year," shouted Yusuke. "And the year before that!"

"Who cares about Tokyo anyway? We're in Hiroshima!" nodded an emboldened Harue.

Misao smiled. Though she'd never admit to it, she found it endearing when her students complained like this. If anything, it unnerved her when their eyes glassed over and they'd sit there bobbing wordlessly in agreement to every word she said. "Okay. Then shall we hop right into the quiz?"

"*Eeeeehhhh! Sensei!*" they said.

"We'll take the lecture," added Harue.

Misao peered over her glasses again. "That's what I thought."

"Wait, *Sensei,*" Akinobu hoisted his hand.

"What is it, Mr. Matsuoka? Have you decided you'd rather take the test?" She let her brows hover in the center of her forehead until the students wiped their mouths clean of remnant giggles.

Mr. Matsuoka, however, didn't seem to find it so funny.

"No, *Sensei,*" said Akinobu Matusoka. "It's just—you still haven't signed off on my papers for the Imperial Special Attack unit. I don't wanna waste any more time hanging around children when I should be out there serving my emperor. Per my duty."

The classroom grew so silent you could hear that bloated, yellow clock tutting its fat, black tongue in glee.

Tut, tut.

Tut-tick-tick-tock.

Misao felt the muscles of her face give out where

they'd been pinning up her smile, then tense up again in all the wrong spots.

The classroom exploded.

"*Eeehhh!* You're gonna be one of the *Kamikaze*?!"

"*Oi*, Matsuoka, when did you even volunteer? I thought you had to be sixteen to join."

"You turned sixteen last month, didn't you, Matsuoka?"

"Wait, *Sensei,* when I join, can you sign mine, too?"

Her fist locked around the macerated cigarette, she bore it into the ashtray as her brittle fingernails imparted frowns into the soft of her hand. Misao, a creature of habit, looked over her shoulder to make sure she wasn't running behind schedule.

8:10 a.m.

Tick-tock.

Tick-tick tock.

"Yes, Mr. Matsuoka. Come," she said finally, and with that, she freed the sealed letter tucked away in the foundations of one of her skyscrapers, sending leaflets and ashes billowing about her paper city. "On that same note, I'd like to announce that three boys in our class turned sixteen this past week. Happy birthday. Even though we're *already winning the war,* our *emperor* would still like to invite as many of you as possible to share his, hm, *glory*."

Akinobu, abandoning his rust-speckled seat to receive his envelope, returned to a throne inlaid with googly eyes and the rounded lips of children.

"Aki, you are so cool! I wish I could join, but I'm a girl. . . ." Junko dropped her shoulders.

"Yeah, well, you're still a kid, and I'm about to become a man. Go play with your toys or something," he rested his cheek on his desk and shut his eyes.

Misao couldn't take it anymore. She strode to the

window and pulled back its rotting veil to let in the damp breath of a still-callow August. Strolling the field of gravel under a cloudless sky was a young woman with an infant swaddled about the breast of her tattered kimono.

Poor, young thing.

Misao'd seen her here before a number of times at the school begging for food. The mother looked even thinner than before. Last time, Misao shared her rice balls with her, but today, she thought she ought to hand over everything she'd packed. It was the least she could do to make up for the fuel she'd signed away...

What time was it?

8:14 a.m.

Tick-tick-tickticktick.

Ah, yes, she still had time.

THE SQUARE

"*Ohayou gozai masu.*"

Swathed in the shadow of the Bank of Japan, Shizuko was positive her stomach had singed cavities into itself. It sure felt that way. Ten days had come and gone since she'd given it food, the longest she'd waited to eat in her life. But her baby—and she'd done so well in ensuring she was fed—had gone hungry for three whole days. She needed to give her something.

That's what she told herself as she forced out the words, "*Ohayou gozai masu.* Please, do you have anything to spare for my child? Please, she hasn't eaten in three days."

Only it wasn't really her uttering those words, was it? Her lips must've been moving, but she couldn't feel them.

The town bell wasn't having any of this. It lapped its

tongue over the painted-white stone and just-cleaned ears of the square, and her baby began to cry.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

It was 8:00 a.m.

"Shhhh," she unswaddled Kimika and rocked the little thing in her arms. She made to tuck her fuzzy head between the folds of fabric holding in her breasts—force of habit—before remembering she'd been out of milk for weeks.

A young girl in pigtails had stopped to come stare at Shizuko. "Your kimono has holes in it," she pointed.

Shizuko pulled her best impression of a smile so as not to frighten the child. "It's a hot day, so this helps me keep cool."

A giggle-squeal wriggled from the fingers the girl clapped to her plump, bowed lips.

Shizuko didn't know what to say. No one had spoken to her in months.

"It's a beautiful day. Let's appreciate the clear, blue sky. No firebombs today," she heard herself say.

"No firebombs today!" the girl giggled again. "Did you know that my mom died last year in an air raid?"

"Y-your what?"

"I live with my auntie now," the girl smiled.

Before Shizuko could get in another word, a woman draped in ruffles and pearls had come to whisk the girl away from her. "Hanako? Hanako! There you are." Soon, their figures blurred into bleary sun-ribbons, but Shizuko could hear the aunt tut her tongue. "And do *not* speak to people like her, Hanako. All they do is ask for your money without contributing a yen to society."

"She didn't ask me for money though," Shizuko could

barely make out the girl's words before they vanished behind an alabaster column.

Or did she? Did the sweet, little girl who'd found her so funny really say that? For all she knew, she could've been making all this up. She didn't know anymore.

Her head hurt.

Securing Kimika into the nest of fabric at her breast, she tried her luck once more, this time with a man in a navy kimono and top hat. "*Ohayou gozai masu,* sir, can you help my child? If she doesn't have food, she will die soon."

"Away from me, garbage-woman! Aren't there any other corners in this city?"

Shizuko felt her legs give out, and moments later, she'd withered into another heap of frayed hemp along the bank's white, stone skin. She saw the children squatting beside her with faces burrowed in leather-bound bones, and she did the same. That's when she noticed laying at her bare feet the front page of this morning's paper: ANOTHER VICTORY IN OKINAWA FOR THE EMPIRE. THE AMERICANS RETREAT IN FEAR.

Right . . . the war.

The hunger made it easy to forget how much she'd lost in the last three years. Her father was killed at sea, her mother and sister burned to a crisp during an air raid, and she hadn't heard from her brother in months. That was okay, though, because at the time she'd still had her husband to write to. But he, too, left her. Killed in Okinawa, apparently. He didn't have to go; he was the only son. But the emperor *said,* huh? The day after she got the telegram, she'd come home to a pile of rubble where their home once stood.

She winced as the acid burned another hole into her stomach.

How much longer did this have to go on? She craned her neck so she could see the clock tower.

8:05 a.m.

Tickety. Tockety.

Tickety-tickety-tock.

With a hard, heavy huff, she rested her cheek on the cool stone. Sometimes she wished her daughter would simply—

—tick-tock tick-tockTOCKTOCK—

—die. Only so she wouldn't have to do this anymore. It was humiliating enough to have to beg on the streets, but to do it in her crumbling nightgown made her look like a prostitute or something. Running a finger down Kimika's soot-laden cheeks, she cooed. "*Kaa-chan* will save you, okay?"

"Darling? Darling, can you hear me?" came a timeworn bleat. When she looked up, she could make out through the sun-spears the outline of an older woman. "Sweetheart, I'm sorry. I heard you talking to that man. I don't have much food myself, as all of it goes to feeding my grandchildren. But I hear that the high school is having a *tokkoubi* today. Why don't you go ask for some leftovers?"

"High school?" whispered Shizuko. Right, today was *tokkoubi*, the one day during summer vacation when children returned to school to check in with their teachers. The thing was, she wasn't hungry anymore. If anything, she felt like vomiting.

"Yes, darling, go get you and your daughter something to eat," continued the old woman. "It's only a five-minute walk from here. Can you make it on your own?"

Clutching Kimika over the swaddle, Shizuko stood up, and all the blood rushed to her head in blinding swirls and starbursts. She tried to nod.

"Do you know where it is?"

Of course, she knew where it was. That was her old high school. And it wasn't her first time begging there, either.

God, this was embarrassing. She prayed they wouldn't recognize her again.

"Th-thank … you," said Shizuko.

The walk felt longer than five minutes. Perhaps it was because of all the weight she'd lost, but by the time she heard the sound of whistles and giggles and the familiar crunch of the gravel beneath her soiled soles, the big, white clock on the school tower read 8:14 a.m.

She'd made it. She'd bought her daughter time.

THE TEACHER

Misao had finished pulling back the curtain when it happened.

It started with the familiar grizzle of a B-29 sailing lower than normal—

—a blanket of white—

—the jelly-jiggle of thirty-eight pairs of eyeballs staring stupid straight at her.

The children had grown silent, but not out of obedience.

Misao, drenched in the slobber of a thousand suns and stars crushed open, turned her cheek to the left toward the light—force of habit—so she could check the time.

8:15 a.m.

Tick-tick-tock-tick-tick-tick-tock-tick

TICKTICKTOCKTOCKTOCK.

That's when she saw it.

Her bones.

She could see her bones glowing through the flesh of her arms.

Misao looked to her students in horror. One by one, the light ate them up, singeing posed shadows of their souls into the white walls behind them.

"Sensei! I'm scared!" came the voice of a boy, the contrived gruffness drained wet and squealy. Her vision went dark, but she knew that voice.

Akinobu. Of course you're scared. You're just a boy.

Misao was out of time.

THE MOTH

"W-water . . . W-w-water, please . . ."

Shizuko's eyelids unfurled, slow and sticky. She must've collapsed. Now, a throng of humans had appeared around her, marching like soldiers toward the school.

Her eyes flickered to the clock tower.

8:15 a.m.

She wasn't out for that long, and yet, was this the same city she had been begging in just minutes ago?

"Water . . . W-water please . . ." chanted the soldiers.

Wait a minute . . . They weren't soldiers. They were civilians—men, women, and children—all dressed in rags. Either everyone in town had decided to copy her ragged attire or she wasn't seeing straight.

Shizuko rubbed her eyes.

If she was, in fact, seeing straight, then that meant that the woman ambling past her didn't exactly have hands. While she did have arms, the flesh appeared to have been melted—like cheese—and dripped down to where her hands should've been.

"What happened to all of you?" Shizuko tried to say,

but there remained no breath left in her chest.

"Water . . . Water, please . . . Water . . ." they crooned.

A group of soldiers had convened round the faucets in the school garden to hand out brimming canteens to the molten people.

And then she saw the pairs of feet dragging past her. They were just like that woman's hands: flaps of flesh. In their wake, they imparted to the earth a trail of crimson.

Shizuko lifted a hand to pull her baby closer to her bosom away from these freakish beings, but her fingers wouldn't reach.

She tried again, but her fingers weren't making contact.

When she looked down, a strange noise left her lips.

"M-my hands . . . my hands . . ."

Something was telling her to check on Kimika.

Pressing her cheek into her daughter's, she cooed. "Kimika. Kimika! Wake up!"

NO.

But she knew.

She knew as she rolled the rest of her face into the sunken splosh where her daughter's pillow-cheeks once swelled and as she tasted the iron-nectar trickling into her parted lips—she knew, okay?

But still—

"Kimika? Kimika! No! Kimika! Someone help! Please!"

She had to see for herself. Slowly, Shizuko let her gaze drop to the mass tied to her breast.

"Oh, thank God! Ha!" she began to giggle, and she thought she sounded just like the girl from the square. "This isn't my daughter! Ha—hahahaha! Someone must've given me a huge lump of corned beef! I'll never go hungry again! *Banzai! Banzai!*"

But no one was listening. Like moths in the light, they

grew enraptured for the wetness that lay ahead.

All at once, the five or so people who had, only moments ago, been guzzling down the canteens of water, became possessed by convulsions, hacking up blood and guts, until they dried up and folded to the ground like paper dolls.

Shizuko watched as a boy in a uniform several sizes too small came darting out of the school. "Help! We need help! Please!"

As he made for the faucets, however, a soldier stepped before him to stop him. "No! Don't give them water! Stop! They'll die! You all have to wait for aid!"

"What do you mean?" said the boy. "Half my class disappeared, and the rest are—like th-those p-p-people out there."

"I'm sure we can give them a little bit of water," came the gentle voice of an older soldier.

"NO WATER," said the first soldier. "They say it's an atom bomb. Dropped by the Americans. These people are severely burned. You can't give them water under any circumstances."

"Shouldn't we just give it to them, then, in that case?" said a different soldier. "If it's really an atom bomb, they're fucked."

"How dare you!" the boy shook his head. "I can save each and every one of them. I go to this school!"

"Heya," the older soldier pointed to the boy's name tag, "Matsuoka-*kun*, is it? I see you're a second year. Where's your teacher?"

Akinobu tried shaking his head before succumbing to retching on the soldier's shoes.

"Don't worry about cleaning that up, kid. Come with me. Let's get your friends out of the classrooms."

"Stay back!" shouted the first soldier in the meantime.

"Please wait until aid arrives!"

"No! Please, *please,* give us water," said a figure on her knees. She was missing the scrap of flesh meant to cover her spine. "We are so thirsty."

Finding herself at the prow of the warbling swarm now, Shizuko felt a set of wings vibrating deep inside her womb. So violently did the beggar-woman begin to jiggle, that her vision vacillated from black to ruby, until the only visible thing was the glowing faucet just meters ahead.

"*Mizu ... Mizu ...* Please … *Mizu ...*" they droned behind her, drawing closer.

Shizuko broke her fever-waltz to steal a glance at the lump lying cold by her milkless breasts, smiling through the thirst. "Kimika. *Kaa-chan* saved you, didn't she?"

"Stop them!" said the hatless soldier.

But it was too late, you see, for Shizuko had hurled herself past the throng of flapping flesh and corned beef, past the armed soldiers and into the garden faucets that lay yawning at their feet. Twisting the wings she had grown in place of arms, she wrenched free the faucet handle and stretched her mouth as wide as it would go, as if collecting gold.

The water burned as it squirted hot love down her throat, and for the first time in years, she felt very rich indeed.

The last thing Shizuko saw was the ghost of that thing called the sun. It was a chalky-white bag-full-of-god, branded with numbers so they'd never forget—rising, rising, rising with a *tick-tick-poof* until it sat fat and twitterpated over a bastardized city of paper.

"Wait for me, Kimika."

But there was no rush. After all, in Hiroshima, it was 8:15 a.m. forever.

Not for Shizuko, though. Only the moths that burned, then burst, were free at last.

"Still Time" by Alejandro Gonzalez

STILL TIME

Amy Root Clements

I ran the risk of what might be called human scenarios. Each led to a saturated zone, a plume, water or airborne events. A brain whose synapses will fire until they're ash.

— SASHA WEST, *FAILURE AND I BURY THE BODY*

If we can understand disease," the huckster says, "we'll understand love."

I didn't choose this show; it's coming from the next room, where another patient gapes at her television from sunup until signoff. A kaleidoscope of noise emanates from the black-and-white box: theme songs, laugh tracks, shrieks of fright, newscasts, prophecies, promises, smooches, speeches, orchestral flutes conveying whimsy followed by the worry of a cello, twangy singers who make me want to dance. Inventors of ingenious products that make me wish I could still dial a phone. Faith-healing preachers who make me want to wring their necks now that I've seen the unseen. Now that I've been reduced to

little more than a soul.

"Because disease," the voice continues, "is transmitted when we are unaware. When we're caught off guard. And then we pass it on to others who are just as vulnerable. With ease, disease knows how to shut off the alarms. It knows how to infiltrate and replicate. What if the world followed those lessons for a different kind of plague? I want humanity to be overcome by an epidemic of love!" Now he has my attention. "It will only happen if we stop inoculating our hearts against the one thing that will save us: love, sweet love." Ah, I adore that song. *What the world . . . needs now.* But, inevitably, there's a catch. To learn more, I have to pick up the phone and give my address in order to receive my free booklet on human potential. Free with a trial membership. If I act now.

Someone turns down the volume, and I hear my doctor's voice. He is speaking with his back to me, as if that will keep me from overhearing. He would never believe that I examine my chart every day. But I do, while reading his narrow mind. My room is narrow too, barely big enough for more than two visitors at once. My doctor remarks to the neurosurgeon that it's my second anniversary, the beginning of another comatose year in a powerless body with a remarkably strong heart but a deeply slumbering brain. Yet my spirit is wide awake, with high-octane perception and full-throttle memories that have nothing to do with cells or dendrites or the vast limitations of anything tangible.

They've begun telling AJ to get on with his life. "The chances that your wife will wake up are slim," they say, "and even if she does, she's sustained permanent brain damage." I'll admit that I should have made up my mind a lot sooner. They talk about their possible courses of action, as if this is somehow up to them. It's never been

their decision. I soon discovered that, as usual, I am expected to do all the planning and sort out all the difficult details. I'm the one who has to choose the next step while the men tell themselves that they're in charge. Everyone assumes I want to come home to them. They say they miss my meatloaf. And they especially miss my gravy. Little do they know how tempted I am to retire from that life. *My* life.

What am I waiting for? I'm ordinarily very decisive. By the time I complete a book of Green Stamps, with all the sizes pasted into every possible slot, I know exactly how I want to redeem them. Should I cash them in for a toaster oven or an ice cream freezer? Easy choice: ice cream freezer. Ice cream makes you a better person. And milk is high in calcium.

My teenage daughter says that soon I will have been here for three Thanksgivings. We're definitely not on the same calendar anymore. Time feels so different to me now. Time and noise. Especially the noise of being busy. Sometimes when people visit me, their voices become muddy with my leftover sounds. My vacuum cleaner blends with the cheers of a high school football stadium, very old performances from Jack Benny swirled in, along with the sound of road trips in my station wagon, when everyone would talk at once and AJ would turn up the music if he wanted us to shush.

The most beautiful thing I hear these days is the voice of my first husband. His name was Sam. You can't imagine how it felt to hear him murmuring in my ear again, twenty years after his funeral. I thought I'd recovered from being his widow; I thought I'd done a good job of letting him go. We'd only been married for a year and a half when he died. Yet, all those years later, on that blazing hot afternoon—the exact moment when my aneurysm opened the floodgates—as I knelt down to scrub the girls' pink

bathtub, I heard Sam right behind me. He started singing, "I'll be seeing you in all the old familiar places." That song had been a dirty joke for us; we changed the words to "I'll be feeling you in all the old familiar places."

I put down my sponge and turned around to see where the singing was coming from. There was a commotion. I could see my mouth producing words, trying to say that I no longer knew how to speak. The door kept slamming because no one wanted the dog to come in. (He's huge—an earnest golden retriever who cannot bear to be shut out of anything.) The pink mosaic floor felt cold while questions echoed against the tiles. "Did she inhale the bleach?" "Does she have a bad heart?" "How can this be happening? She's only forty-five years old." But I was oblivious to them. Sam's voice was warm. I wanted to find out where he was.

I've heard him almost non-stop for months now. He's right around the corner, but he's the one thing I can't see, while the gritty details of my mortal life are spewed at me in perfect focus. Sam isn't saying anything in particular to me; he's just there, humming quietly. It's like a late-night radio show. You don't care that only five or six other listeners are tuning in. You can picture the DJ perched in the booth with his favorite records, maybe wishing that a few more people appreciated his music. But you don't turn it off. It almost feels as if he's right there in your house, dropping by so that you can keep each other company.

Sam sounds so easygoing and suave. He must know I'm here, though I can't be sure. I need to get to him, but I need to get back to my daughters too. How I wish I could have it both ways.

I don't know what my place is in Patty's world now. I was already having a lot of trouble getting through to her before I wound up in the hospital. I want her to go

to college, but she doesn't have the grades. When I was her age, I had the grades (especially in science) but not the money. Or the freedom. I can't tell if I ever figured out how to be a good parent. Was I strict? I'm glad Patty visits me, but she should be doing her homework. She and I have always been the kind of people who lose track of time. Sometimes Patty will come in after school in the late afternoon, and the next thing I know a nurse appears, or one of the candy stripers (why do they let those children volunteer on school nights?), and it turns out that several hours have passed. That's when they say it's way past visiting hours, so "Everyone will have to go." I sometimes wonder if that means me, too.

Patty is failing her classes, but she is helping her little sister, Lynna, make all A's. Neither one of them can spell aneurysm, and sometimes they tell people that I had a stroke, just because it's easier to pronounce. They're *not* the same thing. Having a stroke sounds elderly and ordinary. A stroke is simply a rupture. An aneurysm is a bulge that can burst. And it's deadlier, especially if the pressure has built up over a long time. To me it's an important distinction.

It took them seven hours of observation to decide that the problem was in my brain. After the surgery, they gave AJ a grim prognosis, saying I had sprung a leak in a "poor cranial location." The neurosurgeon waded around inside my head until he found the source of all the trouble and dammed the river. It took him most of the night.

"Is Nelda in pain?" AJ asked.

"Not right now, but when she bent over the edge of that bathtub, she probably felt the most excruciating headache of her life."

He certainly got that wrong. It wasn't like that at all. When I bent over the edge of that tub, I felt the most

exhilarating pleasure of my life: the sudden, unmistakable voice of the first guy I'd ever loved. A man who had cherished me the way young couples cherish each other before the real negotiations of marriage and parenting put a padlock on that hormonal racetrack. Marrying AJ was comfortable. But marrying Sam was intoxicating. So, no. When I bent over to scrub that tub, there was no headache. There was no pain.

I remember nothing about the surgery, but by the time I was in the recovery room, I was no longer in my body. I looked down and saw my own half-dead image staring back up at me. Her eyes were open for what seemed like a full minute, and she couldn't make a sound. We just looked at each other, body and mind and soul coming face to face. Since then, those eyes have stayed shut nearly all the time, while her lips go slack as she sips the air. I tried to take good care of my lungs. Those lungs: should I say they are hers? Or mine? That broken body with its haywire brain is a thing I only vaguely recognize. And yet I can't bear to sever my connection to it. I cannot bear to cut the cord.

The figure I saw lying there on that awful day was completely bald, with only a black row of stitches where her headband should be. I'd spent a lifetime trying to restrain that hair. I had started borrowing Patty's headbands. In fact, I was admitted to the hospital wearing her nicest one. It was paisley, which goes with nothing, but it's cheerful. Such effort to maintain my mane. Yet there I was after surgery, with no hair at all.

It's grown back thick. And not just on my scalp—on my limp legs too. I used to love the way my skin would feel after I'd shave my legs. Patty's legs are hairy, for a variety of reasons . . . all of them having to do with liberating women, including oldsters like me, from having

to look like a porcelain doll in order to get anywhere in life. I appreciate her courageous act on my behalf. Really, I do. But truth be told, for me, shaving was the liberating part, a rite of passage that meant I was an adult woman who could be trusted with something as dangerous as a razor blade.

I miss wearing summertime clothing: sandals and homemade sleeveless dresses. At least I don't have to wear a hospital gown here. Long-term guests like me can wear their own pajamas from home. Right now, Patty has me in a purple polyester long-sleeve nightie with an eyelet bodice that almost comes up to my chin. Hideous. It has a matching robe that uselessly hangs from a hook on the wall next to a plastic angel. Both the hook and the angel are standard issue here, installed in every room.

Why did Patty waste money on that robe? Robes are for people who procrastinate and want to lounge a little longer than they should. "Never waste a day, and never waste a dollar." That's what my dad always said. When I was growing up, my mother made every stitch I had on, and those clothes held together better than most of the stuff I see on the racks for ten dollars. My favorite sundress has baby ducks all over it. I found the fabric in the kids' section of Sew Happy. I was looking for something that would make a nice new dress for little Lynna. She's growing so fast. I could barely keep up with the constant alterations. I thought those ducks were awfully cute, splashing around on tiny blue puddles. I made matching dresses for us, and we would wear them to the market together. People probably thought I was nuts, a grown-up dressed in little-girl fabric. But that was my idea of a good time.

The nurses put lipstick on me sometimes, but it's an awful shade. Frosted. What's the point of wearing lipstick

that makes your mouth disappear more? I guess the real question is, what's the point of putting lipstick on a mouth that no longer smiles. People used to tell me I had good teeth. I think that means not crooked and not gray like AJ's. I've never smoked. We almost punched each other's lights out over the stench of tobacco when we were first married. How is it possible that I turned out to be the invalid? The person who is no longer valid.

I should go. But as soon as I try to leave, I imagine the moment when it's done, and I think of how the sorrow will sound. At night, when it's time for the nurses to turn out the lights in my room, AJ says he's afraid I'll be lonely in the dark. But I know he's the one afraid to be lonely. The freeway trip home is hard for him right now; his convertible is in the shop, so he has to take my car. With the fold-out benches in the back, it can seat twelve. And it has. I can't count all the trips we've made in my station wagon. It's a blue Malibu, the color of the ocean, though we've never taken it to the beach. AJ says the sand would corrode the chassis. We've been to the mountains and the desert and once to New Orleans; that's where AJ thought it would be neat to go ahead and let Patty have some drinks with us at dinner. Next thing I know, I'm mopping up half-digested pieces of her shrimp étouffée in a motel lobby. He said he wanted to train her to dislike liquor. Sometimes his ideas are positively asinine.

I've probably put 100,000 miles on that car. It's one thing to be out on the highway in a car like that with a bunch of kids. It's another thing to drive it all by yourself, long after rush hour, past all the half-lit gas stations and abandoned shacks. Everything is usually closed by the time AJ leaves here, and there's nothing but vacancy signs every now and then to keep him company. As lonely as he feels, he's not always alone because I'm now able to

watch him any time I want to. Which is just occasionally. I seep into that silent car knowing I can't do a thing for him. He won't turn on the radio. He's afraid some of our songs will come on. And if he drives under a bridge while a train is passing overhead, he makes this superstitious little wish: "Nelda will get well." He should know better than to ask God for anything so specific. "The Creator is for comfort," our pastor says, "not for cures."

There's a limit to how much the insurance company would pay, so eventually they made me leave the hospital, in an ambulance that stopped for red lights and did not blare the siren because what's the rush when you're just in a coma? And that is how my body and I came to reside here, a place where every resident is half-alive. I guess it's okay. No need to spend a fortune like we did on those first nights in the ICU (not the right letters for a place where the patients' eyes are shut: Eye See You). My body can't tell the difference between a hospital and a rest home. My visitors can feel the difference, of course. This illness is wearing out a lot of car transmissions. AJ drives all the way out here every day. Every single day.

He does not do well in situations where he's not in charge. He's the kind of man who's always checking up on people: doesn't trust the men he works with, doesn't trust the roofer, certainly doesn't trust the nuns who run this place. But it would be wrong to say he only comes here because he's trying to take charge of a situation he can't control. He is capable of kindness. I suppose there's another reason he never misses a day here: he loves me, and he's afraid that I'll think he's stopped loving me if he doesn't come here and tell me every night. Love is yet another situation he can't control.

I love him too, but all the dead who ever meant anything to me are on the other side, not AJ's side. I can

hear them. Not just Sam. My mother is there. Dad. My big brother. I know this. I know that they are as near as a pistil and a petal. Or, I think I know they're near. That's another thing that worries me. What if it's all a trick, and the next realm turns out to be an entrance to another body, and I have to start a whole new life as someone else, and I never get to be myself again after all?

Don't whistle, AJ. Oh, I can't stand that—it's so eerie. Off-key, but he doesn't realize it. All his adult life, he's gone around thinking he's whistling a happy tune, but in fact he sounds more like an unattended tea kettle. I never had the heart to tell him.

"How 'bout that tune, Sugar? One of your favorites, right?" He's referring to Patsy Cline. Too tragic. Not one of my favorites at all. But I do like being called Sugar. And I like calling him Sugarfoot. Who knows how all that got started.

Thank God for Patty. He can't talk to her and whistle at the same time.

"Mom looks cold today." I'm not sure what she means by that, but she draws the blankets to my chin.

He must have left work early and picked her up at school. They try to visit me separately, to increase the number of times a visitor is checking on me. Or maybe this is Saturday.

Well, that's just like AJ. Can't bring himself to say anything to her. Let's not even talk about the obvious. Let's just shake our heads and leave the room. Patty certainly didn't get her chatterbox gene from AJ.

"Where are you going, Daddy?"

"I need some coffee, Patty. It was a long week."

And there he goes. I don't think he can keep this together much longer. Coffee in the afternoon is never a good sign.

"Sorry, Mom, but I was downstairs trying to park the car. Daddy's trying to teach me how to parallel, but it's not that easy in your big blue monster. Daddy gave up and said he'd come in here by himself because he didn't want to watch me wreck. My friend Beau called the station wagon a hearse today, and then he remembered what happened to you and he felt really bad."

Yes, her beau is named Beau, and he's an evil little twerp, descended from a long line of like-minded brats. It scares me to death to think of what can happen to her. She has no idea how dangerous the world is. Or how much fun you can have with a man who takes you seriously and doesn't lie every time his lips are moving. She would have thought Sam was boring. She definitely thinks AJ is boring. Every ounce of women's lib she preaches goes right out the window when it comes to Beau, though. And there's not a thing I can do to protect her. Patty, you're not going to mention the fact that you let Beau drive my car, are you? And the fact that you couldn't care less if you're just a sex object to him, and you're planning to drop your pants for him any day now if you can just figure out how to fold the seats down?

"Mom, I think I understand how come you got sick."

Not another hypothesis, Patty. You're always so sure you know "how come" I got sick. And it's always because someone did something terribly wrong. When are you going to realize what little influence you have on my fate?

"Sharon's not going to stay over anymore. I told her I don't want to be friends."

I see. Now it's the neighbor girl's fault that I'm sick. That's really a shame. They've been close since elementary school, when they hadn't yet learned how to concoct a feud that lasts an entire semester.

Sharon has always felt like a third daughter to me.

I don't like to admit it, but there were times when I wished I could trade Patty for Sharon. They can both be troublemakers, but Patty is usually the one starting the trouble. Sharon is more sensitive to the needs of others—more concerned about how the fallout will affect the adults. And she's smarter about the ways of the world. Sometimes I can't believe that someone as gullible as Patty could be related to me. I know where Patty's going with this line of thinking, though. The very night before I collapsed, Sharon and Patty took my spare car keys from the shed and tried to drive into town to see Led Zeppelin live in concert. Neither of them had a license. Patty was driving, and she drew attention to herself because she didn't know how to turn the lights on. A neighbor recognized them, followed them, and eventually called us from a pay phone at the coliseum. We sped down there and pulled them out of the long line of kids waiting to get in to see the show. I made Patty and Sharon ride back to our house with AJ I told the girls that their disobedience and recklessness disgusted me so much I couldn't stand the sight of them, and that their music disgusted me too, even though I was not disgusted: that's just the word that a good parent is supposed to use when their daughter has stolen their car. I laid it on pretty thick. But no, I was not disgusted. I was furious and power hungry: rules are rules. And I was genuinely afraid for their safety.

And I was envious. They never have to know the truth, that I used to crank up those albums when I was home alone, and not just when I was doing housework. There was nothing better than the sound of Jimmy Page and his double-neck guitar. Gonna make me sweat. Gonna make me groove. I loved to shake my hair and shake my tail and belt out a few primal screams.

I screamed and screamed after she stole my car:

"Doesn't that band have an ounce of respect for the people who perished on the *Hindenburg*???" Furthermore, we hadn't been allowing Patty to go to concerts yet. She was too young because the concerts were too wild. Someone could slip drugs into her soda. Kids are OD'ing all over this town. She could be raped—by someone she knew. She could be killed. Had she not heard of Charles Manson? But she was oblivious, just the way she is now that she has a boyfriend. Reckless. Gullible. She was on the freeway with her friend driving blind in the night. When she left for school the next morning, AJ had to do the talking (which for him meant barely uttering two syllables) because I was still fuming.

It scared me to see her becoming so rebellious. I wanted (and still want) her to take life very seriously. I've had a good life, but I want her generation to have an even better one. All these opportunities that I would have relished at their age: college, cars, paychecks. The Pill! Being in charge of a big company, or even City Hall. But they just take it for granted, frittering their lives away on foolish whims. Tuning out, with no clue how easily all that freedom can be taken away from them.

And I wanted Patty and her friends to take me seriously. I felt so insulted. How stupid did those girls think I was? Why did they think I was so gullible? They probably would have gotten away with it if they had turned on the headlights. If I had been a troublemaker when I was their age, I would never have gotten caught because I'm smarter than they are. But I did trust them completely. It never would have occurred to me to check on Patty after bedtime or look in the carport late at night.

I didn't know it then, but now I realize that Sharon slipped my face powder into her pocketbook after we got back to our house that night. After all the yelling. She is

very attached to me (her own parents run a madhouse), and she wanted a memento from what she figured would be her last invitation to my place. Her stepmother doesn't even buy her tampons, much less makeup. So she went right into the drawer on my dressing table (said she needed my toilet because Patty was using the girls' bathroom), and she took the little round compact that I used every single day to blot out the imperfections above my neck. On a normal night, I would have given it to her if she had asked. But that was not a normal night. And even if it had been a normal night, she would not have asked. Girls like that are clever enough to know that if you ask, the answer might be no. Now, when she opens my compact and looks in the mirror, her very young and hopeful face, which does not need powder of any kind, has replaced my tired reflection.

My own mother used to be overly kind to my friends too, the ones from broken homes, calling them her "stray cats." It would make me jealous that she paid more attention to them than to me, and I finally told her so. Without batting an eye, she said I didn't need to worry. She said I shouldn't take it personally because she was just trying to make herself feel better (feel superior, in fact) by putting a spotlight on the errors of other kids' lousy mothers. I had no idea what she was talking about. But there I was, all those years later, history repeating itself, polishing my halo while I made up for all the shortcomings of Sharon's mother and the father's second wife. And his girlfriend before that.

If I hadn't gotten sick, Sharon certainly would have been allowed back to our house after a while. I would have insisted, telling her that I changed my mind because she's the only one who ever wanted to help me in the kitchen. Not telling her that I changed my mind simply

because I missed her so very much. But who knows how it would have unfolded. Girls that age find hundreds of reasons to declare war on each other.

"Beau has decided to be my boyfriend, Mom."

That's a strange way to put it. Shouldn't there be some asking going on? Doesn't she know that she gets to decide whether she wants to date him? Why is my daughter handing herself over to him on a silver platter? She's trying so hard to cheer herself up. She thinks that she can hide things from me by not uttering them. She even thinks that if she doesn't move her lips (which is rare for her) I can't hear her.

"Beau is really sweet, Mom. Here, I brought a picture."

Oh, I don't need a picture. I know what this con artist looks like. There he is, grinning up at the camera with his sharky little teeth. He has a "nice boy" haircut. His sideburns are kind of long, but he knows he can get away with anything as long as he keeps his hair above his collar.

"We're going to be in a play together. You can meet him when you get out of here. You're going to like him."

I can see how they will spend the evening. Patty will wear one of her hand-dyed shirts, smeared with shades of tangerine and pomegranate that resemble blood stains. This Beau person will lift that shirt halfway up while her Levis are tugged down around her shins. All of that denim will be wadded underneath them; she likes wide hems.

Patty will think about telling him no. But she will remember the night when I told her I was disgusted with her. She will tell herself that I am right. She'll have no way of knowing that I was never disgusted with her. Patty's thin face will show no happiness or pleasure; no pain either. Her face will be blank, the way mine looks now after a hundred and four comatose weeks. She'll think of a sensational way to describe this night to her

friends. She will not ever admit to its tragedy. She'll go on about how much fun it was, how "tuff" she was, how liberating it was.

I wish she could find someone like Sam. I wasn't much older than Patty when I fell in love with him. No one knows how much I've missed him. He was not a smoker. The air around him was crystal clear.

In Patty's mind, it's as if my life began when her life began. But I had another life. One that has nothing to do with her.

Sam and I only got to celebrate one wedding anniversary. I had chased him all through high school. I was younger than he was. He was the kind of guy who liked to make himself useful. Never let anybody know what he was thinking, but when he did have something to say, it was a stopper: an obscure fact that no one had ever thought of, or a solution—offered gently and politely so that the rest of us wouldn't feel like imbeciles. I met him when he found out that my brother had been drafted. Sam wanted to know everything about going into the service. He started hanging around our place all the time then. He and I made friends right away.

As we grew up, I thought I was just supposed to be his best buddy, not someone he would ever want very deeply. But the letters while we were separated finally made him come around. I never realized how much he had on his mind until I started getting his notes from Korea. Magnificent penmanship. He said that he had never really appreciated me until he had to live without me, and that he knew it was presumptuous of him, but did I want to meet up with him on his next leave? After that, there was no waffling.

We were married on my parents' porch after Sam's second tour was up, and for our honeymoon we went trout

fishing. We stayed in a little cabin at a place called Inn O' Sense. That's how uncomplicated we were. Two plates and two cups on the drain board. Just enough money from his job at the IGA to keep us fed and sheltered. By then, no amount of money could tempt him to stay in the service; he said the path to a pension would have felt like a prison sentence, now that he knew what it was really like on the frontlines. He was glad to be alive.

We had friendship and peace and quiet. We were trying to start a family. I sometimes imagine what those children might have been like.

He wasn't sick for very long, unlike me. He just went to bed with a stomach ache one night and woke up a few hours later with what turned out to be a ruptured appendix. It was all over in a couple of days. He was 25 years old. He had survived two tours of duty defending the 38th parallel but was betrayed by his own body. Of course, I told myself that I'd never live in the countryside again; I wanted to be in a town big enough to have a hospital. That was foolish. Look where it got me.

Losing Sam helps me know what AJ is going through. It is such a bitter feeling when you come home to a ghost's house.

In my case, the ghost's house is a wreck. You'd think they've never heard of scouring powder or trash day. Lynna's clothes don't match, and Patty is thinking of dropping out of school altogether. The drama club is the only thing that keeps her there. I have never, ever let on that I think I'm smarter than she is. All AJ and I ever said was that she'd make better grades if she studied more. But maybe she didn't study more because it was too hard for her. AJ is up to a pack a day. He has the nerve to smoke in here, as if I can't tell. The stench is awful, and I swear it's staining the walls. I wish they'd put me on oxygen, so

he won't be allowed to light up. But everyone says there's nothing wrong with my lungs. At least, not yet.

My ability to experience their daily life feels smaller and smaller to me as time goes on. It has nothing to do with the fact that their hope is waning. Surely this decision is still completely up to me, with or without their hope. If I do come back, they'll forget this affection they're feeling right now, and there will just be another crisis to take the place of this one. And, chances are, I wouldn't come back in one piece.

I think Lynna is the only one who appreciates what's left of our little family. I hope they remember her birthday next week. She'll be eight. Or nine? This is a bad sign; I should know her age. She always recognizes me. She's the only person in the family who can see me. I suppose that's because she's still very young, but there is so much I do not understand. I hope she will not outgrow me. Her imagination is wonderfully colorful, and she thinks I am a figment of it. I keep her from sleeping, but I can't help it. The only time she's ever alone is when she goes to sleep. And that way, I also get to see the dog, who makes the rounds and then winds up snoozing at her bedside. He always recognizes me too; a good thing, because otherwise he'd growl.

Lynna is now too worried to have any childish ways. I try to wait until four or five in the morning to see her, when she's fast asleep, so that maybe she'll think I'm just part of a dream. She's little, yet she understands what I tell her. She has no difficulty with words, but she's not very strong in math. I wish I could go through her flashcards with her. AJ's mother looks after her, but she is sort of a cold fish.

They've never brought Lynna to visit me. I wouldn't want them to. I wouldn't want her to see me like this.

That *would* keep her up at night. But last week, half-asleep, she asked me when I'm coming back. Some of the other kids at school have tried to cheer her up. They tell her I am probably just on a really long vacation, and AJ will surprise her with my return. They tell her I'll have souvenirs and peanut-butter cups for her. For a while, she would ride home from school anticipating the big day of my return, hoping I'd be waiting for her in the living room. I shouldn't do this to her. She is losing her ability to wish and hope.

"I'm going to go see what's taking Daddy so long," Patty says. "You look pretty, Mom."

You look pretty too, Patty. You've got such athletic legs. You look strong in those knee-high boots.

Well, what do you know. "Hi, Mrs. Nash."

Sharon must have been waiting for Patty to leave. Good thing; I don't want any catfights in here.

Sharon also looks lovely today. I think she's been ironing her hair. Hers is the same color as sweet potatoes. Matches her freckles.

"I can't believe you've been here two whole years, Mrs. Nash." Well, at least somebody besides the doctor is being honest about my anniversary. "You're a tough lady," she whispers. She usually whispers everything when she's in here. Just the opposite of Patty.

Mmm, that's nice. She always holds my hand.

"I don't know if you can hear me, Mrs. Nash. But I really miss you. Patty and I had a big fight; that's why I haven't been coming around as much. I want you to know I think you're a great lady, though."

How does she know just what to do? My scalp itches so; my hair has gotten too long. That's good. Use the soft brush. No more tangles. Oh, this is luxury. I've missed you, too.

"I'm going to patch things up with Patty. She doesn't know it yet, but I am. She's been my best best friend forever. But I had to tell her to stay away from Beau. She knows I've had a crush on him since sixth grade."

So my daughter is a homewrecker. And how did that jackass man-child manage to become such a heartthrob?

"She said she didn't care and it shouldn't matter because Beau doesn't want to date me anyway, and that maybe we shouldn't be friends anymore because I'm the one who made you mad and that's why you got sick. To tell the truth, the concert was all my idea."

Patty has always known how to stack the cards in her favor.

"I'm sorry if I made you mad that night, Mrs. Nash. I miss you. You know how it is with my stepmom. I wish I could go over to your house and you could teach me how to make something that looks just like the picture in the cookbook. You never got around to showing me why your gravy never has any lumps. I'd promise to leave your kitchen all clean. I want to go over and help, but Patty won't let me."

Imagine this little girl trying to take on my trio. And the secret to gravy? Patience.

"I mean it, Mrs. Nash. I don't know if you can think at all any more. But you've always been so good to me. You're the only one who would take the time to listen to me, and you really understand what it's like out there. I'm right next door to your house, so I can help anytime. I just don't want you to worry."

Truth is, I don't think you'll be back here to see me for a while. Whenever you want to stop in, you'll probably be intimidated by AJ's car out front, and every time you try to phone my house and check on things or offer to pick up some groceries, Patty will turn you away. At your age,

these things can rage on for months. But I'm not afraid for you just yet. I'll bet that when you leave here today and slide behind the driver's seat, and fire up those cigarettes I wish you didn't smoke, you will pull yourself together. You'll just have to learn how to overlook Patty for a while, how to sidestep her like a mud puddle. And you need to go to college. Or law school. Or flight school. Anything but Home Ec. No more cookbooks. What's in the bag? Oh, that's the cutest thing.

"I thought you'd get a kick out of this, Mrs. Nash. I got this for Lynna, for her birthday. I wanted to show you." A yellow sleeveless dress with a long-tailed kitty cat on the front. I wish I could put my hands on that dress and feel the stitching where the cat is attached. He's arching his back, stretching. Free to do what feels good to him. No responsibility. I guess that's why I think it's a boy cat. And as much as I love my dog, I do admire the cleanliness of cats.

It's ridiculous for me to even think about what's clean right now. Who says we have to be washed clean when we die in order for us to be happy? My life won't be washed clean, ever. There are still dirty spoons in the sink. Sunday comics from last month all over the living room floor.

"Leave it to me," Sharon used to say when she'd come over. Just like Sam: "How can I help?"

I envy Sharon. Just look at her, gathering her things. Slinging a macramé purse over one shoulder, the shopping bag in the crook of her arm. Looking away from me and feeling so disappointed, but so relieved that she can simply waltz through the doorway on a timetable of her choosing.

She's driving her dad's rusty sports car. Stick shift. *Attagirl.* I watch her coast through the parking lot and gather speed, flicking ashes out of the window. Completely unencumbered in her striped T-shirt and cutoffs. Not even

bothering to say goodbye to AJ or Patty. Following arrows to the freeway, where there will be mileage signs and the names of destinations.

She has no idea how much I'd like to drive away with her, hopped up on nicotine and naïve intentions. Wide awake to everything that feels unfamiliar, never conscious of the way things end. Just focused on anticipation, with a system for measuring our progress. A hundred miles from the state line. Historical marker in ten. Gas, food, lodging in five.

Watch me slip out behind her and put my hand on the wheel. I don't need to steal anyone's keys. This is a vehicle of my own design. Watch me barrel past the careful people, forcing my way into the far left lane. Immune from fear and fueled to the brim, without a drop of sorrow to gum up the gears. Watch me fiddle with the dial until Sam's song is clear. Watch me revel in the revelation of my infinite flight. No longer sequestered. Now certain and free.

"Hollow Bones" by Leslie Pagel

BIRD DANCING

Jodi Paloni

Fay is permitted to sit in the chair by the window to eat her lunch, but she hasn't yet picked up her fork. She's watching a cardinal tap his beak against the glass. He thinks his reflection is an intruder, a threat. *Tap, tap, tap,* every morning, and again every afternoon until her head hurts. Tapping marks the time here.

The day nurse calls the cardinal Reds. She says it's her dear dead dad come from his grave in the old country to haunt them. She says this in a mimicking brogue. Irene is trying to be funny, so Fay doesn't tell her the cardinal is merely exhibiting a survival instinct, that it's basic evolutionary biology. And Fay can't change who Irene is either, or what she fundamentally believes. She has no control over other people's narratives. Or that's what her therapist Joan says, that Fay should focus on the one narrative she can control.

Irene blathers on and on about Ireland, how her great-great-grandparents survived the famine. A trick. She's trying to shame Fay into eating the mashed potatoes

growing cold on her plate, the once-melted pat of pooled butter already re-solidified. Fay's pretty sure a nearly two-hundred-year, country-wide famine and a Gen Z starving herself are two different things, and what Irene is saying probably isn't even appropriate here, but she keeps her mouth shut. She knows what is and isn't appropriate because without any birds around—except the crazy cardinal—she directs her behavioral studies skills to her own species, the human flock sequestered in a fabricated biome, birdlike women pick, pick, picking at their plates.

Fay has them all figured out, even Joan, who will tell her to ignore what Nurse Irene says or doesn't say. Focusing on the nurse is a distraction.

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Fay's other distraction is to turn her mind toward her mother, who left them so long ago she finds it difficult to picture her but who made the best mashed potatoes—or at least that's what her sister Kitty always said. During the unmothered years, Kitty taught Fay their mother's recipes as a way to keep the mother-memory alive. In time, Fay could no longer see her mother working in the kitchen, only her sister.

Fay stirs the stiff potatoes with a fork. She licks the tines. These are nothing like the mashed potatoes she is used to, but she only has two days to stop losing, to gain half a pound, or they'll level her up.

"Leveling up" is more like leveling down—mandatory bed rest, tubal feedings, hydration from a plastic bag dripped into her veins. "Leveling up" is a pile of thin hospital blankets that want to trap her body heat but fail miserably as death breaths down her neck. She has felt the

bruise-purple cold of it before. This, she can picture. This, she remembers.

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She can't remember the time between when she stopped going to the dining hall to when they found her on the floor of the laundry room in the basement of her dorm. Brain fog is a symptom. She does remember dropping a mustard jar full of quarters, the glass shattering, coins spilling and rolling, and then darkness. She remembers flashing red lights in the street, then the glow of a sterile white ceiling lamp, then darkness again.

She remembers waking up in this hospital, in the wing set aside for women under twenty-five who hurt themselves in some way. There are so many ways. She looks at the mashed potatoes. She sets down her fork. She mostly likes her way.

Sly Irene glances over her shoulder at Fay's untouched plate while she pretends to take an interest in the cardinal. The nurse has only one job to do. Fay knows how to be sly, too, how to ignore the glances of a nurse. She knows how to look out a window.

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Outside, the sun glares against a scrim of snow on the wide expanse of the hospital grounds. That morning, there'd been an early fall flurry. Fay squints at the cardinal perched on a spruce near the building. The scene looks like a Hallmark Christmas card. She thinks of roast turkey, glazed ham, cheeses and fruits, lemon cake, and sugar cookies cut into stars. She can practically smell it, the feast the winter she was nine and a half. She ate everything offered. She asked for seconds and thirds. She

ate and she ate until she felt she could burst, when all she wanted was her mother.

After dessert, Fay slipped away from the table. She locked herself in the bathroom. She emptied her belly until she felt as hollow as her mother's chair at the head of the table. Emptying relieved the pain of inhabiting a body.

The glare of memory, like this low autumn light on snow, is too much. She closes her eyes and sees herself here again, now in the middle of a big, sad mess, sequestered in this sterile environment, far too far from her birds. She looks back on that first sick she saw in the toilet and remembers how she ritualized the emptying and became weak and thin. All she wanted to do was sit in the window seat at the lake house and watch the birds at the feeders.

On her tenth birthday, she was given her first pair of binoculars and a copy of *Peterson Field Guide to Birds of North America*, but the book she liked better was one she found in her grandmother's old bookcase: a musty, faded red volume that had long ago lost its dust jacket, *Functional Anatomy of Birds*. From then on, at least until lately, she carried both books in her satchel wherever she went.

Now, her satchel is somewhere in this hospital, along with her cell phone, her field notes, her sketch book, her favorite pen—personal possessions she must earn back.

Mostly, she misses the birds.

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At thirteen, she wanted to move beyond window seat viewing, beyond the yard, and stalk the marsh birds on Little Island.

"Albert can teach you," her father said. "He understands more about birds than any of us."

"I can see that," Kitty said brightly. "Albert with his

beloved birds. You with yours." She probably just wanted a break. Fay begged Kitty to go with her and the boy who summered in the cabin next door, the boy she didn't know, to the houseless island in the lake in his canoe. She wanted to do everything with her sister. But Kitty was too busy swimming. Always, Kitty was swimming.

Mornings, Fay watched her sister dive off the dock as if she couldn't wait to get away. Her sister became a wave, then a ripple, and then a thin line on the horizon—a fish, a mile or more out while Fay waited on the dock, wondering why their mother left them, wanting to ask her if their mother would ever return. Kitty would always swim back before breakfast and rise out of the water wide-eyed and breathless, her pale skin shimmering, and Fay would suddenly feel too shy to ask.

Fay felt suffocated in the water. She liked the breezes, the clouds, the skies. They said Albert could teach her the birds, so she would go with him to the marshes. They didn't know she would learn how to fly out of her body.

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Her tray is gone. Irene is gone. The cardinal is gone. She's been allowed to stay in the chair. She is alone in her room, but Kitty will come later today. She comes every day, setting aside her own dreams to see Fay through another ordeal, to make sure Fay is meeting her goal. She comes to try to get Fay to acknowledge the past, their mother's abandonment, their father's lack, the kinds of things Joan wants her to talk about in group. She comes every day to hint about the midnight trip Fay took in the canoe with Albert.

When Kitty comes today, Fay will tell her to stop. She is unrelenting, like the cardinal who has returned, is back at it, the tapping, head feathers stiff and alert, tapping

mightily hard against the glass.

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Fay can't get as riled as Kitty about the night with Albert. He was there for Fay all those long-ago summers when Kitty wasn't, when her mother wasn't. He was funny, the way he talked about birds with excitement as they paddled from the mainland to the island. Once settled in his bird blind, he would talk in hushed tones as the birds drew near. He would move close to her, sometimes whispering hot breath into the side of her neck. The more often he sat close, the more she felt that what had once belonged only to her, her body, was beginning to belong also to him. She felt jittery, like the baby geese who fluffed and paddled in circles when first learning to swim. It was also a little thrilling. She liked the sugary smell of sweet coffee on his breath, and when she asked, he would offer up the dregs of his beat-up Thermos to her. Albert halved the whole of her pain.

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Back then, in the fall, when Albert returned to a town down south where he and his family spent the school year, she would sneak instant coffee from the kitchen and mix it with water or nibble a spoonful of dry-roasted granules straight from the jar. She liked the jerky feeling that broke up the monotony, the emptiness of the quieter season. She thrived on the jolt of caffeine.

That second summer, now fourteen, she grew taller. Her legs stretched long, like those of the great white egret, but Al had become fleshy. He had joined the wrestling team. He would take off his shirt and flex his big beefy

arms and let her touch the newly sculpted muscles. He'd leave off his shirt and lie down on the ledge. Lying flat, he'd hold the binoculars to his eyes and watch the eagles and osprey and cormorants come to fish in the cove as they circled the sky. He would invite her to try it.

Shoulder-to-shoulder on the ledges of Little Island, they would lie down together. Sometimes, he would suddenly turn on his side and tickle her, run his hands over her arms and shoulders and chest and down to her belly. He would squeeze her thighs, ask her where her meat was, call her boney. Sometimes, he'd squeeze her too hard and leave bruises, but he would lend her his really good binoculars if while her hands were busy, he could put his hands inside her new summer clothes. It was a game, he told her. She would have to stay still, not giggle, and not flinch. So she would take deep breaths and continue to watch birds. She would home in on their feathers, would think about how underneath were bones that were hollow, making it possible for them to fly. She would give in to his games, spread her wings out under Al as he rubbed his groin against her, his mouth buried in her neck. She would imagine she was up there soaring. She didn't let him take off her clothes when he asked. She didn't want him to see her, and he didn't push. And they'd go back to watching the birds.

And then he was gone, leaving high school early to enlist in the Marines. At summer's end, when he left without telling her goodbye, she wondered if he was mad at her.

These are the kinds of memories that come back to Fay in group when others tell similar stories. All these girls, these women, the counselors call them, telling stories about the hands and fingers of boys and of men—gentle hands and harsh ones, the violence and the leaving.

From hearing these stories, Fay understands she is lucky. Her losses and Albert's transgressions could have been so much worse. Still, they are asked to try and remember the stories. No matter how slight or how grave they perceive them to be, they are to try and remember the stories their minds are certain their bodies want to them forget. They can judge later. They *will* judge later.

Joan says it's important to stick with the process. If they want to feel like they did before, when their bodies still felt like their own. Fay doesn't know if it's working, all this dredging dark matter out of the muck, but she misses her dear birds, and she mostly trusts Joan. Joan is steady. Joan is repetitious in her behaviors, so Fay tries.

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Kitty raps on the doorjamb. There are no closed doors in this place. Today, she has brought Fay a gift: a terrarium, a goldfish bowl planted with tiny mosses and running pine and embellished with pine needles and flat rocks pocked with garnet and mica and quartz. This makes Fay think of her pinewoods.

"I made it myself," Kitty says. "I took a class at the library."

Killy is vigilant, thoughtful, loving. And today, she sounds more like a sister than a mother, which surprises Fay. It feels like progress. She needs a sister more than she needs a mother. That's the suggestion Joan gave her, and she's doing her best to stick to it, even if it leaves a slight lump in her throat.

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Kitty's hair is wet under her favorite wool hat. Her

flowery maxi dress is damp under a navy-blue sweater speckled with white. Fay has never seen this particular sweater before. Is it a recent thrift shop find? Does it belong to a new friend? Kitty's life has gone on without her. When she leans over to kiss Fay's forehead, Kitty smells of sunscreen and sweat glossed over with fruity antiperspirant. She smells of wet wool and lake.

Kitty moves toward Fay's medical chart tucked in a steel mesh file holder at the end of the bed, and her scent goes with her. Fay pulls the terrarium up to her eyes. She pretends to find great pleasure in the gift as Kitty looks over her numbers.

"Oh, look, an inchworm," Fay says. "Guess I'll be getting measured for a new dress."

The joke isn't funny; dress shopping would only wreak havoc on Fay's recovery, and they both know it. Fay also knows the danger in the numbers Kitty is reading. Kitty frowns.

"I do try," Fay says.

"Try harder." Kitty sits on the arm of Fay's chair and strokes her forehead and holds her hand. She isn't angry. She seems helpless. "Think about getting out of here."

"I will."

Kitty looks at Fay, her maternal patience replaced, for once, by a pleading look. "Think of me," she says.

It's against the rules for Kitty to say such a thing, and for Fay to agree. Family and friends have been instructed not to make Fay's eating or not eating about them or what she owes them, the people who love her, who are certain they can't live without her.

They do not know how impossible it can feel to conjure the simple desire to live.

•

Next, Kitty asks Fay about group, breaking a second rule within fifteen minutes.

"This one girl—woman," Fay corrects herself, hearing Joan's voice in her head, reminding her that aging and independence are not bad things. "Alicia. She said something that stuck." Fay's lips are parched. She can only drink sugary juices or food replacement beverages, but she only wants water, so she doesn't mention her thirst. "She said, 'All the focus here is on making our bodies grow bigger.' She said, 'But how do I grow something I don't really care about?'"

Fay pauses to let what she just said to Kitty sink in. Kitty raises an eyebrow.

"Alicia says she only eats so she can paint."

Kitty squeezes her eyes shut, lifts her chin, and lets out a winnowing breath. She has made it clear in the past she has never been a fan of the group process. She's read up about it. She says it will only give Fay new ideas. But Fay has plenty of ideas of her own, and she shares them in group, not because she wants to hurt anyone but because she wants to see the other women's heads nod in understanding, to hear their fingers all snap in a chorus, to bask in the light of their complete meeting of minds. Hearing a new take on a coping strategy feels like someone who gets it has her back.

She wants to say, Don't you get it?

She wants to say, My body doesn't feel like it's mine.

•

Fay snaps the thick red rubber band on her wrist as she thinks about saying she needs to go to the bathroom when she doesn't so she can burn calories. She watches Kitty suck on her lower lip while she looks out the window.

There is a smear of zinc oxide on her sister's nose, but Kitty's neck is already red and sore-looking. Unlike the rest of the family, Kitty is fair-skinned. Sometimes she forgets the sun will burn her.

"You're fried," Fay says.

"Second summer days all last week. And now this snow. I guess I need you around to remind me."

Fay doesn't want to be needed, but she keeps this to herself.

"We want you home," Kitty says.

First, they wanted her to leave, to go to college, couldn't wait, and now, they want her back home. She doesn't want to be wanted.

"I'm not ready," she says. She's been instructed on words to use with her family.

She snaps the rubber band to keep her from feeling under her sweatshirt for her bones.

•

During those first months of college, Fay would stand in front of the full-length mirror secured to the door of her dorm room, lift the hem of her blouse, set her hands on her hipbones, ledges that stuck out above the waistband of her low-slung jeans. Her fingertips on one hand almost reached the fingertips on the other. Every few days, they came a little closer, thumb seeking thumb behind her back. She'd undo the three top buttons of her blouse and pull at the collar ends to expose her chest. She'd lean toward the mirror, admire the jut of her clavicles. Sometimes, she would slowly lift her arms, look to the ceiling, and think wings.

On field trips—*Ornithology 101*, a class she had to take but could have taught—the straps of her high-tech binoculars chafed the bones and left welts. People would

stare. She wore her blouses buttoned to the neck to cover them, but she hated how her clothing hid her progress.

A kid in her class called her Bird Girl. *Hey, Bird Girl. Here comes Bird Girl.* He was an idiot, but she liked the name, and she also liked how people assumed she was a dancer.

•

Fay is a dancer of sorts. A bird dancer. Or she used to be. When she was younger, she would mimic the overhead flaps and flights of birds—raptors and other flying fowl, all shapes and sizes, that inhabited her tiny world. Most of all, she loved the slim grace of a great blue heron stalking a fish.

Some nights, when Irene is on break, she creeps out of bed and practices bird dancing in front of the window. There are no mirrors in her room or her bathroom, but the reflection from the glass shows her exactly what she wants to see.

Bird dancing is a remnant of childhood, a game her father taught her so she could learn the differences between species by flight behavior. Her mother was not coming back. Teaching her the names and behaviors of birds was merely a ruse to distract her.

•

"Any word from Mom?" Fay says to Kitty. She can't help wanting to provoke her sister, who will not let Fay's illness be caused by abandonment. Kitty wants it to be about men, Albert, and all men only wanting one thing. Fay just wants to keep Kitty invested in this conversation in the way sisters who get to just be sisters might talk.

Kitty doesn't turn around. She's here, but she's not

here. It's as if she's keeping vigil at the window. "You should be asking me about Dad," Kitty says.

The cardinal is nowhere in sight.

•

Her father doesn't come to see Fay in this hospital for women only, but he calls her on the telephone by her bed every evening at five. She pictures him sitting on the gold and tan checkered couch they've had since the seventies. He is watching the sun go down as it paints the lake. She pictures the glass of scotch in his hand, two fingers poured over tiny round ice cubes that his fancy new icemaker makes, him clutching the drink like a security blanket, how he is not sipping it over time as their mother did, just as he isn't eating the small bowl of peanuts on the coffee table in front of him. He will wait until the sun sinks below the horizon and the ice has melted into an inch of water floating on top of the liquor, and only then will he drink the whiskey in three long and loud swallows. After that, he will eat the peanuts. After that, Kitty will call him to the table for dinner.

•

That evening, her father tells Fay about his day at the lab. He describes the colors on the lake, gives her the weather report for tomorrow. Fay asks him if he has heard anything from Mom, just as she asked Kitty earlier—as if it's normal, her leaving, her potential return—just as she does every day.

"Not yet," he says.

•

When they hang up, Fay tries to lift herself from the chair. The room spins. Pressing her hands against the wall, she wobbles to the bed. Not calling Irene for help is breaking a rule, at least the third one today. In bed, she looks at the ceiling. She pretends to talk on the phone to her mother. She pleads with her mother to come back to them, or at least to come see her, see her like this. To explain.

If she focuses on her mother, her leaving, her silence, her responsibility to return, it keeps Fay from remembering other things that happened. Things that are coming to her gradually but feel like they are coming all of a sudden and out of the blue.

•

A couple of days later, Fay asks Joan about what Alicia meant when she said she was only eating so she could paint, understanding it has to do with earning privileges. She had read about a snowy owl haunting the marshes near Goose Rocks Beach not far from here. She's motivated to go see it. She's been sleeping well, has woken up hungry, has been regularly eating hard-boiled eggs and slices of toast with a smear of blueberry jam for first breakfast. She has gained half a pound, so Joan approves a walk to the north wing of their floor to the art room. She will go with her.

•

Joan is tall, older than the other therapists here but younger than Fay's mother. Her hair is cream colored and billowy, piled in a loose knot on top of her head. She reminds Fay of a snowy egret. She is Fay's favorite counselor. She is steady and deliberate, also like an egret. She doesn't puff up or demure like some of the others.

Fay stands next to Joan at a large window, looking in at the empty art therapy room. It is almost time for regular group, so there are no women here. The walls are white, covered with sheets of paper as tall as Fay. Joan explains that here, in this room, women are encouraged to paint big and bold, to use the full extent of their body's motions, not just their hand. It's a form of embodied therapy. There are long white tables where they can sit and play with clay or collage or draw and paint in more reasonable sizes, too.

"Once you have enough points to live in a north wing room, you'll have free access to this space anytime you want to use it."

More than Fay wants to get out to see the snowy owl, she is aching to draw. Her fingers itch for a sketchpad and the graphite pencils standing at the ready in a jar. She was sad to have left behind her scientific drawing class in school. Her teacher told the class that the best way to learn bird anatomy was to sketch, but Fay already knew that. Fay loves to draw bird bones, the vertebrae, the digits, the angles of the joints.

This room is the first thing Fay sees here that makes any sense.

•

A week later, in group, it's Fay's turn to speak. Up until now, she has passed, but Joan said that besides eating, she can earn points for taking her turn. This means she thinks Fay is ready.

They ask the women to talk about one clear memory, one event they remember around the time they began engaging in behaviors. They asked them to not get into the weeds of the story but to focus more on the emotion, the urge before the action associated with the event was

taken, how it made them feel to use eating and not eating to take control of their lives.

"Only what I remember?" Fay says. All the women ask this, but Fay wants to clarify for her own sake. Like the others, she does not remember much. She remembers raptors circling the sky, Albert's hands on her skin, the coffee, the loss of her hunger when she drank it. But she has already talked about that.

"Something you remember that you haven't been told by someone else. If you can." Joan is patient. "Take your time."

Silence fills the space between the women in their circle of chairs, but they have all become used to it. Fay is comfortable, too. The great birders, like hunters, will sometimes sit for hours in silence waiting for a rare heron to flush from the sedges or for a mama kingbird to return with food for her young. Albert taught her ways to stay still by relaxing her muscles and breathing. Fay remembers times when she had to pee and wanted to relieve herself behind a tree or felt hunger pangs and craved the peanut butter and jelly sandwich tucked inside her satchel in the canoe, how she wanted to tug on Albert's sleeve and mouth to him that she was ready to go home but did not act on her desire, not wanting to break the spell of the silence he had cast, waiting to catch sight of a bird.

She would sit crouched next to him on Little Island, listening for the steady *click clack* of an American bittern, and she would try to pace her breathing with his. She remembers it was near midnight, under a nearly full moon, when Al and she finally breathed together. She remembers the terror she felt.

"There was this time," she begins, surprising herself, "I went owling with this boy who lived near us. He loved birds like I did. Still do. He knew his stuff. He was older,

seventeen. I was in middle school. I was allowed to go out birding with him during the day, but not at night."

"'Cause nothing bad ever happens during the day," Alicia says, rolling her eyes.

The other girls click their fingers in agreement. Alicia has shifted out of camouflage, a risk behavior, breaking a rule of survival. She could lose time in the art room for saying this. By clicking their fingers, the others are pulling the attention away from her. This is a type of bird behavior.

Joan shakes her head at Alicia. Joan often uses head movement to communicate, and Fay thinks this is more effective than other therapists who scold. This is also a bird behavior.

"It's Fay's turn to talk."

Fay's heart speeds up, and it feels like the time she was startled by swallows suddenly flying out of the boathouse. She reaches for her rubber band, but she has forgotten to wear it, so she grabs hold of her thumb and twists the skin as she pulls.

"I remember squeezing out of this tiny window in my room and climbing down the trellis. I didn't want to crush my mother's clematis. Hummingbirds love clematis. They feed on the nectar. They nest in the thicker wraps of vine. They line their nests with lichen like it's lace. It's the sweetest thing you ever saw."

Fay closes her eyes, conjures up an image of the hummingbirds zipping away, leaving her completely alone on the still lake.

"I almost climbed back up," she says. "But I'd never seen an owl up close in the wild. I ran down to the dock. I could only see shadows, so I listened for the sound of Al's paddles."

That night, she heard the *toot-toot-toot* call of a saw

whet, then realized it was Al, their secret call. He sounded just like the real thing.

"So, you went owling with this boy," Joan says. "What else do you remember? Tell us everything you're thinking if you can."

"Everything felt different that night. Albert looked bigger in the moonlight. Too big. As if he had grown bigger since the morning. I was wearing these stupid flannel pajamas with Christmas trees on them. I knew it would be chilly. He laughed at me. And when I stepped in the boat, he rocked it, and then he laughed again as I tried to stay upright. He sort of shook his head in disgust the way older kids do to bully younger kids. I would see that happen to other people years afterward and feel so much shame."

"That's good," Joan says.

Joan is pleased when they identify their feelings. She has complimented Fay in the past that it is her strong suit.

"Very good. And what else?"

"As we were moving away from shore, I thought I saw a light on in Kitty's room, and I was afraid she saw me leave and would tell Dad. But I must have convinced myself she was asleep and forgot to turn off her light. Anyway, I kept going."

Fay's stomach roils. She recalls how jerkily Al was rowing that night, as if trying to beat a storm, but the lake that night was like black glass. He seemed angry.

"I thought I had done something to make Al mad. He was digging the oars into the lake, splashing me, and I was soaked to the skin. It was mean. He wasn't usually mean. I was shivering." She closes her eyes and cups her hands around her jaw. "My teeth were chattering. They hurt, my teeth, and I remember that the next day, my jaw was one of the parts of me that still hurt."

Fay pauses and looks around the room. Some girls are nodding. Some are clicking their fingers. One girl cups her jaw too, an echo of Fay's gesture, and when Fay realizes she's still holding on, she lets go, and so does the girl. It's like the mirror game they sometimes play to build trust.

"How about we take a break?" Joan says, then waits.

This is code, or ritual. When it starts to get tough, Joan offers a patient the chance to stop, but it's up to the patient to call it.

Fay yawns. Others yawn. One of the patients looks over at the snack table. They're the only person in the room who actually wants the required glass of milk and three cookies at breaktime.

"Give me a sec," Fay says. She closes her eyes. She sees Al pulling the boat to shore and grabbing Fay's arm roughly, yanking her out of the boat.

When she had asked him what was wrong, he drew her close from behind, wrapped an arm around her chest, and clamped her mouth shut. He hissed against her neck to stop making so much noise, but until then, she hadn't said a thing. He said they didn't have much time. He loosened his grasp on her mouth but left his hand there. He smelled like coffee. His nearness warmed her. She stopped shivering.

"So, we were on the island, and he covered my mouth to make me stop talking. You know, because of the owls. Then, he sort of pushed me along the trail to the tree where the owls were nesting. I thought of how it was like a scene from a Nancy Drew book, only Albert wasn't a bad guy. He was just Albert. He wanted to call in those owls as much as I did. Have you ever gone owling?"

She looks at the others and at Joan, but Joan holds her gaze, no confirmation or denial. Asking a question in group when it's your turn to talk is a way to deviate, to

feel the relief of distraction. Fay knows the rules.

She takes a deep breath. She crosses her legs, then uncrosses them, knowing her body language is being studied by one of the assistant counselors, a new person whose name Fay has forgotten. She slouches. The chairs are cushioned but grow more uncomfortable with the telling of her story, and she is beginning to feel the ache she felt in her bones of that time. She wants to stand and stretch and circle and sit back down like a dog on a rug. And she can. She can walk around the circle while she talks if she wants, but it's weird when the other women do it. It's unnatural to draw this much attention to yourself. It makes her uncomfortable. She tries to concentrate on her story.

"Somehow, Al tugged me along up the hill to the tree, but he didn't let go. He told me he forgot the pack in the boat. He said he'd get it and asked me if I wanted to stay or go with him. I wanted to go with him. I was wet. I was freezing. I was afraid if he left me, I'd die of exposure. Then he said my name, and he started kissing me on the mouth. He used to touch me in ways I knew were messed up, but it was the first time he kissed me."

Fay puts her hands over her face. She doesn't feel sad, but she starts to cry. She wonders if she's crying because after his roughness toward her, the kiss was tender. It wasn't jokey like some of the other stuff or mean like earlier that night. It felt a little like love, but now, she only feels shame.

Joan kneels on the floor in front of her. She is there to be quietly present. Though Fay would like to feel Joan's hands on her knees or hear Joan speak, she understands the way this works. A girl coughs. Another girl shushes her. Fay drops her hands to her thighs and runs them back and forth.

She throws back her head and laughs, and some of the other girls laugh with her. She feels like throwing up, but there is so little inside her to purge. She has the urge to gag, but if she does, then they will all start gagging and the session will end, and Fay wants more than anything to finish, to earn points, to get to that art room and draw. She covers her mouth. Joan has told her in private session that speaking her truth is a form of purging, a healthy version, but that it can be harder than purging food. They have been encouraged to name the difficulty.

"Oh, God. This is so hard."

Joan nods. "You're right. This is hard."

The others snap their fingers. Fay relaxes.

Joan returns to her seat. This signals a show of support, that she believes Fay is ready to continue, that Fay is strong enough to continue, that Fay is stronger than she thinks.

"He raped me."

Fay has never used these words, not out loud or in her head. The women in her group have used these words, but she has never thought of what happened between Al and her that night as rape, and she is not sure she does now, even as she claims it to be. But she wants to try the words on, so she says it again

And she doesn't feel low. She doesn't feel anxious. She feels flat, blank, spaced out. The women are looking at her, watching, waiting.

"He kissed me on the mouth, and I liked it. I kissed back. I could feel his boner on my thigh." She laughs. "Okay, well, no, not funny. That part was scary, and then we were on the ground."

Joan looks grave. She keeps her eyes on Fay. "I'm listening."

"I knew what might be happening. I just didn't know

what would happen next. He had touched me before."

She feels hot and takes off her sweatshirt, knowing some girls will be triggered by the sudden appearance of the outline of her bones beneath her t-shirt, but she wants them to see how birdlike she is. She is proud of these bones. It's one of the things Joan said they needed to explore. In time, Joan always says. For now, Fay seeks comfort in exposing the shape of her body, and she finds it.

"Fay, we can stop here and finish up just the two of us. Maybe that's best."

But Fay feels numb to it all. She brightens. "Look, most of us have been there, if not all of us, in some weird way, in this fucked-up world we live in."

The other counselor stands and walks over to the circle and hovers behind Joan's chair. Has Joan signaled to her? Are they all trained to know when shit's about to hit the fan?

Fay speaks quickly. "He hurt me, and I cried, and then he cried. He kept saying he was sorry. There was jizz on my leg and snot all over our faces. Somehow, we got ourselves picked up and stumbled back down to the boat."

Fay stops speaking. She stands up.

"Jesus Christ," she says. She looks at the doorway, and she sees Kitty standing there, looking in. "My sister." She points, and they all look toward the door. "I forgot this part." She feels dizzy, but she doesn't want to sit. She enjoys the feel of the room spinning, but she can't think straight. She shakes her hands. "I fucking forgot about my sister. Until now." She looks again at the doorway. Kitty is not there. She never was. Visitors aren't allowed anywhere near the group meeting lounge.

"Fay, sit down, please. Girls, it's breaktime. Get your plates. The sun has come back, so we're having snack on the patio today. Fay, you stay here."

Fay is panting, the first sign of her flavor of panic attack. Joan guides her to her seat and pulls up a chair beside her. The support person brings her a frozen orange, which Fay clutches. The three of them sit there together and breathe.

A yellowjacket flies in through an open door. Fay watches as the wasp hovers over the one plate of cookies left, her cookies. She watches it dip inside her glass of milk. She's so thirsty. And hungry. She is starved. She has not felt this ravenous, ever, and now all she can think about is those cookies dipped in that milk.

"What's next, Fay?" Joan says after she checks Fay's pulse and finds it steady.

"I can't remember. I just know Kitty was there that night on the island."

"I meant what's next for you here and now. If you want to talk more, we can go to my office."

"I'm hungry."

Joan tries to keep her poker face, but her eyes reveal a question—or shock.

"All right, let's grab you a snack," Joan says, pretending she hasn't missed a beat.

•

Fay asks Joan to tell Kitty not to come in that day, or the next day, or the next. Joan assures her Kitty understands they are working on a breakthrough, but all Fay is really doing is trying to eat a little more every day so she can earn points to make stuff in the art room. She meets up with the woman, Alicia, who has latticework scars up and down the tops of her arms and doesn't seem to care who sees them.

Fay imagines this is the same as how she likes people

to see her collar bones, her shoulder bones, her ropey arms, and her jutting elbows that bend in a jointed *M* like an osprey when she bird dances, acting out various birds in front of the window in her room that she would never do in this community art space. Here, sitting near Alicia, she is teaching herself scientific drawing, learning how to sketch the feather of the eagle.

Alicia likes to paint. She paints wide, sweeping colors on large pieces of paper taped to the wall. She told Fay she has earned the privilege to use the tools for making marks in the paint. Sometimes, Fay steals a glance and sees Alicia running the dull edge of a clay scoring tool over the tops of her hand. Is Alicia flirting a little with her dear old habit? Makes sense. Sometimes, Fay misses the aftertaste of vomit, the acidic scratch that puking leaves in her throat. Sometimes she misses sore ribs. She snaps the elastic on her wrist. She knows it's all about wanting to feel.

She and Alicia don't talk when they are together in the art room, and Fay doesn't want to, not even to Joan and especially not to Kitty. She can't remember anything else from that night, but once, years after, Kitty told Fay that she knew what happened to her, that she was there at the island with their father in his boat, that their father didn't know everything about what happened but that she walked up the trail at the very end of it, too late to stop it. Fay screamed at Kitty when Kitty said this. She ran off and didn't come back until morning, as she was prone to do, and Kitty never said anything about it again.

Now, she understands that Kitty was probably as confused and frightened as Fay.

She doesn't have to blame her sister, but she definitely blames her father, and it would break Kitty's heart that

she doesn't solely blame Al, so she is not ready to see her. So she will finish the drawing and watch Alicia paint.

She will decide what comes next. And she will eat.

•

Each night, Fay is stronger, less wobbly. When the others are asleep and the quiet is palpable, Fay does her bird dancing. One night, it's an egret slow dancing in the sedges. Another night, it's an osprey gliding, then all of a sudden diving in a rush and a splash. Still another, it's an owl, and she stands there in absolutely stillness, and the dance is only the blinking of her eyes.

Irene talks more about Reds, the cardinal, and her dead father than about what is or isn't left on Fay's tray. Fay checks off the box for baked chicken, baked potatoes, green beans, a roll with butter, a fruit cup, and ice cream, and she eats exactly half of all of it. She gains enough weight to move to a room in the north wing with a regular bed and eat in the cafeteria. Her heart rate and blood pressure are strong. She's earned the right to go to the art room whenever she wants and to take walks out of doors unsupervised.

In a private session, Fay admits to Joan how after that night on the island, she began substituting food for coffee and Cokes and chocolate bars during the day—every day—but ate normally at the dinner table in front of her family. After, she would purge if she could. No one seemed to notice how thin she was getting.

They told her Al had decided to get his GED and enlist rather than finish and graduate at the high school. She tells Joan she heard he never did go on to college to become an ornithologist but had come back after serving his time to live in Maine. He worked as a handyman.

She only saw him once, years later, at a neighbor's Fourth of July party at the lake, but he didn't seem to see her, or if he did, he didn't speak. He seemed so much older. Had to have only been in his late twenties but had graying hair. And he'd grown—not fat, not exactly—but softer in the middle.

Joan asks her if she wants to write a letter to him, to send it or write one even if she doesn't want to send it. It has helped some of the other girls to do this. Fay doesn't want to, and she's not sure why. Joan pushes back. She says it's easier to blame Fay's mother, of course, and her dad, and even Kitty for all her swimming, and she doesn't want to write letters to them either. Joan wants Fay to get clear about what happened on the island with Al and how wrong it was for her to be encouraged to spend all that time with a boy his age, sure, but also how wrong it was for the boy to take advantage of her. She calls it sexual assault. Says it was illegal and that it's not too late to confront him or to press charges.

Now that her brain is working better with food, she thinks she might have been letting Al off the hook. She considers her options as she works on her bird drawings. She tries to imagine what she would write to him. Sometimes, she liked him to touch her, and she liked when he kissed her that night, and she wanted a little of all of it, just not all of it. She didn't like when he was mean, but she understood now that he was fucked up. She isn't as angry at him as the others are. She has only ever felt left behind.

She tells this to Joan.

Joan says, focus on that, how alone she felt to suddenly have no mother, no word from her at all, and how she also didn't have Al. Joan also gives her papers to read about Stockholm Syndrome and trauma bonds, and

she reads them. She begins to understand why Kitty is so angry with Al.

•

Fay is close to wrapping up her stay at the hospital and will begin an intensive outpatient treatment. She feels strong. Kitty mailed Fay's good binoculars to her with a brief note saying she loves her and misses her, and Fay and Joan both think it's good for Kitty to feel their separation.

Fay's satchel with her books and supplies and her phone are returned, but she leaves it unopened on the dresser. She enjoys drawing birds with feathers, nesting or in flight, copying from book pages in the art room and memory, but her interest in bird bones is fading. She'd rather take long walks on the grounds.

A bluebird family is nesting in a box in the field connected to the hospital. She stands on a road separating the green from the adjacent property and tracks the parents flying in and out of the woods with bugs stuffed in their bills. The road is a back entrance only used by employees, and no one bothers her here.

•

The day before her discharge date, she is watching the bluebirds when she sees Alicia coming her way. Fay asked Joan if Alicia could join her on a walk, and it appears Joan has finally allowed it.

"Hey," Alicia says. She is wearing a sky-blue puffer vest. It brings out the blue in her eyes, which look less sad out of doors. She has fixed her hair into a neat bun. She is wearing dangling earrings and shiny lip gloss. She reminds Fay of Kitty.

"Want to take a look?" She offers the binoculars to Alicia.

Alicia focuses in on the birds. "So cute," Alicia says softly.

"You don't have to whisper. They couldn't care less."

They walk the length of the lane to the road and stand looking both ways as if they're children about to cross, but the hospital is surrounded by fields that have been sold off to a housing developer. The construction workers have left for the day. There is nothing to entertain them.

"We could take a right and go into town. Just keep walking," Fay says. She is teasing, but Alicia looks alarmed.

"I'm good," Alicia says.

As they walk back, Alicia keeps her hands in her pockets, but Fay can see that they are in the shape of tight fists. She feels bad she joked about escaping.

"How much longer do you need to stay?" Fay says.

"They're not sure."

"Who's *they*?"

"My parents."

"They're still together?"

"Yeah, but they shouldn't be." Alicia laughs.

"Do they come here?"

"They came once."

"And what about you?"

"I get to paint."

Alicia turns and starts to walk backwards, a little ahead of Fay. She is counting her steps under her breath. When she gets to twenty-five, she turns and walks straight again. She doesn't offer any more information about a departure, and she doesn't ask Fay any questions about hers. She talks about the clouds, how cold it's getting, and how she needs to pee. They walk quickly.

At the entrance, Alicia stops. "We're not supposed

to talk about group stuff outside of group, but I've been wanting to tell you something. My story is like yours. But also different. The boy was my age, and it was during the day, and I was a colossal flirt, not that he shouldn't have stopped when I wanted him to. I didn't want to have sex with him. I wasn't ready. Anyone could have seen us behind the boathouse at camp, and there was one girl who I think might have seen us and got scared. I don't know, but I blame her sometimes. When my father blames me, in my head, I blame her. I don't think I would have left a friend alone in that situation. The guy was an idiot, but a little terrifying, too. And yet, she couldn't have known what was going on, could she? I have tortured myself with a hundred unanswered *what-if* questions, as if answers would change a damn thing. Now, I just want to change me. And help others. And make it all stop."

Fay has never heard Alicia say this much in one afternoon, let alone in one breath, and Fay has never talked to anyone except Joan the way Alicia is talking to her now. She realizes that Alicia might be older than she is, more like Kitty's age. She seems more grown-up outside than when she's inside with her untidy hair, wearing her art smock and painting with her fingers like a kindergartener.

"My mother wants the boy's head on a platter, of course. But it was years ago. He lives on the West Coast. I just think it's interesting, the way we want to find a place to lay blame, like, on one person, or something. It seems to me that women are victims of something greater than one stupid guy, the perpetrator, or the people who were supposed to be looking out for us. This is an issue of hurt people gutted by their hurt and needing something to distract them or relieve them, bullied people wanting to bully, lonely people wanting to feel less alone."

Fay knows that Joan would be pushing back on Alicia's thinking, letting the boy who assaulted Alicia off the hook. She also knows there's some truth to what Alicia is saying. That hurt runs deep. That hurt settles in and feeds on the marrow of bones. She might never understand why her mother left them, but maybe her mother was hurt and hungering, and maybe it had something to do with her father. Maybe her father knew all along he was at fault for her leaving and was so riddled with guilt he couldn't get out of his own way to be a show-up dad.

And poor Kitty. Kitty was only a kid. It couldn't have been fair to her to have to raise a kid sister, and eventually a teenager, when she was barely a teenager herself.

As for Al, he was an oddball, a loner with his birds, the brunt of jokes at school, and then, all of a sudden, there was wrestling and muscles and Fay. And yet he was older. He was bigger and stronger, and he had forced her, assaulted her. That part of her story will never change. These are just some of her musings, questions about human behavior that she wants to speak about, but it's Alicia's turn to talk. And she'd feel more comfortable discussing this with Joan in outpatient treatment.

"I'm just saying that, for me, it's been important to focus more on my shame, the purging of that, and less on the distraction of blame." Alicia lets out a loud breath. "I don't know if that helps you, but I had this weird desire to tell you. Joan said it was a good instinct. You know, to tell you to not look away."

"Yeah, I see what you mean. Thanks." Fay's thinking about the time she missed a heron consume an entire black snake because a kingfisher was acting up in the top of a pine, and he was louder, so she had set her binoculars on him.

"Well, food for thought." Alicia says. "It's cold. I'm going in."

She gives Fay a quick hug, hands on shoulders, bodies not touching.

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Fay sits down on the bench in front of the front doors, the place where people who work here and are allowed to leave here wait for the bus. Kitty and her father will be picking her up in the morning. She is ready to go.

She never stays outside quite this long, and she's sure Joan will make an appearance any minute, but she wants to think about everything Alicia just said. It's a conversation she wants to continue with herself out of doors. She closes her eyes and tips her chin back. She allows what's left of the sun to lay a veil of warmth over her face until she senses movement and opens her eyes. A large bird is flying overhead. It has to be an eagle or an osprey, but when she puts her binoculars on the bird, she can see the telltale V-form of a turkey vulture.

•

Years before Albert taught her the names and habits of the birds, her father taught Kitty and Fay the difference between an eagle, *long dash;* an osprey, *M;* and the *V* of the vulture, all large birds of a similar size. He acted them out in the yard and got Kitty and Fay to act them out, too. After he left them for the glass of scotch in his study, Kitty got bored and went back down to the lake to play in the water until their mother came home from work or a friend's house or the store. Fay stayed out on the lawn. No matter what was happening around her, it always felt

good to do bird dances. She liked having the time and space to herself, to feel her wings stretch open, to run as fast as she could, willing her feet to lift off the ground. Again and again, she would practice being those birds. It was what she spent much of her spare time doing when her mother first left. Bird dancing in the yard is one of the last memories Fay has of a time when her body belonged to herself.

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Another vulture flies in to join the first. Then another. The three of them shift and glide from the hospital green into the neighboring field, where their circle becomes tighter. They fly lower and lower, dipping, lifting, circling, dipping again. This can only mean that something has recently died.

Fay watches their dance as the sun drops behind the trees and the air becomes chilly and the bell rings for dinner. She's looking forward to the evening meal, her last one here, but now there are five vultures, then six. They swoop and rise, confident in their movements. She wants to move from the bench, strike out to the field. Does she dare?

She stands. She tentatively lifts and lowers her arms the way she did the very first time in the yard, in front of the mirror in her dorm room, and here, upstairs, in the night. She lifts and lowers her arms again and again, moving out into the green, beating her wings faster and faster.

She looks up at the building, at the flat windows of the south wing. They should all be heading to the dining room now, except for the ones who just got here, the ones who will eat in their rooms. Maybe one of them is sitting

in her chair, avoiding the food on her plate, looking out the window at Fay.

"Aeneas and the Nautilus Shell" by Gwen Chan

DOLL PARTS

Mila Ishikawa-Gonzales

I've known Kennedy's boyfriend would taste like dollar store vodka before kissing him even crossed my mind. When I whipped the bottle out for her 20th tonight, she gave me an earful about how I could've gotten in trouble or whatever. Didn't even thank me as per usu. But Theo just asked me how I got it. He laughed when I said I lifted it and laughed even harder when I said where from. He's older than us, a grad student at Ken's ivory tower of a school. I've got no clue what he studies. Ever since she first went all gaga about them, I've been tuning out whenever Kennedy starts up with the boy talk. I'm not even sure exactly how old he is, just that he gets this dumbass look in his eye when I speak like he knows something I don't, but he humors me anyway whenever Ken leaves us alone and tells me to behave like I'm some mangy dog that's gonna hump his leg. She's been saying that about all her boyfriends since I dropped out junior year. Like sandbox love doesn't mean jack.

Maybe it doesn't, if the fact that my tongue's on the

offensive in her boyfriend's mouth is anything to go by. But who's she to get all high and mighty about loyalty when she hasn't even noticed I'm not in the back of the car petting her stupid shiny hair like she's the puppy my mom never cared to get me? Maybe it's karma or some shit to make out with Theo. Whatever it is, it's been a long time coming.

It's the kind of kiss that makes your mouth ache, but I don't relent, even as I let him push me down onto the mattress that cost more than the rent at the shoebox apartments of my childhood. It's soft and welcoming and warm and I hate it like I hate everything that's Kennedy's and not mine. Everything that's got Ken when I don't. Furiously, I wonder if she's ever told him anything—how we met in soccer as two dirty girls, one and the same, or how the only dolls I ever had to play with were hers. Am I anything more than a second thought to her, the scar she swears up and down isn't hers?

The bedding smells of the same heady cologne that's all over me as he follows me down, too warm and too hard even as he tries to keep his junk suspended over mine. I bite my nails into his hips and pull on them until it's cradled between my thighs.

I'll stink of him for days. No way Ken misses it. She might kill me.

I moan nice and loud against him, grinding myself against him.

You're so sexy, he pants into my ear. I feel his breath as much as I hear it, half-drunk and horny. It doesn't matter what line he feeds me. It never does. I've never needed to hear that I'm hot shit from some dumb guy too busy thinking with his dick to get that it's not about him.

Too much talking, I say.

Roger Roger, Liv, he says. He's laughing like it's

some inside joke we have. The jackass. We don't have shit, and I'm gearing up to tell him that, leave him high and dry just like Ken but—

But it must happen all at once. One second, I'm pushing the heel of my palm up into his ribs 'cause I've never liked rolling over for anybody. The next, I hear the unbuckling of his jeans and any resistance I've got in me up and dies. I don't go limp as he lines his dick up with my cunt, but the only thing anchoring me to my body are the points of contact: him splitting me open, his hips pressing against my thighs, his hands pinning my hips, his mouth a fever at my throat.

Only one of us is in my body. I thought ruining him for her would be better than watching Ken let him paw at her tits or having her blow me off to screw him or finding his jacket next to mine in her room or seeing that holier-than-thou look she gets whenever she remembers I'm always gonna be the scum on her red-bottoms, always pretending she never liked siccing me on people as if it kept her hands spick-and-span. It's not better. Or if it is, the good part's not here yet. Not 'til Ken leaves his sorry ass.

In/out/in/out/in/out/in/out like a rusty knife reopening a wound I've never wanted to look at.

I wanna look at a mirror instead, see how I look playing with another one of Ken's dolls, mine to ruin and hers to toss. Another mess she'll try to clean me up from.

There's only the ceiling above me now.

You feel so good. He's crashing back into me just like I wanted when I kissed him.

Just like that. Just like always. I make myself moan for him. If he's gonna tell Ken—and he is, and I'm gonna grin and tell her what's hers is mine, and she's finally gonna get down in the filth with me again long enough to hit me—I wanna make it dirty. Give him something to

really write home about with buyer's remorse.

I don't know how long we're there, with me giving everything to get MVP trophy that Ken was always offering to share when we were girls. But I know I've finally won it before he groans and unloads.

I wish she could see me right now.

He rolls off of me once he's had his fill, and he smiles, all peaceful and happy like something I've seen in other people's windows my whole life.

I show him my teeth and say, just to rub it in now it's over, Tell me I was better than Kennedy.

PATROL

Dan McGurkin

The pack's straps pulled down on his body. The patrol had gone on long enough now. Long enough that he didn't even care to look at his watch and know how long. Long enough to arrive at the moment where no amount of preparation could have helped alleviate the pain of the pack's straps pulling down. Nothing could have prepared the body to carry the unnatural weight on that unnatural place between shoulders and neck. And there, just now, he felt the pack and straps join forces with the body armor in a tug of war against his own mind, with his focus and attention as the prize. And the pack and the straps and the armor and the pain were winning.

He had read that shoulder shrugs could help prepare his traps for this work, but that the best preparation would be to wear his equipment as much as possible. To deaden the nerves and inoculate the necessary parts of his body to the necessary and inevitable reality of wearing and walking, hours on end. And so he had worn the equipment as much as possible, even at home. And Carrie had made

fun of him for wearing his gear around the house on Saturdays as he woke early and made her breakfast and coffee and brought it to her in bed. "You look like an over-prepared butler." She laughed at him between sips of orange juice, and the tray sat between them on the bed.

He looked around at the village where the patrol had halted, just after the moment when he had begun to lose the tug of war. Fifteen, maybe twenty mud brick buildings stamped astride the gravel road. Breakfast in bed was his way of thanking Carrie. She was so supportive each weekday when he had been in training, woke up at 4 a.m. to make him a real breakfast and help him gather his bags—there were always so many bags—and take them to the truck to head in for training. He had been a new husband and a new soldier and learning to do both, feeling already the difficulty of doing both well. Weekday hours he'd dedicated to the former, plus any nights he hadn't spent drilling in the field. Weekends he'd dedicated to the latter, thus the breakfasts in bed. And Carrie would look at him as they walked the dog and unfailingly find camouflage paint he'd missed in the shower. Usually behind his ear. Closest to his brain.

The people in the village had started to realize he and the other soldiers were stopping for more than a moment. Most had passed the phase of stopping, staring, and sharing some whispered words. A few had begun to set aside their things and tasks and approach soldiers on the patrol. He thought of Carrie, and how she would set aside her schoolwork and go to the door to greet the mailman. She'd known the mailman in their hometown, so why not this new one as well? He'd tried to explain things might be different than they were in western Montana. And the mailman had proven nice but not as interested in talking or stopping as the one back home. Except for

when it was more humid than normal, and then he'd stop and let Carrie chat with him while he took refuge in the shade of the apartment. The apartment, too. So different but so the same as these mud brick buildings. The one that they'd begun to babyproof so many months early. They'd reasoned that they ought to start early because he wouldn't be there at the apartment when the baby finally came. He'd be over here, in the village. But they both knew the real reason was that Carrie was so happy and excited she just couldn't wait and had to take breaks from her schoolwork to focus on the baby.

The memory unsettled him and he tried to shift the weight of the pack straps and armor and grunted. It'd only been last night when he had seen the email from Carrie. He hadn't known how to respond to something he had never expected. Carrie wrote that she felt ashamed and embarrassed. Part of him knew they should have waited until she was further into her pregnancy to share the news, but they'd been so excited. He remembered the words from her email, the ones her mother had said, that "it happens more often than you know and more than people share." He'd written a quick response to Carrie and logged out, promising to write more after the patrol.

He looked out at the village and people and felt vulnerable and un-bulletproof. And un-babyproof. You cannot babyproof your heart, he decided. Maybe that wasn't his idea, something his dad had said to him once. No, can't babyproof it any more than you can prepare the space between your shoulders and neck for patrol. A child steals your heart. Pregnancy unlocks the door, he thought. And birth throws it open, and the child rushes over the threshold and grabs your heart and stays. Or so he imagined.

A child ran out from one of the mudbrick buildings,

pouring out words they don't speak in western Montana but universally understandable as a request for candy or trinkets. He put on a smile and knelt, and the kneeling forced his body forward and the weight of the armor lifted as it rested on his upper thigh. He removed his pack and felt the relief of blood rushing through the area between his shoulders and neck. He unzipped the top pouch, took out a bag of toffee, and watched as the child ran away with the candy. He watched until the child reached its mother in the doorway. Then he shouldered the pack and continued down the gravel road.

FRESNO: EROS

Gavin Garza

They rent out the *panadería's* backhouse for $950 a month—high school sweethearts, newly engaged, and recently graduated. Every morning they wake up to the *panadero* loading his van with *conchas, polvorónes,* and *marranitos*. The racks smell of Crisco and burnt bottoms. His wife runs the shop when he's away, hangs a portrait of Zapata where she frosts. She checks on her tenants before they leave for work, gives each a day-old *niño envuelto* for the road. Johnny works packinghouse on weekdays, minor league wrestles on Sundays. Xochitl's in community college to save money and takes the rural transit bus. The two say they believe he's the next Eddie Guerrero.

He was bullied until senior year, and flunked every class except track and theater. Two Bulldogs younger yet taller than him used to kick his teeth in by the benches in the schoolyard. It was maybe the dozenth time being the circle's center when Johnny realized he didn't hate people's reactions to seeing his blood.

So, he figured, if one can't be loved, then why not be the topic of conversation?

Johnny wrestles at the Rainbow Ballroom, self-taught, shirtless in patched jeans and a flannel tied around his waist. Sometimes, when someone hasn't thrown a chair into the ring, he gets put through tables. The crowd loves how he sells pain. The locker room loves that he's safe to work with. His gimmick alters every month or so. He's only eighteen but thinks he's grunge right now; his walk-on song is "Loser" by Beck.

Xochitl hasn't gone to see a match since Johnny brought out thumbtacks, blaming her absence on evening mass. She prays the rosary on the bus for a comfortable wage and her future family. It's her second semester in Pre-Allied Health. Today she meets with a counselor between Human Anatomy and lunch to discuss transfer requirements and future residencies. Xochitl knows she'll be asked to think about personal statements, so she outlines as she prays. The bus swerves and exhales smoke around glass in the road. Her parents worked raisins to put her through college—both are in remission now. She prays for a healthy family.

She thinks she can save him. He likes that she's religious. Both cry after sex. On Mondays, they watch *Raw* with chicken-flavored ramen and red *chicharrones*. On Fridays, their neighbors hand them plates of mashed potatoes and T-bone over the fence just before *SmackDown*. They watch what she watches every other night. Lately, she's been into *New Girl* and *Vecinos*. Catholic Jesus hangs by his hands over the television. He rubs the knots from her shoulders with his good thumb as she sleeps. She's scared to dream of the pinholes in his back.

SWIMMING

Charles Hawes

In the mirror she inspects her teeth. If she is searching for a flaw, she will not find it there. Neat capsules of pearl are all in a row, a lapidary look; when she lifts her upper lip the image is delightfully doubled. She sticks out her tongue for good measure: pink and bumpless. The sweet, stainless joy of white wine.

In the mirror she watches as a mother drags her daughter across the showers, making sure that each small limb has been thoroughly rinsed. The girl is screaming, and through the mirror she makes eye contact with the child's wide eyes. She averts her gaze, fearful of what a staring contest might bring. Conversation, commiseration maybe. She is grateful to only be in charge of herself. Like her own messy hair. A bundle of flaxen thread that flops over her face like a lab's tail.

She sends him the text, stuffs the phone in her shoe, along with her house key and credit card, then walks through the showers, holding out her towel and a novel she has no intention of reading. There are no phones

allowed in the pool area.

When she exits the locker room, the water gleams before her. Everywhere in the wide pool, brightness writhes and wiggles, as if the light itself is squirming with pleasure. The stone walkway warms and scours her feet. In the distance, the East River surges, and the tops of skyscrapers frame the blue portal of the sky.

It is hot. The air is soaked. When she takes her first steps onto the pool deck, she is submerged in the din of the adolescent roar.

The pool is cool. The sky, veinless blue.

He once told her that the structure was built to host the Olympic diving trials. This explained the pool's great size, he said, which was greater than all the other pools in the city. It was the first time he had accompanied her on one of her pool days, and he had lugged along a copy of *The Power Broker*. She liked to joke that he was a facts-machine. Always on the lookout for more; facts that went unbothered before being extracted through the vacuum of his eyes, wasting little time in his head before they were ushered back out of his mouth and into her ears. Always beginning a sentence with, "Did you know … ?"

What she knows is that the pool lies on the north end of the park, astride the river; that the surrounding elms stand like guards at attention; that on the south side is a thirty-foot-high cement structure and three diving boards sticking out like tongues, now only good for breaking one's neck; that she loves this useless monument, and is grateful the city hasn't yet torn it down; that it follows an age-old truth that cities and governments and people are wont to ignore: all beautiful things are obsolete.

She stops counting laps and focuses on movement. Left stroke, right stroke, the floor of the pool, left side breath: lifeguards lackadaisically clutching whistles in

their teeth, old locals reposed on white lounge chairs; right side breath: children and parents, single bathers, the red skeletal caterpillar curve of the Hell Gate Bridge. When she flips, she sees the sky through the translucent film of chlorine.

She thinks about breakfast. Egg whites and toast, fresh cream on leftover strudel, Keurig coffee.

She thinks about her morning bike ride onto Roosevelt Island, an area once reserved for the mentally insane, then through the Upper East Side promenade and back across Randall's. In time she has forged this metropolis into something exotic. A riverside hamlet. A beach town. She marvels how so many can forget what the city actually is: a series of islands, a harbor of tidal straits and estuaries and rivers.

She thinks about lunch. A late lunch, on her porch, overlooking the park. Vichyssoise, a loaf of crusty bread that he brought over from a bakery in Tribeca. A half decanter of white wine. Expensive wine. From Burgundy. He only drank expensive wine. But the potatoes and leeks and cream were cheap. You can live tastefully on a budget, magnificently if a sponsor brings the wine.

Any second and he will be hurt. A year is too long to break up over text. All her friends will tell her so. And he, they will say, did not deserve it. Not after the way he treated her, bestowed opportunity and gifts upon her. As if anyone deserves being no longer wanted. As if anyone deserves anything.

She smiles. The boys, hormonally wracked, don't utter a word when she walks out of the water. Just because you can't drink here doesn't mean you can't be drunk. Her friends think they know better. When she offers her reasoning, their faces sour. She knows they will go home and tell their boyfriends, their fiancés, their husbands,

about another poor decision she is making. Another selfish life decision. As if a life decision could be anything but. And their men, their men that flirt, that cast side-eyes to every glimmer of a licentious opening, will shamelessly uphold the verdict. Shouldn't she know a good deal when given one? They will swallow what they really want to say: she is not getting any younger. And she will want to plead to her friends that life is not lived by words, but feelings. But to express these feelings she must rely on words, words that always crumble on her tongue, words that have a funny way of keeping fidelity to other words, since even language is averse to self-sabotage. This bind of reason is enough to make a fool of anybody. All one can do is smile. To live by feeling.

She lies on the lounge chair as a cool premonition of autumn bites at the back of the early evening breeze.

She has stopped worrying. Sometimes a feeling is enough.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

WRITERS

Jackie Lee Morrison is a British-HK-Chinese freelance writer and editor now based in Wellington, New Zealand, who writes stories and essays about identity and belonging, a number of which have been published in literary journals and magazines across the globe. When not writing, you'll find her petting all the animals and eating all the noods. Jackie is currently working on her debut novel and is represented by Naomi Eisenbeiss at InkWell Management, NYC.

Joshua Dean is a senior English major and self-proclaimed *Columbo* scholar at UC Berkeley. "Elliot" is one of his oldest stories.

Devin Caliboso is currently an undergraduate at UC Berkeley but will be graduating very soon. This is his first time submitting a story anywhere, and he's excited for many more opportunities like this to come!

Steadfast, zinging, and yearning, **Romie Asplund** is a Japanese and Californian writer based in Tokyo and the Bay Area. When she is not preoccupied with turning ink to make-believe for lit mags like De Anza College's *Red Wheelbarrow*, she studies English literature at UC Berkeley. As a mixed-race survivor of childhood abuse, it is important to Romie that she eternalizes the experiences

of those living in the margins—those who are neither fully here nor there–through paper and ink. She is currently working on her debut novel, an espionage thriller.

Amy Root Clements teaches writing at St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas. Her previous work has appeared in *Southern Humanities Review*, *Bryant Literary Review*, *Beloit Fiction Journal*, and other publications. She holds an MFA in creative writing from The New School.

Jodi Paloni is the author of story collection, *They Could Live with Themselves*, runner-up for the Press 53 Award for Short Fiction, a finalist for the Maine Book Award, and an Indie Publishers Award silver medalist. Her stories appear in *Carve*, *Contrary Magazine*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Whitefish Review*, *North by Northeast I and I*, *Short Story America Anthology IV*, and other places. She has an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts. She lives on the coast of Maine.

Mila Ishikawa-Gonzales (she/he) is from the California town which doubled as Sunnydale on the hit television show, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, where she won the 5th Annual ECC Poetry Slam. She has been published in *The Daily Californian's* "Weekender" and in El Camino College's *Myriad*. She can be found on Instagram @milafgonzales.

Dan McGurkin is an officer in the United States Marine Corps and currently a Leaders Fellow with Mission43, an Idaho non-profit helping veterans and military spouses succeed after the military. He has taught at the National Intelligence University, deployed to the Middle East, and served as a daily intelligence briefer to the White House. This is his first published creative work.

Gavin Garza was raised in the Institute of Basic Life Principles, a Christian cult. Today, he is a *Best of the Net*-nominated Chicano poet who stays rooted to Fresno, California. Garza's work has appeared in *One Art*, *MudRoom*, *The Acentos Review*, and several more.

Charles Hawes is a writer based in Queens, New York. He has published poetry in the *Eunoia Review*. This is his first publication of fiction. He is working on a collection of short stories.

ARTISTS

Julia Jin is a freelance artist who was previously an editor at the *Berkeley Fiction Review* during her undergrad years. She has created artwork for the *Berkeley Fiction Review* for the last few years, and primarily does book illustration and design work.

Aileen Sandoval works at Monterey Peninsula College as a human resources specialist and is involved in initiatives to hire diverse, equitable and inclusive faculty to better serve the educational experiences of underrepresented groups. Following the completion of her undergraduate studies at California State University, Monterey Bay, she has dedicated her time to refining her painting skills so that she can one day teach entry-level drawing classes at the community college level. She was born in Los Angeles and currently lives in Monterey, California with her partner.

Hailey Dorritie is an illustrator and writer who graduated from the School of Visual Arts in 2024. She's had a lifelong love of storytelling in all its forms, and jumped at the opportunity to create a piece for this grim, disturbing tale. A

recent personal piece of hers, “Pug in Pointillism,” is also set to appear in an upcoming publication of Bluffton University’s *Bridge Literary Journal*.

Carella Keil is a writer and digital artist who creates surreal, dreamy images that explore nature, fantasy realms, portraiture, melancholia, and inner dimensions. She is a Pushcart Prize-nominated writer, *Best of the Net* nominee, and the 2023 *Door Is A Jar* writing award winner in nonfiction. She is the featured artist for the Fall 2024 Issue of *Blue Earth Review*. Her photography has appeared on the covers of *Glassworks Magazine*, *Nightingale and Sparrow*, *In Parentheses*, *Blue Earth Review*, *Colors: The Magazine*, *Frost Meadow Review*, *Straylight Magazine* and *Cosmic Daffodil*.

Alejandro Gonzalez is a multimedia artist from Caracas, Venezuela. He was awarded the 2023 *Spellbinder Magazine* Art Award in 2023. In his best days, his work focuses on themes of societal and psychological unrest through expressive color choices and symbolic imagery.

Leslie Pagel is a Queer artist from Tijuana, Baja California. She’s inspired by Queer love, her cultural heritage, bright colors, and maximalist compositions. Digital and mixed media are her favorite, but she is always learning new ways to create art.

Gwen Chan is a dog-crochet cryptid who can usually be found nibbling cheese furtively swaddled by blankets. With an interest in the absurd and psychological representations in art, Gwen has published “April Flowers” and “WORLD EATER YULIAN” as free to read graphic novels on Webtoon.com. She enjoys walking her dog Tofu and competitive dragon boating in her free time.


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