



RED WEATHER

Fall 2007

lesserfectus faudam et opublici sesilis faceresulem que recup
pertes ficientia verit. Ati, num vit inturninat aci patum iam Rom
Mulabusquem horuro vivessed Cas rem obsendam concute ca
Ponertem porteret Aolilm ealoumi a! Eque cus con nerdici ent
aliae con virmihi, mo estraci fue conficiore, cae pulocat icavoc
nesto pricavo, que ipio, num de etique iaed popubit publiis. R
poposulus, us ores int. Fex serionv occhuco enemquast grata r
erfur, senus swupess frihil emt jmente epam jlon rsblici jcbliiss
ad forum nonsica verdiestri, etis; et, Cupio, o mei saterortum o
side nterdius noctumus signossena, quium huit a num intress
Catistam adductodi potam acibus; nut hus Ad con sedered ess
C. Itatili npricupictor ut dentis. As huium iam oc ina, que comm
clum, cumlatius ret ve, meipnacep, vit; nos am sis, ut vid fit am
consum patua essimor la ocrum pere vium terei tam turox nos
horte morum, quam re quam inprei facepere co nonum sti tus
nos contra rente ium consim teliis firmis. Simus cotissulocae p
rehehwstlr**Only, here and there, an old sailor,** patum obsena, m
endientror**Drunk and asleep in his boots,** ed culici tam. Gra, si
casdactuif**Catches Tigers** ducerfi ribuncl esitantin pratraes her
teres iae a**In red weather.**in sulus, ut egit, C. Os bonirmilinte is
diemerb efacerf erevide mplinte mortiss enatus, que tifere nit
iamproraris remus. Cipies? Dius isquemu luteritrae temum, pr
curs num, - **Wallce Stevens,** nocut veni confit? Nofdsogs med se
mdie jyoia**“Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock”**bes ficiem in di fur
latus consul ur labefecur. Qua di patidelin virtu se quam in nos
mus vasdum elius et; hin audes! Si preo, vius horei fatque nos
facress ederes! Edio, num poti perfinter is es, tua nonsulocut r
supi erisuli caecora vercerica ruofph pholius phanfitabem ute
oricuperbis Catius et Caturari, que cotilicien sentrur iam Palino
nonveris adhucii sulic ter quo in terum ina pro adduc terion tar
terum acibem Pala daerb estrum ari cons faciem oporum huid
Serfic teatui patum ia cast a nem acepoena, quis. Vervit. Evit,
Catu que antius consupimium ores esiconc lusserc ereviu eliss
mume consul temprarehentemus, castra, condit; novestam in
tus? Es habus iae temendam ut furbitiam ocae consuli civirm

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A Word from our Editors

As an Editor-in-Chief of *Red Weather*, I attend bimonthly meetings of the Hamilton College Media Board. During the lone open meeting the Board held to spark some discussion over a recent controversy, a student remarked on the lack of unity within the Board. I whole-heartedly agree with this; the bane of college media lies in the restriction of our time at Hamilton. Editors enroll and graduate, but the publication, and the college itself, remains. In terms of *Red Weather*, though we may be the most innocuous media outlet on campus, there was a veritable abyss where previous knowledge should have been. Myself, Katie, and the Editorial Staff put a lot of hard work and long hours into creating this semester's magazine, but, truthfully, we were winging it. This is not to excuse the magazine in any of its issues, past or current; rather, I feel our work says something about the ability of Hamilton students to rise to the occasion, when we rise at all.

That is my message to you, reading this, walking across Martin's Way or eating at the Diner or alone in your dorm room. Take risks, but support one another—so long as you do something. Hamilton is here for us, but we are also here for Hamilton. Forget about your résumé for a moment and think of the class of 2048, 2020, even 2013. Our physical time here is short, but our names and our deeds will last long into the future. We can do something, but we have to decide to do it first.

With this in mind, Katie and I chose to alter *Red Weather* in some very significant ways. Our Fiction section is expansive because we felt a need to print more substantial works of prose. We did not include art this year, focusing instead on recruiting as much literary work as possible, though we appreciated the few art submissions we received. Our choices were made democratically; while members of the Editorial Staff appear in *Red Weather*, many also do not. *Red Weather* is a student-run publication of fiction, poetry, drama, creative non-fiction, interviews, and literary criticism published twice a year. Calls for submissions are made at the beginning of each semester, and are read and selected by a board of student editors.

This semester's accepted fiction pieces range from fairytale epics to two-page parables, and we received a record number of submissions, proving

that the literary world is indeed thriving on campus. I'd like to thank everyone who submitted for restoring my personal faith in the spirit of writing at Hamilton, and I hope you enjoy *Red Weather*.

- Rachel Richardson '09

Editor-in-Chief, Fiction

You may notice that one of this semester's submissions was authored by Hymen Radcliffe, a persona oft appearing in the *Daily Bull* rather than an enrolled Hamilton student. We had our doubts about including it, and our questions about its status as art, rather than as parody. Is the piece a poem or evidence of a persona? And if it is a poem, who wrote it? Was it the person who created the persona, or the persona himself (herself? itself?) And if it was in fact the persona who wrote the poem, do we intend to accept poems from people who aren't real? We were stymied in uncertainty, and in fact continue to be, about these issues.

But we were, and are, certain that we liked and continue to like the poem, and we wanted to publish it. And then we thought to ourselves, is there any author who does not take on some sort of persona to write? Some of these personas remain close to our own personalities, some we call by our own names even when they are nothing like our own selves, but when we write, we decide on a way of telling the world by fixing ourselves in a certain state of mind. This is sometimes reflected by the character of the narrator, but it is more than this; it is the whole lens through which the work is envisioned. Though I called them by the same name, my own, a different persona wrote "Next to Mine" than wrote "Comedy of Failures."

So think about the personas our writers have taken on, think about how they have named them, think about what that persona is able to say. Think also about the personas you yourself take on - maybe one of them is a writer!

- Katie Naughton '08

Editor-in-Chief, Poetry

interfere fac or nem nius ego iniquidem
 dum, senatere, ne invocul lesserfectus fac
 et opublici sesilis faceresulem que recupp
 item pertes ficientia verit. Ati, num vit intu
 nat aci patum iam Romnos hem. Mulabus
 horuro vivessed Cas rem obsendam concu
 capervidis. Ponertea portereforial manu
 Eque cue col nerdicu entiemui slia con vir
 mo estraci fue conficiore, cae pulocat ica
 re nesto pricavo, que ipio, num de etique
 popubit publiis. Bentem poposulus, us or
 Fex seriony spochuco enomquast maspgr
 me terfecus, sen**poetry**urques imihil vehen
 condam publici publissa nonius ad forum
 sica verdiestri, etis; et, Cupio, o mei sater
 quo nonside nterdius noctumus signosser
 quium huit a num intress imilica; Catistar
 ductodi potam acibus; nem hus Ad con se
 red essatiliis, C. Itatili npricupictor ut den
 huium iam oc ina, que comno. Em, clum,
 es halatius ret ve, conscestis, vit; nos am
 at vidnut amque nes consum patua essim
 ocrum pere vium terei tam turox nos cons
 hede mlinte martice anctus, que tifer

▪ LUCY BARNARD

Banana Slug

The banana slug, with its formidable shade and dewy swelling,
 Drags itself slowly along a fallen tree
 Near a slurping, swallowing stream, or it
 Races a fern in bold green-ness.
 How alien it appears, with sticky sides
 Discharging evidence that fades,
 The glistening marking of a diligent trail.
 It always seemed so snot-like and cumbersome,
 Misplaced, a mistake, a joke in the creation of browns and dust,
 Until I slowed and stopped and looked.
 Now I seek out its blunt glow accenting rotting wood,
 And honor its unique fashion occupied,
 Eating, digesting and forging forward, like escaped intestine
 Of some solitary body in time.

Based on Eric Ormsby's "Skunk Cabbage"

▪ LUCY BARNARD

The Project

On spring Saturdays, we trespassed--
 Old farm fields,
 Backyards.
 A few times, Dad steered the car past chain link fences
 into half-constructed housing developments
 and we would climb up dirt mountains and
 poke around cement foundations.
 When we found good ones,
 we got on our knees and dug our fingers under the edges,
 wiggling them free.
 Dad scraped off the centipedes and ant eggs
 with the bottom of his shoe and left them behind.
 A few times, we stole.
 Dad would park the car on the side of the glittering road
 next to a professionally-built rock buffet
 and leave the engine running.
 I stayed buckled in the seat and listened to the radio
 and waited to feel the car rock under its newest load.
 After a day of excavating,
 when my forearms were pink and sore,
 we turned into the driveway,
 and they tuned, clicking and singing from the backseat.
 We hid them in a pile behind the garage,
 and after a storm they looked dark and clean.
 The puzzle took my dad sixty-two summer days to finish.
 That fall, I walked beside his wall
 and fingered the many rough edges, trying to remember
 where we found each piece.

▪ MARK FITZSIMMONS

A Trilogy of Economics-Related Haiku

Thirty pairs of eyes
 Gaze out at different nothings:
 Equilibrium.

My eyes cannot see;
 Exhaustion has broken me.
 Sweet, peaceful defeat.

I have stretched myself
 Beyond my attention span:
 Elasticity.

▪ LUKE FORSTER

Pretty as a pumpkin,
 Cool as a beer,
 Better than a rumpkin,
 I wish she was here.

▪ MICHAEL HARWICK

Las Vegas

I. Dusk

It rolls over the desert, or what it was.
 Now the indecent luminaria
 of strip-lit strips and the unholy
 insomniac power lines playing their
 derisive tic-tac-toe with the stars.
 The light is strong and heavy
 with inertia. The wheels alight
 and a handful of stars glisten in the
 promise of the dark.

My father and the driver:

Imagine (he says)

Back home (he says)

Tourists

I am ashamed of my rank and the eastlands,
 the wealth of an age of frozen needs
 and the gloaming of the soul for
 the prairie's evolution.

[Far and away on craggy peak land,
 a lion sits and begs
 its eyes rolling upward
 toward the firmaments
 for its curiosities and
 curtain to fall, putting
 an end to its propositions.

frightened, she nurses
 her young and beds them
 into an illuminated world.]

The taxi is a shameless thing.
 Advertisements plastered boldly with
 slapdriven intensity, the beads
 of sweat on the head of the
 Mexican woman peddling her wares,
 her whores and cornshucks with the
 insubstitutive odors of his
 idle hands.

[Somewhere else an ocean rolls
 and people laugh for reasons
 in their hearts. In Mexico
 the sun sets over a gulf
 between nations, a canyon
 of lost souls, and her
 husband weeps for life.]

We arrive and the smell of fortune
 rising, heating, incubating the
 aisles and canopies, monuments
 to the cruelties of the dying sun,
 and the quoted triumph of
 the human spirit.

[On the outside I laugh
 for glories and goldenrod.
 Inside I watch the death
 of a people.]

II. Midnight

Glitz – with the deep and dewless
 dry heat of ruined piles of
 the roses remnant left on the
 stage of the feathered women
 and the tall women with their
 fearsome hearts of tires and
 shade on the corners of the cards
 littering the ground outside the
 volcanoes lakes sighing pits of
 tar and aquariums with their
 gift shops and magnanimity
 their threats to sweep neon
 round the world forever as a
 stream of magmic liquid from
 the teller with fortunes lost and
 made of the fabric of the
 dreams pulled apart too soon
 with their pulpy erotica and
 perhaps best left unbitten – undoes
 the straps on her dress in
 the cool and unfeeling glimmer
 of the neon (girls in their undressings of the senses
 neon with some tattoo of a bird pasted to their parts
 neon of the street on which we lose our fortunes and
 neon minds from the sounds of our senses failing
 neon to win any of it booze scenting decorative a bathroom of
 vomit.
 I mean phantasmagoria.)

III. Dawn

The place survives.
 Yet from the fleetfast swipes
 at the airplane window,
 she gleams her studded gleam
 under the world.
 Were the sea to rise,
 the rumble tumble random
 and her skirt of dreaded roulettes
 her mindless paper suits –
 Gone.
 Each day I hope for her biblical demise.
 The proclamation spewed forth like coin
 with coronary glee.
 Yes, this is the passion of the age
 and the assertion of a Gloria,
 and the little girl next to me laughs.
 the spite of her, the one I still
 have the scent of in my head.
 It was easier to come the last time.
 Spirits of arrival and eyes,
 blinking born,
 drunken slurs already
 behind me –
 (Home and dead to their selves
 a world ahead and a world behind
 below them all the women screaming
 boys boys boys and they laugh their
 heads away)

and then another seven
 then gave up and left a message
 and hoped that you hadn't in fact been there
 to count how many times I tired.

Today I am feeling sunshine and rainbows.
 I'm sitting under a table listening
 to you play your favorite song on my guitar
 eating some toast you made for me.

▪ KATIE NAUGHTON

Next to Mine –

You take
 my chubby inturred knees
 and turn them into
 the glories of an afternoon unhastened

toward the eventualities
 I can never keep my thoughts
 from worrying at –
 the raveled sleeve of your insomniac mind
 the compulsive way you tell me
 in two years you will be dead
 the compulsive way I tell you
 you are wrong
 as though I could know that.

But today you have slept
 and I am willing to let slip away
 the import of knowing just how –
 look at your legs there, stretched out
 next to mine – your feet are perfect
 and if I touched them
 with mine
 I know
 that they would feel like
 warm sand – filling the break made by my arch
 between my whole foot
 and the core of the earth –
 sand just at the heat of fusion.

▪ CHRIS PARMENTER

Entrances to New York

Vesper ades, Vesper ades
 oh Hespere;
 Now hold the way, the turnpike's roar
 the rushing, rushing of the storm--
 we pass through marches, thick and thin,
 and through the marches;
 half dry, and half wet
 in the sun-set,
 New York glowing in the east
 a rising city, stony trunks;

The Meadow-lands, red light
 and towers in close sight
 post-ebb the waters still and calm
 we stand here waiting for the night.
 Our souls have crossed such empty places
 in passage further north.
 These buildings, dead, once held with care,
 now empty, rusting, march-with-death;
 our mouths snap at the empty air.

Hespere, evening star.

II

These roofs, now darkened
 by shaggy tree and purple night
 stand in the brightness of the skies
 reflective of the city's light.
 The distant high-way noise:
 Henry Hudson, north and south;
 Cross-County Parkway, west and east.
 Quiet hauntings long the streets at night.
 You waited by the window, loosened up your hair,
 waited for his image in the street,
 soon half reveiled, and would you dare?
 Quiet rumblings of the roar;
 or have we walked these streets with care
 each day of our lives?
 Have we seen the lawns and houses,
 temples, churches, ivied brick?
 Not with nothing county built.
 These quiet figures deep at night
 free from the siren's blare
 wake, awake in the purple light
 in suits and ties
 but we have waited half the night.
 No images appear.
 The early June is fading
 with sounds of the cicadas.

Vesper ades
 oh Hespere;
 Vesper ades

III

The night moves on the evening's sound
but the darkness should not fall. Not yet.

The red and orange glow
granite towers;
the thought, the city from West Egg.
Men made a place with dreams and pain,
and saw nothing of it, but for a few.
These images remain,
flickering lights the shape of arcs,
faces out of red and white.
The warm air, humid, not yet cool
blows back our hair, our faces;
he road's a passage through the stars.
And head into the city.

Still question,
passing through the borough Queens;
question passing the low rise,
fictional places, unoccurrent times
the mangled ends of dreams and lives,
the light trailed on across your face, as such,
you saw the future like it were Babylon.
No, these are not our streets,
though we've passed the red glare,
looking forward through the blare
grime and neon signs,
a people dreamed:
of wealth, of love, of light.
The dramai of the past surge by,
from which we are torn,

and so we cross the turmid river,
Vesper ades Vesper ades,
oh Hespere;
ades

IV

The bridge now crossed:
do not look away.
You dreamed of better times.
You dreamed of romance of the place
sky bleached,
with darkened streets and Bacchinalia,
the blinding lights confront thee,
come!
Chrysler Building and United Nations,
the Queensboro and Manhattan Bridges,
spot-lights trailing, glimmer hailing,
the field of stars is New York!--
The dramai of the past surge by,

Glass tower, granite tower,
rock and steel, concrete and glass
rise o'er the street,
metal and dust, paper, light:
the rising towers framed with night
I close my eyes, say close thy eyes,
and surrender if you feel:
and in the air beset with light,
in the darkness, flickering shadows,
lose now thy name

lose now thy name:
lose now thy name to purple night.

V - L'ENVOI

There is no reason,
no reason to be found
for the buildings' rise,
save that it was a dream,
 and yet for what,
for what?
This place, this image,
has stolen back our lives
 our ground;
and rise and fall
the Hudson, river, ocean, sound
I do not know where I come from;
beneath the rise, upon the streets,
with dirt, with noise, and cars:
 say again!
Thou hast no knowledge,
of where thou art from.
This is the eminent drama.
Roads and canals,
tracks and tunnels,
ivory towers, stony trunks,
with which we have outshone than the stars
with which we have outshone the night.

Oh Hespere,

 evening star;

CHORUS: Vesper ades | Vesper ades . . .

 Hespere . . .

▪ ANDREW PEART

Frank Capra and the Conman's Romance

A swirl of ideas, postures and pretenses
corrupt our space for living. Gary Cooper
would keep his beard, guffaw at complexity,
and generally seize the day, were it

like the role you scripted for him to be a man
who writes himself. In city politics,
Jane Doe, you sculpt personality
and wait for a Joe to please your better sense.

Perhaps his world is shaved by a drunken barber,
his jaw a glass of many sides and shades
concealing, like a shaded window,

the multiplicity of acts that make
a man a spectacle: He plays the part
and persuades you of his gentle distance.

▪ SPENCER PETTICREW-SHAWCROSS

Mon Semblable

At an unlaid table in the bistro
the fidgeting demons at my elbow

are a glass with a glint of bourbon
at its bottom and a translation

of Les Fleurs du Mal . . . The waitress draws drapes
across the front window, past which the shapes

of the only night I know—an unlit
dithering home through rows of decrepit

brownstones and the paths of a sordid park
before the brusqueness of the double lock

at my door—begin to coagulate
in a crippling vision . . . My buzz abates

at once into an ache. For company
and counsel I raid Baudelaire's supply

of lyrical spleen diagrams
and find his miseries make a sham

of my own writhing. No, I will not
die of decadence, splayed out on a cot,

acquiver with addiction; my vice
is ennui. Still, there's comfort in his choice

of laying bare, wherever witnesses
have gathered, the obstinate sottise

from which no one, he ardently maintains
in his nervous recriminations,

is immune . . . Settled, I swagger out
to play my poses on the street,

rigid with resolve, the hypocrite lecteur
hunched in a long coat, deep in character.

▪ SPENCER PETTICREW - SHAWCROSS

Ruins

Tired, our voices slow and husky with smoke,
we wheezed out the last steps of craggy rock

that arched up high over the boulevard
and trampled on with our heads hung toward

a rotting white rotunda flecked with dung.
I looked past the swaying ferns, to a throng

of racing shells glinting on the river,
the Lego skyline, folds of yellow air . . .

I even spared a timid glance or two
for you—your half-closed eyes, electric blue,

flitted off when I tried meeting them with mine.
I meant to be languid, almost feline

in how I leaned back with a Cheshire smile,
and hissed out scraps of memories while

you laid our laps with a paupered picnic
of peanut butter and pretzel sticks.

Noshing noisily, I gestured to
a limestone colonnade green with mildew,

and grecian bronzes lined along the edge
of an empty square collecting garbage.

You gave me nervous nods, folded your hands,
murmured a complaint about the wind . . .

We parted crudely, after a heavy
half-hour of feeble speeches and ready

promises to keep in touch (we never
did). By now you've settled down forever

where I left you, in the marble distance,
flanked by columns and their stony silence.

▪ HYMEN RADCLIFFE

The Map of Memory: A Cosmic Appeal to the Little Prince

When I am lost and looking at the stars,
and dreaming, I think of you, my little one,
and all that we have been: the genius
of a gone, gone, foregone era.

Exploring the universe, you came to me
one night and soaked my map with feelings. I,
geographer of an unseen planet, lonesome, charting
the constellations of my own delusion,

Not welcoming you, my prince, or your devotion
to the finer things: like baobabs, roses, and the fox
whose soul is wisdom. Have you found the earth, my darling,

or has the greatest rose eluded you?
Will wandering spirits there displace me from your heart,
and send me adrift in galaxies of remoteness?

▪ KATE SHERIDAN

you yawn

the room yawns the door opens
and you yawn you go
nowhere near my bed the first time so it breathes
a sigh of relief
your eyes on my things your breath in my air
the only trails you leave so far

until the next time
you come in you are not yawning
you are too busy for that your body
too busy for that and my bed sheets quiver
and cower from you cower under your weight and mine
the trail we leave together
the indentations of our bodies
the blankets wrinkled and ruffled
like my hair when we emerge
what feels like days later

and all the other times since then
the door hinges are swollen from all the
coming and going you come in and the room
yawns again at the old routine the door swings shut
out of habit

we lie down
 between those sheets that now coo and fawn
 over us over this scene and the room yawns
 out of habit it yawns you yawn
 content in my bedroom
 your eyes on my things
 your breath in my air

▪ JENNIFER VANO

On Fra Angelico's The Last Judgment: The Blessed

I

I had not known that we are born
 upon affixing our calloused finger tips
 to those that whisper "you belong"

until we touched in this garden of ivory flowers,
 and we, once two, became one feeling
 These utopian breezes caress our cheeks.

We are encircled by weightless, ageless innocents
 whose skin is fresh drawn milk and whose voices
 are golden honey as they hold hands

and sing carols of the "distracted life" and
 "rapturous death". Their hymns are lush meadows
 beneath the shade of flowered canopies

where I am reminded that I am now delivered
 because my Father and I once planted reverence
 in the fertile fields of questo, il suo paradiso

II

As I, Fra, Fra, Fra, frantically debate about
 whether to add another heartbeat red stroke to
 the sleeve of the garment that melts like

wax beneath the tips of each golden hair
 on the head of this, no, my Archangel that
 I hope will hypnotize passersby by with its

reminders of the prolific life and what
 is beautiful and how to achieve it forever.
 They will fight, I know, they will want

to ignore that there is milk-white ecstasy
 painted behind the mud-covered walls of their
 “ah, this is it” lack of zeal. Their feet will stick

to the concrete ground and they will ponder
 and clasp their hands together as if around
 the candles distributed for a vigil

III

By the bedside where I once stood guard
 over grandma and her tray of
 carton of milk and apple sauce

and sifted through the pages of
 “Sister Wendy Beckett’s History of Art”
 to show her Fra Angelico and

how life in paradise would be for the blessed.
 I remember how she loved that
 everyone was young and everyone

was an angel and I remember I told her
 that I loved that the tips of their fingers
 caressing each other’s bliss kept them

grounded within themselves as they rose
 with the voices of children into the sky
 above these weathered oatmeal days.

et opublici sesillis faceresulem que recup
item pertes ficientia verit. Ati, num vit intu
nat aci patum iam Romnos hem. Mulabus
horuro vivessed Cas rem obsendam concu
capervidis. Atnertem porteret Loriam ma
ahsque cus con nerdici entiemur aliae con
virmihi, Lo estraci fue conficiore, Eak pulo
icavocre re nesto pricavo, que ipio, num d
ique iaed popubit publiis. Lentem poposu
us ores int. Ute serionvy occhuco enemqu
grata me terfecusmihil vehente londam p
publissa nonius ad forum nonsica verdies
etis; et, Asp **short stories**rortum quo nons
nterdius noctumus signossena, quium hu
num intress imilica; Catistam adductodi p
acibus; num hus Ad con sedered essatiliis
Itatili npricupictor ut dentis. As huium iam
ina, que comno. Em, clum, iyu es halatius
ve, conscestis, vit; nos am sis, ut vid fit an
nes consum patua essimor la ocrum pere
terei tam turox nos consum hode mplinte
tiss enatus, que tifere nit prortem iampro
remus. Cipies? Dius isquemu luteritrae te

■ DANIELLE ALFANO

The Cow

We started to steal. With our plaid skirts rolled high and our boxers hung low, we'd roll out of school during lunchtime. Eva wore aviators while Fitz donned the head of our mascot, Edna the Eagle. Badass, we thought. On weekends, we'd drink from our parents' liquor cabinets and somehow end up at the 24-hour diner. That was about it. We read Chuck Palahniuk and listened to Sublime with all the windows down and yelled, "Anarchy!" We didn't know what the fuck anarchy meant, but we didn't care. We were seventeen.

Eva was of part of what we referred to as the "Czech Mafia." Her extended family lived together on the same cul-de-sac in suburban New Jersey. They were crazy, not institution-worthy, but they had their moments. Eva had inherited their love for kielbasa, and their height. She was 5'10 and obtained speeding tickets on a regular basis. She often wore tie-dyed stretch pants and oversized sunglasses because she "thought it was funny." As president of our student body she usually abused the privileges, entering class late with Dunkin Donuts. "Student Council," she'd explain. The administration hated her. She was eventually impeached and the only president in the history of Immaculate Heart Academy to be denied a speech at graduation.

Fitz was different than Eva. She was stealthy, knew how to move under the radar. She sort of played lacrosse, her only high school activity. She was the oldest out of five, but her family just went through the motions: *Good morning. How are you feeling? I love you.* Her large blue eyes and German cheekbones got her modeling offers, but she turned them down. She wanted to be an actress. She wore big necklaces and baggy clothing, loved the New York Rangers, and drank white tea after her cigarettes.

Like most teenagers, we thought we were different, inseparable but separated from all the other groups of girls that called themselves best friends. The three of us went to Senior Softball games on Sundays to heckle the play-

ers and drove into New York City on Tuesdays just for the roasted nuts. At night, we'd sneak out in our parents' cars and drive from house to house. We called it Lawn Gnoming.

"Dude! What about *that* one?"

As soon as those monumental words left Fitz's mouth, we turned our heads in one of those simultaneous, slow-motion, movie scene moments. We forgot the smiling angel that held a bouquet of bells and the little ribbon-haired girl on the swing resting in our laps. In the trunk, the other assorted objects clattered together as Eva slammed on the brakes of her white Ford Explorer.

"I don't get it." I said from the passenger seat, my eyes squinting.

Eva took off the sunglasses she wore as protection from the apparently blinding light of the moon. She strained her neck towards my side of the car with both hands on the wheel. "Is that a *real* cow?"

Fitz opened her back window for a better look. "Why would you own that?"

"To pull the milk wagon, asshole!" Eva yelled back, turning to face her.

"Fuck you!" Fitz shouted, giving Eva the accompanying gesture.

"I wonder how heavy it is..." I finally questioned, ending the conversation as we all sat back in thought, plotting.

We were parked outside a white house with black shutters, electrical candles lit in every window. A small wreath hung from the red front door. We didn't usually Gnome from houses like these; we were always worried our grandmothers would call us, complaining that a friend's plastic rabbit collection had been stolen from her front yard. But this house was different. The cow stood center-stage, basking in the glory of two spotlights. Her life-size body was attached to a wooden wagon holding fake aluminum bottles of milk, her path decorated with yellow, red and burgundy mums. Behind her stood a white pole reaching twenty feet, the American flag at its peak flapping proudly in the wind.

"We *need* to get that," Eva insisted, bursting into her trademark cackle.

"I think it's attached to that cart, dude," Fitz began, "This is a different kind of gnome." She put up the hood to her navy-blue sweatshirt, her light-

brown hair falling to her chest.

“Well, we obviously can’t get it tonight,” I said, turning to face them. “We’re gonna need a plan for this one.”

For a minute or so we shifted to admire the cow’s beauty once more. Our faces were pressed up against the windows, fogging the glass.

I put my feet on the tan dash, my muddy sandals leaving tracks that Eva should but wouldn’t reprimand me for. “You know how we’re always talking about how we want to be part of a heist?”

“Yea,” Fitz recalled, taking a pack of cloves and a lighter from her worn leather bag. “Eva would be in the getaway van eating chips, you’d be the one accidentally shooting things and fucking everything up, and I’d be too high to do anything.”

“Yea.” Eva paused. “No one would ever hire us.” She opened her window, tossing her half empty blue-raspberry Slurpee into the silent street.

“Yea, we’d definitely suck,” I agreed, taking a clove from Fitz and accepting a light. “But my point is—” I paused, letting smoke escape my lips, “*This* can be our heist!”

Realizing the genius of our plan, we laughed in unison like a bunch of crappy characters in some 007 knock-off. But when the lights over the garage turned on, Eva peeled out with a screech loud enough to wake the entire block. Unnecessary, but I didn’t expect anything else from her. Her ability to maneuver a truck at high speeds was what landed her the job as our token get-a-way driver, not her judgment.

“Eva, relax!” I pleaded, as we sped past sleeping houses, windows dark, cars parked in paved driveways. I buckled my seatbelt and opened the window, letting the wind send my diminished clove tumbling to the asphalt. “Yea, dude, it’s four in the morning, cops will pull you over for anything,” Fitz chimed in, her reprimanding punch landing awkwardly on Eva’s white-sleeved shoulder.

We turned up the radio and sang along as we made our way through suburban streets, waiting at lonely stop lights, passing deserted supermarkets and gas stations. When we pulled into my long paver driveway, Eva turned off her headlights, coasting into a spot next to the basketball hoop.

“So, Fitz,” I began quietly as we grabbed our bags, leaving what lawn gnomes we had in the truck and walking towards my front door. “Just so you know, you can’t smoke the night of the heist. We’re all gonna need clear heads.”

“Dude.” Fitz stopped. I could barely see her in the darkness. “Why?”

“One night, Fitz!” Eva demanded in a high whisper. Fitz began to walk slowly past us, but we followed.

“Look,” I said, “You can have a victory smoke after.”

“Yea, we’ll take you to the diner...” Eva tempted.

“All right, guys!” Fitz gave in, sighing. She turned to face us. “Fuck, stop treating me like I’m a pothead.”

I put my hand on her shoulder. “Dude, you are a pothead.”

She shrugged. She wasn’t about to deny it.

* * *

The next day we sat around our lunch table in the corner of the cafeteria swarming with uniformed girls. Shouting was necessary in such an atmosphere, but we were silent, our attention focused on Krystyn. I had a few classes with her, and we had taken her to a movie or two. When we saw her in line with her tuna sandwich we’d decided to see if she’d join us. She was quieter than the rest of us, had a knack for poetry, and from what we heard, was a black-belt in Tae Kwan-Do. We had just proposed the heist, and she sat with her wire-framed glasses focused on her Diet Coke, thinking. She was always thinking, or at least seemed to be. She had never been Gnoming before, but had briefly heard about our escapades, typically shaking her strawberry-blonde head at the news. We knew the heist would go on with or without her— that was not a problem. Still, we wanted her there. We didn’t want to corrupt her, but the idea of her trading a book for black spandex and face paint amused us enough to try. And we figured her black belt could come in handy if anything didn’t go according to plan. Her first reaction, however, wasn’t what we wanted to hear.

“I bet it was really expensive, guys. A life-size cow?”

She clearly missed the point. Her morals got in the way of what really mattered— how funny it would be. She seemed anxious. Any attempt to

prove why stealing the cow would be a bad idea was pointless, and I'm sure she knew it. Still, she tried. We rapidly shot down any pitiful reason she could muster.

"What if we get caught?"

"We won't."

"What will we do with it?"

"That doesn't matter."

"What about the people who own it?"

"Pussy."

"You're going to make me do this, aren't you?"

"Yes."

She sighed, and looked past us into the cafeteria.

"All right, I'm in," she finally mustered. She suppressed her laughter as we began to whoop and shake her in congratulations. A number of surrounding tables turned to look, wondering what the fuck was wrong with us. We didn't care.

* * *

When I walked into my kitchen the night of the heist, my parents were disturbed. My mother stopped cutting vegetables; my father let the dish he was cleaning remain under the faucet as he gaped at me.

"So, what are *you* doing tonight," my mother asked.

Normally, I would be repelled by such an interrogation, but my outfit was a bit odd. Besides the black spandex pants and shirt, I wore a black zip-up sweatshirt reading VIETNAM in bold red letters, a black beret, and aviators. I looked good, or something.

As I opened the fridge to get a bottle of water, I hesitated. "You know... we're having dinner and...stuff..."

"You're going to dinner like *that*?" my mother asked. She rose from the oak table and stood by my father at the island, the light reflecting off the hanging copper pots and pans serving as some kind of questioning lamp. She was strangely more concerned about me embarrassing myself than the outfit which seemed to say, "Look at me, I'm going to steal shit."

"Whatever you weirdos are doing, can you try not to get so much dirt in

your car again?" My dad knew what was going on. He had seen my post-Gnoming car before, with mulch scattered across the trunk and dirt ground into the carpet.

"No problem, dad, we're not taking my car, okay, bye!"

As my mother turned to question my father I grabbed my keys and ran out the door. I had a pre-heist dinner to attend and many hours to wait until our plan would come to a head in the early morning.

* * *

It was 2:30AM when four spandex-ed girls piled into Krystyn's maroon suburban. It was the family car most suitable for accommodating us and a life-size plastic cow. Even though we'd begged her to wear her Tae Kwon-Do outfit, we never thought she'd do it. But when a glasses-wearing ninja pulled up we figured it was smooth sailing from then on. In an hour or two, the cow would be ours. Sure, she was bigger than what we had dealt with before, but we didn't doubt our abilities. Gnoming was our thing, and we had been successful on every run without the slightest hitch. Eva and I had scoped out the yard the pervious night. From what we'd seen, the only thing that stood between us and the cow was a Master lock cord. For that obstacle, we'd brought a pair of hedge clippers. Eva took the driver's seat. We were ready.

We were approximately five minutes from our destination and passing the local high school when we were detained by the New Jersey Police. Apparently one of Krystyn's headlights was out. At that moment, we all wished Eva hadn't been driving. She was horrible with cops. Although she found her creepy flirtations and inappropriate jokes quite entertaining, the cops never thought so. And how were we supposed to explain three girls wearing black spandex driving around with a ninja at three in the morning? As I took off my beret and watched the officer approach the car, I realized how lucky we were we had been pulled over pre-heist. Explaining our outfits was one thing, but I couldn't imagine what we would say about a giant plastic cow.

"Good evening, Officer!"

Eva thought she was pro. I watched from the back seat as she batted her eyelashes. He seemed more disturbed than seduced.

The cop awkwardly replied, "I'm all right ma'am. Can I see your license

and registration, please?” Eva was still seventeen. In New Jersey, seventeen-year-olds can’t drive after 11 PM and can only have one person under twenty-one in the car at a time. I was the only one who was eighteen, but I’d been too lazy to get my license renewed. Basically, none of us were allowed to be driving. Without a word he shined his flashlight into the backseat, searching for signs of other illegal activity. We all winced from the intruding light, frantically trying to explain the license situation to him—my age, my laziness. It didn’t seem to be working.

“So, do *any* of you have a license?”

His flashlight rested inches from Eva’s face.

“Well, I’m eighteen, sir,” I tried to explain. I’m nervous around cops. My voice wavered as I spoke.

“I know, I know, but not *one* of you is allowed to be driving right now? You have *nothing*?” He raised an eyebrow, his mouth open.

He was trying to work with us, but we were beyond help. Forgetting the licenses, he moved on to his next suspicion.

“All right, All right. May I ask where you’re going at this hour dressed like that?”

“The Rt.46 twenty-four hour A&P,” I frantically shouted from the back. I was typically bad at lying. I was surprised anything came to me.

“Yea,” Eva put in, “We’re *hungry*!” She once again batted her eyelashes. She went on to explain that we were coming from a costume party in a nearby town; this, however, didn’t help her at all.

“Okay...Eva, can you recite the alphabet for me, without singing?” With a flip of his flashlight he warned, “No laughing!” Krystyn and I held each other’s arms as we tried to suppress our laughter. Fitz was in the front facing the passenger-seat window, laughing to herself as Eva stumbled through her “ABCs.” Finally, he was satisfied we weren’t drunk, though it might have made more sense if we were.

“You, in the back,” he said suddenly, his flashlight illuminating my face, “what street do you live on?” This question seemed easy enough, but I could not for the life of me recall it. I began to recite the streets leading to my house instead.

“Uh...Valley...Preakness...Boonstra...Borzada...”

“No, ma’am, what street do you live on?”

“She lives on Danielle Drive, sir,” Krystyn said with confidence. She gave me a sideways glance that seemed to ask, “What is *wrong* with you?” I did, in fact, live on Danielle Drive. Sadly, I had forgotten the name of my street. And my first name.

He shook his head. “Go home, girls. And stay there.”

We all gave a sigh of relief, but Eva wasn’t ready to say goodbye.

“Fine, sir, I guess we’ll just go hungry then!” She yelled at the cop. For a fake reason. He simply walked away from the car. After verbally abusing Eva, we drove home. Sure we had encountered an unexpected snag in our plan, but we weren’t ready to give up.

* * *

It was approximately 4:00AM when we parked across the street from the cow. Our expectation was that we could be back at my house with the cow around five, giving us enough time to stash her somewhere until we could think of an appropriate use.

The Master lock was not just a rubber cord as we had assumed, but a braided metal rope, covered in rubber. We were fucked.

Crouching low, I admired the cord as Fitz and Krystyn opened their cell phones, attempting to help me see. We had forgotten flashlights. Eva eventually lost interest, instead retreating to the car. From the sudden flashes of light we assumed she was taking pictures of herself.

“Goddamnit, Eva,” I whispered to myself. “Give me the hedge clippers!” Fitz immediately placed them in my hand.

The hedge clippers were pathetic, an old, green-handled rusted pair I had found in my garage. I got through the rubber easily, but the clippers made little progress with the braided metal.

“I have an idea!” Fitz suddenly exclaimed, producing a lighter from her bag.

I stopped what I was doing, turning to see her plan. “Fitz, what are we gonna do? Melt the rope with a 99 cent lighter?” She must have been high.

“Yea, Fitz, that will never work,” Krystyn added, sitting down next to me.

The street lamp across the street created a strange backlight as Fitz's spandexed figure began to pace. "Well what are we suppose to do? Give up?"

I had never seen her so passionate about anything.

"Krystyn," Fitz began, "Can't you karate-chop the cord or something?" She sat down next to us.

Krystyn sighed. "I don't think so."

We sat there, staring into the empty street and at the silent car where Eva slept. The sky above us began to change, the blackness slowly turning to blue. We watched in silence as the shapes around us— trees, mailboxes, and shrubs became more defined. Suddenly, Krystyn stood up, brushing grass clippings and bits of mulch from her karate uniform. "Let's try the lighter."

"Really?" Fitz and I both asked in unison.

"Yea," Krystyn said, picking up the clippers I had tossed on the ground. "If one of us tries to melt the cord with the lighter, while the other works on it with the clippers, maybe we'll get somewhere."

Fitz and I looked at each other in disbelief. We tried her plan, each of us taking our turn with the clippers and the lighter. Soon a tired-eyed Eva came from the car as dawn began to break. The sky held no color, only an ever-growing light that warned us of the approaching day.

"Guys, I think I fell asleep," Eva said in a yawn as she walked over to us, face paint smeared across her cheeks.

We laughed. "Yea, way to go," I said.

She lay down in the grass next to us, next to where we had toiled for the past three hours or so. "It's six in the morning," she said turning to her side. "Why don't we have the cow yet?"

I sighed, taking a spot next to her. Fitz and Krystyn followed, cringing from the cold of the early morning dew.

"Eva, I hate you." Fitz said, ripping grass from the lawn and lazily tossing it at her.

"I'm just the get-away driver," Eva defended, tossing a handful back. "Don't judge me." She paused. "We'll just come back tomorrow or something."

We were silent for a moment.

Suddenly I sat up. "Wait," I said, turning to them, "What if we go to the Home Depot. We can get a bolt-cutter or something. Something that will break right through this cord. I'm pretty sure it's open. We can still get this today."

"But it's light out," Krystyn tried. "Wouldn't it be pretty dumb to try to take a life-size cow in broad daylight? Plus, by the time we get there and get back—"

Eva jumped to her feet. "Let's do it!"

* * *

We were early. Home Depot had yet to open their doors. The four of us stood outside in our black spandex amongst ambitious gardeners who gawked at our face paint that was smudged and running down our faces, the hair atop our heads in haphazard buns. When the store finally opened, Fitz quickly questioned the first worker in an orange vest she saw.

"Uh, excuse me sir, where can I find the bolt-cutters?" There was a moment of silence when the confused and probably frightened employee tried to take us in. All he could do was point his finger.

It was light out, too light out. We didn't care. We were past caring at that point. I assumed the family inside the white painted, black shuttered, red-doored house was about to start their day, or maybe already had. When we pulled up, it was like we had rehearsed. Silently, we got out of the truck. Eva remained, her get-away driver skills finally coming into use. I walked towards the cow, bolt-cutter in hand, looking only once for cars, bikers, or witnesses of any kind.

▪ ANNIE GILLILAND

A Ghost Story

There were vague memories of the daytime, when sunlight streamed through pine needles, falling upon waterfalls in blankets, and casting a white-hot glare onto pale moss and rubbery lichen. Somewhere farther below, aspens shook in the wind, and the sound spiraled upwards and outwards in a quiet echo. Up high, amidst the bare, alien landscape of the tundra, tiny pebbles warmed slightly under the powerful, direct heat, where there were no trees to shade them in the thin air. Later on, past twilight, the cool night carried with it a strangeness that shifted through the trees and soil, up into purple, tumultuous clouds.

It was then, while the sun slunk beneath the high peaks, that the sky turned to a bottomless indigo and stars pushed the clouds away. During this time, when the snowy summits seemed to stretch into the moon, the invisible secrets of the daytime emerged from behind the pines and under the millennia-old layered rocks.

Of course, that was in the summer. Winter brought snow higher than the tallest branches, and blizzards louder than the now-frozen waterfalls. Stillness permeated the air in a nearly tangible manner, and anything alive quickly sought warmth somewhere far below. The peaks were then left to everyone else.

Sometimes they could barely see each other, as their misty grey tones blended in almost seamlessly with the night around them. The oldest ones among them were the thinnest, nearly fading completely, spreading slowly into the light air of their surroundings. They were the quietest too, floating silently up and down mountains, easily passing for fog. The youngest roamed the peaks relentlessly. Trailing through each layer of forest, flying through plant life that grew increasingly smaller and rougher, they often settled up on the high tundra for a night, hoping to catch a glimpse of a per-

son, perhaps a lost hiker or camper. Some of the more adventurous would creep down to the bottom of their road, circling the sign that read *Old Fall River Road: Rocky Mountain National Park*. In the summer months, there were tales of real, living people venturing up the road after hours. Yes, the ghosts of the old road were desperate for a glimpse of life.

The dirty road changed too with the seasons and the light, decaying or expanding as everything moved around it. The narrow places that sloped down onto steep, rocky cliffs spent most of the year shrunken and buried under feet of powdery, blinding snow. Autumn brought blankets of colorful fallen leaves, dotting the slim road like paint in the lower regions where there were trees. In springtime, the dirt drifted slowly downwards in the warming showers. The trees that canopied the lowest regions would bend in strong summer thunderstorms. And sometimes in the warmer months, lone cars crept along as slowly as possible, hoping for the vistas at the top, yet oblivious to the other world around them. In the darkest parts of winter, the only sound for miles was the wind pushing snow through the branches of frozen underbrush.

"I did hear one last night! There was a car, I know it. Just no one would listen. I heard something, at least. Come looking with me later!" Nicholas begged again, but he was new, and no one believed him.

"Do be quiet," Celia hissed. "Your attitude is upsetting to some of the elderly." She whisked by him smartly in her translucent gown, frozen forever in the elegance of the grand ball she had attended at the hotel in town before venturing up the road for its views almost a century ago.

Elderly had come to mean those who had died here many decades ago, regardless of their age. Celia was old, but died in her beautiful youth of 23, with an automobile accident along one of the road's many treacherous, steep curves. And *young* meant those like Nicholas - anyone too naïve to truly understand death yet.

Nicholas had died only last year, not paying enough attention to important things like temperature during a camping trip, and was already starting to forget about his own life or the existence of humans. It tended to happen

with time, as the ghosts became intricately entwined with the mountains and seasons, losing sight of all else. Nicholas had to have everything explained to him about death – that he would only appear at night because in the harsh, relentless sun of the daytime he wouldn't even be able to see himself, that he died on this road so this is where he will stay, that even ghosts disappear eventually along with the changing natural world, and certainly that there were hardly any living people left in the world.

Sometimes he could make out the vague outlines in the darkness of the ancient convicts who built Fall River Road, nearly a century ago now, though he was beginning to lose track of time. The rest of the town hadn't cared back then, when they died from the brutal winters, chained together with rough metal up high where there was little oxygen, far removed from the world. And now only the dead knew they were still here, still chained by transparent, misty metal, occasionally making an appearance to bend down and try to shape the worn road, which was the only thing they remembered how to do. They were the oldest of all, and Nicholas was scared of them and the inevitabilities about eternity that they presented. He worried often when he saw their blank, pale faces, like nothing meant anything for them, and like they meant nothing to the world. He didn't mind so much the ones who had simply had car trouble and lost control in the early days. Years ago (and Nicholas could no longer tell if that meant a century or a millennia), adventurers had to drive their old Fords up the precarious hills and around the hairpin curves backwards due to some kind of old fuel system that needed gravity to run. At least, that was what some of them had told him, in fearful and regretful tones. But Nicholas knew if he was still alive, he would love the backwards climb.

There were a lot of stories about this place, too many, probably, to be fully understood. A small town that lived quietly, with little to distract everyone from the looming mountains, thrived on the unreal. There were the old tribal religions still lingering, the huge, ornate, haunted resort, and of course, the road that many were convinced was still being traveled by its own victims. There were plenty of campfire tales of brave travelers secretly

venturing up to the visitor center at the summit by way of Old Fall River Road in its off-season, which was most of the year due to snowfall, and never returning. The antique, dangerous dirt road was by far more intriguing than the newer and safer paved one. From the sign at the bottom, on the edge of town, people looked nearly straight up to watch the road stretching past each layer of trees, growing thinner and higher all the time. But no one liked to think on what might have happened there, and what still did happen there at night when they weren't looking. The town, the mountains encasing it, and its people were weary of the past. Only tourists sought the unnatural, while residents preferred to leave the ghosts to their own pursuits. Perhaps if the dead could simply blend into the scenery, to the sky and the tundra just below it, they wouldn't be there to haunt the town at all.

Of course, no one could avoid death all the time. There were always rumors or brief glimpses of shadowy grey figures, shimmering in the moonlight, appearing from around a tree or briefly in an old building. There were the whispers that didn't come from any living mouth, laced with heavy, slow intonations. No one still breathing could speak like that, like they were no longer afraid of anything. Sometimes, old, soft music drifted from the yellowed windows of the hotel up the hill, played on an empty, cold piano. It was said that the cold wind carried the music up to the top of the mountains, along the quiet, dead road, and on dark winter nights there were concerts on snow-covered peaks, that no one living could hear.

And so on bright summer days, Estes Park, Colorado looked just like any small, western town where life didn't move very fast. But when the shadows of the mountains grew longer and darker, all of its secrets emerged. Most of the town hid safely in their homes, noticing nothing, certainly not the music or the vague outlines of long-gone people. But rarely, there were those who wanted to know what death was really about, and sought out the mountain and its dangers.

The ghosts were all out tonight, under a new moon where they could see each other clearly and watch the stars, asking the usual questions about God and eternity. Music from the hotel below them was playing, and there were

the occasional dancing couples, swirling awkwardly about, trying to remember how they had done this before. There was a bit of a frantic commotion forming, as someone had spread word about a car heading up the road. Nicholas was beginning to understand that most of the ghosts were terrified of humans. He only felt a slight nervousness himself, but nothing that would deter him from his quest of seeing flesh and blood, still breathing and feeling. And certainly nothing would stop him from hoping that something was still significant. Celia had explained to him sternly after he had just died, "There aren't any of them left! To think of seeing one for oneself, well, that is the worst of all. If you see one, then they are truly alive, and they have forgotten about us completely."

Nicholas had come to understand what that really meant: to see a human was a chilling image of what the ghosts once had and could not have back, as well as a reminder of being worthless and forgotten in death.

The convicts were shaking their old chains, moving slowly up the road, fading into the air. One of them had passed word down the line in slow and low tones that a person might be coming. "Go, time to leave," Nicholas had heard whispered from one slumped figure to the next.

He looked around gradually at some of the ghosts muttering in fear. Most had long since abandoned any usual religions, holding nature as the divine, recognizing this road they died on as an afterlife of sorts. Nicholas supposed it could be true. Celia, having died in the beauty of her youth, claimed she was perfectly content to stay in such a grand landscape forever, but Nicholas saw the wistful looks she gave when she thought he had disappeared. Now, she was flitting in and out of trees, making the leaves shake, scolding anyone who claimed to have seen anything out of the ordinary. There was Robert, the old snow plow driver who had simply driven off the road when everything was a mass of white one winter about fifty years ago. Robert was crouched halfway into the ground in his formless shape, praying. He prayed every night, never to any God, just to the air that held them. Flannery, bound here due to rain washing the dirt down the road in violent torrents, said if this was limbo, she wasn't waiting for anything else, perhaps because she had forgotten how to. Flannery embodied mindlessness for Nicho-

las, and he hated the sight of her. She drifted by him now, uttering softly, "Somebody spoke of a human," in a monotone whisper indicating her lack of understanding anything anymore.

Watching the fading, tired chain gang working their way slowly upward some nights, and now trying their best to get as far away as they could and disappear even in their pitifully slow movements, he supposed it was some kind of hell for them. And catching the beauty in a hazy shape fly swiftly over glaciers and valleys, he wondered if heaven really needed any God after all.

"I heard it!" a short, eager boy said, passing quickly through trees to get to Nicholas. He was Robert's son, who had ridden in the snowplow with his father on one unfortunate day. Nicholas waited by the water for the boy to fly to him. Here in the forest of the sub-alpine regions, the ghosts could almost feel the cool mountain stream stretching endlessly in front of them.

Nicholas bristled with excitement, growing brighter in form as he dared to hope. "Where? A human? I'll find it, then!"

Robert floated swiftly towards them, grumbling and shifting tiredly in his with a ripped collared shirt and frayed hair. "Timmy, I told you, you mustn't believe such stories! There are no humans left! Come away from there, we are going back up the road where we are safe," he said, eyeing Nicholas with uncertainty and not a little annoyance.

Nicholas shimmered briefly, dissolving partially into the water of the stream. He had been alive just last year. And yet he, too, was already beginning to doubt that life was real. In the daytime, when he slept (so the ghosts called their periods of rest and hiding), he dreamed of vibrant, laughing faces, flushed with color and energy, knowing fear and joy.

He floated gracefully up to the area just beyond the treeline, just approaching the otherworldly quality of the tundra, as if waiting to touch the sky. It was here, in this strange, unsettling area, that Nicholas could look downwards at everything. This place had a German name, one of the older ghosts had taught him – *krumholz*, rummaged wood. It seemed appropriate for the gnarled branches that twisted low to the ground like snakes, bulging in unexpected places into lichen-covered knots. Here, he had spent so much

time watching elk sleep in droves in the valleys below, reminding himself that something did indeed still live. And the miniscule flowers and leaves that curled into distorted shapes under the trees glinted colorfully into the thin air.

Minutes could have passed, or mere seconds, but ghosts couldn't remember what time really was. Nothing truly changed in death. Yes, the mountains grew and shrunk with each progressive year, avalanches rocked the steep sides, fires burned the forests, the dirt road slumped in the snow, but the permanent residents were only bound tighter and tighter to their world. All Nicholas did was still his shimmering, ephemeral form completely, watching raptly for any sign of solid movement below. He wondered briefly if he was sleeping now, and if any humans that appeared would just be fantasies again.

But Nicholas was aware for certain of several things when he heard the car - it was early autumn, it was late at night and approaching dawn, and clouds were building steadily. Through the September rain and the gushing wind, somewhere down the mountains, echoing off the rock walls, came the sound of a car. It was mixed with the frenzied whisperings of ghosts carried on the wind, along with the dimly white shapes scattering themselves amongst pines and aspens. This early in the morning, the road was definitely closed. Nicholas hadn't heard such a sound in a long time, he had almost forgotten it too. He spotted a few timid ghosts gathering at the roadside, fading in and out of existence with the wind. "Something is alive here," he heard on the wind, the fearful tones gusting through him.

There were murmurs about shadows and dark shapes, and the other ghosts were beginning to climb higher to find places to disappear, passing Nicholas on their way out. They murmured about sounds that didn't belong to any of them. Children hid behind adults, old ghosts said gravely that such things weren't true, younger ones fearfully headed for the biggest trees. "A human is haunting this place," Flannery whispered to him before slowly disappearing.

In the end, they were all gone, and Nicholas was left alone to chase the sounds of a motor and wheels digging through mud. *Human-hunting*, he

thought. He vaguely remembered the idea of ghost-hunting. Whatever had driven someone to attempt Old Fall River road at this hour and in these conditions was a mystery to him. Nicholas wondered, perhaps, if somebody wanted to die. For some reason this thought scared him - he didn't want what could be potentially the last human to forget about life too. He floated after the car.

It was small, and dark green, tinted blue in the dim moonlight and rain. And it was being driven horribly. Nicholas watched the car swerve recklessly around steep curves, barraging through montane forest, sub-alpine forest, *krumholz*, up to the top of the world. Not a bad place to die at all, he thought sadly.

It was in the desolate land at the top that someone finally stepped out of the car. A young man, Nicholas could see. Beautiful, angry, *alive*, dressed smartly and cleanly even in the rain. Nicholas wished he had known him before death. For now he contented himself with watching the man's face turn slowly to sorrow. Nicholas wondered - sorrow that he hadn't died, perhaps. Maybe sorrow that the mountains wouldn't serve as God to him. Sorrow at the whole living world, most likely.

The man sat on a boulder, seemingly resigned. Nicholas floated just behind him, quiet as only a ghost could be. The few stars surviving till this hour shone dimly through the rain, revealing both blond hair and transparent hands alike. A nearly-frozen lake below them reflected the tallest peaks of all, inverting the world for a few disorienting moments. Dirt from the tundra flew everywhere in what was quickly becoming a violent storm, shaking even the tiny, sturdy plants. Nicholas wondered for a small moment if any of this was real.

The rain eventually slowed, continuing only in sporadic, fat drops, which slid gracefully off the young man's skin, tan from sunlight that Nicholas could no longer experience. The ghost remained behind the young man for a long time, hovering just over his shoulder, watching the horizon for signs of the morning and his own departure.

When the man began to shiver, Nicholas's hollow eyes widened. He didn't dare to hope. But as the youthful, round face peeked over a sturdy shoulder

at him, eyes squinting still in the darkness, he crouched down to the man's level. A few seconds passed in complete stillness and silence, as if even the weather was waiting for them.

A hand stretched out. Long, healthy fingers pushed through Nicholas's shoulder, pausing when they were met with chilling, eerie air. The scream followed.

Nicholas understood now the stories of ghosts haunting people in, just for hearing a scream so lovely as this. It reminded him what being afraid of something other than eternal meaninglessness was, and his pale mouth turned upwards in a parody of a smile as blue eyes met his bare ones for the briefest of seconds. The young man was up and running soon enough – straight through Nicholas, desperately brushing himself off as if he had passed through cobwebs. At his car, he turned once more, staring back at the ghost. In the oxygen-depleted atmosphere of the near-heavens, the young man panted hysterically for a minute, catching his breath, fingering his car door. He shook as he looked at Nicholas again, and visibly trying to calm down before jumping in his car and driving away down the mountain. Nicholas watched the car go, following it down again eventually, noting how carefully it proceeded this time.

Soon enough, he heard the whispers again. "A person is coming!" "I heard life!" "I told you, this road is haunted!"

Nicholas hovered just above the road, moving his dim feet, pretending to walk. He flew around rocks and into waterfalls in odd, joyous patterns with the music coming from below him. Celia stared wide-eyed and unmoving at his sporadic darts between trees and under rocks, her eyes asking silently if he had seen anything. Heading ever downwards, at a steady yet inhuman pace, he watched the trees grow bigger around him, overpowering his frail, transparent existence with their branches. At the bottom, he shivered and shook with the aspens themselves, disappearing for the night into their golden leaves. From high above in the tundra, day was just breaking, and ghosts everywhere were fading away, becoming mere legends once more.

▪ BRITTANY GROSS

Virginia's Grandfather

This is the house that Virginia's grandfather bought. He bought this two-story house with the light blue siding, black shutters, and red front door in 1991. In 1991, his only son announced that a baby was on the way, and Virginia's grandfather bought this house, this house that sits on a green, green lawn, this house that's surrounded by aspens and oaks. He bought this house with the three bedrooms, two and a half bathrooms, and hardwood floors so that his only son, his son's wife, and their baby would have a nice place to live. Virginia's grandfather bought this house because he wanted his son to have a better start for his family than Virginia's grandfather had had for his.

Virginia is standing in front of the house that she's lived in her entire life. She is standing and looking at the light blue house, the only home she's ever known, and wishing that she had not stepped out of the car. The crowds of strangers and distant relatives, dressed, like Virginia, all in black, did not give her the queasy feeling that this house does at this moment. For the first time ever, Virginia does not want to go home. She does not want to go into the house that her grandfather bought, but in she goes.

This is Virginia's grandfather's room, located on the second floor of the light blue house. This is the room, just across the hall from Virginia's. In 1991, after newborn baby Virginia was brought home from the hospital in a fuzzy pink blanket, Virginia's father asked Virginia's grandfather to move into the room across the hall from what was then the nursery. And Virginia's grandfather agreed and moved into the room, leaving behind the place he had lived in for more than half his life. When Virginia was born, her grandfather left the tiny apartment which he had refused to leave even after he had the money to afford someplace better, even after his wife was no longer there, even after his only son was grown and gone. He finally left it behind and moved into the room across from Virginia's because his son asked him

to and because he did not want to be left all alone.

Virginia is standing in the doorway to her grandfather's room. She is looking in, her eyes falling upon each object slowly and deliberately. She is memorizing every aspect of her grandfather's room because a vague feeling deep, deep within is telling her that soon this room will change into something unfamiliar. Her grandfather's room is going to disappear, and Virginia is getting goose-bumps at the thought. She walks in, suddenly dreading separation from this room as much as she previously dreaded entering the house.

This is the dresser that stands next to the closet and against the wall opposite the bed in Virginia's grandfather's room, the room that shelters her grandfather's furniture, clothes, books, music, and keepsakes. This cedar wood dresser was built by Virginia's grandfather the year he was married. He made it the year he married the woman whose framed-photograph sits on top of the dresser. He made it because he loved her and wanted her to have nice things even though he could not afford to give her the pretty store-bought goods he thought she deserved. He loved the woman in the photograph, the woman who died giving birth to their only son, the woman who died a year too early to see her husband earn his law degree, the woman who never got to meet her son's wife or to see the beautiful granddaughter who was named after her.

Virginia is standing next to the cedar wood dresser, wondering why she never asked for the story behind it. She knows it was made for her grandmother, but there's so, so much that's still unknown. Had it been a surprise? Virginia's fingers brush across the smooth surface of the dresser. Had Grandfather worked on the dresser a little every night while he and Grandmother talked and talked? Virginia's fingers trace the intricate leaves carved on either side of the round handles. Had they simply exchanged silent, loving smiles as he sanded, sawed, hammered, and carved? Virginia is feeling that her chest is tightening, that something is lodged in her throat. She tries to swallow the feeling.

This is the bottom drawer of the dresser that Virginia's grandfather built from cedar wood. Here in this drawer is where the neatly folded dress,

which Virginia's grandmother wore the day she married Virginia's grandfather, rests. He kept that dress, pink with little white flowers all over it, because it never lost the scent of his wife's perfume. Beneath that dress sits the album, the album of faded wedding photos, which Virginia's grandfather only ever looked at on April 16ths, because that was the day they were taken, that was the day of his wedding. And that album sits atop the record of Les Paul and Mary Ford performing "How High the Moon," which Virginia's grandmother loved so much and which Virginia's grandfather loved because she loved it so much, and which Virginia sang in a talent show because he loved it so much.

Virginia is kneeling before the dresser, pulling open the bottom drawer, and gently lifting the dress and inhaling the flowery scent of perfume. She wants to know the scent that her grandfather could have recognized anywhere and thus the woman, her grandmother, who is such a stranger. Why didn't Grandfather speak of her more? Why didn't he tell Virginia more about her? She places the dress on the floor to her right, then desperately snatches the album from the drawer. Virginia is looking at each photograph, seeing the groom, a man who looks everything and nothing like her grandfather. She'd never thought of her grandfather as an unhappy man, but never in life had she seen him smile like he did in those photographs.

This is the shoebox, sitting next to the dress, the album and the record, which contains all of Virginia's grandfather's most precious things. This is the shoebox of memories which Virginia's grandfather never showed to anyone, but which he showed to Virginia once when she was six years old and sad because the weather was so rainy and cold. Virginia's grandfather showed her the watch, which had belonged to his father. He showed her the yellowed piece of paper on which his mother had scrawled out her prize-winning recipe for apple pie and the baseball glove which Virginia's grandfather had used as a little boy and the baseball which had been signed, not by anybody famous, but by Virginia's grandfather's older brother. In that box, Virginia's grandfather kept the certificate of his graduation from law school and various business cards that he'd used before he'd retired. When Virginia was six she hadn't wondered why her grandfather kept these innocent

trinkets hidden away.

Virginia is removing each item from the box, searching for its significance. She is looking at the watch, no longer ticking, thinking that time has run out, is running out, will run out. She places the watch back into the box. Now Virginia is looking at the recipe. The paper feels fragile. Virginia feels fragile. She returns the recipe and withdraws the baseball glove that smells of leather and grass and dirt. It is impossible to imagine Grandfather young and carefree. Virginia's vision blurs and she replaces the glove. The ball also reveals nothing – Virginia tosses it into the air, high into the air, once and catches it. She feels as though she is the one falling and shudders. Virginia is tired, too tired to keep going. She is tired of incomplete memories and stories untold.

And this is the photograph, the photograph from the shoebox, in the bottom drawer, of the cedar wood dresser, in the room across the hall from Virginia's, on the second floor, in the light blue house. This is the photograph of Virginia's grandfather holding baby Virginia the day she was born. Here in this photograph is little Virginia, in a fuzzy pink blanket. Here is her grandfather, with one of his rare smiles, cradling the baby girl in his arms. Here is something which means everything. Here are the two, together for the first time, for the first time close, for the first time inseparable.

Virginia is holding the photograph, but not looking at it. She is placing the shoebox in the bottom drawer, closing the drawer, and leaning against the cedar wood dresser. The tears are welling before she finally looks at the photograph. She is looking at it now. She is looking at the photograph and crying, crying her first tears. These are her first tears since she came home from school and was told that Grandfather had a heart-attack, her first tears since that morning at the funeral. But now she is crying. Her eyes are turning red and her chest is heaving and she is crying. Virginia's grandfather is gone. Now he really is gone, and now she is crying. Virginia is sitting on the floor, next to the cedar wood dresser, in her grandfather's room, in the light blue house and she is crying.

▪ CHARLIE KAPLAN

All Changes Are Merely Suggestions

Dedicated to Dad, and my love of the word "Vignette"

The fat kid heaved a great sigh. Heaved it right through his second floor window, where it plummeted dozens of feet to the ground, killing a small furry animal that was minding its own damn business in the dewy, cool grass below. The fat kid committed this unintentional act of violence, because he was fat, and because he thought of himself as "the fat kid," and really not a whole lot else. This was why he is called the fat kid, instead of Danny, or something else that merits capitalization. The fat kid had fat parents and fat brothers. The fat kid's fat parents had fat parents and fat siblings. The doctor said to the fat kid, "your family has a history of obesity." When the fat kid asked his parents "what is obesity?" his parents heaved heavy sighs. So heavy, in fact, that they dropped four stories through the doctor's office and ruined a great deal of packaging that a janitor below had been working on. "Dagnabbit!" the janitor sighed to the sigh.

The fat kid tried a lot of different things to not be fat. He tried to do push-ups, but he was still fat. He ate salad, but he was still fat. He stared at himself in the mirror for a very long time, and thought he was getting fatter. He read *Garfield* comic books, and saw that the front of the books called Garfield, "the fat cat." The fat cat! Huh! As if there was something wrong with that!

A bench did its very best to carry the fat kid's enormous girth. His girth was really, quite enormous, you know. He was sitting under the hot, hot sun, and blocked his eyes from the bright, bright light. He was very much as if he was on stage. He saw cars with tinted windows pass by, and imagined that inside of those cars, there were swarms of sexy, attractive, fit people, who were laughing in humiliating cacophony at his size. People who walked by his bench must have been making a mockery of him - their indecipherable conversation and sharp, deafening cackles could have been about nothing

but his unflattering physical frame. His head tilted down, somewhat.

The fat kid began to sob, like a big baby. As if this wasn't humiliating enough, he turned a pathetic, soggy eye to what seemed like an unprecedented tightness in his waistline. As if he needed more problems, he thought to himself, now his pants didn't quite fit him anymore. He noticed now that his watch also began to feel oddly tight. His blubbering ceased as he watched, to his horror, as his watch snapped off of his left wrist. He felt his massive abdomen expand. He stared helplessly as his hated rolls drooped and thickened, taking on the metaphorical quality of ten thousand gallons of partially frozen syrup being poured into a gigantic Ziploc brand bag. His thighs became larger and larger, stretching across the bench like a spilled McDonald's vanilla milkshake. His clothes expanded and tore at seams that didn't stand a chance, and the laces of his shoes snapped and dropped to the ground like the chains of liberated slaves in exaggerated Hollywood movies about the Israelites in Egypt. This hideous burgeoning flowed outward from his body, his sides flowing outward until they sagged down to the surface of the bench, which promptly gave up trying to hold this freakish explosion of a human being, and splintered and cracked below his giggling, unsuspecting buttocks. The bones in his body found that, like the destroyed bench, they were having a difficult time holding this big fatty, and cracked and were ground into dust within his body. Blob-like, he flopped to the ground, and rolled downhill onto a nearby patch of grass, the friction of which slowed and eventually stopped him, under a nearby tree. There he lay for an indefinite period of time, as he considered, then considered against, consulting a physician about this unusual progression of events. It was quite cool under the tree, far cooler than in other places, and the fat kid liked that. He relaxed what parts of his body were still physically able to relax, and began to feel quite comfortable. He felt as though he was sinking into the earth a bit; and sure enough, he was. Slowly but surely, the tree absorbed the fat kid through its roots, passing him into its cortex, its stele, and eventually into the xylem. The tree took the fat kid, particle by particle, into its heart.

Formerly hands, the boy had leaves. Initially hips, the boy had bark. Once eyes, the boy had flowers. "No one ever called a tree fat!" He thought, and set his sighs down.

■ AMANDA LEVIN

Growing Up

Their skin looked black: like the driveway outside my house, the center of a Black Eyed Susan we would find growing by the house we rented in Vermont, the eyes of my bear Puddles whom, proudly, I hadn't brought with me to Jamaica this year; a black that made me pause with my toes curling in the white sand while I watched the men, shoulders broad and strong like the tight rope they tied to their small wooden fishing boats that rocked gently with the waves as they lapped the shore, and the tiny black feet of the women who rushed the waves with small boys clinging to their hips and tugging on their hair.

Placing their large, rough-palmed hands on the edges of their boats, the men swung their legs over together, tucked knees up by their chins as they twisted their bodies to face the women, landing bare-feet in the salty warm water. They stretched out their arms to the outstretched arms of small black boys with saucer brown eyes or curly brown hair, like mine.

When Richard glanced over at me, I raised my white hand up by my shoulder and opened and closed my fingers in the universal sign for waving and he opened his mouth to reveal a gap where his left front tooth had been, knocked out when he had been spear-lobstering in the ocean and had hit his teeth against the coral. He had told me the evening before when he had come by our rented house to visit my older brother and bring me the shell of an enormous crab he had found on the beach that had dried in the hot sun. He gestured me over to the school of fishing boats pulled into the bay that faced a small bar called Jamrock, coconut trees that bordered the sand and remains of branches and bushes from the hurricane last year. Picked clean from the beach were the bodies of fishermen washed up after the hurricane returned them along with deep sea shells and slimy seaweed that crusted on the sand.

I shook my toes from the engulfing sand and stepped toward the boats,

allowing my feet to trail along the surface of the surf as I reached Richard's boat, "The Fish." I heard him ask me if I wanted to go for a ride but I shook my head no, too shy and too engrossed in the patterns of color that spread across the little bay of Treasure Beach, bright red skirts that sat on top of the water, short white shorts paired with brown woven tops, turbans of dreadlocks that wound in great turrets on top of their heads or fell down their backs in thick pieces.

After I thanked him, I wished I had said yes and so I backed up toward the sand, wet then dry, and turned my back to the smiling herd of people to head back to my family and the spacious, empty house that had only color photographs of the fishermen and their families as they grew up.

■ SARAH MAAS

Chaperon

The forest always smells of the battle between life and death. The rage on both sides is unconquerable. It can be felt always.

Always.

You feel it in the way your foot sinks into the emerald cushion of moss that carpets the forest floor; and in the spidery, gnarled fingers of the trees that reach out as you pass. When you walk through the low-hanging mists, there is the unmistakable sense of being in a place you shouldn't—like the feeling of entering a room in the midst of a conversation that is undoubtedly about you and some wretched, foolish thing that you have done.

There is also the sense of being watched: not just by the ferocious forces that govern our world, but also by its denizens. You can never see them—you can go days in the Moribund Forest without seeing—or hearing—anyone. Though at night, if the mist is drifting in the right direction, you might be fortunate to catch in your ear some stray notes of music from the Fair Realm.

Yet if you are foolish enough to follow after that music, you will soon find yourself in the arms of a dryad, strangled by her wooden hands. Or, worse yet, you might find yourself wandering the forest forever—well, at least until you die of fatigue and hunger. All edible life has a tendency to disappear when you are aimlessly lost. The forest, it seems, has its own sense of humor.

There are few men who dare to live, let alone hunt, in the forest. They call themselves swaggering names like The Huntsman or The Woodcutter—you know, things that appeal to male bravado and give them leave to swing about a sparkly axe. I suppose that with such names, it is only natural for them to give our hero the title of Big Bad, though the fools wouldn't know him from the rest of his brethren that stalk through these woods.

In fact, that's the real problem for these burly men. They don't know how

many wolves inhabit the forest. It speaks volumes to the cleverness of my canine companions, who are sure never to be seen in large numbers. That is, unless they are on the battlefield, and King Fenrir is leading his many packs in all of their fang-exposed glory. Then it is that Man wishes he had never begun the war, and that he had never dared to choose the alliance of the three Pig Kings over that of the Wolf Kingdom.

But I will not waste space with blathering about political nonsense. Though I can hear—even from the shade of my den—the yelps and snarls of another pack setting out for patrol. Through years of fighting, the Wolf Kingdom has maintained control of the territory from the Moribund Forest to the Dilapidated Mountains—a far larger area of Grimm than you realize. Yes, Grimm—that is the name of our realm. A bit morbid, isn't it? Well, you needn't look at me with furrowed brows! If those two meddling brothers hadn't claimed godhood and renamed everything, we might have *pleasant* names for our land. But we don't. So you had best grit your teeth and square your shoulders.

Our story begins, like many stories of this nature, with a name. Of course, the name now means something entirely different, but it once meant something far simpler. In fact, one might compare its simplicity to that of human peasants naming their children after food or clothing—such as Candyfloss, or Cashmere. Though the Billy Goats hate the latter name, so, by royal decree, it has been outlawed by the High King, Cole Odinfrewr. But I know for a fact that the Mirror Queen wears cashmere, and that when she's not poisoning apples and turning her children into swans, she simply *adores* lounging in blankets and cloaks of the material. I'm digressing. Our story was *supposed* to begin with a name, but now it has just turned into rambling. I apologize. So, please: jump back a few sentences to the start of this tangential paragraph. A name—a silly name whose meaning was changed long before the unfortunate events of this tale unfolded.

Chaperon.

If you are clever, you will not ask me what this means, but you will stand up, walk to your bookcase, and research the origin of the word. But I can assume that most of you are not very smart, or very dedicated to my story,

so I'll spare you the few moments that it would take to exercise your mind. On second thought—no. You should rise to your feet and discover what the name means. Though given the context of our story, it will soon be apparent.

I really must begin telling the story. And so I shall.

* * *

Feet, clad in shoes of red velvet, meandered along the narrow path. They stopped at every other bush, and often rose to balance on their little toes to peer at some distant sight or lovely flower. Indeed, they were so preoccupied that they failed to notice when the white thatched cottage disappeared, and they had been entirely swallowed by the Moribund Forest.

But the crimson cloak was different than the flighty-minded shoes, and it flashed this way and that through the woods, glancing everywhere as its wearer continued to skip and prance down the path.

It was the cloak that first caught his eye.

At first he thought it was a flag—either from his brethren or from the Enemy. But the wind was with him, and he could not smell the musky, earthen odor of wolfkind, or the metallic stench of iron and steel. It was something else entirely.

Slinking, keeping low to the ground, he moved closer to the path. His golden eyes darted everywhere, and he occasionally lifted his long snout into the air to sniff. It was not the smell of Man, but something similar. Similar, but different. Different, because he could smell them—smell men—far in the distance. It was a whole garrison of Huntsmen and Woodcutters that would soon begin patrolling, as he was now doing.

The Wolf Kingdom allowed for the men to have a small base in the forest—if only because it gave the packs a way to amuse themselves when there was no real danger abroad. Which, believe it or not, was quite often. How they would jump into the air when you let out a howl right behind them! Of course, they'd swing their axes and curse loudly, but men are always slow and stupid, and they are always too late to catch taunting wolves.

He snaked through the underbrush, and began walking parallel to the creature. But it was no use: red fabric covered nearly all of its body, save for

the little white legs. It could have been a prancing strawberry—though, he had never known berries to come alive and grow to such a momentous size. But the Glass Queen had her pumpkin carriage, so it was possible...All he could make out was a large wicker basket that poked out from beneath the folds of the cloak.

What manner of creature was this? The wind had shifted, and he could no longer determine its mettle. It had the flightiness of a bumblebee, yet its complete concealment beneath the cloak...

It stopped and turned.

He slipped back a few feet, and soon only his shining eyes could be seen through the thicket. They were two pools of molten gold framed by whorls of thorns.

How could he have been so foolish not to know what she was? And to track such a harmless creature as this! Had not been covered in fur, he would have blushed.

Golden curls poked through the crimson hood of the cloak, and though her skin was white as snow, it was not from fear. Indeed, her red, red lips parted and said—without fear or hesitation, but rather with immense and delighted curiosity: “Who’s there?”

* * *

Of course, he did not respond, and continued to follow as she made her way—alone—through the woods. Why was a child of Man on this path? She was young—perhaps a turn of the seasons away from budding. He repeatedly stopped to look for the glint of an axe or the green, peaked hood of a ranger crouching in the bushes. The moss made his footsteps soft and silent, but he knew that the child was aware of his presence. She kept looking around. Yet it was entirely possible that she had the inconstant mind of a butterfly and had forgotten about him the moment after she called out.

His question was soon answered. She stopped with the stomp of a foot, setting down her basket to cross her arms. Her brows narrowed, and she let out a huff of air.

“It’s terribly rude to follow someone!”

He halted, sinking onto his haunches.

“You could at least tell me what manner of creature you are, if you will not at least tell me your name!”

Should he say something? His tail swished from side to side.

“Or are you a creature that cannot speak?” she cocked her head and picked up the basket as she began to walk once more. She swung her free arm back and forth like a pendulum. “Perhaps you are something delightful—like a fawn! Oh, how I *do* love fawns! The deer sort, you know—not those beastly little men. One of them played the flute for my uncle once, and when he had fallen asleep to his enchanted music, the wretched thing stole all his money and ran away! But I have no money, so if you are a faun, then you will find me unappealing.”

Though it was now apparent that she was talking more to herself than to anyone else, he rose to his feet and followed once more.

“This is my first time in the forest, you know,”

His father might have killed her by now—or at least leapt out to scare her badly and send her running to whence she came. But she was a small thing, and her voice was merry in its lilt. She reminded him of a bubbling brook, or hatchlings, or something new and light.

“Why will you not show yourself?” She stopped once more, and gently placed her basket on the path. “I would tempt you with food, but this is for Granny. The poor thing has taken in twelve children, and can barely keep them fed and clothed! That’s where I’m going, you know. Though I don’t see how a basket of bread and jam can *really* feed so many children! But Mama says that she often only gives them broth without any bread, which sounds unpleasant to me, so you *must* understand that this bread needs to go to her children and not you.”

His ears perked, and he came closer to the underbrush. He had never known a man—let alone a child—to speak in such a manner. Did she not perceive that this was the Wolf Kingdom?

“Oh, by the Grimm Gods!” she cried, stomping her foot once more. “You are the most frustrating creature I’ve ever met! If it weren’t for all of those thorns, and for Mama’s warning to never leave the path, I would come in there after you and drag you out by your tail! But these are new shoes, and I

would get a fierce scolding if I muddied them!”

Her foot tapped on the ground, the velvet shining in the gray morning light.

His heartbeat quickened, and his ruby tongue flicked to the tip of his snout. Would she turn into something monstrous if he stepped forward? It was entirely possible that she was a deceptive creature, and she would gobble him up.

“I will stand here until you speak—or go away.”

His jaws parted, and he straightened. Two birds flew down the path, flying about each other in frenzied circles.

“Oh, how pretty!” she cried, and started forward to follow after them.

“I would show you my form,” he said, his voice louder than he realized. The girl froze. “But you would scream and run from me.” All intelligent creatures could speak the tongue of Man, though the Wolves loathed to do so. Even now, it felt taboo to be conversing with her.

“I will most certainly *not* scream!”

His mouth pulled back into a smile. His fangs glistened. “You will, child, and I will leave you now. I apologize for vexing you.”

“Oh, please don’t go!” she cried, starting towards the thicket. “I have a very long walk ahead of me, and it would be ever so nice to have a companion!”

Mid-step, he turned to her. “I’m afraid that you will find me an unsuitable companion,” he called over the underbrush.

“Unsuitable companion indeed! I wouldn’t even mind if you were a troll!” She twisted a blond curl around a finger. “Though...I hope that you aren’t. Your voice is very pleasant, and it’s not how I imagine a troll to sound.”

He chuckled. *This* was a child of Man? “Thank you,” he said.

“Please come out of the bushes,” she said, letting the curl drop from her hand.

“Will you promise not to scream?”

She nodded vigorously. “Only babies scream,”

He waited for a moment, glancing and sniffing, then carefully wove his way out of the thicket. The path was hard and dry beneath his paw, and it

sent odd vibrations through his bones as he left the carpet of moss.

Her turquoise eyes grew wide, but she did not retreat an inch as he came forward. They stared at each other, the birds chirping overhead and the wind whistling through the summer leaves. He was about the size of a pony.

“What pretty black fur you have,” she said quietly. Her heartbeat had quickened significantly. “See?” she said, her voice becoming louder as she squared her shoulders. “I’m not afraid. I didn’t scream, or run away!”

He sat down on the path. “What is your name?”

“Chaperon,” she said, and raised her chin in the air. “It means ‘hood.’”

“I know what it means,” he said, though his tone was gentle.

“What is your name?”

His head lifted slightly. “Fenris, son of Fenrir.”

“Son of who?”

“Fenrir, King of the Wolves.”

She did not blink, or even bow. “So you’re a prince?”

His head lowered. “Yes,” he said after a moment.

“Why do you not wear a crown?”

“Animals do not wear crowns.”

She rolled her eyes. “If *I* was a prince, I’d wear a crown *all* the time.”

“It is easier for humans to wear crowns.”

“But I’m sure some dwarf or clever creature could make one to accommodate those large ears of yours!”

Those large ears flicked.

“I can’t dilly-dally,” she said with a sigh. “It’s a day’s walk to Granny’s house, and I’ve never been there before. We’re not actually related by blood. They say it’s shaped like a shoe, and that it smells of gingerbread. Do you know of it?”

Fenris nodded. “Yes, the cottage—I’ve heard of it.” It was one of the few dwellings that they allowed in the forest. Apparently, the woman had been there longer than anyone could recall. To uproot her might release some sort of nasty curse. But what connection had she to this child, if they were not bond by blood?

“Good! You can lead the way,” Chaperon said.

“Lead?” He did not rise to his feet.

“As my companion, you must bring me safely to Granny’s house! And do you mind carrying my basket? It’s so heavy—it’s all of the jam. It’s been hurting my arms mercilessly.”

“I need all of my limbs to walk, and I will not carry it in my mouth,” Fenris said, ears flattening.

“Then perhaps I can ride on you!” She clapped her hands together.

“I am not a horse.”

“Please!” Her eyes sparkled with delight.

They would kill him—and her—if he were caught with the girl riding upon his back. Fenris did not know if he was more afraid of being caught by Men or Wolves.

“I’m afraid you cannot.”

“I have blisters on my teensy, darling toes!” she cried. “I shall faint from exhaustion if you do not carry me!”

Fenris looked around. Her grandmother’s cottage was secluded. It was possible that no one would see them. And she did seem tired—there were red welts on her hands from the weight of the basket.

“I will carry you for a little—until I reach the end of my patrol area.”

“Is that what you do—patrol? Patrol for what?”

“For humans,” he said. “Has your Mama not told you anything of Wolves and Men?”

“No,” she said, adjusting the red hood around her face. “Mama won’t tell me *anything*. Everything I know has come from books—though I have to sneak them out of her room when she’s not looking, and make sure that I put them back before she notices.”

“You like to read?”

“Don’t you?”

“Of course,” he said, and lay down on the ground.

“If you have no hands, how do wolves read books?”

He held up a paw, displaying one exceptionally long nail. “Before King Cole Odinfrewr made them stop, the Bookbinders would puncture a hole in the corner of each page so that our nails might catch them to turn pages. There was a

time when Wolves and Men lived in peace, and we did not scorn them so.”

“How clever! Where do you keep your books so they aren’t spoiled by the rain?”

“We live in caves and dens—the books are kept there.”

“I should like to see your home. I suspect that it is lovely. Do you live in a castle-like den?”

“It is a larger den than most—but it is not like your castles with turrets and drawbridges.”

“I should love to go to King Odinfrewr’s castle!”

“Are you a princess?” he asked with a smile.

“No,” she said sullenly, crossing her arms. “But Mama goes to the castle often—and leaves me at home to watch Jack.”

“Jack?”

She looked at the sky, exhaling a deep breath through her nose. “The baby—what a fat, blobby thing! How he cries and cries for food! I’ve half the mind to stick beans up his nose! I did that once, you know—I stuck a bean up my nose...just to see what it would be like. And then it got stuck, and I was afraid it would go to my brain and sprout a beanstalk and split open my head! But Mama made me blow my nose into her kerchief, and I did—and out popped the bean!”

Fenris’ tail wagged twice.

“Are you going to get on or not?” he asked, and she grinned broadly.

* * *

Chaperon jabbered and chirped as they moved down the path, talking of the Brownies that would steal her mother’s pies, and the chickens they kept who scattered and ran about their yard. Her basket dug into his shoulders, and each time he asked her to move it, she would only say yes, but forget to do so (as another thought immediately entered her mind). It was an affront to allow for a human to ride a wolf, but there was something pitiable about her, and if another—more deadly—animal had come along and found her alone...

“Why do you wear so much red?” he asked, interrupting her flow of verbiage.

“It is the only color I wear!” Chaperon said merrily, though she looked down at her legs. “But I will allow for Mama to dress me in these white stockings. Though how they itch me so!”

“You choose red out of preference?”

“Of course! Why, it’s the loveliest color in the world!”

“Why?”

“Because so many wonderful things are red!”

“Like blood?”

“No, not like blood, silly beast! Like strawberries, and roses, and rubies! All sorts of beautiful things are red, and I will not wear something as insufferable as pink, nor as dreary as blue, or as sickly as green!”

“So you will only wear red?”

“Yes—I have never worn another color for as long as I’ve been able to choose my own clothes.”

He nodded, and they continued in silence. But it was soon broken.

“Why do the Wolves fight against Men? Mama is always referring to it in her letters—that is, when I get the chance to sneak a look over her shoulder—though she never takes the time to explain to me *why* we’re supposed to hate you so much when I ask her about it. In fact, she usually just scolds me for being so sneaky, even when I’m not.” She kicked Fenris’ ribs to get his attention.

Fenris sighed, and shifted his shoulders to move the basket further onto his back.

“No one knows the real reason,” he said. “My father told me that it was because of the encounter with the Pigs.”

‘Pigs? Like the sort that we have?’

“No, no,” said Fenris. “These are a special breed—almost an entirely different species. They walk on two legs and wear clothes. They’re smaller—almost dog-sized.”

“I’ve never seen a pig with clothes!” Chaperon laughed. “It would be such an adorable thing!”

“Don’t tell them that if you ever see one,” chuckled Fenris. “They’re proud—even prouder than the Wolves. You could say that the Pigs pretend

to be Men, and each time someone reminds them of their position, they... well, they’re quite touchy about that.”

“So why did this start a war?”

Fenris sniffed the air. A doe—and her fawn—were just off the path. His stomach grumbled.

“My uncle, Gevaudan, decided that the Pigs needed a lesson. You see, Pigs aren’t very bright, so when he came across a Pig that had built himself a house of straw, he knocked it down.”

“That’s not very nice.”

“My uncle was King of the Wolves at the time—he could do what he liked.”

She twisted his fur in her hands. “So what happened then? Did he eat him?”

“No—but they said that was his intention.”

“They?”

“The two other Pigs whose houses he ruined. The Pigs were so upset that they ran to King Cole and told them some far-fetched tale. But it was enough. The High King had been eyeing our territory for some time now, so he allied himself with the Pigs and declared war on us. We only went to war when your Great Louvetier caught hold of my uncle and killed him. And then the Billy Goats began their feud with the Trolls when King Gruff knocked the Troll King off his toll bridge and made him lose his magic shoes, and we found ourselves allying with all sorts of creatures, including the Trolls.”

“The Billy Goats? You mean Goats who wear clothes like the Pigs?”

Fenris nodded. “They fight for the High King now. I was head-butted by one during battle—it was not pleasant.”

“You’ve been in battle?”

Fenris’ stomach let out a growl as the scent of the deer faded. “Yes—I have seen a fair amount of war.”

“War must be terrible—my brother rides in the war-band of the Frog King. Mama is constantly weeping for his soul because we haven’t heard from him in months. But I suppose that is because he is a terrible penman, and he could barely read before he entered the army, and I don’t suppose that writ-

ing is essential to winning battles.”

“Indeed it is not,” said Fenris, wincing as the girl tugged on strands of fur.

“How far is it to Granny’s house?”

“We have a ways yet,” Fenris said. “You may have to walk soon—I am growing tired.”

“Poor old thing! You should have told me!”

“I am not old,” said Fenris. “But you and your basket are quite heavy.”

“How old are you? I’m eleven.”

“By your measurement of years, I am twenty years old.”

“So you are a boy!”

“I am not a boy,” he said more proudly than he intended.

“A young man has his coming of age ceremony at twenty-one. You will not be a man until then. So you are a boy, just as I am a girl.” She kicked his ribs. “Do let me down—you’ve made me feel beastly for burdening you so.”

He did not object as he lay down and allowed for the girl to dismount. His back felt bare and cold as she left him. He could feel the wind breathing between the stands of his fur, and he ground his teeth. The midday sun filtered through the trees, catching within the clouds of mist that drifted amongst them. Birds chattered. Fenris scanned a small patch of open sky above the path that ran like a crack through the forest canopy.

“What are you looking at?”

He did not glance at her, but sniffed the air as his eyes scanned the sky. “I smell swans,” he said. It was a scent mixed with many things: fish, morning dew, and a stagnant, almost stinging smell of feathers.

“Oh, how lovely!” she cried, and her hood fell from her head. A burst of gold followed suit, and he dragged his gaze from the sky to see her.

“Swans are *not* lovely,” he said, and looked at the sky once more. “The Mirror Queen turned her eleven sons into swans, and now they are her spies. They look for Wolves constantly.”

“Why?”

“To discover our hiding places and general whereabouts.”

“No, no! I meant why did she turn her children into swans? That doesn’t seem very kind.”

“It wasn’t. She tricked them, and uses her magic mirrors to control their minds.”

“But they’re princes!”

“If it’s for the sake of the war, I’m sure others have not protested.”

“How wretched!”

Fenris nodded and resumed walking, jerking his head to motion for the girl to follow. He felt light and flimsy without her weight. “And you humans say that we’re the beastly ones.”

He moved to the edge of the path, keeping within the shadows, and slowed his pace to accommodate her short legs.

* * *

The wall of sunflowers swayed in the breeze—like drunkards or dancers, he could not tell. Despite the towering heights of the flowers, the openness of the sky weighed down upon him like the glare of a great blue eye. He kept low to the ground, and balanced his attention between the sky and the girl who leaped and frolicked amongst the flowers. The smell of swans had faded, but he caught the scent of the Woodsmen—they were still a few miles off.

The air was warm, though it carried with it the suggestion of the upcoming autumn. It also brought the sounds of her incessant singing, and he could track her movements through the violent bending and swishing of the thick stalks. She was now a good way off from him. They had stopped for a rest—or, rather, for him to rest, and for her to eat a meager lunch. She offered half of it to him, but upon finding it to be only a piece of bread and an apple, he declined. His stomach still rumbled fiercely, but Fenris knew he could wait until the girl was gone before hunting.

He was just about to rest his head between his paws when a scream rippled through the air. He was running in an instant, knocking down the body-like flowers, and found her before the shriek had finished echoing across the field. Teeth barred, he skidded to a halt, and the snarl faded from his throat.

She had fallen to the ground, an arm across her face to shield her from some terrible evil, and Fenris chuckled as he beheld her assailant.

“I have never known little girls to be frightened of rocks.”

“It’s a troll!” she wept, though her arm lowered a little so that she might look at him. “It’s a troll who will eat me!”

“It was a troll,” he said, sitting down. “But now he’s stone.” She did not move. “Have a look for yourself.”

Chaperon remained still, but then slowly turned.

“How did he—why is he stone?” she asked. His jaws gently latched onto the hood of the cloak to pull Chaperon to her feet.

“Either from the sunlight or from a curse.”

They stared at the statue, much of which had already been worn away by weather. Its lumbering form was still in a state of running, and its fangs continued to pierce the air.

“Is he dead?” she asked, taking a retreating step.

Fenris moved forward, sniffing at the statue. There was a gash along its left arm, and he could see a rivet of blood—stone blood—frozen as it ran down to its hand. “I don’t know,” he said. The scent of the troll remained, but it was overpowered with the damp scent of stone. It must have been transformed recently.

“I hope that he is—it would be terrible to still be alive and trapped in stone!” Chaperon replied, and then looked at the ground. “Oh, curse it all!” she smacked her thigh and stomped her foot. “All of the bread has fallen out of the basket! It’s ruined! I’ll be beaten for this!” Hurriedly, tears welling in her eyes, she picked up the loaves of bread. Mercifully, most of them were unharmed. Fenris helped her the best he could, and carefully picked up the jars of jam in his mouth. There were some letters on the ground, and as he went to retrieve them, the breeze picked one up and blew it further into the field.

“I’ll get it,” he said as Chaperon started forward, and he darted after the letter.

When he finally pinned it beneath a paw, the girl was far behind, but he could still hear her cursing herself and cursing the troll for scaring her. He glanced at the letter, which had opened to reveal carefully formed words, and would have scooped it into his mouth were it not for what he read.

“Give Chaperon the Chain before she leaves tomorrow. Do not tell her what it is—but tell her that it is of great importance and that she must take care not to lose it. The High King will be waiting at our cottage for the delivery, and will go on to the battlefield. With it Fenrir will be bound, and we will have no more of Wolves or Trolls. In Chaperon’s basket, I’ve enclosed letters for the Woodsmen from their families.”

The letter went on and on, and the air became cold around the Wolf Prince. His heart beat rapidly, and his lips pulled back in a silent snarl. He knew of the Chain, but...but...

“Do you think Granny will notice the bread? It doesn’t look entirely spoiled to me,” Chaperon said morosely, and extended a loaf towards him. She did not see his snarl, and he quickly concealed it.

“Your Granny is not your kin?” he asked cautiously, moving away from her.

“No,” she said, tucking the bread into the basket, and picking up the letter that Fenris had read. She neatly folded it and placed it inside the cage of wicker, not even glancing at the contents. Had she read them already? Did she know of the news she carried—of the evil of her mother, and so-named grandmother?

“And you have never met your Granny before?”

“No—apparently, she can’t be bothered to visit us. I suppose it’s all the children.”

“Does your mother often send letters to her?” He could not keep the snarl from his voice.

“What queer questions you ask! Should princes be so nosy?” She poked his snout, and Fenris had to clamp down to keep from biting her hand off. How *dare* she touch a Wolf Prince?

“Does your mother often send letters to your Granny?” he repeated, beginning to circle her. She rearranged the folds of her cloak, shrugging. Did she not know a predatory animal from a docile one?

“I often don’t get to see to whom the letters go,” she said offhandedly. “Most of them are terribly long and boring, and there are always strange

sorts of people that come to pick them up. None of them are very nice, and they always ignore me! Even when there are large groups of them over for dinner—though, sometimes I will sneak downstairs to hear them talking late into the night. But it's all about King Cole, and it's not as exciting as what one might think. They *never* mention princesses, though they'll sometimes talk of various Queens, none of whom seem very interesting to *me*."

Fenris stalked around her, his tail lashing out to whip the sunflowers. She was blameless—just a foolish little girl to be used as a pawn.

"Pick some flowers for your Granny," he said, almost barking before he broke into a run, and could still hear Chaperon talking as he barreled down the path.

* * *

The cottage was lopsided, and the enormous chimney did indeed give it the appearance of a boot. Smoke rose from the tall feature, and Fenris' hair bristled as he smelt both ginger and...and something else. Something foul, but also familiar.

It was a whitewashed house, and its thatched roof had caved in along one side. A fence of bones—bones each topped with a tiny human skull—ran around the perimeter, and had he not been so preoccupied with the strange scent, he would have remarked on the stilts like chicken's feet that held the cottage aloft.

The bone-gate was left ajar, and Fenris kept his snout to the ground as he slowly stepped forward. A path bordered with small, finger-shaped bones led to the front steps.

This was a house for twelve children? He could not hear their laughter, or even smell their soft, fresh scent. There were no dolls or wooden swords left in the decaying yard, and no clothes hung from the laundry line. He halted mid-step, his ears flattening against his head. But there were shoes—dozens and dozens of shoes, tucked beneath the house. Were it not for the stilts, he would have assumed that the house was built on a foundation of little leather boots and slippers.

Fenris slunk to the shoes, and quickly drew away—as if burned—as he smelled them. They were children's shoes, and they had not been worn for

some time.

This was the grandmother of Chaperon?

Fenris' fangs glittered as he slithered up the front steps, peering into the open door. Someone was humming—no, not someone. A crone. He could hear the click and groan of the cumbersome loom, hear as the heavy bars of wood were pulled and swung.

"Do you plan to enter, Chaperon, or are you just going to sulk in the doorway?"

Fenris did not respond as he moved further into the house. He knew the nature of the Chain—he would rip out this woman's throat and bring it back to his father. Chaperon was still far enough away that she would arrive long after he had left.

He took another step, the dusty wood creaking beneath his large paws. An old woman sat with her back to him, working an enormous loom before the fire. Her dress was black, and a matching, shabby shawl was wrapped around her bent frame. A large table lay to her right, and it was filled with plate upon plate of gingerbread-men and women, their shirts and dresses lovingly decorated. On another table lay letters and maps, books and strange objects.

"I said," the woman started, turning in her seat. The words stalled in her sagging throat, but her eyes did not widen as she beheld the enormous wolf standing in the entrance of her house. A smile spread across her face, revealing a set of dagger-like iron teeth. The whites of her eyes were yellow—like aged paper—and a long, crooked nose stretched out so far that it threatened to hang over her upper lip.

He knew her immediately for what she was, for she had not the smell of Man—not even a variation, like Chaperon. Hers was a sharp and tangy smell, like milk left too long in the sun, or like the earth beneath an overturned rock. She was not the grandmother of Chaperon, for the child possessed the blood of Man, and the blood that flowed through this crone's body was purely of Witch.

"Your Highness," she said, rising from her loom. Her nails were long and cracked, almost brownish in their hue.

“You know me?” he asked, his face still twisted in a snarl.

“You can’t be so foolish as to believe that this nose of mine is for effect,” she said, and chuckled. Her iron teeth flashed in the firelight.

He did not reply. He must bite off her head—pounce upon her and bite off her head in one fell crunch. Though she would undoubtedly taste awful, and it would probably lay some curse upon him.

“Have you eaten my granddaughter, then?” she asked, unhooking her work from the loom. She gestured about the cottage as she released what appeared to be a very long and very beautiful ivory silk ribbon. “Please,” she said, folding the ribbon upon itself, “make yourself welcome. It is not every day that I am graced with *royal* company.”

Fenris did not move. He must kill her—kill her now.

The witch set down the ribbon on a nearby table and moved further into the room.

“That is undoubtedly why you are here,” she said, and stood beside the desk littered with papers. “You killed my granddaughter and read all of the letters she was carrying. You know of the Chain.”

“You will give it to me,” he growled. “Or you will forfeit your life.” He was going to kill her anyway.

She clicked her tongue. “Give up the work of my life?” The witch shook her head. “Weapon for your father’s doom or not, this is still a master achievement!”

“Do not attempt to prolong your life with boasting words,” he said, stepping closer to her.

“Boasting words? Do you not think that I am entitled to boast in the hour of my doom, boy? Do you know what the Chain is made of? The sound of a cat’s footfall, the beard of a woman! The roots of a mountain, the sinews of a bear! Fish’s breath and bat spittle! Such ingredients are not to be found by just *anyone*! Why, I’ve had my children looking for them for *ages*!”

“And where are your *twelve* children now?”

The crone’s teeth flashed. “We all get hungry now and then. And children do come running when they smell gingerbread.”

“I suppose that you will eat Chaperon too.”

“Chaperon?” the witch laughed loudly. “She may not be my granddaughter by blood, but I would never eat her!”

Fenris’ golden eyes filled with light and fury. “And why is that?”

A slow smile stretched across the wrinkled face of the crone. “We are each slotted to a fate,” she said with quiet malice.

“And you believe that my father’s fate is to die within the strangling grasp of your Chain?”

“It has a name, you know,” she said. “Gleipnir.”

“It makes no difference what it is named!” he snapped, and took another step towards the woman, his snout extending towards her. He knew enough magic to defend himself from any incantations that she might utter, but still...Yes, he must act now. Kill her now.

“Once your father is bound by Gleipnir, he will be unable to break free, and King Odinfrewr will kill him.”

Fenris leapt across the room in a mighty bound, his jaws open and waiting for her neck. But the witch was too fast, and she flew into the closet and locked the door. Fenris slammed into the wood once, twice—thrice. While the door groaned, it would not break.

“Where is the Chain?” he roared, hurling himself against the closet. The witch only chuckled.

“So young—so eager for glory and blood!”

“I will break through this door soon enough, old woman, and you will pay for creating such a monstrosity!” His shoulders ached from the repeated force of the impact, and he took a step away.

Minutes passed, and he at last sat down, his tail whipping from side to side.

“How long will you wait?” the witch called from the closet. “I can last for weeks without food or water, you know. We are not like Men. And the moment you leave my house, I will disappear.”

“How long have you been feeding information to the High King’s Woodsmen?” he said, anger roiling within his breast.

“Long enough for your *dens* to be known to me. I planned to deliver the information to King Odinfrewr myself—once Gleipnir was finished, of

course. But if you go, and leave an old woman in peace, I will forget what my children have told me.”

Fenris stared at the wooden doorknob, and did not speak for several minutes. Indeed, he was so intent on monitoring the slightest movement that he did not hear the pitter-patter of small feet through the yard, or the sound of the girl moving through the cottage on tiptoe.

It was only when she threw her arms about his neck and buried her face in his fur that he leapt up in surprise—and pain.

“There you are, you silly creature!” she laughed, and fire—fire like that of Hell—rippled through him. “Look, I’ve caught you with my new ribbon!”

She had wrapped the long, white ribbon of the witch around his neck as if to make a bow. It was strangling him, but not from strength—rather from the agony that it caused. Only a groan escaped his lips as she tied the knot, and Fenris found that he could not move.

“I shall make you my pretty pet!” she said delightedly, but paused as he became frozen and stiff, his eyes wide with anger and panic.

“What have you done?” he breathed, though his voice was barely audible.

The witch began to cackle—cackle like a magpie—from the closet, and the doorknob twisted a full rotation before the door opened.

“Granny!” said Chaperon. “Why were you hiding in the closet? That is, if you are my Granny! Come out and meet my dear friend!”

“Indeed I am your Granny, child,” the woman said warmly. She was now wearing a nightgown, and a nightcap was on her head.

“What a large nose you have, Granny!” laughed the girl. “You look just like Prince Fenris!”

“Ah!” said the witch, walking forward to tickle the girl beneath the chin. “All the better to cook delicious things for you!”

Chaperon held up the basket of bread and jam. “But I thought you had no food,” she said warily.

The witch seemed perplexed, but she only smiled again.

Fenris snarled—or the best he could, as his limbs had stopped working.

“Look at what you have done, girl!” the witch cried, and patted Chaperon on the back. “You’ve caught the wicked, *bad* wolf!”

“Caught him?”

The witch began to wrap the ribbon around Fenris’ legs, and then moved onto his torso. The more he struggled, the tighter it pulled. He could scarcely breathe.

“Of course!” said the witch. “He tried to eat me, you know! Look at what a good thing you’ve done! You’ve saved me!”

“But I—”

“Nonsense!”

There was a loud shout from the yard, followed by the stomping of boots. The witch turned to the doorway, pushing past Chaperon.

“What’s wrong?” the child asked quietly, putting a hand on Fenris’ head. “It looks as if Granny doesn’t understand that you’re my companion—or how to tie a bow! She’s wrapped you up like a present!”

A Woodsman—no. It was not just any Woodsman. It was the Great Louvetier, the chief wolf-hunter himself. He knew him by his smell. The Death of Wolves lingered about him, in his pewter eyes, and his many knives. Fenris’ eyes fell upon the silver axe strapped to the man’s side.

“I came to inquire after the Chain,” said the Louvetier, but he gasped as he beheld the wolf. “It seems that it works,” he said, and began to chuckle, twirling his dark beard.

“That’s Prince Fenris himself!” chortled the witch. “My granddaughter caught him—she tricked him all on her own! Such a clever, brave girl!”

“I did not trick him!” cried Chaperon, walking to the adults. “He is my friend, and you will release him, Granny! You tied the ribbon too tight and now it is hurting him so badly that he can barely speak!”

“Ribbon? I thought you were making a Chain,” said the Louvetier.

“That is the Chain, you fool,” said the witch. “But no scissors, or sword, or axe can cut through it. Only King Odinfrewr can unbind it now.”

“You disguised the chain as a ribbon?”

“Gleipnir is its name,” the woman said proudly.

“Please untie him!” pleaded Chaperon with sudden urgency.

The room had grown fiercely hot, and Fenris’ vision blurred. His tongue hung out of the side of his mouth, and all smells melted into one. Death.

Heart slowing, slowing, slowing down, he could only see the red of her cloak flashing about.

“Untie him?” said the woodsman. “You are a hero, child! You’ve saved Grimm from the biggest, baddest wolf of all!”

“He’s not bad!” she cried, but the woodsman ignored her as he strode to Fenris in his big, clunking boots, and squatted before him.

“Well, *wolf*, what do you have to say for yourself?” He waited, and then laughed. “I forgot,” he said in his deep, gruff voice, “you *can’t* speak anymore. Let me help you,” he said, and Fenris’ world darkened and then exploded with sparks and flames of pain as the man ripped open his jaws, snapping muscle and bone.

Chaperon screamed, and the witch grabbed and held the girl as she attempted to move towards him. A wrinkled hand clamped over the girl’s face, and though she tried to bite her, the crone’s hand remained still.

“Rocks,” said the woodsman, and with a wriggle of the crone’s nose, a pile of fist-sized rocks appeared beside the man. Chaperon squeezed her eyes shut as the Great Louvetier took a rock and forced it down Fenris’ throat. Even his gag reflex failed to work, and the prince felt his stomach rip open as the rock slid inside of him.

Before the pain of the first one finished, another rock had been pushed down his throat, and then another, and another, until such a great weight was in his belly that Fenris could bear it no longer.

The pile of rocks was half-gone when he lost his sight, and he could only hear the muffled sobs of Chaperon as life departed from him.

* * *

Chaperon never wore red again.

She was received with joy and immense gratitude when she returned to her cottage the next day. The witch came with her, and the Great Louvetier followed behind, dragging in a wheelbarrow the rock-filled body of Prince Fenris. King Odinfrewr was waiting, with her mother, and though the High King bowed to her, the girl did not smile.

Nor did she smile when the young Prince Siegfried, son of Odinfrewr, beheld her beauty, and asked her mother to make Chaperon his bride. Of

course, he was fourteen, and they were forced to wait a few years, but he brought the girl to his castle that very day. Soon, the prince’s patience wore out, and, despite conventions, he made Chaperon his princess upon her thirteenth birthday.

* * *

Chaperon stood in the Great Hall of King Odinfrewr’s castle, staring silently at the wolf’s head mounted on the wall. A hand was on her swollen belly, and her ankles were sore and aching beneath the yards of silk and jewels that covered her body. All around her dined the king’s court, and her husband, the Crown Prince Sigfried, sat, laughing, beside his father.

Fenris’ head hung above the High King’s table, his jaws set in a snarl, and his golden eyes replaced by glass replicas. Whenever the court was exceptionally merry, they would often toast to her—lifting their glasses beneath Fenris’ nose. She never partook in the activity, of course. Fenris’ eyes, glass though they might be, followed her everywhere in the Great Hall.

“Dearest,” Sigfried called to her.

Chaperon stared at the head, still hovering in the doorway of the Great Hall.

She dreamt of him when she should have been dreaming of her husband. Sometimes Prince Fenris was a Wolf—others, he was a man, nine years her senior, but handsome and kind. He would tell her that his spirit had been set free from his body upon his death, and had found itself again in the form of a man—a man who would come and take her from the castle that had become her cage.

She was fifteen now, her first child to be born in a matter of weeks.

Fenris’ glass eyes pierced into the empty abyss that stretched across her heart, damning her with each life-giving beat. There were days when she would stare at his head for hours, and days when she could not bear the sight of it. Each time she asked Sigfried to take it down, he only laughed.

“Princess Chaperon,” said the High King, and she blinked. The bearded king’s eyes were narrowed, and she bowed her head as she stepped into the hall. The noise was overwhelming, and the air was hot. Many stopped to look at her as she passed. Her beauty had exceeded that of the Mirror

Queen.

Perhaps she might have found some delight in it—some satisfaction. But any chance of that had been robbed the day she returned to her mother's house, and when she found herself a prince's bride at the age of thirteen. She could not even manage pride in the Seer's prediction that her first child would be male.

Prince Sigfried helped her to sit—a chair that faced Fenris. She could feel his gaze beating upon her head as she allowed her husband to pile food on her plate. When he was done cutting the food for her, she stared at the slices of meat and potatoes.

"You must keep up your strength," said King Odinfrewr. She did not look up at him. "If you want the boy to be the next Louvetier, you should be eating lots of meat."

Chaperon nodded her head obediently, and took a bite of mutton.

"Will you not at least smile, Chaperon?" asked the High King. "You are about to give birth to the future High King of Grimm."

Fenris's snarl stretched further across his face.

"You should know after four years that she will not smile, nor laugh, nor do any of the merry activities in which my twelve sisters partake," chuckled Sigfried. "It would seem that her beauty gobbled up any hint of joy in her."

Chaperon raised her gaze to the face of her husband. He was handsome—golden-haired, just as she was, and had a quick smile. But her mother had given her to him when she was eleven, and allowed for Sigfried to marry her when she was thirteen. She had not seen her mother since the day of the wedding.

"It seems that her eyes have lost their sparkle as of late," said the High King.

"It will return when she gives birth," said one of the king's many daughters. "A baby's rather draining, father."

Chaperon only glanced at Fenris' furious face before taking another bite of her food. She was heavy—immensely heavy. Like a stone at the bottom of a river. There was no way to escape it.

No way at all.

* * *

And so one night, not a few weeks before she was expected to bring this Wolf-Hunter into the world of Grimm, Chaperon crept out of the castle, taking with her the large head of Fenris. She ran until she reached the Lethe River. There she loaded a large stone into her pocket and walked into the water.

It was we—the Wolves—who found her the next morning, floating face-down in the Lyngvi Lake, holding the head of Fenris close to her chest.

* * *

That was three days ago. The war has not changed, nor has either side come to some great compromise or understanding. Word spread through Grimm of the Princess' strange suicide, and no one can understand why the young woman would bring to her grave the head of the wolf that tried to seduce and eat her, and then disguised himself as her grandmother in order to complete the task (and gain a nice meal with the old woman as well). It is in response to their foolish talk that I write this tale, a tale that she once narrated to me.

You see: I owe Chaperon a great debt. I was caught by Men one year ago, and brought to Odinfrewr's dungeons to be tortured for information. Upon hearing that a Wolf was in the dungeon, Chaperon secretly came to investigate, and before she set me free, she told her story in detail. I hoped to one day repay her kindness, and it is my only wish that through the distribution of this text, I might honor the young woman, and our beloved prince.

Yes, this is rather sentimental nonsense, but, despite myself, I am a rather romantic sort of Wolf. Of course, Chaperon had no idea of Fenris' perspective—she merely narrated the bare facts—facts that allowed for my imagination to flutter about until a plausible story came into being. I have taken the liberties of inserting a scene from her perspective, though I believe my portrayal of her sadness to be fairly accurate based upon my perceptions of her gained from our brief meeting. If you're feeling rather impertinent, you might say that this is just as bad as the absurd rumors of Fenris eating people and whatnot, I feel that this is as close to the truth as we will ever come.

King Fenrir eventually suffered the same fate as his son. He was suc-

ceeded by one of his many heirs, though not nearly as popular as Fenris. We have been losing the war ever since, and have been forced to abandon much of the southern section of the Moribund Forest, the area in which Fenris and Chaperon first met. I'm rather sad about that—there were some lovely brooks and glens to be found there.

You might expect me to end this story with the sass and spark that was found in the beginning, but I'm afraid that it has made me rather sorrowful. Such can be the effects of one's writing—especially when writing unhappy tales.

So, please: return to your lives. Go fret over the menu for dinner—go yell at your child for drawing on the walls. Go sort through the mail, decide which dress you want to wear to your next party, and sneak a bit of dessert while the cook isn't looking. Go do whatever it is that you readers do once you finish a story, for I'm rather tired, and I don't wish to speak anymore.

■ FIONA MACQUARRIE

Walk A Mile

Paul wore the same pair of shoes every day. They were nothing to be extraordinarily proud of; they were ancient Reeboks that had been white at one time, with a small, faded blue stripe along the side.

Each morning these trusted friends would carry silver-haired Paul out of his apartment and slowly down two flights of paint-peeling stairs out onto the street. Two buildings to the right, he would pass the woman picking up her paper from the sidewalk. She always looked as if she had just rolled out of bed, with a coffee fragrance lingering on her, and would be wearing a blue flowered bathrobe, with white fleece slippers on her feet.

She would smile, "Lovely morning, isn't it?"

"Just about the prettiest I've ever seen," he would respond.

At the corner, he would stop and sit with the man on the bench at the bus stop who would be reading the *Times*. The man wore a brown hat and a red rain jacket with even the slightest threat of clouds. He had shiny black shoes that were newly polished each week. Paul would ask him what the forecast was for the day, and the man would answer curtly, without making eye contact. Paul would stay only about two and a half minutes, and he forgot the forecast by the time he reached the dog-walker across the street.

She wore a different colored scarf each day over her head to hide her hair loss, and her fingernails always matched the scarf of the day. She walked four dogs, all sizes, and would slow down when she saw Paul coming towards her, his back slightly hunched with age. He would reach down and pat each furry head, cooing. By the time he got to the fourth, she would lose her patience, telling him that she was sorry but they really had to be going. She always wore a pair of shiny flats to match the accent color on her scarf.

The café was at the next corner. Tucked between a bookstore and a Laundromat, it was the converted basement of another apartment building, with chipped concrete stairs leading down to its heavy front door. Huddled with-

in preoccupied bustle of the city, it peeked out with floor-to-ceiling windows and faded green awnings, begging you to notice it, but not wanting to bother you in the middle of your busy day. Paul always answered its gentle, silent welcome, right as the clock struck nine o'clock. This was his final destination – the reward at the end of the strenuous journey of two blocks.

Paul waited just inside the door, his silver hair sliding askew from underneath his faded baseball cap. His hands were folded in front of him, and he smiled complacently as he looked around him at the luscious greens dangling from the ceiling in brown and black planters.

“Sit where you like this morning. I’ll be with you in just a sec.” Linda, in her comfortable sandals as usual, moved her arm around the cozy room, with brick interior walls and pillows resting on every sitting place. Paul padded quietly towards a small table at the window, one that he had sat at many times before. From that unassuming seat he watched people hurry to and fro on the sidewalk above the café. The low ceiling cut them off at their shoes, and he sat there for most of the morning, watching business heels click by in a hurry and flip flops smacking their way to the nearest ice cream store. The windows never let him see above the people’s ankles, but when his eyes glazed over he might have been imagining what they looked like, and if their faces had wrinkles caused by laughing or not.

Linda poured him some tea. He never tried anything new, but he always told her that it was the best tea he’d ever tasted. She smiled, as usual, when he said this and asked if he wanted anything else at the moment.

“Not just yet. No, not just so soon.” Paul wrapped his hands around the mug. “I can’t think that I want anything just right now except this tea and this seat. But thank you,” he added hastily. “Thank you.”

From time to time during the long morning, Linda would come back and see if he wanted anything else. Sometimes he’d hear her, and sometimes he wouldn’t. It all depended on if there was a sparrow trying to find seeds buried in the cracks in the concrete, or if a pair of feet belonging to a child was skipping quickly past the window. When he did respond, the answer was always, “No, thanks, not just yet. Not now.”

* * *

One morning in March, a man in Paul’s apartment building was brushing his teeth when he heard a crash in the stairwell that almost made him swallow the frothy paste in his mouth. Startled, he ran to his living room and flung open his door, to find an elderly silver-haired man, lying white-faced and unconscious at the bottom of the stairs. He cursed and looked around him, but there was no one else around. He rushed back into the kitchen to grab the phone.

Ten minutes later, an ambulance arrived with sirens blaring. Two men rushed into the hallway, where the toothbrush man was sitting on the stairs closest to Paul’s limp body, briefcase in hand and coat slung over one arm. His knee was bouncing up and down, his heel working madly to keep an even tempo. As the men from the ambulance lifted Paul onto a stretcher, one shot a glance over to the toothbrush man.

“What’s his name?”

“No idea. Try his pockets for I.D.”

“But isn’t he your neighbor? Does he have any family?”

The toothbrush man held up his hands and leaned back with an absent-minded shrug of his shoulders.

* * *

The next morning, the woman in the flowered robe looked up at the sky. It was a sharp, piercing blue – the kind that looks as though a robin’s egg cracked on the surface of the earth and melted into the atmosphere. She went back inside her kitchen and spread the paper out on the table. After a moment, she paused, looked up, and hurried to the door again and opened it, looking around for someone she expected to see. But there was no one on the sidewalk besides a woman on her way to work, eyes focusing straight ahead, gait unchanging. The sky might have been green and she wouldn’t have known the difference. The woman in the flowered robe frowned and closed the door slowly. She wandered back to the kitchen and held the paper in front of her face, reading the headlines and skimming the stories, before dressing quickly for her job at the bookstore. She would be late, yet again, but she always seemed to ignore this fact while she gleaned knowledge from the news. While rushing out the door, she made a note to herself to see if the

new orders had come in from the publisher.

* * *

Days later, the bus stop man looked up at the sky and fingered his umbrella nervously. There were ominous looking clouds. He turned to his right, where the bench was empty, and pulled his jacket tighter, as he turned to read the forecast in the *Times*. After a long day of work at the office, he returned to his silent home, devoid of children's laughter and smelling of some interesting new concoction that his wife had attempted in the kitchen. He pulled his red raincoat out of the front closet and stared at it. His wife leaned against the doorway of the front hall with her arms crossed in front of her.

"I'll let you know when it starts raining indoors," she said dryly.

He muttered to himself as he roughly shoved it back inside among a jumble of umbrellas and fishing rods that had never been used.

* * *

Life did not stop to look for Paul. The city continued to rumble past the washed out awnings of the hidden café. People hurried late to work and stayed in their offices long after five o'clock. Flowers pushed their way through cracks in the suffocating concrete sidewalk, as springtime reintroduced itself to a world that was emerging from months of winter's cold embrace.

As the thermometers climber higher, the dog walker began to switch over to lighter silk scarves for her hair. Her route was going so much more quickly these days, and she breathed a sigh of relief every time she crossed the street to the bus stop without interruptions. Her clients got their dogs back sooner and she rarely looked for the man in the baseball hat who used to speak baby talk to the dogs. She smiled more readily at her aging aunt when she returned back to their apartment after her morning walk with the dogs, and retreated into the art room. Her cat swished its tail as it followed her into the sun-streaked, permanently paint-filled haven.

* * *

The first morning that Paul didn't show up at the café was a busy one. So busy, in fact, that it took Linda halfway through the morning shift to realize

that the window seat in the corner was filled by a young college student with a laptop. She walked carefully over to him, her eyes taking on a strangely suspicious look.

"And what can I get for you?" Her hands rested semi-permanently on her hips.

"Hey there. A two-percent hazelnut latte, large. Oh, and make that a double shot of espresso."

She exhaled, clenching her teeth together under a tightly drawn mouth. When she returned with the mug, she had to tap him on the shoulder to shift his attention from the screen in front of him.

"Anything else?"

"Just a refill whenever this is empty. Finals season, you know?"

She nodded, her eyes glancing back at her coworker behind the counter. Turning briskly from the student, she walked over to the counter and asked her coworker if he'd seen the old man with the baseball cap that day. He shook his head, and began to wrap a scone for the musician next in line. Linda suggested that the old man must have gotten caught up in a book and lost track of time, but she got no response. She ran her hand through her hair for a moment, her forehead slightly furrowed, before retreating to the stock room to get more napkins.

But Paul never brought books to the café. He brought his eyes. And his appetite for shoe-watching.

At the end of a week, Linda began muddling up orders and forgetting to ask people if they wanted refills. She took a brisk walk in the park saturated by twilight dew and forgot to water the plants hanging from the café ceiling. At home, she tried to read on the couch, but she reached for the phone instead, pausing and looking at the receiver instead of dialing a number. She got up and began fumbling around the kitchen for the phone book, under piles of bills and grocery lists. Once she had found it, she closed it quickly and angrily, not knowing what letter to turn to. She glanced furtively at the obituaries in the paper the next morning but quickly grew frustrated, as she didn't know what name to look for.

* * *

Two blocks away from the café, and up two flights of paint-peeling stairs, Paul waited. He sat in his apartment, keeping the window open until the breezes got too cold. His feet were restless without their daily walk. The voluminous cast covered his left leg, stretching from ankle to thigh. He tottered around the three rooms, unbalanced, eating canned pasta and peanut-butter sandwiches.

From time to time he sat by the window, pressing his face against the glass, and watching the people move to and fro in their busy lives. He couldn't see their shoes that well from the second story, and he rarely saw their faces. Nevertheless, he watched them make their journeys down the street, crossing over the same cracks every day and passing some of the same people in their morning routines. Somehow, Paul managed to find a way to be a part of those routines even when his own was broken, from this overhead perspective. He watched their shoes carry them on errands and back and forth from school, their lives a vivid movie of the constant trust that people use with footwear, regardless of their ability to return the favor to their shoes.

No one looked up to Paul's window during their travels on the sidewalk below. Children played with chalk, focusing intently on each curve they added to the concrete, and grandmothers pushed baby carriages, avoiding bumps and cracks in the ground. Paul began to stay away from the window, his eyes drifting instead to the unimaginative television, its volume turned to a mere mumble.

Paul was sitting upright in his armchair, leg stretched in front of him on a footstool, when a sharp knock sounded on the door to his apartment. He called out to the faceless visitor.

"Come right in. Come right on in."

An older woman pushed her way through the door, laden with a paper grocery bag. She glanced down at Paul, who had turned around as best as he could in the chair, a delighted smile growing on his face.

"And this food, it will go on the kitchen counter as usual, yes?" she asked, her thick Russian accent dominating her preoccupied voice.

Paul told her that that sounded just fine. He thanked her again and again

for coming to see him each week.

"Bah!" she said, hushing him with her hand. "One door away, it is not far to come. Besides, you are almost ready to get that thing off your leg now, yes?"

Paul nodded, and she briskly added that he should call a taxi to bring him to the doctor's at the end of the week. Paul smiled that night as he fell asleep. The waiting was over.

* * *

The woman in the flowered robe no longer looked expectantly for the silver-haired man when she retrieved her paper in the mornings. It had been a month since she had last seen him, and she had reconciled herself to reporting back to her goldfish about the weather. It made for highly uninteresting conversation compared to the routine with Paul that had unwittingly become part of her life.

Paul's absence had begun in March, and it was now the beginning of May. It had sprinkled some rain overnight, and the paper was waiting at the bottom of the steps in a droplet-covered plastic bag. The woman in the flowered robe bent down to shake off the wet residue. She straightened her back and stopped halfway up, her eyes riveted on strands of silver hair. She hesitated for a moment before opening her mouth to speak.

"Lovely morning, isn't it?"

Paul took a moment to respond, his eyes focused on her slippers. The woman hesitated, and opened her mouth only to shut it again. With a sudden flourish, he lifted his head.

"Just about the prettiest I've ever seen." He continued on his way, but after ten steps, the woman called out "Wait!" She dropped the paper in her effort to catch up with him.

"I'm Trish." She held out her hand, moving slowly. He looked at it for a moment and saw the beginnings of wrinkles and a calloused roughness from dishwashing.

"Paul here," he smiled, and shook her hand.

The two-block walk was taking Paul longer than it used to. The bright city sidewalk was a different world from the tiny apartment that had been his

cage for the past eight weeks and he had reintroduce himself to its inner workings. By the time he got to the corner, the bus had just arrived. The bus stop man was boarding the stairs and Paul could not call out to him, not having a name to use. Paul ceased walking for a moment, his eyes riveted on the bus that had always come after he was sitting in the café. As the door closed creakily, Paul looked up and saw the bus stop man gazing out the window. Their eyes met, and the bus stop man blanched as if seeing a ghost. As the wheels began turning as the bus pulled away from the curb, Paul waved, gaining enthusiasm as he evoked a hint of a smile from the bus stop man, the first that he had seen in their long history of acknowledging the forecast.

Paul sat down on the bench, filling its vacancy. His leg was complaining a little. He rocked his feet back on the heels a number of times, the rubber soles of the graying Reeboks hitting the ground with a gentle thud over and over again.

He was still sitting there when the dog walker crossed the street. Paul heard the yapping of the smallest dog and swiveled his head, his eyes brightening at the sight of the four canines. The dog walker had noticed his baseball cap by the time she'd reached the middle of the street, but it had been too late to turn back. Her fingernails were lime green today, and they glinted in the morning light as her fingers wrapped tightly around the thick leashes. Paul stood up and began to pet the largest dog. He worked his way over to the next two, and stopped when he got to the fourth. He looked expectantly up at the dog walker. She hesitated. Two months ago she would have told him that she had no time.

"They missed you," she told him instead. Paul smiled and spoke in gibberish to the fourth dog, whose tail indicated that he understood him perfectly. The woman paused and readied herself to tug on the leashes.

"Hey, what have you been doing? Where have you been?" she asked.

"Waiting," he answered.

* * *

It was one of the most crowded mornings that the café had had in months. Orders streaming in, people bumping into one another. Linda rushed

around, temper short and heart rate high. She paced over to empty the garbage can when she almost bumped into a man blocking the doorway. Without looking up, she muttered a robotic apology.

"That's all right. That's just quite all right," returned Paul.

Linda stood frozen for a moment, her eyes fixed on the face that she hadn't seen in over two months. She asked him again and again what had happened and got short responses coupled with content smiles.

"And what can I do for you? What do you want? Pick anything. Anything at all, it's on the house."

"Well, now, I'll be happy just to sit in that seat over there, just over there. Maybe some tea in a while, if you like, but not just yet. No, not just yet."

Throughout the morning, Linda stole glances at the table by the window. Paul sat enshrined in his thoughts as he caught up on all the shoes that he had missed in two months. He slipped into the shadows of the corner, and not a single pair of shoes stopped to see what the green awnings sheltered.

■ RACHEL RICHARDSON

A Cloud of Elk

They were naked, and they sat with their backs against the wall and their legs out. She'd wrapped a sheet around her shoulders, but only to pad against the tacks that held Patrick's posters of paintings he'd never seen and bands he rarely listened to. The tacks still dug into her, and she squirmed, eyeing Patrick beside her, but he was transfixed by the television and took no notice.

He wasn't really watching the figures on the screen, but the blue electric light as it flickered and shifted over Lottie's legs. Her ankles were turned inwards, and her chipped biggest toenail met the other in a point. Her skin was neon in the light, and he could draw visual lines from the dot of a mole between her toes to the tattoo she'd penned on her ankle. He could see the cuts from where she'd nicked herself shaving, and the hairs where she had missed, and he wondered whether he could see all her hairs in this glow: the pale down of her arms, the imperceptible peach fuzz below her navel. He shifted towards the TV.

Lottie sighed and crept away from the wall, taking the sheet with her. A tug-of-war ensued, silent but for the canned laughter on the television, and Lottie won, leaving Patrick exposed. He turned away from her, and she sighed louder, wrapping the sheet around her and crossing her legs, perched like a tiny idol on the cotton altar of Patrick's bed.

"Can't we please turn that off?"

He wouldn't face her, and she spoke to the brown of the back of his head.

"You know we can't." Absently, he felt behind him for a pillow, trying to hide his naked backside.

"Come on, Patrick. We're not even doing anything, and she's two stories away—"

"One."

She wanted him to turn and look at her, admire her face, the mess of her

hair piled on top, pinned with bobby pins found in the sheets, but he was resolutely glued to the box. She let a foot emerge from her tent and kicked him squarely in the spine.

"Two, Patrick—we're on the third floor, she's on the first."

"This house echoes. You know that."

Patrick's mother slept downstairs, when she slept at all. Patrick's room had always been on the top floor of the decrepit farmhouse, but there was still an attic above them, and a cellar two floors below. Lottie had spent countless silent dawns poking through the creaky corridors and opening doors, fascinated by its emptiness. She found rooms full of forgotten furniture: an abandoned bassinet, a piano with missing keys, a pile of broken dining room chairs. She hadn't been exploring since Patrick's father had died, not because she knew the insides of the house like she knew the outsides of the boy who lived on its third floor, but because she was afraid of finding his ghost – or worse, his sleepless wife.

"Then why don't we go to the attic? There's a bed up there. Then we'll be three floors away."

"The laundry chute runs from there to the basement; it's practically an intercom. And that place gives me the creeps. It always has."

She crawled over to him, placing her chin in the hollow of his neck.

"Come on," she pleaded, nipping his ear. "It'll be fun."

Patrick turned the volume up.

Lottie threw off the sheet and stormed across the puddles of discarded clothing to her red coat in the corner. Outside she could see the stretching Montana landscape: the field behind Patrick's house, the gravel drive where she'd parked her teal pick-up, the pines that grew all the way up the mountains. She fumbled in her coat pockets to find her pack and hastily lit up.

Patrick resolutely ignored his sprig of a girl stomping naked around the room, but the flare of the lighter yanked his eyes to her form, half-hidden in the dim of the TV. The flame only showed her face, her eyes lowered, her dark brows furrowed.

"You can't smoke in here." His words were flat, his tone tight; he knew that she knew.

“I’ll crack a window,” she retorted, the cigarette dangling in the corner of her lips.

“It’s freezing out, Lottie.”

“Then I’ll go outside.”

She left the door open as she left, still naked. Patrick didn’t try to stop her. The shaft of hallway light was unkind to the dim, messy bedroom; the wisps of smoke vanished in the dark. Patrick stared at the TV, but it was only staring. Sighing, he wound the sheet around him and stared at the ceiling instead, tripping back through his memory to how this had begun.

The first time Lottie slept over, they’d plotted her escape: when to wake up, how to leave her pick-up in neutral until the rusty engine was out of earshot of the house. They’d overslept, and snuck downstairs, feigning innocence, only to find the turned back of Patrick’s mother as she washed dishes. Lottie accepted the offered cup of coffee while Patrick mumbled something about her being too sleepy to drive last night, how she slept on the floor anyway. His mother didn’t respond until the pick-up had rattled down the dirt road, and then she only offered to wash his sheets.

And then his father died.

Lottie didn’t sleep over for a week or so after the funeral. Patrick hadn’t felt like it, anyway. The impression of the knot of his tie lingered around his neck, choking him, a reminder of how choked he’d felt all through the service. Lottie came over for lunch one afternoon while his mother was out buying groceries, a task his father usually undertook. Patrick had apologized for the lack of food in the house, and Lottie shrugged, already unwinding the bread bag and laying out four slices on the countertop. The crumbs landed on her sweater, but Patrick didn’t bother to tell her, to brush them off himself. They ate in silence, chewing across the table from one another, until midway through the meal he’d mentioned the debris clinging to her blue wool and they’d scrambled upstairs, half-mad with the absence of each other. Breathless, gasping, limbs hanging over the edge of the bed, Patrick was striving just to keep up when he thought he heard the slam of the back porch door. Panicking, he’d grabbed a pillow and forced it over Lottie’s gaping mouth, smothering her.

Shame blushed over Patrick as he remembered the moment, how Lottie had flailed, the prod of her sharp knuckles in his shoulders as she punched, how loud she was though her squirming voice fought through her throat, her lips, the cotton and feathers of the pillow. Afterwards, it was all he could do to keep her in the room, finally pinning her hands together with one of his own, and they’d argued and apologized in stage whispers.

So the TV had been settled upon. They’d keep it on, keep it loud, adding noise to noise: the chatter of sitcom characters, the applause of studio audiences, the tiny shriek of the electricity of the device itself. Lottie’s own bed was a mountain away, a gas tank she could barely afford to fill already. Besides, Patrick couldn’t bear the thought of his mother, wandering the empty house by herself in her old floral bathrobe, the lone bird trapped in an enormous, empty cage. And now Lottie had flown.

In his empty bed, Patrick rolled over, crushing the remote under his ribs, and the television turned off.

Lottie did not go directly outside, but loitered in the first floor bathroom. Her cigarette lay balanced on the windowsill, smoking through the inch she’d dared to crack open. The draft was minor but brutal; October in Montana and her bare skin felt dead with cold. She wished she’d had the sense to snatch her coat, and glowered at the ceiling even as she shivered.

The bathroom was the almost yellow of the countryside, faded with age. Once, she imagined, it had been bright, like her hair as a child, blinding in the summer sunshine, the glare of winter’s snow. She was only eighteen, but her hair had already been through the entire spectrum of blond, from the lemon of childhood to the dull gold of now. Soon, she thought, it would be the muted, nearly brown of her mother’s, and blond only in name. Patrick’s hair had undergone a similar shift to its current oak-bark color, or so she’d gathered from stolen tours through family photo albums. She wondered, on her drives to and from the farmhouse, just what their children would someday look like. She hoped they’d have the kindness of his face, his grey-blue eyes, the youth of her skin. He’d aged since the funeral; she half-expected to find a strand of silver in his hair. But she would always appear younger than him, she knew, as she looked at herself in the bathroom mirror, her chin,

her collarbone, the flat plate of chest before her breasts. There were faint lines along her forehead, ingrained from frowning. Too often Patrick had coaxed her to smile, and she did so now in the mirror, but the expression was forced, a mere baring of teeth, not even straight. She pinched her cigarette from the windowsill and took a drag, watching herself, how her eyes squinted as she inhaled forming crow's feet at the temples, the ugly shape of her mouth as she breathed smoke on her reflection. Her hand stole towards the hair that had fallen around her neck, unpinned and soft, before reaching out and flipping the light off, her face disappearing.

She was careful with the screen door, familiar with the slow crash of its closing, like a wave on the ocean, or what she imagined a wave to be, since she had never seen one in life. There were photographs of Patrick standing on some Carolina beach as a pot-bellied child, brown hair gone black with dripping seawater. His mother was also in the photograph, a frizzy-haired shadow with hands on its hips, ready to scold her son the instant he splashed too far.

On the porch, Lottie covered her chest, saving whatever warmth her twig of an arm would give. The cigarette provided no heat, but smoking it gave her something to do, and she closed her eyes, trying to be on the beach, as small as Patrick. She imagined the water, warm as it flowed over her bare feet. It nearly worked; she heard the waves, the shrieks of the sand-castle architects as they watched the ocean devouring their work, the warnings of parents hovering nearby, the boom of Patrick's father as he towered over them, camera in hand.

She hadn't known his father beyond introduction, but she liked him. He made his wife laugh. He had the same face as Patrick. He had a beard, which had frosted over as he lay dead in the meadow at the back of the house, his heart stilled.

Lottie started as the porch light sputtered to life, illuminating her prickling skin; she expected Patrick's bear of a father to fill the doorway, but it was Patrick's shoulders, broadened by his pea coat. He carried Lottie's own coat, the red of brick chimneys and just as smoky, draped over his arm like a towel. Leaning out of the doorway, he offered it to her, and Lottie squashed

her cigarette, burned to nearly nothingness, against the side of the house and grudgingly accepted. Her fingers had gone numb, making each button-hole a battle, an excuse not to look at him.

Patrick stepped out to join her, the screen door banging behind him. Lottie glanced at him as the slam echoed across the field, but his face was impassive. They stood in silence for a time, Lottie concentrating on the return of blood into her limbs, Patrick feeling the ice in the air, both of them eyeing one another. Patrick tried not to see how the cold pulled out the pink in Lottie's cheeks. Lottie bit back a scoff, seeing Patrick's naked legs beneath the hem of his coat, the hair on his toes as he stepped over and placed his against hers, her chipped biggest toenail ungainly, ungirlly across from his. She kept her face down, thinking he would kiss her, but he merely reached in her pocket for a cigarette and turned away.

"Patrick," she said, stuffing her hands in her pockets, unfeeling to the fingertips. His back was turned, shoulders hunched. "Is this working?"

At times, she thought the answer would have been of course, the question itself unthinkable; they'd proven they were built for one another, that they fit, but there were other times, when she'd screamed behind a pillow, leaned cold and uncomfortable against the side of the house, when she wondered how they'd ever come together in the first place.

Patrick didn't answer. It was the first time he had thought of them from outside; logically, with cold practicality. The question was surprising, but that was Lottie: surprising to the point of scaring. She'd throw rocks at his windows, bring a basket for a picnic in the pines, but she'd stare off into the trees sometimes, she'd stomp from the room wearing nothing. He wondered if one day she wouldn't lock herself in the bathroom until dawn as he pounded and called from the other side, if he wouldn't open the door to find her facedown in the bathtub, drowned.

"Patrick?" she asked again. Suddenly her hand was clamped around his arm, squeezing. "Patrick, look!" she whispered, pointing out to the field. A slow herd of elk had gathered, dozens of them, ambling across the field, a stone's throw from the porch. They passed like clouds over the meadow in a somber procession, barely visible in the darkness, but Patrick could see

the shadow of towering antlers, hear the clapping of their hooves, even the canter of the smallest ones, prancing beside their mothers.

“I’ve never seen so many,” Lottie breathed, wonder-eyed, her question already forgotten. “Where do you think they’re going?”

“The woods,” said Patrick flatly, but Lottie was not deterred. She bit her lips, trying to stand as silently as she could, but Patrick wasn’t looking. He only knew she was gone when her hand stopped squeezing his sleeve, when the warmth of contact ebbed away. Seeing her bounce down the steps, he started to call out to her, but her name caught in his throat, and he welcomed the return of the lump that hadn’t left him in weeks.

She meant for him to follow her, he knew, but he stood guard against the house, pointedly watching his cigarette burn. She would come back. Of course she would come back. She was following a herd of elk into the woods for who knew what reason, and she’d turn around sometime and come back. Her clothes were still scattered across his bedroom floor. He could still smell her in his sheets.

Patrick looked out at the mountains, the empty field, her pick-up, dead and waiting. In his pocket, his hand waited for Lottie’s return, the interlock of fingers, the way she had when she stood beside him in the graveyard, as they watched the box holding his father lowered into the dirt. He would wake up tomorrow with her hands in his. Of course he would. She would be there, like she was the night his father died, banging on the door and finally pounding it open to wrench the bottle from his hand, prying his fingers open to expose the pills that never made it to his mouth, replacing everything with herself, filling his hands and mouth and him.

Patrick dropped the cigarette and did not feel it burn the sole of his foot as he ran to follow her. His coat came off in running and crumpled to the ground beside hers, and there it would stay until morning.

▪ RACHEL RICHARDSON

Your Ghost

Your ghost comes across the lake at sundown, sailing a gondola draped in Christmas lights and Easter garlands. You stand at the bow with your foot on the prow, a tall, spider-legged phantom captain. You could have stepped from the frame of a Waterhouse painting, your specialty study before you shot yourself two-hundred pages into your dissertation.

I didn’t want you to find me here. I moved to this shoreline shack twenty-eight miles from Ely so you wouldn’t. The locals in the next town over had to teach me how to say it: E-lee. “Like Robert,” said Hans.

Hans runs a canoe shop and wears shirts with too many pockets; you would critique him like a portrait, but I like the way he phrases things. He may be my only friend outside of Roscoe, who misses walking around Harvard Yard with you, chasing the Ivy League squirrels and flirting with the girls.

“Got any spooks at yer place yet?” asked Hans last time I saw him, at the only restaurant open at 11:30 on Route 85. “I wouldna bunked there less’n I was fixing to freeze, donchaknow. That lake—out of all our ten thousand, that one gives me the heebie-jeebies.”

This whole land gives me the heebie-jeebies, I wanted to say, between the eerie hoot of the loons on the lake and the shadows that could be bears in the trees. Hans offered to paddle me around, out to Ladybird Island, the favorite campsite of Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson. He found out I was “into” history, the way you would say you were “into” art, and he shares a hundred facts with me whenever we meet. He doesn’t know you died, though he knows about loneliness—he is a widower of thirty-three years. He thinks I am summering here, though the first creeps of frost are beginning to form on the lake.

I see your ghost from where I stand at the kitchen sink, washing what few dishes I brought from Boston while Roscoe sleeps against the fridge. You

glide over the mirror-flat water and perch your boat against the rocky beach. There are snakes out there, fish as big as whales, but you stand in your festival boat until it's dark and the mosquitoes have gone to bed.

"I don't like it here," you told me in our meager queen-sized bed on Massachusetts Avenue, bought second-hand on two grad-student's incomes. "I don't think I can breathe."

"It isn't Nebraska," I quipped back again and again, angry that we were slowly sliding into debt, that you wouldn't marry me until we were more settled, that you didn't feel the emptiness where our baby should have been. But I should have told you to breathe through me, to hold onto me, that we weren't adrift like a schooner on the plains. We couldn't afford your prescriptions anymore, but you swore they were souvenirs from a lousy adolescence, a crutch when you could walk just fine.

I don't know where you got the gun. Maybe from your father's toolshed in Nebraska the last time you visited. Maybe from a Southie by the Charles, a kid hustling to buy an ounce of weed. Or maybe from one of your many undergraduates, desperate to make tuition, terrified of the world beyond the class walls.

Your ghost does not have a hole in his chest—he is you on any Tuesday, playing professor in a sweater and tweeds. I do not talk to him, but Roscoe barks and whines at the door, scaring the woods into a silence that keeps me awake all night.

When November comes, I will have Thanksgiving dinner with Hans and his burly, blond children; he'll have a son who is recently divorced, who helps me put on my coat when I leave. Back in the cottage, the lake will be frozen, a plane of white ice from beach to beach. You'll be standing on the water, in ice skates and your gray pea coat buttoned to the neck. And I will address you, saying it isn't you, telling you to go away, explaining I came here to read and forget and leave you in your plot, under the dirt in Nebraska, buried beside your mother.

"I know," you will say. "Just come skate with me."

I'll tell you that's how we began, falling into each other on the rink at Boston Commons, nearly spraining your ankle.

"No," you'll say. "That's how we end."

And I'll walk towards your hand, stopping where the land meets the ice, and ask, "But what if we fall through?"

"You won't fall through," you'll say as I step onto the lake. "You won't."

▪ EILEEN RIVERA

First Rudiments

He imagined a certain right, having had this one brought forth from within, the aching absence of a rib just below his heart. The perplexity that she could stray so far...was not she anchored to him?

Love isn't a weight, she'd try to tell him with fingers that reached and silent lips against lips. It's what brings me back, away from hissing trees and fruit that sing with the promise of light.

He'd hold her vainly, a foreign body against his own. Soft and shapely, hard to grasp, till finally she slips and tastes sin first. He accepts the afterthought, the offering of an apple.

▪ KATE SHERIDAN

The Shoes

Harold M. Shapiro had been lying naked in bed, thinking of shoes (both the ones he sold in the shoe store where he worked, and the kind that he would like to see on the feet of a beautiful woman) for well over an hour. Suddenly, he heard the unmistakable suction sound of his refrigerator opening in the kitchen. He sat up straight and strained to hear the hum of the machine, coupled with the clink of bottles and jars as they bumped into one another, as somebody rummaged through his leftovers. He might not have believed that he was actually hearing all this, but he was forced to when the loud *crack, fizzle* of a beer can being opened traveled down the hall and into his ear.

He jumped at the sound of it. Silently, he got up and put on a bathrobe. Not one for sports, Harold did not own a baseball bat or golf club with which to threaten an intruder. He would have to hope that if a confrontation arose, he would have an opportunity to reach for something in the kitchen.

Staring at the Bud Light can that floated in the air before his fridge, Harold saw that ordinary weapons would be of no use to him. In the dim moonlight he thought he saw a shimmering figure flicker and then fade away again. He thought he knew who the apparition was.

"Jesus, Harold, you look like shit," it said, and his fears were confirmed. An invisible hand tipped the can to an invisible mouth. It was hard to tell where the liquid went from there; the form of Harold's late wife Edie could be seen at certain moments and not at others. She drank a lot in life as well, and she was just as elusive then as now.

"What are you doing here?" Harold asked in a whisper, positively shaking with fear. Had anyone else been there in kitchen with him, they would have regarded him as crazy. That's what they call you when you talk to ghosts, and he knew that as well as anybody.

"Oh, Harold, get off my back," her disembodied voice said. "Look, I'm hav-

ing a beer, alright? And then I'm just going to check my messages and grab a few things. Okay?"

Harold began to sweat. Her annoyance was disconcerting. After all, she was dead. Murdered, no less!

"But— but—"

The voice, Edie's voice, made a disgusted, impatient noise. "You're as incompetent as ever!" She turned away from him. Harold could vaguely see her in the light from the fridge, which she had opened to get another beer. "What an insipid husband I had," she mumbled, casually tossing the empty can into the sink.

Small, outraged noises escaped Harold's pursed lips. His anger at her was not and had never been the anger of a real man. It was a wonder, really, that he had managed to kill her at all. For most of their marriage he had acted like a child, despite his extra weight and the bald spot that crowned his head.

"But I killed you!" He shouted. "I smothered you with a pillow last night, remember? You're *dead!*" He clenched his fists, but he could never have mustered the courage to strike her, even if he had thought his hand would connect to anything of substance. Smothering her had been one thing, but challenging her outright was something entirely different.

His desperate panting sounded silly in contrast to Edie's calm, almost bored sigh.

"Must it always be about you, Harold?" She moved from the kitchen back towards the bedroom. He could feel her presence as it passed him. He followed it.

Once or twice as they moved down the hall, Harold could discern Edie's wavering shape, blue-silver and translucent. She made no noise at all and it occurred to him that she was barefoot. She flickered out of sight again and he watched the Bud Light make its way to the bedroom.

How could this be happening? Harold wondered. After all, he had executed the actual logistics of the murder perfectly. He had come to the decision to kill Edie relatively easily; it had only been a matter of pulling it off. Indeed, he had done everything impeccably well; he'd even hidden the

body properly, late the night before. Naturally, he had spent all day thinking that he had succeeded. "And now *this?*" he said aloud, though Edie did not condescend to listen.

He reached the doorway and entered, seating himself back on the bed. Edie was sitting next to him, imperceptible.

"What do you want from me?" He cowered in a corner. Edie smiled, and for a brief moment Harold could make out the whiteness of her teeth in the dim bedroom. He shivered.

"Oh, hush up," Edie said. "I just want to see who's been asking after me."

The cell phone on the nightstand was lifted and brought to where her ear might have been. Harold sat down on the bed again, his mouth hanging open in disbelief, so that he looked like a pitiful little fish. His vocabulary seemed to have diminished to that of a fish as well, as he could not find a single word to say. All he could do was listen to the faint voice of a man on the voicemail that Edie now listened to.

"Leave that loser," he heard. "Meet me tomorrow night."

It was his suspicion of this kind of infidelity that had driven Harold to murder. He had spent many years thinking that he'd had Edie under his thumb, that she loved him, that it pleased her to indulge his sometimes unusual fantasies. But for months he had noticed a hatred in her eyes that had made him self-conscious at first and later, enraged. He could not stand the criticism, so, the previous night, he had smothered her while she slept. Smothered the disgust she held for him.

"Well, what did you expect, Harold?" She said when he questioned her about the man. "You made me wear shoes in *bed*, for crying out loud! It was actually pretty repulsive, Harold."

He gasped, indignant. "Edith, that's ridiculous. I just appreciate fine shoes and fine feet to fill them. There's nothing repulsive about that at all."

The cell phone snapped shut almost in the same instant that the closet door flew open.

"Just look at all these shoes!" Edie cried. And in truth, there were at least forty pairs sitting in neat rows on the shelves inside. "I don't care if you got them for free at the store," she said hastily as Harold tried to protest. "I

never wanted these shoes, you— you— foot fetishist!

“I only came to get my favorite ones,” she said scathingly as she pulled a shoebox that Harold had never seen from the back of the closet.

He was shocked. He watched it all happen but could not speak nor move. He had killed her and it had come down to this.

And though he could not see her, Harold could hear the tap of her stilettos— the stilettos that, in life, she would have never worn for him— as she sauntered down the hall and out the front door.

▪ JESSICA SCHNEIDMAN

The Song I Sung for Mama

Tonight we're playing at The Black Swan Bar and Billiards. Mama lets me hit a plastic tambourine against my thigh while she strums her old acoustic and sings, long and sad, to the same old folk songs we listen to on our car radio as we drive between bars, coffee places and public libraries, up and down this great, big state.

Tonight the bar was full of plaid backs and dusty boots. I watched their bleary eyes gazing through the dim light and each other; through to the peeling walls and faded photographs of glamorous cars and glamorous women, long since rusted or rotted and passed away. They had stopped listening to Mama long ago, turning their attention from her borrowed words of heartbreak and abandon in favor of the exaggerated tales of long past glory they told each other, and their own soundtracks of failures and defeats which looped through their minds.

Mama put down her guitar in the middle of the song. She didn't even look back at me, she just swayed across the floor with her last sips of whiskey and took a stool at the bar. I watched as the bartender refilled her glass and then turned slowly to switch on the dusty old stereo behind him, thumbing a worn dial until the smoky air was filled once again with a familiar rhythm.

It felt too hot and too early to sit in the backseat of the station wagon with my rolled up sweatshirt as pillow, sleeping and waiting for Mama to drive us home.

The microphone was still on. I sat there, in the corner, with its feedback buzzing and vibrating up and down my spine. I just wanted to stand in front of it for a little while. No one watched as I stood up and held the microphone between my hands, feeling the electricity. I closed my eyes like Mama did. I breathed in deep into my belly and felt a release of pressure, like a big golden bubble, a scream rising up from the bottom of the ocean. It rose up from my gut, up through my chest, and when it hit the surface it was song.

■ A. TAYLOR

Her Silver Spheres

Her body seems heavy. The fabric of her dress comes to life. Wrapping itself around her, it pulls and pulls.

Downward.

Her foot sways, scraping the darkness of infinity that expands below her. Looking at it, she wonders why it has done so. She has no intention of fighting the darkness's slow, strong embrace.

She looks above. Tiny silver spheres flit around. They are beautiful, she decides. And playful. They wobble through the streaks of sun—stealing its brilliance and making it their own. This is only in jest, though, for they quickly wobble back out again. She imagines the sun shaking its shining dome in parental wonder at their self-amusing antics. She smiles as she pictures it.

She looks upward—now past the silver spheres and into the sun itself. She stares and stares. A fire-flash of light. The silver spheres all glow now—star-like. They twist, spin and spiral—mixing with the sun until only a swirl of white light consumes her vision.

* * *

Rain glanced off of the window pane. The rhythmic sound of its tapping seemed to pull her into some kind of strange daze as she watched the cars rush past.

Her legs were pulled up under her. She had nicked one of them that morning and hadn't noticed—now there was blood on the corner of her cotton dress. This was the best dress she had—she couldn't change.

Hopefully, she thought, he won't notice.

Her forehead rested against the cool glass. She played with her breath. She puffed air through her nostrils—fogging the glass. How had he done that before? She pursed her lips, squeezing them on the pane. With a huff, she pulled away. There it was! Chuckling, she watched as the little foggy-heart

vanished from the glass as quickly as it had come.

The phone was ringing.

Startled, she jumped to her feet. Clambering over discarded pillows—her mother always stuffed the window seat too full for anyone's comfort—she raced to answer it.

"Hello?" she asks, reluctantly.

Someone poses her name as a question—the voice she was afraid of finding. She mumbles a consent.

"Look, I'm sorry—but I can't make it tonight."

"Oh."

"Don't be mad."

"No—no, I'm not."

"Something came up—Chris called. It turns out tonight is on. I know you've been counting on this all week, but, I mean, we could always go next weekend anyway. Besides, it's not like..."

"—It's fine, really. I wasn't ready to go yet anyway."

"Okay. Well I'll call you later then, alright?" He doesn't ask her to come with him—he never does. And she never asks why.

"Okay," is all she says, "have fun."

"Alright, I gotta go then—Chris is waiting for me. Bye."

He hung up the phone—didn't bother to wait for her good-bye. She dropped the phone back on the stand. Her hand lingered there for a moment, as she stared at the wall. The wall stared blankly back at her. It was never very helpful.

* * *

The light vanishes. His face replaces it. She looks away from the surface, pulling her gaze downward. He follows her. Ghost-like, he floats there. All she can do is watch him.

His wavy hair is perfect. It isn't pulled by his motions as hers is. She can feel each strand drifting away from her scalp. It is strange how alive each piece of her was now—as if they all were reaching out, grasping at anything that might pull them away from her and preserve them. They can go, she decides. Her body does not matter now anyway.

Still, he floats there.

His eyes are as blue as the distance that surrounds. They burn her own. They aren't as blue as that distance—they are bluer. Too blue. They don't belong here.

* * *

She lay alone. The curtain fluttered. Light flitted in, brushing her eyes. It was cold. The sheets twisted around her frame, not doing much to warm her.

He had left. He hadn't woken her when he left. She didn't know what time it was.

She got up, fumbling in the dimly lit room for her clothes. There was blood on her leg again. This time she noticed.

The door closed behind her. She hoped she hadn't forgotten anything—she didn't have a key.

Flipping open her phone, she called his number. She wanted to say good morning. He didn't answer. Though prompted, she didn't leave a message. He never listened to them.

The street was loud. Cars blew by—leaving a rush of cool Fall air in her midst. Were the seasons confused? She wondered. It was barely mid-August.

She hated Fall. The leaves clashed. Those colors were supposed to be hidden. The golds and browns and reds, deep reds. She had hidden them—Nature had. They should be hidden. During Fall the breeze only played at smelling like Winter. That annoyed her. If Winter must come it should come quickly and completely with its cold. She hated the cold—the idea of cold, the loneliness of cold. She hated Fall. Let August be.

Shivering, she thought of how warm he had felt last night.

She closed her eyes. She had felt more than his warmth then. He had too.

He must have.

* * *

He stares at her. She looks into those too-blue eyes. She tries to read them. They drift slowly upward. Or maybe she drifts downward. Maybe they both do.

She searches his eyes. But she doesn't find what she wants. She never do. She has waited and waited. But she never does.

She never did.

And she drifts downward.

* * *

She was waiting again. Always waiting.

Why? Why did she wait?

What if someday it changed? He changed. She waited because she did not know what else to do.

They were meeting today at the pier. Sometimes they walked along the docks. She loved the smell of the ocean. The water was deep here. The waves swelled from below, making long, reaching grasps at the people above. Always almost clutching something—someone. Then subsiding back into the deep.

Her phone rang. She hesitated. He was supposed to meet her. He was always supposed to meet her. She was there. Where was he?

Her phone rang.

She opened it, not looking at the number—she didn't have to.

“Hi.” Was all she said.

He answered. She listened a little to the explanation, but not really. She was always listening. There was silence on the other end. She paused. She always paused, always hesitated. Something about today was different. Today she hesitated, but today she asked.

Silence.

Did he love her? She loved him—they both knew that. But did he love her? He still hesitates. Finally—

“Yeah. Babe, I do.”

But he doesn't say it. She knows he never will.

Down below, the ocean slowly churned, reaching.

Always reaching.

* * *

The sun leaves her. She has drifted too far. He cannot reach her. No one can reach her.

She looks above—searching for any glimpse of him. She knows now that the depths hold her. She feels their cold embrace.

Her mouth opens. A few of those silver spheres had hidden there. Now

they dance above her. Drifting upward, drifting downward.

They drift apart.

The spheres whirl and wobble as she watches them. Too far now, they are only specks of light—stars that she will never reach.

Never looking away, her lips separate again and she inhales the surrounding darkness. It embraces her mouth, her tongue, her throat, her lungs.

It embraces all of her.

It embraces her because he never could.

He never would.

▪ ELIZA TIMPSON

The Furnace

He had already been sitting in the car when the call came. The flannel blanket covered every inch of his body and the book rested on the plastic steering wheel before him. He noticed too late and before he could press down on the lock that his father had thrown open the car door, grabbed his shoulder and hurled him onto the ground. It had taken all his patience to convince his father that the weather was bad and the man was in no state to drive. He assured the glazed red-eyes that he would take the call. Since there was still beer left in the fridge, he had been met with little resistance.

Now, sitting in front of her, he suspected he had just left one disaster for another. She had come out to meet him in bare feet, and a bluish tint was beginning snake up her ankles, attacking the white of her flesh.

Her lips were colorful in the way a woman's eyes were meant to be. Her eyes were dead. The men, who sat on bar stools, eating peanuts and sipping bud light, would have told her that her green eyes were beautiful. She would have hated that: beautiful. He knew already; instead he would tell her that her lips were the color of bricks and blueberries swirled together and sanded into something touchable.

He coughed, clearing his throat in his best attempt at professionalism. "I understand your heat won't turn down?"

"That was the old problem. Now it won't turn on."

He wanted to ask her if she was cold, wanted to ask her why she was nearly naked, exposed in the snow and the wind. Following her into the house, he wanted to teach her that this kind of cold was dangerous.

"You know, when my dad got the call, he thought it was a prank. No one has lived here for so long. We almost didn't come. You could have frozen to death."

"I hate the heat anyway."

"Well I guess you don't have to worry 'bout that. It's never hot here."

“What is your name?”

“Sam.”

“I used to live in Florida, until last week. Have you ever even seen a palm tree, Sam?”

“No.”

“Would you like to?”

“I guess.”

He tried to fix the heat. Down in the basement she stood close to him, her bare feet on the damp cement, her shoulders hovering precariously on the precipice of air that distanced her body from his.

His breath came in shudders, and she wondered if he was nervous. She watched his fingers catch on the rusted metal, and she decided she was sorry she had sworn at him in the car. The heat would not fix, or rather, he could not fix the heat. She did not know if she wanted him to. The sound of his breathing reminded her of something familiar. It was not sexual like the sound of a man sleeping in bed beside her; it came in slow rushes that tugged on his chest and shoulders. She thought it sounded lonely in the quiet of the cellar.

“Shit.”

“Do you have a girlfriend, Sam?”

“No—well, kinda. I don’t know. Shit, I should have brought some more tools. Miss—ma’am I don’t think I’m gonna be able to—”

“Why not miss? Do you think I’m married?”

“Oh. Sorry. No. I mean, I don’t know. Are you?”

“No. What’s her name, your girlfriend?”

“Well she isn’t really my girlfriend or anything, see I just—”

“What’s her name?”

“Annie.”

The furnace quivered and conversation stopped. She gasped, sending a warm foggy steam into the darkness. The noise of the furnace stopped, and now they were both unsure of what would happen. Frustration crept into his face, and he brought his hands to his head. As he tugged back on his matted

hair, she could make out the faint line of a scar, a faded indentation stretching down his forehead.

“Don’t tug on your hair, Sam.”

“Sorry?”

“It makes you look old.” She took his hands in hers and brought them down to his sides. Her fingertips felt like ice on his skin. “Sometimes I feel old. That is why I came back here. You don’t want to feel that way.” She laughed, but when the sound echoed off the walls it was sad and unnatural.

“Ma’am, what are you doing here?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “That was rude.”

“No. Say it.”

“Well, I guess I never heard that the Turners sold the place, and it being a small town and all, I just didn’t know—”

“They didn’t sell it,” she began, but held her self back, “I am a Turner. I’m Rick’s daughter.”

He remembered her then, she had been at the funeral. The autumn leaves crunched beneath his dress shoes, and head seen her in black with the sunglasses and shiny hair. His sister had complained that the Turner girl was a snob, didn’t even come to the reception for her own father—*too good for this town, that bitch*. Secretly he watched her; she had been like a character from a book, returning to her hometown for one last goodbye before she began her grand adventure.

There was so much to ask her. She had captured him, and he followed without resistance, allowed her to bring him upstairs and place him at her kitchen table. Now he stared across the table at the thin straps of her nightgown with a cup of coffee in his hands. When he told his girl, Annie, that he loved her, this is what he had imagined. Realistically, it would have been a trailer and the table would have been made of plastic, not wood. But coffee and stares were the topics of lovers. He knew about that from the books he read under the flannel blanket in the truck. He wondered if she still drank coffee over the kitchen table in her new life. No, in Florida, probably iced coffee. Who knew? Maybe fruit drinks out of coconuts?

“Are you always so quiet, Sam?”

“No, ma’am, well—yes, actually. It’s just,” he paused, “you don’t look much like you did when you came to your dad’s funeral a few years ago.”

“No? I guess it was the heat. I got sick of all the hot in Florida—all the sweat. If you don’t watch out you end up cooking yourself alive.”

“I think it would be great. I’ve never seen the ocean. I’m going to go, when I’m done with school, leave, you know, and get a job by the ocean.”

“You should. Nothing spells hell like this place”

“Then why are you here?”

She began to hum gently, her lips pursed together into a tight line. “I wasn’t wanted anymore. There was nothing left for me there. Florida threw me out.” She looked at him, at his face, his pimple, his shaggy hair and scrawny shoulders. “It’s ironic, isn’t it? About the heat? I ran away from it, and now it won’t come back.”

He was watching her lips; her body did not move, her eyes were flat, but her lips pulsed with cold. He did not know what to say. “Ma’am, I’m real sorry about the furnace, but it’s no good. The whole thing is busted up. I’m really going to need to call my dad—except—well, he won’t be able to fix it—”

“Why not?”

“Well, ma’am, he has a lot of calls at the moment, and with the weather like it is and all, you know, three feet and 45 below with the wind, he just—well, honest truth really is, sometimes—”

“He drinks?”

“Sorry?”

“Your father. I saw your scar. I know about scars like that. It is okay to tell me if he is too plastered off his lazy ass to help. Mine would have been. People like us don’t need to make excuses for people like them. It’s better just to run away.”

“I’m real sorry, ma’am, maybe I can give you another number to call. You can’t stay here though, it’ll be too cold in a few hours. Maybe I can bring you somewhere?”

“Somewhere? I’ll just wait until the storm breaks. Another number would be fine.”

“But, ma’am, the storm isn’t going to break for days. You can’t live here.”

Together, they both stared out the window, but they could only see white outside. She looked at him. She shook from the cold.

“You need to put a jacket on, ma’am. You’re freezing. Do you have some blankets in the house? I can light a fire before I go.”

He left her on the rug by the old stone hearth. She fell asleep as he watched the flames; her body burrowed itself under the blankets until he could only see the top of her head. He stayed with her until the phone calls from his father came in such short intervals that he had turn off the ring so she wouldn’t wake. He knew he had to leave. At home, he told his father that the heat had fixed itself. The older man did not believe him, but he no longer cared.

She dreamt that she stood on the field outside the house in the middle of the white waves of snow. She wore nothing, but she was not cold. The snow fell on her arms, legs, back, stomach, shoulders, and did not melt. It was white on white. Then he came, and she tried to run. He was holding white blankets. He pressed the blanket up to her stomach and began to wrap the cloth around and around her middle. The place below her skin grew warm as layer upon layer came down upon her. It was white on white.

The weight around her middle became too much, but the man would not stop wrapping. Slowly suffocating, she tried to dig at the cloth, tear it off, but as her nails dug into the linen, it turned to wool. It cut her fingers, and blood red drops fell on the snow. It was Sam who came and pulled him off of her. He was a boy, and he held her so close that she could feel his slow breathing on her cheek. Carefully he unwrapped the blankets around her stomach until she too could breathe.

When he awoke he decided he wanted to hear about the ocean, the palm trees, and the coconut fruit drinks. The sky was still black and air was still white with the snow, but he dug out the tires of the old truck and drove towards her. When he got there the fire had died and the blankets lay empty

on the rug. He tried to call out for her, but he did not know her name. His boots creaked loudly on the staircase. She was in the bedroom, sprawled across the length of the bare mattress. She had taken off her nightgown and she was white all over. He thought she was the most beautiful white he had ever seen. Like frozen yogurt from the gas station, all cream and cold. Annie had never been naked like that. Sometimes, in the back of the truck his fingers had unbuttoned her shirt, stripping away the polyester from her skin to reveal the pink lace of her bra. Annie's skin was the color of five dollar burnt copper from Tan-City in the mall.

How long had she lain like this? Six hours? Seven? Ten? He ran back downstairs and collected her discarded blankets from the fireplace. Back in the room, he wrapped her body in the lengths of cotton and flannel, careful not to touch her skin. Even so, the cold from her body permeated through the cloth. He had heard that before you freeze to death you fall into a state of bliss. He looked at her face, at her closed lips, a deep blue, silent and closed. In the car, her limp body slouched against the passenger window as he drove through the storm. The world became timeless; the snow came too thick for the sun to rise and be seen.

He waited for her in the small room with the TV and the red plastic chairs. The receptionist had noticed his confusion when the nurses had taken her body from his arms and offered him a Coke. The dark liquid reminded him of her lips, and it flooded his throat with a sticky sweet odor. All he wanted was her pale nightgown to appear in the doorway. Eventually he stopped seeing, and the doctor had to tap his shoulder to get his attention.

"Mr. Turner—Sir?"

"Is she okay?"

"Mrs. Turner is going to be fine, although it is lucky she had you around—lucky you found her when you did. They are both going to be fine."

"Both?"

"The baby. Most of her body had shut down by the time you had found her, but she is young and strong. I don't know how the unborn survived though—it is a miracle that such a fragile thing could hold out against all

that cold. How long have you been expecting?"

"Expecting?"

"She hadn't told you yet?" She frowned. "Forgive my intrusion, but are you too separated?"

"Oh, uhhh, no, she just likes keeping secrets I guess."

"Well then, I guess this has turned into quite a day for you Mr. Turner. Come with me, I'm sure she would love to see you."

"Hi Sam." Her voice was dying, shuttering and flickering like an old light bulb.

"Hi, ma'am."

He was rooted to the checkered linoleum, but his eyes pulled at her, willing him closer to the shadow the light made across her open shoulder.

"Why did you—how could you—" he paused. Maybe she would answer. Maybe she would explain. "I didn't know." Another pause. "Are you okay?"

"It's a girl." Her eyes widened as she looked across at him. "I didn't know she was a girl. Did they tell you that? Did they tell you she's a girl? I got so hot after you left. I almost let her die."

"No. You didn't know."

"I did."

"Please stop. You just said you didn't know."

"No. I did and I almost killed her—would have," she stopped, "what kind of person does that make me?"

"I don't know. Maybe you knew I would come back."

"Thank you."

"I told them I was your husband. That is why they let me in. They think we are married. They think she is mine."

"I am going to name her Samantha. I'll call her Sam—after you."

"I don't know your name."

The doctor entered, "Mr. Turner, I'm sorry, but your wife needs rest—and lots of it."

Her eyes were already closed. "I am extremely tired Sam, and the doctor says I should respect my own exhaustion. We will be fine."

“What about the baby? What about you?”

“I’m going to stay here for awhile.”

“Here? Where? At the hospital? At the house? There isn’t any heat.”

“I’m going to sleep now. I can’t wait; it will be the first time in days.”

He protested, thought of screaming and running at her, but still his legs would not move. Her eyes were closed: the green and blue that was beautiful was gone from view and all that could be seen was white upon white. Her lips were still there. They had changed again, now calm like the inside of strawberries. A nurse came and ushered him out of the room. From below he could hear the tap of his sneakers against the linoleum, down the stairs, through the sliding doors, out to the battered truck with the torn seats, stale beer, and dog hairs.

He returned the next day, and the day after that, and every day for the next week. Every time the nurses told him that she would receive no visitors. When a medical intern caught him searching through a list of patient room numbers, he was brought to the doctor’s office and asked to wait. It was the same doctor as before.

“Hello—Sam, is it?”

“Hi.”

“Sam, I know you would like to see Miss. Turner—and it is ‘miss’ I have been told?” She did not stop for an answer. “Miss. Turner has asked for no visitors. We must respect her wishes. However, when I told her you were here again, she did ask me to give you this.” She pulled a white envelope from the inside pocket of her coat. “Please, Sam, respect her wishes. Take the envelope and go. I’m sure she will contact you when she is ready.”

“Wait! Just tell me—is she okay, I mean her, her and the baby?”

“Yes, they are both recovering nicely. Now, if you will excuse me. I have a patient to attend to.”

Sam was left alone, starring at the white paper before him. He dug his nail across the flap, and it fell onto his lap: a ticket to Florida. He stood up and left.

She returned a week later. This time she stood outside the door with boots and a jacket the nurse had lent her, the baggy cotton hanging loosely over the same white and lace nightgown. As the door creaked behind her, she heard it. From deep beneath the floorboards came the shuddering and tinkering of the furnace.

▪ LIZ URSELL

Just Sprinkles on a Postcard

She's not on drugs, Roxanne said; Roxanne's her roommate and she would know. Well what is it then asked Lacey, but she was answered with the unharmonious stabs of forks hitting plates. They didn't think it was an eating disorder either, Sammy always saw her scarfing down peanut butter and banana sandwiches, each glob sliding down her long neck after a satisfied lick of the finger.

Asana thought it was depression, and it was certainly a possibility, but the way she grinned every time she slurped her margarita with a straw (who slurps their margaritas anyway, Keith interrupted), and the way she carried herself in bright vintage dresses, a bonfire of red hair flaring from her tousled bun—no, that wasn't it either.

Where is she now, anyway, Roxanne wanted to know. Keith said she was over in the batting cages and Sam said she was probably with that boy Damien, the one who left hickeys like discolored ink on her collarbone. Lacey told them not to tell anyone, but she saw Damien slipping ice cubes across another girl's collarbone at the bar, pressing his tongue to the water running against body glitter and uneven self-tanner.

What about all the other times? They were whispering now, Keith remembered that he had been talking to her about how he finally was able to buy the apartment and she had stared at her overbitten fingernails, pupils wandering disjointedly. Another time, Roxanne found her in their room, lying on a bare mattress and gazing directly at the sun through their skylight. What about all of those poems she writes? Lacey saw the sonnet about love and natural disasters and dessert foods; she read the line "generic butter-scotch tornadoes vacuum up the sugar in my substance" and became afraid.

Two weeks later, Sam told Keith that Damien had dumped her because she quit her job at the insurance brokerage house. Stupid, utterly stupid, but she better still keep up the rent but Roxanne didn't have to worry

because there was a post-it note on the bare mattress: *In the park*. And this other girl, Janie, said it was true, she was there in Central Park, balls of bedsheets, reams of paper, and a grande Starbucks cup with a dollar sign scribbled on the side. Apparently she thought everyone owed her in advance for her contribution to society.

You can't write about something you've never experienced, that's what she told Lacey. Is that all she told you? And they waited, but no one ever heard back from her except through the postcards—the Empire State Building, MoMA, the Bronx Zoo—and much later, Janie told them that she had left the city altogether. Keith claimed that he got ones from Soup'r Buns in Kansas, and another from Slack's Sugar Shack in Palmer, Alaska.

Does she ever write anything on yours, Roxanne wanted to know. But Sammy and Keith and Lacey all received cards with only a few words each—*hot cross buns, maple candies, in love with an artist, dating Paul the fishermen, just met Enrique from Costa Rica, chicken and waffle houses in southwest—who knew?*

Keith thinks she's writing a cookbook on the most obscure recipes in America, but Lacey doesn't think it's that simple. She's writing the great American novel, you dipshits, and Sam left it at that. Roxanne stares vacantly at her fingernails and says that she's figured *something* out, but she can't put it into words, at least not whole sentences yet—just phrases, snippets on a series of postcards floating through her mind.

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