

A dark, atmospheric photograph of a forest path at night. The path is illuminated by a warm, golden light that forms a glowing heart shape. The trees are silhouetted against the dark background, and the ground is covered in leaves and rocks. The overall mood is mysterious and enchanting.

— ★ —
the *evermore* review
— ★ —

The Inaugural Issue

a note from the editor.

Wow, the first issue of *the evermore review* is here! What started as a suggestion from my professor Tanya Perkins to serve as a project for my master's thesis is now an official publication featuring twelve writers from around the world. I am so honored to have been trusted to publish these stories and to have the world read them. The last few months have been a whirlwind of planning, stressing, and editing to make this journal the best it can be. I am so proud of the issue we've produced, and I'm beyond honored to publish these wonderful, talented writers.

evermore's release nearly two years ago signaled a new beginning in my life: I had just graduated from undergrad (I finished my last class the day the album came out), I was accepted into graduate school, and I just started healing from heartbreak and decided to start again; life started looking up after a very difficult year. To me, *evermore* means starting anew but not without some chaos and darkness following like a shadow. However, it's what we do with that darkness that either propels us forward, allowing us to win in the end, or buries us completely. I decided to take the pain and use it, and I can confidently say I've won. As a Swiftie of fourteen years, I thought a great way to honor the past two years and Taylor herself is to start *the evermore review*, a journal representing a new start for writers, editors, and readers alike. I am stoked to continue this journal for many years to come.

The following issue features stories of struggles and success, life and death. We feature amazing literary and speculative fiction. I cannot say how many times I squealed in excitement when reviewing these stories nor how many times I've teared up at the thought that people trusted me enough to publish their work. It's always an honor and a privilege to share a piece of one's soul. I hope I've done you all justice.

Readers, I hope this issue encourages you and fills you with hope like it has for me. Thank you for reading.

Soli Deo gloria

Olivia Ryckman, M.A., Editor-in-Chief

the *evermore* review

the evermore review

Issue 1, December 2022

Copyright © 2022 the evermore review

Cover by [Marek Piwnicki](#) on Unsplash

the evermore review holds first serial rights and electronic rights. We should be credited as the piece's first publisher upon reprinting.

Content Warning: The following stories involve dark themes including but not limited to: self-harm, breakups, grief, sexual situations, suicidal ideation, death, and murder.

table of contents.

Behind the Door

ivan de monbrison..... 7

Three Lines

melissa flores anderson..... 12

I Don't Look in the Mirror Anymore

zary fekete..... 26

Blackout, The Last Weekend in July, Faults

zach murphy..... 31, 88, 200

august, the ridge, like moonlight

venessa young..... 34, 38, 43

The Egungun Dreams

sophia adepoju..... 49

Then You Went Away: A Short Story in Vignettes

heidi klein..... 80

The Sidewalk Edge

emma mccooy..... 89

The Disappearance of Jay St. James

katherine varga..... 119

In Prudence and Inevitables	
matthew o'rouke.....	140
on the very moment all was lost	
grace elaine.....	161
I Have Two Ex-Boyfriends	
mik johnson.....	165
contributors.....	201

ivan de monbrison

Behind the door

The room is empty. I'm not sure who's speaking? There is a dead man behind the door, locked in the closet, but I swear, I don't know him, he is asking for the door to be opened, but I am not going to open it for him, the dead man will stay in the closet. Well, I'm hungry, it's time to bake bread, it's time to have a cup of tea, to draw a little, but, of course, the dead man is always asking me to open the closet door for him, sometimes he speaks in Russian, sometimes he speaks in Arabic, sometimes he speaks in French. I don't know what language is spoken in Hell, I imagine one of these three or all three at once, if I stop drawing, if I finish my tea, if my bread is baked; will I have to get up to go and open the door for him? The problem is that, if I open the door, I risk ending up in Hell... Outside it is already autumn, it is cold in the morning, it is rather pleasant after the very hot summer that we had, people are rather in a good mood, this freshness even nature is happy about it, even the birds. The horrible summer, the summer of death is behind us this year. I imagine that it will be worse next year, and so for a whole century until the end, but well, it is not my problem, my problem is the dead man who is locked in the closet and who's speaking to me in Russian, I don't know how to tell him that I don't understand Russian, that it is not my language, I don't understand Arabic either, and I even barely understand French. I would have to explain all that to him, but he is

stupid, he is dead, he has no brain, he has no heart, he has no language, he has nothing. A dead man has nothing, he doesn't even have a name. It's like a sick man falling in the street in a very poor city, his money is stolen, his shoes are stolen, his past is stolen, the body is taken away, it is thrown in a hole, and that's it, everything is over, life is nothing, it's a body in a hole... And at the beginning, life, what is it? It's not much too, a bit of electricity... Oh I don't know! It must be very cold in the universe and at the same time the electromagnetic waves of the sun must burn everything, so we must die of cold and heat at the same time, so we can only live under some sort of a cover, the earth is like an aquarium, the glass walls isolate us, and in the aquarium we are fish, and we eat each other... Indeed, we are as stupid as fish, and we think we are important, while outside the aquarium, we are nothing... and even if we were transported in another aquarium, the problem would be exactly the same. Well, I'd have to write a little bit anyway, so I don't totally waste my day, but write what? A poem, a poem about what? I don't know, I don't have any topic anymore, well maybe I'll end up getting up and going to open the door of the dead man's closet, so that at least I'll see his face, he'll be able to get out, he'll be able to show me Hell, after all, I'm already a little dead too... So I get up from my chair, I go to the closet, I open the door, and guess what! On the other side, it's me, the dead man, it's me, the room is empty and outside it's autumn, people are walking in the street, they don't know that I'm already

dead. I close the door behind me, I return to Hell, speaking in Russian and Arabic, locked in with my own demons.

RUSSIAN TRANSLATION

За дверью

Комната пуста. Я не совсем понимаю, кто говорит? За дверью лежит мертвец, запертый в шкафу, но, клянусь, я его не знаю, он просит, чтобы ему открыли дверь, но я ему не открою, мертвец останется в шкафу. Наконец, я проголодался, пора печь хлеб, пора налить себе чашку чая, немного порисовать, но, конечно, мертвый всегда говорит так, что я открываю ему дверцу шкафа, иногда он говорит по-русски, иногда он говорит по-арабский, иногда он говорит по-французски. Я не знаю, на каком языке говорят в аду, я представляю себе одного из этих троих или всех троих сразу, если я перестану рисовать, допью свой чай, испеку свой хлеб; мне придется встать, чтобы пойти и открыть ему дверь? Проблема в том, что если я открою дверь, я сам рискую оказаться в аду... На улице уже осень, по утрам холодно, это довольно приятно после очень жаркого лета, которое у нас было, люди довольно в хорошем настроении, эта прохлада радует даже природу, даже птиц. Ужасное лето, лето смерти в этом году позади. Я предполагаю, что в следующем году ему будет хуже, и так будет в течение целого столетия до конца, но, эй,

это не моя проблема, моя проблема в том, что мертвец заперт в шкафу и разговаривает со мной по-русски, я не знаю, как ему сказать, что я не могу. Я не понимаю по-русски, это не мой язык, я также не понимаю по-арабски, все правильно, если я понимаю по-французски. Надо бы ему все это объяснить, но он глуп, он мертв, у него больше нет мозгов, у него больше нет сердца, у него больше нет языка, у него больше ничего нет. Мертвый-это уже ничто, у него даже нет имени. Это человек, который падает на улице в очень бедном городе, мы крадем у него деньги, мы крадем его обувь, мы крадем у него его прошлое, мы забираем тело, мы бросаем его в яму, и вот, все кончено, жизнь-ничто, это тело в яме, и сначала жизнь-это что, ничего особенного, немного электричества...О, я не знаю! Во Вселенной должно быть очень холодно, и в то же время электромагнитные волны солнца должны сжечь все, поэтому мы должны умереть как от холода, так и от жары, поэтому мы можем жить только под колоколом, Земля похожа на аквариум, стеклянные стенки изолируют нас, и в аквариум, мы рыбы, и мы едим друг друга... Но мы глупы, как рыбы, и думаем, что мы важны, в то время как вне аквариума мы ничто... и даже если бы нас перевели в другой аквариум, проблема была бы точно такой же. Вот и все, короче говоря, мне все равно нужно было бы немного написать, чтобы не тратить впустую свой день, но что написать ? Стихотворение, стихотворение о чем ? Я не

знаю, у меня больше нет темы, хорошо, может быть, я в конце концов встану и пойду открою дверь кабинета мертвецу, так я хотя бы увижу его голову, он сможет выйти, он сможет показать мне ад, в конце концов, я уже мужчина. Маленький мертвый я тоже... Итак, я встаю со стула, подхожу к шкафу, открываю дверцу и угадываю, что ! С другой стороны, это я, мертвец, это я, комната пуста, а на улице осень, люди идут по улице, они не знают, что я уже мертв. Я закрываю за собой дверь, возвращаюсь в ад, разговариваю по-русски и по-арабски со своими демонами.

melissa flores anderson

Three Lines

Madeline tiptoed to the edge of the roof and looked down on the pathway below, her skinny limbs stiff like a marionette. Moonlight reflected back at her where rainwater had collected in a puddle near her feet. It wasn't supposed to rain in Southern California, but it had been pouring until dusk settled down into the treetops, and then it had abated. The petrichor scent floated on the breeze like it always did following the first storm after a dry spell. She thought about what it would feel like to dive into it, to let that smell swallow her.

She wasn't at the top of the building. She wasn't on a ledge. A window on the second story of the residence hall opened up onto a sort of landing over the one-story lobby below. It was wide and long, flat, with a surface covering that looked like worn sandpaper in the daylight.

A year ago, Madeline would have stayed back from the edge and pressed her body against the wall, her fear of falling keeping her at a safe distance. Or more likely, she would have peered from the windowsill, her feet firmly planted on the threadbare carpet inside.

Madeline had watched Dex climb out the window many times to smoke his clove cigarettes. He sat out there, legs dangling in midair, his duster jacket pulled tight around him. They were in a desert, on the eastern

boundary of Los Angeles County, and sometimes the temperatures dipped into the low 40s overnight. It was cold for California.

“Come out with me,” Dex called, all those months ago when they were still discovering each other. “You don’t have to come close to the edge.”

“I’m afraid of heights,” Madeline said. It was easier than explaining she was really afraid of falling, of losing control, of spiraling into an abyss. “I’m staying right where I am.”

Dex stood up then and sauntered carelessly, hovering one foot out into the dark, making a show of his bravery. Madeline looked away, her heart thumping in her chest. She mistook the racing of her pulse for love.

He laughed and drew Madeline’s eyes back toward him, then folded his long frame in half as though he were a paper doll and climbed back in the window. He took Madeline’s hand, his skin cold from the night air.

“I love you, babe,” he said, and leaned down to kiss her chapped lips. His spicy, sweet breath lingered in her mouth. He brushed her long, raven hair back from her face like he was parting curtains to let his light shine on her. And sometimes being with him felt like sunbathing; she never knew when she might be burnt.

Madeline didn’t like smokers, but she conceded for him. As long as Dex didn’t take up Marlboro’s, she kept

her mouth shut when he slid the slim box of Djarum Black from his coat pocket. They matched his jacket, his black boots, his hair that he combed back in a nod to James Dean.

“I’ll just have the one tonight,” he said. “You know, I only smoke when I drink.”

They compromised on that, too. She didn’t like to do shots and hated tequila. But when Dex handed her a shot glass of amber liquid and a slice of jagged lime cut with a bread knife, she took it. He sprinkled salt from a tapered shaker swiped from the dining hall, and she prepared for the ritual. If she didn’t drink, he would call her a killjoy and glower for the rest of the night. So, she threw her head back, shot the stinging liquid down her throat, and then opened her mouth in a comical, “Ahhhh.” As though she’d just had a refreshing lemonade.

Love was about compromise, she thought, and each time Dex offered her another chance to compromise, she did. Like when her roommate shared a flyer for a formal dance in October and Madeline had shown it to Dex who gave it a passive glance before tossing it aside. “That shit’s lame, like prom,” he said.

Madeline nodded as though she agreed. But Madeline hadn’t gone to prom. No one had asked her. She was the girl whose bony legs and sharp nose had earned her the nickname “Chicken” when she was in elementary school. “Your nose looks like a beak,” a boy told her in

second grade. “*Bock bock.*” The name stuck with her through high school, and when she arrived at college and met Dex right away, it felt like she had molted into something new.

*

The day she moved into the dorm, Dex walked by, all 6’2” of him dressed in black, as she struggled to tack up a Siouxsie and the Banshees poster on her side of the room while her roommate had the door propped open to cart more stuff up from the parking lot. He walked into the room, uninvited, and took a push pin from her hand and reached up to the top left corner, his body close to hers as he put one knee on the edge of her bed.

“There?” he asked, and all she could do was nod.

“Cool band,” he said, after he’d tacked up the top right corner, too. “I have all their albums if you want to stop by to listen.”

He leaned against her door frame, a cool smile on his face before he turned away, his bootsteps heavy down the hallway. Seconds later he was back.

“Room 234.”

She didn’t know quite when it happened but by Halloween, Dex introduced her as his girlfriend, and she relaxed into having a plus-one everywhere she went: to the dining hall for lunch or dinner, to dorm parties where

alcohol flowed freely, to the movies when she paid for tickets. But not to formal dances.

*

Dex spooned against Madeline under her green comforter on a lazy Saturday morning. They'd been sleeping together for a few months but always in rushed moments alone in her room or his. But that morning, her roommate hadn't returned from winter break yet, so they had the luxury of time.

"Have you met Ringo?" Dex asked, his face nuzzled in her hair.

Madeline knew who he meant. The girl with the funny name from her Abnormal Psych class, the girl with the long, brown curls and a nose ring, who grew up in China even though she wasn't Chinese. Her dad was an ambassador or something.

Madeline nodded. "She's in one of my classes. She's pretentious."

"Yeah," Dex said, brushing Madeline's hair down against her back and out of his face.

"Do you think her parents named her after the Beatles? Or were they Wild West fans?" Madeline said, before she turned over and rested her chin against Dex' smooth chest. She kissed him.

“I hope it’s not a nickname she picked out for herself,” he said, running one finger along Madeline’s spine. She tried to reach around him to grab a condom from the nightstand, but Dex kissed her ear. “I’ll stop before I finish. I promise.” And she let him get his way. Again. Even though she wanted to say no.

*

It might have been a month or so later, when she spied Dex across the quad, with one hand on Ringo’s tattooed shoulder and the other outstretched toward hers with an offering of coffee. She thought back to that morning in bed when he’d asked about Ringo.

Dex arrived in her room later that afternoon and jealousy tangled up all her thoughts.

“You weren’t at breakfast,” she said.

“I had to meet up with someone,” he said and tried to kiss her.

She twisted away and started to straighten books on her shelf.

“What is your problem?” Dex said to her back. “You’re in a pissy mood.”

Madeline didn’t look at him.

“When we have sex do you ever think about other girls?”

The question hung in the air like the room was filled with molasses, the words incapable of traveling from her lips to his ears.

“I need a cigarette,” he said. “Come out on the roof?”

She shook her head and continued reorganizing the books. Her fingers lingered on the spine of Ethan Frome. She didn’t hear the click of the door shutting, and she knew the crack of light shining from the hallway meant Dex was coming back.

And he did return after a few minutes. He leaned against the door jamb.

“I have a group project. I’m not sure what time I’ll be done. I’ll sleep in my own room tonight.”

He didn’t kiss her goodbye. He didn’t say he loved her. He took the first step away, and this time, he shut the door.

Madeline crumpled to the floor near her desk, next to the shelf where she and her roommate kept their hodgepodge dishes, a couple microwave bowls and spoons, some forks, and other kitchen utensils. They hardly used them. Her roommate was gone all the time with a boyfriend and Madeline always ate in the dining hall with Dex.

But now, through the blur of tears, she saw a glint from the serrated blade of the bread knife in the lamplight. She reached for the handle and pressed it lightly into the tip of her ring finger. It left a jagged imprint. It wasn't very sharp. She put the knife back and crawled into bed. She couldn't sleep without Dex's breath on the back of her neck.

The next day he showed up outside her morning class with a scone and a cup of coffee.

"I missed you last night," he said, handing her the pastry. "I can hardly sleep without you near me."

Madeline accepted the treat and folded herself into his arms, delaying the inevitable.

*

They fought a week later when Dex let it slip that Ringo was part of his group for the project.

"Why didn't you tell me you were working with her?" Madeline asked. They sat next to each other in the dining hall around a table meant for six. Usually, he touched her arm or her leg when they were close, but now he used their proximity to avoid eye contact. She scooped up a spoon of Cheerios and then let it drop back into the pool of milk.

"Oscar's in the group, too. I didn't mention him," Dex said, digging into a plate full of meatloaf and mashed

potatoes. “I didn’t even pick them. The professor assigned teams.”

“Do you think she’s prettier than me?” Madeline asked, looking down at the table.

“Who?” Dex kept eating. He made Madeline say the name.

“Ringo Starr. Johnny Ringo. Ringo Garza,” she said. She scooted her chair back so she was in his line of sight and he would have to look at her. “You know who I mean.”

“Babe, there can be more than one cute girl in the world,” he said. “Maybe I think she’s a little cute.”

Madeline took a sip of water and coughed. She scratched her arm and red welts formed like the time she got hives before a debate in high school.

“Don’t get upset, Madeline. You know I love you.”

*

Madeline woke to the piercing ring of her phone. She rolled over to grab the receiver without opening her eyes. She expected her mom or her sister on the line. No one else would call so early.

“Hullo,” she said in a groggy voice.

“Babe,” Dex said, his words traveling through the phone line from his own room on the other end of the hall.

“Why are you calling me? Just come over,” she said.

“I need to tell you something,” he said.

Madeline turned over and her heart raced like the first time she saw him tottering on the edge of the roof. She opened her eyes and her alarm clock displayed 7:06 a.m. in red light.

Before he said it, she knew what he’d done. Her first inclination was to tell him to come to her room so they could talk it out. So they could find a way to compromise. She took a deep breath and didn’t say anything. She looked at herself in the mirror across the room, the green phone cradled against her ear, dressed in plaid pajama pants that hung off her straight hips and her nose jutting out, out of proportion with the rest of her face.

“Was it Ringo?” she finally said.

Dex whimpered like a bad dog whose owner had caught it misbehaving.

“It doesn’t matter who it was. I love you.”

Madeline didn’t feel angry. She didn’t feel sad. A numbness started at the base of her neck and spread across

her body like the tentacles of a jellyfish. She hung up the phone.

She thought the numbness would go away after a few days, after a few weeks. But it settled in for months. She could make it disappear for a few minutes if she took the serrated bread knife and ran it across her bicep, high up where she could hide the red lines if she wore a shirt with sleeves. The first time she did it, she sat on the floor and held the blade against her skin without hesitation. If she moved it quickly, it didn't bleed enough to need a Band-Aid. But the sting it left reminded her she was still alive.

She didn't do it often. Mostly when she caught a glimpse of Dex and Ringo holding hands on the other side of campus.

When Madeline got home for the summer, she stopped. She spent her afternoons and evenings working at a yogurt shop in town and her mornings lying out by the pool with her younger sister.

Then Dex called her in the middle of the night around his birthday, when he had been meant to visit her before the breakup.

“I didn't mean to hurt you, Madeline,” he said. “You'll always be my first love.”

Madeline let him talk for a few minutes.

“How’s Ringo doing?” she asked when he paused for a moment.

“Come on, Madeline,” he said. “Don’t be like this. Can we at least still be friends?”

Madeline hung up, but now he was back, swirling in her head.

She snuck down into her parent’s kitchen and pulled out a chef’s knife. It had a bigger blade, a sharper edge than the bread knife from the dorm room. She ran it across her arm in three quick strokes, three thin parallel lines on her left arm. Tiny red droplets formed at each line, gravity pulling them down toward her elbow. Madeline grabbed a paper towel to wipe her skin clean, then searched the medicine cabinet in the upstairs bathroom for a Band-Aid.

“What happened to you?” her sister asked the next day as they lounged on the patio in tank tops and shorts.

“The cat scratched me,” she said. “I hate that cat.”

Madeline didn’t cut again, and the lines formed small, raised scars. When she felt anxious, she ran her fingers across the scars.

*

Madeline lived in the same hall again, though Dex had moved to another dorm. She passed the window onto the roof every day without noticing it.

Then, on that rainy night, she saw the window slightly ajar. She looked out as though she expected Dex and the small orange glow at the end of his clove cigarette. No one was there.

She boosted herself up onto the sill and slung her legs out into the damp air. She had on a thin green tank top, jeans and flip flops. The rain had stopped, but she stepped in a puddle and water splashed the cuff of her pants. Her hair blew around her face as she looked out at the dark, the petrichor smell filling her nostrils as she took a sharp breath of the cold air. Her legs moved her toward the edge of the roof, stiff and unsteady. She thought she could jump off the edge and maybe just land on her feet.

“Madeline, come away from there,” a voice called from inside, sounding far away as it fought against the wind to get to her.

She turned to see Dex, one leg straddling the sill, his arm outstretched to her.

“What are you doing?” he said. “You’re afraid of heights.”

He clambered out onto the roof and grabbed her cold hand firmly, pulled her toward the wall. She buckled against him and slid down onto the wet rooftop. Rainwater soaked through her jeans. His fingers gripped her arm below her shoulder where he could feel three small lines if he knew to look for them.

the *evermore* review

Dex had pushed her there, to that edge. He probably thought he was saving her, and Madeline let him believe it. But that would be her last compromise. She felt the cold seep in through her wet clothes, the numbness gone for good.

zary fekete

I Don't Look in the Mirror Anymore

Dear Me,

My face is so round. I hate it. No matter how I turn in the mirror I can't see any sculpted lines. There is no definition to my chin. I have no cheekbones.

Mom always tells me, "Nour, all of the women in our family have bodies like you. It's part of your heritage." I know why Mom named me Nour. Nour means "Superfluous in all things." Mom has no sense of subtlety.

Sandra doesn't have this problem. When she came into English class today David noticed her right away. The afternoon sunlight lit up her cheekbones perfectly. How was David NOT to notice her? The other thing about Sandra is that she doesn't wear a bra. Once Mr. Peterson asked the class for a declarative statement. Sandra said, "Bras are a tight strap of patriarchy which depress women's sexuality and lower their place in society." Slick, Sandra.

When I got home from school I started researching diet pills and I found a new one called HekaVulgare. The ad makes it sound so simple. "Bury your old self." I want to.

*

Dear Me,

Done! I ordered some HekaVulgare. I used Mom's card. The order is coming all the way from Egypt, but it says it will arrive tomorrow. Weird.

In gym class today Sandra purposefully asked for gym shorts that were two sizes too small. I hate her.

*

Dear Me,

It's here! It came in a box scented with some kind of perfume. The instructions say to only take one pill per day. I took one. The instructions also said, "Manifest through thought the things desired." I had some more thoughts about Sandra; I couldn't help it.

*

Dear Me,

Wow! That was fast. I could tell immediately...my face looked different. Usually it's round and plump. Not today. It was like someone else in the mirror looking at me. I felt courageous. I decided to wear a dress today instead of jeans. I only have two. I picked the yellow one. In English class I sat in the front row, next to where Sandra usually sits. The moment David looked at me he stopped talking and just stared. Sandra stared too. Halfway through class I felt something brush the back of my arm. I looked down. David was handing me a note!

I opened it and it said, “Gee, girly! Nice dress!!”

It is working!

*

Dear Me,

Last night after I took the pill I had a strange dream. Sandra was in the dream, but she was small...like a little doll. I reached down in my dream and picked her up. I blew on her body; a desert wind flew from my lips. A moment later the doll started to come apart in my hands...like dust.

In the morning when I looked at myself in the mirror I couldn't believe it. My face is entirely mine but richly different. I kept turning and turning my body and face and with each turn I was seeing a voluptuous hourglass of olive skin.

I did some research on the internet on the ingredients in HekaVulgare. Most of them are the ingredients for cyanide. But I feel fine!

I also googled the instructions that came with the pills. They were taken from an ancient Egyptian text called The Wisdom of Anubis, God of Embalming. The text is supposed to provide fortune for those who quote from it and spite for one's enemy.

Sandra wasn't in school today. Maybe she was sick?

*

Dear Me,

I woke up earlier than usual and went directly to the mirror. I took off all my clothes and just stood there. My mouth was a full set of ruby lips. My hair was flowing.

I wore my other dress. The red one.

When David saw me, he dropped his books. I walked toward him. He started to say something, but I held up my finger and touched my finger against his lips. The saliva on his lips was wet beneath my finger...and then it dried.

It felt like power came out of my body.

*

Dear Me,

I took two HekaVulgare pills last night. I went to my bed and fell asleep. I dreamt that I was floating above a desert floor. The sand below me was covered with thousands of people who had come from distant lands to look up at me. They brought things with them to offer...baskets of dried flowers and crushed leaves. They laid them at my throne.

When I awoke in the morning I didn't look in the mirror. I didn't need to anymore.

My clothes in my closet were all gone. Anubis had replaced them with regal garments. I chose the transparent purple sari. Instead of going to school I went to the highest hill in the downtown city park. The town gathered before me. I saw a column of people carrying a funeral pyre. Sandra's desiccated body was on it. Her eyes looked crusted and white. The cyanide had leaked from her eyes and dried there like salt. Several people were already carrying lit torches.

The torches touched the pyre and Sandra's body was in flames. I saw David. I pointed at him and beckoned. When he reached me, I turned to the attendants on either side of me. My thoughts spoke to them. They removed David's clothes from his body and wound a linen cloth around his hips. I took him into my arms.

There was a crack like lightening. The sun's brightness surged in the sky. In a flash the town below me dissolved into sand and there was nothing left but a magnificent desert.

I suddenly knew things...ancient things. I understood who I was. I stood before the world, a cosmic Pharoic queen. I contained within me all love...sapphic, achillean, eros. All people bowed before me.

I am Nour. I have become my name. I am superfluous in all things.

zach murphy

Blackout

My roommate took off right before I lost my job at the pizza place. The only thing he left behind was a note that read, “Moved back home.” If only the unpaid rent were attached to it.

I sit at the wobbly kitchen table, gazing at the floating dust particles that you can only see when the sunlight shines in at the perfect angle. Sometimes, you have to convince yourself that they aren’t old skin.

The air conditioner moans, as if it’s irritated that it has to work so hard. I haven’t left the apartment in four days, for fear that the hellish temperature might melt away my spirit even more. Is a heat wave a heat wave if it doesn’t end? I gulp down the remainder of my orange juice. The pulp sticks to the side of the glass. It always bothers me when that happens.

As I stand up to go put my head into the freezer, the air conditioner suddenly goes on a strike of silence and the refrigerator releases a final gasp. I walk across the room and flip the light switch.

Nothing.

There’s a knock at the door. I peer through the peephole. It’s the lady with the beehive hair from across the hall. I crack the door open.

“Is your power out?” she asks.

“Yes,” I answer.

“It must be the whole building,” she says.

“Maybe the whole city,” I say.

“The food in your fridge will go bad after four hours,” she says.

I’d take that information to heart if I had any food in the refrigerator.

“Thanks,” I say as I close the door.

When the power goes out, it’s amazing how all of your habits remind you that you’re nothing without it. The TV isn’t going to turn on, and your phone isn’t going to charge.

There’s another knock at the door. It’s the guy from downstairs who exclusively wears jorts. “Do you want a new roommate?” he asks.

“What?”

He nods his head to the left. I glance down the hallway and see a scraggly black cat with a patch of white fur on its chest.

“It was out lying in the sun,” the guy says. “Looked a bit overheated, so I let it inside.”

Before I can say anything, the cat walks through the doorway and rubs against my leg.

“Catch you later,” the guy says.

I fill up a bowl with some cold water and set it on the floor. The cat dashes over and drinks furiously.

At least water is free, I think to myself. Kind of.

I head into my dingy bedroom and grab the coin jar off my dresser. “This should be enough to get you some food,” I say.

I step out the apartment door and look back at the cat.

“I think I’ll call you Blackout.”

venessa young

august

“One more,” Yishen murmured, exhaling. A plume of smoke escaped his lips, fading in the light of the setting sun. He giggled when Daejung leaned down to kiss him again, the high turning the world into a kaleidoscope of colors.

The clouds were cotton candy pink, stained by the sun’s rays. Golden light spilled over them both, lighting upon tanned skin and white sheets. The waves rushed in, white foam dragging along the seashore as they were pulled back out. A spot on the sheets was stained purple with wine, a spot that was covered when Yishen reached out to grasp Daejung’s biceps, dragging him down on top of him. His skin was sun-warmed, searing against his palms.

Hair flashed copper in the sunlight, and Yishen stared unabashedly, a gasp spilling past his lips when Daejung nuzzled into the crook of his neck, the gray of smoke misting the air. He laughed, a high clear sound that floated through the evening, a windchime against the rush of waves outside. Daejung laughed, too, a rumble in his chest that made Yishen’s world fuzzy around the edges. He kissed the taste of sweet grapes off his lips until Yishen was squirming, a pale leg curling around his waist to hold him in place.

His hair was hay under his fingertips, damaged from too much bleach, but Yishen could run his fingers through them forever, if only he could watch the way the sun set it on fire.

They could have stayed there for evermore, getting high off the plumes that smelled like spun sugar, intoxicated by liquids that gleamed red in crystal flutes, purple when they spilled it, tumbling into the bedsheets to make love with the sound of waves and wind their company.

But one day, Daejung would wake up to Yishen trailing fingers over his spine and get out of bed, making promises to return the following summer. And Yishen would let him go, curled up in wine-stained sheets warmed by skin, eyes closed against the eventuality of loss.

He knew Daejung's heart was still back in Georgia, given to a man whose name he would never speak but Yishen heard anyway in his dreams. How lucky this Haneul must be, to wreath Daejung's dreams in purple and pink that he always awoke beaming. He could never know the words Yishen traced into Daejung's spine when he was dreaming, could never know the promises and secrets he whispered into his skin when he was drunk, when the sky turned from orange to indigo before his eyes.

It was why Yishen followed him back to Tennessee, kissed too many men and some women, too, all the while reaching for someone who never reached back.

Fingers threaded into copper hair, a thigh pushed between his legs enough for Yishen to forget for a while that Daejung belonged to someone else. That Daejung had to put aside the cologne that Yishen had given him so that Haneul would never know. Could never know.

As far as Haneul knew, Yishen was a ghost in the night. A slip of judgment when Daejung was vulnerable. One clandestine encounter did not make an illicit affair.

Yishen could still hear the tires on the cobblestones when he drove past the street he lived on, hear the screaming and crying before Daejung came tumbling out.

Even the dimness of the streetlight could make Daejung no less beautiful, standing there in his black hoodie and worn-out pants. Yishen would hate himself later when Daejung awoke in the morning and fled. But in that moment, his resolve was shattered.

“Get in,” Yishen called, confident under the smell of pine trees and maple leaves. “Let’s drive.”

His tears tasted like regret, like the summer sun had been pulled from the sky. Daejung’s moans and grunts were buried into his chest, between his lips and legs, a memory that only Yishen would revisit days later, alone in his bed with plumes of lilac passing his lips.

There was no forgetting Daejung, but Yishen could always find refuge elsewhere, in someone else’s arms,

someone who could cover the taste of sour grapes with the smell of the sea.

“You really are a masochist,” Bolin would say when Yishen showed up on his doorstep, a single backpack slung over his shoulder and the taste of wine still lingering on his lips.

“So are you,” Yishen said, dropping his bag past the door. The doorknob was rusted over, streaks of copper flecking his fingers when he turned it, taking in the white sheets and robin’s egg-dipped curtains.

Bolin’s hand was warm on his waist, his cologne strong in his nostrils when he turned around to kiss him, threading fingers through golden hair that smelled like seawater. He had the softest eyes that never failed to make something bloom inside Yishen’s chest. Yishen liked those eyes, and he hated those eyes. He had never meant to stay, always meant to flee away to the cities with mist gray skyscrapers, hundreds of meaningless people and yet, for those eyes, he always came back to seafoam doors and white birch floors.

Yishen kissed him again, drinking in the smell of salt-air and ocean. It could not chase away the taste of wine, but it was close. So close.

“You don’t have to do this,” Bolin murmured into his mouth, even as his hands slid down his thighs, lifting him up. Yishen looped his arms around his neck,

swallowing the next words. He knew what he was going to say.

“You could stay,” Bolin whispered when he pressed him into the bed, big hands wrapping around milk-pale wrists. “I wish you would stay.”

Yishen shuddered in his arms, lips parting to answer. But Bolin did not let him speak, sealing their lips together before the words could escape. He already knew what Yishen was going to say.

But something has changed.

The clouds were cotton candy pink, stained by the sun’s rays. Yishen trailed his lips over the jut of Bolin’s collarbones. Golden light spilled over them both, lighting upon tanned skin and white bedsheets.

“I’ll stay.”

the ridge

The color he remembered most vividly was purple. It stained his lips, his skin, his sheets, bringing with it the reek of wine that burned his nostrils. Yishen remembered red, color rising onto pale flash, the burn of leather across his back.

Broken glass glinted scarlet, the tips dripping with crimson. They turned to copper to rust, the metallic smell

of blood lingering in the air. He tasted it in his mouth when the foot connected with his ribs, when his head struck the corner of a table.

Once in a fit of rage and pain and grief, he had bought a bucket of paint, the color of morning mist in the sunrise, and thrown it all over the red Chevy in the driveway. They could still be seen now, the flecks of pink that he never quite got out. Could never quite bear to paint over.

The engine rattled like an old man as he climbed the incline, the pine trees receding around him. Gray tinted the fog, turning trees into shadow and the sun into a lump of yellow that dripped into the clouds. His wheels churned in the mud, having turned off the proper road about five miles back. They would leave tracks in the red earth for anyone to find. If anyone cared to look.

Sunlight struggled through the thickness of the mist, pale streaks of yellow dancing across his face when he pulled to a stop. Yishen could see for miles, just a stretch of forest green and then the glittering gray lights of the city beyond.

He leaned over, pulling out a bottle wrapped in red silk, a parting gift from the city that he had bought for himself. A sweet scent permeated the thick pine needles, burning as he tipped it back.

Wine dripped down his lips, leaving purple trails on milk-pale skin. He wiped his mouth roughly, wrinkling his nose at the taste of salt. The sunlight had turned silver, the mist growing ever thicker as he sat there chugging that green bottle.

When he could taste nothing more, the bottle went flying. It was not so satisfying of a sound, the crack it made on soft earth. Yishen doubted it had broken much at all.

“I should go,” he said to the wind and the clouds and the trees, his eyes staring straight over the edge of the cliff. The clouds were thick and dense and gray, like the smoke that he blew out after taking a puff from his vape pen.

He was running low now.

He should go back to the city, or maybe to the house with the blue door and soft white wood furniture. There were other shades of blue there, the navy that painted the night sky, the seafoam green of the sheets. There was no purple or red anywhere, other than what Yishen brought himself.

Or he could go straight. Over the edge, clinging to ecstasy and the agony of loving someone who never looked back. Of being a man of clandestine meetings, of hidden perfume bottles and lipstick stains.

Yishen smoothed his fingers absently over his thighs. His scars were canyons that he could never cross,

could never be brave enough to cross. He was a bird in an invisible cage, attached to a bottle and a bright purple pen.

The high turned the world upside down and right side up, painted it with familiar colors and silver lines. It made the wrong feel right, like the broken edges had been smoothed over with sandpaper.

Another plume of smoke escaped his lips, melding into the silver mist of the forest. He was alone there, with the demons that scraped and scratched at the insides of his mind and the scars that made imperfect drawings across his skin.

Sunlight danced off the blade when he pulled it out of the glovebox, and he could see himself in its reflection. It was warped and ugly, a distorted image in the razor blade.

He felt every ridge of his ribs when he pulled up his shirt, his hands shaking as he traced the lines over every scar that had come before.

“Right there.”

It was a breathless whisper, a hiss of pain following right after. The tip sliced through skin and red dripped between his hands. It was deep, a ravine gouging through the earth.

His phone buzzed right then, as he cleaned the blade on the scarlet cloth, a stark white bandage wrapped

listlessly around the new scar on his skin. Yishen almost ignored it, almost tossed it into the backseat when he reached over to start the engine.

He could go over.

But the buzzing was insistent, like an annoying bee that he could not quite get rid of. Yishen picked up the phone, all the air rushing right out of him at the sound of the voice on the other end.

“Are you in town?”

It was husky and deep, and it stirred up his insides, bringing to mind purple smoke and sunlight on golden skin. He could see them again, tangled up in bedsheets with wine dripping from crystal flutes. See the ridges of Daejung’s spine as he traced his name over his shoulder blade.

“No,” he said breathily. “But I can be.”

“It’s—never mind. Haneul’s calling.”

The name pierced the silver veil, and Yishen was still shaking when the call dropped, his fingers still stained scarlet. The engine was purring now, a contented cat.

The bee buzzing made him look down, despite the burning in his eyes, the salt on his lips.

I miss you.

It was a number without a name, a number that Yishen knew by heart. A number that made him think of dip-dyed curtains and white wood furniture. Where the air was clean and clear and smelled like the sea.

Yishen exhaled. With trembling hands, he pulled the gear shift.

The ridge grew smaller and smaller before him, the city lights vanishing in his rearview mirror.

like moonlight

Bolin always woke up knowing when Yishen would come. There was a sense of wrong before something went right, like a stubborn corner of a fitted sheet or his coffee running out before a busy day.

The wind brought with it the scent of heavy pine and maple, a smell that clung to Yishen whenever he arrived before Bolin's blue door. It was too bright of a color for such meetings, something so clandestine, the color of the ocean on a clear day.

Or perhaps it was Bolin's imagination, for the sea breeze never smelled like anything more than salt and tears. He always thought he could smell the other man on him, on the clothes that Yishen shed in his shower, clinging to him like an anxious puppy.

He could taste the wine on his lips, a taste that turned his stomach every time Yishen showed up on his doorstep, hovering on the borders between the city and the sea. Yishen knew. He always did.

But he did not care.

Yishen came in shadows and between twilight, in a black hoodie too big for him, the hood pulled up to hide the wine stains on his lips. He was drunk, drunk off another man's cologne, drunk off the bruises that marked his thighs.

Bolin should throw him out. He would, if Yishen did not hold his entire heart in his hands. Hands stained purple and red like the sunsets that painted the horizon. His fingers smelled like rust when Bolin let him in, copper flecks flaking onto his skin.

"I've missed you," Bolin said, the thump of Yishen's backpack too loud in the quiet evening. He said no more than that, the rest of his words swallowed by Yishen's lips.

His hands were cold when they reached under Bolin's flimsy tank top, and his breath smelled like cotton candy and wine. It crept under Bolin's skin, worming into his blood like a snake.

Bolin shed his clothes like he was a doll, unwrapping him like a bonbon too precious to eat. Yishen

was never careful, his milk-pale skin marked with purple and red, bruising and bite marks.

He painted Bolin's skies in orange, in red and pinks whenever he appeared, blowing cotton candy scented smoke that clung to everything and lingered when he was gone.

"Yeah?" Yishen breathed, his breath cloying. Bolin reached for him, tangling fingers into windblown curls, relishing in the moan buried into his skin. The world stopped turning for one night or three and they were wrapped up in it, in midnight black and glittering stars.

The purple of the vape pen was stark against Yishen's fingers, the smoke he blew out dissipating in the wake of the morning sun. Pale yellow stained his skin, his hair splayed out over Bolin's chest like a whirlpool. As if Charybdis herself had caught him in her wake.

Bolin kissed his hair, squeezing his eyes shut when another plume of smoke escaped. His fingers trailed over the ridges of Yishen's ribs, a roadmap of scars carving canyons and stories into his skin.

Yishen would leave again, Bolin knew. Kiss another stranger or twenty. But he always came back somehow, wrapped up in pine and maple and sorrow and the sea. Like a shadow in the night, a ghost without a name.

Bolin reached for him, and sometimes, he reached back, yearning etched on his face and the wordless agony he spilled in his sleep.

He could still remember the first time Yishen left, quietly, in the morning, sunlight painted across his face. It brought out the hazel of his eyes, the gray thinness of his smile.

“I told my friend I was out on a run.” The words were breathless, an effect of Bolin’s breath blowing over milk-pale thighs, sucking bruises over bruises to hide the scars. A lick and he arched like a violin bow over the kitchen counter.

“Yeah?” Bolin nipped at his skin, wishing he could engrave the way he looked into his brain. He wanted to bottle up the sight of Yishen loose-limbed and pliant, like he belonged in his kitchen, in his home.

But Yishen was a ghost, a butterfly flitting from a moment to the next. He was too dark, too full of pain and grief and loss to belong. Bolin would have painted his house gray for him, would have burned the lightwood table, painted over the sea-blue door if it meant he could make it home.

Yishen’s cheeks were flushed, a beautiful rosy pink. It was the sunrise over a gloomy morning, the sun waking up to greet the world. And Bolin wished so desperately he could see it.

“Stay,” he whispered, Yishen’s arms looped around his neck. He kissed him again, fierce and hungry, and *desperate*.

Yishen only laughed, a sound like a child playing musical bottles. Bolin could listen to it on repeat for a week, with the waves and the wind as his accompanist. He smelled less like pine and more like the ocean when he left, with nothing but the memories and the wine-stained coverlet to remember him by.

One day Yishen would return, exhausted and drooping and crying, like the world had sucked out all his vibrance. His kisses tasted like regret, like the mountains that Bolin knew he had visited alone, with his smoke and wine, like saltwater and pain.

And Bolin would hold him, would kiss the tears from his cheeks. The eucalyptus was new, a vibrant, biting, stinging smell from the cream he smoothed over new scars. Yishen’s ribs were a mountain range now, a particularly deep crevice digging a pit in Bolin’s heart.

Bolin wrapped him up in white sheets, the starlight soaking in, turning him silver. Yishen rolled over and kissed him hard, stealing every breath from his lungs.

“I didn’t know if you’d care if I came back.”

A milk-pale leg was thrown over the covers. Bolin traced a finger down the silver scars gleaming in the moonlight, bending to kiss every ridge and line. Yishen

shuddered under his lips, splaying out like a starfish underwater.

The creases in his face had smoothed out and he smelled like the sea again.

sophia adepoju

The Egungun Dreams

THE FIRST DREAM

The voice of the rain hit the roof above my head. The pounding sounded like a distant festival drum. *Dum dum dum*. I woke up, my eyes opening, unwilling to leave behind the embrace of sleep. I adjusted my sight to the darkness of my room. Something was standing by the corner, staring at me. It was wrapped in layers of Ankara with a coat of dried palm fronds around its neck. Its face was hidden behind another face. The mask was made with clay burned smooth by the hottest fire. The mask had a face with wide eyes encircled with charcoal, a bold nose that spread at the tip, and a full mouth that had a sly smile. I rolled gently, afraid any sound I made would alert the eight-foot Egungun standing by the corner of my room. Despite the dim light of the moon that seeped into my room from my window, I could see the geometric patterns and colours of its Ankara wrappers.

The first time I'd seen a masquerade was when I was seventeen years old. It was as tall as the Monoon Longifolium. A tree so tall with needles that spread out, it soon took on the name "masquerade tree." I was with my best friend, Yejide. I remember us running as if our lives depended on it. It did.

I sat up, facing the masquerade. Its lips bent into a frown. A few moments later, the Egungun shifted from the wall it leaned on, and I felt my body glued to my bed, unable to move, transfixed on this otherworldly being. I felt the wind crawl up my skin, waking my pores and letting the chill seep into my blood.

The dried needles of the palm fronds slapped against my face, and the Ankara suffocated me as the Egungun pushed through me with amazing speed and anger. I closed my eyes and collapsed on the bed. When I woke up, Mama was beside me. She wrapped me in her arms. She rocked me back and forth, whispering prayers. I wiped the tears that stained my cheeks and separated myself from Mama's arms. I looked at the corner. It was empty, with no evidence left to trace the spirit that had invaded my dreams. Mama hugged me again. She was speaking, but my mind was stuck repeating my dream.

A few weeks later, we buried Aunty Abidemi. The next day, we all squeezed into Baba's Camry heading to Lagos State University Teaching Hospital. It had been a hit-and-run. That night, Mama didn't sleep. She stayed awake, pacing about the waiting room. A month after Aunty Abidemi died, Mama hosted a burial ceremony. Three hours later, the room was filled with fuji music. The pastor asked for more donations from the guests, plates of hot amala pelu gbegiri ati ewedu. They lay Aunty Bidemi to rest. I didn't cry. I stood there, staring at her white casket. For weeks, I had a feeling someone would die. I had felt

the cold seep into my spirit. The Egungun could have told me that its visit was for my aunty.

Beside me, Mama held my arm for support as she wailed. The first death you experience is never easy but neither are the ones that follow.

Three months later, the Egungun came again. I woke up to it sitting on my bed. I almost screamed and lost my balance when I woke to a giant casually sitting beside me, smiling down at me. It was a cone of mystery wrapped in colourful wax prints. This time, I looked closer to the Ankara, and I spotted shades of red, purple, and burgundy. It looked at me as if trying to say something with its unmoving lips that only smiled or frowned.

I knew I had to tell Mama about the dreams, but she was probably going to tell me to rub anointing oil on my head and close the curtains while I slept. I decided not to tell her. There was one person who would believe me, and she was forty-five minutes away.

SECRETS SPILLING

One story I've heard about my grandmother is that she was the daughter of an Ifa worshipper before the white man came with his religion. In those days, Grandma followed her father into the forests to hunt down antelopes and glasscutters. She boiled the bark of trees with pawpaw leaves and lemon grass to make agbo

whenever Tunde or I came down with a fever. If anyone could interpret my dreams, it was Grandma Iyabo.

That morning, I reached the car park with Yejide hurrying to catch up. When we arrived at Ibadan, Grandma fed both of us dodo ikire, and later in the evening, we roasted venison she bought from the market.

“Why did you suddenly come to see me, Kayode?” Grandma asked after we finished eating. She tied her wrapper again and sat down on her rocking chair, a bamboo chewing stick resting in her mouth. Her Yoruba was fluent, stretching the *do re mi ila* on every word, leaving me unable to fully understand her.

“Maami, I’ve been having these dreams. It started before Aunty Abidemi died.”

“What do you see in these dreams?” she asked, peeling the dried skin of a kola nut before chewing on it.

“A masquerade, wearing a red and purple gown with a ceramic mask.”

“Ah, Oya has visited you.”

Did she say Oya? Oya, the goddess of death and rebirth. The Orisha that called storms and winds? I wasn’t the best in mythology, but Grandma had told me some stories to fill my empty knowledge bank. Grandma said the goddess of death’s name so casually. Yejide exchanged a confused look with me. I shrugged back at her. I told

Yejide about the dreams and, like me, she wasn't the best person at spirituality and its matters.

"Maami, did you say Oya?" I asked her. Her smile reminded me of Auntie Abidemi. Everyone said I had her diamond face with high cheeks and a sharp jaw but a flat forehead.

"Beeni Kayode. Your mother will not allow me to tell you about the matters that are important." She sighed and plopped another kola nut into her mouth, crushing the bitter fruit with her discoloured teeth.

"I don't understand, Maami."

"Soon you will." She replied in Yoruba. I knew what she said, but it made no sense. I hated it when elders spoke in metaphors and proverbs. The next day, we left for Lagos.

When I reached home, the only thing on my mind was talking to Mama. Maami knew something, but whatever it was between her and Mama was keeping her from telling me. And frankly, waking up to a masquerade with a grin or frown staring at me was getting creepy and uncomfortable.

When I went to bed that night, the Egungun was nowhere to be found in my dream. Instead, I woke up in a dark room. It was quiet and cold. I called out for help, but my voice echoed back at me. The first echo was normal, then it dragged, becoming louder, then deeper, and finally,

a shriek that pushed me to my feet, racing towards the opposite end. When I jumped, I woke up on my bed. My forehead was decorated with beads of sweat, and tears dropped into the corner of my mouth. I tasted the salt and opened my eyes to the Egungun hovering over me with a tooth-grin smile. The scream shook my whole body, tightening my chest and stealing the air as I tried to inhale.

As Mama opened my door, the Egungun disappeared, leaving a mist floating in the air above my head and that familiar chill wind engulfed me. I was awake. I wasn't dreaming. It was real. I froze on my bed. Mama entered with a start. She gripped my shoulders into her palms, shaking me and calling my name. All I could do was stare at her, seeing the wide eyes of the Egungun.

MAAMI ALAGBO

The weekend that followed, Maami came to stay with us. She brought a big basket filled with herbs, seasoning, broken tree bark, and bottles of already made agbo. Mama said when she entered my room that day, the hairs on her body rose, feeling the evil around the room. Maami wrapped me in one of her Ankaras as I drank cup after cup of agbo.

My sleep that weekend was dreamless. I'd believed that the Egungun wasn't real, and I was probably seeing things and my mind was playing tricks on me. I slept early with the lights on at all times. Now, I felt stupid for thinking that would stop the dreams or the Egungun. But

for a while it did, and I slept peacefully. My life carried on. I returned to the apartment Yejide and I rented.

One night, Yejide and I were driving home from a concert on the Island. As she drove, I turned up the volume of BIA playing from one of my Spotify playlists. I raised my head to reply to something Yejide had asked me when I looked at the road—and there it was. Its palm fronds shook, sucking the surrounding air, shaking violently. It was screaming in the middle of the expressway despite its lips being sealed shut.

“STOP.” I yelled, pressing my body into the passenger seat, hoping it would suck me in. Yejide whipped her head at me with a start. Her legs punched the brake pads. The car came to a screeching stop. The road was empty except for our car. The streetlamps started flickering. One by one they went off, scattering the termites that hovered around the amber lights for warmth.

“What the fuck, Kayode?” Yejide yelled. Her voice calmed when she realised I was shivering and glued to the spot, staring at the distance ahead of us. “What is it? What’s wrong, K?”

I didn’t know how to describe what I was seeing. I couldn’t tell her that the screaming was in my mind. When I looked up at it again, its wide row of mismatched teeth was now stained with red. A heartbeat later, the Egungun disappeared, and the streetlamps came back on like time hadn’t just frozen around me.

“I’m okay. It’s nothing. I thought I saw something crossing the road.” I hoped she believed me. And if she didn’t, I couldn’t tell. Yejide smile back at me and started the ignition. As we sped past the spot the Egungun had been standing, I heard a bony voice calling my name.

Kayode. Kayode. Kayode.

I pulled my AirPods out and plugged them into my ears. I caught Yejide’s eyes on me. I ignored her worried expression and let BIA’s voice drown in the chilly one I’d heard. This shit was getting annoying.

Morning arrived quicker than I’d expected. The sun came up, warming the earth with a fierce embrace. Yejide was still sleeping when I snuck out of the apartment. I didn’t want her to know where I was going. What was I going to do? She would’ve thought I was crazy. I started believing I was crazy.

The only place I could find the answers I needed was at the library. After checking in, I went to the section I knew would have some answers for me: History and Language. My fingers browsed through hundreds of journals covered in dust. My finger stopped on a book with a thick spine with small inscriptions in Yoruba. I pulled it out, using my other hand to swat away the spreading dust. I blew the front page to scatter the dust that covered it.

The Orisha: Rulers of Ancient Ile-Ife.

Maami had mentioned Oya when I'd visited her. Oya was an Orisha. A goddess in her own right. If seeing the Egungun had something to do with Oya, this was one place to search for answers.

I flipped the book open and sat down on the tiled library floor with my legs interlocked in a praying form. The book rested inside the space created by my separated thighs and locked feet. The first half of the book was in Yoruba. Maybe this wasn't the best way to go about this. I continued turning page after page. The book had essays on the different spiritual entities and patrons that the Yoruba people worshipped in the pre-colonial era.

Another page depicted portraits of what the people perceived their gods would look like. In my secondary school classes, we'd studied a simplified story of the Orishas, where they'd come from, their powers, their ewo, and even their chosen sacrificial items for summoning them to the earthly plain.

Almost half an hour later, I stopped flipping when I came across Oya's page. The woman in the portrait wore a smirk that reminded me she was the great goddess of the wind and storm. She could destroy cities and farms with her anger that whipped the calm breeze into a violent, raging tornado. She wore a mask with small seed beads passed through a string of thin ropes that was woven into the crown of the mask. The beads stopped above her lips, shielding her face from whoever wanted to gaze upon her.

I continued reading, absorbing new information about this goddess.

The next page discussed her rumoured ability to communicate with the dead and ferry spirits to the underworld. The book called her “The Great Mother of the Night and Guardian of the Gates of the Underworld,” but it said nothing about the Egungun. Nothing about her afflation to the masquerade that had been appearing to me.

I tore a page from the book that contained summoning rituals for Oya. The page was brown and hard to touch, thicker than the other pages of the book. I tucked it into the inner pocket of my shirt and left the library, hoping no one would suspect a thing.

I greeted Maami when I reached home. She sat on the couch in the living room and chewed on a small kola nut knob. She waved at me and continued listening to the reporter announcing something about state elections coming up soon on her radio. I walked past her and stopped, turning back to face her.

“Maami,” I started.

“Kini.” She answered. It was obvious from the way she answered she wasn’t in the mood nor was she really interested in state politics now.

I moved closer to her and crouched beside her. “I wanted to ask you for something.”

“Eh hen? Kini Kayode?” she muted the radio and sat upright facing me.

“Do you have copper coins?”

For what felt like half an hour, Maami stared at me like I’d asked her to help me hide a body. She smiled, dropped the radio on the couch, and stood. She raised her palm, gesturing for me to follow her. We entered the guest room she always used whenever she visited us. I watched Maami open her box and pull out a small, red, antique silk pouch. She drew the drawstrings and opened it. The copper coins reflected the light from the bulb in her room, bouncing everywhere around us.

“You are ready for answers, then?” she asked, pouring the copper coins back into the silk pouch. I hesitated. Was I ready for answers? What answers did I really want? I wanted the weird masquerade dreams to stop. It was becoming bothersome to wake to the eight feet masquerade leaning casually by the corner of your room.

“Beeni, Maami” I answered. I was dabbling in the occult things Maami worshipped. It was a good thing no one was home. Deep down somewhere in me, I believed the Orishas were real, but years after I left Maami, I stopped believing. Mama would say they were simply mythology. They were a simple way the men and women of Ile-Ife used to make sense of the world around them,

when they couldn't find logical answers until the white man came and brought us answers.

I showed Maami the ritual page I tore from the journal, and she smiled. I smiled back. She took the page and read through it before returning it to me.

“Maami, tell me what is happening to me.” I petitioned her again. She had refused to elaborate on her metaphors, and her proverbs had become even more cryptic.

“You will soon find out. Come, let us prepare before your mother comes back.”

We sat inside her room. The darkness cradled me, reminding me of the dreams I'd been having. Maami arranged the red hibiscus petals around me in a circle and asked me to sit in a mediating pose with my legs calf tucked underneath each other and my arms spread on my separated thighs.

“Kayode omo Adebayo. Listen to me, you are about to enter a realm that doesn't smile easily on mortals. Much less a mortal that doesn't believe in their ways. But I believe the Great Mother of the Night has called you, as she called me many years ago. Listen well and you may believe again.”

Well, that wasn't cryptic at all, I wanted to say as Maami lit the purple candle. I was wondering if she allowed me to on my wild goose chase for answers because

she knew I would return to her. There was no way she just had the purple candle and copper coins lying around. She knew this would happen. I looked at Maami's face for answers. Instead, her wrinkled stoic expression met me, revealing nothing but the fact that I barely knew who my grandmother was or what family history I came from.

Maami poured a ring of salt around the hibiscus petals she plucked from Mama's garden. She placed the lit purple candle in front of me and opened the window. I looked out, and the moon mirrored me except where I was in the dark, trying to siphon the dim light the candle offered me to see with. The mood's gaze pulsed, spreading energy I couldn't see but felt all around. Its silver glow cast down into Maami's room, boosting the candle's own glow.

My grandmother opened her silk pouch and poured the copper coins into her palm. She counted nine and asked me to open my palm. The coins clanged against each other as they fell into my cupped palms. They sucked the silver glow from the moon and formed a dark shadow on my palm.

“Repeat these words after me, and when you are done, kiss each coin and stack them on top of each other in front of the candle.”

I nodded and took a deep, sharp breath. I needed to clear my mind, even if I wasn't sure what I was getting myself into.

“Oya, Great Mother of the Night. Queen of the rain, the winds, and the storm. Bringer of transformation and guardian of spirits. I invite you into my circle and into my life.”

The words rolled off my tongue like a distant memory I was trying to recollect. I repeated the words three times on Maami’s command. Each time, I felt pressure hit against my vocal cords, making it hard for me to speak.

“Oya! Great Goddess! I ask you to grant me meaning in my dreams. Blow your cleansing winds and pour your purifying rain on me and help me build my visions anew and to see what you what me to see. Let me be strong and clear and true and in the highest good of all. Ase.”

Nothing happened. A minute went by and still nothing. I felt the warm air that left Maami’s mouth as she blew the candle out. I shut tight my eyes and felt an arm around me, pulling me backward. I opened my mouth, ready to call out to my grandmother for help, but I had no voice. Instead of my screams, silence bathed my ears. The arms continued to drag me, and my throat twisted as I gasped for air. Saliva seeped into my windpipe, choking me. My eyes bled salty tears and my tongue became dry. I opened my eyes and watched Maami grow smaller as a robust distance sat between us.

“It’s alright, Kayode. Don’t be afraid. Oya doesn’t like fear.” Maami’s voice reached my ears as I choked on my saliva.

THE FIRST SPIRIT WOMAN

I coughed harshly. My chest tightened from the force and my belly drew in, trying to squeeze the air that suffocated me out. I steadied my breathing, my eyelids falling over my eyes lazily before spreading apart again. By the time I realised the hands had released me, I was on the floor inside a void. It was like the one in my dream. Beneath me, water flowed, unbothered by my presence. I noticed figures swimming inside the water, pushing their heads out before diving back in with no effort. The water had no bubbles and was foggy like the clouds had fallen into it.

The important question that wrapped my head into one thought was, where am I? As if on cue, a small masquerade appeared in front of me. Like the one I’d been seeing in my dreams, this one wore a red Ankara wrapper around its whole body. It covered its face with a grinning mask that looked more human. I knew better than to think it had a human face behind its mask. It was a decoy.

The masquerade sprinted past me, its mask rotating. I hurried to my feet, scared for a minute that if I moved, I would crash and drown in the river underneath me. I took a step, and nothing happened. Safe. I thought as I chased after the Egungun that rose to the height of my knees. I looked around where I was as I ran after the

masquerade. I was on a beach with black shiny sand and ahead of me was a castle.

Was I really in the spirit realm? Rocks filled the path the small Egungun carried me past and behind them were shadowy figures like the ones inside the river I'd seen. They cried out as I ran past them. The Egungun stooped suddenly, and I followed its gaze. The shadow spirits behind me scattered away as its grin flipped into a frown. I almost darted away with them, too. But a second after, its grin came back like it didn't just make my heart skip a beat.

We reached the castle with me panting and sweating. The Egungun's mask rotated with a clicking sound. The doors, almost twenty feet high, opened slowly with a creeping sound. The Egungun lead me to what I realised was a throne room. As we moved through the hallway, I noticed shadow figures peeping at us and even different-looking Egunguns hiding behind the pillars. They had the same pattern of appearance with red and purple Ankara over their tall, lean bodies, wrapped with dried palm fronds. The only difference was in their masks. Some smiled, others wore a frown, and one had an expressionless smirk, like the portrait of Oya I'd seen in the journal.

The throne was made of discoloured yellow bones with several skulls forming the headpiece of the chair. Inside me, I felt my heart pounding against my rib cage,

begging me to feel anxiety and fear. Maami's words rang in my ears as my heart pounded against my chest:

"She doesn't like fear."

The Egungun that led me from the beach moved closer to the foot of the throne and sat on the floor. Its regalia of Ankara and palm fronds covered its whole body, forming a cone. The clicking sound echoed around me. The air became cooler, and I could sense the hairs on my skin rose in anticipation. The sound became unbearable, causing me to collapse on my knees, clutching my head in my hands as I tried to block the piercing noise.

I closed my eyes and tried to steady my breath when a pair of hands rested on my shaking shoulders.

"Are you afraid?"

I could swear that the second the voice spread across my ears, melting into my brain, my heart stilled for a moment. I dropped my hands from my ears and adjusted my glasses. Whoever had spoken was standing over me. My head was still facing down. A hand reached under my chin and raised my head up.

"Are you afraid?" she asked me again.

I blinked and allowed my lens to focus on the woman standing over me, wearing a slight frown on her lips. When I looked past, her full lips coated with a blood-red, multi-colored shade. Her upper face was hidden

behind a multi-coloured beaded mask with a crown. Her crown was woven with copper coins and beads, the end wrapped around her shuku, opening up like a round fan.

I shook my head almost immediately, her grip making it difficult to move my neck easily.

One does not look an Orisha in the eye, or else one wishes for death.

She smiled, and I could feel her gaze on me despite the mask. My eyes travelled down her face to her body. She towered over me. Her neck was wrapped with a layer of ceramic beads like the ones in her mask. Her skin shamed copper coins, stealing their glow and making her ethereal.

Her skin was covered in markings made with what I presumed would be white chalk. The swirls glided down her bronze skin, forming intricate geometry and ended with straight lines over her fingers coated with gold.

“Good.” She spoke and her voice caressed the air in my lungs. This was what Maami meant by I had to experience it to believe again. Had she also seen Oya? Did my grandmother know this ancient primordial entity that commanded the storms and winds was real and existed on a plain different from ours?

“Oya,” I started.

“Yes, child,” She replied casually, collapsing on her throne. Her red skirt covered the whole bony throne. In the middle of her cleavage sat a bone key that emitted a silver glow from within its calcified insides.

“I’m not sure why I’m here.”

She let out a wheezing sound, which apparently was a laugh. The Egungun sitting by the foot of her throne rotated its head, emitting that annoying clicking sound.

“The flower doesn’t know why the gardener plucked her.”

Was I the flower in this metaphor? And why did no one tell me Oya was a sarcastic woman? She picked the small masquerade from the floor and laid it on her lap, stroking its head. Oya snapped her fingers, and another Egungun appeared with a wooden pipe. I watched the goddess suck the flavoured smoke before exhaling and bathing me in it.

“Did your mother not tell you about your destiny? And here I was thinking you summoned me ready.”

Destiny?

“Oya, Great Mother of the Night, I know nothing about destiny. I-I just only summoned you to find answers to the dreams I’ve been having. Maami—my grandmother—said you could help me.”

“Did she?” Oya’s laughter rumbled through the throne room, pushing into me.

From behind her mask, I caught a faint glow pouring from what I figured would be her eyes. Was that why she wore a mask? Because her gaze would blind any mortal being?

“Child, your destiny is to walk with me. I am the Great Mother of the Night. My canoe ferries the spirits of the dead from the land of the living to the gates of the underworld. I chose your family.”

“I don’t understand, Oya. Chosen to do what?”

She dropped the Egungun and rose to her feet. Her foot moved without sound despite the layers of beads wrapped around them. Her skirt flirted with the wind she commanded around her. When she reached me, still on my knees, Oya raised her mask, and I flinched almost in response. She held my jaw with both her hands. A chill ran down my spine and my whole body shivered. Her eyes were an empty white void. A silver tear fell from her glowing eyes as she pulled my face to look into her eyes.

The more I looked, the more my mind threatened to tear itself apart. She showed me the past, the present, and the future. I understood much more than I had bargained for. I had answers to questions I was yet to ponder, let alone ask. I saw the creation of time and the balance that was life and death. Oya was on the other side

of the scale. She was Death's lover. She was its keeper and its guardian. She was Death itself, and the winds at the four corners of the earth blew according to her thoughts.

"Child? Do you believe in me? Do you still fear death?" she asked me, softening her grip on my jaw as she pulled her beaded veil over her head. I collapsed back on the floor, landing with a soft thud, my calf cushioning my fall.

"Yes. Yes, I understand."

Maami wasn't crazy. She knew the secrets of creation. But one thing wasn't clear to me. If Oya ferried the dead and controlled the other side of the balance, what was my role in all of this?

"Little flower, I can see your doubts. After the great separation that caused the creation of Obatala to forget the Orishas, communicating has become estranged. We cannot simply visit the human realm anymore. Each Orisha has an avatar that keeps their stories alive. Those who believe in us fuel our existence. You are the next reaper chosen to help bring balance between the underworld and the land of the living."

I was seeing the full picture and not just the portrait I'd been looking at. Maami's words made sense.

"I'm not dead, am I?" I blurted out.

Oya chuckled. “No, little flower, you are alive. Your body remains on earth while your spirit journeyed to my realm.”

“Okay.” At least I wasn’t dead.

“So why now? Why decide to reach out to me? Also, the dreams were not funny.” I closed my mouth immediately after the words left them. Shit. Why did I even say that?

“I agree the dream was unnecessary, but it was the only way. You were not in touch with the spirit realm. To answer your question, I need your help, little flower.”

My help? I almost let out a snort. What help could I possibly offer a thousand-year-old primordial entity that took the appearance of a beautiful woman? She must have heard my thoughts, because she replied to me almost immediately.

“Someone is stealing the new spirits that are meant for the underworld.”

Wait, how did you steal spirits again?

“Okay.”

“I want you to find the spirits and bring them back to my realm. The longer they stay in the human realm, the more they are at risk of becoming evil, sucking off emotions and the essence of the living. Someone has a copy of my powers to determine when someone dies. They

see the Egungun in their dreams and they're feeding the spirits of the dead, turning them evil."

Her voice became deep, laced with the urgency of worry. I mean, how would I even find a spirit thief? Where would I start?

"I will guide you through one of my Egunguns."

"Not that one in my dreams, please."

Oya chuckled again. Her laughter was something I could get used to hearing. "Aja is one of my nine children. He merely wanted to guide you to me."

"Well, he did a good job," I muttered.

"Find the one who steals my dead spirits. Return them to me. When it is time, the words will come to you to find your way home. Kayode, do not be afraid. I will be with you, always."

I woke up with a start. My eyes were heavy as I tried to focus on the shaking figures standing above me. I heard voices that rose in pitch. Maami? Mama?

"She's waking up. Abiodun, calm down, she is alright."

"Kayode? Can you hear me? It's your mother. Kayode?"

"Mm. Mama, I'm fine. My head is aching. Maami?"

“I’m here, child. Did you find your answers?”

Answers. I found more than answers. I nodded as I opened my eyes fully. I was lying on my side. Mama helped me up to sit while Maami offered me a glass of water.

“Maami, I told you to leave my daughter out of this. What if something happened to her? Why won’t you listen to me?”

“I asked her to do it. It’s my fault. I...I wanted answers.”

“Oh, Kayode. I don’t want you to meddle in things you don’t understand, oko mi.”

“I know, Mama. And I think I understand. Trust me.”

I closed my eyes, and when I opened them, I caught a quick glimpse at Aja the Egungun leaning over my mother. He's head rotated with that familiar clicking sound. I had a spirit thief to find.

THE ONE WHO STEALS

I went to work almost immediately after I returned from Oya’s realm. My body felt different, lighter, and sturdier at the same time. Maami decided to leave after Mama asked her to stop influencing us with her magic. I left home and went back to Yejide and I’s apartment. Our apartment sat in the mainland's heart, connecting us to the different parts

of Lagos. I opened the door to Yejide rushing to our small kitchen.

“Don’t burn our apartment, O. We still have eight months’ rent to use.” I joked as I collapsed on my bed. She chuckled and raised her middle finger at me before flipping through the burning plantains.

“Where did you go?” she asked, joining me on the bed with the slightly burnt plantain in our favourite ceramic dish. I snatched one plantain and plopped it into my mouth, regretting it immediately.

“Intense. Maami went back to Ibadan. I don’t think she and Mama would speak again for a while. I mean, they get into fights like these always. But anyway, what did I miss?”

I left out the part of me visiting Oya’s realm and the pending task she gave me and the fact that I was now a soul reaper. Yejide smiled and continued eating. At night, Aja came to me, the rotating clicks of his mask woke me up. Beside me was a small calabash with agbo inside.

“I should drink this?” I asked, unsure if the Egungun understood me. Regardless, I drank the bitter concoction, and almost immediately, I felt my heartbeat rise and my chest lighten. I was floating, and that wasn’t the crazy part. I looked down and my body lay on the bed rigid. Was I officially dead? Shit.

“Kayode.” Oya’s melodious voice reached me from miles away. “You are not dead, my child. You are in the In-Between. The one who steals my spirits works in the realm between the living and the dead. Follow the thread to the next human that dies and find who steals their spirit.” The voice seized, and it became silent. Opposite my lifeless body, Yejide snored away, hugging sleep in a warm embrace.

I floated out of our room, learning my new way of movement, with Aja behind me. I tied the black thread to my index finger, pulling me towards the death of a person. I stopped in front of a house with a lion sculpture on its gates.

“Someone was going to die inside this house,” I said to Aja. It seemed he could understand me but didn’t have a way to communicate back with me.

I drew in a sharp breath and phased through the doors. Being in my spirit form, as Oya had called it, I didn’t have to worry about anyone seeing a woman in her 20s floating over their head with a masquerade behind her. I landed on my feet and watched the mother wail as she gripped her son. It reminded me of when Aunty Abidemi passed away. I shrunk into my translucent shell, aware I didn’t have my body shell to hide in. I didn’t know what it meant by becoming a reaper, watching death take its course.

Aja whipped his head, and I noticed a soft silver glow emitting from the corner of the room. The spirit was the boy who had reached his deadline on earth. Maami used to tell me we were essentially spirits that the gods put inside a body vessel to do their bidding and reach our destinies. And that one day, we would no longer need the body vessel. Like this boy, he couldn't be over twelve years old. I moved closer to him. His eyes fixed on his mother hugging his dead carcass as she cried. I crouched beside him, and it wasn't until I spoke that he noticed me.

“Scary, huh?” I asked. He almost jumped upon hearing my voice. Then he took my appearance and realised I looked like him, well, to be a glowing translucent version of yourself. “It's alright. I'm here to help you. What's your name?”

“Akin. I don't want to go, ma. Please, I want to stay with my mother,” he started, then when he saw my gaze move from his body before dropping to my legs, he realised. “Miss, am I dead?”

The answer choked me, “Yes.”

I explained what the realm for pure spirits like him would exist in till eternity. Oya's wisdom flowed through me. Her calm wind settled the boy's doubts. Maybe I could actually do this. I wasn't the best at what I did. My academics weren't all that great. Maybe I finally found something I could be good at.

“I’m ready,” Akin said. I took his hand in mine and lead him to the swirling wind portal, which Aja opened to ferry him across to Oya’s realm. We were about to push through the wind when a hand thrust itself from the wall beside us and gripped Akin, pulling him away from the portal. Shit.

The spirit thief.

I pulled on Akin’s other hand, but suddenly a weight dropped on me, and I collapsed to the floor. My grip loosened and Akin disappeared into the walls. My head swirled as I turned around, confused. I couldn’t see what dropped on me. But I knew what I felt. Aja glided in front of me, pacing back and forth. He was angry as was I. I would not let Akin turn violent. He would journey into the afterlife. I looked down to see the thread still tied around my finger.

I thrust myself through the wall the hand had used to steal Akin’s spirit. I passed through with ease and found myself inside a small cave. I looked around the cave. It was moist with clammy walls, with moss and mushrooms growing all over the place. A few minutes later, Aja tumbled from above me.

“Took you long enough.” I said. “Come on, we have to find Akin and the thief.”

We followed the thread as it pulled me closer to Akin. The cave was dimly lit, forcing me to squint to see

around me. We reached a T-junction with three paths. The thread continued pulling me. Whatever had taken Akin was fast, and it wasn't slowing down.

We stopped inside a part of the cave with candles lining the floor, raising the temperature of the room. I stalked around the room quietly. A table with a big calabash sitting in the center rested at the edge of the room.

“You shouldn't be here, reaper.”

I turned to face the voice. A woman with thick, fiery hair faced me. She held Akin, pushing him behind her drowning skirt. Like all of Oya's Egunguns, her face was hidden behind a mask. Something jarred the corner of her lips from what looked like a knife cut.

“Who are you?” I asked, drawing closer to her. My finger signals Aja to stay alert behind me.

“You don't listen. I don't want to harm you. Go before he comes.” She raised her voice.

“I'm not leaving without the boy. Give him to me and nothing has to happen.”

She pulled her mask and the face that stared at me was the one I'd been living with for the past two months. It was a face that knew me to the very core of who I was.

“Yejide?” I breathed out, almost in disbelief.
“What are you? Stop these games. Show me your true face.”

It listened and almost instantaneously, the being wearing my best friend’s face morphed. Its body shifted from the high hips of Yejide’s into a swirl of black smoke. I watched Yejide’s face melt off its face. Its hollow eyes glowed silver like Oya’s own when she showed me the vision of creation.

“What are you?” I whispered the words, my feet pulling me backward. Aja scurried to the side of the room, his palm fronds turning black with decay.

“You do not know who I am?” it asked me, tossing Akin to the ground. My heart pounded against my chest. I’d seen nothing like this. Its face was evil, and its voice scrapped my gut, tearing the air from my lungs.

“I don’t know what you are,” I replied purposefully, ignoring the fact it had said “who” and not “what” when it answered me. Fuck. This was why people didn’t dig to find out the meaning of their dreams.

It raised its other shadowy hand, aiming at me. I dodged the onslaught and crawled to the other side of the room. I couldn’t fight this entity. What mattered was I saved Akin. It continued its attack. I dodged them. The last one scrapped my arm, leaving a burning sensation that travelled into my bloodstream. I called on Oya, begging for

strength and wisdom. A moment later, a scythe appeared in my outstretched hand. The sickled blade was made from black iron that shined. I raised it above my head, the beads wrapped around its neck, jingling. I lashed at the shadow, pouring my frustrations and anger into my attack. The blade cut through the shadow, drawing a shriek from its sharp teeth-filled mouth.

“Now Aja!” I yelled, sending another swipe towards it before it recovered from my first attack. Behind me, Aja opened a new wind portal. The breeze sucked everything around us. I reached for Akin’s hand, gripping it with all my strength as the portal drew us in.

We landed inside Oya’s throne room, panting. Its screams filled my ears and the burning sensations danced inside my body. I raised my head to Oya. She glared down at me from her throne, her beaded mask flung over her head. Her eyes stared at me, anger forming small whirls of air around her. Fuck. My world was about to be flipped. I didn’t know if it was for good or for bad. I dropped the scythe, my eyes landed on Akin. I hadn’t fucked up entirely.

“We have work to do, reaper Kayode,” Oya said, walking towards me with a smirk on her face.

heidi klein

Then You Went Away: A Short Story in Vignettes

A Band-Aid and a “Park Ranger”

I pulled at the shaggy Band-Aid on my big toe. It held on to my finger for a sliver of a moment, then floated away in the park stream.

“You know that’s littering,” a man’s voice said.

I turned and saw a young man dressed in a royal blue button-down and khaki pants. Though I viewed him from an awkward angle, I thought he was handsome. “Who are you? A park ranger?”

He scoffed. “Just a responsible citizen on his lunch break.”

I smiled sweetly. “Well, if it bothers your responsible nature that much, you can save the planet and fish it out of the stream yourself.”

“Eww.”

I shrugged and turned around completely so that I could see him better. “Don’t most scientists think the world is going to end soon, anyway? Solar flares or something like that?”

“How am I supposed to know? I’m an insurance agent.”

“Either way, one Band-Aid will hardly make much of a difference.”

He rolled his eyes (dark brown, by the way), and started to walk away.

“Hey!” I yelled. “Are you single?”

He turned on his heel. “Why?”

“I’m single, too.”

“Yes, I am,” he said, shaking his head in disbelief.

Dinner Date

A string of pearls decorates my neck, and your arm wraps around my waist. I’ve never been this happy, and I’m a happy person! I’ve never felt so free. I’ve never felt so loved. You tell me over again that you’ll never go away, and I believe you. I believe everything that you say. How I love every piece of you! Even your coffee breath when you take an early lunch break to meet me at the park and tease me about my left big toe, which I’ve stubbed again. If I ever get to name a perfume, I’ll name it Brady’s Coffee Breath. It’ll be sweeter than jasmine and more bracing than citrus.

Meeting the Family

When I told Brady that his mother didn't like me, he laughed.

"She's not a very welcoming person, but she actually likes you better than she has any of my girlfriends before."

"How comforting. Tell me about these other girlfriends."

"Are you jealous? Really? Before I met you, I hadn't dated anyone for like two years."

"Why does she still have a picture up on the wall with that other girl?"

"Because she was my date to senior prom. That was the only time I went out with the girl. We mostly went together because neither of us had dates and we were in the same physics class."

"I'm sorry." I tried to keep from crying. "I had hoped your mom would like me. I don't want to be one of those people with horror stories about her mother-in-law."

"Oh, so you're planning on marrying me, are you?" Brady asked with a grin.

"Did I say that?" I backtracked.

"Well, that's usually the way you get a mother-in-law."

“Let’s talk about something else.”

“Like my ex-girlfriends?”

“No. I don’t care. I think I should be getting home. I need to go into work early tomorrow.”

“Can I call you later?”

“No, I really do need to get to bed.”

A Proposal

“Why can’t you just agree to marry me?” Brady asked.

“You can hardly handle dating me,” I said with a fake laugh.

“And what exactly do you mean by that?”

“What do you think I mean?” I parroted back with an even less convincing laugh.

“You’re being ridiculous! You’ve led me to believe for months now that if I asked you to marry me, you would leap into my arms and name a date! Shucks, Lil, you’ve joked about booking a venue on the moon!”

“I’ve not deceived you,” I snapped. “I haven’t led you to believe anything. Maybe you’ve just believed what

you've wanted to believe." I paused. "Maybe we should stop now while we're still ahead."

"While we're still ahead? I don't know about you, but I think we've lost more ground in the last ten minutes than we've gained our entire relationship."

Then You Went Far Away

Horrible things happen every day. I'm an optimist. I never thought anything very bad would happen to me. My good mood would prevent bad luck. Brady left me standing at the edge of a cliff. Maybe a kind stranger will save me. Maybe I'll leap. Who can tell?

Letter from a Former Future Mother-in-Law

There once was a girl who kept a boy on a string. As long as he hung there, ready to jump and dance when she pulled, she was happy. One day she jerked so hard, and he jumped so high, that the string broke. It unraveled so far that the pieces couldn't be tied back together. At a loss as to what to do, the puppet master satisfied herself with making everyone around her miserable.

Letter from a Former Future Husband

I've never known anyone better than I thought I knew you. Whenever we talked, the conversation would take hairpin turns down mountainsides I never dreamed that I would end up exploring. You treated the Andes like the side streets around your house. I miss our arguments. They always ended with that apologetic smile of yours and a peck on the cheek. I used to joke that I got into arguments with you on purpose just so that I could see that smile you only used when you said you were sorry.

Do you know something? I think it only took two weeks for me to realize that you could break my heart. I never thought that I was even capable of breaking you.

Letter from a Former Future Wife

We're meeting at Starbucks, but I'm wearing my prettiest dress. You only said that we were meeting because you "wished that our relationship could have a clean break," but there's nothing clean about the fears that made me push you away.

I don't care if I'm throwing myself at you as long as you know that I am and you don't throw me back. I bought a coffee maker just so that I could smell you in the mornings, and I wear that sweatshirt you left in my car the day we broke up. Honestly, it stinks, but it smells like you, too.

I think I know what you're going to say: You want to smooth out the jagged edges of our last conversation. Then I'll ask you to walk with me in the park while we talk about it. I'll tell you that I don't want our edges smoothed out. I want all the jagged shards to be splinted exactly the way when you stepped out of my car that day. I want everything to fit back together where it was before I sent you far away.

When Pieces Fall in Place

When you end something, you can't start out exactly where you left off, no matter how badly you might want to. Words that I wanted to take back were in Brady's head forever. So, when we decided to put the pieces back together, we realized that a few pieces were missing, like a puzzle you've dropped on the floor and tried to clean up: The dog ends up with three, one falls down a vent, and another dissolves into the ether. But we still tried. We tried to ignore the gaps until we couldn't any longer, and then we filled them with new conversations and new plans. We set dates and reset them, almost bought gowns and tuxes, then backed out at the last possible minute. When I finally set out to mail wedding invitations, Brady held my hand as we walked to the post office.

“Once these go out, we can't change our minds,” Brady mentioned.

“We could. There would just be a lot more drama than before.”

Brady turned me to look at him. “If you change now, I’m gone for good.”

I bit my lip and nodded. “I’m not going to change my mind again. I just might cry every day until it’s over.”

He sighed. “Will you stop acting like a martyr walking toward the executioner? It’s marriage, not a death sentence. We can stop now. We can throw these away and be done for good. I can’t take going back and forth anymore. I’ve been more patient than anyone would have advised me to be.”

“I know.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to mail the invitations,” I said as I tried to slow my heart down to a healthy number of beats per minute.

zach murphy

The Last Weekend in July

It was the summer of 1993, and Keilani and I sat by the crackling fire as the bullfrogs croaked a sonorous symphony, the grass swayed from a whispering breeze, and the stars zipped in different directions across the vast night sky.

“What a weekend,” Keilani said, resting her hands on the back of her jet-black hair.

“Rad like a cat wearing sunglasses,” I said.

“Satisfying like spelling Sriracha right on the first try,” Keilani said.

That was our thing. One of our things. In fact, when you’ve known someone since the age of five, you amass a lot of things.

I leaned in toward the warmth of the fire, took a deep breath, and prepared to tell Keilani something that I hesitated to tell her all summer. “I decided I’m not going to Northwestern.”

“What?” Keilani asked.

“I’ve thought about it a lot, and I just don’t think college is for me,” I answered.

“But we had it all planned out,” Keilani said. “Together.”

“I’m so terrified of tossing four years away,” I said.
“And going into debt forever.”

“Why did you wait until the last minute to tell me?”
Keilani asked. “You always do that, and it drives me
crazy.”

“It’s not the last minute,” I said.

“That’s another thing you do,” Keilani said. “I
know it’s not literally the last minute, but you just have this
affinity for suddenly dipping out on plans.”

“Like when?” I asked.

“Remember when you didn’t even show up to your
own birthday party? The party that I organized!”

“I had the flu!”

Keilani stood up. “And the time you said you
would pick me up from my dentist appointment and didn’t
show up?”

“I had a panic attack about driving in downtown
traffic,” I said. “I had just gotten my license!”

“I had to use a pay phone while half of my mouth
was numb!”

Keilani tossed another log onto the fire and a flurry
of sparks burst into the air.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Keilani sat back down, fanned the smoke away from her eyes, and brushed the ashes off her sweatshirt. “I’m going to miss you. That’s all.”

“I’m going to miss you, too,” I said.

“So, what do you plan on doing?” Keilani asked.

“I want to save the world.”

“Like Wonder Woman?”

“No,” I said. “I keep having these dreams about rainforests losing their color and oceans warping into garbage dumps. I want to try and do something. I’m just not sure what yet.”

“Maybe someday there will be an invention that allows us to see each other’s lives from far away,” Keilani said.

“Sure,” I said. “And maybe Blockbuster will go out of business!”

We both laughed until we snorted.

Keilani reached over and grabbed my hand. “We’ll still look up at the same moon,” she said.

I wondered if I’d ever have a moment with Keilani like this again. “What a weekend,” I said.

Keilani sighed. “Over too soon like a Prince song.”

emma mccooy

The Sidewalk Edge

Now, some people don't even believe in ghosts, and I can't blame them. Death being something firmly final is a great comfort to some, and death being permeable is terrifying to others. No one truly knows what happens after we die, though plenty have tried to make their best guess. Death being final, death being a suggestion, or a next stage of being, it's all relative and guess work and difficult to talk about. So, I don't blame them. I can't. I didn't believe in ghosts either until the day Serene woke me up to go ghost hunting.

“Augh!” I yelled, jerking up in my bed. “Could you at least knock?”

Serene stood at the foot of my bed and tried not to laugh. I rubbed my eyes and looked over, but my roommate was already gone. “How'd you even get in, anyway?”

Serene rolled her eyes. “You don't ever lock your door. Besides, the roommate you love so much was leaving.”

“Did he say anything?”

“Nope.”

“Just ignored you? Typical.” I sat up fully and yawned. The sun was streaking through my tiny room and

lighting up the scattered papers on my desk. My eyes focused more, and I realized that Serene was dressed to go adventuring. Her art overalls were covered with old paint, already dirty and streaked with dust, and her white-blond hair was pulled back in a long braid. Wisps of hair fell around her face. She didn't have her camera bag, but she seemed—

“Stared long enough?” I jerked my eyes back up to hers, and she was trying not to laugh again. Before I could say anything, she rolled her eyes. “Saturday? The hotel—”

“Ghost hunting!” I interrupted in a slight panic. “I didn't set my alarm!”

“I've been up since 4 waiting for you, and it's high time you got going.”

“Oh, god.” I yawned and rubbed my eyes. “I thought you threatened to go without me if I slept in.”

“Well, obviously I changed my mind. Get up.”

I rolled over and looked at my phone. 10:30 a.m. Shoot. I rolled out of bed, forgetting I was only in my underwear, and started pulling on last night's clothes. “I am so sorry. I don't know why I just fell asleep. Can you see my shirt anywhere?”

“It's fine. You can borrow your roommate's.”

“It wouldn't exactly fit,” I replied distractedly. My assigned roommate was much shorter than I was. Most

people were. Even with her boots on, Serene barely came up to my shoulder. My dad would always complain that I had gotten my mother's height and that I was impossible to feed. He didn't complain whenever he had to reach the top shelf though. I finally found a shirt that didn't smell horrendous under my bed and pulled it on. When I faced Serene again, she was slightly turned away. Wait. Did I make her uncomfortable? Was she—

“Hey. Andre.” I snapped back again. Serene was giving me a look, one that I'd never seen before. It was almost sad, but not quite; entirely incomprehensible, deep and powerful in some way I'd never be able to describe, or even begin to understand. If I were an artist, it would be this face I would try to immortalize in paint so centuries from now people would look on it and feel something dormant within them begin to move.

“Never mind,” she said after I stayed silent. She pointed to my nightstand. “Grab your notebook, or we're going to get stuck in the coastal traffic.”

I couldn't help but wonder if I had missed something. I grabbed my notebook, phone, wallet, keys, and stuffed them in my bag. I opened the door, gave a mock bow, and Serene walked out first.

“You want to drive?”

“Nah,” she said. “Mine wouldn't start this morning.”

We walked the rest of the way in silence. Had I said something? Not said something? It didn't matter right now; I could overthink later.

I opened the passenger door with exaggerated courtesy. "My lady."

She rolled her eyes and climbed in the front seat. I got in my side, started the car, and backed out. "How far to the coast?"

"Forty-five minutes in the early morning, probably an hour now. Longer if we keep tooling around."

"Fine, point taken."

"Have you done anything for the paper yet?"

"No," I groaned. The one class we had together was Creative Fiction, a class that was somehow on the required list for both Writing and Visual Arts majors. Instead of assigning actual fiction projects, Dr. Hammond had gotten it into his head that topic research papers would help give us perspective on future writing projects. In a fit of artistic inspiration—or madness—I had chosen coastal scenery, and Serene had chosen paranormal activity. The haunted hotel we were going to was built right on the cliffs and had been closed for decades due to unstable erosion. The ghost stories surrounding the place were near-legendary, and although the hotel was supposed to be fenced off, Serene had never had a strong respect for

private property. I didn't like that we were going in broad daylight now, but it was too late to blow it off.

I turned off campus and started toward the nearest coffee shop.

"I don't understand why he's making us do this," I grumbled. "Why not just let us go write and trust that we'll do the research?"

"Well, you're the one leaving it all on this trip."

"Oh, come on—"

"Oh, shut up. You never commit to a topic."

"I can commit to things," I said half under my breath as I stopped at a light.

"Tell that to any of your poems."

I mocked swooned. "Ouch."

"Besides, I've already started."

The light turned green. "No way!" I said. "You always leave me to scramble."

"Not this time," she smiled. "It's only the intro though, I wrote it last night after reading about the hotel. Want to hear it?"

"Sure. Then I'll tell you what I read about the hotel."

Serene looked down at the paper now in her hands and began to read. “Nothing is quite as tragic as a ghost. And I mean that. In a world full of tragedy every single day, the ghost is the most tragic thing of all because they cannot rest. Instead of dying, passing in peace, they stay behind by the sheer force of what connected them to Earth. Rage at their brutal murder, the love left unconfessed, the pull of unfinished business.”

She paused. “That would be the Sunset Triumvirate.”

“I figured.”

She continued. “We can see this force in the living as well; people refuse to move on from the spouse who has left them, from the child who died young, from the missed opportunity years back, from the wound received deeply and slowly so long ago. Ghosts shouldn't really be feared, they are so like us in this refusal to move on for just one day more. Clutching the ground with wispy fingers with the force of a thing possessed, a thing bereaved and wanting.”

I waited a few seconds. “Serene, are you kidding me? That was beautiful! And awful.” I made a quick turn and must've thrown her against the window. “Sorry. But really, have you ever considered writing poetry?” She shook her head.

“Well, I thought that was very nice. But where’d you get—” I glanced in the backseat. “Wait, where’s your camera bag?”

Serene shrugged. “I forgot it. It’s fine, I’ll just remember what I see.” She leaned back and closed her eyes. “Besides, I can fudge the research. It’s not like Hammond is the worst professor we’ve ever had or anything.”

“You’re right,” I said. I pulled into a Starbucks drive-thru and wondered if I even had enough money for coffee. “You want anything?”

“Nah, I’m good.”

“Really? Have you even had any yet today?”

Serene made a noise of displeasure. “I had one cup at 4:30. Which is when you were supposed to be up. Seriously, I’m good.”

“What did you even do while I was sleeping? That was what, five or six hours—”

“Welcome to Starbucks.”

I ordered and pulled through the line. When I looked over, Serene still had her eyes closed and she looked so still and lovely my chest physically hurt. Without looking up, she asked, “Who was your worst professor?”

I didn’t even have to think. “Definitely Jones.”

Serene huffed. “Of course. How could I forget?
He—”

“He said that African languages weren’t as
sophisticated.”

“And then you glared at him, and I—”

“And you started yelling—”

“Because what kind of professor looks a black kid
in the eye and says that.”

“I don’t even know—”

“Why did we even have to take Intro to Linguistics
anyway?”

“Beats me. But I’m glad we did.” I pulled up to the
window and paid. “Otherwise, I wouldn’t have gotten to
know the crazy white chick who yells at an adjunct
professor the first day of freshman year.”

“Is that all you saw?” As I grabbed my coffee from
the window I looked over and saw Serene smile. “A crazy
white chick?”

“Nah, I was more thinking she was the most
interesting girl I’d ever seen in my life.” I turned and said
thank you to the disoriented looking barista. “Canvas bag,
braided updo, she was wearing patchwork jeans and a
paint-stained shirt. I knew I had to get to know her, or I’d
regret it forever.”

There was silence as I got to the highway—nearly five minutes—and I was fully starting to overthink it when she replied, “You mean that?”

I looked over. “Of course.”

It was moments like these that made me wonder. We were sitting in the car, driving to the coast, and whether I meant to or not, I had revealed a little too much. It was like were waiting to cross the street, and every time one of us made a move to leave the sidewalk, the other would hesitate. More likely, I would look, see no cars, and refuse to cross the street because I was scared Serene wasn’t standing next to me at all.

The moment passed, and we swayed away from the sidewalk edge. Maybe it was just me, maybe it wasn’t.

We came up on the ocean and started winding our way along the cliffs. It was a gorgeous day; big puffy clouds drifted across the sky and the sea seemed almost green. It was a rare sunny day in October. The Oregon coast rarely saw such gorgeous weather this late in the year. We really should have come here more often, maybe should have taken a day trip and have a picnic. Or, if the weather was bad, find some coffee shop by the beach and write.

“You know why they call it the Sunset Hotel?”

“Why?”

I sipped my coffee. “The owners wanted it to be this retreat for rich people. Built it right on the cliffs so they could see a perfect sunset over the ocean.”

“Idiots. I can see the sunset from my dorm window for free.”

“Still, a good idea in principle. But you can’t see the sunset from your dorm?”

Serene just laughed. “Just a joke. Now, tell me a ghost story.”

I looked out over the coast.

“According to lore and the building permits, the Sunset Hotel was designed, built, and paid for by a group of businessmen—sorry—businesspeople, called the Sunset Triumvirate. Two men, one woman, so called because they were buying up real estate all over the Pacific Coast to build luxury resorts that could see the sunset.”

I paused dramatically.

“And then we take a departure from easily discoverable legal records and enter the lore.”

Serene interrupted. “I thought you were researching the coastal scenery by the hotel?”

“Okay, so I got distracted by the haunted hotel and its gruesome story of theft, murder, and scandal. Sue me.” Serene nodded at me to continue. “So, the Sunset Tri,

shady businesspeople with a lot of money that no one quite knew how they'd gotten, come to Oregon after a long stretch of time in California and immediately love the location of what would become the Sunset Hotel. See, they'd saved the name for the perfect location, the perfect building, and the perfect luxury experience. Supposedly, they'd bribed the local officials because it was supposed to be protected habitat for an endangered species of seagull. But did they care? No! They threw their money at the problem and began construction."

"Here's where things get tricky. Rumor followed them, persistent. They weren't trying to build hotels at all, it was all a front. They were actually pursuing an ancient demonic ritual: if you could say the right words and the right moment of sunset through a certain stained-glass window, the Devil would appear and give you your one wish."

"That's bullshit."

"Ok, probably, but doesn't it sound cool?"

"Maybe."

"Can I finish? The more they built, the more the rumor grew. By the time the Sunset Hotel was finished, there was determined underground following that believed it. Within the first week of opening, the hotel was a smashing success, business was good, and the Tri were shut up in a room on the third floor, doing "business" they

wouldn't specify. One morning, they didn't come out. The staff waited until lunch, then knocked on the door. No answer. By the time they finally broke through, the smell was obvious. They were all dead. Poisoned, every one of them. The police never figured out who it was. The hotel had to be sold, but no one would buy, not with a stain like that. And when those bribed county officials brought up the endangered species, the unstable cliffs, the hotel was shut down for good."

"Seriously? They all died?"

"Well, it was back in the 70's. At least one person actually died. I couldn't find anything on it."

"Spooky."

"Couldn't be spookier than the row of abandoned warehouses by your house."

"I guess so."

The silence was odd, Serene loved talking about her adventures in those buildings. But it was the kind of silence I'd gotten used to when hanging out with Serene. When I glanced over, she had closed her eyes again and was facing the sun. Her face was relaxed, calm. Her blonde eyelashes turned almost white in the sun and her freckles were starting to fade. It was like if I only saw her out of the corner of my eye, I would see through her; a beam of light sitting in my passenger seat with white-blond hair and the most arresting eyes I'd ever seen.

I knew I was staring; I tried to pay attention to the road. To say she was beautiful was not enough. She was lightning in a soda bottle, the moon that pulled art from the shores of my mind, the brief moment of silence between peals of thunder. Everything about her was beautiful to me. Her voice, the way she tied her shoes twice, how she scrunched her face up when she painted. The way she'd go for hours without speaking then get into passionate arguments over a casual thought. I loved the way she loved tea scalding hot with no sugar added, sipping and wincing while struggling through a history reading.

And there I was, getting too close to the sidewalk edge and swaying away again.

I'd tried for years to write a poem about her, but they had never turned out quite right. Maybe one day I'd be able to do it.

My cell phone rang, and I swore at the sudden noise. Serene looked up as I dug around in my back pocket. I glanced away from the road.

"Oh, it's your grandmother," I said. "Why isn't she calling you?"

Serene didn't answer for a moment. "I forgot my phone."

"What? You? Forgot your phone?"

“Oh, shut up.”

I answered and held the phone on speaker with one hand and drove with the other. When I gestured to Serene to hold the phone, she drew her hands away and shook her head.

“Andre?”

“Hey, Mrs. Robinson! What’s up?” Serene’s face was closed, set in hard lines in a way I recognized from my father when they had placed my mother in the ground.

“Andre,” Mrs. Robinson continued in her measured way. “Have you seen Serene today?”

From the corner of my eye, I could see Serene shaking her head firmly. “Uh, no. Sorry, Mrs. Robinson, but we haven’t met up yet today. I’m just getting coffee right now.”

A pause. “That’s alright. Will you please let me know if you see her? I want to know if she’s coming home for Thanksgiving.”

“Of course,” I said. “I bet she’s alright. Don’t worry, her phone probably died, or she’s caught up in a painting.”

“That is likely.” Mrs. Robinson sounded unsure. “Thank you, Andre. You’re always welcome to come as well.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Robinson, but my dad wants me home. I’ll let you know when I find her.”

After I hung up, I tossed my phone in the backseat without looking. “Want to tell me what that’s all about?”

“Not really.”

Serene could be like that sometimes. Go silent, retreat in her head somewhere and not crawl out for hours or days later. I tried to understand, I really did. But where her grandmother could be formal and distant, my dad was always up close and personal. Running from something was never an option growing up. With her, I would just wait it out and know that she’d come back at some point.

“Are you sure? Did you guys have a fight?”

Serene didn’t exactly glare at me, but it was close. Then her face softened. “No, but I’m just not ready yet. It’s-it’s complicated. It’s fine.” She put her legs up on the dash and sighed. “Trust me. It’s better this way.”

That was way more than I was expecting to get from her. “Ok,” I relented. “But we’re re-visiting this later.”

“You’re going home for Thanksgiving?”

“Yeah,” I said, surprised. “We talked about it last week. My dad’s sister is coming.”

“Oh.”

“Would you rather come with us this year? I can call my dad—”

“No, it’s fine.”

The rest of the drive passed in silence. The cliffs grew taller and more jagged. We slowly climbed higher along the two-lane highway. Seagulls started appearing over the coastline, screeching and wheeling in looping patterns as they chased each other and searched for food. I pulled off the highway and found a smaller road. Two lanes turned to one, then the paved road turned to dirt, and we passed several “Closed” signs. If Serene wasn’t in the car, I would’ve turned back. The road was clearly unused, closed, and not open for a couple of college students looking for inspiration. I hated going anywhere remotely dangerous. Those warehouses by Serene’s house freaked me out; it was like they were just waiting for you to get hurt so they could swallow you whole. Broken boards, unclear paths, rusty nails, rabid animals; every time we went exploring, I couldn’t help but imagine the worst. But Serene was with me, she was fearless, and I’d follow her anywhere. Any nerves I had about danger became a low hum in the background.

Occasionally, Serene would look over with an inscrutable look on her face. It wasn’t bad, but it wasn’t joyful either; it was how she had looked at me this morning. I refused to think it was what I hoped it was. I might’ve been entirely gone when it came to her, but I

could still tell what sorrow was when I saw it. Some people think sorrow is entirely sad, but it isn't, not really. There can be happiness and nostalgia and regret and love all mixed up in there. It's the mixing that makes it so hard to understand.

Besides the obvious fear of losing Serene's friendship, I knew that this look was something impossibly deep, too deep for a Saturday afternoon of ghost hunting, too hard to understand while she was so close. I swayed away from the edge.

"Look!"

We turned a corner, and the hotel loomed large before us. What an eyesore. I stopped and approached the rusty chain link gates. They were closed with an equally rusty chain without a lock. I flipped the chain to the ground, turned around, and gave Serene a thumbs up. The hum of nerves was a little louder, but I was committed now. She flipped me off. As I walked back to the car, I saw the shadow of another car parked in the woods off the road. It didn't look old or broken down. I wanted to look closer, but then Serene leaned out the window and yelled at me to get going. I got back in my car, and the woods stared silently as we passed onto the hotel grounds.

When we finally pulled up in front of the hotel, I understood why people said it was haunted. Besides the stories, it was just unsettling. It might have been entirely ugly from a distance, but up close it was nothing short of

grotesque. It was jagged, startling, out of place. It was angular, modern, and thoroughly out of odds with the forest around us. It certainly didn't look like anything that was built in the 70's. The first floor of the hotel was at ground level, and I could practically see the top of the roof. If we were to walk around the side, which we did, we could see how the hotel was built into the side of the cliff.

Gaudy and imposing, the old Sunset Hotel was painted a sick shade of pea green. It went down the cliff in a dizzying display of engineering and stopping just above the crashing waves. Time had chipped away at the rock, and on days with high wind like that day, the entire building swayed on its foundation. It was no wonder it had closed down only a year after opening. The hotel was risk personified, a declaration of defiance in the face of the ocean. I wondered what kind of sick mind decided to foist such an ugly and useless building on the beautiful coastline.

“I don't know about this.”

“Oh, come on,” Serene replied. “It's fine.” Her face had gone pale, and her mouth was set in a hard line. She steeled herself and walked back to the entrance. “It's perfectly safe.”

“Serene, wait!” I ran after her and caught up right before the front doors. My bag bounced uncomfortable against my thigh. The doors were large, heavy, paint peeling and cracking at the edges. “I don't think this is a good idea.”

“It’s fine,” Serene said tersely. I looked at her, and it was almost like looking at a stranger. The moment passed and she shrugged. She made an attempt at a joke. “It’s not like we’re here at night or anything. Ghosts can’t get us during the day.”

I didn’t know about that. “We could just go back. You can write about the creepy hotel, and I’ll write about the coastline. Nobody would know.”

“It’s fine,” she insisted. She folded her arms and waited. The doors seemed to push outward, like they were holding something I really, really didn’t want to see. I pushed open one door slowly, and it creaked as it swung back. I hesitated as Serene walked forward and disappeared into the darkness. I leaned a bit on one foot, unwilling to step inside. In the car, the existence of ghosts seemed laughable, but here, I became unsure.

Serene was fearless, always going first, and I couldn’t even see her anymore. I leaned back, forward again, and then plunged into the darkness.

“It’s not the ghosts I’m worried about,” I grumbled.

“Shut up,” came the echoing reply.

My footsteps creaked loud on the floor as I walked into the lobby. It was dim. The floor was moving slightly with the wind and cobwebs hung from the walls. Two ornate staircases curved downward past the front desk and

faded into the second floor. Chandeliers might have hung from the ceiling at some point, but the hooks hung empty. Honestly, what were the previous owners thinking, putting a luxury hotel on the barren Oregon coast? Oh, right, there were members of the occult trying to summon a demon. The thought did not comfort me. The silence between gusts of wind was creepy, and I was suddenly glad we came in the daylight.

“Andre!”

“Coming,” I replied distractedly. I could barely see by the time I came to the left staircase, and I wished I had brought a flashlight. “Serene?”

“Down here.”

Why was she moving so fast? I creaked my way down the staircase. I passed non-descript paintings worn thin by the salt air and time. It got darker in the stairwell, then lighter again as I hit the second floor. It must have been a sort of second lobby, a common area of sorts. Rotten chairs sat in groups, and a mildewed carpet ran down the length of the room and stopped before another set of stairs that curved inward. Large windows gave a beautiful and terrifying view of the ocean and for a moment, my breath hung in my lungs, and I had an inkling of what the owners must have envisioned. The face of evil is terrifying and wondrous to behold. I shook my head, trying to clear the unhelpful thoughts.

“Andre!” Serene’s soft voice echoed below me. How had she gotten to the third floor already? The floor creaked alarmingly beneath a powerful gust of wind, and then the hotel fell silent. I had adjusted my feet to match the movement of the floor, and when I straightened, I heard Serene call again.

“Coming, coming!” I pulled my notebook and pen from my bag and made my way to the second staircase. The wind had died, and I almost wished it would return. My steps were obscenely loud, even on the carpet. It felt like I was something profane, dirtying the sacred ground of the dead and resting. The hotel was dark, full of awe, brimming with fear and the little deaths of things that never happened. I wrote frantically by the afternoon light, pinning phrases and words to paper before stopping at the top of the second staircase.

“Serene?”

No answer. Oh, we really shouldn’t be here. The staircase had holes in it, the carpet was fraying and stained. I waited, held my breath, but I couldn’t hear Serene moving on the third floor. My knuckles were white on my notebook as I descended another floor. Were the Tri on the third floor? Waiting for us? Surely there must be a grain of truth to every story.

“There you are.”

It was dark, too dark. Where were the windows? As my eyes adjusted, I saw Serene standing over a large hole in the floor. The windows were boarded up completely, only thin lines of light showed through. I felt sick at the sight. Why had they boarded up the windows? Torn down the walls? What should have been five or six individual rooms was one large one. No doors or walls to hide anything.

There was a pale light across Serene's face; the freckles on her nose were lit up in a final attempt to show themselves before the winter faded them into the background.

The hole was large, but if I hadn't been looking at Serene already, I wouldn't have even known it was there. There was something about the angle of the floor, the slant of the hotel on the cliffs, that made it blend in with the shadows. I approached Serene, but she gestured at me to stop. I was already uneasy, but my unease soon blossomed into full-on fear.

"Serene?" I saw a flashlight on the ground, unlit. The boards by the hole looked like they had been broken recently; there were fresh splinters sticking out that were bright brown and untarnished by the salty air.

"Serene," I said more firmly. I was surprised by the steadiness of my voice. She turned and seemed to stare straight through me with infinite sorrow on her face.

“There’s someone down there.”

“What?” I moved to go forward, but she held her hands up. “Someone down there? We need to see if they need help—”

“No, Andre,” Serene said. She paused and cleared her throat. “She’s, uh, she’s down there. But. It’s beyond us.”

Those nerves I had were humming at a frequency I hadn’t felt since Serene has broken her ankle last Christmas in those god-forsaken warehouses. Then the full meaning of Serene’s words hit, and the frequency increased.

“Uh,” I didn’t know what to say.

“We better call someone.”

I just stood there, poetry notebook in hand, feeling entirely at a loss. Someone dead? Hadn’t I thought there was something deeply wrong? We shouldn’t even be here.

“Andre.” A deep, shaky breath. “We should leave. You need to call the police.”

That was the last thing I wanted to do. We were trespassing in a very dangerous, very closed hotel that everyone said was full of ghosts. And, well—

“Serene, I can’t. We’re the only ones here, and, well, I am a very suspicious subject.”

But before I had even processed it, Serene was passing me, and I was walking back up the stairs, following her again. Fully conscious of what I knew was on the fourth, or, God forbid, the fifth or sixth floor, I chose my steps very carefully. The boards creaked louder than ever under my feet, and by the time we got to the first floor, I realized that I had left my phone in the backseat. I stopped. Serene kept walking in the eerie silence, silence that seemed to echo around my brain.

“Wait.” Serene looked back at me, waiting. “Never mind.”

Back at the car, I called the police and told them what I knew. Then, I sat on the ground next to Serene, and we waited. I was in my room all night, I told myself. My roommate was there. Then I felt sick for even thinking about me while there was someone down there, lying dead on the floor. So much for ghosts and creepy stories, we had found the real thing.

Serene hugged her knees close to her chest and stared off into the distance. I felt off, unrooted in some crucial way. There was something wrong, I could feel it, I knew it in ways I couldn't explain. It was probably the fact that there was someone dead in that hotel. Probably the fact that I would be facing the police, never an experience I wanted to have. I hadn't done anything wrong, but did that matter? But Serene was here, and I owed it to that girl down there.

“Hey, Andre.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you wish everything had turned out different?”

I paused. “Like what, everything?”

“I don’t know.” Her bangs had fallen out of her braid. She huffed. “Like, what if we had made different choices? Tried...something else. Or someone else. I don’t know. I can’t—” She pressed her hands against her forehead.

“Like if your parents had stuck around? Or if my mom hadn’t died?”

“Yeah,” she tucked her hair behind her ear. “Like that.”

We’d had conversations like this before. But it was usually me asking the what-ifs and Serene sticking to the ground in firm affirmation that what was done was done. I’d never seen her so distressed. I tried to switch perspectives quickly.

“Well, hm. I guess.” It was harder than I thought. “I think that things might have been different. My dad would have been happier. Maybe you wouldn’t be as close to your grandmother.” A seagull flew above us and disappeared over the roof. “But it did happen. And even if we had made different choices, I still think we would have ended up in some version of today.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” I was warming up to the idea. It wasn’t something I had ever said aloud, but as I spoke, I saw it taking shape. “There are so many options, always, but there are things that feel so right, there can’t be any way for them to not happen. Like writing. Even if I had chosen a different school, I still would have had to take a writing class and discovered how much I love it.”

We heard faint sirens in the distance, and I kept going.

“But meeting you?” I turned and looked at Serene. If I looked at her too casually it was like she wasn’t as concrete. Like if I was only directly looking at her, she would really take shape. I was probably nervous. “It feels so right, so impossibly right, I know I would have found you eventually. There are people that call out to you in a cosmic way, like we’re both made of the same thing that’s trying to get back together. And no matter the ifs or the could-haves, we’d still be sitting in some version of today having this conversation.”

Two squad cars pulled up, cutting off Serene. She closed her mouth and just watched as two officers came over. I stood up. I directed them inside, told them where to find the hole. The younger officer didn’t so much as look at Serene, but the older one looked down and then gave me a funny look. I brushed it off. It wasn’t the first time people looked at us weird.

Serene and I listened to the creaking of the hotel as the officers went inside. Some of my anxiety started to lessen. They seemed professional, and so far, no one was casting blame. My mind wandered back to Serene's question. Had I stepped off the sidewalk? Swayed a little too close to the edge? I had meant every word. Minutes passed. Maybe half an hour. The creaking and squeaking signaled the return of the officers. I wondered what they had seen. Serene hadn't even let me look, though I supposed that was a mercy.

"Andre," Serene said.

"Hm?" I was watching the younger officer push open the front door. His face was grave.

"You know I love you, right?"

I froze. My stomach swooped like I had missed a step. Or stepped off an edge. I slowly looked at the girl next to me. "What?"

"I always loved you." Her face held the look she gave me when she had first woken me up. It was infinitely tender, equally sad, impossibly deep. I could hardly breathe. "I don't remember...when...but I do-"

"Mr. Satchel?"

I whipped my head back around and saw the older officer standing over me. I got back up and dusted off my pants.

“We found the body of a young woman on the fourth floor. This area is closed, so she must have broken in.” I grimaced, and he pretended not to notice. “Did you know her?”

“No, sir.” I shook my head. The younger officer went to his squad car and was relaying some kind of instruction.

“She was wearing denim overalls, a red shirt, and had blonde hair in a braid. We’re waiting for—”

“Wait. Serene, that sounds like—”

I looked back, but Serene was gone.

katherine varga

The Disappearance of Jay St. James

On the first day of the disappearances, I walked along the river, narrating to myself out of habit: “Jay St. James’ journey began early in October when he was finally confronted with his destiny.” I wished I could skip the meeting with my academic advisor and begin the quest that awaited me. My last meeting with her had not been worthy of the saga that will eventually be read or sung for centuries, but it played through my mind as I walked.

“What would you like to major in?” Ms. Mendez had asked from behind her desktop computer. Her desk also held a heart-framed photograph of a golden retriever and a stack of self-help books. I wondered if they were for her or her students.

“Light,” I said.

“As in...physics? Light particles and waves and all that?”

“No,” I said. “That’s too limiting. That should be part of my study, of course. But light is more than its physical properties. Light invites marvel, clarity, magic. It can be found in calculus, nineteenth-century literature, ancient Japanese history, dendrology, Marxist media theory, history of lost worlds. Those are the classes I want to take.”

Ms. Mendez glanced at her computer screen and typed something. I could see her email reflected in her glasses. “What career are you interested in?”

“I don’t need one. I’m going to be the next Lucifer.”

Ms. Mendez took off her glasses. In a rote tone, she asked, “Is that a rapper? A baseball player? Either way, those are not sturdy career paths. A degree from Penumbral Academy will take you far, but it doesn’t work miracles. If you do want to pursue a competitive occupation, it would behoove you to have a stable plan or at least a parallel career. I can help you form one.”

I needed to leave. I would agree to some absurd major designed by people with no knowledge of me to escape suffocation by rationality.

“You’ve taken a lot of history classes,” she said, and I said, “Sure. I’ll do that.”

She handed me a pamphlet listing careers I could pursue with a history major and smiled triumphantly, no way of knowing she had only won this battle because I chose to lose it. In my haste to leave her office, I had neglected to complete a form, so we scheduled another check-in appointment to finalize my paperwork.

When I concluded my walk by the river and arrived at her building, I was neither alarmed nor displeased to find her office empty. I sat in the waiting lounge with my

book, dreaming of Ragnarok, waiting for her to arrive. After ten minutes, the secretary popped her head in.

“Have you seen Ms. Mendez?” she asked.

“Not yet,” I said. “We were supposed to meet at 10.”

Concern crossed her face, but she straightened it away with a smile. “Haven’t seen her yet today,” she said. “Probably traffic.”

After another ten minutes, she came by again. “You might want to head to class,” she said. “I’ll let Ms. Mendez know you were here.”

“She was supposed to sign my form,” I said.

The secretary scribbled “Extension OK’d by office,” and I left for class, History of Warfare, only a couple minutes late. The professor looked at me expectantly when I entered, as though waiting for me to arrive before starting lecture.

“Has anyone seen Rina?” she asked. No one spoke. “Strange,” she said, clearly thrown off. Because the T.A. Rina wasn’t there to hand back our last homework assignment and its feedback, our professor told us to hold off on the next assignment until we got suggestions for improvement. The last homework hadn’t sparked a fiery rebellion in my soul, so I hadn’t done it. I was thankful for

the break from more work though, of course, I hoped Rina wasn't out with anything serious, etc., etc.

I returned to my room for a quick ramen lunch. Sidney bragged about not having any Monday classes until 3, so I expected to see them there—if not still asleep, then playing games on their computer. But their bed was empty and unmade, and more surprisingly, their messenger bag was still in the room, with their laptop on the desk. I assumed they were in the shower, until I saw their shower caddy hanging from the wall.

I warmed up my ramen in the dorm kitchen microwave and ran to peek my head in the bathroom. Empty, including every stall. I grabbed my ramen by the top edges and hurried back to my room, eager to drop it on my desk and give my burning fingertips a reprieve. Still no Sidney.

I instinctively reached for my phone to text them, then I saw their phone on their desk. Usually, I wouldn't touch their stuff, but this felt like an exceptional circumstance. I couldn't unlock it but noted the battery life—100%. They hadn't left their phone behind to charge it.

I wasn't sure what else to do but go to class. Sidney would show up by the time I returned, I figured.

The History of Death Rituals usually put me in a better mood, but I arrived to an empty podium. As the

students joked about how long we needed to wait before we could leave, the head of the history department swooped in and raised her hand to get our attention.

“Professor Mori is out today,” she said. “He apologizes for the late notice, but he isn’t feeling well. He asked that you use this as an opportunity to catch up with, or get ahead of, the readings.” She left as abruptly as she had entered.

We hadn’t been assigned any readings yet. Mori was still finalizing the syllabus. My peers packed up their notebooks and laptops and left. I bent over my agenda and pretended to review my to-do list from last week, waiting until everyone was gone. And then I put my head on my desk. I had already deduced the disappearances were linked, and I would need my rest before uncovering the truth.

A tawny brown owl flew in through the window. The closed window, I should clarify. She tapped her wing, and I lifted my hand in a wave, a welcome. She passed through the glass and soared around the room.

She didn’t speak in a conventional way, but I understood her. Her meaning was clear from the way she gestured her wings and nodded her beak.

“You want to study light?”

Of course I did—this majestic creature could see into the depths of my intellectual curiosity. And believe me, that shit runs deep.

“Go to the quad,” she communicated. “At moonlight. The lesson begins then.”

The rest of the day passed in an endless blur. I listened to a professor ramble about Dickens, knowing that the real literature, for me, would begin that night. Who else could appreciate the layers of brown in the owl’s wings, or the wise twitch around her eye? I always knew I was different, and now I had proof: an owl chose me.

I didn’t worry that Sidney was still missing when I returned to my dorm. Actually, I felt a glimmer of relief that Sidney wasn’t there to see me slip on my grey knit sweater and sneakers in the middle of the night.

I was surprised and rather disappointed to find a group of people, perhaps twenty total, waiting in the quad. They didn’t seem to have come together—everyone stood a few feet apart from each other. I naturally took my place a few feet apart from the closest people. Those around me smiled and waved but didn’t speak. I eyed them. Were they my competitors? Foes to conquer before earning my right to pursue a quest? A few more people came, then a few more.

We were mostly silent until chimes played out, a few ominous notes and someone by me giggled. “A

tritone. The devil's tone. We were talking about that in music history today.”

“Is that where you got the invitation?” a voice behind me asked.

“Yes,” the first voice said. “It was in the middle of a symphony. The other cellists zoned out and missed it altogether. But I heard it, soft, coming from the percussion section.”

“I was in a programming class,” the voice behind me said. “The date and place appeared in code.”

“I thought I was taking my poetry lecture too literally,” another voice said. “I wasn't expecting all this!”

“I'm not even sure if I was in a class,” a new voice said. “I may have been tripping a little.”

A few people laughed, and I jumped in.

“Me too,” I said. “I mean, I wasn't under the influence. But I fell asleep in an empty classroom and woke to the owl.”

“It was a squirrel for me.”

“I didn't see an animal.”

“Me neither.”

More voices offered more information. Murmurs came from further away as side conversations broke out.

There were too many of us for any one person to hear everything, but I suspect everything said was heard by at least one person. The gist: no two people were summoned in exactly the same way, but we all were told to be at the quad in the middle of the night, in a manner that was too enticingly mysterious to decline.

After an hour, someone went, “Guys, I think this is it.” And someone else said, “I want pancakes.” And someone else said, “Fuck, yeah. I have maple syrup in my kitchen, who’s in?” Groups went in different directions. It was starting to feel like a cheesy orientation event. Nothing groundbreaking. Nothing enlightening.

I stayed until the very end, until there were only five of us left. We looked at each other uncertainly, then agreed to take a walk by the river—just in case anything came up.

“What was that, do you think?” a tall guy with long hair asked. “A trick of some sort?”

“I thought we would disappear,” the girl with a green streak in her hair said.

“Disappear?” the guy laughed.

“Haven’t you noticed?”

I caught her eye and nodded. Of course. That’s the only reason I was there—to find the link between the two mysterious occurrences.

The tall guy looked up at the moon. The moon's shine didn't quite reach the quiet river, which reflected only darkness.

"Maybe we never get a reveal," he said. "Maybe we go through life doubting this night really happened. And maybe that's for the best."

I shivered a bit, either from the night air or from the hollow sadness that comes with remembering your mortality.

"Or maybe we'll remember," the girl said. "And even if we forget, we'll still know."

The group dissolved. I returned to my room, reluctant for the night to end but already feeling fatigued. If I wasn't about to start a hero's magical journey, I needed to make sure I woke in time for class.

*

I awoke the next morning to an empty dorm and thought, forget my classes. I needed to find Sidney. I'll admit I didn't know Sidney terribly well. They could never quite keep up with my banter. I knew they wanted to be a chemical engineer and loved anime, but we didn't have midnight heart-to-hearts. I had no idea why they might feel the need to disappear, or where they would go. I assumed this wasn't their decision.

I went to Ms. Mendez's office to see if she had returned, but her door was closed.

"Any word from her?" I asked the secretary.

"She had a family emergency," the secretary said brightly, then frowned as if she had only just heard what she said. "She'll be in Tennessee. Indefinitely."

"That's awful," I said.

"If you need academic guidance, Mr. Jones has been taking on her students."

She smiled. I smiled back. "Family emergency." Vague, but too personal to invite further questions. The Tennessee detail was a bit too random. Plausible, but suspicious. I had made her nervous. I tried to be nonchalant, but perhaps I was one student too many asking questions.

"I left my pen in her office last time. Can I go look for it?"

Her smile faded. "The door is locked, for Ms. Mendez's privacy." She handed me a shitty ballpoint from a mug on her desk. "You may use this."

I feigned a smile and said goodbye.

The next stop in my investigation was the river that bordered campus. This was less empirical and based on the sudden horrid thought I had that, what if the bodies were

below the river? The trees and grass and leaves looked as they always did—nothing dug up or out of place, but the walk was worth taking because I met the girl with the green streak in her hair. We made eye contact, smiled, and I turned around so we could walk in the same direction.

“Any updates?” she asked.

“The higher ups are hiding something,” I said.

“Of course they are. It’s weird, what’s happening. But they don’t want the donors to think anything’s wrong.”

Her name was Jade. We didn’t mention the night in the quad, but we didn’t need to. It was a shared past that allowed us to see something we recognized in each other—a shared memory.

“I don’t like this,” I said, and immediately regretted my petulance. This was not the attitude of a hero about to solve the disappearance of a roommate, advisor, T.A., and professor. I sounded like someone who feared being next.

“I don’t either,” Jade said, and for a moment, I felt a little better.

*

The following Monday another slew of people disappeared, including my R.A. and my favorite dining hall worker. There was no more plausible deniability. Everyone

knew at least one person who had vanished, but nobody knew where people were going.

Because the circumstances were so deeply distressing, they became a joke. Social groups had different inside jokes for what was going on, but the most common word I heard was “the reckoning:” “I hope whoever stole my lunch gets reckoned!,” “If you don’t turn in this problem set on time, you’ll be the next to get reckoned,” and “You might as well have a cookie for breakfast, you never know which meal will be your last before you’re reckoned.”

Professor Mori’s class was canceled, and my dorm was too quiet, so I walked to the river. In Sidney’s absence, the campus felt trapped under a huge, invisible cage. Nothing was right.

I ate a sandwich by the river in moody resignation and passed Jade standing on the pavement next to a tipped bike. She looked down at her phone with dismay.

“Hey,” I called out, and she looked up with wide eyes.

“This bike,” she pointed. “It’s my girlfriend’s.”

“Is she—”

“She texted me that it was a beautiful day, so she was going to bike on the trails. I haven’t heard from her since then. 11:03.”

She spoke to her phone, willing it to give her more information.

There were no bumps on the sidewalk to explain why the bike was tipped over. No signs of blood or abandoned possessions. No clear injury done to the bike.

“If she fell, wouldn’t someone have seen her?”

This area had less traffic than central campus but was still within sight of several academic buildings.

“Unless someone attacked her.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t that,” I said. “She was probably reckoned.”

Jade’s eyes grew wide, and I felt bad for saying the obvious.

“My roommate was, too,” I said.

“I remember,” she said. “And still no word?”

“None,” I said, though a few pieces clicked into place for me. Jade saw it on my face.

“What do you know?” she asked.

“Not much,” I said. “I’m just grasping at coincidences, like anyone else.”

“Tell me.”

I described the similarities between her girlfriend's disappearance and my roommate's. Both were on a Monday morning. Both happened when no one else was around.

I looked down the sidewalk. I imagined biking alone, seeing an empty trail and road, and then just—vanishing. I imagined it so vividly that it didn't feel like a hypothesis.

“Anything else?” Jade asked.

I thought that was enough.

“We've already figured all that out,” she sighed. “And pinned it down to between 11:01 to 11:28. I guess she thought biking in public would be safe. But there must've been no one around.”

“How'd you figure it out?” I asked, a little perturbed.

“At the quad. We've been meeting every night. We pooled together what we knew.”

“Every night?” I asked.

“Shit's getting weird,” she said. “I figured you had a reason for not being there, and you'd come when you were ready.”

“I've been too busy,” I said.

“Maybe you could come tonight. We need as many people as we can.”

“I might be busy. We’ll see.”

*

Instead of going to the quad, I had been spending midnights in the library basement, returning to favorite texts from favorite classes, searching for ways to communicate from beyond the cage. Were there equations I could solve to find Sidney’s distance from campus? Ghost stories that would reveal the rules of traveling beyond realms? Ancient rituals to communicate with missing persons? I yearned for clarity, ideas, understanding. I yearned to discover.

Jade found me there Friday night.

“Are you coming?” she asked.

“I have homework,” I said. “Any new breakthroughs?”

“We have plans,” she said, and handed me a flyer encouraging me to be around people on Monday from 11 – 11:30. The bottom of the page said, “Keep everyone safe, keep everyone here.”

I smiled my thanks. She hovered by my desk. I made a point of looking down at my book. I didn’t want to jinx my plan by sharing it, but I was going to be alone on Monday at 11. I was going to find out firsthand where

people were going, and I was going to bring them back. When I looked up, Jade was partway out the door, and I wondered if this last glimpse of her backpack would be the last I saw of her before Monday, when I disappeared.

*

It wasn't. When I stumbled into my room late Sunday night, Jade was on my floor.

"How'd you get here?" I asked.

"Picked your lock," she said. She had a blanket and pillow but looked wide awake playing a game with colorful shapes on her phone. "Where were you tonight?"

"Studying," I said. "Did I miss anything?"

"We're going to try to not be alone," Jade said. "That way no one will disappear. Figured since we're both roommate-less, we should stick together in case one of us oversleeps tomorrow and ends up. . .God knows where."

"If no one disappears, who's gonna save the reckoned?" I asked.

"You don't think the reckoned are trying their best to get back?"

Sidney would rather stay in bed and beat their high score on Tetris than go to a lecture. They didn't have the motivation or knowledge to find their way home.

My eyes itched from hours of reading. Jade didn't say anything. I climbed into bed facing the wall, my back against her, and fell asleep.

*

On Monday morning, I woke before Jade. I dressed in the bathroom down the hall, so as not to disturb her, and left for breakfast. A tense anxiety filled every corner of campus. Dread rattled out of the cereal dispensers, flowed out of the bins of paper towels in the bathroom, and swirled around the statue of our dead rich founder riding a horse. Any sight could be the last thing you saw before you disappeared.

I went to the basement of the library, the ideal place to be reckoned. I armed myself with a notebook, an apron, and an owl's feather I found under a tree. At 10:48, I started to panic. Not for myself—for Jade. "you up?" I texted her. She didn't respond.

I watched my phone, never letting its light go dim. Nothing. If she was still asleep in my room, she would be alone. She had trusted me to keep her company, and here I was, ready to save the day—ready to embrace my destiny and uncover the truth.

But Jade—

10:52. I packed my books, ran up the stairs, and sprinted across the quad, checking my phone every few

seconds. I justified to myself, if not this week, then next week. I wasn't a coward, no, I was helping Jade.

But wouldn't it be better to sacrifice Jade and also get reckoned, so I could save her along with everyone else?

But what was my plan, really? I had my books and my talisman. I didn't have a clue what I would face.

All heroes need a mentor, right? I wasn't sure if the owl counted.

11:11. The hallway was empty. I needed to keep Jade from being alone. I ran. I threw open my door—unlocked, even though I had locked it on my way out. I lunged in and—no Jade.

The blanket she used was neatly folded on my bed, with the pillow sitting on top. Her phone and bag were gone. Had she woken up and left to find company? Why didn't she return my text? I had no way of knowing.

I could rush to the library, or find a common room, or even a bathroom, and hope to find other people, so I could make it through the rest of this Monday morning and live another week to observe the mystery without being in it.

Or I could shut the door and sit on my bed, heart pounding. Maybe Jade had decided to be alone, to try to find her girlfriend. But this wasn't her story, it was mine.

A tap at my window. The owl? No, my owl was tawny brown, and this was white—unnaturally white—and not an owl. A crow. I opened my window in haste, and the white crow swooped in and perched on my bookcase. It gestured towards the sun.

“What’s out there?”

The crow flew out my window towards the edge of campus. Not thinking to take anything with me—not even an owl’s feather—I walked in a daze into the hallway, empty, down the stairway, empty, through the lobby, empty, out the front door. Just an hour ago, I had seen a swarm of students going to class. Now, the sky was gray, and I saw only a handful of people, none of whom I recognized except for—

My roommate’s flash of red hair.

“Sidney! Wait!”

I grabbed their arm. “Where have you been?”

“Jay St. James?” Sidney asked and laughed in delight. “You’re back!” They squeezed me.

“You’re the one who’s been missing,” I said, not returning the hug.

“False,” they said. “But we can catch up later. I’m running late.”

“For what?”

“Meeting with my mentor. Long story. Maybe you’ll read it one day, or hear it sung.”

They sped walk away from me.

“I’m supposed to bring you back!” I said, and continued to follow until I got distracted by a flame. The woods on the outskirts of campus were on fire.

Out of the burning trees emanated the purest, cleanest light I could possibly imagine. Light that became its own prism, illuminating shards of colors, rainbows. This was the light I had searched for in books and math problems and operas and machines. It was there in the woods, waiting for me.

I took a few steps closer, then noticed that as I got closer to the light, the campus got darker. Although it was midday, it looked more like twilight. I squinted towards the library. I now knew where the reckoned were—and I could see them! Surely that was more information than anyone else had so far. I could go back and tell people what I knew, compare it to what they knew—

But still the light called me. I imagined being consumed by it. Me alone.

And then I heard Jade’s voice coming from campus.

“Jay? You’re here, too? Join us.”

I couldn't see her. But I imagined her green hair, her concerned eyes. I had no idea what I was doing, what the light meant, or how I would save campus. But Jade didn't care. She just wanted me to be okay.

I turned my back to the forest and ran into the mid-day night. The wind pushed against me, noisy in my ears until it got louder, and I realized it wasn't the wind; I was almost on the quad, surrounded by the sound of my peers in the dark cheering me on.

matthew o'rouke

In Prudence and Inevitables

Present Day

Rachel Stewart grew to despise warm weather. It reminded her of too much, associated itself with the wrong crowd in her mind. So, in a bid to cling to her sanity, she had taken her twins to live in near-solitude in Sweden, nestled between snow-blanketed mountains and the blinding white shore of the lake Sommen. The children never grew bored, not on walks to the village, not reading by the fire, not helping their mother cook. The fear and anger Rachel knew was soothed—and depleting each day—in the cold expanse.

“Mamma, look!” called Emelie, the younger twin by nine minutes. She was bundled up so thoroughly that her rosy cheeks had barely been visible above her scarf as she’d run ahead of her mother and brother. She now stood waiting for them not to catch up to her but to watch what she was about to do. As soon as she was certain her mother was looking, she raised her little arms straight above her head, mittens reaching for the clouds, and angled her body slightly so that she could tip herself to the right. The attempted cartwheel in snow boots didn’t end as the six-year-old had planned. While her twin, Isak, threw his head back and released his warm laugh into the frigid air, their mother rushed forward to pluck the girl from the snow. Emelie didn’t cry, or kick, or do anything to disrupt

the peace of the white landscape around her family; she knew that in her mother's arms was the safest place she could be.

Rachel carried her daughter the rest of the way into their closest village just north of Sommen, the lake with ice so thick during the larger portion of the year that not even an elephant could break it. Now though, in springtime, the sharp sun began to work at weakening the cloudy surface of the ice into something more closely resembling glass. As the days grew brighter, the ice grew thinner, and farther and farther from the lake did Rachel allow her children to play.

Nearing mid-day, Blåvik held a quiet bustling atmosphere that hugged the patrons who entered the shops and filled the streets. The church's solid white geometry almost blended in with its snowy mountainous background, but its bells rang out with a clear ding that could not easily be ignored. Rachel and her twins made regular visits to the village, and often it was the little ones' favourite part of the week, seeing the people, smelling the food. While the biting cold in winter made brisk efficiency a necessity, Rachel let her children do all that they desired in the village as soon as the weather began to lose its sharpness. They were smart kids: they knew when adventure was brave versus when it was foolish, which adults they could talk to.

Emelie was the image of her mother: plump cheeks, thick brown mess of hair, round and glistening russet eyes. Rachel had a feeling that as her daughter grew, she would resemble her own reflection more and more with each passing moment. Her compulsive smile and drive for spontaneity lit up the little family's house more than the sun or fire ever could. Isak, on the other hand, reminded Rachel of no one but his father. Darker hair, almost black, and a pair of pale, diluted, green eyes. His face was sharper, his voice quieter. While his sister filled up their home, he gladly stepped back. It gave Rachel a certain ache, sometimes, to look at him—seeing the man she loved reflected so uncannily in their son was like watching a solar eclipse without eye protection.

Seven Years Ago

Oliver had entered Rachel's life at just the right time. Her parents were harsh, and the days were long in the house they shared. So, as soon as she was old enough, at every chance she had, Rachel got the train somewhere.

Anywhere. To see people, to know that she existed in a world where she could be something to someone other than a problem. And Oliver proved it.

He charmed her without trying. The night was dark, and each became the other's light. Rachel had been delighted for an excuse, the reason, to finally escape her parents' grating clutches. Yet, when the time came to

introduce Oliver to the Stewarts, the young couple quickly realised that neither of them had the necessary funds that would allow them even to move out, never mind emigrate as they'd hoped. Sweden, bright and cold, sat undisturbed in the far distance. So, begrudgingly for Rachel's new partner and infuriatingly for her, they stayed, leaving any thoughts of their dream home in a loosely shut box.

Pregnancy had not been the plan. And after two years of fighting matches over wet bowls turned the wrong way up on the draining board or windows being left open too long and "freezing the whole house," Rachel and Oliver had gotten the message loud and clear that they were not welcome. Oliver was working in the local newsagent's, ringing the local elderlies up every Sunday and the local drunks up every Friday. Rachel was babysitting for a neighbour, trying to bring in a little more cash, but still, the pair's dream felt almost impossible. And then her sickness rolled in like a tsunami—the constant fatigue with it, the hunger, the heightened emotions. The third time in a week that Rachel had insisted on going to bed at 8 p.m. on account of a headache, Oliver followed her up to their room and asked: "Are you pregnant?"

Rachel barely heard the question, for it reached her ears as an alarm. A convoy of new worries berated the mountain of older ones, and she promptly sat on the edge of the bed so she didn't lose her balance. She scanned the last handful of weeks of her and Oliver's relationship, a window where an opportunity could've arisen without

either of them knowing. As soon as she allowed herself to recall the nights, it clicked, the yelling truth of it. She looked up at Oliver as the tears began to flow.

Present Day

Their first stop that day was the bakery—both Isak and Emelie lunged to keep the door open as their mother entered in their gleeful wake. The golden smell overtook the little family a half-moment before the sight did: glistening, steaming, and glowing creations sat waiting to be plucked from their shelves behind the glass casing, beckoning patrons farther into the little shop. The place was painted a pale purple, decorated here and there with hanging plants and adorned with warm lights. The snow seemed a distant memory as the children's boots hit the tiles of the magical room. Rachel counted her money slowly while they waited in line, trying not to hear Oliver insisting to pay, or, more likely, begging her for his favourite cardamom buns. Her mouth gingerly turned upwards at the thought of him acting more childish than their own kids, and before she knew it, the three of them were at the front of the queue, without him. Each twin got two pastries, as sweet as sweet could be. One for now (because how could she possibly make them wait?), and one for this evening. The baker was one of their favourite people in the village—he had a grey moustache that danced when he smiled, and his hands were so big that just

one of them could cradle all of their pastries before he handed them over the counter. The three tottered out of the shop, covered in smiles.

“Oliver, there’s jam all over your face,” Rachel laughed, reaching down to wipe her son’s cheeks. She paused. “How did you manage that, little Isak?” she added quietly, attempting to maintain a jovial tone despite her mouth suddenly being a wobbling line. It wasn’t the first time this had happened. It probably wouldn’t be the last.

Her son kept smiling up at her, seemingly oblivious. His eyes grew teary from looking sunward for too long, but before he could notice the water brewing in his mother’s eyes, too, his sister had pulled him away. Emelie began dragging him towards the doll shop, and he was used to this, often delighted in it alongside her, so the scent of wood and paint began to invite him in. But Rachel, despite her enthusiasm with her children’s freedom at this time of year, insisted on acting on her priorities before the real fun could set in. It was time, she had decided, for her twins to each get a new pair of shoes. It seemed that every day she noticed how much they had grown since the night before, and though it made her heart ache, she knew she didn’t have a choice in the matter.

The cobbler’s workshop was much darker than both the golden bakery and the bright snow, but it too held a certain warmth within it. The dark tones of the newly repaired and created shoes matched the smell of

leather and polish that wafted around the family as the heavy door swung shut behind them. Sounds of hammers on wood and whirring sanding machines filled the air they stood in, and Rachel ushered her children towards the owner of the place, Mr. Rooney. The ceiling of his workshop was low, and from it hung strips of thick leather. Nails and pins lay along the edges of each workbench. The workshop did not currently inhabit any other customers, so only the cobbler's assistants brought movement to the cavernous space.

“*God morgon,*” began Rachel in the direction of the cobbler. But almost as soon as she had opened her mouth, she felt her hand be insistently tugged. She looked down at her daughter, whose giddy enthusiasm had disappeared. Her round face had a new sort of cloud over it, one of unease and overthought. Rachel followed her line of sight and was met with the back of someone's new shoe, a workman hammering firmly. Emelie reached up and covered her ears, wincing, on the verge of tears, and Rachel realised that she did not know what to do in this situation any more than she knew how to fly.

Mr. Rooney was familiar with the trio, and so he called Isak to him to allow Emelie time to calm down, showed him some of the tools and materials on his workbench. Rachel barely had time to smile at him gratefully before Emelie's face scrunched up in the commencement of a cry. But her mother didn't understand—the hammering had halted for a few

moments, so what was prompting this torrent of upset onwards? Her daughter pointed, refusing to speak in such a scary place: the wooden foot moulds that hung all along the far wall and spread upwards and across the ceiling. Twos, in their hundreds. Cream-smooth planed wood. Little holes in the sides, like punctures or bullet holes. Like eyes.

A young mother, in this situation, has no experience. And not only does she have no experience, but she has no help. Aside from the very short-lived charity provided by Mr. Rooney, Rachel was completely and utterly by herself in the dark and rich-smelling shop. She thought, in the moment where the responsibility of keeping her child from causing a scene had not yet rested its whole weight on her, that this was a problem that would've been easily solved if Oliver had been there. He would've explained to Emelie why the man was hitting something heavy onto something lighter, and why it made him happy to hear, not afraid. Would've picked up her other hand and led her to the wall with the moulds, helped her to understand why they looked the way they did, acknowledged that they looked funny but that was all they were—funny, silly. Nothing to be nervous about. He would say, “They don’t really have eyes. And if they don’t have eyes, they can’t tell time like you or I can. Come to think of it, I believe it’s almost lunch time!” He would lift her up to run her small hand along the hanging moulds, and then he would lead her back out into the day. Tell her

to catch a snowflake on her nose, and that they could come back another time.

But Rachel was not acquainted with shoemaking. She neither admired nor resented the hammering, the leather strips, the wooden smell. She couldn't teach her children the intricacies of a craft she had no knowledge in. And she knew, somewhere in her, that Oliver would have.

By the time Rachel had exited her reverie, her daughter had let go of her hand and run out of the workshop.

Six Years Ago

The twins were born in the middle of the night, wailing. The only midwife in the Stewarts' hometown was a fifty-eight-year-old widow who somehow knew everyone but didn't have a single friend. Her method was effective, but traditional: Rachel nearly passed out multiple times from the unmedicated pain, but the babies were perfectly healthy and seemed rather eager to be in the world and have a chance to shout about it. Oliver wept when he held his children for the first time—quietly, with his arms rigidly cradling the little ones to his chest, he tasted salt on his tongue as the tears flooded his face, for he could not stop smiling. Each crooked tooth was on display in the candlelight of the early morning, and the wail of the twins eventually subsided. Once the midwife had left the room

for more clean sheets, and just before Rachel drifted into a dreamless sleep, the young couple whispered to one another. Wonderment danced in their tired eyes when they both decided simultaneously to give their new son and daughter Swedish names; they weren't giving up on that dream just yet.

Rachel's parents did not once enter the room. Their tight hold on their daughter had begun loosening as soon as she had come of age, but her decision to date Oliver had broken their trust completely: he was not rich enough, handsome enough, nor clever enough for their wishes. The news of the pregnancy had overwhelmed them almost to the point of permanent estrangement, their debate over whether to kick the young couple out of their home only devolving when they imagined a newborn baby having to grow up on the streets. The Stewarts' compassion had limits, ones that seemed to no longer apply to their own daughter.

One of the many spare bedrooms in the mansion was hastily renovated by Oliver and one of his newsagent's colleagues in the first couple of months of Isak and Emelie's lives. Double the cots, double the bottles, double the clothes. Rachel had to refrain, day after day, from begging her mother and father to help her; she wasn't close enough with any of her friends to ask them for their caring hands, so she muscled through the long days without Oliver and the long nights with him.

Spring began, mercifully. In such an ancient house, heating was an issue, and Rachel and Oliver had become so preoccupied with the twins' comfort that they often went to sleep numb and shuddering themselves. They spent their early months of parenthood in constant fear that the Stewarts would harm them or the babies, so despite their craving for freedom, the couple hid away in the two rooms they could call their family's, sneaking into the kitchen for their own meals whenever Rachel's parents were out at some function or other. When spring came, and their time inside grew brighter from the windows and warmer from the sun, they found themselves smiling a little more.

It was forced quiet and voluntary captivity: this was the distinction they had to make. They could've left. They could've left their invisibility behind, but they stayed where it was cold, and harsh, and not entirely safe, because they would rather be in a cruel house than bring their babies into the biting apathy of the streets. They were saving. They resolved to each other every single day that the eve of their departure was coming, and that when it did, they would make no attempt to say goodbye.

Present Day

New shoes forgotten, Rachel decided that finding her daughter was going to be a lot easier if her son didn't come with her. With Mr. Rooney already shooing her out

the door, Isak safe in his care, Rachel took her cue—she emerged into the sharp spring sunshine, heart racing.

“Emelie!” she called. Across the road was the doll shop.

She raced over, snow boots suddenly six times heavier than they had been, but Mrs. Epping, the shop’s owner, reported not to have seen the little girl since last week.

“Well, did you see her go past?” Rachel persisted. She refused to believe that she had gotten this wrong, and Mrs. Epping was not being particularly helpful.

“Mrs. Stewart, I would know her little head of hair anywhere. If I had seen her, she would still be in here, you know that,” she replied solemnly.

Rachel drifted out of the shop, white spots bursting in her vision. Not there. So where?

The main street had become fit to burst since the family of three had arrived earlier. Couples and teenagers and families with two parents bustled all around her as she held back from crying for what felt like the tenth time that day. In such a tiny village, Rachel hadn’t thought it possible to feel so small.

“*Min dotter!*” she called out over the passing heads. My daughter! A handful of them turned to look at her, but kept walking, too busy for a careless mother’s

preoccupations. She tried again. “*Jag har förlorat min dotter!*” Her voice was straining, limp above the townspeople’s chatter. I have lost my daughter! It took everything in her not to sink to her knees in the snow soon to be sleet.

She pushed past some of the blank faces that had now stopped to look at her, farther down the street towards the bakery and post office. New passers-by—surely one of them would have spotted a little six-year-old girl dashing into a shop.

“*Min dotter saknas,*” Rachel called. Her throat seemed to be closing up, her boots made of lead. My daughter is missing. A group of children around the twins’ age ambled past her, laden with sweet treats and overflowing with giggles and talk. She didn’t have the energy to stop them, so she spoke once more. “*Var är min dotter?*” She waved meekly at one of the small boys. Where is my daughter? They passed as if she was nothing, as if she was less than invisible, less than a thought. “*Var är han?*” Her heart was frantic. Where is he? Giving up felt like both the easiest option and a decision she would regret for the rest of her life, more than anything she’d done before. She tried to tell herself, over and over again as she stood in the middle of it, that Blåvik was a small town. A village. Finding her daughter should’ve been easy. There was no giving up.

Rachel’s gaze wandered down towards the bakery, that golden shop. As she made her way there, her line of

sight was repeatedly interrupted by every patron tending to their own affairs, until the bakery itself was just a blur in the near distance. Her boots had abruptly become lighter, and they carried her there. Finally, a gap in the townspeople appeared. She sidled along the very edge of the crowd, keeping the bakery's entrance in her view. She had a good feeling about this.

Then, neither in front of the bakery nor through the glass of its windows, Rachel saw him. Just past the golden shop, at the opening of the main street of Blåvik. Right before the spot where the crowd thickened and the noise rose stood Oliver Paige, as languid and lanky as he'd ever been. His dark hair pricked the white mountains behind him, and a soft smile overtook his face, lighting up the diluted green of his eyes. And beside him, intact in her pink mittens and scarf, stood their daughter. Rachel's heart seemed to fall from her chest at the sight of them.

"I was wondering where she'd wandered off to!" She called to her partner. He laughed and lifted Emelie's little hand above her head as if she were a champion of something great. Their heights went from one extreme to another: her mess of brown hair just barely reached his stick-thin thigh. Polar opposites, but undeniably father and daughter—same smile, same delight in mischief, same sense of wonder. Rachel told Oliver that she would come back with Isak, he was waiting in the cobbler's. She turned around, having waved a happy goodbye.

Four Years Ago

Isak and Emelie grew rapidly in that stagnant, too-big house, all thanks to their parents' nurturing hands, the absence of their grandparents, and each other. Although there was an abundance of bedrooms in the Stewarts' mansion, the twins shared the same one; they insisted upon it.

So, when an unfamiliar roaring sound seemed to fill the walls, and their skin began to get prickly, Oliver and Rachel's children screamed together.

Two floors below, the blue and golden living room was holding on to the flames that had erupted within it. The sprawling sofas, the Persian rug, the alluring paintings on the dusk-blue walls, all under threat because the mahogany side table that boasted the Stewarts' finest glassware (ornate tumblers for whiskey, shimmering martini glasses, decanter, ashtray) hosted a sizeable handful of flames that licked and snapped at the wall nearest. Mr. Stewart had elegantly missed the ashtray when he had flicked his cigarette down onto the table before leaving the room. He had looked behind him just as he reached the doorway, and though he saw the danger he carried on. Did not necessarily deem it safe but made a subconscious agreement with himself that if it escalated, he would not mind. It was late; his disobedient daughter, her hateful boyfriend, and their spiteful children were asleep upstairs. They would be none the wiser.

Mrs. Stewart always checked that each room of hers and her husband's were well and truly clean before they went to bed. As her husband was out tonight with one of his many business partners that doubled as drinking buddies, she popped her head into the living room last she intended to sit and have a quiet drink herself before the night enveloped the house in its entirety, what with the devilish twins and their horrid parents asleep two floors above. But she stumbled across a surprise in the room outlined in gold: a fire. Red, dancing, and on the move. She was not scared. Her heart did not race. She was careful, and quiet, and decisive, as she always had been, so she pulled her wispy blonde hair back before leaning over the little table and tipping the open whiskey decanter on its side.

Mrs. Stewart dashed out as the flames engulfed the table and began to hollow out the living room. She packed bags and boxes for her and her husband, collected their important papers. Left the photo albums behind to turn to smoke and ash. With whiskey still smouldering on her fingertips, Rachel's mother ran into the chilly night to fetch her husband. Now, the two of them could leave the old mansion behind: as it burned, with their daughter and grandchildren inside.

Present Day

Emerging into the sharp sun once again, this time with her son gripping her hand, Rachel moved as quickly as she could through the crowds and down the main street towards her partner and daughter. Isak almost tripped several times, but he knew no different than to follow his mother when she told him to, no matter how excited he had been about Mr. Rooney's tools, how he longed to go back and try them, how he'd left his scarf in the workshop.

She knew Isak was struggling to keep pace, but she had found his sister and wasn't going to slow down now. She'd seen Oliver in this town before, and from the previous incidents she knew that his chances of remaining where he'd been were slim. Isak had to meet him again. Finally, they could all be together, in the place her and Oliver had always dreamed of. Finally, they could get married.

But the other half of the family were nowhere to be seen—the crowd kept moving, and past it stood no one. The opening of the street, past the little glowing bakery, was as quiet as ever. No dark hair pricking the white mountains in the distance. No pink mittens and scarf.

If Rachel had been jogging before, now she was running, sprinting, lunging herself and her son into the spring day as if her breath was just ahead of her, dangling like a carrot in front of a donkey, and in order to catch it,

she had to move forward, forward, forward for all she was worth. Isak was huffing and puffing next to her, but she didn't mind once his hand still gripped hers—they could both rest tonight, at home, with Oliver and Emelie. But for now, they had to run.

Sommen glistened in the distance, past the waning crowds. Sun rays sparkled on its thinning surface, and Rachel, for the second time today, had a good feeling. She began to march determinedly towards the lake, her small boy trying still to keep pace, his hair interrupting his line of sight every time a dip in the snow occurred.

Vast, flawless, and bright: Sommen at all times of the year, but especially now. And when she squinted, she saw—atop the shimmering ice and timid water under its surface—her daughter. A coat and scarf too big for Rachel to discern the expression on her little round face as she stood, trembling feet in sleet-covered boots, on almost the exact centre of the lake.

No Oliver. No safety net. Just her daughter, stock-still, between the effortful sun and the weakening ice.

She saw her mother and brother, and her eyes lit up.

“Isak, Mamma!” she called, voice muffled behind the scarf. She stretched her little arm as far above her head as she could and waved her mittened hand. Rachel scooped Isak up into her arms and moved as quickly as she

could with the added weight, towards her endangered daughter.

When Emelie saw them moving faster she began to make a spectacle of herself: she jumped up and down in excitement, waving both hands, calling to them louder. Rachel saw it happen in slow motion. Between every jump, she could almost hear the crack. She was both too far from her daughter to grab her from the icy surface, and too far from the town to run for help and make it back in time. Emelie was none the wiser, her red cheeks beginning to show above her scarf, her boots bounding joyfully—mercilessly—on her little patch of surface.

Before Rachel knew it, Isak was wriggling, attempting to release himself from her clutches.

“Mamma, let me go,” he begged, his voice tightening under the threat of tears. “Let me go and help her.”

Isak could swim; Emelie had always refused to learn. Maybe it wasn’t such a bad idea. Rachel put him down into the snow beside her, and off he took, chasing his breath, his mother close on his heels. He reached the lake, stumbling, and there he was: onto the white-blue of Sommen and reaching for his twin, despite the distance between them. He was smart: he went slowly, taking his time, picking his way over to her. To her mother’s horror, Emelie kept jumping. Heavy boots, spring ice. Up to sixty metres of just-thawed water right beneath her.

“Stop, Emelie!” Rachel yelled as she neared the snowy shore. “We can see you! Isak is on his way!”

Though he was progressing carefully, he was moving at a considerable speed, and soon was within fifteen metres of his twin. His figure became an increasingly smaller blob as Rachel watched from the shore; she knew that it would be worse than unwise for her to venture out onto the surface herself, to risk her weight pushing the spring ice to an impossible extent.

Emelie was uncontainable. Her bob of brown lapped at her cheeks as she landed each time, her eyes glistening as if they’d still be able to laugh underwater. Up, down, up. And suddenly, in the stretching, unforgiving sun, down was the last thing.

The sound of the ice finally breaking nearly ruptured Rachel’s eardrums, though she would come to know, after a month of restless nights, that it couldn’t have truly been that loud from where she stood. But in this moment, on the edge of the village that she had called home but had never felt like it, on the shore of a lake that glimmered like magic, like addiction, like death, here was the worst she’d ever felt. After a childhood and teenagehood filled with aggression and ridicule. After a relationship fostered behind closed doors and between whispered promises. After the fire. After the leaving. This, she knew, would always be etched into her mind as the worst of all.

Inevitability was what really drove the knife through her raw, racking chest—of course it had all led to this. Of course the children who'd survived a fire would drop below the springtime ice and be the ones to drown. Of course Rachel, the foolish girl from before, had led her here. To a life of isolation and too much responsibility to wrestle without his help. And of course, as her babies' final breaths escaped, she saw Oliver again. There he was in the bedroom, being swallowed by the flames; and there she was again, running away.

The sun glared as the twins' mother planted her knees in the snow and wept.

grace elaine

the very moment all was lost

Fake your death. A word of advice, a suggestion, perhaps the only way love can survive. What does it say that in order to live, love must play dead?

The liquid sloshes around in the vial, rose red. Blood red. You uncork and sniff; it smells like river water. If you play dead, you might reach happiness.

Or you might find happiness was never within reach. Is the shot at a hope that could fail worth it? Or is there another way?

Red, blood red.

You think of the soft blue eyes of your beloved, your one and only. There is nothing in this world you would not do for them. There is no mountain too high to climb, and there is no pit too deep to traverse. Hell would be worth their smile and permission to hold them in your arms without fear.

The cost of love is death.

The cost of love is blood.

The vial drops to the floor, glass shattering into a thousand pieces, and you exchange it for a blade. You know what you must do.

*

You kill their parents first, and then your own.
Your blade shines rose red. In a world where you are told
your love is an impossibility, you must take matters into
your own hands. Red dress, red lips, red splattered across
your face, red rose with red petals in your red-soaked
hands as you extend it towards them. A peace offering.

An I love you.

Their ever-soft gaze does not hold reciprocation. It
holds icy horror.

The thorns dig into your palm.

“I did this for you.” It is a plea. What you mean is,
Don’t leave me alone.

“I didn’t ask you to.”

“You didn’t need to.” You twist the rose stem in
your fingers. A single petal flutters to the ground. It is wet
with blood and lands on the blade of the sword that slayed
your enemies. The blade that brought the end to everyone
who was standing in the way of you and your love.

Your best friend. Your one and only. You will
never love another; you know this. You have known this
for some time now. And finally, there is nothing standing
in your way.

Nothing except for your lover themselves.

“You were the one who said there is no point in bloodshed.”

“There is a point,” you correct simply. You have seen the light; they can as well. “It is justice.” The price of love is—

(Screams still echo in your ears.)

“No,” your lover says. What they mean is, *You are a monster*. It is a fair assessment, and you cannot argue. But this was always what you were destined to become: A curse, a stain on the world you were brought into, the skeleton in someone’s closet.

You pick up your sword. The blade points downward, rose red droplets plinking against the floor. You hold the hilt out towards your lover. You hold the rose out as well.

They take both.

You turn your back. “Kill me if you want,” you offer, knowing they won’t. They will never love another; they know this. They have known this for some time now. “There’s a point in that, too.”

The cold blade of death does not come swinging, not today, and you are allowed to walk away.

It is punishment that you continue to breathe. It is punishment for both of you that you will wake again

tomorrow and the blood that was spilled was neither of yours.

*

Ten years later, they hold the same sword to your chest, the tip touching the skin that covers your heart.

You have both grown away from the young lovers you were. But beneath the dark circles and the haunted eyes, you are still the same children you were ten years ago. There is not a place in this universe you could run that would be far enough to erase your past.

There is not a place you could have run that would have saved you from the inevitable end.

They whisper your name, reverent, like a prayer, and in your last moments, you are finally able to laugh again.

mik johnson

I Have Two Ex-Boyfriends

I have two ex-boyfriends. Both left their marks on me, like bites on skin.

We got a dog when I was ten, a gray border collie with a chipped ear. “From a fight,” the shelter manager said, pointing to the notch; it dipped deep into her flesh like a vampire tooth.

“A fight?” Dad asked. “That can’t be. She’s a collie!”

“Don’t let that deceive you,” the manager said, inspecting her nails. “She’s fierce.”

With a few jabs of his thumb, Dad pointed to the other dogs in an effort to convince me to pick another one—any other one—but I wouldn’t budge. Something in the collie’s blue eyes and weary gait.

“She’s got a history,” Dad said.

“I’ll risk it,” I said.

“We’ve got chickens.”

“She won’t eat them.”

Dad rested one hand on his hip while he rubbed his temples with the other. “Fine,” he said. Mom had died last year, and between her loss and the bullies at school, he

would risk nothing else that might damage my heart. I just wanted a friend.

“Make sure you feed her,” the manager said. “Or else.”

Dad shot me a look; I rolled my eyes. Outside, in the parking lot, the collie jumped into the back of the pickup like she was our regular dog. On the way home, in the rearview mirror, I watched her poke her head over the tailgate and wag her tongue in the wind.

“See?” I said.

“Okay, Okay,” Dad said. “She’s a shoe-in. A regular Old-Yeller.”

“Not Yellow. Blue.” And that’s what I named her.

That summer, and the next, and the one after that, Blue was at my side. We wandered through the brush along the creek behind my house, grasshoppers scattering in our wake. For Friday night movies, Blue nestled her head in my lap, catching loose pieces of popcorn in her teeth when they dropped out of my hands. During Fourth of July fireworks, she snuck slurps off the drippy side of my ice cream cone.

It was the fifth summer when things got busted up. Dad had been asked to speak in church, so he left the house early, heading to the woods to study and pray. Meanwhile, I cozied up in my covers and slept late. Too

late. When my eyes saw the clock, I jumped out of bed, slipped into a dress and headed for the back door. Blue waited next to her bowl, expecting breakfast.

“Sorry, girl,” I told her, “As soon as I get back.”

I turned the doorknob and half-stepped outside when padding feet and a flat growl sounded behind me. “Sorry, girl—” I said again, but halfway through, my words slid into a scream. Blue sunk her teeth into my ankle and shook, hard.

The rest of the day was a blur of fur and neighbors. Dad, rushing home, brushing tears off his cheeks. Blood, gauze. Nurses, stitches.

I came back to a house without a dog. Despite the betrayal, I missed her. I cried. Wobbly on my ankle, it took me months before I could walk again normally.

Dylan was like that.

*

We met in September after the dog bite, when Mrs. Franco made us lab partners in tenth grade science. Dylan and I didn’t talk at first. He played football and was a hot-goss new kid. I, on the other hand, played piano and had lived in po-dunk Pangolin my whole life. He was popular; I was not. Obligatorily, we graded each other’s homework and shared lab equipment. That was it.

The morning of the fetal pig dissection, Mrs. Franco wheeled a cart into the classroom, its contents reeking of antibacterial hand soap and pickled flesh. Mrs. Franco parked the cart right in front of our desk, a dozen wrinkled piglet noses peeking over the rims of trays. Beside me, Dylan's face faded from peachy keen to ashen gray.

As Mrs. Franco began to give instructions, Dylan leaned over and whispered into my ear. "We've um...got to cut into one of those?" he said.

"Yup," I said, annoyed. "It's a dissection. Didn't you ever do one in your old school?"

"Never," he said.

Before I could ask why, Mrs. Franco started giving instructions. "Recover all the major organs without piercing them, and you'll get an A, easy. Understood?" A couple kids gave her halfhearted shrugs. "Alright then, little scientists! Get started!" Mrs. Franco pushed a tray onto our table. Beside me, Dylan clapped a hand over his mouth, his cheeks bulging over his fingers like the throat of a pond frog.

What is happening? I asked myself. The quarterback has gone queasy? I studied his face, then looked at our specimen. A yellow-pink piglet, jaw clamped shut, lay stiff and dead on a white absorbent pad. Beside it, two pairs of gloves and a scalpel. Though this wasn't my idea of fun, it wasn't anything I couldn't handle—after

deer hunts and hand-plucked turkey dinners, this dissection was just another chore. If it weren't for Dad, I admitted to myself, this assignment would probably suck for me, too.

Turning back to look at Dylan, a bud of compassion bloomed inside me. Feeling bold, and kind, I reached my hand under the table and squeezed either side of his knee. "I'll do it," I said, voice low.

"What?" he asked, leg jumping at my touch.

"The dissection," I said. "I'll handle it. All of it. Promise."

"For reals?" He said, face smoothing over with relief. A little color seeped back into his cheeks.

"For reals."

The dissection was pretty straightforward. With a scalpel, I drew a line from the piglet's neck to the bottom of her belly. Parting the flesh, an ooze of amber fluid gushed sideways. Within a half hour, a pair of lungs, a heart, two kidneys, a stomach, and a uterus lined the edge of the tray. "Finished," I said.

"Stunning!" Mrs. Franco said, beaming behind her shop goggles. "A-plus!" She slapped Dylan on the back and reached to shake my hand. Seeing her juice-spattered gloves, I declined, instead ducking my head in a polite nod.

“Mrs. Franco?” someone called. As she walked away, Dylan’s body went rigid.

“The pig juice—” he panted, “She touched me—my shoulder—”

“I’ve got it,” I said, interrupting him. Stepping sideways, my hands went to the collar of his jacket, the backs of my fingers brushing against his neck. After he shrugged out of the sleeves, I wrapped the material into a tight ball and shoved it into my backpack. “I’ll launder it at home and bring it back tomorrow,” I said. “It’s a pretty warm day out there, so you should be fine—”

It was my turn to be interrupted. Dylan wrapped his arms around me, pressing me into his chest. My cheek landed soft against his shoulder, the scent of spicy cologne and Barbasol shaving cream filling my nose. “Thanks,” he said.

“No biggie,” I said, shocked. My arms hung at my sides, a pair of limp fettuccine noodles.

“But I was shook, Candy.” Dylan pulled away, looking me in the eyes, his hand resting under the curve of my elbow. They were amber-colored, his eyes. And huge. “You totally came in clutch.”

“Um, you’re welcome,” I said, slinging my backpack over my shoulder.

The bell rang. As it did, a duo of football buddies—Jake Rambo and Miguel Santos—shouldered over, standing square and full behind Dylan. “Bruh,” Jake said, tugging on his hoodie strings. “Didn’t think you’d be into a pure-vert like Candela.”

“Nice,” I said, my voice sarcastic. Inwardly, I winced.

Miguel shot an elbow into Jake’s side. “That was rude, Jake,” he said. “Cut it out.”

“It’s not rude, it’s honest,” Jake said, stretching his hand toward me like I was a specimen in a zoo. “She’s got great hair, I’ll give you that. And maybe there’s a hot bod under all those overalls. But seriously—who would want to date a prude like her?”

“Bye,” I said, my elbow slipping out of Dylan’s hand as I lifted my fingers in a peace sign. I would not wait around while a bunch of boys discussed the pros and cons of associating with Candela Hodson, placing my body and my beliefs on opposite ends of a scale.

“Candy, wait!” somebody said. I pretended not to listen and hurried out the door.

Later that day—before throwing his pig-juiced denim in the washer—I held the inside of the fabric up to my nose. I breathed him in again, slow and soft.

*

The next day, Dylan beat me to class. Waiting on my chair was an envelope and a present.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey,” he said.

“This from you?” I gestured to the gifts.

He shrugged. Grinned.

I opened the present first. A box of assorted chocolates wrapped in multicolored cellophane.

I opened the envelope. A note, written in perfect, boxy handwriting: “Thanks for saving my skin yesterday. And I’m sorry for my PIG-headed friends. They make me want to SNORT. Just so you know what I think of them—they can both go roll in the MUD. Maybe I could make it up to you by taking you to the movies this Friday? OINK once for yes; OINK twice for no. If you OINK once, I might SQUEAL.” Beneath the script was a drawing of a cartoon pig, its eyebrows raised, as if pleading.

My face flushed scarlet as I closed the envelope. Dylan. *The* Dylan Shephard. Asking me to the movies? My stomach did backflips as I handed him his jacket. “Those were some pretty bad pig puns.”

“Did they work?” he asked, reaching under the desk to squeeze my knee.

“Oink,” I said.

*

He picked me up at 7. I smuggled Junior Mints in my messenger bag, and Dylan bought over-the-counter popcorn. We saw *The Space Between Us*. Though I couldn't believe that a jock would be into a chick flick, he totally was, amber eyes agog. When the sex scene came up, I quietly excused myself to the bathroom and waited in the hallway 'til I was sure it was over.

"Don't take this the wrong way," Dylan asked me when the credits started rolling. "But you got up when the characters started getting it on. Is that why Jake called you a pure-vert?"

"Yeah," I said, blushing. Grateful that the darkness hid my face.

"Care to explain?" he asked.

"Well..." I looked away, scratched my knees. "The short answer is this: I'm saving love-making for marriage."

"Oh," he blinked. "I see. And all the other kids hate you for it."

"Yeah," I said. "But I'm not sure why. Their choices, their business. My choices are mine. They want respect, and I do, too."

"Got it." Dylan said. "Sounds lonely."

"It is," I said, bouncing my feet.

“Help me understand, though. This was...just a movie?”

“It still made me uncomfortable.” Stretching a scrunchie off my wrist, I pulled my hair into a ponytail, locking my gaze on the scroll of white credits up ahead. I hated this—everything about this. I had finally landed a date with a cute guy, and here we were, date one, my controversial values in the spotlight.

“You’re a rare flower, Candela, and I like you.”

My jaw dropped. I had not expected this. Go away, he should have said. Get your goody-goody two-shoes saint stuff away from me. “You like me?” I asked.

“I brought you to the movies, didn’t I?”

“Yeah.”

“And I bought you chocolates and wrote you a note.”

“Yeah.”

“And I said I like you, and I mean it. You’re not like everybody else.” Dylan snagged my hand and pulled it into his lap, cradling my fingers between his. “Will you be my girlfriend?”

“Girlfriend?” My pulse throbbed under my wrists.

“Yes, girlfriend! Are you reduced to one-word sentences or something?” The after-show lights came on,

revealing a theater void of everyone but us. Dylan cocked his head to the side again, smiling.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Can I kiss you?” he asked, leaning forward.

My breath caught. “Yeah.” I closed the gap between us. His mouth was soft, supple. Salty from the popcorn. A two-toned rainbow exploded across my mind, a dazzling arc of brilliant blues and shimmering golds.

Dylan pulled from the kiss and squeezed my hands. “Will you come to my next game?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Absolutely.”

*

The band boomed loud. Crunched next to strangers in the stand, Dad and I split a hot dog while humming along to the songs we knew. When Coach called his name, Dylan got up from the bench and ran backwards, his eyes searching. When our gazes synced, he pressed his hand to his lips and threw me a kiss. I pretended to catch it in the air, and Dylan laughed, his shoulders shaking in a lovely chuckle. From the corner of my eye, I caught the glare of Suzette Miller, cheer captain. Her eyes glanced from me to Dylan while her body bounced and twirled, a flurry of icy-blue pompoms and thudding steps.

“Wow. He’s crazy about you,” Dad said. “Proud to call you his girl, eh?”

“I think so,” I said, trying not to let Suzette steal the warmth of the moment.

“You okay?” Dad said, wiping ketchup off his lips with the back of his index finger. He followed my gaze to Suzette. “She’s just jealous. Dylan’s a good kid. I like him. A one-horse guy.”

“He is.” I patted Dad’s knee. A series of hollers broke over the crowd as, out on the field, a chocolate missile hurtled through the air. Dylan, running backwards once again, kept his eyes on the ball. As it fell, he scooped it to his chest, darted between two jerseys, and tumbled into the end zone.

*

The rest of the semester went like that. Movies, kisses, football games. When January rolled around, we fenagled our class schedules so that six out of eight classes matched, with Art History for first period—Dylan’s idea. When I asked him why, Dylan just shrugged and said, “Sounds interesting.”

The first unit centered on “sculpture through the ages.” Mr. McNeill sparked our curiosity with a slideshow timeline, beginning with the angular grooves of *Lion-Human of Hoblenstein-Stadel*, a 40,000-year-old statue. “Maybe man didn’t descend from apes,” Dylan whispered

from the desk beside me. “Maybe we’re actually lions. Beasts.”

“Hmm,” I said, studying the grooves on the lion man’s arm. “Would that make you a predator?”

“Only if I can hunt for you!” Dylan pulled at the end of my braid, tucked it between his teeth, yanked. My head dipped sideways.

“You’re gross,” I said, though I loved it.

“Candela? Dylan? Something you want to share with the class?” Mr. McNeill asked.

Dylan giggled, his voice pitching high and loopy. Embarrassed, I looked across the classroom, away from my teacher, only to catch the stare of Janie Sybil, dance company lead. Her nose wrinkled tight above a cinched-purse mouth. What a glare. Behind her, Miguel waved a hand. I brushed them both off and turned back to the slideshow. “Sorry, Mr. M,” I said. “We’ll quiet down.”

More slides hurried past: grotesque medieval works and passionate Greek carvings. When Mr. McNeill paused to talk about Italians, a photo of *La Pietà* took my breath away. Mary, a powerful mother woman, cradled a dead Christ in her ample lap—her expression stolen, sad.

*

A week later, Dylan, Jake, Miguel and I pushed through hangers at Savers. Pangolin High’s masquerade

ball was next week, so we needed costumes. Though Dylan and I had hoped to go alone, Jake and Miguel filched a ride.

“Mm, how ‘bout this one?” I said, raising up a polyester shark suit with a six-inch hole in the side—it was just a popped seam, easy to stitch.

“For you or for me?” Dylan said.

“For Jake,” I said, “It would drown us.”

Jake lifted his head, scowling. “That’s lame. I’m not going as a shark.”

“Cool it, bro,” said Miguel from a couple racks down. He shot me a smile, his front tooth chipped. “It’s a nice costume, Candy. Jake’s just got a bee up his butt.”

“No, I don’t!” Jake barked.

“Wanna go?” Miguel threw his shoulder into Jake’s gut before Jake pulled him in a headlock.

Dodging the scuffle, Dylan sauntered to my side, arms held behind his back. He parted my hair and leaned into my ear. “I think you’d look amazing in this.” With one hand, he revealed a hanger. Dangling by two straps was a mermaid costume, sheer, the nipples covered with a narrow stretch of sequins.

“Oh, dear!” I said, smacking the costume away. The blood in my neck pulsed hot.

“Sorry,” he said. “Stupid joke.”

“Duh.” I socked his shoulder with my knuckles.

“How about this one?” With his other hand, he revealed a classic renaissance dress, the bodice laced with red ribbons.

“Yes!” I took it from his hand and held it up to my body. “What do you think?”

He smiled. “Beautiful.”

*

The morning of the masquerade, I woke up with a sore throat and a fever of 102. I texted Dylan.

CANDY: dill I'm so sorry, I woke up super sick today. strep throat. can't make it to the masque

Dylan: babe that sucks. I'll miss you. feel better. can I still go stag? that ok?

I held the phone in my hand, considered. What I really wanted was for him to come to my house, wrap me in an Afghan and spoon-feed me soup. But the masquerade...I wouldn't spoil it for him.

Dad knocked on the door. “You okay, honey bug?” he asked through the wood.

“Fine, Dad,” I croaked. I looked back at my phone.

CANDY: Yeah

*

There's a cottonwood tree behind the school, full of gnarled knots and twisting branches. On warm days, Dylan and I would lean our backs against the trunk and lay our textbooks across our laps. It was here that I told him everything. How much I missed my mom and her empanadas, the kind with the raisins and the carne dulce. I told him about Dad's quiet walks in the woods when he was sad or needed God. About feeding our chickens. Saturday morning cartoons. The one song by Etta James that always gets stuck in my head. I even told him about Blue, showed him the scar—it was nothing more now than a faded white triangle. A few weeks back he'd kissed it—my scar, my ankle. "I'm sorry, Candy," he'd said. "What a bite."

Dylan, however, was a stubborn geode. Details about his life were like jeweled innards, shining through fissures just a little at a time, each glimmer revealed after the crack of a hammer. Besides his varied palette for movies and his success as the school's quarterback, all I'd been able to get out of him was that he was a peanut butter addict, a chronic fan of John Mayer, and a transplant from San Francisco. He lived with his aunt and uncle. "How's it been," I asked him under the tree, a week after my fever had broken, "moving to a little Utah town like ours, after all that time in the city? On the coast?"

Dylan cocked his head to the side while he took a bite out of a granola bar. He chewed while he considered an answer. “I miss the ocean,” he said, his eyes far away. “My mom and I used to go sailing. Alcatraz is bomb, and the sourdough bread...gah, it’s to die for.”

“If it’s so great, why’d you move here?” I asked. “Why do you live with your aunt and uncle?”

He opened his mouth, hesitated, then shook his head. “Nah, I don’t want to talk about it.”

A twinge of worry pricked me. “But aren’t there people who miss you? Didn’t you break anyone’s heart when you left?” I was thinking of his mom. If she had died, he would’ve told me already.

Dylan’s expression froze. “Um, did you Google me?”

My eyebrows knitted together. “No.” I pinched his chin, soft and playful. “But maybe I should.”

“I wish you wouldn’t.” Dylan sat up straight. “Do you know what I really miss most about San Francisco?” He reached for a zipper on his backpack, plunged his hand inside a pocket.

“What?” I asked, curious.

“The museums.” His hand emerged holding a ballpoint pen. Yanking the cap off with his teeth, he laid the point to my wrist, its tip landing on one of my freckles.

“The artwork.” He began to draw from one freckle to another.

I laughed. “What are you doing? Connecting the dots?”

Dylan winked. “Exactly.”

My skin is like a cup of brown sugar that got spilled over an ivory countertop: a spray of tan on white. Dylan’s pen danced from freckle to freckle, sketching a picture over the stippled canvas. He stole kisses in between pen strokes, and behind his lips, I felt an urgency, insistence. Flustered and mesmerized, I let him draw and kiss, kiss and draw. Line, line, line, lips. Swoop, dip, curve, kiss.

Minutes later, Dylan pulled his pen away. “*Voilà, c’est magnifique!*” Etched on my skin from wrist to elbow was a woman. Venus de Milo, to be specific. Armless. Bare-breasted.

“I...I...” I stuttered, my cheeks flushing hot. Giddiness and shame tumbled somewhere under my stomach. “You’re an artist?” I said, a secondary thought.

“*Oui,*” Dylan replied. “*J’ai été un artiste toute ma vie.*”

“You didn’t tell me you’re an artist,” I said. “You didn’t tell me you speak French.”

“Can you see it?” He said, ignoring my words. “You’re a goddess, Candy. Like her.” He dropped the pen,

ran his fingers up my elbow, traced circles under my bicep. “I’ll bet you have curves like hers, Candy, under all these buckles.” He grabbed the left shoulder strap on my overalls, pulled it sideways, pulled it down. His mouth pushed to mine, but I pulled away, my teeth clanking hard against his. I pulled my leg backward in an effort to stand up, but Dylan grabbed my other arm, holding me in place.

“Wait,” he said, “I’m sorry.”

Confused, hormones reeling, I plunked back down. Dylan started sketching again. He sketched and twirled and dotted until a naked man filled the void.

“Michelangelo’s *David*,” I said.

“*Oui*,” Dylan repeated. “That’s me.”

“We just studied these in art class,” I said. “Why are you drawing them on my arms?” My voice shook like a branch caught in a storm.

Dylan curled his fingers into mine, pulling my hands together ‘til my arms, the drawings, lay side by side. “These two? They belong together, Candy. We belong together.”

“I already believed we belong together,” I said. “We’ve been dating for five months.”

“I know,” Dylan said. His amber eyes burned like smoky wood. “But we belong together like this.” He gestured to his drawings. “Nothing in the way.”

A shock of fear. “You know where I stand,” I said. “Not ‘til I’m married.”

“We won’t make love,” Dylan said. “Let’s just be naked. Candy, you know how everyone makes fun of you for your beliefs? Well, at my old school, I was made fun of for mine—for being an artist. An anatomical artist. Football is crap. Art is a wonder.” His hands found my shoulders, traced ovals to my collarbone. “I knew that—of anyone in this town—I could tell you, Candy. You would understand me.”

I sat agape, frozen, reeling with sweet sounds from his lips and sour surges from my gut.

“Every day we spend together, every kiss we share, I’m dying to share this part of me with you, Candy, my artist part. I want to draw you, Candy. All of you.”

His spicy cologne, his swooped blonde hair, those golden, amber eyes. My gaze floated into his, and I wondered, for a moment, what that would be like. Nothing between our bodies but air. Dylan leaned towards my neck, his lips finding the place where my jaw and my earlobe collide. Fingers wrapped around the other strap on my overalls, and with that touch, the truth blew out the stupor. This boy didn’t want art, and he didn’t want me.

He wanted my body.

Flattery and shame exploded in my chest. “No!” I said, getting to my feet. “No, I won’t do this with you. You

heard what I said, and you know what I meant, and I won't, I won't, I won't." I yanked my overall straps back on and snagged my backpack. Who was this artist with his pompous French and slurpy innuendos? What had he done with my happy-go-lucky football buddy boyfriend? Stuffing my hands into my pockets, I walked away.

"Candy!" Dylan shouted after me. "Don't be stupid!"

"You're one to talk!" I shouted back.

He jogged up beside me, holding out his hands. I flinched away. "I'm sorry," he said, "I moved too soon. Forgive me, yeah?"

"I don't know yet," I said. "Don't talk to me. I need some space."

"At least take my jacket!" he said, pulling off the denim. "To cover your arms. I know you'll be embarrassed."

I sighed. He was right. I tore it out of his hands and threw it over my body. He turned back to the tree, and I turned home.

The entirety of the two miles to my driveway, I pressed my arms to my chest, the smell of Dylan stinging in my nostrils. The drawings of David and Venus hid like secrets under the sleeves. And though my eyes stayed dry, my heart sobbed.

*

Six magic erasers, twenty gobs of baby lotion, and an hour of hot water later, my skin was free of graffiti and rubbed cherry raw. I joined Dad for dinner: pork chops slathered with apple slaw.

“Mighty long shower,” Dad said. “What’s wrong, honey bug?”

I poked at my plate, unsure how to answer. Finally, I said, “Dad, did you ever get a funny feeling when you started to get serious with Mom?”

Dad frowned, his puzzled look. “Like what kind of funny feeling? Butterflies?”

I shook my head. “Moths?”

Dad’s smile wilted. “I never felt anything but sunshine with your mother. I mean, we fought some, but...she just felt like the hoof to my shoe, the green to my garden, the chicken to my feed.”

“That’s pretty sappy, Dad.”

He smiled. “It’s your mother we’re talking about. Of course I’m sappy.”

I thought about Mom, how she would wear fire-engine red lipstick because Dad liked how she looked with it on. She would sling herself across Dad’s lap while they watched the evening news, and sometimes when he

reached to pinch her butt, she swatted his hand away. Dad didn't touch her again for three days—that was her rule: “Swat means space for three days' pace.” Even though they had been married for fourteen years and had felt every part of one another thousands of times, Dad always respected that swat, tucked his hands underneath his thighs.

Dad scratched his chin, set his fork on the table. “Is something wrong, Candela?”

*

Dad and I made a plan: I was going to talk to Dylan at school the very next day, before classes. I was going to set hard and firm lines with him. I was going to say it like it was, and he would reach for my hand, and I'd swat it away, and he'd say “That's fine, Candy, I'll wait to see you naked as long as you need me to and we can get married when we're forty and dance to the Etta James song at our wedding if you like and we'll have three kids and buy your dad's farm and we'll be happy happy happy happy happy.”

Dad would be sitting on a bench, he told me, at the park just next to the school, and he would be there all morning reading a book and I could call him at any moment, and he'd come pick me up in less than a minute if things went badly. We'd talk to the principal and make sure I was safe. But Dylan was my boyfriend, and we went way back to biology class and the gutted pig, and I knew

that everything was going to be okay between us after all because yesterday was just a fluke and the jacket, the jacket.

As I stepped into the front doors of the high school, a band girl I hardly knew—Mercedes? Mackenzie?—popped a bubble of blue gum while she thrust a phone into my face. “You need to see this,” she said. Miguel Santos stood beside her.

“What are you talking about?” I said.

“Just look at them,” she said.

“Listen to her,” Miguel said. “Candy, you deserve to know.”

Not sure how else to react, I grabbed the phone.

The first photo was of Dylan in the center of his football team, a photo from last fall. There was Miguel and Jake and the rest of the guys and two groups of cheerleaders hugging either side of them, their arms posed in sharp angles. So what? I’d seen this before.

I swiped right. “PRODIGIOUS TALENT IN TEEN BOY,” an article read. “Dylan Shephard, age fourteen, is the youngest artist currently interviewed for consideration by the museum’s gallery panel. Angela Misou, local curator, considers Shephard to be ‘the greatest up-and-coming artist in the Bay area at this time; an artist to watch’. Shephard’s art draws inspiration from the work

of prominent impressionist artists, especially Edouard Manet.”

“Manet painted naked ladies,”
Mercedes/Mackenzie said.

“Only sometimes,” I hissed. This article and what Dylan had said yesterday checked out. He was an artist—a really good one—and apparently, he painted people bare. But why had he left the Bay Area?

I swiped right. Somebody’s Instagram post, a girl named Lily Mecham. It was a crude drawing of five girls holding hands, etched in pink and purple crayon. “Still weeping with my girls @ Palo Alto. Don’t know when we’ll be over it. Dylan Shephard can rot in Hell.”

A pit started to burrow in the bottom of my stomach. Is this why he’d asked me not to Google him? Lily Mecham. I committed the name to memory; I would ask Dylan about it later.

Right again. Dylan at the masquerade dance—the one I’d missed when I was down with the fever—dressed as Dracula with flour-white makeup. Dancing with him, Suzette the cheer captain in a booty-shorts fairy costume with translucent wings. I’d told Dylan he could go stag, and what had I expected, that he would dance alone? They were just dancing, he and Suzette—no big deal.

The next photo was a screenshot of a handful of text messages. Dylan's name and Dracula photo appeared at the top. It read:

Dylan: hey suzie q you looked beautiful last night

Suzette: thanks u looked kinda hawt yourself

Dylan: o yeah?

Suzette: but u have a girlfriend.

Dylan: sort of. its not serious. hey, u said i'm kinda hawt, how come?

Not serious? A twist of dread. I kept reading.

Suzette: well . . you've got nice abs. but i could've done without the white makeup

Dylan: i could've done without your whole costume. humor me?

Suzette: lol WUT?

Dylan: send me a pic, plz? i think ur a goddess and i bet u look great topless

Pain, chilly and immobilizing as ice water, rushed from my chest to my ankles. He had called her a goddess and he'd called me a goddess and that wasn't fair. I shoved the phone back into Mercedes/Mackenzie's hands. "This could be anybody," I blurted, darting between her and Miguel. "You two could've staged this, easy—just replaced the name and photo on your own contacts and pretended this was Dylan and Suzette. He wouldn't do this!"

"Hang on," Miguel said, refusing to take the phone back.

"Candy, calm down. One more pic. That's it."
Mercedes/Mackenzie said.

"I can't." My hands trembled.

"You've gotta," they said, in unison.

"Sorry, I—" I raised the phone, screen wobbling in my hands as I swiped right. A photo. Suzette. My words disappeared as I dropped the phone and screamed.

*

Dad met me halfway across the parking lot, catching me in his arms, patting the top of my head before tucking it under his chin. Tears wobbled down my cheeks and soaked the fleece of his jacket. "I just got a call from the principal," he said, his voice choked with shock. "She's worried about you, since you've been so connected with Dylan...Sweetheart, I don't know how to tell you this, but

for the past five months, Dylan's been manipulating other girls in your school to send him pornographic pictures, and he did it at his last school, too, and got expelled—”

“Stop, Daddy,” I whimpered. “I know.”

*

Nobody would let me see him, and I suppose that's for the best. Everything was messy. That day, after Dylan walked me home, is when the principal found out and the cops got involved. For weeks and weeks afterwards, a bunch of girls like Suzette and Janie went to counseling. Though Dylan had never seen me in anything but a t-shirt and overalls, I had to go to counseling, too. I wanted to purge my life of him, down to that first day in class, so Dad told me he would drop off the jacket at the aunt and uncle's house.

I wrote thirty-two drafts of a goodbye letter, but I tore every one apart. What was there to say? “You broke my heart?” Duh. In the end, I opted for a needle and thread. Pulling the jacket into my lap, I pinpointed that space on the shoulder, where Mrs. Franco had slapped him on the back with the juice gloves. With a needle and white thread, I stitched one word: SWINE.

*

The rest of sophomore year traveled over me like a fever dream. The only standout moment was when Mercedes/Mackenzie, whose name actually turned out to

be Maya, invited me to join her rock band. It seemed like a pity invite, though, so I declined.

The summer after passed in hot, isolated freedom—not unlike the island home of a marooned forgotten: both paradise and hell. No guys, ‘cept Dad. Just work; a private little box behind the window of a Sno Shack in the grocery store parking lot, the syrup-stained pumps, my equivalent of Crusoe goats. I wrapped myself in long hours and dystopian novels and the burial of all feelings for Dylan. Apparently, he was living in New Mexico now. Rumors circulated amongst my classmates about him going to juvie or an addiction recovery camp or just relocating to his cousin’s sister’s boyfriend’s house. Go figure.

As the months passed, the pain waned, and people stopped asking. Until.

It was the second-to-last day of summer.

“Hello,” he said. A boy stood in front of the Sno Shack, his stance crooked with one hip cocked, his body dressed in cutoff jeans and a chip-toothed smile.

“Miguel?” I asked.

“That’s me,” he said. “Been a long time.”

I squinted, then nodded. “I—It’s good to—” I started, but my teeth clashed, creaky from lack of use and shattered social skills.

Miguel continued, undeterred. “I haven’t seen you in a long time, not since...well, I was wondering...I just always wanted to get to know you better. Want to go out? We could get pizza.”

My eyes bulged wide. “I’m at work,” I muttered.

“When’s your lunch break?” he asked.

“2:30,” I said.

“I’ll be here,” he said.

At 2:45, we found ourselves across the table from each other at Zarelli’s down the street. “I never saw it coming,” Miguel said. “Dylan was just...such a nice guy. Top notch. It’s like, he was two-faced, or something, to pull that crap off.”

“You’re telling me,” I said.

“You had no idea?” he said, the same question everyone asked.

“Zilch,” I responded, the same way I always did.

Miguel stirred his Italian soda with his straw then peered at me with curious eyes. “What do you wish would have happened,” he asked, “between you two?”

This was the question I wished everyone would ask. The floodgates opened. I told Miguel all—from the pig dissection and the movies and the graffiti on my skin. I told him about the first kiss we’d actually had and the

matching graduation gowns I wished we could've had. About the stacks of college books and the diamond on my finger and the squishy twin babies in the cradles we would make out of reclaimed wood. About how I didn't know who to believe anymore and how it sucks to be betrayed because trust issues are like a jar of scrambled jelly.

"He was gonna be the one," Miguel said. It was a statement, not a question.

"Yeah," I snickered. "He was gonna. What a pair we made, Dylan and Candy: The Pure-vert and the Pervert."

Miguel looked back at his soda and offered a halfhearted smile. "Listen, Candela. You've been through the wringer."

I shrugged. "I've been through worse." I plucked a piece of pepperoni from the last piece of pizza, then slid it onto the edge of my tongue.

A silence passed between us. Then, Miguel said, "Hey, I've had a lot of fun chatting with you."

"It's been nice talking to you, too," I said.

"Mind if we take a picture?" Miguel pulled out his phone.

"Sure." I scooped closer to him while he held the screen up and clicked. The smile on my face in that photo—it looked real. I was healing.

*

My afternoon shift at the Sno Shack was slow without customers. Pulling out my phone to bide the time, I opened Instagram. The first thing that popped up on my feed was the picture of me and Miguel over pizza. The caption read: “lunch date today with my new GF, gonna treat her like a queen cuz she deserves it after the last guy.”

Furious, I exited Instagram, hammered Miguel’s number, and put it all on speaker.

“Hey,” Miguel said, picking up.

“GF?” I said.

“Um—” he said, playing dumb.

“The Instagram post.”

“Is that a problem?”

I lifted my hand to smash my phone, thought better of it, smacked the counter instead. “Yes, that’s a problem. I am not your girlfriend. You didn’t ask.”

“But I did,” he said. “Before pizza. I said, ‘Want to go out?’ And you came with me. Going out means dating, Candy.”

“Don’t patronize me. I thought you meant just for that one date.”

“Either way,” Miguel said. “You started dating Dylan on the first date, so I assumed—”

I threw my shoulders back and my neck tightened. “Shut it, Miguel. I am not your girlfriend, and I never will be, and you can’t just assume things. You have to ask—you always have to ask.”

“Candela,” he sighed, “you’re in a fragile state right now. I knew I couldn’t be too direct because of all the trauma you’ve been through. I know it’s hard to date again, but don’t make any rash decisions right now—we will be amazing together. I’m your boyfriend. I’m here for you while you recover.”

“Well, since we’re in pretend-land,” I said, “let me say it to you straight: you’re not my boyfriend anymore. I’m breaking up with you. Don’t call again.”

I hung up the phone and tossed it in my purse. What a joke.

When my shift ended, I pulled off my flip flops and wandered home barefoot. Dad had offered to give me a ride, but I could use a good walk, so I said no. Above me, the sky faded from bubblegum to tangerine as the sun winked downward in the west. Feeling an itch start to tug at my hand, I slapped it, squashing a mosquito body flat and leaving a spatter of blood. Another on my knee. Splat. Another on my shin. Splat.

I thought about Miguel. He had a handsome smile, and going to pizza with him had been nice, really. But when Dylan had been in my life, Miguel had always been a side story, interrupting conversations and asking for rides. And all those assumptions this afternoon spurred by that obnoxious Instagram post? No way. He was a dud. A mosquito bit my neck. Splat.

Below me, the hum of crickets pulsed in the patchy grass on the side of the road. I thought about next Monday, the first day of school of my junior year. Would it suck as bad as last year? Who knows. An owl hooted from the trees on my left, the leaves beneath it sparkly with the sheen of early moonlight. Maya-not-Mercedes/Mackenzie had texted me yesterday saying, “my band is still dying for a keyboardist. give it another thought, plz?” Maybe that first time hadn’t been a pity invite after all. Maybe I’d join.

Down the street, the porch light glowed at the end of the driveway like a lighthouse beacon guiding me home. When I stepped inside, Dad paused his movie, the blue screen reflected in his glasses as he stood to give me a hug. “Honey bug, I’m glad you’re home safe,” he said. Then, gesturing at the bumps on my body, said, “You got eaten out there. Can I get you some calamine lotion?”

“No, Daddy,” I said, squeezing his hand. “It’s just an itch. It’ll pass.”

“Wanna watch something with me?”

“Sure.” I wandered into the kitchen to make a bowl of popcorn while Dad picked up the remote and flipped channels. Itching the back of my hand, I opened the pantry. As I reached for the kernels, I tripped over the dog bowl, the metallic one that used to be Blue’s—we kept forgetting to take it to Goodwill—and my elbow knocked into a shelf. “Ouch!” I said, standing back up. With the back of my heel, I kicked the bowl to the side, grabbed the kernels, and closed the pantry door.

I have two ex-boyfriends. Both left their marks on me, like bites on skin.

zach murphy

Faults

You were born into chaos before it became your shadow. You learned that your first heartbreak didn't unequivocally break you, it just prepared you for the future. You wondered why the stars preferred not to be seen, then you understood them for retreating behind the shroud. You longed as your dreams danced in the distance, only to taunt you in your sleep. You witnessed things burn because there was no other way. You witnessed things burn because there should have been another way. You felt your soul splash, sink, and swirl, like a tear that gets lost in a storm. And still, the mountains patiently breathed.

contributors.

Sophia Adepoju is a Speculative Fiction writer, book reviewer, and content creator. She tells stories to re-imagine Africa and Nigeria through a futuristic lens. She writes magical realism stories based on African mythologies. Follow her on Twitter

@__lachelnreadingbookss or Instagram @Lacheln__

Melissa Flores Anderson is a Latinx Californian and an award-winning journalist, who lives in her hometown with her young son and husband. Her creative work has been published or is forthcoming in Punk Noir Magazine, Maudlin House, The Write Launch, Voidspace Zine, Daily Drunk Magazine and Rejection Letters, among others. Her CNF “Six Gun Fights” received a Best of the Net nomination from Variant Lit. She is a reader/editor for Roi Fainéant Press. Follow her on Twitter @melissacuisine or Instagram @theirishmonths. Read her work at melissafloresandersonwrites.com.

Grace Elaine (she/they) has enjoyed writing ever since they can remember. They are a creative writing major at Ball State University and currently the associate poetry editor for The Broken Plate.

Zary Fekete has worked as a teacher in Hungary, Moldova, Romania, China, and Cambodia. She currently lives and works as a writer in Minnesota. Some places she has been published are Goats Milk Mag, JMWW Journal, Bethlehem Writers Roundtable, and Zoetic Press. She

enjoys reading, podcasts, and long, slow films. Follow her on Twitter @ZaryFekete

Mik Johnson works as assistant editor-in-chief at Inscape Journal. At present, she formally studies creative writing as a graduate student at Brigham Young University, and informally studies sourdough bread baking, patchwork quilting, and Aqua Zumba from anyone who is gracious enough to teach her. A KidLit aficionado, Mik writes short stories and novels for young adult and middle grade readers, examining themes of mental illness, multiculturalism, grief, religion, and rural living in the child and teen experience. Her favorite Taylor albums are Fearless (Taylor's Version) and Speak Now. Along with her husband and two sons, Mik makes her home in Utah. Find her on Instagram @mikjohnsonwrites

Heidi Klein grew up homeschooled on a farm with eight siblings. Most people find her peculiar, but that's probably just to be expected. When she isn't working as a bank teller, you'll probably find her at home or at church. When she has time to write, she prefers to write from the perspective of peculiar narrators.

Emma McCoy is a poet and author with love for the old stories. She is the assistant editor of Whale Road Review, co-editor of Driftwood, and poetry reader for the Minison Project. She is the author of "In Case I Live Forever" (2022), and she has poems published in places like Flat Ink, Paddler Press, and Jupiter Review, and essays and

stories in Overtly Lit, the evermore review, and others.
Catch her on Twitter: @poetrybyemma

Ivan de Monbrison was born in Paris one century after the birth of the painter Matisse and just before some bald apes set their feet on the moon and put a flag there himself. He is just a poor fellow plagued by psychotic disorders. He has found in poetry a medium to conjure his delirium into, if possible, meaningful words. He writes in many languages because none of them is really his own, probably as a consequence to his autistic tendencies. Back in school, most teachers thought he was a total idiot, maybe they were right, but even an idiot has the right to write poetry, I guess.

Zach Murphy is a Hawaii-born writer with a background in cinema. His stories appear in Reed Magazine, Still Point Arts Quarterly, The Coachella Review, B O D Y, MoonPark Review, and Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine. His chapbooks *Tiny Universes* (Selcouth Station Press, 2021) and *If We Keep Moving* (Ghost City Press, 2022) are available in paperback and ebook. He lives with his wonderful wife, Kelly, in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Matthew O'Rourke is an Irish poet and short fiction writer currently studying for his BA in English. His work can be found in *Crow of Minerva* and *Healthline Zine*, and is forthcoming with *VIBE*, *Chinchilla Lit*, *Heart Balm Literary*, *Musing Publications*, and *Spiritus Mundi Review*.

His writing traverses cursed settings, matters of healing and release, and identity.

Katherine Varga is a writer and theater critic living in Rochester, NY. Her plays have been performed in seven states. Her creative prose has appeared or is forthcoming in Passengers Journal, Qu Literary Magazine, Arasi, and The Paper Crow. These days, you can find her listening to "Would've, Could've, Should've" on repeat.

Venessa Young is a dreamer and a writer who does her best thinking in the shower or floating in the pool. Her work has been published in For Page and Screen. Having completed a Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing, she has learned the value of experimentation. Her writing does its best to defy the boundaries of genre, flitting between poetry and prose, lyrical essays and song. When she is not writing (a difficult task indeed), Venessa can be found at the piano singing, crocheting, napping or on Twitter @VOlympianlove.