

Patchwork Lit Mag

Issue 4



Patchwork Lit Mag

patchwork lit mag is a literary magazine created by English students at the University of Iowa. The magazine is open to everyone, and each piece within this magazine was evaluated anonymously and voted upon by the team based on their individual merit. The views and opinions expressed within are not representative of the *patchwork lit mag* staff.

The mission statement of *patchwork lit mag* is to foster a community of diverse voices, stitch together all of our loose threads, and house the thoughts that overflow. We are looking for honest narratives, stories that defy genre, escapes into handcrafted worlds, and words found between the seams. We embrace brokenness and all stages of healing. Our magazine will showcase a mosaic of intricately-woven patches of our lives.

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Masthead

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Letter from the Editor-In-Chief

Dear reader,

I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your continued support of our magazine. It has truly meant the world to us that we have had the opportunity to publish so many amazing artists within our pages. You are the reason we have lasted so long, and you are the reason that we feel confident completing our journey as an independent magazine. Upon creating *patchwork*, our goal was to connect with, amplify, and find inspiration in the creations of others. It is a tough industry, but one in which every contributor deserves to feel valued and supported. We hope that our magazine has provided that feeling for each and every one of you.

At its conception, *patchwork* was a conglomeration of ideas, a symphony of voices, and a strong core that came from the intentions of us all to create a safe space where art and writing could be cherished in all of their messiness and nonsensical glory. Just as each title and each brushstroke strung themselves together to create a complete magazine, the order of these pieces became a story within a story. They spoke of resilience, and growth, and magic, and our staff grew mesmerized by what we would create next. We began our career as editors as college students, and just like you all, we also needed support and strived to be valued. These gratifications did not necessarily come from our university or our communities but from each other. We started and ended this magazine as a team, no matter how small or large we became. The one thing that made this happen, in addition to our contributors, was us, and that is something we shouldn't sell ourselves short for.

As we move on to our next adventures as writers, editors, and friends, I will continue to show the love and support that we created within this magazine. Whether it is from across the world or across the kitchen counter, we have created one everlasting thing that the publishing industry at times lacks: genuine support and compassion. To Jacob, Jeff, Sonia, Zoey, and the rest of our staff, I wish you the best of luck, and I look forward to reading your names in a book one day, whether on the outside or the inside.

All the love,

Amanda Pendley
EIC of patchwork lit mag

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The Boy and the Christmas Lights

Stacey Manos

We found out Daddy was dying when I was ten years old. Because I was only ten years old and had cartoon looking glasses and a scrawny face that made me look even younger, no one ever explicitly outlined that fact to me. But I knew. Everyone used to tell me I looked just like my mother but I wanted nothing more than to look like Daddy. Not only because he was dying but because what ten-year-old boy wants to be compared to a forty-year-old woman who cleans her big yellow house all day long.

Daddy wasn't scared of anything. He didn't get too excited about much either. He was like the rocks by the ocean. The dark and jagged rocks just below the shoreline that get slammed with the crashing white water over and over and over again and never move an inch out of place. Mama's hands always shook and Daddy's hands never shook, even when he was being pumped full of that magical substance they called chemotherapy. I never wanted my hands to shake either. I wanted to join his band of rocks.

Daddy always said that Christmas doesn't start until the string lights stretch across every house in the neighborhood. Like I said, he didn't get excited over much but he would jump for joy over a fine light arrangement. He would put me in the front seat of his navy blue Ford pickup and we would go around looking for the best light show in the whole town. We never really decided on one and he would always end the night with a cup of hot chocolate from the Hot N Tot for me and a cup of warm water for him. He was always cold. He would say "My boy, there's nothing that a drive through the Christmas lights can't fix."

Daddy hung our Christmas lights every year but that year, Daddy was tired. He never said he was tired, he wouldn't dare let those words fall out of his stoic throat. But even my far-sighted eyes could see that Daddy was growing more and more tired with each sun that insisted on rising. Each time the sun rose, it came with a harsh bell signaling the next round in a bloody boxing match with a promised winner. Mama tried to gracefully skate over the fact that the lights were not up, suggesting that maybe they had been misplaced in the attic or lost in the shuffle of a couple garage sales. I knew exactly what I had to do.

I was already on holiday break from school so I picked an especially fine Thursday to fix everything with Christmas lights while Daddy was at work. I had convinced myself that if I could put up these Christmas lights, all over my big yellow house, all by myself, then maybe Daddy wouldn't die because there was nothing that Christmas lights couldn't fix. He said so himself and Daddy never lied. I picked up the long brown ladder from the backyard and dragged it across the freshly mowed lawn all the way to the front of the house. I had watched Daddy hang the lights every year, so it couldn't be too hard. As I climbed the ladder, with a hammer in one back pocket of my dark wash jeans and nails in the other, I had a fleeting moment of doubt. I didn't doubt for one second that the Christmas lights would make Daddy better. I just questioned whether or not I could be the one to do it. The house was taller than it seemed when I watched Daddy hang them. But when I reached the top of the roof, with the multi-colored bulbs swung over my small shoulder, I looked out at the sky, and all the doubt faded.

I spent all afternoon hanging those lights. I worked carefully, not quickly. I triple checked that each nail was hammered in the right place to ensure the lights would be centered and symmetrical. I outlined my older brother's bedroom window with another string and chuckled as I remembered a summer day when he put on his Superman cape and tried to fly out of his frame. It turns out he wasn't the only one trying to be a hero on that roof. I wrapped the lights around the top of the white painted chimney, just like Daddy did. I did everything exactly how he did but when I stepped down from the bottom rung of the ladder and looked up at my big yellow house, I couldn't help but think that Daddy's lights were somehow brighter than mine.

The sun was going down but I was relentless in my determination to stay outside until Daddy pulled his pickup into the driveway, despite Mama's requests to go help her set the table. After forty-five minutes of pacing the yard and checking my watch, I finally heard the relieving sound of the pickup's engine coming around the corner, turning onto our street. I knew that sound like I knew nothing else.

That night was the first and last time I ever saw my father cry. Don't worry, he still jumped for joy like I knew he would. He let his keys fall out of his hands onto the freshly mowed lawn and he lifted me up and spun me around in the sky; my glasses fell off. His smile was one I had never seen, it took up his entire tired face. For a moment, I thought my lights had worked their magic instantaneously. But when my father set me back down on my own two feet, I could see my magic was only temporary. My father placed his cracked hands on either side of my face, tears hesitantly

streaming down his cheeks, and he whispered: "My boy, you are going to be a beautiful man."

My lights bought my father three more Christmases than he was supposed to have. I would go with him to doctor's appointments and watch as they shook their heads in disbelief when he explained that chemotherapy was good, but his boy's Christmas lights were magic. No one could explain how he was still standing year after year, but neither of us were all that surprised.

Like I said before, my magic was only temporary. My father's lights went out and I'd like to think I turned out to be the beautiful man he told me I would be all those years ago. I grew up and built my very own house. I built it with a hammer and nails and an old brown ladder. I built it out of rebellion and abandoned promises. I built it with cracked hands and tears in my eyes and fight in my bones. I still hang the Christmas lights every year. I drag my aged body to the rooftop and look out at the sky. Sometimes, if I'm lucky, I see my father dancing on the horizon. He gives me a wave. He tells me we have the same eyes.

That Night Before Thanksgiving, When My Mom and I Go To Our Small Town Bar After She Takes Me to Her Father's Headstone On His Birthday

Hannah Rose Showalter

After she takes me to see my grandfather's grave for the first time,
my mother takes me to the bar,
She says
birthday drinks, for grandpa
and I cannot say no to her,
even though chasing the cemetery
with a night in my hometown bar
seems like a cocktail of cheerlessness.

It is almost empty here,
and I imagine even if it was full it would still feel empty.
The bartender says
you are sisters, right
And my mother and I,
I and my mother,
we tell her we are not.
My mother says
that's my kid
and I like those three words
better than the three names she gave me.
They do not believe my mom is old enough
to have a daughter who's old enough to drink.
The old man next to us bathes his mouth
with Busch Light like its Listerine
and says
you could be twins

look,
same chin, same nose
Yes, yes, yes,
Same chin, same nose.
I was called her name my whole life and I always answered to it.
Her stomach was the first door step I carved my heights into,
that's where her stretch marks came from.
When my mother's ex-husband,
who I sometimes call my father,
wouldn't leave our house
for a whole, salty summer,
the summer I turned seventeen,
I asked him why he wasn't
fucking gone yet,
because
same chin, same nose,
I know when she is bleeding
even if it's happening inside of her.

I have my father's eyes
but that is it.
Thank god, the rest of my mirror is my mother.
Thank god, it's her red, red, hair.
Thank god, it's my mother.
My mother.
Thank god.

how to romanticize poem-making

Rachel Alarcio

- i.
Cut snippets of lyric
from conversation, dissect
entrails of childhood demons,
resurrect memories with invocations.
- ii.
Blend together:
hummingbird silence,
and library cacophony
for a false alphabet soup.
- iii.
Package, then serve
to humanity's howling hollow
stomach with the concoction, please
ease aches transposed over time.
- iv.
Let the back of your hand
graze the page; let journals fill,
like Greek vessels, with the ale of
alliteration, worn ruby robes
- v.
of rhyme and crossed-out lines:
all smudged with sweat,
spilled lemon tea,
and wicker lamp oil.

Empty Words

Amritha Selvarajaguru



Through the years

Josephine Geiger-Lee

He proposed when her lips were cherry red, red, red (prime for the picking), and her hair fell in fistfuls of white. He proposed when her skirt swayed at her knees, the fabric pressing soft kisses to her freckled skin beneath. He proposed, his pants open like the blades of scissors, one blade primed, as he fell to one knee. He proposed when the music giggled and babbled into the open air.

He proposed, and her hand fluttered to her mouth to protect her cherry red, red, red lips.

“Will you marry me?” he asks, words thick with sugar.

And her future unfolds in front of her, desperate and keening. She thinks of the nights spent at the outdoors movie theater, giggling and flirting and winding her hair around her finger, and the freedom, the freedom, the freedom. She thinks of the days spent at the diner, bustling tables with a broad smile, twirling and spinning with her skirt outstretched around her, collecting the stories of the patrons all around.

She thinks of her ring finger, unburdened.

In front of her, the man stares at her with that hungry, hungry look in his eyes. He will ask her to give up the red for something softer, something calmer; he will transform her into a woman of pink, a wife of white, a mother of blue.

Her future cries out, gurgling like a baby taking its first breath, but she licks her lips, smearing the cherry red.

“Will you marry me?” he had asked.

“Yes,” she says, for what else could she be?

-

He proposed when her cheeks were bubblegum pink, pink, pink (prime for the popping), and her browned, tanned hair fell in curls the size of fingers. He proposed when her belt cinched in around her waist, the fabric pulling and tugging her freckled skin beneath into an embrace. He proposed, his hands reaching and grabbing and yanking, as he fell to one knee. He proposed when the music swayed and swirled into the open air.

He proposed, and her hand fluttered to her cheeks to hide the bubblegum pink, pink, pink cheeks.

“Will you marry me?” he asks, words smoothed by practice.

And her future unfolds in front of her, persistent and pleading. She thinks of the nights spent at her desk, studying and transcribing and reciting the words

belonging to those with strong chins and smooth chests and empty eyes. She thinks of the days spent at the quad, stretched out in the sunlight with her few girlfriends, laughing as the strokes of sunshine painted them in gold, laughing at the freedom, the freedom, the freedom.

She thinks of her ring finger, unburdened.

In front of her, the man stares at her with that cunning, cunning look in his eyes. He will ask her to give up the pink for something more neutral, more mature; he will transform her into a woman of white fences, a wife to the blue, a mother of an overwhelming, all-encompassing grey.

Her future cries out, yearning like a child claiming its first word, but she drops her hands to expose the bubblegum pink.

“Will you marry me?” he had asked.

“Yes,” she says, for what else can she be?

-

He proposed when her eyes were rimmed with cotton-candy blue, blue, blue (prime for the possessing), and her dark hair stuck upright after being teased and mocked. He proposed when her jeans rode up on her hips, the fabric gripping and grinding against her freckled skin below. He proposed, his eyes unknowable and dark as they searched for answers on her waist, as he fell to one knee. He proposed when the music pulsed and pounded into the open air.

He proposed, and her hand fluttered to her forehead, shadowing her cotton-candy blue, blue, blue eyes.

“Will you marry me?” he asks, words rough and ragged.

And her future unfolds in front of her, silent and somber. She thinks of the nights spent at the crowded concerts, feeling each chord wander her body with precise fingers, feeling the notes probe and finger the line before dropping away. She thinks of days spent at the studio, one hand wrapped tight around the microphone, the other exploring the open air around her with a reverence she cannot describe, and the freedom, the freedom, the freedom. She thinks of her ring finger, unburdened.

In front of her, the man stares at her with that wild, wild look in his eyes. He will ask her to give up that blue for something else, something she cannot know, something she will never know; he will transform her into a woman of never-ending, unspooling blue, a wife of the grey nothingness behind his eyes, a mother bearing the empty-eyed children.

Her future cries out, shrieking like a teenager discovering its first injustice, but she blinks away the cotton-candy blue.

“Will you marry me?” he had asked.

“Yes,” she says, for what else can she be?

-

Her lips were cherry red, red, red.

Her cheeks were bubblegum pink, pink, pink.

Her eyes were cotton-candy blue, blue, blue.

She slipped to the ground, taking a knee for her partner, and she pulled the ring box free from her pocket. The music stopped, and the silence unraveled in the open air. "Will you marry me?" she asks, her words full of hope.

Their future unfolds in front of her as her partner reaches for her, helping her back to her feet.

Her partner smiles.

"Yes."

Abraham and Isaac Go Camping in the Porcupine Mountains

Paul Lewellan

And He said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.

—Genesis 22:2

"Strange Mom didn't want to come with us." Isaac tried to start a conversation. "She loves camping." *True enough.*

"I wanted a guys weekend. Just you and me." *Lame.*

When I told my wife the same story she, too, knew I was lying. Ironically, had I told her the truth, that this was a sacrificial journey, Sarah would not have believed that either. She knew how much I loved our only son.

My plan was for Isaac and I to do a little fishing, walk the Presque River trails, watch the sun set on Lake Superior, then make s'mores, and finish the day with prayers of thanksgiving to a demanding God. In the morning I'd build a stone altar, unwrap the sacrificial knives and— *Well, you know the story.*

Admittedly, this camping trip wasn't what YAHWEH envisioned when He commanded me. He wanted a mountain in the land of Moriah. Well, international air fares being what they are, that wasn't going to happen. We live in Platteville, Wisconsin. I teach accounting at the U of W there. The Porcupines were the best I could do on short notice.

YAHWEH posted a How To– video on YouTube to show me what HE had in mind: blueprints for the stone altar, the prescribed wine, an obsidian knife for surgical precision– YouTube deleted it. They have a policy against human sacrifice. Still, I made a promise with HIM centuries ago, that's how Isaac was born. I had to fulfill my contract, even if it was unlikely to hold up in a Michigan court.

The flaming pyre to send the sacrifice up to Heaven was another problem. The posted park wildfire danger was Level 5 (Extreme) because of the drought. Groundfires were prohibited. The prudent thing to do was hide the body. I'd tell my wife the kid ran away with a fishing guide twice his age who looked great in jeans and a tank top and liked her men a little on the young side. That story was the best I could come up with on short notice. Sarah would know I'm lying no matter what I said. "*Your lips are moving*," she'd tell me.

Honestly, I don't know why HE demanded this of me. Was it a test? Was HE looking for validation in the Post Covid Era? Was it a slow day in Eternity? Or was it part of a cosmic plan I was too stupid to understand. All I knew was that *even HE* can't always get what HE wants. No one can.

We stopped at the Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park Visitor Center to check in and purchase our \$10 daily fishing licenses. That was the highlight of the day for Isaac because of the young woman working the counter. At 6'1" she towered over him. Even in the baggy dark olive pants, boots, and drab uniform shirt, my son was smitten.

Struggling to make conversation while filling out the fishing application, Isaac told her, "I've always wanted a job like this."

"I haven't," she said. Her badge read, *Aoife Bryne, Trail Coordinator*. "It's seasonal. I get paid \$12 an hour. I was supposed to be working the information center and registering campers or else managing the bookstore. I've got a double major, business and psychology. I wanted to work in HR, but they made me a trail coordinator."

Though startled by her outburst, Isaac was not deterred. "Trail coordinator sounds like something I'd like to do."

Aoife looked up from the paperwork and their eyes met. "It's part trail maintenance, brush clearing, and mowing, and part park police, except without a badge or weapon of any sort." Isaac took in her every word. "I say, 'Excuse me, ma'am, but masks are required for indoor park programs even if you're vaccinated,' or 'Sorry, to bother you, sir, but pants are required in state campgrounds.'" My only son laughed. "'Excuse me, miss, but even though recreational use is legal in this state, smoking marijuana in public is still illegal.'"

At a loss for conversation, Isaac commented, "You have an unusual first name."

"It's Irish. Pronounced 'ee-fah'"

"Aoife," my son mooned. "It's lovely."

I collected our fishing passes, trail maps, and campsite permit, then strolled over to the bookstore to give the young folks a minute. I heard

my son say the obvious, "My name is Isaac," and "We're camping at site 52," information I was sure Aoife had already noted.

Isaac and I had a good day. We hiked along the root beer colored Presque River. Gradually he'd opened up to me. With the pandemic, his last year of high school had turned to shit: remote learning, the soccer season cut short because of a COVID outbreak, no Senior Trip, virtual graduation ceremonies, Prom cancelled.

That final blow was a mixed blessing. Isaac and Tiffany Delgado had dated exclusively since they met in 8th grade in the Lego League Robotics Club.

Their senior year Tiffany took a sudden interest in wrestling, attending matches on the UW Platteville campus where I taught. "Go Pioneers!" Just before Christmas she appeared at the high school wearing a Varsity Letter jacket belonging to a sophomore wrestler named Wyatt Grundell from Denmark, Wisconsin. Wyatt wrestled at 157 and briefly attended my Intro to Accounting class in the fall before switching his major from Business to Soil and Crop Science.

Tiffany eventually confessed her duplicity the night before Spring Break. She was going to Cancun with Wyatt's fraternity brothers and sorority sisters. "I'm ready to set aside my childish ways."

Isaac spent Break in his room in the company of his well-worn copies of the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition*. But I digress.

As evening approached I considered our meal options. Our fishing attempts had produced nothing more than a mouthful, all catch and release. Isaac's last meal would be Hormel Chili or fried Spam and potatoes. Then Aoife appeared in full ranger uniform and Smokey the Bear hat despite the unseasonable heat. One hand held her citation book. In the other was a stringer of walleyes. Isaac jumped up from his canvas deck chair.

He looked good: curly brown hair, dark eyes, and a chiseled chin that offset the prominence of his nose, broken three times playing rugby for the local club team. He was not the stereotypical accountant's kid.

Aoife smiled. "Any luck fishing?" She saw the cans of Spam and knew the answer.

"Had great afternoon with Pop, but a lousy day for catching fish."

I pointed to the walleye. "Looks like you had some success."

Her faced flushed with anger and she waved her citation book in our direction. "I caught two Badgers from Kenosha without park permits or fishing licenses, marinated in Old Style, who assumed a 'sweet young thing' like me would let them off with a warning. Stupid old farts!" Aoife caught herself and turned in my direction. "No offense."

"None taken."

"I'm supposed to be off-duty."
Interesting. "What happened to those yahoos?"
 "They're packing up their campsite. I called a ranger who'll escort them out of the park. They were in no shape to drive."
 "What happens to the fish? They're nice looking walleyes."
 Aoife stepped forward. "I thought you might like them. Otherwise I'll leave them out for the bears."
 "I love walleye—" Isaac blurted out.
 "There's too much fish for the two of us," I suggested. "If you're off duty, perhaps you'd join us for supper?" Isaac beamed.
 "I'll need to change."
 "That will give me time to clean them."
 She handed me the stringer. "I thought I would get experience in bookkeeping and customer service. Now I think law enforcement might be a better career path."
 "Keep your options open," I suggested.
 "Should I bring something to drink?"
 "Pop's got that covered," Isaac said, pointing to the two coolers by our canvas tent. "No stranger ever leaves our home thirsty."
 Aoife found the remark curious. She took another look at my muscular son in his cargo shorts and Clown Shoes t-shirt. "I'll be back."
 Because of the fire danger, I pan fried the fish on the Coleman stove with butter, and my secret lemon pepper panko beer batter. On the second burner I fried an obscene amount of hash browns.
 As I was plating the walleyes, Aoife appeared wearing cutoff denim shorts, a black tank top, and sandals. The ranger hat had been replaced by a Brewers baseball cap that failed to contain her unruly red hair. She was carrying a small backpack and a blanket. "What do you have to drink?"
 Isaac escorted her to the coolers. He opened the larger of the two, our beer cooler. "Oh my—" she said.
 "Pop's into craft beer."
 She read off the names. "River's Edge, Three Blondes, Dead Bear Brewing, Founders, Tenacity Brewing from Flint.... All Michigan beers."
 "Drink local," I said. "It's the eleventh commandment." She grinned her approval. Aoife was not a casual beer drinker.
 She pulled out a Haze Road from Five Shores. I grabbed a Kusterer Salzburger Marzen. I handed Isaac a Bell's Two-Hearted Ale.
 "Dad, I'm only eighteen," he protested.
 Aoife and I both had a good laugh at that.
 I'd been teaching Isaac the intricacies of craft beer since preschool.

My only rule was he couldn't share the beer with friends. On his own he'd decided to be the designated driver at every high school party. The arrangement worked for us.

We settled down to a long leisurely beer-soaked meal, rejoicing in the bounty YAHWEH had provided.

Eventually the conversation slowed. "It's almost sunset. You two should go down to the lake," I suggested.

"I brought a blanket," she said. "I know a spot—"

It was the way she said it— The hair stood up on the back of my neck. "I'll do the dishes." They left the campsite hand in hand.

Hours later just before they returned, I retreated to the tent and feigned sleep. I heard rustling outside. Aoife said softly, "Don't be nervous." Soon enough I heard their moans. After midnight she whispered, "I have to go." A few minutes later Isaac entered the tent, trying not to wake me.

Unable to sleep, thinking of the sacrifice I would make in the morning, I spent the night listening to Isaac snore. I arose at sunrise and began gathering rocks for the altar. I'd barely filled in the first layer when the voice of authority broke the morning stillness. "Stop right there, before I have to restrain you."

"What are you suggesting?"

Aoife was in full ranger uniform, boots polished, ranger cap strapped on her head, uniform crisp and pressed, shoulders squared. "Regulations must be followed in Michigan State Parks: 'No stone altars, no human sacrifices, and absolutely no fires.'"

"I wasn't....," I protested as Isaac emerged from the tent.

"Pop wouldn't...."

She waved us off. "No need to explain. YAHWEH is a harsh and demanding god. I can't stop you from following orders from HIM," the imposing Trail Coordinator affirmed. "I can prevent you from doing it in a Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park."

Isaac stared at the stone outline on the ground beside me, the obsidian knife resting beside the altar cloth. "Dad. Is this true?"

I stepped toward him. "Son, I was told...."

Aoife interrupted. "YAHWEH changed his mind."

"What?" Even as I asked the question, I recognized the power and authority wrapped in her ranger uniform.

"Do you think you're the only one YAHWEH speaks to? Your wife Sarah called the ranger station and alerted us." Her hands rested on her hips, the same position my wife assumed before she handed me my lunch. "Does it always have to be about you, Abraham?"

"I yield to your authority."

"Not mine," she said humbly. "HIS." I started gathering up the rocks. "Not so fast. You'll still need a sacrifice."

"But what—"

"It must be something rare and precious. Something that proves your fidelity to the One True God."

"I have nothing—"

As if with one mind, Aoife and Isaac turned their heads to the beer cooler. "The Utopias," they said in unison.

"No...," I moaned.

The pinnacle of Samuel Adam's brewing is Utopias (*Yes, with an s*), a beer that is barrel-aged for decades, and hand-bottled. The 2017 decanter of Utopias in my cooler came from a batch of just 68 casks which yielded only 13,000 bottles. I'd spent several hundred dollars for this beer. The term beer doesn't begin to describe it, 28% alcohol by volume (ABU), more like a Cognac. Miller Lite is 5%.

I'd saved this Utopias for a special occasion, planned on drinking myself into oblivion with it and then drowning myself in the lake after I'd slaughtered and immolated my only son. YAHWEH apparently had other ideas. And HE knew my wife.

"Perhaps we should leave your father to do what he must do," Aoife suggested.

"We could go swimming," Isaac suggested.

"I don't have a suit," she demurred.

"This early in the morning I don't think you'll need one."

"The water will be cold."

"There are ways to warm up afterwards."

"My shift doesn't start until eight."

"That should be enough time—"

After they disappeared down the path, I gathered the stones and formed a small pyramid, saying a prayer of thanks as I sheathed the knife. Reverently I removed the Utopias brew kettle decanter from my cooler. I moved to the altar. I twisted off the copper cap to reveal an another tightly sealed pop-off cap. That, too, I removed.

I sat in my lawn chair prayerfully, savoring the aromas wafting from the bottle. Finally I lifted the Utopias, tilted the bottle, and slowly poured the dark libation onto the altar and into the soil from which it came. In the tent I could hear my cellphone announcing a new text. That would be Sarah.

When the decanter was empty, I set it on the ground beside me, resisting the temptation to taste the drops remaining on the rim. I closed my eyes and found peace.

After Aoife left for her shift, my only son and I had a lengthy conversation about the nature of the Divine and the inscrutability of the Female, we lifted several pints in praise of both, stopping the revelry before lunch so I'd be sober enough to drive home that afternoon. Miraculously two small loafs of French bread and three smoked perch appeared in the food cooler. We had them for lunch.

On the way out of the park we stopped at the ranger station. I bought postcards at the gift shop. Isaac checked us out with Aoife. She handed him a brochure about opportunities for summer employment and kissed him on the cheek. I got a wave. My son and I began our journey home.

The Untimely Death of an Unnamed Father

Oliver Nash Willham

Cast of Characters

Albert, the eldest son, late 30s

Florien, the second son, 30s

Liza, the eldest daughter, early 30s

Len, formerly known as the middle daughter, now youngest son, early 20s

The Lawyer, a mysterious character

Scene

A Drawing Room in a Large Townhouse that reeks of wealth

Time

Unknown, past

Act One

Scene 1

Setting: Four plush chairs are sat in a small drawing room in a presumably expansive and expensive brownstone. One wall contains a tall wooden door that leads to a hallway, the other is made up of large windows. An empty umbrella stand sits next to the door. The room is dominated by a portrait of an older white man, the Father, hanging above an unlit fireplace. The place is decorated for Halloween, cheaply, with purple and orange crepe paper and plastic skeletons. An empty candy bowl sits on a small table. Outside, it rains. FLORIEN sits reading "Slaughterhouse Five" by Kurt Vonnegut. He turns the pages intermittently.

FLORIEN

So many damn doodles.

Enter LIZA through the hall door. She shakes off the rain and shoves an umbrella into the stand.

LIZA

You haven't lit the fire?

FLORIEN

I've asked his attendant to.

(He does not look up.)

LIZA

The old man? We'll be waiting forever.

(She sits across from him.)

FLORIEN

Well.

LIZA

How long have you been waiting?

FLORIEN

A while. Not long.

LIZA

Have you heard anything?

FLORIEN

I've seen the attendant.

LIZA

Did he say anything?

FLORIEN

Has he ever?

(He turns the page. She looks towards the window.)

LIZA

It's been a while, hasn't it?

FLORIEN
 Hmm?
 LIZA
 Since we've been here. Together.
 FLORIEN
 Oh, years.
Enter ALBERT through the hall door. He has a collapsible umbrella he fumbles with, trying to fit it into the stand. It eventually is forced in.
 LIZA
 Hello, Albert.
 ALBERT
 Liza, Florian.
 (He nods to them both.)
 ALBERT
 Have you been waiting long?
 FLORIEN
 Not long.
 LIZA
 I just arrived.
 ALBERT
 You haven't lit the fire?
 LIZA
 Not yet.
 FLORIEN
 The attendant will do it.
 ALBERT
 He's still alive?
 FLORIEN
 Seemingly.
 ALBERT
 I haven't seen him.
 LIZA
 Florian had a chat with him. About the fireplace.
 (Albert sits next to Florian. Florian turns a page.)
 ALBERT
 Weather's been bad lately
 LIZA
 Lots of rain.
 ALBERT
 Lots of cold.

FLORIEN
 Could be worse.
 (The Door creaks open an inch, but no one enters. They all look at it.)
 LIZA
 Odd.
 ALBERT
 Do you think she'll come?
 LIZA
 I doubt it.
 FLORIEN
 Who?
 ALBERT
 You know who. The missing one.
 FLORIEN
 There are two of those.
 (There is a moment of silence.)
 ALBERT
 Only one of them could show up.
 FLORIEN
 Surely both could.
 ALBERT
 If this were a séance, perhaps.
 LIZA
 Let's not talk about that.
 FLORIEN
 Still feeling for her?
 LIZA
 Aren't you?
 FLORIEN
 It's been long enough.
 (He turns a page. Silence.)
 LIZA
 Why hasn't that fire been lit?
 FLORIEN
 The attendant will be along shortly.
 LIZA
 How long ago did you ask?
 FLORIEN
 Not more than a few minutes.
 ALBERT
 I think she'll come.

FLORIEN
Who?
Enter LEN, through the cracked door. He shoves his umbrella into the stand.
FLORIEN
We were just talking about you.
LEN
(With a half-smile)
I thought you would've forgotten.
FLORIEN
No,
(He turns a page)
I remember.
ALBERT
I knew you'd come.
(He stands as if to embrace him, then sits again, thinking better of it.)
LEN
Why haven't you lit the fire?
FLORIEN
The attendant's coming to.
LIZA
I'm glad you came.
LEN
How could I not?
LIZA
You haven't before. When Mom—
ALBERT
I knew she'd come for this.
(Len looks uncomfortable but doesn't correct him, resigned to it. He sits in the final seat.)
LEN
So, what finally did it? They wouldn't tell me on the phone.
FLORIEN
What didn't?
ALBERT
Well, it was a couple things.
LIZA
I told him smoking didn't help. I told him and told him.
ALBERT
He wasn't right after Mom.
FLORIEN
He wasn't ever right.

ALBERT
Don't say that. He was a good person.
FLORIEN
Really?
ALBERT
He tried to be.
FLORIEN
Not very hard.
LEN
What exactly are we waiting for?
LIZA
The fire to start.
FLORIEN
Is that all?
ALBERT
The lawyer. He's meeting us here.
(Florien turns a page. Silence.)
LIZA
It's almost a year since her death, to the day.
FLORIEN
Is it?
LIZA
I remember the decorations. It was Halloween then too.
LEN
It is almost a year. I remember the decorations too.
LIZA
But not here.
LEN
No. Not here.
ALBERT
It made Thanksgiving hard. With Dad.
LIZA
Dad didn't seem to mind it.
ALBERT
It was inside.
FLORIEN
How could you tell?
ALBERT
I could see the sadness inside. He hid it well but--
FLORIEN
The only person who's seen inside Dad is the mortician.

ALBERT
 Don't say that about him.
 FLORIEN
 Who's left to hear?
 LIZA
 I wish that fire was on.
 LEN
 I could light it.
 LIZA
 No, you don't know how.
 (Thunder, and silence.)
 ALBERT
 It's good to be here all together.
 FLORIEN
 Not all of us.
 LIZA
 Shut up.
 FLORIEN
 It's only the truth. She's not coming.
 (Silence. Liza stands and goes to the windows.)
 LIZA
 How do you not still feel for her?
 FLORIEN
 It's been a long time.
 LIZA
 She was a child.
 FLORIEN
 And she got out of it all easily.
 ALBERT
 Don't upset her, Florian.
 FLORIEN
 Fine.
 LIZA
 I know what you're doing. It won't work. I've accepted it.
 (Silence.)
 ALBERT
 The rain is really coming down now. Was it hard to get here in it, Helen?
 LEN
 It's Len now, you know that.
 ALBERT
 Oh, right. Sorry.

LEN
 I remembered where it was. The rain didn't wipe this place away from
 my memory and the face of the earth.
 FLORIEN
 Isn't that what rain does though? Wipes away?
 LEN
 Wipes away but never fully cleans the slate.
 FLORIEN
 Leaving us as the misshapen runoff of chalk pooling at the bottom of a
 chalkboard.
 LEN
 It's not that complex.
 FLORIEN
 You always were for simple answers.
 ALBERT
 Look, let's just talk normally.
 LIZA
 I wish that fire were lit.
 ALBERT
 Len, how has work been?
 LEN
 I haven't had much of it.
 FLORIEN
 Then this must be good news! Daddy's coffers opened once again.
 ALBERT
 Don't treat him like that. He's been good to us.
 FLORIEN
 To you.
 LEN
 To both of you.
 ALBERT
 To all of us. And I know he missed all of you.
 FLORIEN
 He tell you that? Or is this another one of your "seeing inside" moments?
 ALBERT
 He spoke of it often.
 FLORIEN
 When?
 ALBERT
 Occasionally. At breakfast.

FLORIEN
 Ahh, when fresh from dreams. Makes anyone wish for the past.
 ALBERT
 He was making wishes for the present. For his children.
 LIZA
 He's right, Dreams are wishes for the past.
 (She walks over to the fireplace, takes a poker, and rummages through
 the cold coals.)
 ALBERT
 He wanted his family back together, at those breakfasts.
 FLORIEN
 Well, it's a little late now. We've missed breakfast.
 LEN
 What time is it?
 (Albert and Florian check their watches.)
 ALBERT
 Nearly Three
 FLORIEN
 Does it matter? We must keep waiting either way. The lawyer shows up
 on his own time. Then charges us for it.
 LIZA
 It seems the attendant takes his time too. Are you sure you asked him?
 FLORIEN
 As plainly as I speak to you now, I told the attendant to light the fire. He
 went for wood or something.
 LEN
 Or something?
 FLORIEN
 Or something. A lighter, a match. Some newspaper. Does it matter? He
 went to fetch it.
 LIZA
 And he'll be back soon.
 FLORIEN
 Of course.
 LEN
 And if not, we could start it ourselves.
 LIZA
 You don't know how, I told you.
 (Silence. Liza goes and sits again.)
 FLORIEN
 It'll be six years this Christmas.

LIZA
 So now you're bringing it up.
 FLORIEN
 Well, it was when we were last all together.
 LEN
 Some of you were already gone. There were just three of us left living
 here then, really.
 FLORIEN
 Where was Albert off to?
 ALBERT
 I wasn't far. I was never far.
 FLORIEN
 But Liza was.
 LIZA
 That wasn't my fault. It's not my fault I got in where I wanted.
 FLORIEN
 And it just happened to be cross-country.
 LEN
 Had to be East Coast.
 FLORIEN
 But what does it matter, anyway? We were all here. It was Christmas
 after all.
 LIZA
 No. We won't talk about it.
 (Silence. Albert clears his throat.)
 ALBERT
 Father loved you all!
 FLORIEN
 Where did that come from? Daddy issues?
 ALBERT
 It just didn't seem like you knew. He told me that, before it all happened.
 LIZA
 Before the fall?
 LEN
 The fall?
 LIZA
 That's what started it. He fell a few months ago.
 LEN
 And no one told me?
 ALBERT
 We didn't think you'd care. It didn't seem serious at the time.

LEN
What isn't serious about a fall?
LIZA
Well after Mom's thing—
LEN
I told you I was busy for that. And Mom never understood, you know that.
Are you not over it?
FLORIEN
It's already been a whole year, move on. She missed it.
LIZA
It was a beautiful service. I'm just sorry you missed it.
LEN
(sarcastic)
I guess you're making me sorry too.
ALBERT
Dad kept the lilies in his room, he cared.
FLORIEN
What, about the lilies?
ALBERT
About Mom.
FLORIEN
Because he kept the lilies?
ALBERT
Well, they were for her, it was for her memory.
FLORIEN
Or he liked the smell. He always did like that kind of smell. Remember
Alicia?
LEN
Our maid?
FLORIEN
She always smelled like lilies, didn't she?
ALBERT
Don't say that about Dad.
FLORIEN
Oh, you know he got up to that.
ALBERT
He didn't.
(Silence.)
LIZA
The rain is making it cold. I wish that fire were lit.

FLORIEN
It will be.
LIZA
Can you promise?
FLORIEN
I won't promise.
(He turns a page.)
LIZA
Why? Do you not think it will be?
FLORIEN
Because if I don't make a promise, I won't break it. It's beyond my control
anyway, I've told the attendant to light it. He will or he won't.
LIZA
And if he doesn't?
FLORIEN
We'll sit here freezing until the Lawyer comes.
LEN
I'd rather risk it and light it myself than freeze.
LIZA
But you don't know how!
LEN
I'll risk it.
(Len stands and goes to the fireplace. He grabs the poker from
where Liza set it. Liza stands.)
LIZA
Don't. You don't know how to light it.
LEN
There isn't enough wood.
ALBERT
There never is. I kept telling him he needed more wood, especially as
winter got closer, but he kept putting it off.
LEN
I guess we'll wait.
LIZA
You couldn't light it anyway.
(She sits.)
LEN
Really? Really, Liza? Why couldn't I light it. If we had the wood?
LIZA
You just, you just don't know how, ok? I just don't trust you to light it.

LEN
Are you talking about Christmas?
(Liza looks away.)
LEN (Cont.)
Of course you are. I was like 7. I've grown.
LIZA
Yeah. You can still see it, you know. If you look close enough. It's just a little paler than the rest of my arm.
(She traces a rough circle down her forearm with a single finger.)
FLORIEN
What the hell are you guys talking about? What Christmas?
LEN
Did you forget?
LIZA
Well, it was really just us.
(Len looks back towards the fireplace.)
LIZA (Cont.)
Christmas Eve. I found Len kneeled before the fireplace because he was scared of Santa Claus. He thought a fire would keep him out of our house, so he was lighting a bunch of newspapers and logs.
ALBERT
Liza, do you need to bring this up? We remember.
(She pretends not to hear. They let her continue, knowing she just needs to get it out.)
LIZA
He'd built it too far out. The stockings started catching—you know, the ones we had when we were little kids. The quilt-y ones, with the snowmen. I pulled him away and tried.
(She's looking far away.)
And tried to. Smother it. Smother it with a blanket. She was just watching, watching them burn.
(They look at each other. Eye contact.)
LIZA (Cont.)
It caught onto my sleeve. Burned all up my forearm. Then Dad was there to put it out and Mom drove me to the hospital while Dad stayed back with you guys. My skin was so pink!
(She leans back and laughs.)
I didn't wear anything but long sleeves for a year.
(She turns to look at all of them. They look back.)
LIZA (Cont.)
You remember that, right?

(Pause. They do, but won't say it.)
LEN
I won't try and light it then. Look—
LIZA
It doesn't matter. It was then. In the mirror -- I barely notice it anymore. Some things you just can't change.
LEN
(Nearly silently.)
Alright.
(Len sits back down.)
LIZA
The rain's letting up.
ALBERT
Is it?
LIZA
Only a little.
(Silence.)
LEN
Did he ever mention me, Albert?
ALBERT
Sometimes. Towards the end.
LEN
Did he ask for me?
ALBERT
I think he knew you were busy.
LEN
So, no.
ALBERT
No.
(a beat.)
I'm sorry.
LEN
Don't be. It's not your fault.
ALBERT
Don't blame him either. It was hard for him to understand.
LEN
It was harder for me.
(Silence.)
LEN
I just don't want to pretend he was—no, they were—somebody else. They were who they were. And now they're always the same.

FLORIEN
 Bugs in amber. Maybe time will change things. Everything's more
 interesting in retrospect.
 LEN
 It's hard for things to change when they're dead.
 FLORIEN
 Then it's up to the living. Absence makes the heart...
 (He doesn't appear to have the energy to finish the platitude
 and waves it off with his hand. Finally, Liza steps in to finish it.)
 LIZA
 Grow bitter. If we take you for example.
 FLORIEN
 Me? Why?
 LIZA
 Could be your superior air.
 LEN
 Didn't you recite Hamlet in your mirror while shaving? "Oh, pity me."
 (He snort-laughs.)
 Talk about drama. I think you took longer in the bathroom than I did.
 (Len, Liza, and Albert laugh.)
 FLORIEN
 Yeah? But I never took the longest. If I was self-obsessed Hamlet, who
 was Ophelia? Now that they're both gone maybe I'm stuck being next.
 LIZA
 Stop it. Don't say that, not about her. We were just joking.
 (Silence.)
 LEN
 It still smells like lilies in here.
 LIZA
 There were hundreds. She was well-loved.
 ALBERT
 And Dad went all out.
 LEN
 What?
 ALBERT
 Dad went all out on her funeral.
 LIZA
 It was perfect.
 FLORIEN
 Still, lilies for who?

ALBERT
 They're a dead flower. For the dead. You know who.
 FLORIEN
 Yet he kept them alive.
 (Albert stands, glowering at Florian, anger growing.)
 ALBERT
 Don't start this again.
 FLORIEN
 I won't. Then it would never end. Plus, then we might start talking about
 other funerals.
 ALBERT
 His?
 FLORIEN
 No, hers.
 LIZA
 At least we were all there.
 FLORIEN
 Physically.
 (Silence. Albert sits.)
 LIZA
 Do you think the Lawyer will be here soon?
 FLORIEN
 Why, other plans? Got somewhere to be?
 LIZA
 No. I just wish I would've dressed warmer.
 FLORIEN
 Ahh, protect yourself from the cold. I'd think with her on the mind you'd
 always dress warm.
 LIZA
 I told you to stop bringing her up.
 FLORIEN
 Didn't Albert want the whole family here?
 ALBERT
 I meant Hele- Len. Sorry.
 LEN
 It's ok.
 FLORIEN
 I'm just saying it's ok to acknowledge one of us is missing.
 LIZA
 Not missing. Dead.

FLORIEN
 Now you want to talk about her.

LIZA
 It just seems like you do. You keep bringing her up, but I'm the one who misses her? It seems like she never leaves your mind.

FLORIEN
 It's been years. I've accepted it.

LIZA
 No, I don't think you have. I haven't and I'm so tired of you pretending like you don't give a shit about her. Especially when it was your fault.
 (Florien stops reading.)

FLORIEN
 What did you say?

LIZA
 It was your fault. You're the one that let her go up there. She asked you.
 (Florien looks away from her. Liza stands as she confronts him.)

FLORIEN
 It wasn't my fault. She chose to.

LIZA
 She was fourteen! And you helped her? What was, what is wrong with you? Did you just not care or was it something else? Did you want something to happen? Did you want her to die?

(Florien stands and drops the book. He's angry, he's on the verge of tears, he's not there anymore, in that room, anymore. The others stand, too, but stay away from him.)

FLORIEN
 You're right. Goddamnit. You're right. Do you think a day goes by where I don't think about that night? She was so happy, she begged me to go. It was supposed to be a short drive. The snow was falling slowly, it wasn't slick. They were going to be in the car the whole time, twenty minutes. She didn't want the bulky jacket, what did it matter. It was just chance, ok? It was just chance that I was the one in the kitchen, I was the one she walked past and asked to leave. What difference would it make? It wasn't that late. How was I supposed to know?

(Len rises, approaches, and moves to touch his arm, but he brushes away from her. He's crying.)

It could've been any one of you.

LEN
 Florien, I'm sorry. I was there too, I know...
 (He moves away from Len, towards the window. Len knows better

than to chase him. Liza stands in silent judgement. Albert, still sitting, looks away from him.)

FLORIEN
 You don't have any idea. It wasn't you. I mean, it was so stupid of her. Asking me? Why. Why did she need my permission? She could've just gone. Snuck out in the night like the rest of us. I know we all did... we didn't ask each other. But she stopped and asked me. What the fuck.

LIZA
 She needed to have permission; you know how she was. She'd never do anything "wrong." She was a child.

FLORIEN
 So was I.

LIZA
 Well only one of you died for it.

LEN
 Liza.

(He stares at her. Liza looks like she's going to take a step forward, continue the fight, but in Len's gaze she hesitates and slows.)

FLORIEN
 I wish I could stop seeing it. The crash. Her hanging there, in the seatbelt. Snow coming in the broken window. The headlights were still on. Why couldn't they find them? It must've taken her so long to freeze.
 (He turns and strides to the fireplace.)
 Goddamnit. Why hasn't he lit this goddamn fireplace.

LEN
 It wasn't your fault.

ALBERT
 I'm sorry.

(There's silence for a beat. Len moves forward and touches Florien's shoulder. Florien picks up a plastic Halloween skull from the mantle and turns it over in his hand. Len looks back at Liza. Liza looks away, towards the floor, then turns away from them entirely.)

LIZA
 I'm sorry too.

(She goes back and sits down, facing away from the fireplace.)

LEN
 It's tough. Things will change. It'll be ok.

FLORIEN
 When?

(He wipes his eyes.)
 Where's this fucking Lawyer. I'd like to leave.
 ALBERT
 He'll be here soon. He always arrives on time.
 (Len pats Florian's shoulder and sits back down. Florian remains at the fireplace. The door to the study opens.)
Enter THE LAWYER in a black raincoat with the hood up. They stand in the doorway for a moment before putting their black umbrella in the stand.
 THE LAWYER
 Albert, a chat first.
 (Albert stands, looking confused, then leaves with the lawyer. The door shuts behind them.)
 LIZA
 So just like that, he's here?
 LEN
 Looks like it.
 LIZA
 Alright then.
 LEN
 Final stretch. How long do you think they'll talk?
 LIZA
 I don't know. I hope not long. It's far too cold in this room.
 LEN
 The attendant's coming.
 LIZA
 Can you hear him?
 LEN
 No, but he must be. Surely.
 FLORIEN
 I asked him to. He'll come.
 (Florien has composed himself. He moves and sits back down but doesn't pick up the book. He and Liza will not look at each other.)
 LIZA
 When?
 FLORIEN
 Soon.
 LIZA
 How do you think Albert is doing?
 FLORIEN
 Do you always talk about people when they're out of the room?

LIZA
 Only when I'm sure they'll feel it.
 LEN
 That's comforting.
 LIZA
 I'm just saying. Maybe we shouldn't have left him alone with Dad.
 FLORIEN
 Why not? You heard how he talks about him.
 LIZA
 No, it's just. Can you imagine? Being alone with him. Visiting all the time, in this house.
 LEN
 We grew up with him, is that any better?
 LIZA
 We had barriers. Each other. And Mom.
 LEN
 Sure, but she wasn't much better.
 LIZA
 She tried just as hard.
 LEN
 Yeah. Tried.
 (He pauses.)
 You're sounding like Albert.
 LIZA
 What are you saying?
 LEN
 Defending her.
 LIZA
 All I'm saying is she loved us.
 LEN
 Now you're just copying him.
 LIZA
 Maybe they never leave us.
 FLORIEN
 I think *he's* coming back.
 LIZA
 (Touching on fearful.)
 Back?
 FLORIEN
 Down the hallway.

LIZA
 Oh, Albert.
 LEN
 Who else?
 LIZA
 ...the attendant, perhaps. Or--
 FLORIEN
 I'm sure he's still coming, too. It could even be him.
 (The door opens. Albert enters with the Lawyer. Albert is pallid.)
 LIZA
 All done, then?
 ALBERT
 Yes. There's some news.
 (He turns to the Lawyer, then back to the others.)
 LIZA
 Is something wrong?
 ALBERT
 In short, it turns out Dad had some, rather sizable debts. The estate isn't quite insolvent, but the majority will go towards their payment. What's left seems to be a small amount for each of us. And the townhouse, which he wanted to go to his oldest son. So, uhh, me.
 (The other children do their best to not appear shocked, and they nearly succeed. It almost feels inevitable. A final joke. They've gathered for little reason. The Lawyer steps forward.)
 THE LAWYER
 I'll have letters drafted with specific amounts after the estate sale. I doubt we'll need to sell this place, so it should remain in Albert's control.
 LEN
 Why did you have to do this in person? Why invite us all here for this?
 THE LAWYER
 Bad news is best delivered face to face.
 FLORIEN
 If delivered at all.
 THE LAWYER
 I'm afraid I have nothing else to say.
 (They move towards the door and grab their umbrella from the stand. They pull their hood up.)
 THE LAWYER (Cont.)
 Good night. Expect to hear from me soon.

THE LAWYER exits, leaving the four alone in the room.
 LEN
 So that's it then. All that for this.
 LIZA
 And the fire never lit.
 (A short silence.)
 LEN
 Did you know, Albert? Did you know about all, well, this?
 ALBERT
 I had no idea. I didn't think, I thought it'd be good news for us. That we'd be together and--
 LIZA
 Well, here we are.
 (A second short silence.)
 FLORIEN
 I should be going. If I stay any longer, I'll never stop smelling like lilies.
 (He and the others begin to stand and make moves towards the door as they speak.)
 ALBERT
 Must you?
 LEN
 I should. It's a long way to travel.
 ALBERT
 You could stay here.
 LEN
 No, I couldn't impose.
 LIZA
 I must be going.
 ALBERT
 It's still raining.
 FLORIEN
 We'll be fine. It's just water.
 ALBERT
 We'll do this again.
 LIZA
 Yes.
 LEN
 Of course.
 FLORIEN
 Mm-hm.

(They hug as they leave.)

FLORIEN

Goodbye.

He exits into hallway, book tucked under his arm.

LIZA

I'll see you again.

ALBERT

Anytime.

She exits into the hallway with her effects, leaving LEN alone with ALBERT.

LEN

We'll do this again, soon.

ALBERT

I hope so.

LEN

I miss it, sometimes. When we were all together, under the same roof. In some ways things were easier.

ALBERT

And more painful.

LEN

And more painful.

(He laughs.)

ALBERT

Be safe. I...

(He doesn't know what to say. It wants to be an apology, but he can't figure out how to begin.)

LEN

Don't. It's alright.

(They embrace.)

LEN (Cont.)

Someday.

He leaves with his effects and closes the hallway door behind him. ALBERT, now alone, goes to the rainy window and looks out it in silence. The lights dim. A soft knock. Has decided someone come back? Or is it only the storm outside, threatening to burst in?

Lights off, darkness.

Splitting the Atom

Theodore Heil

On the train home,
down Park Avenue,
over the dam bridge and

across the boroughs
with their envious river.

My forehead was pressed to
the cold glass, the shaking
like a winter thunderstorm.

There came to be
a world, perfected and

sprawling, behind the window.
Framed in the reflection:
Samson's hands on the

body of his book;
across the page

clasped in his mother's ring,
his finger tracing the words
we shared with each other;

the pink and
faded cover of

the book,
night,
my face.

It was after this,
our day together in the park,

watching the pigeons
speckled black and white
like the cows back home.

We entered
the station, waiting

for our impossible train,
swaying and opening
in the dull heat—

like flowers
or friends.

I watched him
clutch the rail,
letting me take the open seat

without a second thought
or a sound passed between us

I live for the moments in between words when
the one I love leans against
the subway doors, molten.

The Creation Story

Ashley Gilland



She wanted to blow the biggest bubble,
so large that it would orbit her and call her mother.
She could protect the eggs in a dish soap nest.
The freshly paved house,
the perceived haunt of dandelion ancestry
beneath the terracotta tiles
inspires wish-making as such
and she already presides over the pirate ships
and rubber ducks.
The girl would fill her lungs
and blow so sharply
that a trail of tiny moons would dart away
from the pucker,
swooping and diving into the suds.
She impatiently tried to accommodate
and expelled so slowly that the globe would
quiver and tremble as it expanded
and pop
before ever proving it could withstand
independence.

Eclosion

Melissa Nunez

When we purchased a cup of caterpillars to observe, my son embraced the role of rapt attendant. As if they were permanent additions to the household, family pets. We took an impromptu trip to the beach the weekend after their arrival, and he insisted on bringing them with us. He would hear nothing of how self-contained they were. The food they required—a gel along the bottom of the cup. Clear instructions not to open the lid until pupation was complete, chrysalises fully formed. So, we brought them with us. They rode the hour-and-a-half in the cupholder of the van and found a spot on the dresser of our room when they were not being shown off to every family member who joined us on the trip.

~

When I first started leaving the house on my own with my children, even trips to places like Chick-fil-A, all clean surfaces and wide smiles, were an adventure that could make my heart palpitate unevenly. Things go smoothly with Maia in her carrier, the promise of food a glue keeping Phoenix to my side while I order and get our table set. The calm continues when they are both confined in our booth and eating. My daughter's love of being cocooned in the pouch at my chest is a small mercy after her brother. He never wanted to be strapped down in a sling or wrap or stroller. He always wanted on me, to be touching me, but had to feel always free. To know his feet could hit the floor in an instant if he so desired.

~

When we returned home it was time for them to hibernate. We carefully checked each day as each of the five caterpillars chose a spot in which to attach to the lid, suspend downward and form their shell. One caterpillar decided he had not yet had his fill, continued to carve a circular path at the bottom of the container, guzzling and growing. We could not move the lid into the net provided until he too transitioned into pupal stage. Finally, two days larger and later than the rest, he climbed up to the top, dislodging a fellow in the process. We moved them all to the net, even the one now detached. We noticed in the transfer that another had left a part of its hind abdomen exposed, outside of the chrysalis. Maybe the urge for future form overwhelmed the call for careful construction.

~

Phoenix is done with his food and wants to go play. I have chosen a table along the windows of the play area, but even with this anticipatory move I am unsure. The door to the play place is closer to the side exit of the restaurant than to me. I feel the nervousness in the tremor of my voice as I ask him to stay seated while I clear the remains of his meal. I'm sure he'll want more when exhaustion overtakes his current state.

~

When it was time for them to emerge, the largest one came first. While the instruction guide informed us of the trembling, it was a different thing to see the quick successive movements with our own eyes. The convulsing of the small clear encasement defied logic of energy. The pulsing shivers continued until thin legs pushed through. Making way for the entire winged insect to materialize.

~

A pair of children enter the play area. They begin a game of tag. Weaving through the walls of mirrors and spinning beads for tic-tac-toe, up and down both stairs and slide. There are a few collisions, but it seems all in fun. There is the resound of laughter, no howls or tears.

~

Two more followed. They stretched their wings, offering the remaining moisture to the air in flicks and folds, and then took flight—flipped and fluttered in their net. We made the mixture of sugar water, sprinkled it on a few flower heads along with the provided sponge, added a fresh orange slice. We continued to observe the partially encapsulated pupa and the one on the floor of the enclosure. My son was especially concerned. "They are going to make it, right? They will all come out?" The one on the bottom had turned black. We knew it had taken a different course, one that ended in this containment. But of the other we weren't so sure.

~

His little body is all jumps and jitters as he waits for my answer. I know I need to give him freedom to do big things. "Ok," I finally say, though my heart seems to be knocking at my sternum. In mere moments he is on the other side of the glass, velcro shoes in cubby holes. I see him in glimpses and flashes between the sections of play structure as he runs and climbs. I have to trust he knows what to do. I feel good until he enters the tunnels. I can't follow him with my eyes anymore.

~

A day later, we saw signs of emergence from the last hanging chrysalis. It wriggled and quaked, wracked its being as it struggled to exit its clear cask. The front half emerged; the back half remained enclosed. Stuck tight.

We took to the internet and received mixed advice. Some said to leave it be. The butterfly had to squeeze itself out of its shell on its own in order to get all the moisture off its wings. Without this process they would not dry properly and expand as needed for flight. Others said you could assist it a bit and have it still endure enough of the struggle necessary to survive.

~

The tunnels lead up to the ceiling, follow the length of the walls. There are so many directions to take, and I cannot tell where the reverberations of hands and knees on high density plastic are coming from. I have not seen him in several minutes. What if there is a child, like the one at the library park last week, to tell him all his ideas are stupid and boring? What if someone else is waiting in the tunnels? Why is it taking so long?

~

We attempted an extraction. We placed the half pupa on a paper towel on the kitchen table. My husband used tweezers to try to peel back some of the chrysalis wall along the fracture. The butterfly seemed to be struggling less. Faint from fruitless effort. We cracked open just enough to allow it to slide through. We placed it back in the net. Close to the sugared flowers. It crawled around a bit, but its wings remained closed and wrinkled. Plastered to its abdomen. Paper fan folded shut. When it was time for the release, three butterflies fluttered away. We placed the fourth one on the grass in hopes the fresh air and sunlight could undo the damage of the failed eclosion.

~

Phoenix emerges from the slide. A smile on his face. I take a breath as he climbs up the stairs again.

Love Sick

Cheryl Byrne

Another moan comes from the bed where Alan is lying, curled up like a foetus. I take a damp wash cloth and dab it across his forehead, brushing his hair from his face. It looks dark, the dim lighting and his sweat combining to take away the shining blond. “Shhhh, there darling, is that better?” I cradle him sometimes, wrap my arms around him and rock slowly, his head resting against my breast as he drifts off to sleep. I have had to feed him for weeks, he hardly has enough energy to raise his arm. I spoon soup into his mouth, scraping the edge along his lower lip after each mouthful to catch the leaks from the corners. When he’s finished, I plump the pillows and draw the duvet up to his chin then brush my lips against his forehead lightly and leave him to rest. I stand at the door and watch for a while, until his soft snores tell me he is safely asleep.

There is an anxious joy in caring for a loved one. I waver between the two, catching myself in a moment of contentment when I fold his freshly cleaned sheets or frowning with concern as I kiss his cheek. At the moment, I’m more in the anxious than the joy and I pull my cardigan closer around me and fold my arms across my stomach as I walk softly down the stairs, my feet make no sound on the heavy carpet.

In the kitchen, I take bags of vegetables out of the fridge and empty them onto the counter in a cascade of greens and reds and yellow. I pull the knife out of its block with a hiss of metal against metal and with the other hand, fish the peeler from the drawer. Before, Alan would have been next to me, cheerfully pulling a carrot out of the bag, the pot between us slowly filling. I watch thin curls of orange fall into a small pile on the chopping board, the brighter colour revealed under the duller peel. The knife rocks backwards and forwards, its blade releasing the freshness of the celery and the sharpness of the onions. I wipe the back of my hand across my eyes, clearing the tears. I cook vegetables in hot water for a long time then remove most of them before blending what remains together and adding some chicken I cooked last night. Not too much seasoning. A little salt. A little pepper. A little of my own herb mix. That should be enough for a couple of days.

I can hear Alan now, he's awake, he needs me. He is so weak he can't even walk to the toilet alone. I help him out of bed. "Lean on me love." He bends toward me and we wobble to the bathroom together. He is lighter than he used to be but I still struggle a little and we stumble together to the toilets. The fever is confusing him, he keeps trying to steer out the bedroom door and I have to hold firm to keep him going the right way. He sits on the toilet, hardly noticing I'm still there. The first time I had to do this, he insisted I leave the room but now he is comfortable with me again. He slumps slightly and leans to the left, falling in slow motion. I have plenty of time to catch him.

I help him back to bed, my firm hand around his waist directing him, I am getting used to taking the lead in this dance. After tucking him in I sit on the bed. He opens his eyes and whispers, "Claire, please!"

"Shh it's ok, I know." I lean in and stroke his cheek with the back of my finger, smoothing the wrinkles away. "Just rest, you'll feel better soon." He moans in response, but I know what he means. "I love you," I say. "Don't worry about anything. I'll look after you." He is lying on his side, I sit and rest my hand on his hip. "Oh love, you'll be better soon. Then maybe we can go on that trip we talked about, go to Italy and take some cooking classes." His eyebrow contracts slightly and I think he is trying to say he remembers. "Remember that chocolate making class in Switzerland." I smiled at the memory of the sweet smells and of our faces covered in cocoa powder and smeared with chocolate. Alan had hardly any nuts in his bar, he'd eaten most of them, sneaking them into his mouth whilst the teacher had her back turned, throwing me conspiratorial looks. "You'll like the Italy trip. I can start planning it now and we can go as soon as you're better, what do you think?" Alan hardly ever replies to me, but I feel that speaking to him in an engaging way cheers him. "I know we talked about the trip a while ago," I say taking his hand, I take a deep breath, "but maybe it can help us get back to where we were before Daniel." His hand flinches in mine and the corner of his mouth pulls down just a little, barely a twitch.

Daniel had changed us. I remember the feel of him growing inside me, the power I felt as my body created life. I was making a person. Often, as I was walking down the street or shopping or reading, that thought stopped me. I would freeze and try to take it in. I was making a person. Friends, who have now fallen away, would talk to me as though this was normal. "Has the morning sickness eased?" or "Have you found out the sex?", all matter of fact. Asking me whether I had decided on chicken or beef for my dinner that night. I calmly replied "Yes, eased a few weeks ago" or "We find out next week." All the time wanting to shout about how

amazing it is, about how un-normal it is. "I am sick because of the tiny half formed human living inside me!" I was making a person.

We had argued playfully over whether to find out the sex but I gave in, after all, I had this experience of sharing my body and I thought Alan should have something. I had hoped that knowing, boy or girl, would bring him closer to it all.

They told us on a Tuesday afternoon. I had joked about how Tuesday was a nothing day, the worst day of the week as I lay on the examination table and they squirted jelly on my distended belly. I shivered a bit like I did every time and said "Oh, that's cold". The nurse moved the head of the wand around for hours. Well, probably not, but it felt like it. I imagine they get training in how to keep their faces expressionless, not realising that expressionlessness tells us all we needed to know. The next few hours were filled with scans and tests that I barely noticed. My entire being was focused on the precious creature inside me whilst my body was pricked with sharp needles and moved from room to room. When had I last felt him move? The world shrunk to me and him. Could I keep him safe inside me? It was almost a blessing, time I could spend with him, focused only on him. Alan made me lean on him, took my weight and helped me walk around the small room we were given. The walls that contained our grief were surrounded by miracles and the occasional cry of a new life reached us, protesting at being taken from its snug home. Nurses periodically disturbed us with medical necessities, but otherwise we were alone. Our family.

Then I pushed. I pushed and pushed and tore myself apart. Knowing I would not have a beautiful screaming pink baby at the end. Tears and sweat mingled to drench my face and blind me. Alan was there. I could feel his hand in mine and a small pressure occasionally to tell me I wasn't alone.

They let us hold him for a time. To say goodbye, they said. It was healthy, the thing to do.

And then I was a childless mother. There is no word for it like it's too awful a concept to be named. I had no little creature in my life entirely dependent on me, no one to nourish with the milk leaking pointlessly from my breasts.

I stand up quickly, pulling myself back to the bedroom, the shame and the grief make me itch. I breathe deeply and imagine pushing the memories back into a far corner of my mind. I need something to occupy me, so pick up the needles and wool from the small table next to the armchair. Resting back into the chair, I pick up a stitch, wrap the wool and let my hands pick up the familiar routine of knit, purl, knit, purl. The winding wool pulls the unwanted thoughts from my head, centres me in the present, as though

the strands are tying the memories up, holding them fast and I can look away safely, knowing they won't sneak up on me while I am kept busy. Knit, purl, knit, purl. I have opted for something simple, a long scarf in green for Alan, his favourite colour. I love to watch the wool slide across my finger, around the needle to become part of something. Each stitch as important as the others at holding the shape of the whole.

I talk as I work, of old times, picking a memory far away from Daniel. "Remember when we met? That seedy bar, crowded and stifling. I hated it, at least until you joined me in my corner and suddenly it was three in the morning and we were being ushered out by those bouncers and all our friends had given up on us and left." I glance up between stitches, and smile. "It's mad to think that we were once those two kids."

I snag a stitch when Alan moves, turning over to face away from me. I drop the knitting mid-row, "Alan," I say, a question in the name. He is moving, trying to sit up, I think. I walk around to the other side of the bed so he is facing me again, and climb on, sitting back on my heels and leaning forward. "Alan?" I whispered, "What's wrong?" I shuffle a little closer to him and reach for his hand. I stroke his palm with my thumb. His hand jumps in mine, he is trying to pull it away from me. It must have taken a lot to move that violently. He has hardly moved in days, only when I have taken him into the bathroom.

I release his hand and stand, looking down at him, and I think he must blame me. He would never say it, but it makes sense. It's amazing he stayed as long as he did. He did look after me, but we didn't really speak about it. And I treated him terribly after, picking arguments if I found one thing slightly out of place. Shouting at him for not turning up for dinner, then shouting at him the next night when he was there. I see now, I just wanted to shout, but Alan bore the brunt of it.

He cared for me when I refused to leave the bedroom except to go to Daniel's room. I would get up and walk barefoot on the cold linoleum down the long hall to stare at the empty cot or sit on the white rocking chair I had so painstakingly picked out. Then I would sit for hours imagining what life would be like if he had been there. Every time Alan followed me or came home to find me there, he stood in the doorway, neither in nor out of the room, hovering in the between place and waiting for me to say something. I pretended he wasn't there so I could pretend Daniel was. Just for a little bit.

Alan's sister, Deborah, was a frequent unannounced visitor in the beginning, bringing food and cooking for him in our kitchen. He brought some to the bedroom for me most nights, "Claire, will you eat? Please?" I feigned sleep most times and he would leave it on the bedside table, returning to collect the untouched plate when it'd had time to go cold.

I heard them talking, more clearly when I got up to visit Daniel in his room, Deborah asking about Alan, about how he was. I tried not to hear his outpouring of misery to his sister. What was his suffering compared to mine? Compared to the grief of the Mother whose body has been torn and broken by the child who was stolen from her. I would hear Deborah ask about me. "Has she left the house yet?" or "will she go back to work soon?" As though I wasn't doing things in accordance with her timetable. I should have been making more progress. But more often than not they spoke about him. His horror of it all. "That room was hell. That room where our dead son was born. How can something dead be born?" He cried sometimes. His sobs travelled down the hallway to our room and disturbed my isolation. I turned my back on them, refused to let them in.

Now I step back a few paces, gently, avoiding the squeaking floorboard by habit. I watch as sleep takes him, his breath evening out and his eyes closing. When I am sure he is safely asleep, I move quietly from the room. I start to turn around at the door, tempted to go back in and curl up in the chair for a while, to keep him close.

I try not to think about the night that he left. I had heard something in Daniel's room and my stomach leapt slightly, betraying the hope of my body, a hope I knew was impossible. I had crept down the hall and seen Alan, standing with his back to the door, staring out of the window.

"Alan what are you doing?" I asked as I walked toward the door. I could hear movement and a thud and when I opened the door, I found him picking up one of Daniel's toys. The one with the shaped blocks and the matching holes. One of the fallen friends had bought it for him.

"I'm sorry" he said when he stood, a blue cube in one hand and a green circle in the other.

"Sorry for what?"

He looked down at the toys he held and took a deep breath and for a minute he looked like he intended to turn away. But his shoulders set firm and his back straightened, as though preparing himself for a difficult task. I reached out and rested my hand on the drawers next to me to anchor myself.

"Claire, I'm sorry, I can't do this anymore. I just wanted something small of his before I leave." He said it slowly, clear so there was no room for misunderstanding.

"Before you leave?" I replied quietly.

He took a breath. "Yes. I need to get away. From this room, from you."

"What do you mean from me?" I looked past him at the rainbow painted on the wall. The red line had faded a little and could do with a touch up.

"You need help. Help I can't give you, or that you won't let me give you. I just can't take it anymore; I don't know what to do." I could see him pacing out of the corner of my eye. "I don't know how long I'll be gone for, but I need time. Claire, I'm grieving too and I can't stay in this house with this room held up as a shrine to what we've lost."

"What we've lost? Our child you mean?" I spat. Lost was the wrong word, he was taken, not left on a bench during a country walk.

"Yes." He sat on the edge of the rocking chair and it tilted forward. I pulled my eyes away from the painted rainbow and looked at the man who had stood next to me for hours in the hospital, and had tried to care for me since. The lines across his face traced the worry and the grief he had been through and I realised that they didn't match my lines. He looked tired and old and like someone who craved to be looked after. "I just feel so useless all the time," he said hopelessly.

I stayed in Daniel's room while he packed a small bag and left. The door closed quietly behind him with a sense of finality that threatened to rip a scream from my throat. I had wondered about blame with Daniel. Had I done something? The doctor said no, that these things happen sometimes, but that didn't seem enough and the question remained. This time, I knew it was my fault and I had to put what was left of my family back together.

He called a few days later. We exchanged the awkward pleasantries of the recently estranged before he asked when he could collect some more of his things. The air around me pushed against my skin, nearly stopped my breath, but I managed to reply, "Any time you like."

When he arrived, I made him a cup of tea and asked him to sit down, but he just took the tea to the bedroom. I tried to talk to him, standing in the door of the bedroom we shared, telling him I was sorry and I didn't want this.

"I can't Claire. Please don't. Not now," were his only replies, delivered with his back to me. He started feeling sick after about half an hour.

"Maybe it's psychological." I said, "Maybe you don't want to do this."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm just coming down with something."

By the time he'd packed up his things it was clear he couldn't drive.

"Stay in the bedroom" I said. "I'll go into the spare room. You can't go anywhere like this."

I drag myself out of the past as I pour myself some water, my hand shakes a little and it splashes in the glass. I shiver when drops hit my hand, the one Alan had pulled back from and I know that he will try to leave if he gets better. My stomach twists at the thought, of being alone in this house surrounded by reminders of my broken family. I turn to the cooker where the soup is cooling and add some more herbs while tell myself I am being stupid, not to think that way.

A little later, I go to check on Alan. I think he's awake although his eyes are closed. I brush his hair back from his face and kiss him gently on the forehead.

"We're going to have to wash you today. Shall we do it before or after dinner?"

He doesn't reply but I think maybe it's best to do it after. I gather the tray together, heading to the garden to collect a fresh rose, something to cheer up the bedroom. We go through the routine of feeding, making sure the soup is not too hot, it wouldn't do to burn his tongue. He hardly opens his eyes, he just half sits, very still, swallowing the food I give him. He doesn't try to bat away my hand anymore. He did that in the early days, but I was patient, he needed the energy to get better.

I give him time to recover then help him shower. This is not a task either of us enjoy. I sit him up, move him round on the bed and inserting myself under his arm, I hoist him to his feet and struggle into the bathroom again. He is even less responsive than usual and I almost have to drag him but we get there eventually. I lower him into the bath to undress him, it's much easier that way than trying to prop him up and take off his pyjamas at the same time. He helps where he can but his movements are slight, an obvious struggle. I pull the shower head down to wash him, I lather shampoo in his hair and rinse all the sweat from his suffering body then lift his arms to rub soap underneath. He sleeps through it all. His face taking on a peaceful look, the slight frown he has worn since his illness has started to smooth away.

I sit him in the arm chair in the nook by the wardrobe, next to the open window whilst I change the bedding, so he can feel the fresh air for a little while. He has slumped and fallen asleep again and it's difficult to get him into bed. He's no help at all but luckily, it's only a few steps. This would have been impossible when he first became ill, but I marvel sometimes at what I can do now. He is lighter, yes, but I am stronger as well. I love the muscles peaking through on my arms, I know they will make me a better carer for him. When he's tucked in and sleeping soundly, I kiss his forehead, he is cooler than he has been. I pull the covers more firmly about him, keep him safe from the cold of the open window.

I turn off the light before settling into the chair. I have slept here since Alan became ill so I can be near him, but not disturb him. He used to complain about my strange body temperature. "How can such a warm body have such cold feet?" I had laughed easily at his lover's teasing. I close my eyes and dream in flashes. About Daniel. He would be a toddler now. He has learned to run. A flash of him running across the living room.

Alan catches him and lifts him laughing into the air. A flash of him at the dinner table. Alan and I taking turns to feed him mouthfuls of food. He grabs the spoon halfway and puts it in his mouth, scraping the sides a little, leaving orange sauce on his lip. A flash of him sleeping, of Alan standing up from the rocking chair, putting aside a book of fairy tales he has finished reading to him.

I don't sleep for more than an hour and when I wake my eyes open quickly. The ghost of a child who never existed runs across the bedroom floor and jumps onto the bed, where Alan is lying in the same, slightly awkward posture I left him in. I follow it slowly, a sense of wrongness walking with me. The ghost child fades away and it is just me and Alan. I place my hand on his forehead. Cold.

I climb into bed next to him and cradle him, rocking slowly, stroking his face and running my hands through his freshly washed hair.

Weather Vain

Stephanie Stephan

After a meal of honied ham, mashed turnip, and limp green beans, the conversation circled back around to where it began: how would they solve the garbage can issue?

Aunt South was in favor of an anonymous letter.

Uncle East was in favor of setting a trap.

And Sylvie, had not been asked.

"It's just ridiculous. It happens maybe—I don't know—two or three times a week," said Uncle North.

"And he never says anything?" asked Aunt South.

"No. Just knocks them over and drives off. I've watched him do it. I haven't said anything yet, but I'm getting down to my last nerve."

"Well if you want to know what I think," began Aunt West as she set the dessert tray on the table, "I think you should run over *his* cans someday. See how he likes it. That'll teach 'em."

A tall blue candle burned in a sconce on the wall. Sylvie's eyes reached for it, like balloons caught on a power line. Its warm orange flame bobbed behind the glass shade. Protected.

Several years ago, Sylvie and her cousins graduated from the kids' table to the long glossy table in the dining room. In all that time, it had never occurred to anyone to offer Sylvie or her cousins coffee with dessert. Sylvie slipped into the kitchen to pour herself a cup. The conversation was still churning when she returned, though the problem had swelled. They no longer spoke of it as Uncle North's issue but as a collective trial.

"Why don't we post a complaint in the neighborhood newsletter? It doesn't have to be directed at *him*. It would be a good reminder for everyone. We can do it anonymously," said Aunt South.

A nod went around the table.

The dessert tray was heaped with cookies. Pink and green leaves sandwiched together with chocolate, crunchy lace, layered petit fours—pink, yellow, and green—pale sugared cookies punctuated with a glacé cherry. Sylvie knew not to be fooled by them. They all tasted the same. No amount of chocolate could drown out the flavor of almond and anise. She carefully selected a pink leaf and crammed it into her mouth. It turned to sand.

Her eyes returned to the candle and she allowed her mind to go fuzzy and wander.

Uncle East reclined, smirking, arms crossed. “You know, if we really want to get him, we should fill your garbage can with rocks. He’ll get a hell of a surprise the next time he throws it in reverse!”

“That’ll teach ‘em!” said Aunt West.

“No! Don’t do that! Just post in the newsletter,” said Aunt South.

Aunt West rolled her eyes.

And on it went. Should they? Or shouldn’t they? And if they didn’t, they wouldn’t...but they might if they did. But then—in that case—what they ought to do might not be what they didn’t do, but what they *did*. Of course, not everyone would do that...

Outside, the street was dark. The streetlamp in front of Uncle North’s house had gone out along with several others, but a few orange lights could be seen in the distance. The inside of Sylvie’s coffee cup was just as dark. She pulled the dish of powdered creamer toward her and dumped a spoonful into her mug. It sat on the surface, a white mountain. Then the edges eroded, all of it swallowed beneath the surface. It did nothing to lighten the liquid.

Last year, Sylvie arrived at the family gathering, pockets stuffed with courage. During dinner she made her move. She crammed herself into the first sliver of silence available. Work, she announced, was going great. She was very happy at the company. Better still, her boss had been impressed by her artwork. Sylvie was going to be promoted—that meant more creative freedom, more responsibility, a significant raise. It was so exciting. Wasn’t it exciting?

A few people stirred, emerging from the fog. Yes, that *was* exciting.

“When *I* first started out,” Aunt South said, “I worked—pardon my language—I worked my ass off. Sure, people took notice. But that’s just what you *did*. I had this coworker—Beth—a real piece of work—do you know what she did?...”

After that, Sylvie had given up. She scolded herself for it. She had so much to say, but somehow, nothing seemed important enough.

A heavy drop of blue wax slid down the candle.

Sylvie dropped another spoonful of powder into her drink. It bloomed, and faded into the black. She pressed her palms to the mug until they burned. She took a sip. Grimaced. Uncle North never cleaned the coffee pot, so each cup held the bitter remains of the previous year.

Across the table, her cousins were trying to adapt. They followed the conversation. Nodded when appropriate. Her eldest cousin sat up straight. He leaned in, opened his mouth. He hesitated for the right moment, and

when it appeared, he began to interject with what *he* would do about the garbage can issue. Immediately though, he was cut off by Uncle East, who had fresh ideas of his own.

“That’ll teach ‘em!” said Aunt West.

Sylvie took two spoonfuls this time, dropped them side by side and watched them erode, but the coffee did not change. She shivered, goose flesh prickled her arms beneath her sweater. She drew her cup closer and soaked up its heat. Perhaps it was time for her to adapt too. What would *she* do about the garbage can issue? Was it worth preparing an opinion? She glanced around the table. Something by Uncle North’s head glinted and disappeared. Then again. Several somethings. Tiny white specks.

Sylvie stared.

Some of the specks gathered on his mustache, clung to it as he spoke. The others hit the table and melted. Slowly, Sylvie took another scoop of creamer and dumped it into her coffee. More flurries appeared. She stirred her coffee clockwise and watched the snow follow the same swirling path around Uncle North’s head. A few flakes found their way to Aunt South’s eyelashes, frosting them white.

“Just call the police. They’ll take care of it,” said Aunt South, “Show him you mean business.”

“Well I guess I could, couldn’t I?” said Uncle North.

Sylvie smiled.

She blew a ribbon of steam from the surface of the cup, and the air around her grew cold. She rubbed her arms.

“Can we turn the heat up?” Sylvie asked.

The question floated away, unanswered, and Sylvie did not hesitate. She added another scoop.

The new snowflakes were larger. They didn’t melt when they hit table. Sylvie stuck her tongue out and caught one, tasted the cold, clear, blue of it. She stirred a burst of flakes toward her cousins, sugared the rims of their milk glasses, made fluffy piles on their hunched shoulders. She blew on the surface again, adding more power to her spoon, and guided the flakes back towards Aunt South. They formed a small drift by Aunt South’s hand, and every time she fiddled with the cookie on her plate she plowed a little path.

Sylvie flicked a few at Uncle East, tickling his nose.

“Well if you want to know what I think—” Uncle East said, finishing the thought with a sneeze.

Sylvie laughed, and Aunt South shot her a disapproving look.

Uncle North, who had been quiet for quite some time, pondered all of these suggestions. At last he came to a conclusion.

"I won't say anything just yet," he said, "but if he knocks them over one more time, then I'll take action."

A nod went around the table. For a moment, they were quiet.

"But when you do," said Aunt South, "I really think you should consider the newsletter."

Sylvie snorted.

Aunt South frowned, but did not make eye contact with Sylvie. "And if anyone has anything to add," she said, "I would think they could do so without being rude."

Sylvie thought of all the things she'd said over the years, and wondered if any of them had stuck. She thought of the cookies, always the same. The coffee, always trying and failing to catch up to the flavor of a fresh brew. She thought of her promotion—impressive, but no longer the shiny new thing it once was—and she found, for once, that there wasn't a single thing she longed to say. Sylvie picked up the dish of powder and upended what was left of it into her mug.

"That'll teach 'em!" said Aunt West.

A gale thundered into the room, and with it, more snow. The candle on the wall shuddered. The furniture groaned. Sylvie could no longer hear anyone, but she could see the words leaving their mouths in thick plumes. Snow covered the table in a sheet. Fat icicles dripped from Uncle North's nostrils, from the thermostat. The cookies were buried like summer flowers. The light from the chandelier dimmed, lightbulbs smothered with snow, metal arms struggled to hold the extra weight.

Sylvie squinted through the blizzard. She could not see her cousins anymore, only human shaped piles of white. She put her spoon in her cup and tried to stir the snow away, but it did not follow her. She lowered her lips to the surface and tried blowing the gale away, but it would not leave.

"Uncle North" She called.

"Well if you want to know what I would do—"

"Aunt South!"

The gale put a hand over her mouth.

The snow continued to pile, falling through the table, fingering the bare skin of her ankles, claiming sanctuary in her socks. There was a dry ring around her mug where the heat had worn the snow away. She picked it up—stiff hands, rosy knuckles—but found the porcelain veined with hoar-frost. A thin sheet of ice coated its dead surface. There was no warmth left.

Sylvie threw the coffee to the floor, brown splashed white, but the storm didn't stop.

The gale bullied the candle on the wall, shoved the flame in one direction, then another. But the fire held fast to the wick. The glass shade was filling with snow.

Sylvie got to her feet. She wrapped her arms around her chest, waded through the drifts towards the candle, one crunching step at a time. The gale turned on her, raked its nails over her cheeks, grabbed her by the ears. Sylvie threw her arms out, shoved it back, and kept moving. When she reached the sconce, she removed the glass shade, and grabbed the candle. A drop of waxy gratitude fell onto her hand. Sylvie cupped her hand around the shrinking flame and bounded out the front door.

Outside the world was quiet and dark. She stumbled through the maze of cars in the driveway and stopped when she reached the end. Her uncle's garbage can lay on its side, its guts strewn across the sidewalk, the smell of old pizza, onion skins, and raw chicken juice muted by falling snow. The streetlamp in front of her was dark. She was quite alone.

"I should feel bad," she said. "I should feel bad."

But no matter how many times she said it, her feet did not move.

The flame offered no more than a drop of heat, she drank it through her fingers. Then, it went out.

For a moment all was dark.

Then the streetlamp lit up, and she saw them in the wedge of orange light. Millions of snowflakes. And beyond them, a million more. They flicked in and out of sight. Illuminated for a moment, then gone, lost forever to the heap. Sylvie watched them for a long time. To her surprise, she felt enormous.

allen_sunflower

jw summerisle



An afternoon in the nursing home

Qiang Zhang

Brown skin, so wrinkled with sunlight;
You've known pain.

I hold your gaze – harrowed, lost, as if you,
Had stolen the first rays of dawn,
They asked for it back but you would not give;
Eyes searching for a home again.

The walls of the nursing home peel back, unfurling;
The piano with stains and dulled wood – I play a note and it,
Rings unnaturally loud; piercing the walls, the air tastes like
An ice cube, melting, cold, numb,
I do –
I do feel lonely.

Your wheelchair is stiff; My feet shuffle tentatively after each other,
Pushing you forward –
You are made of dust, and stars, and sky.
I wonder if you have ever tenderly embraced a child;
Screamed at a lover,
Felt the gut-wrenching weight of existence –

As we all do, sometimes.

In the light from the window,
The world turns on its axis
Can you see?

turn around, touch the ground

Amritha Selvarajaguru

the summer of fifth grade, i spent hours alone
in my room, trying to memorize the american national anthem.

it was late june and the air felt sticky when it blew
in through the open window, and downstairs, my mother made

lemonade, crunchy ice, sip it once, and curd rice,
while my father vacuumed the rug in the living room.

on the tv he played *jai ho* and sang along terribly, and
jana gana mana, and they spoke in low voices in tanglish,

mostly tamil. my mother and father were not yet citizens,
so i held my breath and sipped the air and committed to heart

all the things i thought i should. *amma* called me down for lunch
and lemonade when vacuum and the dulcet sounds of *tamila tamila*

finally stopped, and i was only two stanzas in, unfinished.

300 Miles

Emma Erlbacher

I have my mother's eyes. They're green, smeared blue-ish grey in the middle, on the rims. Speckled yellow at the core. I have her laugh too. Do it at times that don't make sense. After funerals. Heartbreak. Getting a paper-cut. Breath uncontrollable, airy. Like it would hurt too bad to hold it in.

We go for the same type of men too. Like them angry. Laced with mommy-issues. Wounds raw, unhealed but won't admit it. Both tense up at the thought of saying no. Never knew it to be an option until our therapists said so. Like chaos because that's all we know. Only difference is I like girls too, she didn't understand at first but got used to it. Same relationship issues either way. Suffocating, but always feeling like we have to stay.

I have my father's stubbornness. Won't move. Especially if you say so. Fragile ego. Hates being wrong. We both have the tendency to bottle everything up. Until that bottle breaks. Anger for him, just tears for me. And then. Sweep the glass under the rug like it never happened. I have his nose, his smile. His hunger for knowledge too. Stick to gaining stability through academia. Grades. People telling you that you are, in fact, good enough. Know validation the same way we've grown to know love, dreamt of—beautiful but unpredictable.

We know the same heat, same flaming bipolar diagnosis. Never know when we'll snuff ourselves out. But his lows don't get as low, and my highs don't get as high. As a child, I saw how his anger made my mother cry. Hated to see her that way. Eyes filled red, then later, grey. Vowed I wouldn't turn out the same. Genes must have heard too. Something, I think, about nature vs. nurture. Experiences tell the body what to do. Converted anger to silence. Don't know how to get mad without crying. Can't, I don't think. I've tried. Best I've done is scream in a car in an empty parking lot.

I loved them.

Love them.

I'm older now. Packed up and moved away. Face has changed, but this body hasn't. Still reacts the same.

Still hear my mother when I say yes but mean no (undressing, turning on the radio). The crack of her voice when I laugh to cover up the sound of fear. See her when I look in the mirror, eyes still green but dry and blood-shot. See my father in the orange bottles of medication on my counter. Bupropion. Fluoxetine. Quetiapine. The ones I take but don't want to. One is blue and I convince myself it's pretty. Hear my father when my lover whistles, when he talks too loud but doesn't mean to.

300 miles from home but the ache is the same.

That's the thing about trauma. About pain.

It doesn't give a fuck about distance.

Content warning: physical & sexual abuse, self-harm, domestic violence, homelessness, incest, drug abuse, mentions of blood and childbirth

An Open Wound

L.V. Rose

Sometimes I stand in front of the bathroom mirror and study the faintly purple scar on my abdomen. Sometimes I think it's beautiful evidence of the life I created, and sometimes I resent the lumpy belly pooch. Sometimes, when I feel like drowning, I imagine it as a jagged crack in the concrete from which a flower can grow.

1990

The little girl slips down from the warmth of her mother's sleeping form. Small bare feet on the rough carpet. Her brother's back is turned to her. She knows he is pretending to sleep, still too afraid to close his eyes even if he won't admit it. She can see the blue-black, not quite hidden by the collar of his threadbare shirt. The shelter is quiet. She wraps her fingers too tightly in her hair. Sister is still at home with him. Her deft fingers start to pull at the strands, pulling them out—one by one by one.

2020

The little girl emits the quietest of peeps in the middle of the night. Her mother slips out of bed, from the warmth of her snoring old dog. Bare feet on the plush carpet. Her husband's back is turned to her; he is asleep. The house is quiet. Heart thudding and skin aflame with adrenaline, she rushes across the hall and into the nursery. Her daughter hasn't even woken. The sound, just a happy squeak in her little-girl dreams. Delicately, the mother strokes her daughter's silken curls before sneaking back to bed. She counts to quiet the familiar roar of fear. She counts each book, each curtain, the framed photo, the laundry—one by one by one.

2022

"Mama, that cereal is for the hippo," my daughter, E., tells me. She is two-and-a-half.

"Hmm, can I share with him?" I gesture toward the purple plush toy and the Rice Krispies.

“No, mama. You can has your own cereal. Here you go.”

Parenting is simultaneously the most wonderful and most difficult thing any of us has ever done—but for those of us navigating healing at the same time, sometimes even getting through the morning seems unquestionably impossible.

Some days come with the normal difficulties of parenting an almost three-year-old. Lots of patience. Lots of big feelings. Lots of crying and giggles and running and hugs. A stubbed toe. An obnoxious singing cartoon. A hippo that steals your cereal. All of it is exhausting but beautiful.

Other days, I try to draw from that seemingly-endless well of maternal patience and not only find it empty but find it filled with bitter darkness, cold stones, and thick black mud.

My daughter doesn’t know. I hope, desperately, that she doesn’t know—that some days my heart is filled with screams and memories of violence, of big rough hands in places they *should not be*, of the cries of my mother and siblings, of a picture of my dad’s mugshot and the satisfaction it brings.

Some days I can’t help but compare and then become consumed. Sometimes I must use all my energy to tread through the water of post-traumatic stress, depression, helplessness, hopelessness, and fear, and the ruthless guilt when I realize I have so little energy left for her.

As a toddler, I confessed my father’s crimes to a social worker’s chocolate-colored rabbit puppet. With help, I stopped ripping out my hair. As we grew, my older siblings acted out the reckless violence they had felt and witnessed—they fought, ran away from home, became involved with drugs, punched through walls and even windows, including the breaking down of our front door with an axe.

Mom attended and took us to therapy: therapy for survivors of domestic violence, therapy for survivors of incest, therapy for survivors of sexual abuse. She waded the waters of her own trauma while trying to rescue us from ours.

Still, an undiagnosed personality disorder, substance abuse, and additional abusive (though less abusive than my father) men, meant our home remained

in chaos. In order not to participate, to avoid becoming consumed by this chaos, I shut down. I became—I am only recently beginning to realize—a perfect shadow.

My daughter is anything but a shadow. She is loud and unashamed. She runs naked, laughing through the halls while covered in spaghetti sauce. She giggles and dances and sings off-key and tries to feed our cat imaginary ice cream. She boldly approaches strangers in the park, at the coffee shop, at the grocery store—to ask their name, to announce hers, to share a Daniel Tiger song or Elmo sticker.

I watch her, sometimes, and burn with unimaginable joy. Other times, I watch her and feel myself pulling away. To engage, to hold her little hand, is to admit her vulnerability and mine.

But a shadow cannot feel. In order to enjoy her company, to breathe a fraction of the joy that she brings, I must also feel that sick, aching sadness. I try to feel it a bit at a time: the disgust and anger and drowning grief. I hold my breath and sob in the car. I write, go to therapy, and cry some more. I cry for the little girl that could have been but never was—for the toddler me that was just a vessel for someone else’s needs, for the me that spent so long hiding and surviving in the peripheral shadows that she became one. A reflection of others and what they wanted, always moving through the world but existing without substance.

My daughter cries too—because my husband turned off Cocomelon, because I won’t let her take the cat to the library, because she can’t have four oatmeal cookies for dinner.

When I planned my pregnancy, I read all the books and took all the classes. Thoroughly and doubtlessly prepared. At 41 weeks, I got an induction, 20 hours of labor, an emergency c-section, and a tiny human that broke me open. When they sliced open my abdomen, my scream came out a whisper. They pulled her out, a part of me, covered in my blood—and in that moment, I am sure, more of me—maybe too much of me—spilled out. All the things I knew, never knew, and never wanted to know. And life came out. And trauma and memories, and grief and rage and fear. And a new depth of compassion and devotion and hope.

And then I stuffed it all back inside an open wound and tried my best to once more become a shadow.

“I love you soooo much,” E. tells me, and I breathe and pause to feel this moment and soak it into the blood and essence she emerged from. I kiss her golden curls and hug her tight to me. A part of me cracks beneath the weight of this love she has for me. A part of me that this love somehow breaks apart—delicately, painfully. And the wound in my soul aches—opening a little wider to let the love pour out.

Middle of Nowhere

Melissa St. Pierre

You couldn’t go anywhere in 1997 without being bopped by the infectious tune of “Mmmbop.” You just couldn’t. Even if you didn’t “want” to like the song, you found yourself grooving along and hitting every “oh yeah!” with enthusiasm. I was twelve years old and I was going to marry Taylor Hanson.

I listened to *Middle of Nowhere* on repeat. I knew every word to every song and knew “everything” about the band. I was an expert.

I began writing stories that involved my groups of friends, the band Hanson, and me. We were all trapped on a deserted island and had to figure out how to escape. I don’t know if we ever successfully did or if we’re all still there someplace, in the middle of nowhere.

I remember filming a video in my friend Cate’s living room. We interviewed each other with plans to send it to the band. Why? I have no idea. What did we say? I have no idea. I only remember being asked how old I’d be on a given date and my age was the same age that Taylor Hanson was at the time. I turned 65 shades of red and I remember laughing and (probably) running away. Thank goodness Instagram wasn’t around back then. We’d have been Insta-stars, for sure.

The closest I ever got to the band was on July 28, 1998. They played the Palace of Auburn Hills on the Michigan stop of the tour: Road to Albertane. (Once the tour ended, I bought the VHS and replayed this glorious moment over and over, as teenagers are prone to doing.)

I was going to marry Taylor Hanson.

My friend Natalie and I were attached at the hip back then as well.

We did almost everything together and were as close as two twelve year old girls could be. We had silly stories to tell, sleepover parties to have, flashlight tag to play, and joy upon to joy to share.

Including, attending the Hanson concert. We had dinner at the Palace Grille, the restaurant at the venue, and I thought it was fancy. It wasn't. It was just expensive.

The concert was a blast and I remember dancing and singing along to all the songs in my unabashed twelve year old way. Bless our moms. They deserve sainthood because 1997 was just the beginning of the "boy band" bubble that lasted into the early 2000's, and it would only be the beginning of concerts I'm sure my mom wouldn't have attended but did.

Natalie and I remained as two peas in a pod and began high school in 1999. We still did everything together, even our first boyfriends were best friends.

But something shifted in early 2000 and it wasn't Y2K.

I got closer to some friends that remained in the marching band with me. Natalie had been in band with me in middle school but high school marching bands are like a big musical gang with (some) talent and coordinated moves. I felt my interests moving and I felt Natalie going in the opposite direction.

"It's fine!" I told myself over and over. "We are still best friends."

But, we weren't.

And as time went on, I got closer to my band friends and she to her other friends and we became what was considered cordial acquaintances.

By the time I was ready to graduate, I was *ready to graduate*. I was done with high school and all that it entailed. I wasn't miserable, but I was done.

I was so done that I skipped the senior party after graduation and chose to go home with my family.

I thought about Natalie and what she was going to do next.

I had almost asked her to do one of those "best friend" yearbook photos with me but she had already done one with her best friend, a guy we all liked named Kyle.

My other long time best friend had one done with her (then) closest friend, a girl I also liked, named Sarah.

So, I didn't do one.

But it's funny how things work out sometimes.

I reached out to Natalie during the end of my freshman year of college. We got together and had lunch and it was like no time had passed. We still laughed easily together and had a great time catching up, which was easy since she was going to school in the Metro area and so was I.

In time, we were as close as we were as kids.

Every time I make a left turn to go north on M-24 in Lake Orion, Michigan, I think about the time she missed the turn and ended up driving us north in a southbound lane. Two 20 year old women screaming "OH MY GOD!" as she righted herself. We looked at each other with panic stricken eyes and had a minute to contemplate what *on earth* had just happened and were we still alive?

We even worked at the same crappy store in the local mall together. The manager was crafty though and rarely scheduled us together, and we did overlap, I usually had to run to class or to one of the other jobs I had.

College years: a mixture of chaos, poverty, and glimmers of hope.

We graduated from college in 2007 and each went onto graduate school. Both, again, in the Metro area, so staying in touch was easy.

She picked me up when I broke up with a longtime boyfriend. Ordering me to put on a pretty dress. We blasted Jessica Simpson songs and "Public Affair" is *her* song. We drank cosmopolitans and ate a fancy (it was just expensive) dinner.

We each got "real" jobs and I thought we would be friends not only forever, but the kinds of friends that became the moms that ours were in 1998.

Once we settled into our "real" jobs and graduate school life, we drifted a bit, but I still considered her one of my very best friends.

I hated her boyfriend.

Hate might be too cool a word.

I *detested* her boyfriend.

He was too uppity for me and his attitude toward me reflected the fact that he thought I was “just” a “small town girl”. Probably because I didn’t give two shits about what his family had or his family’s money.

I was grudgingly nice to his face but I really didn’t hide the fact that I couldn’t stand him to Natalie.

On the other hand, she was enamored.

He bought her anything she could possibly want and he was the right amount of “society” to appeal to her.

They got engaged and I was pretty excited for her. It was what she wanted, so I was happy. I wouldn’t understand this forced feeling of “yay” for years to come, but it was.

In mid-2010, I saw Natalie at one of our favorite meeting spots. I was pretty excited to tell her about the teaching interviews I had lined up and I had begun tossing around the idea of looking for a house. The housing bubble had burst and it was a buyer’s market. Buying a house was less expensive than renting an apartment and I was knee deep in listings.

We visited and laughed and it was a great afternoon.

Like a ninny, I didn’t have the courage to ask her if she’d chosen her bridal party yet.

So, I chickened out and *emailed her* when I got home.

What a lame thing to do. Super lame.

She emailed me back indicating that the people “closest to her at the time” would be standing in her wedding.

I cried.

I ugly cried. Big fat tears rolled down my cheeks and I felt flattened.

I had imagined being in her wedding since I was twelve years old. Where were the Hanson moms now?

Even through the years when we weren’t particularly close, I knew, I just....*Knew*... but I didn’t know anything anymore.

I didn’t get invited to the wedding.

I cried.

I ugly cried. Big fat tears rolled down my cheeks and I felt flattened. Again.

I sent her a card telling her that I had stopped waiting for the invitation and I wished her well (I think).

I cut off communication with her because thinking of her made my eyes well up with tears. I knew my days of Hanson mom fantasies were over.

Four or five years went by and I wrote her a letter, finally. I said I wondered how she was and I was genuinely interested in hearing back. I did, and the letter was cold. The tone of voice was sterile and let me know that I had been put on a shelf of memories for her: in the middle of nowhere.

A few more years went by, and I had a daughter of my own.

Social media can be a beautiful beast.

We reconnected: again.

Now, we have things in common. Our children are a source of mutual delight and I would enjoy having lunch with them one of these days.

I burned out my copy of *Middle of Nowhere* at some point between 1998 and today. Just now, I went to look for it and it’s no longer on my shelf of ancient CDs in my home office. I have a cd player on my desk, adjacent to Alexa, and sometimes I wonder why. My car doesn’t play CDs. I rarely play them, unless working in my office, and that’s even rare. My daughter prefers to play in the living room, so I work at our dining room table most days.

I didn't marry Taylor Hanson.

We are not the Hanson moms.

I don't know if she has any of the wild stories I wrote in middle school.
They could be lost among things long since discarded. Shoulder shrug.

"In an MMMBop they're gone."

Mr. Gold

R. W. Haynes

Dramatis Personae

Mrs. Worth, charge nurse

Perla, medication aide

Anita and Susie, nurse's aides

Mr. Gold, elderly Austrian bed patient

Martin, a new orderly

Location: West Dallas Care Center, a nursing home

The stage is empty, except on the right side there is a hospital bed with curtain. The other side is open and can be separately illuminated. Conversations occur either in the open area on the left or by the bed, in which lies Mr. Gold.

Two women in white uniforms walk into the open area and begin to talk. One carries a clipboard, and the other has an armful of folded linens.

Mrs. Worth: You take care of Gold real good, OK? His sister is coming to see him tomorrow. You know how some of these families can be.

Perla: OK. He's usually pretty easy, if he don't fight.

Mrs. Worth: You want me to send Anita down to help you?

Perla: Nah, I can handle him.

Mrs. Worth: He's like a ton of bricks.

Perla: He's no problem, most of the time. He flips right over. Just every now and then he'll grab the rails. And then it takes two to get him changed.

Mrs. Worth: Turn on the light if he gives you any trouble.

Perla: Mrs. Worth, he don't bother me none. The one I need help with is that old bastard across the hall.

Mrs. Worth: Bullard? Is he gettin' grabby again?

Perla: He never stopped. Last night I damn near busted him across the face.

Mrs. Worth: Well, let's take care of Bullard right now while I'm down here.

Perla: I thought we were going to get an orderly down here. What happened to the guy they said they were going to hire?

Mrs. Worth: I don't know. I thought he was supposed to come in tonight. It's hard to get a guy to work this shift.

Perla: Sometimes we need help with some of these patients, and some of the other girls are afraid, working down here with no men in the building. I don't think Bullard would try anything if there was a man watching him.

Mrs. Worth: Well, we do what we have to. I hope the guy shows up. Let's get Bullard changed. I dare the son of a bitch to lay a hand on either one of us.

(Another uniformed woman walks in the door.)

Anita: Mrs. Worth, the orderly is here! He came on a bicycle, and he's soaking wet.

Mrs. Worth: Oh, God. Wet already, and he hasn't changed a patient yet.

Anita: Mrs. Worth, you're not gonna make him change patients like we do, are you? He'll quit for sure.

Mrs. Worth: He's gonna do just what everybody else does. Nobody gets special treatment around here. Everybody cleans shit and piss, and this guy is no exception. Anita, why don't you help Perla with Bullard? Get a good grip on his arms and let her change him. Turn on the light if you have a problem, and I'll send you some help. I better go get this new orderly to work.

(They all walk out, and the lights fade out and come back up. Perla, Anita, and Martin walk into the room. In the bed, Mr. Gold is making muffled sounds.)

Mr. Gold: *(gasping)* Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind?

Wer reitet so spät. . . Wer reitet so spät?

Perla: What's the matter, Gold? Are you wet? OK, Martin, help me with Gold. We'll change Gold, Anita, if you want to check on the next room. Old Goldie is mumbling again, aren't you, Goldie?

(She whips back the curtain and pulls down Mr. Gold's bedding, checking with her hands to see if he has wet the bed. Finding no moisture, she neatly re-arranges the sheet and blanket, checks Mr. Gold's forehead with her palm, fluffs his pillow, hefts his water pitcher, and straightens out the objects on his bedside table, talking all the while.)

Perla: Good boy, Goldie! He's dry as a bone, thank God. I tell you, Martin, this old boy can pee like a horse when he has a mind to, and I don't even want to talk about when it's number two, but I guarantee you it's a job. Good thing he usually calls for help and gets the bed pan on the day shift, even though those people on three-to-eleven like to pretend they don't see the light and leave him dirty for us to change. Fill up his water pitcher, will you? You got the mumbles tonight, Goldie? Some nights he won't shut up, but at least he don't scream like some of 'em do. Most of the time he's a real good patient.

Martin: It sounded like he was speaking German when we came in.

Perla: *(laughing)* Maybe he was. Heil Hitler, Goldie! That's all the German I know. Do you know German?

Martin: I had a couple of years in college, but. . .

(Anita rushes in.)

Anita: Perla, come help with Lovelady; she just slapped the crap out of me!

(She rushes back out.)

Perla: You straighten up here, Martin. I'll be back in a minute. Old Lovelady's on the warpath again.

(She hurries out. Martin fills the plastic water pitcher with water and places it on Mr. Gold's table.)

Mr. Gold: *Wer reitet so spät ... Wer reitet so spät. . .*
 Martin: *Sprechen Sie Englisch? (There is a pause.)*
 Mr. Gold: Of course. *(pause)* Do you?
 Martin: Yes sir.
 Mr. Gold: *(slowly)* I thought everyone here spoke Spanish.
 Martin: Not me. I thought you were reciting a poem.
 Mr. Gold: I don't know. How long have I been in this place?
 Martin: I don't know. Several months, at least.
 Mr. Gold: It seems an eternity.
 Martin: No one knew you could talk.
 Mr. Gold: Ha.
 Martin: Why didn't you say something?
 Mr. Gold: I have very little to say.
 Martin: You should at least let us know you are conscious.
 Mr. Gold: You smell like vodka.
 Martin: You're no bed of roses yourself.
 Mr. Gold: Does the truth bother you? I will remain silent.
 Martin: No, Mr. Gold, I'm sorry, I probably do smell like vodka. A little
 booze helps a lot on a job like this.
 Mr. Gold: There's nothing wrong with a little vodka.
 Martin: Where are you from?
 Mr. Gold: I was born in Vienna.
 Martin: So did you waltz?
 Mr. Gold: *(with sudden emotion)* All the time.
 Martin: And the poem. . . It's Goethe, right? *Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht
 und Wind?*
 Mr. Gold: My God, I haven't thought of that poem in years. "Der Erlkönig."
 I remember my father. . . *(trails off)*.

(Martin is looking at Mr. Gold with puzzled concern when Perla hastens into the room.)

Perla: OK, Martin, have you got Goldie all fixed up? Come on and help me
 with an emergency. I got a lady down here that weighs four hundred
 pounds, and we need a strong man to help us move her.

(She seizes Martin's arm and pulls him out of the room. He waves weakly at Mr. Gold.)

Mr. Gold: *Wer reitet so spät durch nacht und Wind?*
Es ist ein Vater mit seinem Kind.

Mein Gott!

*(The room goes dark for a minute, then the lights come on. Perla and Anita enter,
 chatting vigorously, with folded sheets, and they busy themselves, checking
 Mr. Gold and changing his linen etc.)*

Anita: *Pero todos los hombres son borrachos, verdad? Este Martin no parece
 malo, o que piensas?*

Perla: *Yo no se, pero a lo menos tenemos ayuda en la noche.* He told Worth he
 just broke up with his girlfriend. She says he's a good worker, but
 some of the patients take advantage of him. He's got a lot to learn
 about this kind of work.

Anita: They say he reads books between rounds. He must not be all that
 drunk.

Perla: Maybe he's reading the Bartender's Bible.

Anita: May be. He can read whatever he wants. I'm glad he's here. This
 place is scary as hell on the graveyard shift.

Perla: No kiddin' about that. *Ya tiene miedo la Worth.* She was down answering
 a light at the far end of the hall on Station Three and when she came
 out of the room old lady Smith was standing in the next doorway and
 hollered "Nurse!" just as she went by, and, I tell you, Worth like to shit
 her calzones. She was still shakin' ten minutes later.

Anita: Old Smith can really screech.

Perla: Yeah, Worth was white as a sheet. I said, "Miz Worth, we need to
 get an orderly on this shift before we all have a heart attack." You
 know how she is. She don't want to ask the big shots for anything.
 But I could tell she agreed with me a hundred per cent.

Anita: Well, maybe she said something, 'cause now we have Martin anyway.
Mejor que nada.

Perla: How 'bout it, Goldie? Are you talking German to Martin?

Anita: Does he really speak German?

Perla: Gold? or Martin? *(laughs)* Well, don't ask me. Martin says he speaks
 a little, and he says Gold is from Austria or Australia or somewhere,
 so I guess he speaks it, or he used to.

Anita: Well, son of a gun.

Perla: My husband was stationed in Germany when he was in the military.
 He said the German cops would beat hell out of the GIs over there. He
 was there when Elvis was in the Army.

Anita: You got the wrong soldier.

Perla: Tell me about it. I bet they didn't beat on old Elvis.

Anita: No way.

Perla: This guy Martin's been here, what, three days now?
 Anita: I guess.
 Perla: Maybe he's gonna work out. At least he's not lazy. He's tryin' to do something with his life.
 Anita: I thought you said he drinks on the job.
 Perla: Well, he's doing OK so far, even if he is. It's a pretty dirty job, after all.
 Anita: Filthy, stinky, nasty and dirty. But it sure pays good.
 Perla: Ha!
 Anita: And with Martin here, I guess you can leave your gun at home.
 Perla: My gun goes where I go. Hell, I might have to shoot Martin with it.
 Anita: He doesn't seem aggressive at all to me.
 Perla: Just kiddin'. I don't go around shootin' people for the hell of it. But on this shift I need some protection. Even with Martin here it's a scary place after midnight, and we never know for sure if all the doors are locked.
 Anita: The windows, either.
 Perla: OK, that does it for Goldie. *(loudly)* Bye, Goldie! *(They leave the room. After a minute, Martin walks in and stands looking in silence at Mr. Gold. He shakes his head and walks out. The lights fade.)*

(The lights come up. Anita and Worth hurry into the room and begin checking Mr. Gold.)

Anita: Come on, Goldie, be dry.
 Mrs. Worth: So what do you think of Martin so far? Give me the water pitcher.
 Anita: Oh, he's OK. Maybe he's trying too hard.
 Mrs. Worth: What?
 Anita: Well, you know, on this shift the patients need to sleep. He starts talking to them, and sometimes, well, you know how they like to talk. . .
 Mrs. Worth: He'll get over that. The rounds have to be made.
 Anita: Sure. It always takes a while for new help to fit in. He's pretty friendly and all.
 Mrs. Worth: I think he'll work out just fine.
 Anita: Word is that he's got a broken heart.
 Mrs. Worth: That's what I hear. He'll have to get over that, too. You young folks always have broken hearts. Broken hearts or big notions.
 Anita: Come on, Mrs. Worth, didn't you used to be romantic? Is Goldie's robe on the floor on that side?
 Mrs. Worth: Here you go. Me? I guess so. I don't really remember. Are you scheduled for tomorrow night?

Anita: No, I'm off. Why don't you remember? You're not an old lady or anything.
 Mrs. Worth: Well, Anita, you know how it is. Work, work, work. Bills to pay, kids to raise, taking care of the house. Hell, I grew out of that romantic stuff a long time ago, and you better do the same.
 Anita: Not me, Mrs. Worth. Not for a while, anyway. See you later, Goldie.
 Mrs. Worth: You know, I'm supposed to give Gold a laxative tonight. Go on and get the other rooms. I'll bring the laxative.

(They both leave. In a minute, Worth and Martin walk in.)

Mrs. Worth: So you're speaking German to Mr. Gold. Help me raise him up. Here, Gold, Swallow the medicine. *(They lift Mr. Gold's head and Worth spoons a liquid into his mouth.)* Mm-mm, Goldie, isn't that delicious? Swallow! Swallow! Don't spit it out!
 Mm-mm. Keep him up till he swallows. You got it, Goldie? You got it? Did you swallow it? Let me see. *(She gently pries his mouth open.)* Good boy, Goldie! Now you can go back to sleep. Put him down, Martin. OK, good. *(She fusses with the pillows.)* Well, Martin, what was he saying in German? We thought he was just mumbling.
 Martin: When I first got here, he was reciting part of a poem, the same lines over and over.
 Mrs. Worth: No kidding? What was it about?
 Martin: Well, the poem is about a father who is riding on horseback through a storm. It's at night, and he has his son with him. Suddenly a spirit begins trying to take the little boy away from the father.
 Mrs. Worth: Good Lord, that sounds morbid!
 Martin: And when the father finally reaches shelter, the son is dead.
 Mrs. Worth: God a'mighty, Goldie, I didn't know you were crazy, too.
 Look, Martin, he's out cold as a wedge. You like Mr. Gold, don't you?
 Martin: He's quite a man.
 Mrs. Worth: How does the poem go that he was saying?
 Martin: Well, in English, it's something like

Who rides so late through the night so wild?
 It is a father with his child.

Mrs. Worth: That kind of gives me the shivers. Ha. And who wrote it?
 Martin: A man named Goethe. He was sort of the Shakespeare of Germany.
 Mrs. Worth: Hey, we read *Romeo and Juliet* at the junior college. Boy, that's a sad story. Have you read it?

Martin: Yep.

Mrs. Worth: You know, Martin, I've been wanting to talk to you about something, and this seems like a good time.

Martin: All right.

Mrs. Worth: You know, Martin, this nursing home is a big place, and we got fifteen women working here on the graveyard shift, with you the only man. We're real glad to have you here, 'cause we're so close to the freeway, and all kinds of riffraff are liable to come in and do the Lord knows what and nobody will find out till it's too late.

Martin: I've noticed the lack of security.

Mrs. Worth: Well, Martin, just between you and me, some of these women on this shift are pretty lonesome, and you're going to have to work with them in private on this long shift, and I just want you to keep in mind, you know, that—I know you're a decent young guy and all, but what I mean... well, an attractive young guy like yourself has to be careful to keep something from happening that we would all regret, if you know what I mean. Some of these lonesome women...

Martin: But most all the women here are married.

Mrs. Worth: Martin, the married ones are the loneliest of all. Why do you think they're working graveyard?

Martin: Well, I don't go chasing married women.

Mrs. Worth: I know you don't, Martin, but if you're not careful some of them may be chasing you. I've been married to my husband for twenty years, and I'd never be unfaithful no matter how attracted I was to a guy. My husband comes home at night and drinks two six packs of Budweiser and goes to sleep, but he's my husband, and that's that, no matter how I feel about somebody else. On a weekend, he'll put away two cases of Bud at a minimum. When he's not drunk, he's asleep. But he's my husband. Now some of these other girls, well, you have to watch out. They're a lot younger than me, and not as old and ugly.

Martin: Now, Mrs. Worth, how can you say that? You're a fine-looking lady.

Mrs. Worth: Thank you, Martin. That's my first compliment of the night. *(Laughs)* Probably my last, too. But I'm pretty old, Martin. How old do you think I am? Guess.

Martin: Good Lord, Mrs. Worth, I'm no good at guessing ages.

Mrs. Worth: Ha, ha. Put you on the spot, didn't I? Well, I'll let you off the hook. I'm thirty-five. Do I look it?

Martin: I'd have sworn you were five years younger.

Mrs. Worth: *(tapping his cheek)* And how old are you?

Martin: Twenty-five.

Mrs. Worth: Ten years. Well, sonny, you listen to an old woman who's had some experience in this world. Keep your distance from these girls and your mind on your job, even if they start flirting with you. If you want to flirt with somebody, flirt with me, 'cause I'm happily married, and I go to church, and it won't hurt nothing 'cause we understand each other. You behave yourself, and everything will be fine. If any of the girls gets too familiar or anything, why, just let me know. That's what I wanted to talk to you about.

Martin: OK, Mrs. Worth. I didn't come to this job looking for a girl friend.

Mrs. Worth: I know you didn't, Martin. You're just like me, and you have a professional attitude. I just wanted you and me to get all our cards on the table. You know, that towel over there has a big hole in it, and that don't look good. Could you run and get another one and replace it? I had better get down the hall and see if Anita's through with this end.

(They leave, and Martin returns almost at once with a new towel, which he substitutes for the old one.)

Mr. Gold: Is that you, Martin?

Martin: Yes sir.

Mr. Gold: Thou shalt not commit adultery.

Martin: What do you mean?

Mr. Gold: I hear a lot.

Martin: I know. Why don't you talk to the other staff?

Mr. Gold: Why?

Martin: I'm not committing adultery, Mr. Gold.

Mr. Gold: Listen, Martin. Are you listening?

Martin: Yes sir.

Mr. Gold: My wife died sixteen years ago. *(pauses)*

Martin: I'm sorry.

Mr. Gold: My wife died sixteen years ago, and she... she is still with me... all the time...as long as I exist... Are you listening to me?

Martin: Yes sir.

Mr. Gold: Respect marriage. Do you hear?

Martin: Why are you saying this to me? I live like a monk.

Mr. Gold: I hear the women talking. At least two of them think they are in love with you. Both married.

Martin: Well, I didn't know that.

Mr. Gold: You weren't born yesterday. What about the conversation that just ended?

Martin: Don't read so much into things.

Mr. Gold: (*mocking*) Don't read so much... And Perla, do you know she has three children?

Martin: I knew she was a mother.

Mr. Gold: And the .25 Beretta in her purse, do you know about that?

Martin: I'm not surprised she carries some protection on this shift.

Mr. Gold: This is the Wild West. Anita has a .38 Smith and Wesson. You're making a gossip of me, Martin.

Martin: Don't get so excited, Mr. Gold. People talk, people flirt, ladies who work night shifts in Texas carry pistols. My life is basically dull as hell.

Mr. Gold: You are important to me, Martin.

Martin: I appreciate your saying that.

Mr. Gold: There aren't many nursing home orderlies in Texas who can recognize a quotation from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

Martin: That's a strange poem, isn't it. Mrs. Worth said the opening lines gave her the shivers.

Mr. Gold: What gave her the shivers was hearing poetry from a young man at two o'clock in the morning. I'm afraid the Erlkönig will take you away before all of this is over.

Martin: I'm too old for that.

Mr. Gold: You sound like Mrs. Worth. Good night, Martin. Remember.

Martin: I will. Good night, Mr. Gold. I'll be back in a couple of hours.

(*Lights dim a minute then come back up. Perla and Martin walk into the room. Perla returns to the door, looks both ways down the hall, then throws her arms around Martin, kissing him on the mouth.*)

Perla: Well, you made it to work after all.

Martin: Just barely. Be careful. Mr. Gold's got ears like a fox.

Perla: Oh, he's sleeping like a baby. You worry too much.

Martin: I just want to show some respect, that's all.

Perla: OK, we'll respect old Goldie. He can't hear us over here. I bet you're pretty sleepy, huh?

Martin: I drank a pot of coffee, so I'm all right for now.

Perla: I don't need much sleep.

Martin: I noticed.

Perla: Well, we can sleep any time, but we can only be together when the circumstances are just right. Uh oh, here comes somebody.

(*They hurry to check Mr. Gold. Mrs. Worth walks in.*)

Mrs. Worth: Perla, run down the hall and help Elizabeth clean up old Mr. Evans. He's really a mess, and somebody has to hold his hands.

Perla: Yes, Ma'am. (*She leaves, winking at Martin behind Mrs. Worth's back.*)

Mrs. Worth: Boy, she's sure in a good mood.

Martin: Mm-hmm.

Mrs. Worth: Word is, she's just separated from her husband. It's kind of a shame, but they say he's a lazy good for nothin' that's always trying to get a free check from the government so he won't have to work. And he's got a violent record. Perla's one of my best girls when she don't have personal problems.

Martin: She's helped me a lot.

Mrs. Worth: She's a good worker. She and I go back a few years. We both worked at another nursing home, and we've always got along real good. Too bad about her marriage.

Martin: It sure is a shame.

Mrs. Worth: Well, me and my husband don't get along all that good. We just kind of pass each other on our way in and out, but we respect our marriage, even if we do sleep in separate beds. I respect my marriage no matter what, 'cause that's what holds society together.

Martin: You're right. (*He begins to change Mr. Gold, and Mrs. Worth comes to help him.*)

Mrs. Worth: You don't think I'm crazy?

Martin: What do you mean?

Mrs. Worth: I mean, living in a marriage without love. Some women in my situation would just throw theirself at the first attractive young men they met, but I'm not that kind of a woman. No matter how attracted I was to a guy, I have to respect my marriage, even though my husband is a drunk, fat son of a bitch. So am I crazy?

Martin: No ma'am. I think you're doing the right thing.

Mrs. Worth: Thank you, Martin. It's so nice for somebody to understand me. You know, it's a real pleasure to work with you.

Martin: Thank you, Mrs. Worth, that's a very kind thing to say.

(*Mrs. Worth hears approaching steps, and places a finger to her lips, and they busy themselves with Mr. Gold. Enter Perla.*)

Perla: Lord a mercy, you guys are slow. We done cleaned Old Man Evans up and y'all are still workin' on Goldie. Evans had a loose BM and somehow pulled all his change off the night stand and got everything all mixed up together. Yuck, what a mess! We started to send for

you, Martin, to wash all the caca off the nickels and dimes. Never an orderly there when you need one, right Mrs. Worth?

Mrs. Worth: You're right about most of 'em, honey. We have to keep an eye on Martin and make sure he gets trained properly.

Perla: Well, I'm doing what I can, but he's kind of a slow learner. *(She laughs heartily.)*

Martin: Give me a chance, ladies. I've never been an orderly before.

Perla: You're like Jerry Lewis, the disorderly orderly.

Martin: Do you still need help with Mr. Evans?

Perla: Heck, no, and don't change the subject. We just threw his change in the garbage. Believe me, I'll call you when I need you.

Martin: You know, there's a spill here by the sink. I'm going to get a mop and clean it up.

Mrs. Worth: OK, Martin, good idea. We'll check the next rooms. *(Martin leaves.)*

Mrs. Worth: Well, that young fellow has a real future, Perla, don't you think?

Perla: Well, for a white boy, he's OK, but he still has a lot to learn.

Mrs. Worth: Now Perla, I want you to be real nice to him, seeing as how it's next to impossible to keep an orderly on this shift, and he's working out well so far. He's kind of shy, and I don't want anybody scaring him off before he has a chance to get used to the job.

Perla: *(making a face)* OK, Mrs. Worth, I'll do what I can. I have to admit he comes in handy sometimes.

Mrs. Worth: I was afraid some of the girls would be flirting with him by now, but he seems not too interested in any of them—don't you think?

Perla: Nah, I think he's a cold fish. Or else he still has a broken heart. I wouldn't worry about him any.

Mrs. Worth: I think you're right about the broken heart. Sometimes a guy goes looking for a consolation prize, though.

Perla: All he'll get around here is a bedpan, right, Mrs. Worth?

Mrs. Worth: Well, that's all most of us get.

(They walk out, passing Martin, who enters with a mop. He begins cleaning the floor by the sink next to Mr. Gold's night stand.)

Mr. Gold : Thou art the man.

Martin: Oh, no.

Mr. Gold: Thou art the man.

Martin: I'm no angel, Mr. Gold.

Mr. Gold: We'll be lucky if those two baggages don't shoot each other down like dogs. It's your fault this has happened, Martin.

Martin: Look, Mr. Gold, I just don't care any more.

Mr. Gold: Because of your famous broken heart?

Martin: What?

Mr. Gold: You don't know what trouble is.

Martin: What?

Mr. Gold: Get out of my room till I calm down, Martin.

Martin: My pleasure, Mr. Gold. *(He storms out.)*

Mr. Gold: Your pleasure. Indeed.

(Lights go down.)

(Long period with no light, then the lights come on. Mrs. Worth and Anita walk into the room.)

Anita: You never know about men, Mrs. Worth. I don't trust a one of 'em.

Mrs. Worth: Well, Anita, you've had some bad experiences. . .

Anita: Some bad experiences, hell. I ain't had nothing but bad experiences. My daddy was a pervert, and he was about the best man I ever had in my life. A woman's a damn fool to trust a man.

Mrs. Worth: But look at Martin, Anita. He's always here when he's supposed to be, and he's gentle with the patients, and a hard worker. I. . .

Anita: He's just like the rest. So far, he's behaved himself, but wait till he gets a chance. He's no angel, Mrs. Worth. I see how he looks at the girls. He looks like a wolf checkin' out a herd of sheep.

Mrs. Worth: Come on, Anita. He seems to me to be a perfect gentleman, and if he has the normal instincts of a young single guy without a girl friend, who can blame him for that?

Anita: Just don't trust him, Mrs. Worth, or any other man. All they want is one thing.

Mrs. Worth: Well, I'll tell you a little secret, Anita, if you won't tell anybody I told you.

Anita: OK, my lips are sealed.

Mrs. Worth: Well, the other night he told me I was attractive.

Anita: What did I tell you? Of all the nerve!

Mrs. Worth: Don't get me wrong. He wasn't trying to seduce me, or anything. I don't care how attractive a man is, I've been married to Horace for twenty long years, and that puts paid to that—I'm a faithful wife and always have been, and Martin knows that. He just kind of blurted it out, in a nice way, of course, that he thought I was quite attractive, and, to tell you the truth, honey, I kind of appreciated it. Don't get me wrong or anything.

Anita: Just as I figured. He's startin' at the top.
 Mrs. Worth: Ha ha, Anita, don't be weird about it.
 Anita: He's gonna work his way down through all the other women that work here.
 Mrs. Worth: Hush, girl, now I wish I hadn't've told you. It was just an innocent compliment, and he's a nice guy, not like these men you've had experience with.
 Anita: Like hell.
 Mrs. Worth: Come on, Anita. You just can't believe he's a nice guy.
 Anita: Mrs. Worth, with all due respect, all Martin wants from you is . . .

(Susie, another aide, bursts into the room, extremely agitated.)

Susie: My God! My God! I can't believe it!
 Mrs. Worth: What's wrong?
 Susie: The cops are at the office. Perla's husband shot her and Martin at her apartment. They're both at Irving General in critical condition. The cops are looking for Lupe. They want to talk to you, Mrs. Worth.
 Mrs. Worth: Perla and Martin? Shot? What happened?
 Anita: Men are all killers. I knew it.
 Susie: They must have been fooling around. Anyway, Lupe was waiting at the apartment with a gun, and when they got there he just shot 'em and took off.
 Mrs. Worth: Martin and Perla?
 Susie: They had everybody fooled. She always told everybody she didn't like workin' with him. I guess she was lyin'. Now she's payin' for it.
 Mrs. Worth: Are they both in critical condition?
 Susie: Martin is, and Perla's shot, too, but I don't know how bad.
 Anita: Looks like we'll be short-handed tonight, Mrs. Worth.
 Mrs. Worth: How can you all be so cold? *(She bursts into tears and runs from the room. Susie and Anita look at one another in sudden recognition. Susie raises her arms level, hands upward.)*
 Mr. Gold: *(in a loud and harsh voice)* Ach, Martin!

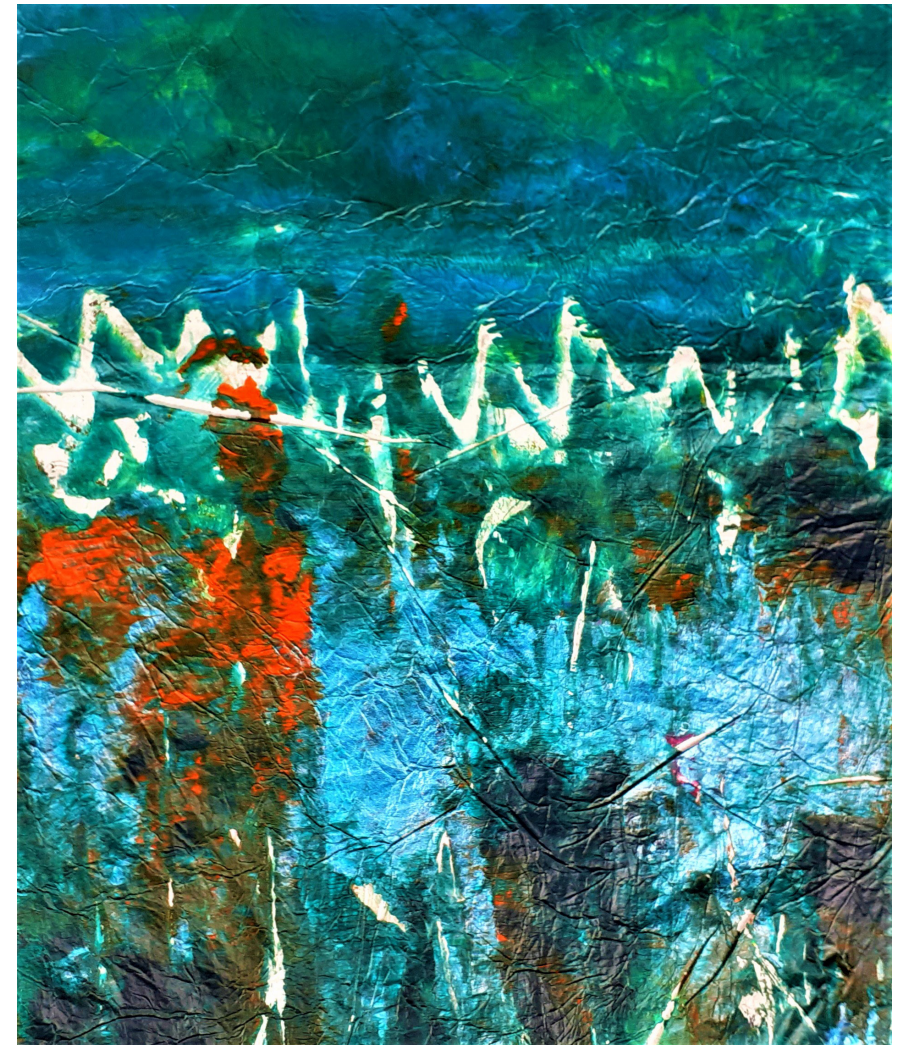
(The women turn and stare at him.)

Mr. Gold: *Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind? (he pauses)*
Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind.

(Lights fade out.)
 END

The Red Man

Anna Freyne



Clementine

Theodore Heil

For my father

My cat died the day
the clementines ran out.
Her small body lay
petrified among
the memory
of orange peels—
mouth broken open,
bare teeth white as death,
somehow yellow in the daylight.
It was a feeling
like the heart-bite of
being in love:
food untouched
for days as she
stumbled around the
house, seeking solace
in the deep pre-death dark,
like she was a child again.
She hid underneath beds
and in the crook of corners.
I searched the bookshelves,
the bottom of my teacup,
the bed at the window,
and couldn't find her,
until she was dead
and the finding
didn't seem to matter anymore.
I have never cried
so hard over
an animal in my life,

even myself.
I took her body
to be buried
in the backyard,
in a cardboard box
taped so the squirrels
wouldn't find her and
finally, finally,
let her precious body
wilt into its silence.

Turning It Down

Joseph O'Day

I was living at my parents' house at the time, sleeping upstairs in my sister Maureen's old room, next door to Aunt Mary. Maureen had left and gotten married and I'd relocated from downstairs, where I had been wedged between my parents' bedroom and our kitchen, and subjected to the late-night noise of their television sets. My mother in the parlor watching *Johnny Carson* or Celtics' games or an occasional Ingrid Bergman movie. My father in his room listening to local news and the repetitious forecasts — his carwash operation depending on good weather.

Downstairs I had to put up with the tick-tocks of the kitchen clock. That's where I asserted a semblance of control. I made it my evening routine to hide the clock inside a kitchen cabinet, behind dishes and coffee cups and napkins, sometimes wrapping it with a towel for the extra buffer.

For a short while we also had a cuckoo clock, with a cutesy bird that emerged from behind a little door and cuckooed the number of the hour—e.g., four times for 4 p.m.—every hour. I solved this problem by removing the cuckoo's battery and putting it into hibernation. For a while my mother made me reinsert the batteries and reset the time each morning, but eventually she threw up her hands and stored it away in a closet, minus the batteries.

As for the TVs, Mom and Dad seldom lowered volumes to my satisfaction. And they had no problem letting me know what they thought of me and my noise problem. "You're a nut," they said.

I envied Maureen's life upstairs, living with easygoing, unobtrusive Aunt Mary, free to read or sleep in restful peace. When Maureen left, my parents encouraged me to move into her room. It was similar in size, about eleven by eleven. It became my bedroom, my workroom, my living quarters. There was a single closet, two dresser-drawers, and an old painted-brown desk. Our hundred-year-old house hadn't undergone much upgrading, especially upstairs, so my new room had no outlets. I had to rig wires from the ceiling light to the walls in order to plug in items like a desk lamp, a silent clock, and a fan.

It was quiet, but stifling. Its lone window was old and difficult to open completely, having been painted so many times, and didn't allow much air in. I wondered if the stale air and dust particles in my new room were remnants from my grandparents' day. On cool, windy days the room felt cold and stuffy. On hot, humid days the lack of breathability was problematic, even with a fan — akin to what mountain climbers must encounter at high altitudes. But despite its limitations, it was quiet and I was happy.

One July night, however, the room's claustrophobic ambience spurred my detonation. The humidity and temperature were oppressive, the air stagnant. I removed the blankets and attempted to sleep atop the sheets. I also removed my clothes. My perspiration made everything moist. I towed myself to no avail. I'd be dry for a few minutes, then return to a dampened baseline. I had to be up early the next morning for my new job at the hospital.

I could have tolerated the sweat and the wet. A shower and a washing machine would remedy that. I could have tolerated the lack of fresh air. It was unpleasant, but I'd live. What I couldn't tolerate was the boisterous merriment coming from a yard party two houses down. I understood how pleasurable it must have been to be spending a hot summer night outdoors with friends and relatives, enjoying food and beverage. But it was past eleven, and as the night deepened, the group got louder. Damn that beer.

I tried to focus on pleasant thoughts (a therapist friend told me this helped him sleep) — *I'm finally out of school; finally making a full-timer's salary; if I relax I'll fall asleep* — but bad thoughts broke through: *my plastic fan is useless, even aimed at my face and turned up full tilt; having to leap out of bed to towel off my legs and face and back is totally ridiculous*.

The clincher, however, was that the party hosts were *neighbors*. I'd grown up having to avoid disturbing neighbors. If I was playing catch in the yard with a friend, for instance, my mother made us situate ourselves so as not to risk the ball escaping into a neighbor's yard. "It irritates them and you might not get it back," she warned. During long summer evenings, when it was still light past 8 p.m., I wasn't allowed to make noise outdoors. For example, I couldn't bounce a basketball on our driveway or exercise with the iron weights in my garage because this intruded on our neighbors' peace and quiet. I remember purchasing my first pack of firecrackers, excited to be doing something semi-legal, and making the mistake of setting one off in my yard. The next day, Mrs. Smith reported to my mother that the noise got her dog so nervous that it became ill. That ended my firecracker journey.

So here I was, lying in sweat, being kept awake by a party's loud conversation and lively laughter, with no end in sight. When midnight arrived, I decided to act. I stepped out of bed, put my head to the screen, took a deep breath, and as loud as I could, yelled QUIET.....

My voice reverberated through the neighborhood, throughout the entire city of Salem. The power of it shocked me, its ferocity scared me. I ducked beneath the window, suddenly imagining partygoers coming for me in a collective, rowdy, alcohol-fueled mania, gathering at my doorstep with torches ablaze, demanding that the source of this acrimony step fourth. For all I knew, they could have been thugs, wearing sleeveless vests and having bulging muscles with tattoos demanding "justice" and "freedom," just itching for such an insult to come their way, granting them license to set the world straight.

From underneath the window, I slipped back into bed and decided to let the party carry on, unhindered. To my relief, they grew quiet, thank God. I heard a comment or two, a laugh. The possibility of repercussions kept me awake a while longer. I finally fell asleep and made it to the hospital the next morning without incident.

When I arrived home after work, my mother said that everyone in the neighborhood heard someone shout "quiet" the night before. She knew it was me but was too embarrassed to tell them. "Don't ever do that again," she said.

"Don't worry," I said.

That was more than forty years ago. Over the succeeding years, I've struggled to better tolerate the loudness in my life. I've been assisted in this struggle by my wife and three children, my mother, and my dog. Arriving home after workdays filled with its own kind of commotion and disarray, I typically encountered one of my daughters in the living room talking to friends on the phone, my son in the family room playing his latest video game, my wife at the kitchen table drilling homework into my other daughter's mind, and my Golden Retriever's barking demands that I take him for a walk.

In her role as grandmother, my mother insisted I relinquish my pursuit of quiet, saying in her direct way, "I don't want to hear you telling the kids to 'turn it down.' Let them grow up normal."

Over the years I've come to realize that my *intolerance* to noise has contributed its own noise, that it's not always an external volume control that need dialing down. I'll always remember how frightened I was that hot July night when I let loose on the neighbors, how my shout seemed

to power itself, independent of my control. That I had taken an action I couldn't take back. The image of myself huddling beneath the window afterward, crawling to my bed, makes me laugh. But the manner in which I'd unleashed my frustration scared me then and scares me now. Self-righteousness and raw emotion, with little consideration of consequence, had ruled my behavior.

I'm with my wife Kris, eating lunch in our family room, roughly the size of the upstairs bedroom where I'd unleashed my wrath. Unlike that old bedroom, the family room has six large windows that open wide and let in a refreshing breeze. Kris has remarked that when we're together in the family room, I commonly go out the door into our yard, walk around for a few minutes, then return. "Why?" she asks.

"Not sure," I said. "Getting outside for a minute or two makes me feel good." Even with the family room's big windows and sunny brightness, perhaps stepping outside the confines of four walls just helps me stay on the down-low.

Lie to me about the rot

H

Deep down I know poets can cultivate beauty in both a blossoming flower and one that is wilting. Deep down I know you cannot sift through the stars with your fingers, and when you pluck out the brightest it won't be for me. We are balancing on the parapet, laughing, zephyr cupping our souls in her protective embrace. Today the trees are restless—they weave a quilt of shamrock that shivers. It whispers to me a familiar tune, burdened by the same mournful lyrics—that with one touch we will tumble, one kiss and the greedy dusk will rip apart your ivory bones. I ignore them as usual. It's inexplicably easy to pretend. Deceive. And how can I tell myself the truth when I see ripples of you in the water below, when you peek down at me from the seams of azure, when every time I look at your hands the stories I ache to recount tear away at my throat? You sprint past me, laughing. I curl the moment around my tongue, savouring its embers. On afternoons like these our exhales are hot and the ink of untold tales glisten gold and life reverberates like a jazz tune.

But sometimes, when it's too early and my blinks sync with your pulse, your veins churn blue and it is blinding. I can't deny that the sky in your wrists will inevitably decay into coal black. That a porcelain skeleton can and will break, even skin that the sun so tenderly makes love to an insufficient safeguard. I think of the sanctuary in the crook of your arm, silver clouds that undulate on mirrors upon your breath—when you told me forever, you didn't mean it, and if you did it's a hollow-cheeked promise you can't keep. When the moon reaches through gingham curtains, stroking your face, lingering just a moment too long, it paints the marks underneath your eyes, stains a scarred heart that claws at your torso— that's when I hear you crumbling. That's how I know you lie about immortality, about roses, about the bleeding limbs I anoint with tears. That with fluttering eyes and falling chests rusted pages of a calendar are also flying, and soon the paper will rip and disintegrate in an empty depression on the duvet.

So honey, put on that aureate facade that masks your sunken eyes, and tell me about the ichor and the birdsong. Because I would believe you if you held the autumn twilight in suspended motion, pour the syrup of

a dozen maples through the hourglass. I'd believe it if you told me that cosmos line these veins, that this flesh can meld into the grooves of history. That one day distant travellers will find your name etched into bark, your silhouette in the morning when it is so lovely I hold it in my palms, ribcage and irises and all, bottled up and floating towards a sandy shore a thousand years later. I'd believe anything.

Ruido

Juan Sebastián Cassiani

