

The Broken Teacup - Volume 5

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Jeffrey Zable is a teacher, accomplished conga drummer/percussionist who plays for dance classes and rumbas around the San Francisco Bay Area, and a writer of poetry, flash-fiction, and non-fiction. He's published five chapbooks and his writing has appeared in hundreds of literary journals and anthologies more recently in *The Paradox*, *Uppagus*, *Trashlight*, *Beach Chair* and many others. His selected poetry (from Androgyn Books) should be out by the end of the year.

IN THE FINAL ANALYSIS by Jeffrey Zable

Surely, there are a lot of people out there in the world who I'll never meet, some of whom I'd like, some I'd like a little, and some who I wouldn't like at all.

I'd venture to say from previous experience that I'd like one in ten, like two in ten a little, and the rest not care for at all.

This would all be dependent on how much time I spent around each person which, overall, would probably necessitate around 2 to 3 hours of interaction to make a reasonable determination.

This determination would also, in part, reflect on whether the person was male, female, or a child (someone under the age of twelve).

Regarding a child, I will say it's possible I would be more tolerant, given that I was once a teacher of children, as well as a child myself, remembering that I could be a bit difficult on occasion—absorbed within myself—not attuned to what others were thinking and feeling.

Given this, I could understand if an adult—who's generally not sensitive to children—didn't care for me unless they met me at my very best, which, unfortunately, could seldom be predicted. . .

Alex Stolis has had poems published in numerous journals. Two full length collections *Pop. 1280*, and *John Berryman Died Here* were released by Cyberwit and available on Amazon. His work has previously appeared or is forthcoming in *Piker's Press*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *Louisiana Literature Review*, *Burningwood Literary Journal*, and *Star 82 Review*. His chapbook, *Postcards from the Knife-Thrower's Wife*, was released by *Louisiana Literature Press* in 2024, *RIP Winston Smith* from *Alien Buddha Press* 2024, and *The Hum of Geometry; The Music of Spheres*, 2024 by *Bottlecap Press*. He lives in upstate New York with his partner, poet Catherine Arra.

In barlight she looked alright, in daylight she looked desperate;

that's alright I was desperate too by Alex Stolis

"Sequestered in Memphis" *The Hold Steady*

She was on a secret mission,
a fully loaded '68 Shelby

speeding to the nearest
exit ramp, wanted me
along for the ride

called me a coward,
called me a rebel,
an unheard song;

if I'd buy her a drink
she'd tell my fortune.

I'm Judas with no silver
I'm useless without forgiveness
I'm hesitant for a moment

enough for the moon to bust through the window
enough for her to lose interest
enough for me to lose my senses

& there's nothing left to show for it
there's nothing left of togetherness
there's nothing left

there's nothing
nothing
& we hold on for dear life.

Fight Club by Alex Stolis

It would definitely be Plath
in two rounds, maybe three.

Sexton is a sissy; takes guts
to stick your head in an oven

even more to marry Ted Hughes.
Lock a garage door. Start a car;

no wonder she lacks stamina.
The crowd argues favorites,

men prefer Anne; how she holds
a cigarette, crosses her legs, opens

her mouth slightly, inviting attention.
Women are blasé, betting on a draw.

They know what men don't, the scent
of despair breaks a person on the verge

of victory; a perfect balance between two
forces of nature will destroy gravity.

Yuan Changming co-edits *Poetry Pacific* with Allen Yuan. Writing credits include 12 Pushcart nominations for poetry and 3 for fiction besides appearances in *Best of the Best Canadian Poetry* (2008-17) and 2159 other publications worldwide. A poetry juror for Canada's 44th National Magazine Awards, Yuan began to write prose in 2022, his hybrid novel *DETACHING*, 'silver romance' *THE TUNER* and short story collection *FLASHBACKS* available at Amazon.

This Is Not a Vision: the Crow by Yuan Changming

Caws blatantly, zigzagging right
Above my head each time I take
A walk along the street

Constantly I stop to wave away
The nuisance, but it refuses to
Leave me alone while it keeps
Flapping its ominous wings
Against all my jumps and hopes
Until I began to doubt if it is
Really a bird or my lost soulmate
Returning to tell me something
(About what my twilight life holds?)
In the camouflage of summer twigs

Bradford Middleton lives in Brighton, UK. Recent poems of his have featured at *The Literary Underground*, *Beach Chair Press' Fred Voss tribute*, *Yellow Mama*, *Mad Swirl*, *Beatnik Cowboy* and in *The Good Press' The Paper*. His debut poetry collection is currently doing the rounds of various small press publishers.

TIRED & DREAMING OF SLEEP by Bradford Middleton

I've sat around most of today
Tired, dreaming of sleep as if
It a long lost friend.

Tonight I sit here waiting,
Counting down, until that
Time comes for me to go
& live the dream of a sleepy
Old man.

Jonathan Fletcher holds a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Columbia University School of the Arts. His work has been featured in numerous literary journals and magazines, and he has won or placed in various literary contests. A Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, and Best Microfiction nominee, he won Northwestern University Press's Drinking Gourd Chapbook Poetry Prize contest in 2023, for which his debut chapbook, *This is My Body*, was published in 2025. Currently, he serves as a Zoeglossia Fellow and lives in San Antonio, Texas.

On Studying Cuneiform Tablets at The Met by Jonathan Fletcher

*Grad school field trip
Ancient Near Eastern Art collection
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
New York City, New York
Fall 2021*

Not sure I believe in my writing
enough to press it into clay.
Not sure any of it will survive
a millennium. Tempted
to lay down my stylus and
never etch again, I pass two winged figures—
hooves of bulls for feet, heads
human and bearded.
I think of my own writing,
hybrid that it can be.
As I study the cylinder seals,
I think of the contract
I make with my readers.
On the side stands Ashurnasirpal¹—
flat and alabaster,
a libation in hand, performing an offering.
What is being given?
Who is receiving? A deity, perhaps?
Except for my own words,
I have little else to offer.
Though I am no god,
I nonetheless create.

¹third king of the Neo-Assyrian empire

On Learning That Healthy Mice Avoid Mating With Sick Ones by Jonathan Fletcher

Hands cupped, I imagine
them in my gentle hold—
hunched, ears flat, fur matted,
movements slow.
Would that I could breathe
into their crusty nostrils.
Would that their tails would flick,
ears lift and open like sails.
Would that the healthy wouldn't scurry away.
I want the other mice
to understand. I also want to be
understood. And loved.
And Dr. Bailey to
fix me. And the wheel I am
on not to crush me.

Thomas Zimmerman (he/him/his) teaches English, directs the Writing Center, and edits *The Big Windows Review* <https://thebigwindowsreview.com/> at Washtenaw Community College, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA. His poems have appeared recently in *Cold Signal*, *TrashLight Press*, and *Trouvaille Review*. His latest poetry book is *My Night to Cook* (Cyberwit, 2024).

burnt billet doux by Thomas Zimmerman

i bleat *unroll desire's darkened scroll*
my love & your sung spell is singeing me
your bobblehead i nod *agreed* but you
insist *aggrieved is what i sang* // i don't
know how to end or to begin time cramps
my thought just like an oldtime hex shaped coffin
// poet that i'm reading says that God
was sick the day when he was born my god's
bipolar silenced by benign neglect
& i am not so much a man of clay
as one of papier mache piñata of
a person // carpet burns you smile the fireplace
gnashes teeth of gold these thrashing sparks
in air i breathe your kisses smother me

Scott Sharpe is a poet from Apple Valley, California. He is the author of *For the Love of Poetry*, and his work has appeared in *Lacuna eZine*, *The Broken Spine* and other magazines. He is currently compiling poems for his second book, including a modern epic and other poems.

Tea for Two by Scott Sharpe

I wash
Smash—

my dishes,

my China,

in my bathroom sink

the tears
splash down into the blood from the cuts.

Disbelief reflects in bloodshot eyes,

and I think

you were only worth
paper cups anyways.

Tea anyone?

Ordered Out by Scott Sharpe

You deliver scrutiny
like a DoorDash driver

in the rain

cold,

impassionate—

palms outstretched
like you are expecting a palm reading

with little recognition
that I am just hungry
for your company.

DS Maolalai has been described by one editor as "a cosmopolitan poet" and another as "prolific, bordering on incontinent". His work has been nominated thirteen times for BOTN, ten for the Pushcart and once for the Forward Prize, and released in three collections; "Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden" (Encircle Press, 2016), "Sad Havoc Among the Birds" (Turas Press, 2019) and "Noble Rot" (Turas Press, 2022)

How to tell a friend honestly by DS Maolalai

look: it's not like
I want you to stop it completely.
I'm telling you this now
because I hope you don't
have to. I want you to be able
to come and have a drink with me
some saturday afternoon
in my front garden patio
with the trams running
regular as sewage pump
outflows. the sun out, people
smoking on the corners.
I want barbecues with beer
and hot sausages, badly cooked
hamburgers. I want to tell stories.

don't you remember
what happened with your mother?
my god: you have a wife
and son.

A canal in paris 7 years ago by DS Maolalai

I remember some canal
cutting paris and sitting
with Fallon. talk
about love—his girlfriend
then, and the girlfriend
who I'd just split up with.
the water moved thickly
and brown as the coffee
which we drank every morning
looking into a courtyard
where pigeons crowded
up through the cobblestone.

his girlfriend was living there
with him in a walk-up
apartment—I was over to visit
from London to sleep
on their floor. some memories
stay with you, moment
and image and temperature,
as discreet as the tea
and the teabag—wet brownness,
the sucking of heat.
I remember him telling me
things that he liked
about Mathilde—too personal, frankly,
to share in a poem. I remember
telling him that I'd never felt more wretched
and I was glad he was my friend.

of course he eventually
broke up with her—and I met someone
new and got married. I love a canal though
in paris or anywhere
and still think sometimes about
heartbreak, and Fallon and girls.

Leah Mueller's work is published or forthcoming in *Rattle*, *Writers Resist*, *Beach Chair Press*, *NonBinary Review*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, *New Flash Fiction Review*, *Does It Have Pockets*, *Outlook Springs*, *Your Impossible Voice*, etc. She has received several nominations for Pushcart and Best of the Net. One of her short stories appears in the 2022 edition of *Best Small Fictions*. Her fourteenth book, *A Pretty Good Disaster* was published by Alien Buddha Press in 2025.

Hermit Card by Leah Mueller

1800 miles carry weight:
each grows heavier

and turns to cement.
Your legs refuse. Too far to go.

You stay in armchair routine,
lean your head against the wall,

seal your eyes. Lack feels like home:
its empty blankets folded neat to hide
cavities that defy filling.

Our land is covered with boulders
and highwaymen. I don't blame you
for not wanting to leave.

Paul David Adkins (he/him) earned an MFAW from Washington University. In 2023, Backroom Window Press published his collection *Sound and Fury*. Journal selections include *Badwater*, *Barzakh*, and *Spillway*. He has earned two Best of the Net and six Pushcart nominations and the 2019 Central NY Book Award for Poetry.

Arthur Herman Bremer Reflects on Ambiguous Feelings of Fear and Delight During His Quest to Assassinate Alabama Governor and Democratic Presidential Candidate George C. Wallace by Paul David Adkins

— *Must of began to cry 8 distinct times yesterday night. —Assassin's Diary*, pp. 27

You know things are right when you cry.

You know things are wrong.

And I was the fulcrum between the right and the wrong,
the heartbreak scene and the beautiful story.

All night
on the dark, empty schoolyard that was my life:
the kids home, teachers perched on their bar stools,
and the arithmetic lessons I let blow from my folder
flapped flat against the distant chain link.

Have you ever felt
that way, alone, a loaded gun
left on a playground bench?

And the planet revolves eight times a night
because it's yours,
and it does whatever it wants.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *New World Writing*, *River And South* and *The Alembic*. Latest books, *Bittersweet*, *Subject Matters* and *Between Two Fires* are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *Rush*, *White Wall Review* and *Flights*.

DOWN LUNATIC ALLEY by John Grey

Here at the Halloween harlequin store,
shadows are dancing with the walls
and the displeasure of my company
is reflected in the snarls on the faces
of the ventriloquist dummies.
I'd leave but wherever I'd go
the animosity of jackals and Rottweilers
will be there already, snapping and growling.
So, I sit up at the bar, order an arsenic cocktail,
and a little of what the dead man on the floor is having.
And I munch on nuts and bolts until my teeth shatter.
A cop punches me in the jaw, then apologizes
for not shooting me in the back.
I hum my secret song, the chant of the tribe
that my secret daddy taught me.

IN YOUR EXPERIENCE by John Grey

You have seen
a gun barrel pressed against
the temple of a trembling man.

You were there
when the trigger was pulled.

The noise rattled every bone
in your body.

The sight of a head exploding
was repeated in your own
disbelieving skull.

It was in a war zone.
Or it was in your neighborhood
at sunset.
You can't remember.

You were a soldier
or you were just a kid.
You feel like you've been both
and yet none of these.

You're in a bar
telling your story
to whoever will listen.

Some believe you.
Some don't.
Some buy you a drink.
Some put a finger to their temple,
shout, "Bang!"

Pulkita Anand is an avid reader of poetry. Author of two children's e-books, her recent eco-poetry collection is '*we were not born to be erased*'. Various publications include: *Tint Journal*, *New Verse News*, *Green Verse: An anthology of poems for our planet* (*Saraband Publication*), *Ecological Citizen*, *Origami Press*, *Asiatic*, *Inanna Publication*, *Bronze Bird Books*, *SAGE Magazine*, *The Sunlight Press* and elsewhere.

All Earth need is love... by Pulkita Anand

love flows out of his mouth like vine clinging in the sunlight, and like water descending in the dark —Wendell Berry

I will love you my whole life
Our parents married, and now I
I would like to thank my parents for raising me
To a place surrounded by trees, a river
That meanders its ways, and rests near a mountain
Sharing her stories of fish and birds,
The scented cool wind caressed me
The long walks on the short days
The short talk on the long ways
The nights filled with Cassiopeia,
Cancer, Orion, Big Dipper,

The night I found my moon
The stars in your eyes filled my life bright
Promise that you won't go crazy for money
Promise that you will embrace my farm
Promise that you won't cut this oak
This palm, this cypress, this apple,
these beds of flowers where we sowed our dreams
these goats, these rabbits, these monkeys
these birds who listen to our prattle
Promise that you will care for them, all
Promise that you won't sell any
Promise that we will live here ever after
For better, for worse,
In sickness and in health, to love
And to cherish, till death do us part,
To love them and honour my words
All through your life

I do.

Ed Schad is a writer and art curator living in Los Angeles. He has published widely, including in the *L.A. Review of Books*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *The Blue-Collar Review*, *The Nonconformist*, *Rue Scribe*, and *Frieze*. His first collection of poetry, *Letters Apart*, was published by Dopplehouse Press in 2023. @icallitoranges

Mirror by Ed Schad

I started with a cold hammer and struck a sun right in the middle,
and vectors of cracks sent nebulas outward, so creative and wanton
I added stars with thrown acid and watched the fires bubble.
What a genesis it was, my enacted ruin, and I wanted more,
I wanted to break open its dark matter and did so with a bat,
I wanted to split it all down to atomic points and did so with a gun,
and in a slow harassment of my every reflected memory and fear,
I picked off the remaining shards, one by one, and made my hands bleed.
Even that wasn't enough, so I peeled the silver skin off the backing board
and let it oxidize in the light, hanging like a shroud, I and it,
the beast and the beat-up mirror, for another cursed year,
pearlescent seasons of green and yellow and blue, together.

Suhjung Kim is a poet and writer from Seoul, South Korea. Her poems have appeared in *Blue Marble Review*, *Paper Crane Journal*, *Eunoia Review*, and elsewhere. When she's not writing, she enjoys reading books of all genres, listening to music, and swimming.

Seoul by Suhjung Kim

reeks of cigarettes stir-fried
in garlic, cracked watches,
blurry dreams.

Somehow, the subway's
always late.

*Don't mind me
Please stop pushing.
Maybe tomorrow.*

Tie-strung necks try
to keep their heads
above the whirlpool

of slippery soy sauce,
red gochujang flakes,
benevolent despair.

A warm plate of cold
Mondays.

Kevin B is a writer and poet from New England. Their work has been featured in *Esoterica*, *Molecule*, *Havik*, and *Folly*.

The Break Room by Kevin B

Sarah quit in front of the birthday cake.

The cake was for Porter. His birthday was over the weekend, which meant they would have cake for him either on Friday or Monday. This time, it was Monday, because his birthday was on a Sunday, but there were no hard and fast rules about these kinds of things. There was a cake committee, led by Maura, and all cakes were purchased from the nearby supermarket. I have watched dozens of birthdays happen here. I've listened to people with badges and bad haircuts sing "Happy Birthday" off-key—slowing down the tempo as though to prolong their midday respite. Cake presentation was supposed to be tacked onto lunch, but sometimes they did lunch and then a cake later in the day. That meant a sort of "second lunch" and that would be frowned upon by upper management, but upper management was barely ever in the office post-Covid. These days, they came in at nine, did a walkaround, went back to their offices to make a few calls, and then left early citing the need to drive their children to gymnastic meets or play rehearsals.

This cake was vanilla with chocolate frosting. It was the cheap kind that melts as soon as you pull it out of the fridge. I have yet to see a cake in this room that didn't look like it would give you the runs, and yet I've never seen any leftovers. I don't know what it's like in the rest of the office or the world-at-large, but I know that here inside of me, people love cake. Cake gives them a reason to live. I've never seen anyone skip a cake presentation, and I've never seen someone quit while the cake was still being sliced. In fact, I've never seen anyone quit inside of me at all. Quitting is talked about in here, certainly, but it's never *happened* in here. Quitting happens in the upper management offices. It happens in the conference room. A few years ago, two employees were in here gossiping, and one mentioned that someone had actually confronted a manager in the men's room and quit while the manager was standing at the urinal. I wish I could have seen that, but I can't see anything outside of myself. I catch glimpses of the outer office through my doorway, but because there's a hallway leading down to me, those glimpses don't tell me much. I hear more than I see, but it's like being backstage at a play. I know what it's like being backstage at a play because one of the employees worked as an actor in New York prior to the pandemic. Now, they're an executive assistant, and they come in here and regale whoever will listen with stories of show business and performing. People listen politely, but I can tell they're not all that interested. They just want to sip their over-creamed coffee and nibble on their stale muffins and dream about when you could smoke indoors.

When Sarah quits, she does it simply. It does not appear to be prompted by anything in particular. I have an idea sometimes of who can handle working here at Benton, Benton, Frye, and Benton. No one seems to be all that happy, but the majority of them stick it out for years. It's the rare case that cracks and returns to the outside world. I have no idea what the outside world looks like, because there are no windows in me. A break room without windows seems odd, because a view would help the employees relax, but maybe the point is to deter them from dreaming of an escape while they're in here flipping through a copy of People magazine from six years ago. Sarah did not strike me as someone who would ruin a birthday cake presentation, but she does. Or maybe she doesn't. She waits until the singing is over, and then says very calmly—

“You know what? I quit.”

She walked out and nobody said a word. Mitch chewed loudly on the piece of cake he'd been eating when Sarah decided that working was no longer for her. I say “working” and not “working here,” because something about the way she said “I quit” makes me think that she's not planning on getting another job. At least, not a conventional one. Last week, she was in here telling Al that she wanted to become a firefighter, but one that *exclusively* fights forest fires.

“Aren't all firefighters the same,” Al asked her, picking the raisins off a danish that somebody had brought in the day before, “If you can fight one fire, can't you fight them all?”

I could tell Sarah thought this was the dumbest thing she'd ever heard in her life, but she smiled at Al anyway, because he's been working here since 1991, and the only reason he hasn't retired is because that would mean spending his days alone at home. His wife died of skin cancer three years ago, and he never talks about it. Instead, he tells stories about his son who lives in Missoula and didn't even come home for the funeral. He told Al it was because of Covid travel restrictions, but Al thinks his son is a coward who can't face death or mortality. He doesn't phrase it like that. Instead, he talks about when his son was a child and how he wet the bed until he was halfway through junior high.

“Twelve years old and still wetting the bed,” Al would say to whoever happened to be making coffee in me at that moment, “And who had to change his sheets every time? His mother. But he couldn't be bothered to find a way to be by her side when she needed him. I shouldn't say more than that, but I'm sure you can tell what I'm thinking.”

I could tell. I don't know if anyone else could.

Al doesn't say anything when Sarah quits. People who quit make him uncomfortable. He clears his throat and gets a paper cup so he can enjoy some water from the half-filled cooler. Mitch swallows the last of his slice. Danielle, who can go the entire day without using the restroom,

asks if anyone has plans for the weekend. Nobody answers. What I know about forest fires comes from a podcast that Sarah listened to on her lunch breaks over the course of a week. She didn't bother putting her headphones on, and if anyone asks why she didn't have her headphones on, she said it was because forest fires are something everyone needs to know about.

Looking back, there were signs. I should have seen the signs, but I was focused on the strange smell coming from the back of one of my cabinets. I concentrate on the fridge. Nobody's cleaned it in over a year. I think about how I would look with a window. Or two windows. I'd settle for one. I'd like it on my north side. I don't know what the north side would look like, but there's a National Geographic magazine from several years ago on the table and on the cover is a mountain. I'd like a window that faces a mountain. I'd settle for one that looks out onto the parking lot. That way I could watch everyone arrive in the morning and leave in the late afternoon.

I'd watch their cars pull away while waiting for the motion detector to trigger my fluorescent lighting to turn off. Once I'm dark, I'd listen to the heat turn off inside the office. I'd listen to the pipes rattle. I'd listen even closer than I listen now. Every so often, a bubble will work its way from the bottom of the cooler to the surface. I don't know what it feels like to be thirsty. I don't know how badly someone can need a drink. I don't know how to sing or sing off-key, but I know all the lyrics to "Happy Birthday."

If I could sing, I would sing it perfectly.

I wouldn't miss a word.

Huina Zheng holds an M.A. with Distinction in English Studies and works as a college essay coach. Her stories have been published in *Baltimore Review*, *Variant Literature*, *Midway Journal*, and other reputed publications. Her work has been nominated thrice for both the Pushcart Prize and the Best of the Net. She resides in Guangzhou, China with her family.

How I Became a Chair by Huina Zheng

As the third of four children, I never quite fit in. While my siblings chased each other around, screaming and squabbling, I sat alone on the old rattan chair by the front door. No one remembered how old it was. It had been there since we moved into the makeshift wooden house beside the brick factory. The wicker was polished smooth, and when you sat down, it let out a faint creak, like a sigh. Across from our house stood a shed patched with asphalt paper, home to two rabbits. Between the shed and our door stretched a loofah trellis my mom had built from bamboo poles. The vines wrapped around it, their tendrils like tiny hands gripping the frame. I liked to watch them, hoping to catch one in the act of moving. When the wind blew, the shed gave off a composty rabbit-stink, but I could bear it. Beside it was the hand-drawn well, where my mom did laundry each morning. If she saw me, she'd yell, "Why are you just sitting around like a fool? Come help already!"

She couldn't stand seeing her daughters idle. My eight-year-old sister had to look after our three-year-old brother and one-year-old sister, so at six, I was given chores. But I hated doing laundry. In summer, the sun scorched my back and sweat soaked my clothes. In winter, the well water stung like knives. What I hated most was washing my little sister's cloth diapers. If they were just wet, I could hold my breath, dump on detergent, and pretend not to see the yellowing water. But if there was poop, those yellow-green blobs, I'd gag over my millet porridge. After meals, my mom made me wash the dishes too. The greasy bowls were worse than laundry, their slickness reminding me of slugs. But if I sat in the rattan chair, she'd see me. There was no escape.

That morning, sunlight filtered through the loofah leaves, casting flickering shadows. I sat still as stone. When my mom passed with the red bucket full of dirty laundry, I shut my eyes. *I'm not here, I'm not here, I'm not here.* If I didn't move or speak or open my eyes, maybe she'd forget I existed. Her footsteps approached. Then receded. No shouting, no sudden kick. Then she called my name. Once. Twice. Three times. Then nothing. I kept still. Maybe I'd fallen asleep. When I opened my eyes, she was standing in front of me. The bucket was full of clean, dripping clothes. I started to rise, but she was already hanging them up, snapping each one into the wind. Then she carried the empty bucket inside. The sunlight stung my eyes. I looked down at the rattan chair, but I had no shadow. Yet I was sitting right there.

When she returned, I braced for a slap. Instead, she dumped a soaked blanket on top of me, one my little sister had peed on.

The world went dark. Wet. And rank.

Roberto Ontiveros is a fiction writer, artist, and journalist. Some of his work has appeared in the Threepenny Review, the Baffler, AGNI and the Believer. His debut collection, *The Fight for Space*, was published by Stephen F. Austin State University Press, and his second book, *Assisted Living*, was published by Corona/Samizdat Press, which will release two novels, *Secret Animals* and *The Order of the Alibi*, in a single volume.

The Chase by Roberto Ontiveros

Gillian could not hide her envy when she noticed how her sister's recent dental work altered the counters of her already lovely face. The women were twins no longer, and that made Gillian feel simultaneously free from a lifetime of comparisons and very alone.

When she met Amber for coffee that Friday, two weeks after all oral surgery was over, looking at her sister was no longer like looking in a mirror.

Sitting across from Amber at the patio table outside The Double Helix cafe, Gillian felt a kind of pull to get closer to her twin, while watching her nibble at her brownie, slowly and with the caution of a woman with a new and unfamiliar method of mastication. Gillian felt a strange gravity coaxing her to come near her twin, but not to embrace or kiss her; it was almost as if she felt the urge to admire or even inspect her sister up close.

"So...do you think I need to get the very same work done?" Gillian asked her—by two minutes—baby sister.

Amber raised an eyebrow and frowned in an unfamiliar way. "No," she mumbled with a mouth full of brownie.

On the bus back to her apartment Gillian chided herself for even suggesting that she get a similar surgery as her sister, who did not want to get the work done, corrective work that only occurred after a mysterious accident that impacted Amber's nasal cavity and jawline as well as four teeth on the left side of her face.

The twins were as close as twins in horror movies can be, that is they never bothered asking each other any personal questions which could always be answered just by being near one another.

Gillian knew—the feeling hit her when she saw her sister tap the bridge of her new nose at a café—that Amber's ex Brian was somehow involved in her injuries.

She had a deep hunch that there was some kind of abuse, however accidental, had occurred, but could not be sure.

Back at her apartment, Gillian opened up the downloaded pics on her computer to see all the hundreds of images of her and her sister side by side; sometimes the twins wore the same clothes, sometimes the two dressed very differently as if to flaunt the actual lack of difference between them. In profile, Amber and Gillian shared the same slight Roman nose since they were twelve—until five months back. Now Amber's nose was flattened in a way that looked curiously perfect for her now narrow jaw. Gillian and Amber had always had a kind of fox-like face;

Amber's face was now more like a cartoon deer. They both still looked related, they both still looked like sisters but not identical twins, fraternal perhaps, and cousins for certain. It was perfectly conceivable that now one of them might actually truly start to appear to be the youngest, now that the side by side comparison was absent, increasing changes would widen the rift of what was no longer recognizable.

That afternoon Gillian sat by the window of her second storey room, looking down onto the sidewalk at the bench where the bus took her to work at the hotel every morning and dropped her back here every evening.

She watched the people walking by for hours as if watching movie actors preparing for a very brief but vital scene to be captured on film. As the lamp lights came on at dusk she saw a woman jogging down the block and suddenly understood how her sister had been injured.

When she phoned her to ask, Amber confirmed that yes she had in fact been running and had an accident while running. She was very lucky that it was not that bad. "But look, sis—all the work that needs to be done is done, and I just have to get used to my new face now," she said, in a voice that to Gillian even sounded different now, slower as if uncomfortable with vowels.

"You're not the only one who has to get used to it," Gillian replied.

Amber was quiet.

"You were running," Gillian restated then waited five deep sigh seconds before asking: "But who was chasing you? Who was making you run?"

Amber snort-laughed, and even her laugh sounded different, vented through different teeth and clouded by an unfamiliar channel of exhalation.

"Well, sis," Amber said, "we *had* just broken up."

That evening Gillian spent forty minutes looking in the bathroom mirror, touching her nose, touching her jaw, making her eyes go wide and then closing them to consider how far she would take her plan.

When Brian answered after the third ring, Gillian's heart stopped racing and settled into a kind of relaxed rhythm.

Gillian and her sister's ex fiancé Brian met outside her apartment, at the bench that was visible from her second storey room.

The lamp lights were as intense as the interior of a supermarket; the brightness over that square of bench lent the spot the focus of a set prop on an otherwise dark stage.

Brian brought the cardboard liquor box of Amber's heels, her journals, her Jane Austen paperbacks and her jewelry box, plus whatever mail was left in his pad, just like Gillian had requested when she called him up at 9 p.m. and asked for her sister's things.

"How is she doing?" Brian asked. "I mean, I *know* I won't see her any time soon."

Gillian looked at the box and pulled out a framed picture of her and her sister as kids. In the nine months that Amber had been living with Brian, this picture, taken when the twins were seven and at a park hugging each other and wearing matching red winter coats, had been one of

the items that Amber thought important enough to bring into the home of the guy she thought she wanted to live with forever.

“We had some really great times, Gil. You *know*, I did not want her to go,” Brian said.

Gillian exhaled and looked at the framed photo in her hands.

“But Amber *was* going, Brian. She was not going to stay.”

Brian let his head lower in some kind of sulk, then cleared his throat and said: “Yeah, Gil, she was going and then it seemed like we were going to make it, and we were even talking it out that night she ran off. It seemed like we would be okay, you know. We talked for hours out in the open, at that bar you met us at one time. But then the bill came and Amber put down for her part and got up and then she started to walk away.”

Gillian snapped the glass framed photo of her and her sister into shards of shatter; bits of glass hit her face and she could even feel what she knew must be blood trickling down from her left temple.

Brian murmured a kind of slow negative, and then stood up almost defensively as if to ward off some attack. Then, straightening his back, he nearly snarled: “*Hey, what do you want from me?*”

Gillian held her jaw with her left hand, then pulled her fingers down into a pinch that ended in a kind of silent snap of thumb and index. She dropped the broken frame and stood up from the bench, leaving the liquor store box of her sister’s belongings on the cement and started to walk away.

After ten paces, Brian called out aloud: “*Hey, what do you want?*”

At this question Gillian started to walk faster.

“*Look*,” Brian screamed, “*I am sorry. What do I need to do?*”

At this Gillian’s steps turned into a kind of jog.

As she approached the street she saw four slow headlights from two idling cars and one man holding flowers outside a bar.

When she heard the fast footsteps behind her Gillian started to run, imagining that she should see herself from an upstairs apartment window, what she would make of the chased woman speeding towards a street with a smile on a face that was about to change forever.

Jacqueline Hyatt is an undergraduate at Arizona State University. A member of the Creative Writing Concentration, she writes about the complexities of human relationships, growth, and the consequences of apathy. Her work has been published in *Bright Flash Literary Review*, *Applause*, and *Canyon Voices*.

Placeholder by Jacqueline Hyatt

There is something about her squishy hips and bigger-than-anything smile that smothers you. Trapped in a claustrophobic club, she holds your hand taut and she dances terribly in her tight black top. Try not to clamp your ears when she sings ugly, cries uglier, to the music. Not quite what you pictured or wanted, but the way she grabs your sweatshirt sleeve makes your heart stick to your ribs.

Dad taught you that women like her are not for marrying, but you appreciate her flavor. Plastering your neck with lipstick, she jokes that she has left her mark on you. The little things about her make you smile, but she sees spinning solar systems when all you see is your reflection.

Yimi Lu writes about people who don't say what they mean, in the cadence of Chinese accent. Born in Shanghai, she now pretends to settle in Northern California. She builds code by day and disassembles herself by night to see what remains. Find her at <https://www.yimiwriting.com/>

Late by Yimi Lu

"What date is it today?"

I was in the closet, deciding which shirt to wear, when Peter called from the bedroom. His voice was neither too high nor too low, nothing unusual. I didn't know the date, but I knew it was a weekday. I had five minutes to leave if I wanted to be on time for my work shuttle.

"What's wrong?" I raised my voice, already in a hurry. I didn't want to check my phone for a question he could easily answer himself. He didn't reply. I pictured him shrugging on the bed. After more than a year together, his voice was enough for me to picture his face.

A sharp flicker of annoyance rose in my chest. "Tell me what you want." I hesitated, unable to decide between staying calm and pressing harder. I pulled a dark green shirt from the hanger. It went well with black pants. I dressed, checked the mirror, and felt ready for work. Three minutes to the train. I decided to sound more impatient to end it quicker. "Listen, I need to leave now to catch the shuttle. Don't make me late. Tell me now."

Peter was standing by the bed when I stepped out of the closet. "No," he said, his face was not as gentle as I had imagined. "I just wanted to confirm that you know the date today."

Why? I still didn't get it. I unlocked my phone. "It's August 10," I checked the time and almost shouted. "Are you satisfied?" Two minutes to the shuttle. I needed to get out the door.

"And you remember August 8 is my birthday?" His voice was steady.

Our eyes met in the middle of the room. The question sat in my mind for ten long seconds before the meaning hit me. I understood then why he had looked sad before we went to bed the night before. My stomach tightened as if the shuttle had just pulled away in front of me. I thought of the beautiful earrings he gave me on my birthday, the dinner he booked for our anniversary, and the New Year's Eve call I missed because I had lost track of time. On his last birthday, we had only known each other for a month or so, and I only realized it after the day had passed. I had promised him I would celebrate this year. His smiling face when I said that clearly returned to me. I was pretty sure now that it was me who was being unreasonable on this weekday morning.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to forget your birthday." My voice grew quieter, almost a whisper. "We can celebrate this weekend."

"No worries. It happens." His expression was steady, almost too steady. "You need to catch the shuttle now."

He guided me toward the door, checked that I had my bag, and closed it between us.

Outside, the air slowed me down. The street felt longer than it should. I heard the shuttle's brakes somewhere ahead, then the sound faded. I kept walking, knowing I had already

missed it, just like I had missed Peter's birthday, and maybe other days I had missed and could no longer name.

Carlos Po is a former math and science teacher from Manila, the Philippines. He enjoys writing speculative fiction in his spare time, and his work can be found at disconcertingtales.wordpress.com.

Remember Me by Carlos Po

I've been having the same dream every night for the last month. I'm on the bridge with Kenny. We're arguing about which Power Rangers we are. I want to be the blue one, because the blue one's always the coolest. But Kenny wants to be the blue one. He says I'm the wimpy yellow one. I say hell no, he's the yellow one. He says fine, I can be the blue ranger, but in the Ninja Turtles, he's Leonardo. I concede. I know he's the blue ranger too, but Kenny will smell the blood in the water if I admit it. Then an errant car driving too close to the sidewalk almost clips Kenny's leg. He jumps away, a bit too far, and he stumbles over the railing. I grab his hand and call for help, but no one's around. I try to pull him up, but he's much bigger than me. His weight starts dragging me down. We cry and cry and I tell him I love him, but I can't help him. I have to let him go and he falls down the gorge.

I've had this dream before, but never this frequently. I'm at the part where we're talking about whether Raphael could beat Leonardo if they went all out, and Kenny says, "let's cut all the bullshit, man." He hasn't said this before.

"What?"

"I need you to really think. About why this is happening."

"What do you mean, Kenny?"

"I'll give you the day tomorrow. Make it easier." And he pushes me in front of the oncoming car and wakes me up.

*

I'm back on the bridge that night. So is Kenny, as always, but this time he looks older. A lot older, like my age now. "Do you get it?" he asks.

"Oh god," I say. "You look so much older."

"Yeah, yeah. Thought this might speed things up. So, know why you're here?"

"Yes, I think," I say, tears welling up in my eyes. "I know why I'm here."

"Okay, tell me," he says.

I wipe my nose. "I was just a kid, there was nothing I could've done. And I've been to therapists basically my whole life since then, but they haven't worked. I still keep blaming myself every day and night, every time I walk by a bridge I freak out. I know it wasn't my fault, and I need to let go, but...that's why you're here, isn't it? To help me accept that you died in front of me, and that it wasn't my fault, Kenny?"

Kenny sighs. "No. That's not it at all." He pushes me in front of the oncoming car and I wake up again.

*

Kenny and I are back on the bridge the next night. "So, how are things? Good?" he asks, sarcastically.

"No." I've had a shitty day. A customer yelled at me for confusing two varieties of tomatoes. "And I still don't know why I keep having this dream."

"You're *sooooo* dramatic. That was a really great performance last night. You should've been Pinocchio in the school play, you know." He chuckled. "I know that was the easiest answer, but you're gonna have to think a little harder."

"I genuinely have no idea what else it's supposed to be," I complained. "Is there another part of this I haven't considered?"

"I, me, I. It's all *you*. Ever think about what I want?"

"What?" I stopped walking. I hadn't considered that yet, actually. "Do you want me to...take responsibility?" He nodded. "But it wasn't actually my fault, though! What the fuck did you expect me to do? We were 10!" I protested. He stared at me, unimpressed. "What? What do you want from me?" His eyes sunk into his face until they were just dark holes.

"Okay! Fine. It's my fault. I killed you. Are you happy?"

"That's part of it," he said, and pushed me in front of a car for the third time this week.

*

I appeared before Kenny, again, mentally and emotionally exhausted. "I'm back. Again. Are you just punishing me?"

"No."

"Then why am I here?"

"I was hoping you'd find out for yourself, but you've never been good at, well, anything."

"What do you mean?"

"God, you're dense. Look, your life sucks right now, right?" I couldn't disagree.

"Sort...of?" I replied.

"Me? I was gonna be great. I got perfect marks on every math test, was the best goalie on the soccer team, could run really, really fast and had cool hair."

"So...you want to...go back? But how?" He looks at me and grins wickedly.

"You want to trade places with me? Please tell me that's not it."

"Ding ding ding!"

"What? Why would I do that? What do I have to gain?"

"Nothing! You get nothing. That's the best part. It's better than being sad all the time, right? Nothing."

"I don't know, this is a huge decision. I love you, Kenny, but..."

"I knew it would be like this. That's why I hoped you'd get it yourself. Haven't changed at all, have you? Still acting like a baby."

"You know what? Fine." I said. Kenny leaned off the bridge and I took his hand. He let go of mine and he was still where he was, floating in midair. "Hey, just remember me, okay?" I asked, feeling myself start to fade. "Yeah, whatever, sure," he replied, and he woke up instead of me.

*

Kenny Wu, age 9, woke up with a gasp. He had just had the strangest dream about someone named...was it Mike? Francis? Dreams often left him seconds after waking. Oh well, he thought. No use worrying about it now. He had a big soccer game tomorrow, and the team was counting on him to dive heroically and stop the opposing team's goal attempts in their tracks. He put his head on his comfy feather pillow and fell asleep.

Chef's Instinct by Carlos Po

HOST: Two chefs enter. One chef leaves. I will put these self-proclaimed masters of cuisine through a brutal gauntlet of culinary challenges that will leave their taste buds spinning and their dreams CRUSHED. I'm your host, Jackson Bai, and this is Chef's Instinct. Let's welcome our challengers.

CHEF 1: Hi, my name's Brad, I'm the chef de cuisine of the bunker's cafeteria. I have 20 years of experience as a chef before the Cataclysm, and if I win, I promise to serve ice cream for every meal! Hell yeah.

CHEF 2, my name's Yuwei, I'm-I was a home cook from-never mind-and a mother to 3. I'm here because I'm tough, and if any hoity-toity chef from a cafeteria wants to test me, I'll give them the fangs. Ha!

HOST: Welcome, challengers! Let's give them a warm welcome!

Loud applause from 19 people.

HOST: Let's start our first challenge. We're gonna be making a pre-Cataclysm breakfast favorite, a cheese omelette. You have half an hour, go!

Brad and Yuwei race to the ingredient pantry, snatching ingredients for their baskets.

HOST: Brad seems to be taking a very traditional approach, grabbing the carton of eggs, some slices of cheese...Yuwei, she seems to be taking a more unconventional approach grabbing some eggs as well but deciding to go with a cheese spread. Now, that cheese spread is finicky to work with, but with the right spices it could do a lot.

Brad is grabbing some artificial garlic flavoring. Interesting choice, as garlic flavoring doesn't taste exactly like garlic, but, work with what you get. Yuwei is avoiding the garlic entirely, instead using shallots. She can afford to be a lot more generous with the shallots. Wait, she's putting some mycoprotein in? Oooh, this could be interesting. Brad appears to have eschewed the protein entirely.

Cooking methods. Yuwei is using a microwave and fiddling with the settings, clearly going for a very home-cooking, nostalgic method. Brad is attempting...oh...he's using the exhaust from the generator that's blowing into the kitchen along with some margarine as a way to lightly toast the omelette. Very clever. Could bring some harmful pollutants into the omelette, but we're all full of pollutants anyway. Might even add some flavor! Sorry, bad joke.

Okay, time is up! Let's try both of these. Judging these dishes will be Yvette Bai, my mother. It happens to be her 79th birthday today as well! Let's give her a hand, everyone.

Applause.

JUDGE: Do we have enough food rationed to do this?

HOST: Of course we do, mom. Chef Yuwei?

CHEF 2: I made a homemade omelette with fried shallots and myco slices, and the filling is cheese spread.

Judge cuts a slice and eats it.

JUDGE: Mmmm. The fork slices right in. The myco adds a great variety of texture, I think this could be seasoned a little more. The shallots crowd out everything else. But overall, amazing dish.

CHEF 2: Thank you, chef.

HOST: Chef Brad?

CHEF 1: I made a gourmet toasted president's breakfast omelette with American cheese slices and a vinegar sauce.

Judge cuts a slice and eats it.

JUDGE: Wow. I didn't think those flavors of vinegar and garlic seasoning would mix, but you've married them perfectly. The toasting on the omelette is a bit burnt, unfortunately. And though the vinegar is really adding a lot, when I taste vinegar I think, "cleaning the air ducts". But great effort, chef.

CHEF 1: Thank you, chef.

HOST: So who's the winner, mom?

JUDGE: The winner of this round is chef....Yuwei. By far.

CHEF 2: Yes! In your face!

CHEF 1: Next time I see you at the cafeteria, I'm giving you an even smaller portion. Heh.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: This is stupid. We're all going to die.

HOST: Who said that?

Silence.

HOST: Never mind. The next round is dessert. You're going to be giving me your takes on a classic pre-Cataclysm dessert. You're going to make me, or her, more like, a...banana split. Go! Chefs run to the pantry and grab ingredients.

HOST: Yuwei seems to be hoping to use frozen yogurt as an ice cream substitute, while Brad seems to be gathering materials to make his own ice cream. Two very different approaches. Brad's shaking the milk, sugar, and ice in the bag...is he gonna do that three times for the three flavors? It seems he will. Yuwei is seasoning a log of mycoprotein with banana flavoring. If it works, it works. Brad seems to be....caramelizing a cucumber? Dear lord, we are on our last culinary legs here! Oh, haha! Look at them go!

Host sniffls, audibly tearing up.

HOST: God, this is beautiful. Alright, challengers, let's see what you've got! Brad, you first.

CHEF 1: I have a two-flavor caramel cucumber split.

HOST: Doesn't it traditionally have three flavors?

CHEF 1: Yes, but I don't want to waste our strawberry flavoring on this.

HOST: Noble, noble. How is it, mom?

JUDGE: Surprisingly, the cucumber is a great substitute for the banana. I didn't think you could pull it off, but it works really well. I would like the strawberry ice cream as well, but I appreciate your thriftiness.

CHEF 1: Thank you, chef.

HOST: Now, have you tried Yuwei's?

JUDGE: Yes. I really love the myco slices and banana, but I'm sorry, the frozen yogurt just didn't work for me. Frozen yogurt needs to be blended, it's not just yogurt put in the blast chiller. And the flavors were all over the place. Mango and caramel didn't mix for me.

HOST: So who's the winner, mom?

JUDGE: Um....

HOST: You're the winner, of course, because it's your birthday! And everyone else here, who all get to try the chef's delectable desserts. Form a line, women and children first, of course! But you first.

Crowd groans.

JUDGE: No, no. I'm old. I don't need food.

HOST: Come on, mom! We're not giving up on you yet.

CHEF 2 (whispering): Brad. How much food do we have left?

CHEF 1 (whispering): Not much.

HOST: And that was Chef's Instinct, live! Join us next time as-yes, there's going to be a next time. There WILL, okay?

JUDGE: Thanks everyone, for making this such a special birthday.

HOST: We need to celebrate what we can, mom. One day when this is all over, we'll do this in a real kitchen. And you're ALL invited. You're all coming. I promise.

Host and judge hug. Chefs hug. Everyone hugs and cries.

Elan Maier grew up on the mean streets of Silicon Valley. He graduated with a Creative Writing master's from Oxford University, his writing has been published in *The Appalachian Review*, *Assignment Literary Magazine*, and *Queens Review*, and the first chapter of his novel *The Face Between* was recently published to *Write Launch*. He now resides in New York City.

The Strangest Thing by Elan Maier

The Mailman.

There's a dull sunlight coming through the leafless cedar branches and bouncing off the Guffins' unpainted, tin mailbox. I look up from it to see Eve Giffin coming down the walkway.

“Morning Thomas.”

“Good morning.”

Thomas isn't my name, that's the other mailman; I take the high-road of not caring.

Eve's cheeks are chapped and pink like she's spent the week skiing without sunblock. She wears pearl-colored seashell earrings, her hair is a luminous, enhanced chestnut, and she moves with an enviable stride, a muscular sort of walk, that of someone traversing a large trampoline, thrusting herself forward, anxious to meet what lies ahead. It's the gait of someone for whom danger is foreign. You learn that walk in country clubs and through afternoons charging things to your parents' credit cards within massive, air-conditioned malls. It's exposed and uninitiated and from a very different world than my own.

She throws a window-washing wave towards me that morphs into a shoulder pat as she nears.

“Happy holidays, Thomas.”

“You too, happy holidays.”

Eve stops. “How have you *been*?”

She says ‘been’ like there's an update she's been craving, like she has any idea what I get up to off the clock, as if chatting with me is an important daily touchstone though this is the first time she's pushed past cursory greetings. I sense—and this is the part of my brain I still struggle to silence, that I know I'd be happier without—that, standing there with her crossed arms and her look meant to convey bottomless neighborly care, she isn't having a conversation with me so much as what I represent. I'm the Less Fortunate, the Working Man. She's projecting her goodwill, in what she might consider charity, towards the outline of my body and hat in a way that makes her feel good about herself without really having to pay attention. She'll tell a friend about it later, about her nice moment with the simple, sweet mailman, and her friend will set a WASPy hand on her inner elbow and purr, “Eve, you're such a generous person,” and they'll look off and sip wine and feel warm in their saintliness. That's the point of this interaction, not anything I have going on.

“Oh pretty good,” I answer. “Hope the sun pokes out at some point.”

“I hope so too. Well, as you can see, we're back.”

Her eyes are expectant though I never knew she'd left.

"I had a great week. I was up in Sunday River, a really needed break."

"Oh good."

"It was beautiful. Good food, good drinks. Have you been?"

"I haven't." I don't know where Sunday River is.

"So..." She realizes, I think, that she's told me this without being asked a question and that there's no real point to what she's saying, so she shudder-shrugs in a vague, *well-that-covers-that* end-bracket. "So that's why the house has been so dead. We didn't up and move away without saying goodbye."

She laughs so I laugh, but I'm confused because her husband—or who I take to be her husband, I try not to get involved—*has* been home. The same guy I've seen raking the home's side garden, with such a serious look you wouldn't dream of disruption—he's been there behind drawn shades, brooding across the panoramic front-facing window of this Cape Cod two-story, the shape of another body in close proximity.

Something in my reaction makes her change. What she was before—the bouncy, beautiful, moneyed, soon-to-be-pregnant ski-bunny is gone in an instant and I see her for real. The way her cheeks fall causes her thickly applied makeup to crack and a little nameless muscle, just below her right eye, twitches four times, *bang bang bang bang*. Her gray eyes search mine, then she looks to the patch of soggy grass between the sidewalk and street, and then turns her whole body to look back at the house. It's a rich quarter-minute, the first authentic one I've seen her have. I've confirmed something.

"Huh."

I want a dog to bark or a horn to honk or a breeze to blow, but it's quiet. The strangest thing: I feel, though I tell myself that whatever happens beyond a mailbox is no responsibility of mine, that I've broken some unspoken law and that something dangerous has been set in motion.

Eve.

I just realized I can recognize my husband's car by the sound alone. My ears pick it out from the others washing down our sidestreet. I realize it's him as the engine slows and dies beside the curb. There's a silence during which, I know, he's picking his computer bag from the space below the passenger seat and giving an inspectional look over the surrounding yards and walking down the stone path bisecting our front lawn. There's the refined *clack* of his fine leather shoes, the resting frown across his face, as if he's always on the verge of some important strategic breakthrough, and then there's the sound of the turning knob and the outside air.

"Hello?"

Don't start crying, I tell myself. You don't know for sure. Give him a chance to explain.

"Hello? Eve?"

I don't answer, knowing that not answering is the most melodramatic choice I can make yet making it anyway.

"Anyone home? Eve?"

It's the strangest thing: had I never stopped for that yuletide chat with our monosyllabic USPSer, my day would have been peaches. I would have bought my nephews their Christmas gifts, wrapped them, called my mother, called my sister, gone to the market, marinated chicken thighs, possibly dropped-in on a spin class.

Instead, I've been a moment behind the rest of the world. I dropped my cappuccino in a Starbucks. My fingers forgot they were holding something. The paper cup hit the tile and exploded and I just stood there, watching the foam drip down my knee-high brown leather boots as the barista cleaned around me, his breathing conveying that he wished I'd never been born, too dazed to apologize or move out of the splatter.

The hallway light comes on and then I see the shadow of the top of his head laid flat on the worn colors of the runner and I hate him—his walk, his car, his shadow.

“There you are,” he says. He’s little more than a silhouette, yet his eyes manage to reflect the light from the window over my shoulder. There’s fear on his face—understandable, as I’m sitting in the dark in a room rarely visited, designated as the nursery for the babies we haven’t had. I watch his smart, shining eyes as they flick to the glass of vodka resting on my knee. He knows I don’t drink alone and he knows I don’t drink vodka. His eyes spring back towards mine and a curious smile breaks on his face, his canines lit for a moment, either because he thinks this is some oblique, slow-developing prank or because he thinks that this, him smiling, is enough to ease what ails me, to convince me that whatever I’ve been worrying about will soon turn out okay; monkey-see-monkey-do with me as the monkey.

“What are you doing?” His voice is breathy. It’s a distance from the doorframe to where I sit.

“Sitting,” I say.

“Everything alright?”

I frown rhetorically.

He looks at me for a good moment. “Can I turn on the light?”

I don’t answer so he doesn’t. He puts his hands in his pockets—Robert has to have his hands in his pockets more than anyone else on earth. He’s in a purple sweater, the quarter-zip opened to show his paisley blue tie, and he stands there like a doctor under pressure to diagnose.

“Holiday season,” he says and looks at me. “It’s a tough time of year.” He’s assuming that our childlessness, our struggle to conceive and our lack of needed, simultaneous gung-ho for the project—that that’s what has me here, in this darkened room. His head goes slack and he sighs like he’s been feeling the same thing, and then he crosses droopily, mimicking what he must feel to be my body language, to a small lamp in the corner, set there because we didn’t know what else to do with it, clicks it on and, in a display of solidarity, sits right down on the carpeted floor, his back against the sliding closet doors.

This, I think, how ably he can mirror—*this* is Robert’s genius. It explains why he’s so professionally successful and why he’s passed every personal-life-checkpoint ahead of the pack, this ability to seem receptive—to *seem* personal and vulnerable while really just caping himself

in time-sharpened camouflage. It's a reptile instinct and it makes me wonder if I actually know him or if he just knows me well enough to give me what I want.

"That's all there is this month. A bunch of talk about, I don't know, *holiday cheer*. All the pressure to be *happy* all the time. It's..."

He looks past me and shakes his head like it's all too much to take.

I give him nothing. My remoteness makes me happy; it's not how I usually am.

"I'm guessing we'll order in?"

His mouth is open, his jaw askew—he's waiting for me to laugh so he can join in on the laughter but there's, as always, a message within the joke. A cynical fortune cookie, classic Robert. Trojan-horsed inside this seemingly harmless quip is his pervading criticality, his projected ideas of propriety—I'm not sure if he means to do this so regularly, illuminate in this way what he thinks I'm doing poorly, or if his judgmentalism is so malignant that it's entirely out of his control. In this order-in-question there's a commentary on my failure to prepare dinner, my inability to fulfill my basic responsibilities, which seems a theme beneath much of what he says.

"I guess so," I say.

"Does anything sound good? Food-wise, I mean."

"Um."

"Or are you not hungry?"

He pushes each shoe off with the opposite one and starts massaging the arch of a socked foot. The side of my face that he can't see gets frigid. My eyes are towards the doorway, towards where he just stood.

"How was Raleigh?" I've never loved the sound of my voice more.

"Raleigh?"

"Yeah."

He wrenches his face into that look of squinting apoplexy, usually directed towards wait staff and braindead airport personnel, meant to indicate that it takes him a painful level of contortion to understand what I'm trying to say.

"That face," I say. "Don't make that face."

He stares at me. I stare right back. It's a different kind of look than we've ever shared before. There's a crackling. He goes white and offended and then gives a big, Dickensian orphan-keeper huff, like I'm a child and beyond reason, so he pushes himself to standing, picks his shoes up with two fingers, and gives me his back. "You're in a bad mood."

And he's gone.

I watch the ice rattle in my glass.

You couldn't wish for a better wedding day. It was fall and the sky was a swaddling blue and the winery, which swept below the arrangement of outdoor tables, was flecked with gold and brown. I had never seen someone as happy as Robert. He was always laughing or slinging an arm around a cousin's shoulder. At the end of it, once we'd gone up to our room and realized how sweaty we both were, after he helicoptered his tuxedo jacket around the suite in an

impression of an overzealous stripper, he put his hands to his cheeks. “My face hurts from smiling.” “Mine too,” I told him. I knew him then and I loved him then.

Now, he’s making sure I can hear everything—his entering the office, his putting his laptop on the desk, the stomping to our bedroom. I take the second-to-last sip of liquor, which feels cold and warm at the same time, and then he’s back in the doorway, shirtless.

“Is that why you’re sitting here? Because I went to Raleigh without you—”

I interrupt him at a lesser volume. “Needed a moment?”

“What?”

“Hmm?”

That eye contact again. I look at his pale chest, at the coil of hair in an upside-down question mark around his belly-button, and wonder if there’s supposed to be a threat in him being half-naked, if I’m meant to see him as an animal capable of wreckage.

“Did I do something wrong? Should I have *not* gone to Raleigh? Should I quit my job and just stay here and—”

“So you *did* go to Raleigh.”

He shifts from one foot to the other. “I don’t understand.”

“You were in Raleigh.”

“What am I... what am I supposed to say?”

“You were in Raleigh, like you said.”

He scoffs to show me how ridiculous I’m being, though it’s really him trying to muster the outrage he knows he should have under such interrogation.

“Robert, were you here or in Raleigh?”

“I told you already.” He half-disappears behind the door frame and then he’s back. “Were *you* here? Were *you* actually where you said you were, in Maine?”

I let his question fall to the carpet to show him how dumb he sounds. “That’s not an answer. Should I ask you again?”

“I did, yes, I was in Raleigh, what the hell?”

My fingers lift my glass and I tilt my head like, *if you say so*.

“Is that it?” he asks.

“How was it?”

“How was what?”

“Raleigh.”

His eyes rove the carpet—again, he shows one thing, does another. He shows me that I’m the accusatory housefrau, with so little going on in her life that I’ve taken up the recent hobby of paranoia—though I’ve never cornered him this directly before—while actually buying himself time and scanning for a place to take cover, an angle he can argue with enough passion and righteousness to win a wider, broader battle.

He shrugs. “It was good.”

“I’m glad.”

And he's gone again. It's more of a stomp than a walk. I can hear him turn the corner into the kitchen and yank open the fridge, shoulder it closed, pop a bottle cap, throw the cap towards the bin but miss, and take a long gurgle of beer.

I look at my feet. They're in thick-stitched wool socks. I flex my feet to the point of hurting and watch the shape of them as they change.

He'll be back any second, a competitor like him. Me, I can leave it there. But he can't lose and he's an experienced enough negotiator to *know* that he's losing. I feel it through the walls between us—it's gnawing at him. It sounds like he's padding around in a circle, thinking of a better card to play, some riddle so entangling that it'll shut me up or make me cry.

He starts speaking from down the hallway. "Okay, it's obvious you want to accuse me of something, so just come out and say it." He falls into a cool lean against the doorway, Steve McQueen all of a sudden.

It's darker now. The window behind me has less to offer.

"I don't think you went anywhere."

Though his reaction is that of someone frustrated at having to repeat himself, there's a panic in his fluttery blinks. "Eve—"

"You were here."

He fixes on me, black-eyed.

"Eve, for the love of Christ—"

"Do you want me to go through the trash? I haven't but I will."

I'm standing now. It came to me in the moment, that image: me on hands and knees, the tipped over wastebasket, my fingers sorting through the mess on the floor. It must not have occurred to him either that I might do such a thing, because his eyes ping-pong from one corner of their holders to the other. It's too frenzied a cataloging for him to make it look like anything else.

"There." I split the distance between us and aim a finger at his nose. "What is that?"

"What is what?"

"*That*, what you just did, *that*."

He looks at me, a centimeter of black space between his top and bottom lips, in what's either an attempt to differentiate what I think from what I know, or—and this would be a new card—a minor play for mercy. What I know is that he's too much himself—he's too cocky to have spent the week worried about the lipstick-smudged coffee cups and ice cream cartons he'd discarded.

He reads this and waits.

"The mailman saw you," I say. "Thomas. He saw you. Our house was never empty. You were here."

His reaction is different from what I expect. Instead of another practiced whole-body regathering—some showy reaction he's unsheathed so often that he can approximate it out of context—he looks off to the side, to where the lamp glows its toothy white. I get his profile. He sneers.

“Thomas, huh?” he rumbles.

Something’s scary in his tone, like a charred loaf of bread, so I answer quickly.

“That’s right. He saw you here. With somebody, I’m guessing.”

Robert doesn’t look away from the lamplight. The smirk is still there; I’ve never seen him wear an expression so completely. Some grim expectation looks confirmed. It’s the expression of someone stabbed in the back, by the mailman perhaps—as if Thomas has broken some male code of silence, though Thomas didn’t actually say anything—he didn’t need to—his thoughts had been clear.

Though Robert still has that smile, he morphs in front of me. His color fades and his jaw goes slack and I can see blocky muscles in his neck I’d never noticed before. Though I expect the same spastic, arm-flopping physical vocabulary he’s relied upon through our talk, he does nothing. The one eye I can see closes off and breath starts to enter him evenly, slowly, his belly getting rounder and smaller and rounder again, the shadows changing on the purple cashmere as he breathes in a new, frightening calm.

Thomas.

It’s the strangest thing: I’m moving eastward down the street, on a not particularly noteworthy mid-December afternoon, when I hear my name rocketing towards me from behind.

“Thomas! Hey!”

It’s got that unmistakable spikiness that promises violence to come and, even as I turn, a sourceless heat pounds the top of my forehead, under my cap’s fur lining, and I pee myself a little. I’m pulled back into my early years, when I had to walk home after school, when the dropouts with early-bloomed mustaches used to threaten me under the bridge. I used to pee myself then. I curled in a ball when they hit me. They’d walk away laughing, and as I turn towards whoever’s saying my name, I wonder if the same tactic might work in this different, later instance.

It’s a man I can’t quickly recognize. He’s wearing only a T-shirt and burgundy boxer briefs and socks that rise to his mid-calf, marching down the wet sidewalk through the mist, moving so vigorously that his chest is angled towards the ground, a cartoon of someone in motion, one free hand pistonning up and down, the other one gripping a long wooden handle of some tool or weapon, the head of which is hidden behind his body—I hear it clink on the ground.

It’s the resident from a few doors down, I think, the man with the unadorned tin mailbox—Robert, maybe—the Porsche-owning, childless husband I’ve only seen passing in professional attire or hand-mulching the flower beds in his side yard, with whom I’ve said all of fifteen words.

He shortens the distance between us. I start to backpedal. He brings his free hand to the wooden handle of whatever clanks behind him, as a lopsided smile—like a raindrop turned sideways—unzippers on his face. “Thomas! Long time no see!” He swings the wooden shaft up behind him like an axe and its metal shines and I understand it to be, I think, some soil-turning

tool of which I don't know the name. And as the sharp end flies towards the side of my head, glinting in a sun I thought hidden in the cold, before the day becomes enveloped in a slow-motion, inkblot perma-black, I wonder what the hell I must've done to make him so mad.

John Randolph is a writer living in New York City. You can find his work at johngrandolph.com

The Unknown, the Forgotten, and Everything in Between by John Randolph

Let me begin by saying that I understand where you're coming from, more than you know. In fact, I used to be just like you. As your teeming mass fills the streets below me, I see the anger in the eyes of you and your friends and inside me passion stirs. I can make out the signs poking above your shoulders, hand-drawn messages that read "truth is a human right" and "end censorship" and my gut has a hard time disagreeing with each message, with the craving to know behind each protesting face. In your number I find brothers, lovers, teachers, mailmen, barbers, friends. I see the human beings who make up the fabric of my life and I can't help but sympathize with your cause.

Yet I utterly disagree with what you stand for. I have grown old behind the curtain which you wish to raise and I am certain it is better to keep it firmly in place.

Allow me to back up in order to align us on the history of this matter. I am a historian, after all. By now, you are fully aware of the timeline of the so-called Censorship Acts. You have read up on their history, and I commend that. The men and women who today bleat with megaphones from atop the marble steps of my building have exaggerated the details of the matter (and what else can be expected, given their fervor for their beliefs?) but their through-line is for the most part faithful to the truth.

What are most remembered are the moments of vivid violence that scar our collective consciousness, memories that burn fresh when the environment heats up: cameras ripped from the hands of elderly citizens; attics invaded and torn apart at the hint of contraband; scrutiny and distrust at every level that someone might be breaking the rules—after all, they only really work if everyone abides. But, despite what those with megaphones may tell you, these instances were exceptions. The transition was overwhelmingly peaceful, smooth, and broadly popular across the electorate. The period we now view as the creep of censorship was filled with ordinary days marked by birthdays, weddings, and graduations, days that we spent on our backs in swimming holes and gazing from corner offices and picking our children up from school, days of quotidian life. There was no grand societal upheaval, the way there is today.

You, I'm sure, remember the first Censorship Act. You remember the tale of the movie director Ferdinand Le Fleux; you have even seen some of his films. When he made his radical move, he didn't intend to usher in societal change. His movies had been struggling at the box office and his studio had been hemorrhaging money. One last chance, they told him—if his next movie didn't make money, they would drop him, and he would never direct again. That night, sitting in a basement bar with his cinematographer and a script no less dry than their past flops, they came up with an odd plan, partly to save money and partly to promote the film. The contents of the film would be a secret. They wouldn't advertise besides blank posters that gave the name of the film—High Noon North of the Border—and a release date. They wouldn't

release a trailer at all. Viewers, they theorized with desperate hope, wouldn't be turned off by Le Fleux's name on the byline, nor by any poster iconography that would so closely match his other films, and, instead, their curiosity would lead them to buy tickets. It was a crackpot plan, a last grasping at straws of a man on the knife's edge of failure. Le Fleux was not thinking of the future, only about his own skin.

To everyone's surprise, the plan worked. It went better than anyone had expected: *High Noon North of the Border* was an overnight hit. It quickly became a cultural touchpoint, and yet those who hadn't seen it couldn't seem to find out what it was about. Moviegoers, keeping with the spirit of Le Fleux's viral advertising, kept their lips sealed when asked by their friends about the show. Customers arrived in droves. Theaters were sold out for months.

In the end, the movie itself was never critically acclaimed - it was a cookie cutter spaghetti western little different from Le Fleux's other works - but its success at the box office immediately turned heads and would soon change the industry of film, not to mention the country. Le Fleux's last-ditch effort, the final match of a freezing man, was the first flicker of a wildfire that swept the globe.

Other directors followed suit. They shrewdly framed Le Fleux's approach as a defense of the artistic vision, though in reality they may have been more motivated by ticket sales. Their art, they said, should be presented to the viewer for the first time as they intended it to be consumed, not spoiled by a three minute slapdash summary of plot points pieced together by a junior editor into a trailer distributed for free. Trailers gave way to teasers which gave way to posters displaying only a date and a title. Moviegoers responded by flocking to theaters, relishing the thrill of the unknown. The long-dying movie industry entered a second golden age. This is a golden age the theaters still enjoy today. You've never experienced anything different in your life. You don't remember the days when a muted audience entered theaters knowing just what to expect. All you know is the thrill of opening the double doors at the IMAX and sitting before a black screen, waiting in earnest for the show to begin and only learning the actors, the arc of the plot, the emotional twists, and the nature of the resolution when the director feeds it to you, bit by bit.

My parents for their first date went to one of these unspoiled movies, which were just beginning to come into style. My father was opening a pack of Jelly-beans when he was struck by the first jump-scare of what turned out to be the most frightening films of that decade. The row in front of them was showered in candy as he jumped into my mother's arms. He would retell that story all the time during my childhood, and I could see in his face the fear and excitement he felt, the same feelings as going through a roller coaster blindfolded.

Before long, law followed popular will, as it always does, and publishing trailers or spoilers of any kind became illegal. The punishment was a small fine, but the statement was made. This was the first of the Censorship Acts.

Intrigue was the catalyst of the American movie revolution, and soon other forms of media took notice. The back covers of books soon were as blank as movie posters. Plays posted no cast lists. Museums replaced their websites with unadorned pages showing simple, inviting messages.

Who wanted to see a painting that was easily accessible online? Consumers pressed into galleries, knowing that only they and those around them were seeing the unique art before them at that very moment. This is the world you've grown up in: a world where people leave their house to experience things, as there is no other way. You never knew the days when most folks spent an afternoon laying on the couch or in bed, a screen delivering to them the ghost of experience. Did you know that the average American used to spend several hours a day consuming empty, hollow pictures of reality? In the world you know it's an absurdity to spend a day lying around. It's a waste, what with everything out there to discover.

My great-aunt, a woman who had spent her days in the cradle of her sitting room, no longer sat. She was pulled, little by little, from her house, the way a cat is coaxed from under a porch. When she finally emerged, she saw the world with new eyes. She had lain around for nearly twenty years, glued to her laptop, but now discovered a love of backpacking. "The world," she once told me, as I sat on her knee, "is broader and deeper than I had ever imagined." People everywhere approached life with a newfound excitement.

And as they explored the outdoors they also enjoyed a wider range of art through the democratization of production. No longer were pieces of media sold by the reputation of the creator, cast, or musician—instead, recommendations were passed from mouth to ear, as simple "you've gotta watch this." Take music for an example. This may be hard to imagine, but before the Censorship Acts, the same artists dominated the charts, album after album. These so-called A-listers would produce hit after hit, each song an assured success due to their accrued fame. In the world you know, musicians have to prove themselves with every release - they can't rely on past fame - and songs survive or fail on merit alone. The new marketplace of music allows only the most popular pieces to rise to the top, while all else sinks to the bottom. New artists emerge daily, promoted by their ability and drive, not their name. Fame is dead. Long live talent.

All the while, the tide of public opinion swept the legislature with it, and what was already the de facto modus operandi became codified in law. The narrative now is that the final Act was a bold statement of an overzealous government, but that's not the case: Censorship Act X was an exclamation point on a sentence that had already been written, the natural ultimate step of what had come before.

In each generation there are front-page all-caps events that draw the citizenry from their private nooks into public unity like bees swarming to protect their queen. Days where you step from your stoop to join the masses and reel at the size of humanity. Days like today, when no matter how I strain I can't see a single pavement brick beneath your feet. Seventy-five years ago on the day that Censorship Act X passed and all photographs were banned, the streets were choked by such celebrations. Piles of photographs as tall as two men were burned in Washington Square Park; polaroids floated on the Ohio River like scales on a great snake. There were holdouts, yes, as there always are, humming in the corners with staunch opposition, but on that day they seemed to vanish under the weight of the jubilant majority.

The years that followed were the brightest the world had ever seen. People sought new adventures without a glance back at the past or a hint of what they might find. To you, this is

natural, but to them it was novel: only seeing a mountain view when you have summited it, the cold puffs of your breath like fog and the hot sweat beneath your armpits; only grasping the infinity of the Swedish ice fields as you skate across them, peering from your parka; only understanding how narrow the alleys of the casbah of North Algiers are when your shoulders scrape the baked clay of the walls on either side; only finding the truth of experience via the thrill of the unknown; only learning the plot twist when the movie reveals it to you. We had entered the age when the world existed through your own eyes, fingers, and tongue. We had entered the Age of Wonderment.

Following Censorship Act X, the first catacombs were built, hundreds of feet below the sun's reach and with layers of rock and sediment as protection from prying eyes. In these vaults, bookcases stand floor to ceiling farther than a man can walk in ten days, on each shelf a confiscated camera, labeled and cataloged. Rolodexes of photographs lie beyond the cameras, so broad that they seem not to curve, holding every picture ever taken, meticulously organized and indexed by an order of blind librarians who roam in darkness.

“Open the vaults” has been a rallying cry that rises from the square below to find my ears even through the double glass windows. You long to open these catacombs, to let light shine into the crevices it has never seen. But I have seen the vaults, and I know it best to keep those doors shut.

The first generation after the Censorship Acts entered a civilization that was busy reinventing itself. I was one of these so-called new-bloomers: The Age of Wonderment began when I was three. Unlike you, I came of age in an environment where nearly everyone around me - my parents, my older siblings, my teachers - had known times before the Censorship Acts. Every day, despite their extolling the benefits of censorship, I was plagued by the desire to know more. I yearned to join them, to understand what wonders photographs could hold. One Sunday night, playing dress-up in my grandmother’s attic, I pulled open a trunk to find a small square tucked between musty sheets. It was the first photo I ever saw. Between its yellowed corners, a young girl beamed at me, her smile as big as the sky overhead. She is halfway out of the top of a car built like a mailbox. One hand is flat on the roof, pushing her up, and one hand is extended in a wave - she has partly climbed out of the car when she is caught by the camera. Her hair is caught in the wind, half-covering her face, but her beauty is apparent. Already on the roof is a man flat on his back, shins and feet dangling in the direction of the photographer. His face can’t be seen from this angle—just the vertical cigarette and puffs of nicotine above, like a miniature smokestack. The photo is a bygone moment of joy on a Jeep parked on a dusty back road.

When I looked up from the photo, my grandmother stood beside me. I shied away, knowing even at that age that I held something illicit, but in her sad smile there was no hint of punishment. Who is this in the photo? I asked, trembling, but as the words issued from my mouth I saw in front of me the answer. It’s me, she said, and beneath the lines of her face and the white of her wispy hair was the young, joyous girl who had leapt onto that Jeep however many decades ago. And who is that on the roof? My grandmother shuffled towards me and took the photograph from my hand. That’s your grandfather, she said. I peered past her elbow, but as hard as I

squinted, his face remained out of view. I had never seen his face before, and I never would. I don't remember how long we stood together in that attic, but by the time the trunk was shut once again, my fascination with photographs, as well as the past, had hardened into something real.

That fascination would turn into an obsession. When I arrived at college I declared that I would study history and, unlike so many of my friends who drifted from major to major, never wavered in my choice. Late nights in the library, when my eyes drooped and the words on the page before me blurred together, I would remember my grandmother's photograph and remind myself that somewhere, a mile below my feet, were caverns upon caverns of untold records just like it. Deep underground lay the forgotten history of our species blocked by armed guards and locked doors. How badly I wanted to be one of the select few with privileged access. When I graduated top of my class and, after three more years of study, had my historian's license, I held the key in my hands.

I can still close my eyes and see the first time I walked into the vaults. Stern faced men with guns longer than their arms parted ways for me. Behind each door that opened for my key was another set of curling stairs and I followed them, venturing down, down, down. The last door, a blank slab of marble, held no lock, and it swung inward at the pressure of two fingers. Beyond, the catacombs lay, silent and spectacular. Despite my decades of dreaming, they exceeded my wildest hopes. I wandered aimlessly, grabbing photos at random. The first holds a young girl staring straight upwards from flat feet and locked knees, her black hair touching the ground behind her. On a telephone wire above, a monkey peers back. The second shows a man poised to hurl a fistful of chalk as pink, turquoise, banana yellow explode all around, his mouth frozen open in a shout of laughter—India's Holi festival. In the third, grim-faced soldiers lie in trenches and it is difficult to tell which are alive and which are returning to the earth.

My boss found me asleep, my head on a pile of photos. I had been awake for three days, intoxicated by the memories in each frame. I understand, he said. Make sure to keep track of time down here. I nodded and groggily clutched his arm as he led me back out of the vaults, but in the end I would ignore his advice. I'd spend long hours absorbed in photo after photo, zooming in on odd details, wondering at the instants of humanity that they captured.

The years wore on and I continued to spend my days in the vault. I gorged on the photographs of the world like a starving man brought to feed. My skin grew sallow and my eyes hurt at the sight of the sun. I rarely left the underground, and my friendships waned. What few remaining social ties I had frayed, then separated altogether. I hardly noticed the lack of human contact - I had my photos, and they kept me company. To everyone around me, though, it became apparent that I was transforming into a lonely uninspired hermit. Finally, eventually, inevitably, the photos began to run together. They became dull and repetitive. Yet I didn't want to rejoin the outside world—I had seen it all, through the lens of someone else's camera. What few memories I have of the aboveground from that time were flat and dull, the sky painted in shades of gray.

This is the paradox of photographs. Human beings evolved in a world of scarcity, so when we're faced with abundance, our vestigial brain propels us to be as greedy as possible. We spoil our appetite with foreknowledge: pictures, previews, movie trailers, promises of what is to come.

These morsels serve to make us listless and unmotivated. It is your thirst to know that makes you want to blast open the doors to the vault, but in fact that desire to act is an end in and of itself.

I have never traveled. I have never, since entering the catacombs myself, known the joyful pleasure of novel experience that you find on a daily basis. I am no longer a citizen of the Age of Wonderment. I am living in the past. Every day I rue my choice to become a historian, but there is no way to turn back the clock. I've been poisoned by my own hunger for experience.

When I have communicated this argument to you, the usual rebuke is that anything can be forgotten. If we can learn what spoilers tell us, then we too can forget. If we can know, then we can un-know. But that is only the case for the unremarkable. The truly extraordinary is never forgotten. Worthwhile memories are branded so forcefully into our consciousness that the patterns of our neurology that represent them can't ever be wiped clean. That is why the unknown is our most valuable finite commodity. Even though forgotten items pile up as we age, the cache of unknown and memorable only dwindles from the moment we are born. It's vital that we spend these valuable moments of delightful discovery in real, true, full-bodied concrete experience, not spoil them by half-living them through previews on a screen.

That's why I advocate for maintaining the Censorship Acts as they stand. Let us continue to live in the bliss of unknowing. Let us keep our personal mysteries hidden, until they are unearthed by empiric encounters. Let us keep our passion for exploration alive. Let us extend the Age of Wonderment another century.

However, I understand that it is likely I will be overruled. As someone who sits behind a desk in the top floor of the national historical society, I will be dismissed as a dusty arm of the state, or, worse, as a jealous relic preserving the worth of what I've seen by keeping it private. The generation before me were the last to endure a time before censorship, but they are no longer here to warn us against our folly.

At this very moment I can press my hands to the glass of my building and see you raise your fist and pass homemade pinhole cameras hand to hand. I see faded photos, taken from attics or buried in antique shops within chests of drawers—a sailor's smile, red-rock cliffs, a young girl clambering out the top of a Jeep as the wind toys with her hair—they are symbols of the resistance. The will of the people, as far as I can see, is clear, and democracy, as it always has within our republic, will eventually win out, be it a day or a decade. I hope that reason will prevail, but this hope will likely be in vain. I know you mean to release us from darkness, but the overwhelming light you seek to unleash will shine bright enough to bake everything to the same shade of faded alabaster. Once we have opened the vaults, there is no going back.

Allow me to conclude with one final story, a story of hope. See a boy who is born during the heaviest New York City blizzard in a decade. When his father carries him the twelve blocks home, a pudgy ball of perfect pink flesh bundled in blankets, the only sound is the creak of his footfalls on the fresh snow. The city itself, ordinarily filled with screeching and honking, is soft and dormant. As the father passes a group of college kids carrying cafeteria trays towards Central Park, he thinks—though he may be imagining it—that the newborn stirs and turns his head

ever-so-slightly towards them. They're going sledding, he says to the boy, and gives him a kiss on the forehead.

When the son is five, he has a corona of blonde curls that bounces as he runs with bare feet. The boy smiles as big as the sun at his father and opens his fist to show him whatever he's found—the feather of a hawk, an extra-long earthworm, a round rock that sparkles in the sun the way water does—and at each new discovery the father has a wistful recollection of a time in his own childhood when everything in the world was brand new. The father and the boy ride their bikes to the zoo, scramble atop a small mountain, row far enough into the ocean that the shore can't be seen. At each new scenario the son giggles and cheers and soaks in the wonders of the earth with wide eyes. The boy grows up in a world without spoilers. In his life, everything he touches is new if he has not encountered it before. Although he ages and grows into a man, he never loses the sense of childlike joy, and every time he smiles the father sees behind his features the bright-eyed toddler.

That boy is my son. That boy is you, son. He can be your son, too, if you pack away your signs and go home.

Isabella Bustamante (she/her) is a writer and cat mom who currently resides in the Pacific Northwest. She has a BA in Creative Writing from The Evergreen State College. Her writing is often informed by place, memory, and trauma—with the occasional dash of whimsy, horror, and/or magical realism. Her work has recently been published in *Still the Water: An Anthology of Olympia Poetry*.

Lemonade Poppies by Isabella Bustamante

When Macie's parents dropped her off at Aunt Lizette's doorstep, a baby goat was shoved immediately into her arms.

"His name is Charley," Aunt Lizette said, her voice lyrical, the words floating off into the air. "He doesn't have his mother anymore. The poor thing died of complications from the birth. You can take care of him while you're here. You'll need that—something to take care of."

Macie recoiled at the squirming little thing in her arms, detesting how it looked up at her with its odd, horizontally slitted eyes. She looked back at the Honda Civic that sped down the gravel driveway. It swerved left onto the dirt road and she saw her father lift his fingers up from the steering wheel for a brief second, the way in which one would wave casually at a passing stranger. Her mother didn't even look in her direction, instead staring ahead firmly from the passenger seat. Macie tried to wave as the car disappeared down the road, but it blended away into the surrounding green and auburn trees, and then it was gone.

The baby goat bleated loudly and peed itself.

"Oh. Wow. Okay, then." Macie muttered, lifting the little creature as far away from her as she could. She felt a pang of hatred for the thing—not simply because it couldn't control its own bladder, but because of how vulnerable it was, the helplessness palpable in its soft, white fur. It looked up at her with gleaming, innocent eyes, as if it had not just ruined a pair of her most prized vintage jeans.

Aunt Lizette laughed lightly. "That'll happen. Often. You best get used to it. Come inside, we'll get you cleaned up." She took the goat from Macie, and they walked into the farmhouse.

Dressed entirely in flowing layers of paisley brocade, Aunt Lizette glided across the scratched mahogany flooring. She made it look easy to move beyond the grasps of gravity, as if she wasn't wearing the heavy, hand-stitched leather boots that poked out underneath her ensemble. Shelf boxes of partially blooming flowers and hanging vines decorated the entryway, with framed sketches of pastoral scenes lining the walls. There was a delicate perfume of jasmine wafting through the house, accented by the underlying musk of baby goats. Surprisingly, to Macie, it smelled a bit nicer than the sewer-scented streets of New York City. Weird—but nicer.

Bleating whines became louder as they walked deeper into the house. The living room, it seemed, had become a daycare of sorts for baby goats, with a playpen, empty bottles of goat's milk scattered about, the floor covered with straw and blue pee-pads.

Aunt Lizette lifted the goat—Charley, Macie reminded herself of its name, though she questioned whether it mattered if a goat had a name or not—and cleaned it off with a nearby collection of baby wipes, then deposited it into the playpen with its assumed siblings. Aunt Lizette twirled around, and gave a disapproving look at Macie’s now-ruined jeans. “You’ll need something more substantial to wear than that, anyway. Farm work isn’t easy, or clean. Charley was doing you a favor, really. Come.” She flitted forward like a moth dashing to light, motioning with her hand for Macie to follow into an open side room.

Aunt Lizette flourished with her arm towards the plainly furnished space, the rose-gold bangles lining her wrist glittering and clacking together. “This is your room.” It was simple, with a cupboard and dresser, a fluffy cow-patterned rug on the floor, a rocking chair, a quaint twin bed. Linen curtains covered a window facing the back of the farm, and a clock hung on the wall above the dresser. There was a distinct lack of foliage compared to every other inch of the house she had seen so far. It felt less alive.

“There’s a bathroom down the hall, on the right. I’ve left an extra change of clothes there for you that should hopefully fit. Go get cleaned up, and we’ll talk afterwards.”

“Oh, okay. Thanks, Aunt Lizette.” Macie felt the pressure to say more, to express some universal sense of familial gratitude that she was supposed to have, but the words, and the subsequent feelings, didn’t come to her. She hardly knew Aunt Lizette apart from the occasional artisanal goat cheeses that arrived in the mail during holidays, the stacks of letters with pressed flower petals between the pages. It was difficult to reconcile the person standing next to her to the one her mother only ever mentioned after an extra glass of wine during dinner.

Macie walked down the hall, only to realize that she had immediately forgotten which door led to the bathroom. Two inconspicuous doors stood on the right side of the hallway, and a larger door was on the left. She almost went back to the bedroom to ask Aunt Lizette—but thought better of it. She wasn’t a child. She could find the bathroom without help. She practically heard her mother’s words echo in her ears: *don’t do this Macie, don’t do that.* Her mother hadn’t even trusted her enough to stay home alone for a week. Her father had shrugged, saying *sorry kiddo, but it’s your mom who makes the rules.*

Macie sighed, and opened the door on the left.

It wasn’t a bathroom—but rather, what seemed to be a teenager’s bedroom. *NSYNC and Backstreet Boys posters covered the walls, and a small bed piled high with patchwork quilts sat in the far corner of the room. It seemed untouched by time—dust was nowhere to be seen, but if the decor was any indicator, it hadn’t been lived in for decades. Macie didn’t know anyone her age who would listen to the Backstreet Boys unironically.

Something glittery caught her eye—a diary, placed on top of the bed.

Don’t do it, Macie, her mother would have said.

So without hesitation—and, perhaps, spurred on by a delightful rebellion against what her mother would want—Macie walked into the room, and picked up the diary. The cover read: *Property of Livia—DON’T READ THIS LIZETTE!!*

Livia. Liv.

It was her mother's diary, then. This was her mother's room when she was growing up—she had never mentioned that she grew up here, on the farm.

To think of it, her mother never mentioned many things about her childhood or her life before Macie was born. She would only give brief anecdotes, like: *I met your father in law school, and then we fell in love, and then we had you. That's all there is to know, really.*

Macie flipped through the pages, scanning the words so delicately written in a pink gel pen, the I's dotted with hearts, the swirly C's and the swooping L's. It was surprisingly more girly than she had expected. There was talk about crushes, trigonometry homework, and what dress her mother should wear for prom.

A line, partially scratched out in pen, stood out to her: *I think I like —*

Macie raised her eyebrows, and frantically skimmed the pages for a shred of context. More pages were scratched out in black ink, indecipherable. She found some pages missing, tiny fragments of paper still clinging to the binding.

Something rustled in the hallway, pulling her out of the diary's entrancing pages. "Macie? Did you have trouble finding the bathroom?"

Macie tried to set the diary back in its place. A photo slipped out—softly worn at the edges, showing a younger version of her mother, and a man she had never seen before. Macie grabbed it without thinking, and held it behind her back—twisting around to face Aunt Lizette just in time.

"Macie? This isn't the bathroom." A hardness flashed in Aunt Lizette's eyes for a second, her serene expression faltering.

Macie felt her heart pound. She slipped the photograph into her back pocket, her palms sweating. "Sorry, Aunt Lizette. I forgot where you said it was."

"It's right there." Aunt Lizette pointed towards one of the doors on the right.

Macie nodded, and headed towards the bathroom, crossing in front of Aunt Lizette.

Aunt Lizette's hand gripped her arm, nails digging into her skin. "Don't go wandering around where you shouldn't, Macie," Aunt Lizette whispered, the words spoken so low that Macie wasn't entirely sure that they had been spoken at all.

Aunt Lizette smiled, all sunshine and rainbows, any hint of the prior storm behind her eyes gone—and walked back to the guest bedroom, whistling a tune Macie didn't recognize.

Macie entered the bathroom and locked the door. No matter how long she scrubbed her skin raw in the shower, the constricting feeling of Aunt Lizette's grip on her arm remained.

*

After showering, Macie changed into the clothes Aunt Lizette picked out: a pair of oversized corduroy overalls, with a blouse that matched the paisley designs of Aunt Lizette's current outfit. It was all a size too big for Macie, the silky shirt coolly irritating her skin. She tucked the photo she found into one of the many pockets in the outfit, making a note to look at it in more detail later on.

Macie arrived back at the room, and sat on the edge of the bed. Aunt Lizette sat across from her on the rocking chair, tilting back and forth.

“Sorry you’re stuck with me for the week. We’ll probably have a better time than your parents will, anyway. I don’t know what Liv was thinking. A last minute vacation to Bali to make up for the honeymoon they never got to have sounds kind of... desperate, don’t you think?” Her lips curved in a smirk, her faint laugh lines becoming more defined.

Macie got the sense that this wasn’t the first time Aunt Lizette uttered snide comments about her mother, but she still nodded in agreement.

It was true, after all. Her parent’s trip was a desperate, last attempt at saving their marriage. It didn’t need to be said aloud for Macie to understand it. She had noticed it months earlier, when her father began to actually look at her mother during dinner, or in the car, or at night, while they watched *Friends* reruns on the couch—he was *really* looking at her for once, as if to immortalize her image in his mind, like she’d already left him without putting the action into motion. Perhaps she already had.

“Look. I’m not like your parents. And I’m definitely not like your mom—I love Liv, but she can be... a bit of a handful sometimes. Trust me. I had to share a womb with her. She kicked a lot, you know.”

Macie choked down a laugh, a smile threatening to break out. Aunt Lizette and her mother were twins, and looked alike physically—but their personalities were drastically different. Her mother had always been a bit steely, uptight, and withdrawn. So far, Aunt Lizette seemed more free, like worries and anxieties were foreign entities to her.

Aunt Lizette continued. “I’m not going to give you a curfew or anything like that. I just ask for two things while you’re here. Number one is to take care of Charley, because I think it’ll do you some good. It’ll teach you some responsibility, and if you’re good at it, you can help me to take care of the other baby goats, too.”

Macie instantly revoked any hint of a smile from her face. “Do I have to? I don’t really think I like Charley... or baby goats. Or goats, in general.”

“All the better, then, for you to learn to care for something you dislike.”

Macie groaned. It was pointless trying to argue. She could see a fiery stubbornness settle in Aunt Lizette’s deep brown eyes, the same look she had seen an endless amount of times from her mother. “Fine, I guess.”

“Wonderful. The second rule I have for you is this: don’t eat the lemonade poppies.”

“The what?”

Aunt Lizette repeated her words with a smile. “Don’t eat the lemonade poppies.”

Macie frowned. “Do people really eat flowers?”

“Some do.”

A silence settled between them, and Macie shifted her weight uncomfortably.

Aunt Lizette stood up from her chair. “Come on, Macie. Let’s finish the tour.”

*

The farm was expansive, rural, and alien to Macie. She had been raised amongst steel and cement, skyscrapers that danced with the wind, taxis that arrived before you realized you even needed to go anywhere. What bothered her most about the farm was how it feigned silence. At

first, there seemed to be a quiet serenity, nothing present in the air but a pollinated spring breeze. But then, a gentle orchestra would begin—the humming of bees and the rustling of flowers in the eastern field, the distant stomping of horse hooves from the stables, the scream-like ramblings of adult goats from the barn. Macie disliked the loudness of nature and animals that erupted from the absence of people.

Aunt Lizette—after dumping Charley back into Macie’s arms—fluttered with Macie through different sections of the farm, providing information about each area’s purpose. Aunt Lizette boarded horses, and taught horse riding lessons on occasion. The goats were mostly so that she could produce cheese, but some goats, she noted, were particularly empathetic and sociable, and could be trained to become emotional support animals. She sold the goat cheese at local farmer’s markets, occasionally infusing the cheese with the honey produced from the bees, sprinkling powdered edible flower petals on the top.

“All my cheeses are award-winning, you know,” she said with a wink. “I win first place in the county fair each year.” Charley bleated quietly in admiration.

“Oh. That’s cool, I guess. Do you get... like, money from it?” Macie said, struggling to find anything to add to the conversation. How many things can one really say about cheese?

Evidently, a lot—Aunt Lizette took a pause in their tour, and spent the next forty-five minutes talking about the history and politics of pricing goat cheese. Macie continually bit her tongue to prevent herself from falling asleep upright.

As Aunt Lizette’s goat cheese lesson finally ended, Macie blurted out: “Are we done yet? Can we go back inside?”

“Almost,” Aunt Lizette replied, her voice like a windchime. “We have one last stop.”

They walked past the goat barn, and approached a greenhouse that Macie hadn’t noticed before. It was small, the size of an outhouse, with the glass tinted an opaque emerald. Aunt Lizette shuffled through her pockets, taking out an elongated, antique key. She unlocked the greenhouse door, and revealed an assortment of clay pots with yellow blooming flowers. The golden petals lifted upwards in delicate circles, with dark seeds gathered at the center. It made each flower look like an eye, one that couldn’t blink, but just kept on staring unnervingly. Macie thought they looked ugly.

Aunt Lizette grinned. “These are my lemonade poppies. My pride and joy.”

“Okay... and... what was your rule again? Not to eat them? Done.” Macie said, stifling a yawn. “I don’t eat flowers.” Her tone was a bit harsh, but she reasoned it was justified. She was tired, and hungry, and beginning to grasp the complexities of her mother and Aunt Lizette’s strained relationship. The woman was undeniably strange.

“Oh. Well. I can promise you that they’re delicious—the petals—and that’s exactly why you can’t eat any of them. They’re somewhat... addicting.” Aunt Lizette murmured, her melodic voice becoming delicately strained. “I would’ve told you more about them, but I can see that you aren’t interested. It’s fine. I was fourteen once, too. I can understand your view.” She looked away from Macie for a moment, exhaling loudly and clasping her hands together.

The faintest glimmer of interest shot through Macie, piercing her fatigue. Addictingly delicious petals? It sounded like a half-truth, the kind of white lies that her mother told her when she was younger. “Why are you even showing these to me if I’m not allowed to—”

Charley decided then that he needed to be the center of attention, and kicked his hooves against Macie, wrestling out of her grasp and onto the soft grass below. “Hey!” Macie called out, reaching down to pick him up. She stumbled, falling forward until she caught herself with her hands, her palms burning against the floor of the greenhouse.

Aunt Lizette helped her up to her feet, and asked if she was okay. Macie nodded, but shot a passive-aggressive look at Charley, who stood by Aunt Lizette’s side obediently, false innocence glittering in his peculiar eyes.

They decided to end the tour, and walk back to the farmhouse for dinner. Aunt Lizette walked in front of her quietly, carrying Charley. Macie looked down at her hands, opening up her palms to assess the damage. An unexpected gift resided in one of them—a wilted petal of a lemonade poppy, the edges sliced, the formerly vibrant color now a muddy ochre.

Macie tucked the petal into the pocket of her overalls, right next to the photo. She decided not to mention either of them to Aunt Lizette. She remained silent, and kept her hands in her pockets, her fingertips occasionally brushing against the wispy softness of her stolen treasures.

*

After three days at the farm, Macie could confidently say that she hated the place.

Caring for Charley was exhausting enough—feeding him at odd hours of the night, cleaning up after him, dealing with his annoying presence in general—but she had to do so much more on top of that. Labeling jars of honey, picking flowers from the field, wrapping circular packages of goat cheese in twine and recycled paper. She had to help brush the horses and refresh the stalls with fresh hay. The horses looked down at her and swished their manes with disdain, evidently disliking her as much as she disliked taking care of them.

Each meal at Aunt Lizette’s included an unfortunately artistic use of goat cheese, and Macie had to smile and fabricate compliments while the acrid chalkiness of the food slithered down her throat. After dinner, Aunt Lizette always worked on her embroidery in between caring for the baby goats, and left Macie to her own devices. Of course, though, there was no internet or television at the farmhouse. There was nothing for her to do except go to sleep after dinner.

After a few days, Macie could barely find the energy to get out of bed. All of her muscles ached, and she wished she was home. She just wanted to lounge around her house, or go hang out with her friends at the mall. She wanted to be away from Charley, and away from all the animals at the farm—even after several showers, she still couldn’t get rid of the smell of goat from her hair. It made her want to puke, to cry—or even, to run away.

It wasn’t like her parents would miss her all that much. They had dumped her here on Aunt Lizette’s doorstep with hardly a proper goodbye. They were too involved in their own problems, too invested in trying to save a marriage that they both knew had been dead and gone ages ago.

If only she could text a friend—Carly and Mariana were both older than Macie, and they had just gotten their licenses. She would do just about anything to convince one of them to make a trip out here to save her from this goat-infested hell hole—maybe she could bribe them with some of her birthday money, or promise to do all of their homework for the rest of the school year. Well, maybe that would work if their parents weren’t rich... or if their grades weren’t already at the top of their class. *Damn it.*

Macie’s fingers reached out for the cool metal of the phone underneath her pillow. She had managed to sneak the phone in, and stashed it away from Aunt Lizette’s potentially prying eyes. Her mother hadn’t let her pack any of her things for the week-long stay, including her phone charger—*you won’t need anything like that while you’re there, sweetie*, she had said, in that annoyingly kind voice of hers. But of course, there was no cell reception out here. There would be no running away for Macie—no communication to the world that she so desperately wanted to return to.

Macie picked up her phone, and peeled back its protective case. Inside of it was the petal and photo she had found the first day.

The photo raised more questions than it answered. It seemed to show her mother—potentially when she was around Macie’s age—and a young man, possibly a bit older. They were both dressed up for some sort of dance. Yellow flowers were wrapped around her mother’s wrist, and the man had a matching boutonniere. The back of the photo had a caption, scrawled in sharpie: *1997. Livia and -*

Again, there was a name scratched out—belonging to the man, apparently.

Macie didn’t know what to make of it all. Maybe he was a jerk, or they had some sort of bad breakup. Her mother never mentioned anyone from high school, or any man that wasn’t her father. Curiosity burrowed into her mind, but she didn’t have any solid answers.

The petal bothered Macie, too.

She considered throwing it away, or feeding it to Charley, or eating it herself. Aunt Lizette’s warning stuck in her mind: *the petals are addicting*. A part of her felt it was some sort of reverse psychology move, used to make the rebellious teenager go against the rules purely out of spite.

Macie liked to rebel—in theory—but had never been particularly successful at it. At school, all her friends had already started smoking weed, vaping, and drinking on occasion. She’d taken a hit of a vape once, but it made her choke, cough, and spit up her lunch. Cigarettes hurt even worse. She wanted to like it all, truly—she *wanted* to be that perfectly imperfect rebellious teenager. Her mother certainly treated her like she was one.

But she wasn’t, really. She hadn’t kissed a boy yet, nor had she been invited to any parties. She spent her time outside of school watching reality TV, or scribbling art doodles in her journal. Despite all her efforts to rebel, she was unceremoniously... kind of normal.

Lame, if anything.

She wondered, though, if eating that petal would be the same as feeling the dizzying sting of nicotine rush over her—without all the coughing. Or, if it simply tasted like actual lemonade.

Regardless, if she did decide to eat the petal, it would be of her own volition—out of curiosity, and nothing else.

Macie was still in bed, ruminating over the possibilities of the petal and the meaning behind the photo, when Aunt Lizette knocked on her door. Charley stood up, startled awake from his sleeping position at the foot of the bed.

“Macie? Get up and get ready soon. We’re going to the farmer’s market today.”

Macie rolled off the bed and gently pushed Charley onto the floor with a nudge. “I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

Macie dressed herself in another one of Aunt Lizette’s curated outfits and a pair of leather boots.

She snapped the case of the phone back on, and slipped the phone into her boot.

Her phone still had 24% of battery left. Maybe the farmer’s market would have some hint of civilization—or, at the very least, a few bars of cell service.

*

Aunt Lizette had her own permanent stall at the weekly farmer’s market, in a centralized, high-traffic location. Customers ranging from grizzled old farmers to out-of-town couples visited the stall, chatting up Aunt Lizette like they were old friends. Macie was tasked with operating the sales, doling out change and receipts, and filling paper bags to the brim with goat cheese and tiny jars of honey. Charley accompanied them, set up next to the stall with his own playpen and goat harness. He basked in the attention from the people passing by, his little goat tail wagging like a dog’s.

Macie noticed that, throughout the day, more and more women seemed to approach the stall—but none of them actually bought anything. Their eyes would scan over the parcels of goat cheese and honey on display, their lashes fluttering with quiet precision. They would look Macie up and down, then briskly walk away without a word. None of them necessarily looked alike—but they all had the same silently worried expression.

Macie wondered if they were just depressed, or sad—she would be depressed, too, if she had to live her life out in the middle of nowhere with only a weekly farmers market to look forward to. She cast a glance at Aunt Lizette, who looked as energetically ethereal as ever. No, the dull, isolated life here didn’t depress Aunt Lizette—she seemed to thrive off of it all, relishing in the power she had away from the rest of the world.

Towards the end of the day, the crowd dwindled, and Macie was finally able to relax from the busy work.

“Do you mind if I take a break?” Her voice cracked a bit at the end as she asked the question, her fingertips numb, aching to pull out her cell phone. She almost expected Aunt Lizette to read her mind, to refuse her with an eccentric spiel of *there isn’t any cell reception here either, darling!*

Aunt Lizette waved her hand in the air. “Not at all. But take Charley with you, would you? He could use a good walk.”

Macie sighed—taking Charley with her wasn’t part of the plan—but she relented, and took him out of his playpen. She picked up the leash, and he bleated happily. Macie shook her head. He was still annoying—but even she could begin to admit that he was almost cute at times, like a puppy who was missing a few necessary brain cells.

Macie tried to hide the eagerness in each of her steps as she walked further away from Aunt Lizette. There had to be cell reception somewhere here—somewhere tall, maybe? There was a hill outside of the circle of stalls that made up the farmers market. It wasn’t particularly high-up—she could scale it easily with a few steps—but it was the only option.

Macie set her sights towards the hill. Charley lagged behind, getting distracted by the passing stalls filled with vegetables and colorful flowers. Macie tugged on the leash. “Come on, Charley. Don’t ruin this for me.”

Charley seemed to get the memo, his hooves clicking against the cement pavement as he matched her pace. His steps softened as they reached dirt and approached the hill.

The hill was a crumbling mess of rock and dried clumps of grass, but Macie’s boots allowed her to navigate it easily. Charley hopped up along cheerfully—even though Macie knew he wasn’t a mountain goat, he sure acted like he was.

When Macie reached the top of the hill, she realized it was more dangerous terrain than she initially thought. The other side of the hill had a steep drop-off, leading to a deep ravine with a rushing river at the bottom. Macie didn’t know how many feet down it was, but it definitely wasn’t a survivable drop. She pulled Charley’s leash closer to her, backing away from the edge, and let out a strained breath.

There was a sparse collection of pine trees at the top of the hill. Macie sat behind one, leaning against its prickly bark. She didn’t want Aunt Lizette to potentially see her—or her cell phone.

She took the phone out of her boot, and tapped the screen. It glowed dimly, but still had an X over the service bar—no signal, still.

“No, no, no,” she murmured, raising the phone higher. Charley began to whine in bleats, apparently noticing her desperation.

She walked back and forth, straining to keep the phone high up in the air. There was still no signal. She briefly contemplated climbing up one of the trees—but she knew she was too clumsy for that, and would likely break a bone or two on the fall down.

Macie readied herself to walk back down the hill, but she heard a noise—the gentle *pat, pat* of footsteps coming closer to her.

“You need to leave. You can’t be here.”

A spindly man appeared in front of Macie. He had long limbs, and wore torn, ragged clothing. His face was entirely gaunt, possessing a concavity that rivaled the ravine beside them. His pupils were dilated, his eyes a smooth, endless charcoal.

Macie took a step back from him—but he closed the distance between them, grabbing her arms with cold, bony fingers.

“You need to leave,” he rasped, *“they’ll hurt you, too.”*

Macie screamed and closed her eyes instinctively. She could feel his hot breath on her face—it smelled sickly sweet, like fruit left to rot.

“They’ll make you forget.”

She opened her eyes, and the man was gone.

Charley was yelling in panicked bleats, and her phone was still in her hand. There was no one else on the hill. Macie rubbed her eyes, opened them, closed them, and opened them again. There was still no man to be seen—and no service on her cell phone.

Maybe the weirdness of everything was just getting to her—an exhaustion and stress-induced hallucination. Or maybe she’d finally gone crazy. One of those.

Macie couldn’t shake how real it all felt. She put her phone away, and picked up Charley. He finally became quiet—and nuzzled her chin affectionately. Macie patted him a little, and walked down the hill, her hands shaking slightly.

When Macie arrived back at the stall, Aunt Lizette was standing with her arms crossed.

“That was a pretty long break you took, Macie. I had to help the rest of the customers alone, *and* pack up the stall all by myself.”

“Well, I—I saw something out there,” Macie said, her voice quiet, not quite believing her own words. *Did* she really see that man? She couldn’t know for sure.

“Really? Who was it? Bigfoot?” Aunt Lizette said, her usually fanciful tone sounding more cold—more like her mother’s.

“No, no—it wasn’t—ugh! I don’t really know what it was, but something weird... happened.”

Aunt Lizette sighed. “You’re just as difficult as your mother can be. Come on, let’s head home for now. The farmer’s market opens up again tomorrow—we have to get up early.”

Macie bit her tongue, holding back the words that Aunt Lizette wouldn’t bother listening to anyway. On the drive back to the farmhouse, Macie held Charley in her lap. She smoothed his fur and looked into his weirdly shaped pupils, trying to forget the abyss-like eyes of the man she saw on the hill.

*

Aunt Lizette was less present at the stall the next morning. She kept disappearing at odd moments, citing the need to replenish the stall’s goods, or to get some goat’s milk for Charley. When she did return to the stall, she never had any of the aforementioned items she claimed to fetch.

Macie wondered if Aunt Lizette had something to hide. Maybe she had a drug dependency, or a secret lover. At least that would make her a little bit more interesting—her personality would consist of something more substantial than goat cheese.

Macie wished she had some sort of substance to cope with. She felt like she needed something to take the edge off ever since yesterday. Instead, she snacked on some lavender-flavored honey sticks from a neighboring stall, pretending to enjoy the floral sweetness, pretending it could help her forget.

It wasn't that delicious, but it wasn't that bad, either. She bet that the lemonade poppies tasted the same. An indecisive flavor stuck somewhere between a mix of candied sweetness and heavily scented lotion. Nothing that special.

An elderly woman suddenly peeked over the counter. Macie took a step back from the counter, startled. The woman was incredibly tiny, with little wisps of cloudy white hair on top of her head, a pair of thick spectacles threatening to slide off her nose.

"Can I help you?" Macie asked, a honey stick still hanging off her lip like a sweet cigarette.

The woman said something indecipherable, muffled by phlegm, and looked at Macie expectantly.

"Sorry, what was that?"

She cleared her throat, and huffed loudly, "Lemonade poppies. I want all of your lemonade poppies. Please."

A stillness fell over the farmer's market, replacing the former bustle and noise of commerce. Macie could feel people turn their gaze towards her, like she had been placed in front of a live, scrutinizing audience. She could have sworn some of the men looked similar to the one she saw on the hill yesterday—their pupils dilated, eyes jet-black. Macie blinked, and their eyes were back to normal again, yet the people continued to stare at her. She focused her attention back on the elderly customer.

"Sorry," Macie said, her voice quivering slightly. She waved her hand over the goat cheese and honey in front of her. "I don't think we're selling any of those right now. We just have what you can see here."

The old woman's expression sharpened harshly, her glassy eyes narrowing underneath her spectacles. "Let me ask again. *I want* some lemonade poppies—"

Aunt Lizette arrived with a cardboard box in hand, and interjected, "Of course, Doris. Of course. Here—for you. I grew these special, just for you." She thrusted the box forward, an offering. Just like that, the tense silence in the air of the farmer's market dissipated, the feeling of being watched gone.

The woman snatched the box, muttered a quiet thank you, and walked away more quickly than Macie would have expected her capable of doing.

"But—Aunt Lizette! She didn't even pay you!" Macie objected, feeling dissatisfied with the interaction. She hadn't expected the old woman to act like that. It unsettled her.

"Oh, she has. Don't worry about that. The payment is on its way now, actually," Aunt Lizette said, motioning towards a man in a beige delivery uniform approaching the stall.

He dropped a heavy white styrofoam cooler onto the counter, nodded to Aunt Lizette, and left without a word.

"What is it?" Macie asked, her hand unthinkingly reaching towards the cooler.

Aunt Lizette swatted her hand away. "A trade, Macie. Not everyone sells things for money."

"But still—what did you trade for?"

“Nothing a young girl like you would need to worry about.”

Anger seeped into Macie. Aunt Lizette was willing to use her around the farm for free labor, to make her work at the farmer’s market all day, to do chores and take care of Charley—but as soon as she had any questions, she was suddenly “too young” to get to know anything. Aunt Lizette was just like her mother, then, with the whole *I’ll tell you when you’re older*, excuses. Macie was fourteen—in a few years, she’d be a legal adult. She didn’t feel like a child anymore.

“Fine. Well, since I’m too young to worry about those things, I’m done working for the day. I’m going to wait in the truck.” She spat out the honey stick in her mouth, letting the plastic fall onto the ground below. “Come on, Charley.” Macie picked up Charley, his fur tickling her nose.

Aunt Lizette didn’t object as Macie walked away, but she could feel a set of eyes sweep over her, like thin needles pressing into her back.

*

Macie ate her dinner in her room that night. The meal was supposed to be Swedish meatballs, but it wasn’t an authentic recipe, of course, when the lingonberry jam was replaced with a goat cheese roux. She ate as many as she could tolerate, and pushed the plate aside. Charley sat on the rug, and gave her his best attempt at puppy-dog eyes that a baby goat could muster. It wasn’t very convincing, to say the least.

“Nope. Sorry. You’re not getting any of this,” Macie teased. Charley bleated indignantly.

Macie took out her phone again. It was dead, now, completely—the dark screen revealed nothing but her distorted reflection. She took the phone case off, and shook out the photo and petal. The petal was beginning to look more decayed, its edges beginning to shrivel up.

The photo had begun to bore her now. There was a mystery there, surely, but did it really matter that much when it involved her own mother? Her mother was as boring an adult as possible—a patent-use lawyer, an occasional bird-watcher, a detached mother.

The petal, though—she couldn’t get it off her mind.

Was it really as addictive and delicious as Aunt Lizette said it was?

She placed the petal on the bed, hesitating. The old lady from the farmer’s market *did* seem addicted to the petals, or at least, was way too eager to have them. Maybe she shouldn’t try the petal, after all.

But what if it could offer her some relief—a way for her to escape from those black eyes she saw every single time she closed her eyes?

She reached her hand out towards it—but Charley jumped up, snatching the petal away before her fingers could even touch it.

“Damn it, Charley.”

Charley chewed the petal triumphantly, giving off a satisfied look that said: *you should’ve given me those Swedish meatballs.*

Macie watched him for what felt like hours, waiting to see if he had some sort of reaction to the petal—but his dull eyes revealed nothing. Maybe the petals had no effect on goats.

Macie sighed heavily. She sunk into the covers. Sleep didn't come, but those dark, haunting eyes did.

After a few restless hours, Macie heard several creaking footsteps from upstairs. She tried to shut her eyes, and return to the beginnings of a dream—but she heard it again, louder this time, *creak, creak, creak*.

Aunt Lizette's bedroom was upstairs, directly above hers. Macie had never heard her stir this late at night—from what she had seen, Aunt Lizette was usually knocked out cold after a few post-dinner cups of bitter lemon chamomile tea. Macie opened her eyes, and listened.

The footsteps moved around for a few more minutes, then slowly, delicately, walked down the stairs, in the deliberately effortless way that Aunt Lizette had perfected. The back door opened and shut soon after. Macie waited, and then shuffled out of bed, peaking through the curtains of the window.

Aunt Lizette was drifting her way through the back of the farm in a white nightgown, an oil lantern held out in her hand. It was a ghostly sight. Macie wondered why Aunt Lizette always had to be so odd—why couldn't she have just used a regular flashlight?

Macie watched until Aunt Lizette's spectral silhouette disappeared behind the goat barn—heading directly for the greenhouse. She stepped away from the window.

If she couldn't have a taste of the lemonade poppies, she wanted to know what made them so special, at the very least. She wrapped herself in a quilt she found in the cupboard, and slipped on her boots. Charley tried to protest with a few pathetic bleats, but Macie shushed him. "This is all your fault, you know. Stay here. I'll be right back."

The night air brushed coldly against Macie's face, causing her eyes to water, her nose to drip. She sniffled, and stepped along quietly, trying to listen in case Aunt Lizette re-appeared. Though Macie hated the farm in general, she hated it much more at night. Owls hooted in the trees around the property, making her jump at every harshly shrieked *hoo, hoo*. Darkness transported every building into a shaded, towering silhouette. A chill pricked at her skin, pouncing along her collarbone like predatory claws.

The goats were asleep and the barn was silent. That is what disturbed her the most—she had expected to use their ever-present bleating as a cover for her footsteps crunching along the grass.

After a few minutes of walking, she reached the barn. She flattened her body against the side of it, and inched forward until she could peak her head out to see the greenhouse. It was illuminated by the hazy glow of the lantern. Macie hadn't noticed it earlier, but Aunt Lizette must've been carrying the white cooler from the farmer's market. It was opened now, and she was rifling through it.

The flower pots that Macie had seen on her first day at the farm were now empty. Bags of poppyseeds and soil were propped up against the cooler. It seemed like Aunt Lizette was trying to plant more lemonade poppies.

That was it, then. She was just planting flowers at night—that was all. It probably helped the flowers grow better, or something. Macie wasn't an expert on gardening, anyway. She shouldn't have bothered getting out of bed in the first place.

Just as Macie had resolved to return to the house, Aunt Lizette pulled something out of the cooler. It was vaguely round, and pink-ish—Macie squinted in the darkness, trying to determine just exactly what it was. The light from the lantern was flickering in and out. Aunt Lizette walked over to the flower pots. The lantern dimmed, then brightened—and Macie could see what it was then, resting ever so neatly in Aunt Lizette's palms.

That glossy sheen it had, the thick green and blue veins that snaked around it. Bloodless and pale.

It was some sort of organ—a heart, or a liver, or a kidney. She couldn't tell if it belonged to an animal or something else. Maybe it belonged to a goat. Macie felt her knees grow weak.

Aunt Lizette dropped the heart into one of the flower pots, and then scooped seeds and soil on the top, smoothing it all out. She did this casually, humming softly to herself as she did so. She turned back to the cooler and grabbed another organ, repeating the repulsive process.

Macie felt nauseous, bile stinging its way up her throat. *She almost ate one of those petals.* Flowers nourished by flesh.

She tried to cover her mouth with her hands, tried to run away—but she couldn't prevent or hide the sound of spewing her stomach's contents directly onto the ground in front of her. Directly in Aunt Lizette's line of sight.

“Is someone there? Macie, is that you?”

Macie couldn't move away fast enough, and Aunt Lizette walked up towards her.

“I didn't want you to find out about this, Macie. Frankly, I'm disappointed you came outside at this time of night.”

Aunt Lizette kneeled down next to Macie. She smelled like dirt and blood.

“Well, I suppose now you've seen everything. No use in lying to you, since you're *so* mature for your age,” Aunt Lizette whispered, presenting the offending thing in her palms like a gift. “I use hearts to grow my lemonade poppies.”

“Goat hearts?” Macie asked, a whimper more than a question.

Aunt Lizette shook her head. “No.”

Macie's eyes widened. Adrenaline kicked in, and she pushed herself up. “Get away from me!”

“No, Macie,” Aunt Lizette replied. “You came out here when you know you shouldn't have. If you want to act like you're old enough to know everything, then fine. I'll show it all to you. Come here.” She grabbed Macie's wrist roughly, and began to drag her towards the greenhouse.

“Don't touch me!” Macie screamed, tears swirling up in her eyes.

“I'm not going to hurt you. You're my niece. I have no interest in *your* heart. Look,” Aunt Lizette said, her voice overly enthusiastic. “These are the hearts of men—men who have done awful, horrible things.”

Aunt Lizette, with the heart still in her hand like a fleshy ornament, gestured towards the cooler that they now stood in front of. There were several hearts wrapped in plastic inside. Each one had a label attached to it: *Dave, Rafael, Michael.*

Names. The names of actual people—people who used to be alive.

Aunt Lizette smiled. She let go of Macie's hand, and caressed the heart in her hand like a pet. "I'm doing good work here. When women need to get rid of the men who have wronged them, I help them. My lemonade poppies thrive off of these hearts, too—that's why they're so special. Do you understand it now, Macie?"

Macie wanted to throw up again, but only acid rose in the back of her throat. "I don't, Aunt Lizette. You're actually insane."

"Macie, don't be like that. We could work together, you and I—"

Aunt Lizette's hand reached out for her wrist again, but Macie took off in a sprint. Dirt kicked up from behind her in smoky clouds.

"*Macie!*"

Macie had no destination in mind, her head a fuzzy, incoherent mess of thoughts. If she were to go back to the farmhouse, Aunt Lizette would find her easily. She couldn't walk away from the farm on foot—Aunt Lizette could catch up to her easily in the truck.

The only option she had was to hide.

Footsteps pounded the dirt behind her. She turned around the corner of the barn, and flattened herself against the wall, trying to feel for the door. She found it in a few panicked seconds, the cold metal on the handle situated against splintery red wood. She launched herself inside, wincing at the rusty squeak of the door's hinges.

The musk of goats hit her nostrils. She zeroed in on the huddle of sleeping goats in the barn. There were at least forty of them, if not more—even without light, she could see the outline of their rounded, fattened figures. It would be easy to conceal herself behind them.

The barn door opened with a screech behind her.

"I really hoped you would've been more open to all of this, Macie. I thought you would've grown during our time together. To care for things other than yourself."

"Leave me alone," Macie rasped, her throat dry and constricted. "I don't want to be involved in any of this."

Aunt Lizette walked across the barn slowly, the heels of her boots clicking against the floor. Her lantern casted long spiraling shadows across her face, her lips curling upwards as she laughed. "That sounds like something your mother would say. Liv is so... rational these days. She used to be more emotional, actually, if you could believe it."

Macie said nothing, trying to calculate her next option for escape. Aunt Lizette was blocking the only door to the barn. She looked over her shoulder. There was a ladder in the corner that led up to the second floor. If she made her way there slowly, backing up inch by inch while Aunt Lizette talked—maybe she could get away.

“We had some trouble between us when we were a bit older than you. We both liked the same guy. His name was Jeremy. It was stupid, I know. But it was worse because we were twins—we looked so similar, he could hardly tell us apart.”

The corner of Aunt Lizette’s lip twitched slightly. “He was supposed to be with me, but Liv stole him away. He didn’t even notice that she wasn’t me. The bastard.”

“That wasn’t very nice of either of them,” Macie offered, her tone emotionless. She stumbled a few steps backwards, trying to make it seem accidental.

Aunt Lizette stepped closer. “No, it wasn’t. But it all turned out well in the end, anyway. Hiding his body was difficult—what the neighbor’s pigs wouldn’t eat, I scattered throughout the farm. His heart ended up in a flowerpot, and what can I say? My lemonade poppies would be nothing without him. My first love, my first lemonade poppy. It’s almost poetic.”

Macie coughed, her stomach twisting. She thought of the photo of her mother and the young man, his name scratched out—was that him?

“What do those flowers really do, anyway? Are they really so addictive?” Macie asked, stepping back. Just a few more steps and the ladder would be in reach.

Aunt Lizette’s eyes twinkled, her face contorting into a sick grin. “Oh, I’m so glad you asked. They *can* be addictive, in a sense. They can cause euphoria, feelings of ecstasy—but usually, they just cause disorientation and memory loss.”

Macie took one more step back towards the latter—but her foot brushed against something. A tin can, or some spare farming tool. It clattered and rattled along the barn floor.

The goats woke up in unison with their guttural screams. They stood up together en masse, gurgling and bleating. Macie couldn’t move. The screams entrapped her like a vocalized spider’s web.

“Shall we see what effect they have on you, Macie?”

Aunt Lizette rushed forward, and placed a hand over Macie’s mouth.

Something soft met her tongue—a petal.

It tasted like an explosion, a bursting image of lemon slices soaked in sugar, of poppies swaying in the breeze. A tranquil sweetness.

And then it soured, spoiling on her tongue—rotting everything. Her taste buds shriveled. An acidic tartness overtook her, until her vision blurred, her legs giving away underneath her.

“*Rest now, Macie, and forget.*”

*

Macie awoke in bed, a grogginess clinging behind her eyes and forming a headache.

Aunt Lizette sat in the rocking chair. “Oh, you poor thing. You must be sick,” she crooned, her lilting words sounding more like a song than a spoken sentence.

“Sick?” Macie tried to get up, but Aunt Lizette gently pushed her back down.

“Don’t try to move too much. You’ve been feverish, and having nightmares all night.”

“Oh.” She felt like she was still dreaming. Like everything she saw was seen through a broken kaleidoscope.

“I have good news.. Well, mostly good news. Your parents are here to pick you up early!” Aunt Lizette clapped her hands together. “They ended the trip sooner than expected because they’re getting a divorce!”

That made sense. Macie knew then that she was awake.

“Anyways, before you go today, I want you to have this,” Aunt Lizette said, handing over a small frame. “I made it just for you.”

Macie thought it was a picture, at first, or some sort of painting.

It was a framed, pressed flower. A poppy. An inky iris of seeds flattened out in the middle, its yellow petals splayed out against a white background.

“You can hang it up in your room at home. It’s delightful, isn’t it?”

“Yeah... Thank you.”

Aunt Lizette left the room, mentioning something about getting Macie’s parents some goat cheese to take back home.

Charley sat on the edge of the bed, his white fur ruffled and out of place. For a moment, his eyes looked entirely black. She blinked, and Charley looked normal again. He hopped up towards her, and licked her nose. It tickled like warm bubbles.

Aunt Lizette came back into the room, her arms full of round packages of goat cheese.

“Are you ready to go, Macie?”

“Can I take Charley home with me?”

Surprise swirled in Aunt Lizette’s eyes. “Of course you can. I didn’t think you liked him, though—what changed your mind?”

“His eyes,” Macie whispered, her voice hoarse.

“What did you say?”

Macie shook her head from side to side, and cleared her throat. “He’s, um, cute.”

Aunt Lizette nodded, pleased with the answer. “He is, isn’t he? It’ll be good for you to take him home. Take your time getting up, and I’ll walk you to the door.”

*

On the car ride home, her father said nothing as he drove, and her mother only ever looked at her through the rearview mirror. It startled Macie how similar her mother and Aunt Lizette looked. They had the same eyes. A golden brown. Indecipherable and always watching.

Macie sat in the back, the frame Aunt Lizette had given her resting in her hands. Charley sat in the seat next to her, wrapped up in a quilt. His eyes were alight with excitement, his nostrils flaring from the fresh breeze brought by the rolled down windows.

She decided to break the silence. “When you guys get divorced, I want to live with Dad.”

“Macie!” Her father said half-heartedly, pretending to object. Macie could see the glimmer in his eyes through the rearview mirror, the slight smile at the edge of his lips.

Her mother turned around, glaring. “We’ll talk about that when we get home, Macie. Lizette wasn’t supposed to tell you about... all of that.”

“Okay.”

A few more moments of silence passed, and her mother let out a dejected sigh. “How was your time with Lizette, anyway?”

Macie looked down at the frame in her hands. The petals looked paper thin, almost transparent enough to see through.

A sensation struck her—like a sugar wafer melting on her tongue. It pelted her stomach with nausea, tugged at her taste buds. A physical reminder. Of what, exactly, she couldn’t quite recall.

“Honestly?” She said, tossing the frame outside the window, watching as petals and glass shattered in reflective rays on the road behind them.

“It sucked.”

Gregory Smith is a retired medical social worker. He is the author of 35 short stories, 22 of which have been or will be published. Greg is active on social media, including Facebook, X, Blue Sky, Instagram and TikTok. He enjoys reading, watching sports and classic movies and listening to oldies music in his free time.

Heavenly Connection by Gregory Smith

For the past six months, I found myself looking at my son with sympathy. He had felt the loss of his mother, who had died in a tragic plane crash. But now, it was good to see him open up because I hadn't seen him this animated and happy in a long time.

The disconnected cord of the plastic toy hung harmlessly as he talked. Funny how he tended to use his hands when he talked...just like his old man.

Actually, this Angel Cloud Hospice program called "Heavenly Connection" was for anyone who needed it. Even I could make use of it if I wanted to, but in reality, I thought I would feel pretty stupid talking into a toy phone with no connection.

This whole idea of the Angel Cloud was started back in 2010 in Japan, of all places, as a way to honor their deceased loved ones. They came up with the idea of setting up a toy phone on a small table next to a park bench or along a hiking trail or on church grounds...a quiet and secluded area for privacy and reflection so someone could express one's feelings into the phone, by "talking" to someone on the other end...someone in Heaven. Take your time, gather your thoughts, and say everything you forgot to say or couldn't say in life, maybe something as simple as "I love you." Their motto was "Allow the breeze to carry your words." Finding peace was the ultimate goal.

I don't know if there were any "last words" I wanted to say to Joy. Maybe "Don't get on that plane to Seattle!" Nothing was going to change and nothing was going to bring her back. If I thought of something more to add I could always say it at home, not here in the middle of our town park.

One day after about fifteen minutes of this nonsense—ok, I suppose it wasn't "nonsense" to Billy—I gave him a "come on" gesture to wrap up his conversation because we needed to head home.

"So, how's Mommy doing?" I casually asked as we walked.

"Good," he replied assuredly. "I told her what I did in school last week and she was happy. 'Don't forget to do your homework!' she said."

"Well, Mommy was much better at helping you at arithmetic than Daddy is," I admitted. "It was never one of my stronger subjects."

"I know. She said that you stink at arithmetic," my eight-year-old remarked.

"Harsh but true," I conceded.

"That's okay. She said if I ever need any help, I could bring my book to the park, and she would help me," he replied.

When we started doing the Heavenly Breeze program, we agreed that we were only *pretending* to speak with Mommy. We had accepted the hard fact that Mommy now lived in Heaven and wasn't coming back. So, as much as dear old dad "stinks" at arithmetic, he was the only help available now.

I noticed that my son's "conversations" with his late mother had taken on a more everyday quality, more real-life, when things like homework, the latest Little League baseball game and icky little classmate Susie Tompkins were the main topics of discussion.

When Billy first started using the toy phone there was a lot of understandable tearfulness. Billy would ask questions like "When are you coming home?" and make simple, quiet statements such as "I miss you." These emotional phrases lessened as the months passed. I noticed that he always ended their talks with "I love you TOO," as if she had said it first.

As time went by Billy requested more privacy during his talks. I could understand how he wanted to act stoical and brave, and not cry, just like his daddy, or at least *not be seen* crying. So, I began to walk down the path, still keeping an eye on him yet giving him the distance he wished.

About a month later I met him one day like usual at the school bus stop down the block from our house, and he excitedly began to tell me that he got an A on his arithmetic quiz that morning.

"So, you don't stink like your dad?" I teased. "I guess our lessons together must be paying off, huh?"

"No," he yelled with glee. "It's Mommy! Mommy helps me. Can we go to the park so I can tell her I got an A for the first time ever?"

"Saturday...like usual," I said.

"Please? I know Mommy will be happy to hear this good news," he pleaded.

"I can't tonight, Billy. I still have work to do at home. And you promised me that you would clean that junky room of yours after school, remember? Plus, Mommy *knows* how you did."

"Yeah, but I just can't wait to *tell* her," Billy replied.

"You'll have even more to tell her on Saturday. Hey, what about your old man here? Don't I get any credit for your improved grades?"

It didn't matter. By that time, we had arrived home. Billy ran inside to "write a letter to Mommy" before cleaning his room, a letter which would remain on his desk, a letter about his arithmetic success.

Sometimes it felt like I was competing against a ghost. Billy always loved both of us but I'll admit that he had a special love for Joy. It was my fault. I didn't pay enough attention to my little son or even my wife in the past. I allowed work to come between us. I regret that now, especially with the way things turned out.

I just wasn't, nor will I ever be, Mommy.

*

Billy's time on the Angel Cloud phone was nearly twice as long that Saturday. I know he wanted to tell her the good news about his quiz but I couldn't imagine what else they were talking about. When I walked back to the park bench to escort him home, he was still yakking on the toy phone; in fact, when he saw me approaching on the path, he held one hand over the receiver and started talking in a whispery, hushed tone so I couldn't hear.

"Billy, let's go!" I demanded. "You've been here long enough."

Notice I didn't say "You've been talking to Mommy long enough." This entire charade was starting to grate on my nerves, so much so that I started drinking again, a habit I had given up after Joy died to help me cope with the stress of suddenly being a single-parent. This craziness with pretending to talk to a loved one who was gone was too much for me to handle anymore. I just wanted the two of us to finally *get back to some kind of normal*. To leave the fantasy of the toy phone in the past and move on with life. I made up my mind to start steering Billy *away* from Saturdays in the park. I was sure he wouldn't like it at first, but I reasoned he would get over it, no matter what any psychologist, psychiatrist or social worker said.

"Billy," I began, "Do you really think we *need* to come to the park anymore to talk with Mommy? After all, if Mommy is really in Heaven, which we both agree she is, then you can talk to her from *anywhere*. Doesn't that make sense?"

"I guess," he agreed.

"And you don't actually speak to Mommy directly, do you?"

"What do you mean, Daddy?" he asked.

"Well, you don't really hear Mommy's voice, do you?"

He remained silent for a few awkward moments, his head down, his eyes searching the sidewalk. I had my reasons for asking that specific question. Not that I really believed my son was actually having a conversation with his late mother...

"Well, you don't really *hear* Mommy's voice, do you?"

"Of course I do," he said. "*She wants to talk to you too.*"

Now this was going way too far. Billy wasn't going to get me involved in this charade. The hospice people had suggested that I try talking on the disconnected toy phone too, because it might help me to process my wife's sudden death, and that perhaps I needed mental health counseling as well. Of course, I rejected all of those silly offers. Sure, I took her passing hard, just like Billy, but a grown adult doesn't need to talk on a stupid toy phone to process his grief. I had come to grips with her death in my own way. If I chose to deal with reality through alcohol then that was my choice.

"Billy, I don't know. I'm not ready yet. Maybe I don't want to talk to her. Maybe I'm mad at her for leaving us alone," I said honestly.

My son stopped walking, tears clouding his blue eyes.

"I'm sorry to put it so harshly," I said, kneeling down and hugging him.

Ok, let him get it out of his system. Let him cry all night if he needed to. I would be there with him, offering hugs and support. At least he was able to cry...unlike his father.

"Son, we all process our grief differently," I explained in a whisper.

“Talk to her...please,” he insisted between sniffles.

I hesitated, not knowing how to answer. I wondered why this was so important to him.

“Ok,” I agreed. “Next time.”

*

The following Saturday we went to the park, as usual. Billy had his chat with his late mother. Then he handed me the toy receiver. I held the blue receiver to my left ear. What was I expecting to hear...a dial tone? A busy signal? Or perhaps a ringing sound?

I had decided, delusional or not, that the only way to help Billy accept his Mommy’s passing was to play along. I would make up a conversation if I had to. Anything for my son. Anything to help ease his pain.

Needless to say, I heard nothing as I listened.

“Joy?” I whispered. “Are you there?” I wasn’t sure if I would hear her voice. I braced myself, just in case. It would’ve sounded good to hear her soft voice one more time.

“I’m going to assume that you are there and you are listening. I just wanted to say that I’m sorry. I’m sorry for being angry. It’s not your fault that things turned out the way they did. I wish you had never gotten on that plane. I wish I would’ve been more involved with you and Billy instead of other things. I know now...a little too late...what’s *really* important in life.”

I looked at Billy, who patiently nodded, as if he were a psychologist, encouraging me to process my grief, to forget my guilt and my pain.

Believe it or not I actually waited after I spoke. I waited for an answer. Of course, I didn’t expect an answer. Still, I waited. Why did I hesitate? Was I *hoping* to hear her voice? I waited...and waited...and waited. I felt like a fool, sitting on that park bench, mumbling into a plastic phone.

There was no answer. No sound. Not a thing. Either there never was a sound or my dead wife no longer wanted to talk to me.

Billy gave me a quizzical look. I decided to improvise and make up a conversation. Should I play into his fantasy? Was it the right thing to add to his delusion? My son always had a vivid imagination but this was pretty extreme, even for him.

“Yes, honey,” I said. “I miss you, too. Everything is okay with me. Work is going fine. In fact, I just got a promotion. Isn’t that great? I couldn’t wait to tell you...”

This phantom conversation continued on for a few minutes. I started to run out of things to say so I made up stuff on the fly.

“So, what’s Heaven like? It must be beautiful,” I said, waiting a moment to allow her to “answer.” I asked my deceased wife anything that came to mind at that moment, like “How’s God?” or asking how other deceased relatives and pets were doing.

On the way home we did our weekly post-Heaven wrap-up.

“Wasn’t it good to talk to Mommy?” Billy asked.

“It was wonderful,” I replied.

“Did you *really* talk to her, Daddy?”

I wondered how to respond to that question. Was Billy still playing *pretend* or was he serious? What if I said I really had a conversation with his mother and HE was just pretending all along?

“Billy, remember when the nice lady from hospice told us about the phone in the park? And we decided to try it? We agreed that we were only going to *pretend* to talk to Mommy, right?” I reminded.

“I know,” he said. “I was only going to play pretend too. But then *she answered me* so I didn’t have to pretend,” he said.

Why wouldn’t my *dead* wife talk to me then?

*

The following Saturday was going to be special: It was Joy’s birthday. All week I thought about what I should do or say. As my grief process continued, as I told myself that I was fine, just ignore my sadness, work, drink to forget, I realized that whatever I was doing was *not* working. Billy’s way to cope with Joy’s death was to imagine he was hearing her voice. I needed to try something different.

I did some research about the grief phones and found it was a growing phenomenon. Reading a few testimonials let me know I wasn’t alone. Granted, I didn’t find anyone who actually “*heard*” their deceased loved one on the other end as Billy claimed. I was beginning to believe that his vivid imagination was running wild or...the supernatural was happening.

This phone business did make me think of Joy more often. Instead of trying to forget her I found myself thinking of her even more. I remembered past birthdays since we started dating, and then after we were married and had Billy. Whether it was getting her a nice card, jewelry, candy, going out to dinner or just cuddling at home, one gift I never forgot was a single red rose. Roses were Joy’s favorite flower. A single rose always meant that she was the one and only. It was my signature gift to Joy.

Billy made his own birthday card, like every year on Joy’s birthday, and gift wrapped his most recent school picture. Truth be known, I’m not a bad cook...but I have never tried to bake. Billy suggested that we bake Mommy a birthday cake. Not wanting a fire in the kitchen, I voted for buying cupcakes.

We ended up buying three cupcakes with three candles and we celebrated Joy’s birthday on the park bench. Billy had his favorite, chocolate (with sprinkles on top), while I had vanilla and Joy’s favorite, pumpkin spice, we shared together.

What happened next cannot be explained. It was a mild, calm October afternoon. We lit the three birthday candles on top of each cupcake, sang a brief rendition of “Happy Birthday,” and proceeded to blow out the candles.

“Billy, you do the honors. Make a wish and blow out Mommy’s candle,” I suggested.

As hard as he tried, he couldn’t do it. It was as though we had purchased those fake candles from a novelty store, the kind that, no matter how hard you tried, the candle would not extinguish.

“My wish didn’t come true,” he sighed. “Mommy still isn’t here.”

Suddenly we heard a soft ringing sound from the toy phone on the stand.

Did I *really* just hear that? *A ringing sound from a disconnected plastic toy phone?*

“It’s Mommy!” he yelled, grabbing the toy receiver. “Happy Birthday, Mommy!”

I swear that at that exact moment a gust of wind extinguished her candle.

My mouth hung open for a second.

“Wait, Daddy wants to say something...”

Billy handed me the phone. The moment of truth had arrived. I no longer felt stupid. I believed with my whole heart and soul that my dear wife, on her first birthday away from us, was on the other end of the line...a heavenly connection.

“Joy, Happy Birthday, honey,” I said.

No response.

“I brought you a rose on your birthday, like always,” I continued.

No reply.

“We love you and miss you, Joy,” I said.

Suddenly it happened.

“*Thank you, sweetie. I love you, too,*” she answered.

Click...and she was gone.

Maybe it was the rustling of the trees. Or was it Joy’s voice? Maybe I did hear her voice...*in my heart*. And maybe that’s how Billy heard her too.

Deep down inside I was able to process my own grief. I was beginning to find peace.

And the man who never cries shed a tear.

I took Billy’s hand and we headed home, already looking forward to the next time we would talk to Mommy.