

The Broken Teacup - Volume 8

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John Doriot is an award-winning author and poet. He has written seventeen books and has received seven Georgia Independent Author of the Year Awards from 2022 to 2025. Three of those awards were for collections of poetry. He has contributed poems to *WestWard Quarterly*, *The Broken Teacup*, *Poems for Tomorrow*, *Harrow House Journal*, *Feed The Holy*, and *Four Tulips* magazines.

Winter walk by John Doriot

The woods were covered by a ghostly veil this morning
Apparitions flitted in and out, visible for seconds before disappearing
Though my dog and I walk side by side, today's weather
brought forward a feeling of being lost.

I don't fear what I can't see.
I fear what I can see.
The fog of old age is an ill-fitting blanket.
I am always thankful for another walk, but I find myself
forcing myself to focus on today and not tomorrow
or the ragged nature we have both become.

blankets by Walker Watson

Blankets aren't a lover or a friend,
yet here I lie, where warmth won't mend,
wishing these folds were arms of yours;
but you are gone, and night endures.
Each breath I take returns to me,
as hollow as the space you leave,
I ache beneath this borrowed weight,
where night and I lie desolate.
The sheets remember how you lay,
a fading heat, a ghost of day,
and I, like fabric, twist and turn,
for touch that will not soon return.

Ann Youmans is an editor and writer who enjoys telling stories and experimenting with language. Her poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and can be found in *Wildscape*, the *Brussels Review*, and elsewhere. In her free time, she gorges on audiobooks while walking the dog.

Being a Writer by Ann Youmans

I'm supposed to want to do this:
Wake up with deep thoughts
Write them down
Ponder the sky for more
Find some profundity that rhymes with
"I had Halloween candy for breakfast"

Keep your hand moving, the gurus say
And my hands always are
But not grasping pens
Don't I want to gather my life up
Smear it on the page
Show you my brain?

The struggle says no
Or is that just stiffness
Lumbering, word by word
Toward the next sentence

Scenes on the Way to a Doctor's Appointment by Ann Youmans

Cicadas all the time

Literally all, day and night, every hour, every day, every night
 Finally, one January night, pairing wool socks out of the laundry, it hits me:
 There aren't actually any cicadas here, now,
 in my big stone house muffled against the cold.

The kids today mumble.

They don't enunciate, they lack confidence.
 They know more than they think,
 they need to put their diaphragm under their words.

The office conference room is on the ambulance route. Our meetings are regularly interrupted
 by someone's emergency, by someone sitting too far from the mic
 in a high-ceilinged room of glass walls and exposed brick.
 The Internet glitches.

I stare at my neighbor's masked face:
 more mumbling.
 Why is my instinct to look at people when they talk?
 Why did I think I hear better with glasses?

The audiology booth is a blanket of stillness.
 Sound is waves, and in this room there are none.
 The door opens with a pop,
 headphones rustle past my hair and then murmuring.

silence

static

raise your hand when you hear the tone

I only hear it in one ear, should I raise that hand? Switch hands? Should I talk? If I talk, would
 there be sound in this room?

The word recognition test knows I have been faking it.

This is the word caught

This is the intern fitting me for hearing aids
 These are my robot ears
 I can find the conversation without glancing up, twist the volume knobs off max,
 I hear all the tones.
 I raise my hand.

David Harrison Horton is a Beijing-based writer, artist, editor and curator. He is author of *Necessary* (Downingfield, 2025) and *Maze Poems* (Arteidolia, 2022). His work has recently appeared in *The Belfast Review*, *Roi Fainéant*, *Modern Literature and Yolk*, among others. He edits the poetry zine *SAGINAW*. davidharrisonhorton.com

A Song of Amplifiers by David Harrison Horton

Poplar trees surround the building,
adding color
to an otherwise monochrome
view.

The night of the police raid,
she sang her heart out
in ways
that would frighten her later.

The measure of happiness
is a shifting metric.

Will there be time
for memory
and assessment
when the dust has settled?

Dr. Arya Gopi is a bilingual poet, translator, and academic from Kerala, India, working in English and Malayalam. Her English collections include *Sob of Strings* (2011) and *One Hundred Lines of Discords* (2023). Recent poems have appeared in *Guernica Magazine*, *Ultramarine Literary Review*, and *149 Review* (USA), among others. In 2025, she served as Resident Fellow of the Poetic Frequencies Residency under the UNESCO Cities of Literature Programme at Heidelberg University, Germany, and was the only Indian writer selected for both the Melbourne and Dublin UNESCO City of Literature programmes that year.

Cosplaying a Mother by Dr. Arya Gopi

I look at my mother every now and then,
The cruellest being on earth during mornings.

I look at my mother every now and then,
The kindest person in the world during evenings.

She is easy and difficult at the same time.
My pretences have no meaning beside her.

She constantly swirls around me, breaking
the orbiting patterns out of the usual plot.

Alleviated bridges of love and loss, fall and rise;
Break down at the strike of the funeral knell.

She daily cooks and serves lunch of puritan
emotions; anti-nutrients fight a tug of war and fail.

Overridden by hunger, sleep, and empathy, I ask for
more and more porridge; though I know the ration.

I migrate from room to room as a diehard traveler.
I mislaid her care somewhere in the obtuse past.

My regrets don't have anywhere else to go;
Conventionally, they hide behind the words of hunger.

She says the truth without bothering who the listeners are.
What we eat keeps us alive; it can kill us too, she foresees.

Ascetic in the kitchen and primitive at the reading table.
Erratic beauty is courage for her, and I take it for granted.

She is a mixture of sun and frost and who sleeps
On the harmonium of impalpable familial acerbity.

She is the hard bone on which my unreasonable
miracles break their teeth; an untransferable simulacrum.

She eats all incongruous gossips at once and equally divide
the twenty-four clock among us and bet her sun never sets.

The most unchanged human being I ever know,
But the most changed mother I am yet to know.

Leigh-Anne Burley publishes children's and adult poetry. Her work is online and at her website.

Derailed Dreams by Leigh-Anne Burley

Dreaming dreams in a land of
sugarplums and fairy tales.
Shimmering schemes in festive boats
glide down the merry river.

To a magical realm where
might be and could be
dressed in pristine perfection,
march down our bright lanes.

Soaring ambitions tied to kite tails,
grand plans, grandstanding at parades, and
year-round picnics by tranquil lakes.

Train cars crammed with reality chug into stations
carrying shovels and bloody knuckles.
Long-haul freight cars huffing up steep hills
to somewhere lost over the rainbow.

Hardship and heartache switch track lines.
Grinding wheels slow the click-clack rhythm.
White steam turns black, elongating
the arrival times at train stations.

Our train huffs through strange terrain
with no conductor and no tickets to punch.
Captives of lurching thoughts, we ache
to disembark at the next station.

Lying awake, straining to hear
the blast of the train whistle.
Outside, the what-ifs plow the fields and
plant the seeds and
wait for the spring rains and the autumn harvest.

We crawl back into a cocoon and pray
to be repurposed into what we do not know.
Something, anything but this gut-wrenching disappointment.

At last, the whistle blows, and the train pulls into the roundhouse.
Exhausted passengers step down onto the wooden platform
carrying suitcases of broken, displaced dreams.

Back home, they pick up where they left off
among familiar houses and shops
along ordinary lanes on ordinary days
dream dreams anew under cloudy and sunny skies.

Sammy Bellin grew up outside of Pittsburgh. His poetry appears or is forthcoming in *Rust & Moth*, *wildscape. literary journal*, *January House Literary Journal*, *Delicate Emissions*, *La Rotonde Review*, *Barely South Review*, and *Sontag Mag*. He currently lives in Lewisburg, PA, and enjoys hanging out with cats and wandering in the cold. You can find him on Instagram @sammyabellin.

Memories of Strawberry Picking by Sammy Bellin

A soft dew kissed our green shinbones
as we crouched in soggy grass,
attacking all that the earth spit back,
and started the picking.

Crimson blush stained my stubby shy fingers,
Mother's were burnished bronze
with a mix of fresh dirt and strawberry guts
tallied on her calloused hands.

Negotiating prickly leaves, hissing at hidden
crawlers claiming berries for their own,
I was of little use. Mother could yell,
surely, but instead

she'd reach in the wicker basket and pluck
the freshest berry, juicy red ichor
bleeding from her thumbs. With a gentle toss,
I'd cradle it two-handed, this sacred

communion from the healthy patch and bite.
Nothing more needed said.
Humbled by my hunger and a sweet tooth,
I settled into a squat and began the hunt.

Joey Whitton was born on the East Coast, raised on the West Coast, and now lives in the Deep South. Hardcore punk has inspired him for decades. His poetry is forthcoming in *Heavy Feather Review* and has appeared in *Flipside Magazine*, *Misfit Magazine*, *Sky Island Journal*, *Poetry Pacific* and *BlazeVOX Journal*. This is his first appearance in *The Broken Teacup*.

Hello, Crow by Joseph Whitton

I brought you
some crushed crystal
so we can stay
up all night—

bandages for your eyes,
a razor for your feathers,
and ice cream too—
Crow,

it's better
than putting
your beak to
the wire.

Alex Stolis has had poems published in numerous journals. 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 Hudson Valley New York with his partner, poet Catherine Arra.

Pretty girl keep growin' up, playin' make-up, wearin' guitar by Alex Stolis
title from "Left of the Dial" by *The Replacements*

In a dream she falls;
she's not good enough to fly
she's not bad enough to be punished.

Her wings, dirt & mud; she clings
to a branch of stars
bursting into constellations,

braces herself against the smoke of space & falls.

She falls through onyx soot
past Andromeda, past Orion, past Pegasus
into a blinking & suspicious ocean.

She floats. As if anyone's going to care;
as if she's supposed to know herself better,
as if life wasn't for dying all the time,

as if living once is enough; until it isn't.

Maple, rusty autumn leaves swayed as they
 Descended and disintegrated

Temperatures dropped degrees below zero,
 Heralded winter snowfall, and I felt the snow
 Crunching beneath my feet under the clearest,
 Starry night skies I had ever seen

Snow melted, days warmed, leaves grew in
 green—
 And I remain

In memory,
 I still ache
 All those tearful nights I spent wishing I could leave
 Feeling myself unraveling

A myriad further sorrows will come—

Yet so will contentment
 Days with soft sunrises, singing starlings,
 tranquil Sunsets and starry night skies

Seventy five years are ample opportunity
 To create memory
 I called it my quarter life crisis
 My father asked me if I planned to live so
 long

I answered:
I don't plan to but
I might

Rachel Turney, Ed.D. (she/her) is the Writer in Residence (2026) at NKollectiv in Englewood, Colorado. Her poems, research articles, reviews, and drawings can be found in a variety of publications. Rachel is passionate about immigrant rights, teacher support, and empowering other artists. She is a *Writers' Hour* prize winner and Best of the Net nominee. Her photography appears on a few magazine covers. Rachel is the founder of the popular online reading series Poetry (in Brief). She is on staff at *Bare Back Magazine* with her monthly column *Friday Night in the Suburbs*. She reads for *The Los Angeles Review*. Her debut poetry collection, *Record Player Life (the b-side)* is available with The Poetry Lighthouse. Her second poetry book, *Retired Wannabe Club Kid*, is out now with Parlyaree Press. Website: turneytalks.com Instagram: @turneytalks Bluesky: rachelturney

Pun and Coffee by Rachel Turney

Draped in fog, the mountain is constant and consistent,
like your shoulders peeping out of white sheets.

I know I will find you there every morning, next to me,
in a state of unconsciousness.

I watch you intake breath in the strips of light that leak
through the frosted windows.

I slip from the bed to make our coffee. I know the tinkle
of the whirring beans will wake you. This is my blame-
less way of getting your snoozing attention.

Coconut milk spins and froths. Ceramic clinks when we
tap our mugs together, items we owned before we met
and brought with us to this shared home.

You make me laugh, probably by saying something that
is witty, but also stupid. You live in a maze of puns.

I wrap my arms around you and think about how you
are my mountain and that I never want to dwell in a flat
place again.

Bryn Wood is a writer based in Cyprus whose work explores varied styles and approaches. Writing, a relatively recent passion shaped by chronic illness, serves as both an outlet and a means of engaging with the world, the human experience, and all its complexities.

Utility by Bryn Wood

bury me
deep, deep
near the earth's core

I'll keep the fossils
company

while
they keep me warm

or

burn me
use my ash as chalk
dust your palms

I'll keep your grip firm
as we
scale a climbing wall

prick a hundred holes
in my stomach

fill them with lemon seeds

and
lay me in
Neapolitan soil

braid my hair into two
skipping ropes

gift them to your daughters
they can double dutch

I'll count

do what you will with me

just let me matter

anywhere
at all

Julia Raye is a writer and poet from Grand Rapids, MI. Born in Florida, she moved to Michigan when she was 12 years old. Her work is influenced by her neurodivergence, her background in video editing, and her love of magical realism. She has been published in *Heartlines Spec* and the *Grand River Poetry Collective's* online journal. When she's not reading her poems at open mic nights, she's watching cheesy sitcoms with her fiancé and snuggling her two cats.

found light by Julia Raye

- *on the myth of the light leaving autistic children's eyes upon vaccination*

*Has something evil boarded up
the windows to her soul?*

No plywood here, though I did unfurl
prismatic window film, paste it across
the glass, and smooth out the air bubbles.

Just a measure to soften my inner world,
that's all. I still see you, your shape
pacing the neurologists' office, fretting

for my future. Remorse will haunt
your next quarter-century, so let me
exercise it: I love you no less fully,

though in sun-caught fragments,
you have to believe me. Denounce
guilt at your god. You did your best

with the daughter you were given,
and I've done my best
to leave the light on.

Bella Melardi is a poet and author. She writes about the political and personal. She attends OCADU.

This Was home by Bella Melardi

You tell me
you love like you are bleeding,
my arms swallow your shape.

My body slips
beneath your grip,
our shadows fixed
under twilight teeth.

I am blood,
already rehearsing my exit,
never trusting containment.

I love into the dirt,
always leaking,
dripping, falling,
scattering across concrete
until the ground grows freckles.

Blood abandons the safety of skin
when it mistakes exit wounds
for escape routes.

But in the end
it only trades warmth for cold air,
until the body gathers it back
and whispers:

this was home.

Mike is a Missouri poet whose work moves through rural myth, grief, and the quiet strangeness of everyday life. His poems favor restraint, atmosphere, and emotional precision.

Backwards Man by Mike Hagen

When the dark comes, I wait wide awake in the bed they call empty.

They see the light that soft, steady thing behind me something still living. Not me.

The backwards man sees me.

He waits where the light thins where it gutters where it turns porous not in it. Never in it.

The backwards man waits.

I keep my eyes wide hold them wide as if that might keep me here.

I count. I breathe. The numbers will not stay in order.

Sleep slips in without crossing the room.

And then something presses into me.

The mattress gives. Not beside me against me.

Something lines with my body close enough to touch.

His limbs fold inward joints nesting where joints should open.

His head turns too far then further and still he finds my face.

I pull the sheet up thin, useless a breath between us.

He presses in.

A hollow where his nose should be not flat gone and I feel it that absence against my skin.

His hand holds mine before it reaches me. Backwards.

Fingers folding the wrong way tightening until my bones listen.

His grip is not on my hand it is in it.

For a second my fingers answer him. They move before I do.

The sound leaves me before I can make it drawn out like breath in cold air.

The backwards man waits. All day he waits. All night he feeds.

He does not take me. He leaves me.

I push back head to head a dull, desperate knock. Again. Again.

Get off me.

Nothing turns.

Morning comes.

Only the light always the light and me standing where I was.

K. P. Nguyen is a lover and writer of poetry and speculative fiction. She is a first generation Vietnamese-American. During the day, she works as a non-profit fundraiser. She has previously been published in *Ethereal Voices Literary Magazine*. She is currently working on multiple novels that highlight the shared experiences and struggles of diasporic Vietnamese families and their children. You can find her on Instagram (@kpnguyenwrites).

Lesser god by K.P. Nguyen

Ready, aim, shoot for the stars
If people can make it around the moon
you can pull yourself out of bed
put one foot in front of the other
brush the sleep out of your mouth
eat a whole breakfast
exceed expectations
clock out of your 9-5
clock into your passion project
cross your t's and dot your i's
string words together
stack sentences over sentences
and paragraphs over paragraphs
hallucinate without influence
surgically remove portions of your soul
and stitch the pieces into worlds
you created from scratch
like a lesser god

Kaitlyn Altobelli is a BFA student in Creative Writing at Bowling Green State University, where she is the managing editor and secretary of *Prairie Margins*. Her work earned second place in the Toledo Museum of Art 2025 Poetry Prize and has been published in *Silly Goose Press*, *30 North*, *Folio*, *Green Blotter*, and *Short Vine*. Follow her writing journey at <https://linktr.ee/kaitlynaltoelli> or on Instagram @kaitlynaltoelliwrites.

Lamentation of the God of Wolves by Kaitlyn Altobelli

Are you doing this right?
 Little beast trapped away, chewing on kitty litter
 waiting to be fed.
 That's not where you belong.

Little pup, you should run
 through no man's land,
 crying out to Fenrir
 but you're whining in the basement,
 dreaming of a biscuit.

Is this the American fantasy?
 White picket fence, taste of exoticism—
 we call it second nature
 to destroy the undeciphered.

You take too much pleasure
 in obsession. So hungry to be loved
 by what hurts you.
 This is the origin of cruelty:

creature stops dreaming.
 Are you doing this right?

Stuck barking at the gates
 never sprinting through twilight.

Brennan Burnside is a home care aide. He lives in the southeast right now.

The Migration of the Plastic Bags by Brennan Burnside

My own experience of them comes after my son was murdered in the hell-fire of a disturbed young man bearing a semi-automatic weapon. It was a decade and a half from that time now and the young man has been forgotten along with my son and his thirteen classmates and young teacher. I liked to imagine that I had been forgotten, too.

Certainly, I'd tried.

I had cocooned myself in silence.

My wife and I had separated and I had not remarried. She had. Something inside of her switched that never switched in me. I wondered if there was some element of my son's death that was my fault. Maybe she saw that and that's why we had stopped talking five years ago. Just stopped like the signal from a dead satellite drifting out of the solar system.

Me, too.

I am a dead satellite floating in empty space. I spoke often, but it was always through a membrane. My brother never punctured it and my parents had settled for a soft, uncomfortable silence. I know it's absurd, but I can't shake the feeling that everything has been my fault. I have dreams that I hold the door of the school open and refuse to close it. I've had them for many, many years. I've never told any one. Like I said, no one can puncture me. I'm impenetrable. Holidays are pleasant enough though. Enough. Still, it always feels like it's snowing inside.

This last December I was disintegrating. The parts slowly falling off and drifting away silently. I preferred this way. Just disappearing. That was fine. That's what I tell everyone: "I am fine, I am fine, I am fine..."

The voice gently fades away as the body floats further into space.

Snow covers the living room.

Pleasant. Soft. Quiet.

Just last Saturday in a park near my home, as I was absently turning the rusting wheel of a merry-go-round for my niece—they appeared. I had not seen the news that day, but already word of another shooting in a neighboring county had reached me on the radio broadcast before I quickly shut it off. My niece said, "What's that?" and I followed her finger. At first, thinking that it was the coda from a birthday celebration a few streets over: a group of balloons released in a fervent moment of joy, but their translucent bodies quickly brought things into focus...

It was as I'd read: *they travel in packs, appear to communicate with each other*. How? It seems absurd, but *the way* they move easily suggests it. Especially if you look as long as I did. There is poetry in their gentle billows, almost a language. There are no markings on them. No grocer chain in their right mind has claimed them. Online you find all kinds of origin stories. People

claiming that *they* let them go years ago in order to remember a relative fallen to violence—but it is all ridiculous. They are simply trying to conceptualize it. Grip it in their palms. Make it smaller so it can be solved and mystery can be dispelled and a normal course of affairs can be considered. So that confusion can be reconciled to some crude time-table logic. The Reign of the Banal always desires authority from us. It is a winter sport. You can always tell its approach by the snowflakes on your windshield.

The plastic bags have no more reason than weather systems and *even less than that* because if you could understand the language of a storm it could explain to you why it is the way it is. It could open its chest to you and show you its meteorological tissue and you would understand how little your concern was in the face of something that has no concern for the delusion and affectivity of time. Only of push and pull, of accumulation and release. Maybe that is what is so sobering about the plastic bags. Perhaps they're in migration to that island of trash undulating somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. Why not? Perhaps trash has become self-aware and now calls to its ilk to join it as their body grows to eventually consume us all. Why not?

No one knows their data. The more they try to parse it out the less it reveals itself and the more they only see themselves standing alone on a small plot of earth. Staring up with a palette of terrified eyes. Fragile and alone and alive. Thinking, "I am only my job right now, but when I retire what will I be?"

The bags, some have speculated, are God. What a concept, I thought to myself as they passed, that God would be so obvious.

I counted 27 of them.

"27," I said to myself. "27."

My niece shook my hand and I looked down. She asked me if I was okay.

She said that I'd been crying.

Nora Esme Wagner is a senior at Wellesley College. She lives in San Francisco, California. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Smokelong*, *Wigleaf*, *JMWW*, *Milk Candy Review*, *Flash Frog*, *Vestal Review*, and elsewhere. Her stories have been selected for Wigleaf's Top 50. She is an assistant fiction editor at Pithead Chapel and the Co-Editor-in-Chief for *The Wellesley Review*.

Allergens by Nora Esme Wagner

We'd always been amicable. Not me and Gael, who from the start were like feral animals, each intent on domesticating the other. Me and Molly, his British Shorthair. I knew the spot by the base of her tail she liked scratched; I knew to scatter her kibble in huge, random orbits around the room, even though Gael hated the mess. I understood her hunting instinct.

The first time was over something stupid. I hadn't preheated the oven, or guacamoled the avocados before they browned, or filled Molly's water dish. It's hard to remember. Harder still to remember the sensation of his hands. Hanging at his sides, they seemed harmless. Even with their pale knuckles. If I squinted, they just looked like white mittens.

Molly watched it all unfold. Firefly eyes gleaming from under the couch. A toy squeaked between her claws as her grip tightened and tightened, the plastic rat threatening to atomize, until the noise finally made Gael stop. "Stupid cat," he said, striding toward Molly, who leapt away from him like a jet of fizzy ginger ale. I panted, I put my hands around my neck to remind myself I still had one.

That night, after the half-apologies, the teary make-up sex, the petroleum jelly, my sneezing fit started. Tickling me with her spined tongue, Molly lay between us in bed. Every time Gael crept closer, her tail batted him off.

"I think I need a break from Molly," I said.

"But she always sleeps with us."

"I might be having a reaction to her fur."

"You're not allergic to cats." Gael frowned as I blew more phlegm. "This has never been a problem. You probably just have a cold."

So we slept. Or Gael slept, while I achooed, itched, forced out breaths, tried to unburrow Molly from my side.

The next morning I woke up covered in hives. They were hot, red, raised, like rooibos tea was bubbling up from under my skin. My throat had stiffened into a rod.

"Gael. Gael. Gael."

I couldn't muster more syllables, so when he finally roused, I only held out my arms.

"What the fuck?"

We agreed I'd spend a week at a friend's. Space from Molly was the pretext, but I dodged Gael's goodbye kiss. It landed on my clavicle, a misfired missile.

"Was there a fight?" my friend asked.

I explained the Molly problem. The eruption of welts, how my throat bristled. No, this had never happened before. Yes, how strange!

One morning, as I was frying an egg, waiting for the whites to turn from translucent to opaque, she tugged down my turtleneck. By then the bruising was faint, olive and mauve. "I can give you something for that," she said.

As she rubbed in the cream with gentle hands, I knew my sojourn was over.

Gael and Molly were waiting for me by the front door. She was the same shade as his sweater, just as staticky and electric. He kissed me and I kissed back. Molly swept her rough tongue over my cheek. The reaction had fully passed, and my skin felt even better than before, purified, like tiny fish had nibbled away my dead epidermal layer. Even the bruises were almost gone, invisible under foundation.

We made love on the couch, against the fridge, in the shower. We laughed over how silly we were to think I could be allergic to Molly. What fools! How relieved he felt, knowing he could keep us both.

In the bathroom, Gael's jerks rocking neon-toned shampoo bottles out of the caddy, I saw Molly slink in through the open door. He didn't notice. But I caught her flashing eyes, her poker-tail.

We both called out sick on Monday. Spent the day with our bodies interwoven. Molly prowled the house, banging open doors, surprising us in corners, like a parent keeping their teenager from getting too handsy. We swaddled her in a blanket. We covered her in pets. We talked about what wonderful cat parents we made. Maybe we should try for a baby!

I thought I'd finally discovered the true nature of our relationship. What had been sour was just fruit waiting to sweeten. How had I ever left? How could I ever leave again?

The second time.

I hadn't opened the window to let the weed smell out, or checked to make sure the chicken was fully cooked through, or binned Molly's litter when I said I would. Again, it's hard to remember.

I didn't know Molly was there until her tail whipped my legs. My body felt all neck. Then the swipe of her fur. Reminding me of elbows, fists, knees. Before I could act, Gael yelped. Released his hands. Screamed at Molly for scratching. I rattled for breath.

Gael passed out on the couch; I took the bed with Molly. Waking, the hives were painless compared to last time. Still, without a word to Gael, I packed a bag and headed to my mom's.

Marshmallow, the cat she adopted after I left for college, had hair so silky and fine it seemed vaporous. Like exhalations in cold air. When I asked to sleep in a separate room from Marshmallow, citing my recent bout of allergy, my mom tilted her head. "Really? That's new."

All three of us shared a bed. By morning, my throat felt clear, clearer than it had been in months. The hives were flatter, paler, but the bruises even angrier.

Gael had sent me dozens of frenzied texts. Photos of Molly. One captioned: She misses her mama sooooo much! Her pupils were mean slashes.

I didn't respond. Instead, I followed my mom to the vet to pick up medicine for Marshmallow's goopy eye.

"You had this problem when you were one," my mom said. "A clogged tear duct. I thought you were the prettiest baby in the world! But looking back on photos, you're a little monster. A mother's love is blind."

I unrolled balls of yarn for Marshmallow to chase, slept curled around her for half the day. Eventually my mom asked when I planned to go back. She had her Mahjong group at seven. "Unless something's wrong. Then stay as long as you need," she said with crinkly eyes.

No, nothing wrong. Only the allergies.

I gave Marshmallow a sweatpant lace to keep. Pausing in the doorway, I turned around and saw she'd already shredded it into fibers.

There was no reconciliation period when I returned. Gael was furious I had ignored his messages. Furious I had abandoned him and Molly. His hands instantly pounced. The hands I'd once associated with back rubs, cat pets. Massaging marinade into chops for our anniversary dinner.

He slept nearly on top of me that night, alcohol breath exuding in heavy, cloying puffs. Between his body weight and my already tightening windpipe, I couldn't get air. Molly had been kicked out of the bedroom, but through the crack in the door I could make out her sleek form and glowing eyes. All night she stood vigil.

The reaction was the worst yet. I couldn't produce a sound. Only waited for Gael to wake up and see that I'd transformed into a mutant raspberry.

"We're getting you tested," he said coldly.

The doctor, whom Gael kept insisting was only a nurse, was no-nonsense. She had a springy ponytail, sharp questions that she directed only to me. When did the hives start? Did I have a history of animal allergies? Could I think of another potential trigger?

With a tiny dose of the cat allergen, she pricked a patch of skin on the back of my arm. One of the only areas on my body free from hives. A spot Gael hadn't touched last night.

"Normally the reaction is pretty instantaneous. But because you're demonstrating such severe symptoms, I'll give it a few more minutes."

No bump erupted. My skin stayed clear, somehow shinier than before.

The drive home was silent. Gael made erratic, unsignaled turns, hands throttling the steering wheel. I crept to the edge of my seat. Kept my eyes on the lock switch. In the windshield reflection, I was so pink and glossy it looked like my gums had peeled over my face.

It was the last time.

As I slipped out that night, Gael in a drunken, sleep-talking stupor on the couch, Molly wouldn't shut up. I gave her a treat to stop her mewling. Tonguing it out of my palm, she fixed me with a questioning stare. She wanted to know where I was going. If I'd be back.

I bent down and picked her up. Velvety fur against my hot, swollen body felt like an icepack. She stroked me with her tail. Licked the length of my briar of hives.

I took his keys from the wall hook. And took his damn cat too.

During pollen season, my eyes sometimes water, my throat sometimes closes. For a moment I am flung back. Reminded of what it feels like not to be able to breathe.

The tightness in my chest loosens when I see Molly chasing the golden airborne particles. Her paw reaches out to close around one but always stops just short.

Erica Radcliffe recently earned her Bachelor's degree in Physics and in the near future hopes to get a Master's degree in Planetary Science. She love science but writing has always had a special place in her life. She likes to write poetry in prose though she leans more toward the latter. Her main inspiration comes from wanting to explore emotions in different scenarios, or from objects in nature that she finds beautiful. When she is not writing she is either reading fantasy and/or sci-fi, playing video games, or spending time with her family.

Gummy by Erica Radcliffe

The woman returned from the store, breathing heavily as she set most of the plastic bags down on the counter. A boy trailed behind her and set down the lighter ones he'd insisted on carrying.

Two old ladies had commented on how much they'd looked alike. They said her "son" had her eyes and then asked where her husband was. She'd smiled tightly and lied that he was at work. She didn't have anyone else but only the boy knew she was lying. She felt a little guilty but also knew it wasn't necessary to tell the truth since there'd be so many questions afterwards.

However, they should've been corrected on the whole "mother" thing. She didn't like to be called that. Her stomach rolled with guilt every time someone said it. Including the boy. But then she would need to explain and she was not in the mood for judgement, or to be the topic of gossip later over cups of Marriott coffee.

"Remember that girl from the store?" One would say.

"Oh yes, tragic. I wonder how her heart can take it." The other would reply.

"I say, she'll cause too much sorrow for him."

The other would nod her head so hard her glasses would slip.

"That's the last of it," the boy proclaimed proudly with a smile, bringing her back to the present.

"Good." She huffed and turned toward the door so she could lock the car "Start unpacking the bags."

The plastic was rustling as she opened the door that led to the garage. He was always so obedient that it surprised her at first. She assumed that he would act like any other seven-year-old and hide away to play on his iPad. But he was also much too astute for his age.

She sighed as she got to the car and saw pink, sticky strands on the leather seats; the remnants of gum. The acrid smell of the Clorox wipes stung her nose as she used one to clean them off.

She tried not to buy him gum that often for this reason, and, well, because it was bad for his teeth. He'd stopped when she spotted him putting it on the seat in the past, but perhaps she needed to be a little more firm. The fruity odor told her that it had been strawberry Mentos, his recent favorite. She remembered the time she'd asked him why he was so happy when he first tried it.

"I think it's like you, mama," he had said. Not noticing how she cringed, he continued:

“You seem so hard on the outside, but the inside of you’s a gooey, sweet mess,” he finished as he severed one in half with his teeth.

“See?” he showed her. When she nodded, he put the other half in his mouth and started to chew. The second piece in five minutes.

So focused on her task, she didn’t hear the door open or see two large eyes peek out and see what was taking her so long.

She turned around when she heard a small gasp, but only saw an open door. As she finished, she noticed strings that were connected to her hand. Looking up she saw more attached to the boy’s booster seat. Sighing, she went into the house.

A few hours later, they both sat at the table, the boy working on his homework while she read on her phone, occasionally checking on him. She had just finished a chapter of her book when she heard a sniffle. Looking over, she saw the boy rub his nose.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, concerned. He rarely ever cried around her.

He looked up at her with a sad, but fond, expression.

“It’s my heart, mama.”

She stiffened at the word. “What do you mean?”

“My heart, it’s...” he paused, brows furrowed in concentration. Then his eyes widened slightly, as if he’d had an epiphany.

“Gum,” he said softly.

“Gum,” she repeated.

“Yea...It’s so sticky, like gum. Like when I put it on the seat of the car and take it off, there are the little sticky strings. But you don’t like them.”

She saw tears bunched above his lower lashes.

“Why don’t you like them?” he choked and started to sob.

She leaned back, startled at his behavior.

“What do you mean?” she asked gently, “Honey, I don’t like it because it leaves a mess everywhere. The seats get sticky and I have to get the gum off before it hardens. I wasn’t angry, just a little...annoyed, sweetie.”

Yet this attempt to console the boy only caused him to cry harder. She reached out her arms to try and hug him, but he wiggled out of her grasp. He cried, clenching and unclenching his fists, looking down and the pink strings that stuck between his fingers. The woman sat confused, helpless as his cries continued and eventually turned into hiccups. When he calmed down a little more, he began to speak.

“That’s it mama, you don’t like them,” he hiccupped. “My heart’s so sticky and no one likes it. They try to rub it off and it hurts. Especially when it’s you, mama!” He took a breath, “The other woman always yelled at me for it, so I know that she hated it, and me too.”

She felt her chest become heavy as he started to sob again. She thought he understood. He’s too smart for a seven-year-old. *But*, she thought, *he’s still seven.*

“Sweetie,” she said as softly as she could, “I’m not your mama.”

“Why not!” he wailed.

As he continued to cry, she looked down and saw the thread, thick and red and pink, between them tremble. It seemed that the threads she’d been seeing everywhere weren’t just her own. Thinking back, she remembered the first time she saw the pink strands wrapped around red ones. It was their first time shopping together. She’d bought him the mentos gum, and he had hesitantly offered her one. She took it with a “Thank you” and a smile. The boy’s eyes grew wide, and he smiled the most dazzling smile a seven-year-old could give.

He was still crying as she wrapped him in her arms, squeezing him tight. She held him until he was sniffing softly, and then until he fell asleep.

Later she would see him numbly step into Sam’s van, on the way back to his home. Back to his real mother. She knew he could only stay with her for a limited amount of time.

As the van drove off, she could see the sticky thread between them grow thinner and thinner.

The next day, she was in Sam’s office.

“Well, the boy’s set up with her now,” Sam said. “It’s always nice to bring families back together, don’t ya think?”

“Yeah” she replied, eyes focused on a stack of papers on the desk. She’d signed those papers earlier. She could still see the sticky threads that clung to them.

“You did good. Most people either treat them little more than animals or end up adopting them. Terrible amount of paperwork when they do that,” Sam said while rearranging the boy’s files.

“Especially in cases such as his,” Sam continued, “people don’t understand that it’s really for the best for the children to return to their parents.”

She looked up, “And if they hate moving back?”

Sam looked up at her and sighed, “I’m afraid we tell them the same thing. But let me tell you, it gets extremely messy if they don’t. There’s questioning, going to court, and so much paperwork.”

“Right,” she replied, gaze fixed on the floor.

Sam continued to speak, but it turned into a dull mumbling in the background. She kept her eyes on the floor, on the thin string laying there. And if she looked hard enough, she could see it bleeding in a steady trickle.

She cut all ties with the organization the hour they called her about another child.

Chris Britt is a short-story writer living in Evans, Georgia. His first published story appeared in the Fall 2025 issue of *Euphemism*.

Leonard by Chris Britt

Mama never gets mad, but she's pacing the kitchen, shaking her head, and every few seconds she stops at the table and bends over and reads the article again and her face gets redder every time.

"The nerve of him," she says. "The actual nerve."

It's afternoon, but Mama's made a bowl of oatmeal with cinnamon and sugar because it's cold in February and I spoon it at the table.

"And I voted for him. Told everyone at church he'd do a real good job because he's done so well in business."

The paper is upside down across the table so I can't read it, but I know she's talking about the mayor.

"Third grade, Leonard. I've known him since third grade. A little uppity because of the money, but always nice to me."

I remember third grade. Mr. Taylor put little parachute soldiers on the bulletin board when we learned to multiply. The men climbed the board as we memorized our twos and threes and once we learned our nines everyone got their parachute soldier and threw it in the air over and over at recess. Rachel Phillips' soldier tangled in tree branches and I got in trouble for climbing the tree and rescuing it.

"A letter." She nods like a chicken pecking the ground. "I'll write a letter to the paper. And I'll get other people to write letters." I'm confused because Mama said actions speak louder than words, and I'm not sure if writing a letter is action or just a bunch of words.

The *Clifftown Inland Mariner's* two-person staff had dedicated the front page to articles concerning Blaine Henderson, the mayor of Clifftown, Missouri. In office for six months, he was a lifelong Clifftown resident, descended from his grandfather's iron-mine fortune, which funded his father's aircraft-component business, which begat Henderson's purchase of three radio stations and the TV station in nearby Kingston. For two decades, local companies curried favor, seeking but never obtaining reasonable ad rates.

Henderson eventually tired of the business and directed his energy toward expanding his Clifftown estate. He purchased cornfields from local farmers, sicced attorneys when the city council denied setback variances, penned raging editorials denouncing a political climate that prevented freedom-loving Americans from constructing a private airfield. When the previous mayor died after falling ill at the American Legion's senior-adult catfish fry, Henderson flooded his own airwaves with attack ads that ensured victory.

The morning of his first day as mayor, Blaine Henderson waltzed into the city manager's office. "It just occurred to me," he said, while thumbing through one of the two Bibles Bill kept on his desk, "there may be underutilized city land that could be sold to raise funds for worthwhile endeavors."

"Pardon?" said Bill, danish flecks lodged in his beard.

Henderson rapped the Bible with a knuckle. "Let's peruse the official maps, shall we?"

That conversation, six months later, led to the February headline: "Mayor Plans Personal Petting Zoo on City Land."

"Goddamn lying reporters," said Mayor Henderson. "It's a tiny unused corner of the park, to be purchased at fair market value, so that Annabelle has an appropriate space for her menagerie. Did you know that Teddy Roosevelt kept a shitload of animals at the White House?"

Police Chief Harold Thompson, childhood friend of Blaine Henderson and former morning DJ of Radio KTXQ in Kingston, moaned from behind his face-rubbing hands. "Yeah, B. You've mentioned it several times."

"You know the only thing that ever happens in that corner of the park is cow-drop bingo on the Fourth of July? Hell, I'll let the cow shit on my front yard. I'll even pay for the goddamn fence and bingo cards." He wore a gold Rolex on each wrist, and checked the time on his right watch. "Hand me that phone, now."

The *Inland Mariner* phone rang as Walter Wilkins tugged at his scalp. He stretched his arm, hand hovering above the receiver for two more rings, and snatched it. "Wilkins."

"What in the bloody hell, Walter?"

"We gave you a heads up and nothing you said refuted our reporting."

Muffled mummerings on the mayor's end, as Walter tapped his foot.

"Where did you get your information?"

Rolling his eyes, Walter said, "I've got sources. But I'll tell you, all we needed were the public records from the state. It's all there."

More muted conversations as Walter waited for the mayor to remove his hand from the phone. "Did you pull off a Watergate, Walter?"

"Come on, now."

"You've got stolen records hidden in the *Mariner* office?"

"Don't be an idiot. We're just reporting facts." A space heater lay silent on the floor. Walter nudged it with his foot and the fan roared before sputtering.

"I'm gonna need a retraction."

“Not possible, Mr. Mayor. We can do an interview, or you can draft a response that we’ll publish...”

“Goddamit, work with me here. We used to four wheel together.”

“Can’t do it.”

The line went dead and Jean appeared at Walter’s door, worry creasing her forehead. “I can tell by your voice that something’s up and you’re busy and you’re gonna send me to the high school to photograph the play rehearsal.”

“You’re a master of deduction, Jean,” said Walter while opening a file cabinet.

“Please don’t. Those kids and their snide remarks.”

Walter glanced at Jean’s pudgy neck and briefly reconsidered. “Sorry, shit storm’s about to hit.”

Bacon smell from the kitchen. I smile because bacon means pancakes and Mama buys real maple syrup even though it’s more expensive.

“Leonard,” she says. “I meant to tell you last night. I ran into Mr. David at the store. They have Cherry Coke starting today and he wants you to have the first one. Isn’t that thoughtful? I told him you’d drop by after your haircut. Wouldn’t you like a nice fresh Cherry Coke?”

I nod at Mama. I would like a nice fresh Cherry Coke.

Mama gets up and grabs a white envelope from the counter. “And take this letter to Mr. Walter. Hopefully he can include it in next week’s issue.”

I put on my red scarf and red Clifftown High jacket from a long time ago, when they let me pass out water bottles at basketball games.

I walk one street over and into the park. Pass the ballfield where the dog bit me. I had to kick it in the balls because its teeth had clamped onto a smaller dog’s neck. The smaller dog died right there and they put the other dog to sleep and I cried for both of them.

Turn right at the creek and follow the brown grass topping the levee. Little white pieces of ice on the sides of the creek. Squirrel nests way up high in the trees but I don’t see any squirrels. One time a squirrel came to our back porch after we went inside and it tried to eat a hot dog bun. Since then, every time we have hot dogs, Mama points and says, “Evil temptress of squirrels!”

I’m early to the barber shop but Mr. Travis unlocks the door and lets me read *Sports Illustrated* while he gets his scissors and combs ready. The barber chair has arms with cracks in the leather from all the elbows pushing down.

Mr. Travis wraps my neck tight and says, “You couldn’t pay me enough to go to a Cardinals game, after that strike. A bunch of millionaires just trying to make more millions.”

Once we took the church bus to St. Louis and Ozzie did a backflip on the field.

“How about that mustache, Leonard? A little trim?” I nod and Mr. Travis snips. He has a knife tattooed on his forearm and a blue vein runs through it.

I cross the street with my hands in my pockets because I forgot my gloves. Smoke comes out the back of the barbecue place.

The tobacco bulged Mayor Henderson’s lip as he paced. Brown-stained paper cups, in varying degrees of fullness, lined his desk.

“Carol!” said Henderson. “Run down to the Sinclair and fetch some Copenhagen.” He pulled a \$100 bill from his wallet as his assistant rumbled from the outer office in her beige orthotic shoes.

She paused at his desk and gathered the dip cups. “No!” he said. “Leave them. I like visual proof of my progress.”

“Your dipping progress?”

“Progress of any kind, Carol.”

Raising her hands in mock surrender, she snatched the money from his hand.

“Don’t forget the receipt,” he said.

With her linebacker shoulders, Carol leaned forward, as if ready to charge the mayor and barrel through the window to the ground below. “Do you really think I’d steal your change?”

“We’re in crisis mode. No time for hurt feelings, now.” He shooed her away and pressed his hands against the desktop.

Chief Thompson, his face like pounded dough, trudged into the office and brushed shoulders with Carol as she passed. “Look out your window. We got protesters.”

They peered through the blinds at the domed courthouse across the street. Three people, bundled against the cold, stood near the empty fountain, poking signs into the air.

“Bunch of commie assholes,” said the mayor. “Get rid of ’em.”

“It’s public land, B. First Amendment and all.”

“Don’t give a fuck.”

“I’m afraid we’re required to give a fuck.”

Blaine spun his head, neck popping like an aging wrestler. “How many times you been sued?”

“That would be zero.”

“The courts are fucking turtles and I’m the hare. Somebody wants to sue? God be with you, and maybe you’ll get a resolution in five years. By then, no one gives a damp shit.”

Two blocks later I see the courthouse, across the street from Mr. David's restaurant. There's a soldier statue in front of the courthouse, by the fountain. Usually there's no one there, but today there are three people with hats and gloves and signs.

Mr. David's not open yet but he unlocks the door and lets me sit at the table by the window. I keep my scarf on because I'm by the door and the cold slips through. I look at the signs across the street. They're made of colored paper and have sticks attached to them. Cars drive by and honk and the people wave. One of the signs says, "Parks for the People."

Drum roll against the counter behind me. "Big day, Leonard," says Mr. David. He fills a big plastic red cup with ice and pushes it against the machine. "Come up here and I'll take your picture with the Cherry Coke. The *Mariner* might publish it." One time my picture was in the paper after the basketball team won districts.

I smile, with teeth. The Cherry Coke burns my throat and it's the best cherry I've ever tasted.

In my pocket I feel the envelope and thank Mr. David for the Cherry Coke before leaving and walking another block to the newspaper.

Usually when I go to the *Mariner*, Ms. Jean and Mr. Walter tell stories about the funny people in Clifftown, like the man who was scared to be in jail so he stuck cardboard inside his peehole so the guards would take him to the hospital, but today as I open the door Ms. Jean rushes out with her camera and says hi and runs across the street toward the courthouse. Mr. Walter doesn't look up from his typewriter and when I place the envelope on his desk and he sees that Mama wrote "Letter to the Editor" on it, he nods at the pile of envelopes in the basket on the counter and says, "Tell your mother that great minds think alike."

Chief Thompson appeared in the *Mariner* office at 4:15, folded piece of paper in hand. Outside, red lights blinked from two police cars surrounded by jacketed patrolmen. One of them shoved a dolly onto the sidewalk and leaned against its handle.

"Got a warrant here, Walter." Chief Thompson, five-foot-three in boots, waved the paper like a damsel's handkerchief.

Walter Wilkins stepped casually from his desk, hands resting in his back pockets. "Remember that time on the morning show when you called that retirement home in Kingston and pretended to be an Indian guy, like the guy on *The Simpsons*, and kept asking if they serve Slurpees for dinner?"

Turning and beckoning the police officers looking through the window, Chief Thompson said, "What's your point?"

"Great preparation to lead a police department."

"Ok, boys!" Thompson said as he scratched his cheek with a middle finger extended. "Load up these cabinets and computers."

In fifteen minutes, the police reduced the *Clifftown Inland Mariner* to boxes of yellow legal pads and drawers of dried-up ink pens. Walter stood nodding among the dust bunnies and power cords, arms crossed, before turning to Jean. "Grab the camera and document the hell out of this."

The next day I walk to Mr. David's restaurant and stop at the door because across the street I see the three people with signs from yesterday, but there's a fourth person and I can't move because it's Rachel Phillips and I haven't seen her in years and I don't know if she lives in Clifftown anymore and even though we're 35 she still looks exactly like she did in school when she was the only person who would sit next to me in church and never made fun of me and one time we prayed on the floor in pairs and she held my hands and for a long, long time I would think about her soft fingers every day.

The door rattles when I yank it and I walk right past Mr. David and into the bathroom. In the mirror I see that my hair is thinner than when Rachel last saw me, and I'm wearing black glasses instead of the clear ones I wore in high school, but I still have the same red mustache that I grew senior year so I think Rachel will recognize me and smile and when I think about it a warm puddle spreads through my chest.

"You alright, Leonard?" says Mr. David when I leave the bathroom. I must have a look on my face.

I nod and he gives me a Cherry Coke.

At the window I watch Rachel, with her wool cap pulled down over her ears, and her hair is still curly red and tumbles from under the cap. I think about her red hair and my red hair and even though I don't know how this works I wonder if our kids would have red hair if we ever had kids.

Then a fifth person walks up to the group, carrying a sign, and he stands next to Rachel and hugs her and my insides twist because she hugs him and he bends down and kisses her wool cap.

She holds her sign high and yells something I can't hear and she looks angry and happy and beautiful all at the same time.

The guy next to her holds his sign high and walks in circles and even though I don't know him I know he's not good enough for Rachel.

The *Kingston Herald*, that morning, featured a photo credited to Jean Wessel, showing in full color the aftermath of Blaine Henderson's raid on the *Inland Mariner*. After Chief Thompson left, Walter had used all 93 horses under the hood of his '88 Dodge Omni to sprint the twenty minutes from Clifftown to Kingston. The *Mariner* was a mere weekly publication, while the *Herald* was the county's daily newspaper. Walter had spent the previous evening with both the reporting and editorial staff of the *Herald*, resulting in unequivocal condemnation of Blaine Henderson.

Chief Thompson trudged into the mayor's office as Henderson, standing by the window, yelled, "Carol! Coffee!" The mayor's face darkened as Thompson waved the *Herald* like a windshield wiper.

"You're losing friends. Stay on Carol's good side."

"You know that LBJ used to take a dump with the door open, all while jabbering with his staff?"

"Please tell me Carol hasn't seen your pecker." He threw the paper on the mayor's desk and pressed his palms against the sides of his head.

"She should be so lucky." The mayor turned to the window. "Where are we with the protesters?"

Pointing toward the courthouse, Thompson said, "I've got Jenkins and Mobley over there, keeping an eye on them."

"I want SWAT, Harold."

"There's no reason for that. It's just five people making noise."

A sloppy spit left the mayor's mouth, dribbling down his chin, some landing in the cup he held. "Show of force, numbnuts. I want those protesters gone and the way they'll leave is us making them shit their pants."

Thompson massaged the back of his neck. "Our SWAT guys are brand new. Maybe two trainings in Jeff City. They don't do crowd control."

"How hard is it to stand there and look like a badass? I want shields and helmets and batons. And that tank-lookin' thing we got from Fort Leonard Wood."

"It'll just draw more protesters and more attention." The chief's voice, unlike during his radio days, was heavy and defeated.

The tip of the mayor's shiny black cowboy boot slammed into the table under the window, toppling framed photos of horses and jet skis. "Don't make me shit with the door open."

The chief raised his hands as one does when encountering a rabid dog. "It'll be dark in a few hours, and they'll go home," he said, motioning toward the courthouse. "I'll talk to the guys this afternoon and get 'em ready in case things get worse tomorrow."

At breakfast, Mama's frowny face as she reads the Kingston newspaper. "I just don't understand him." She flashes the paper at me and I see a picture of the protesters and Rachel's face is small but I'll cut out the picture later and save it in my desk. She folds the paper and tucks it under her arm. "Walks around like he can just buy everyone off and bully the city council and Walter, all because he's the mayor."

When Mama asks if I've seen the protesters, I nod. "I don't want you over there," she says. "Just stay on Mr. David's side of the street, okay?"

Before leaving the house I run a comb through my mustache. I wonder if Rachel would like a Cherry Coke from Mr. David's restaurant.

When I open the door a blast of frigid air rushes in and I see ice on the walkway and on the sidewalk. There's no wind but there's a little frosting of snow and as I walk through the park I keep stepping off the path and onto the snow because I like the crunch it makes under my feet.

Yesterday there were five protesters at the fountain, but today about fifteen people circle the fountain, all holding signs, and two police cars are parked nearby and as I get closer a black truck like from a war movie parks near the fountain. The truck says "SWAT" in white letters and the door opens and out pours five or six police officers wearing all black and helmets and carrying clear shields that look like plastic and are nearly as tall as the police.

The cops stand in the street, looking at each other, and then at the protesters, and back at each other. I look for Rachel, but she's short and maybe she's behind one of the tall protesters.

I see through the smudged window that Mr. David's is full. People sitting at tables, waiting in the bathroom line, leaning against the walls eating sandwiches. I open the door and warmth hits my face.

I join the line and the man in front of me turns and looks across the street and runs out the door. In the space where he stood, the space I step into, are red curls under a wool cap and my palms get sweaty inside my gloves and it's suddenly so very hot in Mr. David's because it's Rachel right in front of me and my throat is dry like sawdust and I never know what words to use.

I remember standing behind Rachel in the cafeteria, her hair spilling down to her shoulderblades, and it was pizza day but the line wasn't moving so she kept rising up on her toes and I loved watching her calves flex and relax. I wanted to tell her that she had strong calves and pretty hair but I was too scared and the next week we graduated and I didn't see her again until yesterday.

I pull off my gloves and wipe my hands down my pants because they're so wet. I want to reach out and touch her on the shoulder.

So I reach out and touch her on the shoulder.

"They're just standing around, Harold. Like a bunch of virgins at a frat party."

The chief's jaw worked at the antacids he'd just popped into his mouth. "You don't escalate unless there's a need. Sometimes presence does the trick."

"I want them gone. Now."

Chief Thompson lifted the walkie-talkie to his mouth and clicked the button.

Rachel turns and her mouth drops open and smiles. "Leonard, it's you!" Her cheeks are red from the cold and she has little wrinkles beside her eyes because she's smiling. She looks in my eyes like no one has ever looked in my eyes and I want to stand there forever with Rachel.

She reaches out and squeezes my arm and air rushes into my mouth like a big firehose of wind.

“How are you?” she asks.

I want to tell her that I went to Kingston State for a week but came home because I was scared and banging my head against the wall in my dorm room. How I live with Mama near the park but it’s not bad and she should come over tonight because Mama said she’d cook tacos. How I bagged groceries at the IGA for four days but quit because I was sweating the whole time and the girls who worked there were mean and the manager smelled like fishsticks.

But I never get the chance.

Cold air behind me as the door opens. Rachel’s eyes get big, looking over my shoulder, and her eyebrows push together and she looks angry. A man’s voice behind me yells, “SWAT guys have batons out!”

“No, no, no,” says Rachel and her hand drops from my arm and she’s gone out the door.

I follow her onto the sidewalk but stop at the street because Mama doesn’t want me to cross it. Rachel runs into traffic but it’s okay because the cars driving by are moving really slow.

The SWAT team stands shoulder-to-shoulder on the sidewalk, facing the protesters, who stopped circling the fountain and are now holding their signs high. Rachel grabs a sign propped against the fountain. She stands next to the guy who kissed her and they all start chanting and I want to throw up because the guy will kiss her again.

But he doesn’t.

He looks at Rachel with an angry face and gestures toward Mr. David’s and his mouth is yelling but it’s not moving the same as the other protesters’ mouths so I know he’s yelling at Rachel.

One of the police officers raises a walkie-talkie to his ear, and Rachel lowers her sign and turns and yells at the guy yelling at her.

The police officer lowers his walkie-talkie and shouts to the other police officers and they’re all nodding and looking down at their belts and stepping in place, like at the start of a race.

The guy lowers his sign and points a finger at Rachel and as he steps closer to her she steps to him and he pushes her with his elbow and Rachel steps back and slips on the ice and falls backwards and I forget everything Mama ever told me as I step into the street and I’m not running but walking fast around the cars that have stopped. The police bang their shields against the ground and all I want is to make sure Rachel’s okay and then punch the guy in the head and take Rachel home for tacos.

The police start to move toward the protesters and I know I need to walk around them to get to Rachel. There’s a car stopped in the street blocking my way around the police, and the driver is yelling and pointing at the police, so I walk right toward the police as fast as I can because I see Rachel is still lying on the ground and no one is helping her because they’re all looking at the police.

Then I'm next to a cop but a little behind him and I think maybe everything's okay because Rachel is on her knees and trying to stand up, and the cop next to me turns and his eyes get big and I stare at his eyes because Mama always tells me to make eye contact and the cop's arm swings up and his big black stick smashes into my chin and it's like in the movies where for a moment everything stops because it's all blinding lights and my eyes don't work.

When my eyes work I'm lying in the road and the slush is cold against my cheek.

The cop has his knee on my ribs and reaches for my hands but my hands reach for Rachel because the other police move toward the protesters and the protesters are pushed against the fountain and I start to scream and scream because Rachel never stood up and she's on her knees stuck behind the protestors who are being pushed against the fountain. There's a metal railing on top of the cement around the fountain and my chin is wet with blood or snot and I'm crying and praying at the same time but there's not enough time for God to do anything because Rachel's looking right at me and her head is pressed against the railing and her mouth looks like a fish mouth and I know I'm the only person who can save her so I yank my wrist from the cop's hand and push my palms into the slush and that's when the cop's boot kicks me in the gut and the air rushes out of me.

He rolls me onto my stomach and his knee is digging into my back. My chin against the street feels like a thousand needles, but all I can think is that I'm facing the wrong direction because I see the underside of the car parked in the street and Mr. David's restaurant behind it. I can't see Rachel and I don't know if she's okay and I think maybe they'll arrest me and arrest Rachel and put us in the same ambulance so we can take care of each other.

Red mustache on Mama's face.

I blink and try to move but everything hurts.

The red mustache goes away and I see it was Mama holding a mustache to her upper lip. She looks older than I've ever seen and squeezes my hand. "You're in the hospital, sweetie. They're taking care of you."

I want to ask about Rachel, but I can't move my mouth and it hurts and all I can see is her head smushed against the fountain metal.

Mama's cheeks are wet but she smiles anyway and holds up a newspaper. "I want to show you something." It's the paper from Kingston.

On the front page hundreds of people stand around the fountain at the Clifftown courthouse. More people than I've ever seen there.

"Look closer," says Mama. She stands and brings the paper closer to my eyes.

Mustaches on faces. Some black and some brown, but mostly red. On the men and women and the little kids standing on the fountain.

"They're for you, Leonard."

I groan because that's all I can do.

"You remember Rachel Phillips from church? She's in a room on the floor below. She gave an interview and said you were trying to help her when the police hurt you. So everyone went to the party-supply store in Kingston and bought every single mustache. They had to drive extra down from St. Louis."

I try to smile but lightning shoots through my jaw. I start to cry and Mama pats my shoulder and yells for the nurse, but I'm crying because I thought Rachel was dead and now I hope Rachel will walk down the hallway with me, with those gowns that flap and show butt cheeks.

The nurse puts drugs into a tube and I feel light and my jaw stops throbbing.

"Remember that Chinese man?" says Mama. "The one who stood in front of the tanks? Mr. David says you're the Missouri version of him."

I remember the Chinese man. I hope he's okay.

Mama kisses my forehead. "They say a thousand people at the courthouse today. Someone set up a microphone. I'll drive over and tell everyone you're out of surgery. They'll be so thrilled."

She crosses the room and stops at the door and puts her hand on her heart. "You made more change than a sackful of letters."

Mama leaves and I close my eyes. I see Rachel next to my bed with a bandage covering an eye and one arm in a cast. My jaw doesn't hurt anymore and I pull the needle out of my arm. My bare feet step onto the cold floor and I stand facing Rachel. She holds my hand and rubs it with her thumb. We lower ourselves to the floor and hold hands facing each other just like we did in church. The heat from our bodies warms the floor and I want to hold Rachel's hands forever.

Looking Through Windows by Peyton Kullander

I didn't mean to start the habit.

I'd thought about telling the staff that you can see directly into the psych ward from the apartments across the street, but I hadn't gotten around to it. I figured that if no one else had bothered to, I couldn't be considered a bad person.

It really was simple curiosity at the beginning. I couldn't look away, it was like a car crash, but the car was volatile and could explode at any moment leading up to it. Well it was like a series of car crashes, one after the other, each one more or less likely to burst into flames.

I still remember the first patient I had the pleasure of watching—I decided to call her Mary. It seemed fitting, because from what I could gather she had religious psychosis. I could see her praying for hours each night at the side of her bed, holding a rosary or something that looked like it. After that came Harry—the man with the circular glasses who paced around the room and fought off invisible ghosts, shadow boxing for his unknown audience.

The paintings came later. I'd run out of ideas and subjects, no more girls in cityscapes and proud portraits—I found myself allured to the characters behind those barred walls. The first one I made was of Mary, holding a rosary of pearls while in blue hospital scrubs. The next one was of Harry, fighting the air. Then came Susan, with her thick auburn hair and screaming fits. I painted her fighting off the male guards.

I stood before my easel, right in front of the window. Phil was pacing around, picking the skin off his nails and mumbling to himself. I outlined the curve of his sharp jaw. I heard a knock at the door.

“Coming!” I yelled, pulling the curtain shut.

“I'm sorry to sneak up on you like this, but I wanted to do this in person,” Scarlet said as soon as I opened the door, pushing past me towards the couch. She started to sit, then looked at it and bounced up, like something had bit her. “See look—this is what I'm talking about, you don't know how to take care of yourself!”

“What?”

“I'm sorry, I should probably start from the beginning.” She took a deep breath. “I don't think this is working.” Tears dripped down her face.

“Why are you crying?”

“I really like you, but I think we're just at different points in our life,” she said after sighing. “Like this,” she said, waving her arms around, “Like this, you can't keep yourself clean. And you're so fucking secretive! You're so picky about everything!”

“That's not fair, you just walked into the middle of me cleaning! I was just doing the dishes!” We were barely seeing each other at that point anyway, but a sinking feeling set into my chest, a hollowness in my stomach. “I promise I can change.”

“It’s too late,” she said, looking down, “I just can’t do this any more.”

“Do what anymore? We barely see each other?”

“Exactly? What’s the point? I don’t want to fight. I should get going.” She walked towards the door. I let her, figuring there was nothing else to be gained by begging.

After the door shut behind her I took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. I figured I should try to feel the emotions in my body, something one of my art professors taught me, but I felt strangely normal, heart rate as usual, no sweat on my brow, just like how I was when I was painting Phil. I didn’t know what to make of it. I looked at the credenza by the door. It looked monstrous. I kicked the leg, snapping it in half.

I sat in the silence and debated my next move. I walked towards my closet and flipped through my button downs, finding one to wear. I was going to go out that night, find a hookup, find a rebound. No way was I going to take this in the chest. No, I was going to take this like a man.

Inside was dark and dingy, the booths had cracked, aging, brown linoleum and one of the pool tables had a tear right down the middle. It was cheap, so it fit into my budget. I took a seat at the counter.

“What will you be having?” the bartender asked me.

“Just a Miller High Life.” I looked up and down the bar. It was still early so it wasn’t packed yet. There were two men my age that I passed over quickly, two girls that looked to be underage, a woman sitting alone reading a book. I grabbed my beer and headed over there.

I sat at the stool next to hers. “Whatcha reading?”

She put the book down with a smile. “*A Very Nice Girl*,” she said, showing me the cover.

“What’s it about?” I asked. I felt my face twitch and tried to relax.

“It’s about this opera singer who falls into a love affair with a wealthy older guy. It’s really good, a lot smarter than it sounds,” she said, giggling.

“Oh really,” I said, curling the side of my lip. “Sounds pretty sexy to me.” She blushed.

“It’s not that type of book!” She lightly slapped my arm. “I wouldn’t read that in public!”

“Oh so just not in public?”

“You know what I mean!” She was full on laughing at this point.

I asked her what she does. She was a travel nurse, only in town for the rest of the week. I told her that I was an artist and she got a sparkle in her eyes. “Really? I’ve always wanted to know an artist.”

“You don’t know any artists? I feel like there are a lot of us.”

“Well not at least where I’m from.”

“And where’s that?”

“South Dakota. Middle of nowhere.”

“Wow that’s far,” I said. “Would you ever move to the big city?”

“Honestly, maybe. I’m liking it a lot more than I thought I would.” She took another sip, finishing her glass.

“What are you drinking?” I asked. “I’ll get you another one.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” She responded, looking down.

“Oh come on, here look I’ll do it for you.” The bartender walked towards us. “Can she get another of whatever she was having?” She was still looking down, giggling softly to herself. I wondered if this was the first time someone’s bought her a drink.

The bartender set down her drink. It was bright pink. “What is that?” I asked.

“Vodka cran,” she said, innocently sipping through her straw. I smiled.

“Ah, nice. I’m more of a beer guy myself.” I said, holding the bottle out to cheers. She clinked her glass back and seemed to settle into the moment, her shoulders relaxing.

I ended up figuring out that she was 24 and named Lynn, which was good because then she wasn’t an unacceptable amount of years younger than me. I told her I’d been meaning to compliment her hair, that it was stunning. I was trying to woo her but it really was, it fell into brown curls down her back. It had to have been natural, how perfect it was. You could always tell with girls who tried too hard, there was always a fatal flaw, a hair out of place, a smudge of lipstick on a tooth. Only girls with perfect natural beauty could maintain it all the time. It was how nature intended it.

We continued to talk about her job, me letting her talk all about herself. It was nice for the girls, they were unused to it and welcoming towards the change. She liked the fact that she got to help people but hated the blood and the fact that she had to invade people’s privacy. I said that I admired her for it, and it was kind of true— God knows I would not have the patience or altruism to do something like that. I was perfectly fine living in my apartment, budgeting what money I had left of my inheritance to float me by until I made it big.

We sat at that bar talking for hours, staring deeply into each other’s eyes. I’d read something online that said that sustained eye contact forces a connection, so I kept that connection strong, burning between us until I felt certain that she would go home with me that night.

She tumbled over her heels out on the street and I had to catch her, quickly grabbing her arm. “Ouch!” she yelped, pulling back her arm once she got her footing.

“Sorry, I was just trying to help you.” But I could tell something had changed. She crossed her arms and a pout emerged on her face. “I’m sorry if I hurt you,” I eventually said.

“It’s fine,” she said, still looking forward. I clenched my fist and looked straight ahead.

Eventually we found ourselves outside of my apartment building. It was red brick and had a black metal door on the street, with a loud buzzer that reverberated through your ears after it finished ringing. I took her up to the third floor.

“Sorry that it’s not the biggest place. I’m really here for the location,” I said, opening the door. I held the door open for her as she walked in, taking in the room. I flicked on the lights.

“I like it,” she said, but I could tell that she was forcing it. “I like the green.” She walked further into the apartment, towards the window. She began to look at my current painting.

“Oh, is this what you’re working on?” she asked, leaning her head in closer.

“I call it Phil.”

“Is that what you’ve named this guy?” She was still looking at the painting.

“Yeah.” I shrugged. I didn’t want her to look up, to look out the window, where Phil was now pacing at that moment.

I had only told some of my friends about the inspiration of the paintings. I told it to the ones that wouldn’t care, but I did change it for the general public. I said that they were representations of the different parts of my psyche, manifestations of all of my neurosis’. I guess it worked well enough. But still, I didn’t want Lynn to see. “Where do you get your inspiration from?”

I took a deep breath. “It’s a representation of different maladjusted parts of the psyche through stereotypical psychiatric patients. It’s an exploration of how we pathologize different normal human feelings.”

“That’s really interesting. I’m guessing that this one is anxiety?” Her head started to turn towards the window. I moved towards the couch.

“Why don’t you sit down with me. Take a breather.” I said, patting the spot next to me. She looked at me strangely.

“Um, sure.” She walked towards the couch and gingerly sat down next to me. I put my arm around her shoulder.

“Want me to turn on a movie?” I asked, reaching for the remote.

“What do you have in mind?” She looked around the room. Her face started to turn towards mine, towards the shining light through the window. I grabbed her chin and kissed her. She pulled away. “What the fuck!” She yelled.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to.” She looked straight at me, then right through me. I could see in her eyes that she saw it. That she saw him.

“Is that fucking him? Is that the fucking guy from your painting?” she yelled, stomping towards the window. She pulled the curtain back to get a better view.

It was undeniable. Phil was pacing in the same exact way expressed in my painting. I searched my brain for solutions. “Look, I can explain.”

“There’s nothing you need to explain,” she said, pushing past me. “You’re a fucking creep. I’m leaving.”

“No, I promise!” I yelled, following after her, reaching my arm out to her. “It’s not what it looks like!”

“It’s exactly what it looks like!” She yelled, stopping to face me. I started to cry.

“I really didn’t mean to, I couldn’t help it.” I said, the tears starting to roll down my face.

“Oh great, so this is some compulsion. I’m not doing this, I’m out of here.” She walked toward the door.

“Please!” I screamed as she slammed the door. I collapsed on the ground, the sounds of my sobs the only thing breaking through the sinful silence. I cried and convulsed, the feeling building up through me. I stomped towards the window, the fire building in my veins.

“Fuck you!” I yelled, but he couldn’t hear me. “Fuck you!” I yelled, then opened the window. I grabbed the painting and threw it out onto the street. I looked up to see Phil, staring at the mirror below.