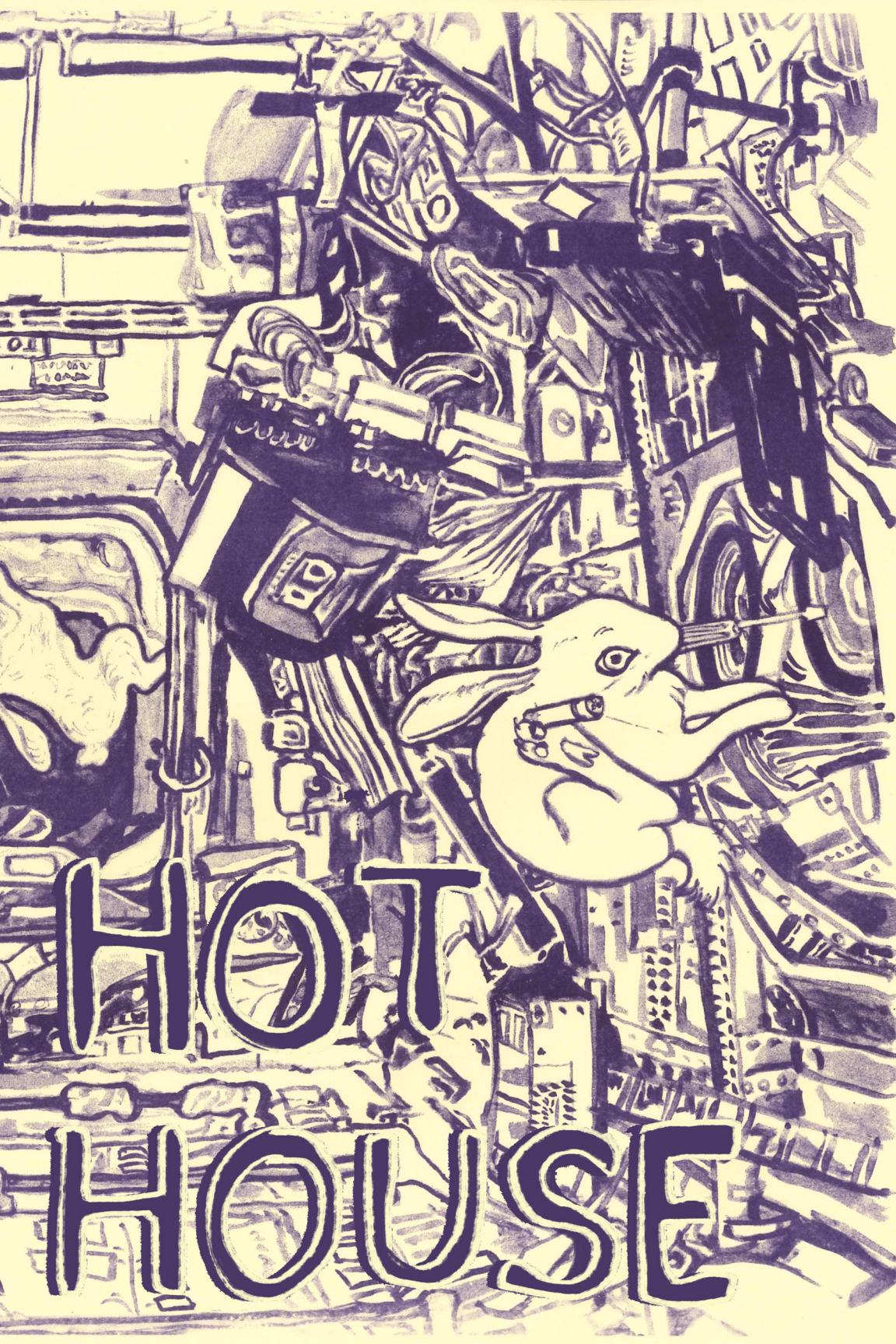
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Dedicated to those who
dream under the Texas sky

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unblank your page, friend!
bonnets blush blue for no one,
songs are better sung

Keep writing,

Charlie Sharpe
Editor-in-Chief

Fiction

The Bell

Esperanza Magaña

The bell is eight feet tall and oxidized into a mint green like an abandoned bunch of copper pipes left to rot in the darkest corner of a basement. It is aged a hundred years and the wood base supporting it has withered and chipped in various places, but the amount of carvings and staples, with bits of colored flier still stuck underneath the tiny silverbars, will distract from the fact. It is in memoriam, the bell, but the name has been scratched out in a hatch-cross pattern and has not been rung in more than thirty years despite standing in front of the town hall. The clapper was stolen ages ago. The town hadn't bothered to replace it. Nobody cared. Why should they? It didn't matter, in the end, that the bell was voiceless because what was there left to ring for? It has been sitting there, growing old, for as long as Valerie can remember.

❧

Valerie sits at the bell after school, everyday, for a long, long while.

❧

Today, after a particularly harsh week in which no one would listen, because they never do, Valerie sits against the bell, warming her cool body with the metal. Her neck is hung swan-like. She believes it can reach anything.

Valerie crawls under the lip of the bell, only standing once she is covered in darkness. She cannot hear anything inside. No sound seeps through. It is like she's dreaming—she feels weightless. The structure is cool from the rain that had just stopped, and she's in darkness.

The bell looks much bigger when you're on the inside—empty too. There is black soot all over, in patches. She thumbs the hole above her where the clapper once was, for it is now gaping and soulless. All she can think of is the clapper, how it worked, what it might've looked like in here. Would it have felt less lonely if Valerie were here with it? In an act of sudden anguish at the world, Valerie swings a heavy fist onto the curved wall. The bell vibrates and a small dong sounds, but it disappoints Valerie. She hits the wall again, and the metal body shakes tiny Movements, but still, she is not pleased. Two fists create a stronger vibration, and the body of the bell tips upwards, like a child in its first stages

of flying in the air via swing. Valerie ignores how the sound rings in her ears, she instead takes a step back before turning into dead weight and hurling her body against the wall, almost into it. hurling her body against the wall, almost into it. A loud ding and the sound reverberates throughout, accompanied with swaying from the bell. The body swings back and takes the girl with it, but she doesn't mind. She has to time it right, so some throws take longer than others, but they all result in the same answer: ringing.

It is clamorous and aching, the bell no longer hollow and devoid. It drowns out everything, everywhere. It drowns out the girl's laughter, the blood leaking out of her ears and nose, it covers the noise of her scraping shoes, and chimes unabashedly deafening. Valerie's shoulders will surely be bruised, and she thinks she has broken a wrist, but that is trivial when compared to the symphony she's conducting. For she is the master, commanding what she once couldn't.

The bell is swinging fast and wildly, and Valerie will have to be quicker if she wants to win the game she's playing. The girl throws herself against one wall before quickly flinging herself forward again in a rhythmic repetition. It is exhilarating. Her feet twist and trip over the other and her hair is flying all around her like the gnarled branches of a sickly tree as she spins around and against the curve of the wall, laughing. It is a joyous sound that matches the same frequency and tone of the bell, sister-like and haunting.

The bell being run on its own, a miracle! A plethora of neighbors, the locals, and folks from town had all gathered together in the streets, dancing and frolicking to the cries of the bell.

They grasp hands and intertwine fingers, squeezing each other's palms as they twirl each other around and 'round in the breeze and warmth of sunlight. They cannot hear the laughter or the slams inside the bell, and no one looks close enough to see the bloody shins peeking out from under the lip of the bell, being dragged around not by a force of their own.

Ganadora

Jude Villarreal

When I want to kill myself, I hear Mami's voice.

"¡Levántate, Yolanda! Acostada no se logra nada."[1]

She says it in her *señora* way, low and rough, and I imagine her swatting my legs with her newspaper until I swing them off the couch and plant my feet on the carpet. Carpet, I have come to know, is so American. They have it everywhere, even in restaurants and buses. In Mami's house, the floor is a strange amalgam of rock. One step would leave my foot black and my body cold, so I wore shoes everywhere—and wear them everywhere still.

On our first full day in the new apartment, Fernando told me many Americans take off their shoes before entering the home.

"Like the Asians?" I asked him.

He had nodded and, with a business-like air, removed his shoes and plopped them neatly beside the front door. "There," he said, grinning. "Practically gringos already."

I wanted to tell him I had no plans to become a gringo, but I did not want to fight, and anyway, this is one of those things I know he will not understand.

From the moment we crossed the border, I have not stopped feeling guilty. I left my country for what Fernando insists is a better one. In some ways he is right. The cars are shinier here, the air less pocked with dust, the ketchup more substantial, the cities taller. But I think in the ways that matter, he is wrong. Americans, they are very smiley, but not at all noble. If they knock at your door it is to sell you something or to ask a favor of you, never to *echar el chal* or share some food. This is because the centerpiece of American life is the climb. Even when they look right at me, I feel as though their eyes and their hearts are peering upwards to the bigger thing. Slow living, that doesn't exist here, at least not from what I can tell. It might not be their fault, but still. I do not want to be like them.

1 "Get up, Yolanda! You can't accomplish anything lying down."

"Ponte a hacer algo, niña."[2]

The baby starts to cry from the other room. I get up immediately, shimmying out of my stained apron and tossing it on the couch. Isabela's face is bright pink, her little fingers balled up tight. Normally I would dote on this, *mi princesa color rosita*, but I'm filled with worry. Isabela is a good girl; she never makes a fuss. I lift her from her cradle, pressing her close to my chest. Once she's nestled into the bend of my arm, I pull down my shirt and forfeit my nipple into her mouth. Her tongue glides around it, but she doesn't latch on and instead tries to beat her fist against my breast.

"*Ándale, mi amor.* You are hungry. You have not eaten," I tell her, repressing the escalating pitch Fernando claims my voice takes on in my more frantic moments. Isabela only squeezes her eyes shut and wails. It's so loud. Her pacifier isn't on the dresser where I keep telling Fernando to leave it, so I know he was the last to use it on her. He's always putting it somewhere new, and now I can't find it and the girl is crying which she never does and I don't know what's wrong, but my Lord, it is *so loud*.

I fly around the house, turning over sofa cushions and kitchen rags, asking Isabela, "What is wrong, *mija?* Why do you cry?" as if she could answer me.

After ten minutes of searching, I let out a sob. Isabela's screams have dulled my hearing. It feels like there's a bubble in my right ear. Despite all of my soothing, she refuses to relax. I lower myself onto the American carpet of her nursery, rocking her back and forth with wet vision. I think about calling Fernando and asking him where the pacifier is, but he does not like being called at work. What's more, he probably wouldn't remember where he left it. He would be both useless and mad at me, just like the girl. I press my fingers against my temple, forcing myself to take deep, staggering breaths.

I have suspected there is something evil about me for a while now. Good mothers, they consider maternity a blessing upon their lives. Some say they started truly living only when their babies came along. I looked at my daughter for the first time and felt that the nine months of swollen feet, the incessant taste of pennies in my mouth, and the permanent stretch marks on my belly had not been worth it. I was unsure that I loved my baby, and I think *Diosito, perdóname*—I continue to be.

---

2 "Do something, girl."

Fernando was always ready to be a dad. This is what made keeping the baby an easy choice. I figured I would grow an appetite for motherhood along the way, and if I didn't, it wouldn't be hard pretending to find any part of this rewarding.

"Cuando tengas hijos, te vas a acordar de mí."[3] 3

She's right. My sweet mami, she is always right. I think of her thick fingers flipping tortillas over the hot flame of the gas stove and the curve of her broad back as she labors over her pozole. Just above her nose are two wrinkled lines, a set of parentheses from decades of worrying about me with a furrowed brow. Hardened, bent, indented—being her child, I unknowingly demanded the full capacity of my mother's body, and she silently conceded because she is the best mami.

The guilt pricks my eyes and the walls of my nostrils like spice wrongly swallowed. Mami would not want me to be afraid of sacrifice, and so I have abandoned my country, my language, and my people for all the opportunities Isabela can have on this side of the border. I have sacrificed myself, too. I am not Yolanda anymore, but Isabela's mother. And this is forever. This is the rest of my life. It is too late to go back. I hate that I am not satisfied. What a terrible woman I am. I must learn to put this badness of mine away somewhere.

Too loud. I wipe my nose on my sleeve and gently stroke my girl's tiny head. Her cries come in slower howls, a sign that she is tuckering herself out. I shuffle on my knees to her toy bin and fish out a daisy-shaped teething toy. She's too young for it, but I'm desperate for peace. Her hands find a rubber petal instantly, her bleating dying out as she marvels at what I've presented her with. She is a curious child. Perhaps she'll grow up to be a scientist. Maybe an investigative journalist, though Fernando wouldn't like that. Too many of those are killed back home by *narcos* and politicians.

Now that I can think, it occurs to me how hungry I am. I take Isabela to the kitchen and set her down in her high chair. Already, a thin glob of her drool is oozing down the toy and her forearms.

You will not take my chi-chis, but you will take that thing, *escuincla*?" I chide softly, grabbing a jar of green salsa from the fridge. "No good. Your daddy does not fuss about them."

At this I laugh so hard, I have to grip the oven handle for support. The loitering tears from before fall, this time for a good cause. If

3 "When you have kids, you'll think of me."

Mami were here, she would do one of her exaggerated gasps and scold me, but I know she would find it hard not to laugh too. She has the greatest sense of humor, my mami.

Isabela stares at me blankly, her chin glossy with saliva. I shake my head, smiling, glad she cannot understand. I fish two warm tamales from a big pot on the stove and set them on a plate. This morning was my first time making them without the help of a wiser hand, so when I sink my fork into the masa, there's a little more resistance than there ought to be. The corn husk doesn't peel away effortlessly. I take a bite. Even my salsa lacks culture. It is embarrassing, but Fernando won't notice the difference between these and the ones from home. Like most things lately, there is no other option but to swallow.

Then a knock on the door.

"Package for Yolanda Canizares?" A man's voice.

The air leaves my body and refuses to return. He said a word I am not familiar with and my name. Mine. The only way he could know my name is if the government sent him.

Horror skewers me. Immigration. They have come, just like my mother-in-law said they might. They are here to deport me, and Fernando, whose English is better than mine, is not here. He could explain to them that he is here on a work visa and I am here as a tourist. Legally. One of the good ones, as he likes to say. Not at all like the people Fernando's family calls *mojados* with the same tone they'd use to talk about the grey water at the bottom of a garbage bag. With his help, they might care. They won't throw me in a cage until they feel like letting me go. I've heard the stories.

I look around. Fernando keeps his work visa in his car, so I don't have the option to show it to them. The closet. I can hide in there, perhaps barricade the door until Fernando comes home and fixes all this. I pick up my Isabela. The sudden movement makes her drop the daisy. She grunts in surprise and within seconds she's howling again. I press her close to my body and bend down to pick up the toy.

I murmur to her, "Take it, *bebé.* Take."

"Uh... hello?" the man says again, followed by two unconfident raps on the door. I have to open it. It will be worse, I think, if I do not.

There is no time to rifle through the Spanish-to-English dictionaries Fernando bought for me. I stroke Isabela's head, trying, failing, to retain the knowledge of all my English words and grammar structures, but there is nothing in me except the shame in my bones.

"*Ay, por Dios, hija. No crié una pendeja, formé una ganadora*."[4]

Okay, Mami, okay, okay. Even though I feel the furthest thing from a *ganadora*, a winner, I will brave this. If the worst thing immigration can do is send me back to you, I will not be afraid.

I flip the lock and swing the door open with a swiftness that sends cold air flying to my face. The man on the other side is dressed in tree-bark brown. He wears white socks that stop just below his knees. His short hair is wet and plastered to his forehead. It peeks out from his hat, which reads "UPS." Behind him, there is a large van painted the same brown as his uniform. A delivery man. My heart had shot into my throat for a delivery man.

The man steps back, wiping the sweat from his upper lip and smiling weakly. "S-Sorry. I heard the baby crying and thought something was wrong. Um."

He holds a small tan box in front of him. I take it slowly, shifting Isabela onto my hip, thinking of many things to say but saying none of them. Isabela gurgles at him and he waves at her, looking very uncomfortable, probably because I cannot take my eyes off him.

A delivery driver. *Caray.*

Just as I begin to feel we are competing for who can be the most awkward, the man grabs the clipboard tucked under his arm and pulls a pen from his breast pocket. I try not to stare at his pit stains as he says, "Please sign, please."

"Yes, thank you," I mumble, setting the box down and scribbling my name where he indicates. The paper is slightly moist with perspiration. And then he leaves in his sputtering van, and I watch him go with my noisy child and my new box, which I would not have received if I had chosen the closet.

"Que exageradita, Yo."[5]

Once inside, I set Isabela back into her high chair.

"Quiet, quiet," I groan over her bawling. She beats her hands against the tray before her, then starts battering the space above her head. Her fist finds my jaw quicker than I can react. I yelp, rubbing the spot. "Isa! What is happening to you? *Cálmate, ya!*"

Isabela is a constant lesson in patience. I imagine shaking her until she is silent or giving her a firm smack on the bottom, but these

4 For Christ's sake, child. I didn't raise a dumbass, I formed a winner.

5 "How dramatic of you, Yo."

are the thoughts that make me a bad person. I do not like her when she is acting like this, and that is not fair of me, I know. I sigh, rubbing the bridge of my nose. She is too young to learn from punishment, and many years will pass before she is old enough to have mercy on her mother. I cannot do anything but bear this.

I push my mediocre tamales aside and set the box down. The label sticker on the front has my name, and below it—my mami's address. Hurriedly, I grab the fork I had used to part the masa and tear through the tape on the packaging. I toss the box aside after practically ripping it to shreds.

Mami sent me three things. The first is a green spiral notebook with little Santas on the cover. I sit down and open it to the first yellowed page. It reads "NUECES GARAPIÑADAS." Sugar-coated pecans. She would make them every Christmas. They were sticky and tasted like coffee. It's a recipe book. I flip through the rest of the pages. None of them are blank. Each one contains the instructions for some classic dish from home.

The second item is a large, yellow envelope. I pinch the prongs on it together and pull out three thin hoops with cloth stretched over them. Taped to each one are plastic baggies with multicolor thread, needles of various sizes, and a water transfer pen. I reach into the envelope one more time and find a booklet. Embroidery. Mami sent me a hobby.

The last thing in the box is a pink, puffy book. It's larger than a regular book or magazine, with a worn perimeter, and a note on the front. I reach for that first.

"Cómo estás, mi corazón? Te extraño muchísimo! Cada momento pienso en ti. Sé que estás pasando por algo pesado y difícil, estando en un país desconocido siendo nueva mamá, pero nunca olvides echarle ganas a la vida. Sigue adelante con actitud de grande, de ganadora, de reina. Porque eso eres, mi amor!! Enfócate en el futuro brillante que te espera. Tu mami te ama para siempre."[6]

A photo album. There are pictures of my brothers before they were men, covered in mud and squinting away the harshness of the sun. There's Papi with his old face like a bloodhound's. There's a candid

6 "How are you, my heart? I miss you so much! I'm always thinking of you. I know you're going through a difficult time being in a foreign place as a new mother, but never forget to give life your best effort. Persevere like a big person, like a winner, like a queen. That's what you are, my love!! Focus on the bright future that waits for you. Your mami loves you forever."

photo of Fernando and me at our wedding. He's pointing upwards to something out of frame. His eyes are set on whatever it is. I'm looking at him. The last picture is about halfway through the album. It's a picture of me as a little girl, plopped in Mami's lap. I'm helping her stick a needle into cloth held taut by a hoop like the kind she sent me. We're both mid-laugh. Mami's eyes are pressed closed, just two lines with whiskers on the ends. The rest of the book is blank. I kiss the note. I kiss every picture in the photo album. I cry.

Sniffling, I scoop up Isabela, patting her back. Despite her yowls, I kiss her, nose pressing against the fat folds of her tiny neck. She smells only of skin.

"*Tu mami te ama para siempre,*" I tell her. Though it scares me to say it, she deserves to hear it. It is the best feeling in the world. Being a mother will be like growing calluses around my heart. One day, it will no longer terrify me to give her everything.

My daughter lets out a burp. Then she is quiet.

The Lost Honour of Farhana Azeem

Zainab Siddiqui

We lived behind drawing-room curtains and underneath dining table conversations. We crawled inside our parents' sheet covers as they engaged in long conversations. We were small enough to fit inside our dadi's cupboard while she gossiped with Auntie Sheila on the World-com. When we went to school, we used the longer corridor to the bathroom, passing by the teachers' room, feigning a deliberate disinterest in their discussions. In the afternoons, our TVs played *Dragon Tales* as our mothers talked about the scandal with the maids, the gardener, the milkman, and Mrs. Saleem across the street. We collected pieces of conversations like rare gems.

It was in July, earlier this year, when we first saw the family that had moved into the newly built corner-house. We gathered on our balconies when we heard a giant truck turn the corner into our tiny street. The truck, containing large brown boxes and wooden bed frames, was followed by a white Pajero driven by a small man in security guard overalls. A tall, dark man with a purposeful gait and a thick mustache stepped out first. We assumed him to be the man of the house. He was followed by what we assumed to be his wife, a tiny, round woman with short, dark hair, thin glasses, and a strict expression that belied her soft features. She was lecturing a young girl, around our age or maybe slightly older, with thick glasses and a neat braid that ran down her tall neck.

"I heard they used to move around a lot. Now they're finally settling," our mothers told each other.

"I talked to the wife. What a nice life she has!"

"Just one kid and three maids to take care of the house. A cook, gardener, and a driver too!"

"They have two sons. They're both in the army. He's an army man himself. Hence, the protocol."

Our mothers envied them and resented our fathers. Why couldn't you have joined the army? Why couldn't we have a cook, a

gardener, a driver? Why couldn't it have been us in that Pajero? They never said it out loud, still we heard it in their arguments. But we, we were curious about the little girl. One of us found out that her name was Farhana Azeem, but her mother and father called her Fari. Another one of us found out that she had a maid dress her up every morning and she took a rosewater bath every night.

"She only bathes her hair in saffron milk. It's why it's so silky," we said to each other. "She rubs aloe vera on her skin every morning so her skin glows."

"She went to a fancy, private school."

"She is good at math."

"She wants to become a doctor."

"Her handwriting is neat. She writes in cursive."

Layla suggested it first, and then we all got excited about it. We had one month before school started. While the neighborhood boys no longer included us in their cricket games, claiming our throws were off and never letting us bat, we decided to play our own games and needed more members for our league. So, we approached the new family's house.

The house stood out, not just because of its sheer size, three stories tall and a large rooftop, but also because it was different from the rest of the houses on our street. Our homes, as old as the Partition itself, were covered in city grime and layers of peeling paint. Unlike our concrete courtyard and dilapidated fences, the new corner-house had a large, tiled patio, a driveway with a gleaming black Jeep and a white Pajero, a terrace on the second floor adorned with potted China roses, fragrant jasmines, and varieties of bright, orange hibiscus. Even the stray cats who took all the liberties lounging around our front gates and shared walls avoided the shining edifice.

The driveway, lined with neem trees, provided us with cool shade from the sun. Through the large windows, we could see a woman working, juggling various pots and pans, seemingly frustrated as she talked to herself. We assumed she was the cook, as the delicious aroma of spiced eggplant wafted from the kitchen. From the balcony, old Pakistani folk music, a mix of radio static and high-pitched feminine voices, greeted us.

A tiny woman with rolled up sleeves and shiny, brown hair gathered at the top of her head opened the door. We assumed she was Mrs. Azeem, judging by her shaped eyebrows and the old-fashioned

frock-style shalwar kameez she wore. A slight expression of annoyance showed on her face as if we had disturbed her from a peaceful afternoon nap.

"Salaam, Auntie. We're all going to play. Will your daughter join us?" we asked. It didn't take much convincing for Farhana to join us. We remember our very first meeting with her. She was slightly taller and older than us.She had long hair, tied in a braid, and her skin glowed like pearls."Thank you for inviting me. It's so nice of you. What are your names?" Of course, she was nice too. We noticed her thick accent and how she politely used *aap* instead of *tum* to address us. We observed the way she walked with her head slightly lowered and her incessant habit of thanking us. She always extended her hand to greet our mothers but never our fathers, opting instead to walk past silently. She always wore modest shalwar and kameez while we wore jeans and t-shirts our mother had bought us at the Sunday bazaar.

We would all gather at one of our houses for our wedding parties. When it was Fari's turn to be the bride, the most coveted role, we dressed her up with our mother's pink or red or yellow dupattas with carefully embroidered beads on them. We draped it around her head and stole jasmines from Mrs. Anwar's garden across the streets to make flower bracelets. We used the plastic money from cotton candy packets and put it in red envelopes as gifts for the bride. Sometimes, one of us would be the bride's mother and one of us would be the groom so we would draw a mustache with a paintbrush. We would put on her makeup with the pigmented pink gloss all being her lipstick, her eyeshadow, her blush. We used water in cups and pretended it was tea as we laughed or fought or gossiped like our mothers did.

Fari told us many stories, and we listened eagerly. Her shyness soon bloomed into laughter and eager conversations as our friendship grew. She told us about the waterfalls in the Naran Kaghan valley and the joys of sledding in the snow. We, who had only seen the sweltering heat and the monsoon rains, could only imagine the soft cushion of freshly fallen snow. She went on in detail about her old school in a small village up north where the teachers carried sticks to punish misbehaving students. When we asked her what grade she was in, she hesitated before answering:

"I don't go to school anymore. My cousin teaches me at home."

"Why don't you?" we asked, not really trying to hide our jealousy.

"My father said so. Because I started menstruating."

"What is menstruating?" Sehr, the chubby youngest of the group, chimed. We giggled into our hands but we were as curious as Sehr to know.

"I'm older than you so I know. You will all know when you're my age too."

But, after much insisting and guesswork, Fari finally told us.

"Yes, it's why your mother hides those pink wrappers in her cupboard, Nadia. And why she skips some of her prayers. It happens when you get to my age."

"What happens?" we asked.

"You bleed."

Our faces twisted in horror.

"For a few days," she assured us. Then added, "Every month."

Fari's explanation only made us terrified of our own fate. That night, we went home and prayed to God to heal Fari and to protect us from her terrifying fate.

But now, we knew better. One by one, each of us succumbed to the same fate that had struck Fari. Or even worse. We bled *and* we went to school. Our mothers taught us how to change our towels and pads. Some of us started wearing training bras that picked at our skin in the scalding heat. We learned never to discuss these things with our fathers and brothers but we knew they noticed the change too. Perhaps it was that we smelled different or the expensive face washes and creams we started wearing. We scrubbed our feet, we shaved our legs, waxed our underarms, hid our swelling chests, but our bodies continued to grow, resisting all our efforts. With our new curves, our narrowing waists, our bodies taking shape, there was something else we had to maintain. It was never mentioned to us nor taught. We were not granted it either. It attached itself to us like it does to all young women.

Our Honour.

We had to nourish it and protect it. This delicate thing, perpetually endangered, was tethered not just to our own livelihood but also to our parents' and siblings'. One wrong move and losing it would forever attach us to shame. It was the single greatest responsibility anyone our age could have and we took it upon us with a disturbing pride and hesitant obedience.

We stopped wearing skirts to school, stopped showing our legs. Our shirts got longer until they reached our knees and our pants got loos-

er around our thighs. We hid our growing chests with scarves, and played games inside during the day and not out on the street. We stopped bothering the neighborhood boys, stopped pleading to be included in their games, and the older, kind guards stopped talking to us, regarding us instead with an unfamiliar formality. When we accompanied our mothers to the grocer and the butcher, we embodied an angry scowl, even when we were quite happy, to not invite any suggestive stares.

It was in early September when the tail end of the monsoon season brought with it wind gusts and occasional storms. When an unexpected storm hit us at night, we rushed to climb up the stairs to our rooftops, rescuing the half-wet clothes from the clotheslines, and admired the neighborhood, steeped in darkness from the electricity outages. Then, we hurled the bamboo woven chairs and tables into the shaded veranda and helped our grandmas, who slept under the open sky during the summers enjoying the cool salty Arabian sea breeze, inside.

The rumors didn't start until we saw a shadow on the rooftop once. It was there that we saw a silhouette, her silhouette, with her fully exposed back shining silver under the moonlight.. Her dark hair flowed down her side, and she was sitting on a rug. We saw another figure, arms interlocked with hers, their faces moving in tandem. It was mesmerizing to witness. They moved together in a synchrony we had only witnessed of snakes dancing to the flute's music.

We talked about the incident among ourselves and for the first time, it was our mothers who listened to us. They stood outside closed doors as we pretended to play our games. They went through our journals, hoping to find a clue. They called each other, piecing together a narrative from each kids' story.

"The Azeems' daughter… she's having an affair."

"I think it is the driver. I saw them talking to each other alone. My kids know better than to talk to a driver."

"It's a shame. So much wealth and luxury. Can't even control their own daughter."

"Imagine the influence they're having on our daughters. We can't have that type of degeneracy promoted here."

So, our mothers protested, and we protested back but they won in the end and we were forbidden from inviting Fari to our hangouts. It didn't stop there.

Our mothers called a meeting and decided to march to the Azeems' house. Tell her parents what their daughter had been doing. We

watched in quiet terror as they stormed up to the house, past the lined pathway, the jeep and the Pajero, behind which we were hidden. We saw them ring the front door bell. Their arms crossed in front of them like their eyebrows in anger. We never got to hear the conversation they had inside their drawing room, but our mothers left the house with a satisfied look. They had insulted Mrs. Azeem, possibly insulted her daughter. Now, it was up to her on how she controlled her.

We had all gathered after school to play in our balconies, the neighborhood boys smashing balls into our windows and us never returning them.

It was then, one day, when we saw Fari on her balcony, beside the potted roses and plants, her skin pale despite the golden cast of the sun and her hair, now only reaching her shoulders, splayed around her. We weren't even sure if she was real or just our imagination but one of us called out to her.

"I can't," she responded, her eyes flicking between the inside of the house and our balcony, six feet from hers. "My father is watching," she whispered.

We had wanted to ask if that was really her on the rooftop, if what our mothers had said about her was true. We wondered if she was really ruined. What did that feel like? But we found it best to keep our questions to ourselves. We did not know, then, that it would be the last time we saw her. By the end of the month, the Azeems had packed up their belongings and moved out, having lost their honour in our neighborhood. The milk-man had stopped delivering to their house, fearing the dishonour would follow him home. "I have two small daughters and a wife," he said apologetically to Mrs. Azeem one day. The men had stopped inviting Mr. Azeem to the mosque. The maids had stopped working at their house, fearing their business, and the driver with whom the affair was suspected was laid off. Even then, the rumors continued. So, they left. They could start over in a different neighborhood, a different town, a different city but whispers of their dishonour would always follow them. It was a fate, our mothers said in warning, worse than death.

It was the day after the Azeems moved out when two police cars blocked either exits on our street. Then, seven policemen in their blue uniforms, stepped outside. We had never seen a police car on our street so we watched in awe. They yelled commands, telling us to go inside and

no matter how hard we tried to peek through our balconies, the police yelled at us harder. They investigated the now-empty house. Some of them rang our doorbell, investigating our rooftops and water tanks. After a six-hour investigation, nothing was found, and they looked disappointed.

"We received a call. From a child. She said she was in danger," they told us. "We're looking at possible foul-play, even murder."

Our gasps were not enough to contain the shock of our community. The police asked questions and our parents answered diligently.

Two days later, we heard it on the news. They called it an honor-killing of a fourteen year-old girl. Her body was found in a ditch a few blocks away from our street. We knew it was our Fari We wondered who had done such a horrible thing to her. We cried privately in bathrooms and we cried together on each others' shoulders. Our mothers let us.

Two months after her death, the mention of her name felt like dishonour itself. We no longer said it with each other and we no longer said it in secret. We just hoped that the monster who had gotten to Fari wouldn't get to us next. We hoped that by carrying her memory secretly in our hearts, we could keep her alive. But to everyone else, her existence was deliberately forgotten.

Without Fari, our lives felt aimless. We went to school in groups, a fear having settled in our hearts in the place Fari had left hollow. When Sehr told us about the man in the rickshaw who had held her arm for too long, we told her to stay quiet. We told her we would protect her secret to make up for what we had done with Fari's. We imagined all of our names on TV: Layla, Sehr, Amna, Zahra, Shireen, Bano, followed by Fari. We imagined flashing headlines and reporters coming to our abandoned houses.

Soon, we started celebrating birthdays again and dressing up for Eid. No one had told us what the appropriate time to stop mourning someone was but we followed the birds and the stray cats who had moved on from the incident, lifting out neighborhood from the haunting that had befallen it. Streamers hung from our windows and lights adorned our rooftops. The night before Eid, we went to the market and bought the glass bangles we wanted. We decorated our hands with henna, and our mothers allowed us to stay out late into the night.The house was torn down with its beautiful terrace and tiled patio. The neem trees were cut down, the flowerpots were given away. A developer bought the empty plot that had dramatically declined in value. He built his office

there, a single-story square white building with small windows and barely any trees.

As for us, we grew up on these streets and graduated from school. Some of us went to college, others got married and moved away. But we held Fari deep inside the crevices of our mind. We held her memory like a pact. Sometimes, we would drive past the old street with our husbands and children and be reminded of how Farhana Azeem lost her honour which was worse than losing her life.

Through Flailing Water

Esperanza Magaña

Recently, as I was strolling through the weeds of the ragged lawns of my childhood neighborhood, near the pond where overgrown shrubs of bulrushes lay bare to the biting wind, I saw death; my death. It was a horrid sight filled with the rapid flash of flailing arms and a bobbing head and I was sure it was me despite never seeing his face because he was wearing my coat. The coat my mother gifted me for my thirty-fifth birthday, with the gold-plaited buttons and the cleanest stitches made by hand. There was no sound. My arms created mute splashes and I cried windless cries, no water gurgled in my throat but instead flowed through silently, filling the cavern of my face with as much sound as a falling leaf. It was the lack of sound, that small detail, my world. that clued me into my world.

I don't quite remember my reason for walking the trail on Duck Pond Drive. I cannot, these days, seem to remember much of anything. But I must be forgiven for my negligence in saving myself. I did not try to. It seemed disrespectful to disrupt what almost looked like peace. I just stood there, on the sidewalk of the trail, facing the sight just eight feet away with my mouth hanging open as if to catch flies, the air smelling of sulfur and something bitter. It did not stop, the sight, not when I walked further down the trail, away, past empty benches and rusted drinking fountains, not when I took a sharp left and walked up the incline of the hill where the trail continued. No matter where I looked, it did not stop. At the top, where the view overlooked the suburban neighborhood and dirty water, with cars rushing behind me on the road, I could still see myself struggling to catch breath.

I couldn't watch anymore. I did not stay to see the back of my head slowly bob down, right arm in the air. But I finished the trail. I took the long way back home, avoiding the pond and its algae film. Simply walking down the street, I was reminded of those sticky days in June when all the boys in the neighborhood would play together. It was al-

ways a game of tag, or some form of running and shoving—freeze tag, but to become unstuck, you had to be slapped upside the head twice. If the parents forced the little sisters along, the nieces or younger cousins, we'd play hide-and-seek at the playground there, by the pond. I would've visited one of their houses, but they all left long ago. Front doors shut and locked.

When I get home, leaving my heavy boots by the front door and putting up my coat, I do not greet my mother in the kitchen but climb the stairs to my room and sleep.

My mother does not speak much to me anymore. I am in this house that was once mine, where she raised me, and we are not talking. Sometimes it's like she can't hear me. I will walk past her, to get to the living room and out the front door, and she stiffens at the sound. And I recall exact moments like these, years and years before, as a teenager—her boy. I would walk past her, to get to the living room and out the front door, and she would run after me, beating me to the door and pecking at my cheeks while holding my unwilling body steady. I remember feeling mature with my bright red Nissan, so cool, but when she did things like that I felt like a boy. Her boy. Now I walk empty hallways and find her sobbing over piles of newspaper clippings.

But that is the least of my worries.

I awake with a conviction—and slight fogginess of it all being a dream despite lack of. Why couldn't it have been? Or, perhaps, maybe I had not seen myself at all. Perhaps it wasn't my body at all, but some other man unlucky enough to slip and fall in. Unlucky enough to sink below the muddy, stagnant water of the man-made pond.

It's early. I can hear exhaust pipes squeal outside as I make my way down the stairs, coat on and bootless. My mother is sitting at the kitchen table, completing the morning's crossword puzzle. Her usual cup of coffee, toast, and scrambled egg whites are all laid out untouched. All of it smells rotten.

Duck Pond Drive is the same. Empty of people, despite the area being popular for morning jogs, and there are no ducks like usual. It's as if it had been left alone for me to contemplate, inspect. Maybe it's empty for what I am about to find, to leave me alone to do the dirty work and deal with the morbid nature of a dead body at the trail. I near the pond with cautious steps. I do not let myself close enough to fall in; I will not allow stupidity to cloud my senses. But I near dangerously. I pick up a branch the girth of my wrist from a pile nearby and run it through the

water like a paddle. The water lags on the pull of the stick, ripple-less, and I feel nothing below. Surely the man has to be there. With my luck he has rocks in his coat, sunken far below my grasp.

But there is nothing. And so I sway on my heels. In fact, after much staring at the dark green pool, the water does not move at all, I notice. I sit down, arms on my knees, and watch, and I have the urge to jump in but do not.

"It's dead water." Her voice is like fog. Everywhere. She sits next to me, staring hard at the water too. She doesn't give me a name, and I do not care enough to ask for one. "That's why it smells like shit here." She's wearing a red shirt, the color deep and opaque. It's the color of wine, of blood you spit from a clenched mouth. "They didn't put in an aeration system, so there's a lack of oxygen in the water that isn't being circulated despite the plants, and blah blah, you know the rest." She sighs. It's only when she wiggles her toes that I notice she's not wearing any shoes, despite the cold. She isn't wearing a coat either, but it seems like she doesn't mind. I don't offer her mine. "I mean, just look at all the bacteria!"

I huff a disenchanted grunt in response, but she stays anyway. Her hair runs along her back darkly. It looks wet, almost. And after a few minutes of complete, awkward, silence, when she turns her head, meets my eyes with her own, I notice hers are the very same as her hair. She has no irises, none at all, just obtuse dots of black where color should be. I say nothing.

She sighs again.

I stand, walking away with the branch lagging behind me like an empty leash. I check my watch and it reads 11:15 AM, and the time seems familiar to me, but I cannot remember why.

"How's your mother?" She calls out.

I stop and look at her. She is still by the pond, now lying on her back with rigid toes pointed straight up at the sky. "You do not know her," I mumble. "Of course I do. We all know Carol." She ticks back, annoyed as if I should be aware of this too. "I've known her and you, actually, for two years." She gestures to the row of houses just across the street, pointing at the one nearest the pond. "I moved in two years ago." She says. "I don't think you remember," She adds, and her tone exudes one of sly contempt, a joke I should have understood.

"I do not."

"Well, that isn't *my* fault, is it?"

"I suppose not."

I walk back to the woman, the 'neighbor', and look down at her. My body doesn't shadow hers even though there's sun, and I notice she's wet. Droplets on her skin like a sweating glass, beads that don't move. On her arms, her cheeks, neck— she's soaked. She looks up at me with her guileless, glistening eyes. They gaze at me waiting, unmoving as if frozen in place. Corpse-like. Then, a flush of hatred runs through me. A flush of power at the sight of her, of shame, then I am full of contempt but do nothing about it.

Then it happens. The neighbor sits up, turns her head—quick—to the pond. I turn too and *he* appears. There is not a word stronger than that to describe what it looks like. I do not look away—not even a glance—but there he is. In the water. Flailing. The back of his head bobs up and down, his arms scratching and pounding against the rough current he is creating. I did not see him fall in, for he didn't. And there isn't sound because he does not make any. He just *appears* in the water, dying. "You see him too?" I question, my voice just above a frightened whisper.

"Yes." She answers.

But I do nothing.

"Like a silent film." The neighbor jokes.

The stick weighs heavy in my hand, and the rough bark scratches at my palm. My hands itch.

"His face. I can never see it." I sit next to the woman, following the scene with my eyes as I go down. I cross my legs and let go of the branch.

"Well, do you try?" She looks at me, but I do not have it in me to stare into her eyes again.

"I have to?"

"That's a stupid question."

But my hesitation is too long, and the moment for any form of salvation passes by like a breeze.

In dismay I watch as the man sinks under the green algae of film, right arm in the air, and the pond becomes still. No more splashes, no thrashing or silent gurgles. As if it did not happen at all.

"You've done that about three hundred and fifty-five times now." The woman declares.

"What?"

"You killed yourself two years ago."

"I—"

"And now, at exactly 12:32 PM, you drown. Every day."

"Why"

But she shuts me down with a mere shrug, innocently, "I'm not telling you that."

I look down at my hands. I touch my face and squeeze my nose red. The neighbor watches as I run my fingers through my spoiled, aging hair, and I feel *real*. I scrunch my toes and feel my joints skim the top leather of my shoe. When I squeeze my fist I can feel my dry skin crack and spread over my knuckles. Then I try to remember, and I cannot recall, if I brushed my teeth, the motions of falling asleep and waking up—of *eating*, and I think back to the last time I was hungry and realize I was never at all.

But she is lying and I know it. I fucking know it because she stares at me with *those eyes*, and in their darkness, I can almost see a glint of what she is holding back from me.

"Bitch." I say, standing. I leave her. I run the three blocks home. I slam the door open to which my mother, standing in the hallway staring at the framed family picture, jumps. "Jesus," she gasps, frightened. I don't bother removing my shoes, my coat; I simply stand by her side, breathing heavily. She slowly turns to me, looking past my eyes over my left shoulder, and I know she feels me because she has that same look from years ago, as if she wants to squeeze me. And I know then, from the fact that she does not reach out and hug me, touch my shoulder, or kiss my cheek that whatever it is I am, I am dead. I knew it before, surely. But now, I *feel* it.

"What do you need?" She says. I touch her shoulders, and she feels solid and warm. Yes, that.

The house phone is not working; I found this out the next morning, and I wondered how everything else worked around me. There is no ringing or beeping or buzzing; the noise is like cupping a seashell to your ear. I wonder if I'm even holding a phone at all or if it's all in my head. A trick of this cruel world. I leave the house to find a functioning payphone. I guess they had removed most of them because I only found one. I checked everywhere I could. It was located three miles away next to a bus stop, and it was grimy, sticky. Every number I pound leaves black soot on my finger. It doesn't work. There is only an incessant, hollow echo that reveals nothing.

The phone never gets warm from my hold on it. I keep it snug-

gled between my ear and shoulder, just for that sense of normalcy, even if it means listening to nothing. I stand there and wait for nothing at all. I mumble under my breath, wondering what to have for dinner. I laugh at a joke, I check my wrist for the time. I watch the street, shuffle my weight to relieve the ache in my feet. I hear the squealing exhaust pipe of a red Nissan as it flies by.

I had walked so far for so long that I didn't bother hailing a cab. I sit and wait for the bus. It is about ten minutes before someone joins me on the bench with a handful of filled reusable grocery bags, struggling to carry them all. We sit there together for a while, not talking or acknowledging each other. I say hello, but I get no response. The bus comes and takes me home to a mother cooking dinner, the air smelling like ash. She had given the doorway a quick glance before shaking her head as if spooked and continued stirring the sauce on the stovetop.

I go back to the pond the next day and the trail is empty, still. I sit at the playground and stare at the neighbor's house. Her door is closed. I did not dream last night (I don't know if I can, I cannot remember), but if I did, I would've dreamt of her eyes. I wonder how she can hold such a vast, dark expanse, how she can carry that burden, for when looking at her, I truly feel the definition of evil, like a justice.

I do not have the courage to ring at her door. I do not have the courage to ask for clarification. So, I stand. And rather than knock, I steal the newspaper from her lawn, searching every page and section for a mention of a man found in the water on Duck Pond Drive. There is nothing but an obituary for a fifteen-year-old girl who attended the same high school I did. I wonder if she killed herself too; if she is like me.

That feeling of contempt flushes through me. The hatred I felt before practically seethes at the sight of the newspaper. Like an itch on my face that I know too well, I look up to see the neighbor staring at me through her window. I avoid her eyes and walk back to the playground, sitting on the swing with my back facing her house.

The flimsy corners of the paper curl in my hand from a starting wind. It breezes through the pages and my scarf and I feel it pass my head like a tickle. The trees surrounding the pond begin to sway, leaves falling onto the water like lily pads. Then it begins. I turn my head and stare at the water, never peeling my eyes away when he appears. He isn't facing me, and he's dying. I do nothing but watch, and from this distance, he looks like my father—and I realize, as I watch the body sink again, that I grew up to be exactly what I said I wouldn't.

My mother hasn't been in my father's office since the accident, from the little I remember. She always refused to come in. There's still dust on his mahogany desk. I swipe my fingers on the glass top, over the guarded Polaroid picture of me getting baptized: the pale white of the shell basin and my glassy eyes like a doll. I open the top drawer and rifle through the countless late bills and yellow legal pads, a baggie of coke, until I find it, the letter. It is aged and flimsy, thin, wrinkled and folded in its yellowed envelope. Scrawled in his loopy handwriting, his swirled *C* and twirled *L* in *Carol*, on the front in blue ink. *To Carol*.

To Carol, I don't love you anymore.

It is, essentially, what he had written.My mother had found it sitting on top of his desk; she read it and cried. I remember watching her, at just nine years old, hiding by the doorway, watching. *To Carol*. Then she shut herself in her room and did not cook lunch, one of the only times she didn't. I ate bread and Ritz crackers at the kitchen table while reading the Sunday strip. I would not understand it then, not until I was older, but he decided to leave me. He ran away, taking with him the father figure I so desperately needed for some woman who could not hold a flame to my mother.

It was a crash, a collision with a semi-trailer bringing in our town's local groceries on the highway, but we wouldn't know my father had been there until two weeks later from a knock at the front door. A police officer, face solemn as if melted. "Ma'am," then the news. My father was in the car with his mistress, driving on Interstate 70 when a semi-truck fell onto the woman's Toyota Corolla and sent it dragging into the cement barricades of the highway, simultaneously crushing both the vehicle and my dad. They have reason to believe, the officer said, that at some point, somehow, my father's right hand had been sliced—clean cut—as he was reaching into the back of the vehicle, body twisted to his left in the passenger seat. His body had been practically pulverized.

We buried clothes and a dismembered hand. His cassettes and vinyl, fishing rods, stamp collection—he'd left behind all his shoes except one pair, the pair he was wearing while on the highway. Like a purge, we buried it all but the items in his desk office. My mother refused to touch the room and banned me from ever going in there. As if I listened? I do not know why my mother never threw away the letter, why she didn't bury my father with it. It would've been a good last laugh, I think so.

I wonder what she buried of mine.

My mother is talking to the neighbor, and it almost feels like I'm in trouble because there's that newspaper on the table, in the middle of the two women. Like a little boy caught stealing; if he was still alive. I let the door slam behind me, and my mother jumps in her seat.

"Did

you

hear that?" She asks the woman sitting across from her. The neighbor nods. My mother buries her face in her hands, murmuring incoherently. The neighbor looks directly at me and smiles. Her eyes are never quiet, it seems.

"I hear him all the time. Doors slamming and my floor creaking." My mother says, slowly lifting her head to stare out the window, past the neighbor's shoulder. "And I miss him all the time too." She adds.

"What are you doing?" I ask, but the neighbor ignores me, continues nodding at my mother, rubbing at the hands she has cupped in her own.

"I'm a suicide-loss survivor." My mother says. She chuckles an *I'm sorry* chuckle, wiping at the tear falling down her cheek. "I don't have it in me to throw away his things, you know?"

The neighbor nods.

"But I feel him everywhere, and nobody will let go of it." My mother says, almost wailing, gesturing to the newspaper between the two women with her chin. "He's haunting me."

She murmurs.

The neighbor nods.

"I drive his car sometimes." Sighing, my mother admits.

The neighbor nods.

"Around the neighborhood."

I shuffle my way to the table, sliding a chair out and sitting next to the neighbor. This newspaper is the same one I had stolen, but this one is yellowed, clearly aged.

"My boy." My mother sighs, pulling her hands out of the neighbor's grip.

The neighbor opens the newspaper, inching it closer to my mother.

"You drive the car around *town?*" She questions.

"In his memory." My mother defends.

"Ah, I see." The neighbor nods, turning her head to look at me. When she sees me staring, she points to the paper. It's a picture of that

fifteen-year-old girl from the obituary. It's her volleyball photo. The ones you buy in sheets and cut out to share with your family. She has long, long hair. She's smiling like nothing will happen. The headline in bold letters reveals she was killed at 11:15 AM. They don't say it there, but she was throttled.

The neighbor is frowning, smiling almost. "And you miss your son?"

I read further, scanning the page, and I see it. My work photo. She was throttled.

My mother laughs at that, head tilted back. Then she says: "He was going through a really hard time, and I always blame myself for never being there for him. I'm his mother, and I didn't even know...he was de-pressed. It's his father's fault." She pauses. "They're just hard. I married one and birthed the other, I would know." She's running her right forefinger over the stitched white tablecloth, the one we've had in this house forever. There are tears in it from snags over the years, but she continues with her finger, skipping over the open holes and tracing the intricate lace designs.

The neighbor turns the pages of the newspaper slowly, delicately, until she gets to the obituaries. "What a beautiful girl." She mumbles sadly, tugging at her long sleeves. My mother doesn't even look at the pages; she's still staring at the tablecloth, picking at it."

"Do you remember that man who, about ten years ago," my mother interrupts, looking up, "—would wait under the bridge on the Hudson trail? That he'd wait there in the evening for women running? How he'd *chop* those poor girls to bits and pieces? What if I was a victim?"

The neighbor nods.

"How horrid." My mother sighs. She folds the newspaper up, then sets it aside with a content release of air. She grabs the neighbor's hands and squeezes them with her own. "Thank you for talking with me. It feels nice to be normal after two years of hell." The neighbor nods, smiles, nods, "I hope it helped."

"Would you like coffee?" My mother asks.

The next day, I go to the pond. I wait on a swing, watching the water. I wait and watch until he appears. One blink and there he is again. Flailing. I walk up to the man, expecting nothing. And I try seeing his face, I really do try—but there is a sound and it stops me; he yells at me, and it doesn't matter anymore if I can see his face or not because there's

sound, finally.

"Charlie, help!" A woman's voice. Then splashes. He is dying, and I can hear it; pounding, slaps, screams, I hear it all and I freeze. I do not move. It's not the man, no—it's my mother. She's in there, drowning. Flailing. I can see the top of her head, hear how her voice is no longer soft and warm but frightened. She's yelling for help and I cannot move. It is the presence of sound, that small detail, that proves to me this is happening in actuality. Then she sinks, quietly. Her head bobs down without bubbles and gurgles, but her right arm is raised, the last part to go. I walk back to the playground and sit, watch the water.

My mother.

I look at the watch on my wrist and it reads 11:15 AM.

"Go see." Her voice, everywhere. Again.

The neighbor sits next to me on the swing, dragging her foot back and forth through the wood mulch, her toe digging into the dirt. We both sway, softly. I do not know when she appeared, but here she is. "Go see," she says. Again.

"I don't want to," I murmur.

"Go see."

"Leave me alone."

"I've been trying for years."

"Go away."

"No." She pauses. "Go see."

I say nothing.

"Look at me." She demands. When I say nothing, she stands. "Your mother. Your mother."

I say nothing.

The neighbor shakes her head: "As a dog returns to his vomit, so too a fool repeats his folly." And she walks barefoot, without looking both ways before crossing the street, to her house. When she opens the door, I see nothing. Where there should be a living room, a kitchen, something, is instead a vast, dark expanse of black. Empty. She lets the door slam behind her.

I walk the three blocks home, make a right into my neighborhood, and stop at the third house with the tiled porch. I slam the door open to which my mother, standing in the hallway staring at the framed family picture, jumps. "Jesus," she gasps, frightened. I don't bother removing my shoes, my coat, but I go to her, and she can see me, feel me, because with every step I take forward, she takes one back. And I know

then, from the fact that she can see me and won't touch me, that I scare her—that whatever it is we are, we are dead. She doesn't face me when she murmurs, "What do you want?" She cries instead.

The Dragon

Jarob Abbott

A dark black car slowed to a stop at the end of the dirt road. Its hull, normally sleek and shiny, was covered in a musty tan from the miles of unpaved driving. Out stepped a polished, suited, and grey-haired man, who took a quick mental note of the dirty car and typed into his phone:

REMINDER. GO TO CAR WASH.

Across the driveway, in the open gate of a fence, stood a thin young woman. She smiled politely, waving her arm. The leather of her jacket stretched and folded, and her dark hair flowed in the wind, though obstructed by her white-brimmed cowboy hat. Her outfit was a variation that she'd worn religiously from age eight. Its ingredients were simple: A pair of light brown cowboy boots, a light blue bootcut jean, a flannel undershirt, some overshirt, and any of her six cowgirl hats. And to accent it all, a little gold necklace strung through a cross.

The man didn't notice her waving. He was too busy staring at his phone, sweating like a pig in his grey three-piece suit. She had to call to him.

"Hello?"

His head whipped up, revealing his thin beard. He said nothing, but she heard all she needed in the sound of office dress shoes crossing gravel. She stuck out her hand.

"Welcome to my daddy's East property," She smiled. "Named so 'cause it's East of the other two. You must be Ron. I'm McKenzie, but all my family calls me Kenzie. And my friends. And strangers, too."

The man took her hand and gave it a firm grip. He didn't chuckle. Most did. Kenzie noticed those kinds of things.

"Hello, Kenzie," he replied. "I much prefer Dr. Weston."

"Aw, that's alright. I reckon you put all that work into a PhD you oughta get recognized for it."

He smiled and replied.

"I reckon the same."

She looked into his dry eyes.

"Do you reckon the reports are true? They're all they can talk about in town," she said.

His smile fled.

"I could not comment on that at this time."

"Of course. But you think they might be tied to this place."

"I drew circles of a mile radius around each report site. This property is one of a few that fell in the overlapping zone. And this is the last of said few that I have to check."

Kenzie shook her head.

"And that sounds all and well, Dr. But I could've saved you the hassle with a tool I like to call common sense."

He sighed as **if** he'd heard **it** all. His position shifted, his stance less casual than before.

"I'm only doing my job."

Kenzie put her hands in the air in an act of surrender.

She knew that this was not a fight she could win. When the feds demanded, she provided. She wanted no trouble from them.

Dr. Weston crossed into the property, letting the gate shut behind him. They started down a long path that was devoured by the surrounding forest. The underbrush was thick and green, the trees a nice mix of Oak and Cedar, and the breeze a soft, dreamy lull that ever so often flushed Kenzie's hair and ruffled Dr. Weston's coat. The sweet smell of acorns and bark danced with the wind. To most, it would instill a feeling of childhood, of a good memory at the park with their parents. But to Kenzie, it was just the smell of home, and Dr. Weston hadn't recalled a pleasant memory in years.

The doctor interrogated her immediately.

"Are there any structures on the property?"

"Yes sir, there is," she said. "Only the one house.'

"Anything odd with it?"

She nodded as they walked.

"My daddy was a conspiracy nut back in the day. He built a massive underground bunker in case Russia ever dropped an A-bomb. **As** if they would bomb out here in the middle of nowhere!"

She laughed, but **it** was soon replaced by a nagging dread of reality. Her face fell flat as she continued.

"It's weird how people worry their whole lives about some stupid thing, and then what gets them is never so extravagant."

"Mmm," Dr. Weston agreed. "What was it for him?" "Heart attack. Mama was a good cook. He ate like a pig."

They stepped into a brief clearing, and the warm sun touched

their skin, singeing their paleness. It felt invasive, a pest that didn't belong on their cool, breezy walk.

"Not to drag the issue," Kenzie said. "But I figure we're wasting our time."

"You're not the first to feel that way."

"You read the news, right? These people, probably meth-heads, said they saw a monster. The craziest one said it looked like a dragon."

"The world is changing, Kenzie. I wouldn't discredit the insane."

"But that's impossible. I'll comply all you like, but you're searching for a ghost."

At this statement, the tone of Dr. Weston's voice darkened. His face hardened as a lifetime of lessons laid plainly in his expression.

"Ghosts would be a pleasantry," he spat. "You speak with far too much certainty. We're talking about life, dear. When the possibles are impossible, and the uncertainties are certain, there is no better a time to stab you in the back."

Kenzie stopped under the shadow of a house. There was nothing, witty nor dull, that she could say to retort that. In front of the pair, a skeleton of a home lay crumpled and squashed as if stepped on by a giant. The ceilings sagged immensely from the center, the walls bulged out, and the support beams had fallen useless on their sides. The white, chipped paint was contrasted by layers of mold and rot that peeked out of every crevice of the planked sides. It looked not just like an abandoned home but abandonment physicalized.

Kenzie found the keys in her right pocket. She showed them to Dr. Weston.

"As if we need them," she quipped.

But Dr. Weston's eyes snagged a glimpse of something peeking out the right of her pants.

"You carry," he observed.

She laughed to herself, approaching the front door.

"Yeah, you're from the north, alright," she sneered.

"Ain't no way a Texas woman like myself is meeting a strange man in the woods without some way to defend herself. That would be just plain stupid."

"What model?" He asked.

"Colt Python Revolver. It was Daddy's gun. Before he died,he wouldn't get me more than a .22 'cause that was more a lady's speed. But

now he's gone, and I got this .347 on me at all times."

"You don't seem to keep it very concealed."

She snorted and stuck a key into the front door's keyhole. It didn't fit; in fact, it was far too short. She fumbled through the remaining keys.

"Honey, it's concealed 'cause no one's looking. Nobody expects a woman with a weapon."

Dr. Weston disagreed. The dark wooden handle stood out starkly as it popped over her leather holster. He'd met a few in his line of work who'd carried with lethal intent. Their guns were modern, slick, and practical. This ornate revolver felt for show.

"You know how to use it?"

Kenzie froze and spun around. Her face was red hot.

"Now that done pissed me off. I have been living out here my whole life. Of course, I know how to use it! I used to compete with my .22, and I can hit a dime from thirty yards away nine times in ten."

"I didn't mean anything by it."

"And that's okay, then. But don't say that again. I grew up hunting and such, too, so don't get any ideas that I can't use a shotgun or rifle neither."

"You still hunt?"

Kenzie's shoulders relaxed a bit. She went back to fiddling with keys.

"Yeah," She recalled. "Got a big 'ol 'yote a few weeks ago."

"A clean kill, I assume," Dr. Weston said. "I don't figure hunting is for me. I could never consistently ensure an animal is shot cleanly. My hands are too shaky."

Kenzie shrugged.

"I mean, they're just dumb animals."

And with that, the door popped open.

A sweet, musty smell, like mildew grown onto a rose petal, poured out of the door. Kenzie gagged when she smelled it first, unprepared for such an abomination to her nostrils. Unfazed, Dr. Weston walked calmly into the living room in front of them.

The floor was covered in trash. General garbage persisted, but it was accented confidently by stacks of egg cartons and energy drinks piled as high as he could stand. The pair had to **lift** their legs high and step deep just to walk roughly 10 feet. The deep, hollow thuds of bottles and cartons hitting the ground flooded the home. The walls were cor-

rupted with a growing, living mold as black splotches spread upwards against the wallpaper of yellow daisies and green grass. The ceiling fan hung to Kenzie's chest, as low as the ceiling sagged in the center. Old, rotten books filled whatever space was left to fill. Kenzie turned to Dr. Weston.

"This ain't how my daddy left it."

"I did reckon that," Dr. Weston agreed.

"What do you figure the bottles are for?"

"Sports drinks tend **to** have similar ingredients to embryonic fluid. From there, it's just eggs, some stock, and now, we got bootlegged cell growth.

He kicked some bottles.

"Where **is** your basement?" He asked.

She made her way across the mess to a small, lockless door. She opened it, revealing a descending valley into a dark, smelly, mustier room.

She looked back at the Doctor. Every instinct screamed to stop there. But there was a flare in his eyes, a burning curiosity that was mounting. Said his eyes. Go further.

So she walked down into the dark, decrepit basement.

As the air grew denser, she noted the plethora of built desktop computers lined against the wall by the tens. These computers looked mostly shattered, their plastic hull hardly containing the computer chips and electronic boards. The walls were a dark, thick concrete, and the ceiling here didn't hang, rather it stood rigid and tall.

"Hello?" She called to no one in particular.

Something shifted in the back. Probably some rats, she thought. Dr. Weston reached the bottom of the steps behind her. They got a clearer view of the room.

From the ceiling hung long, thick wires draped like old cobwebs and connected to thrown-about servers. In the room was a sparse blinking, green and blue, of the occasional computer monitor and server port. Along the floor were slues of tubes, some broken but a few still intact. These tubes were filled with a light pink embryonic fluid, and floating in the center, much against the amusement of Dr. Weston were little clumps of white cells. These caught his attention, and he bent down to examine. But something in the back of the room called to Kenzie.

She crossed the broken glass and stopped just before an outstretched wall of iron bars. At the center was a door, locked closed with

a lock and chain. She looked beyond to the very back of the room. In the left corner, some dispersed light found its way through a massive burrow to the surface. And in the other corner-

She froze.

"Dr. Weston?"

He said nothing but approached. It took him some time, but eventually, he froze, too. Sitting in the back, shrouded by darkness, on a pile of bones, was a creature the size of a horse. Its eyes were circular, front-facing, and impossibly wide. It stood on five legs, all curled and ready to pounce as its disfigured neck turned to look between them. Its skin was rough in patches, smooth in others, and broken and bleeding everywhere else. Two winglike flaps folded over its back, as its blood-red flesh seemed to singe or rot at the edges. Its mouth curled open in a sickly pant as teeth lined not its gums but the edge of its lips. And worst of all, it was staring at them. Just a cold, hard stare.

The two couldn't speak. A noise finally shook them awake, one that Dr. Weston knew from television and Kenzie knew from childhood the racking of a shotgun.

"Y'all don even thank 'bout movin', " a voice spoke.

They spun around. In the doorway stood a burnt-red man in muddy overalls and a once-white undershirt. His teeth were sparse, his brows hung low over his sagging eyes, and his skin was leather and cracked. In his hand, Kenzie identified a 12 gauge pump action shotgun aimed right at the two of them.

"Gracie here ain't harmed no fly, so I 'spect you to treat 'er with a bit a sweetness," he continued. "Oldtimer. Come here, lemme make sure you ain't tryna kill us with nothing under that suit."

Dr. Weston went to cross to the door but felt the tension in Kenzie's body and knew what she was about to do. He shot her a glance, nodded to the gun, and then his eyes opened wide to stare at her soul. They pleaded. Not yet. She eased up, confused. Dr. Weston crossed to the armed man and let him pat the sides of his jacket, cringing at the grimy fingers touching such a pristine and expensive coat. The hands made their way to his pockets, where they found a collection of Ziploc baggies, Cutips, a phone, a pocketknife, and a government badge labeled **DGA, Department of Genetic Alteration**. The man looked at the doctor, narrowing his eyes.

"Ya with 'em?" **He** sighed. "Aw, shit, she wasn't supposed ta live. All the others were purged like tha rules says. But ya seen her. She

a tough cookie, and she sweet as day, don't ya know?"

"Listen to me. You may get out of this without charges **if** you-"

The man pushed him back and aimed the shotgun straight at Dr. Weston's forehead.

"I know what ya want! And I ain't givin' it to ya! I won' kill her, Oldtimer, I jus won'!"

Dr. Weston stuck his hands up and spoke calmly.

"Okay. That's perfectly okay."

Behind him, Kenzie felt the weight of her revolver grow too heavy. She needed to do something before she lost the chance. She could shoot at the man, but he was obstructed by the doctor. She could shoot the creature, but that wouldn't positively change their predicament. She could shoot- That was it. She whipped her pistol out and aimed for the chain on the cage door.

"Hey!" the man shouted. That was all he could get out.

She pulled the trigger. In a volley of sparks, the chain split in two and fell to the floor. She ducked behind a terminal just as a shotgun blast rang through the basement, and pellets lodged into her forearm. Her gun fell from her hand. She turned to see, in the reflection of a large glass vial, Dr. Weston ducked down behind her. The man didn't trail his shotgun after them. His eyes were locked on the creature, who calmly pushed the cage door open. Then, to her chagrin, the man started laughing.

"Ya are idiots, " he chuckled. "Gracie wouldn't never hurt me. She jus like a kitty or somethin' else sweet. Now come outta ya's hidin' spots 'fore I start jus blastin'."

"I would rather not," Dr. Weston spoke. "Unless you'd like to friendly up our terms."

"I ain't frienly nothin' jack shit," The man replied, then racking a fresh shell. "Now come on out by the count of or it's over."

Kenzie looked at Dr. Weston. If she jumped for her revolver, she was dead for certain. She felt for the phone in her pocket, but she knew there would be no service. It was part of what her daddy had put in these walls. No radioactivity meant no phone signals.

"Five."

Dr. Weston shrugged. He hoped something would happen, the cops would miraculously arrive or the man would just drop dead.

"Four."

A faint giggling picked up. Kenzie checked in the reflection and saw the creature rubbing up against the man. He pet it gently. It was

almost sweet.

"Three."

The creature began pawing at the man, much like a cat would a ball of yarn, and he pushed it off of him.

"Stop it, Gracie. Two. Y'all best stand the hell up!"

Gracie put its mouth around his leg, ever so gently, and began sucking. He laughed, this time heartily, and gave it a playful nudge.

"Gracie. Stop it. I need ta, ya need ta cut that out."

The sucking continued, louder now.

"Quit," His voice grew panicked. "Hey! Cut it out! Hey!"

Kenzie scrunched her nose as blood pooled around the beast's mouth. It ran down the man's overalls and over his working shoes, building up on the concrete floor. The sound of sucking changed to the sound of tearing, both of cloth and flesh. Gracie worked its way up his body finding lodging around his chest. He tried to angle his shotgun to the beast, but it fell to the floor, useless. "Gracie! Ow! Ow! Let go!" His voice was now a biting shriek. "Please! Please, Gracie!"

Gracie wagged its stump of a tail and bit down hard. The sound of crunching bone, like celery stalks, cut through the raw screams. He beat, he squirmed, he pushed and prodded, but it did nothing to quell the beast. In a final clench, ribcage gave way, and the screams turned to a soft gurgle, then died. down to silence.

Pleased, the animal sat down with its new toy and began to chew. It sat at the base of the stairs, outlined by the light coming from the house above.

Kenzie crawled around the stack of servers and looked at where the animal's eyes were. Its back was turned to her. She crawled along the dirty, rough floor and reached for the gun. Not close enough. She checked for Gracie again.

It was staring at her.

She leaped for the gun, but the creature was far faster than anticipated, and its foot kicked it far into the back cage. It placed a paw on her back and pressed down. She felt that same feeling the man just had, a crushing of her chest.

Dr. Weston popped out of his hiding spot and screamed.

"Gracie! Gracie!"

The pressure released off of her, and Gracie jumped into the air and spread its deformed wings, gliding to him in an instant. He jumped under a collection of cables, clinging desperately to the walls. The beast

followed him and lunged with an outstretched arm.

And froze. It was caught in the cables. Gracie jumped again, trying to pull itself from the wires but it proved impossible. She thrashed and churned, her body smashing against the concrete ceiling, rumbling the building like an earthquake, only to stop when one thick copper wire strung around her throat. It reached its claws out to the doctor, tail still wagging, eyes still smiling, but its head was turning a deep shade of blue. It lay there for a second, breathing droplets of the man's blood onto Dr. Weston's face, foul rot reeking from its dying flesh, before slumping over in the mess of cables, stuck like an insect in a spider's web.

The two of them breathed in silence for a moment. The doctor crept around to the creature's side, where he met Kenzie and they examined Gracie in tandem. They notice the scarring and fresh cuts running down her side, a perfect distance from the back leg, self-inflicted. At close now, they saw maggots and roaches crawling in and out of the wounds, wriggling about in a disgusting pattern.

"Poor baby," Kenzie found herself blurting out.

"It's just another experiment," Dr. Weston sighed.

"They've become increasingly common. Beasts that should've never been made."

"But they don't ask for it," Kenzie leaned toward the body, seeing the worms crawl through flesh. "Life must've been so painful."

Dr. Weston opened the knife in his pocket and began slicing off flesh.

"What're you doing?" Kenzie asked.

"Collecting samples. We need to know why this specimen was so successful post-incubation."

"Stop it! You're no better than those maggots!"

The doctor ignored her. Kenzie picked her revolver off the ground and pointed it to his back.

"Now, I said stop it! This poor thing has been through enough! If you touch her anymore, I'll put a bullet in you, I will!"

Dr. Weston sighed.

"**I'm** getting sick of Texas."

That week, when the doctor returned home and gave a written report to his superior, he left out a few of the details. He spoke of a lab, of the bootlegged fluid in the basement, of the failed experiments, of the man living down there, but he made no mention of a dragon. He felt it in poor taste. Perhaps Kenzie had gotten to him, or perhaps he was just

too old to push the world into a new age of genetics. Perhaps that breakthrough should wait.

Kenzie never spoke of the incident either. She went back to a casual rural lifestyle on her daddy's ranch. But every once in a while, she couldn't explain it, she would return to that basement and sit and think. There was something oddly calming to her about the dragon's body laid out in such an active display. It was like a fossilized exhibit in her own personal museum.

The Last Pigeon

Ren Daley

Vera tried to fly with no wings, no feathers, and nowhere to go. Her heels had a habit of never quite hitting the floor, always reaching for something greater—and she was great. She was a great woman, but a poor bird.

At night, she'd climb to the highest point in her village—a decaying clock tower that loomed over broken cobblestone paths. There, perched on the edge, she'd spread her arms wide, toes skimming the ground as she willed herself skyward. Vera would close her eyes, imagine the wind rushing through phantom plumage, the ground falling away beneath her. But gravity, a greedy mistress, would never surrender to the air. Vera would never know the joy of being carried by anything other than herself.

❧

Twenty-five years into that unsuccessful endeavor, Vera realized she needed a secondary dream to keep her occupied. So this great woman, who could have anything else she wanted, had a daughter. It was the most ordinary thing she would ever bring herself to do.

She had long ago abandoned her clock tower, which had been disintegrating year by year along with her aspirations. Without wings, the farthest she could lay her nest had been atop the seaside cliffs, a two-day journey from her beige little village.

Vera watched the moon make paintings in the black ocean, and in the vastness of it all, found herself wondering for the first time in many years if she might be able to fly over it. "Look, my darling daughter," Vera whispered, her breath warm against her little Paloma's ear.

"Look at the world below. Isn't it beautiful when you're above it all?"

Though she birthed her, there were days that Vera could not be sure that her daughter was her own. Her baby did not stare at the sea. No, little Paloma was all contentment with a wide-eyed trajectory on her mother's bosom. Vera had frowned at this, expecting her blood to have an ounce of curiosity of the world that lay ahead, some sign that they were both birds born in the wrong body. But Paloma was just as

mundane as the rest, and for Vera, this was a cardinal disappointment.

Vera was an unremarkable mother. She fed her child when it was hungry, bathed it when it was dirty, beat it when she was annoyed. The little girl was agreeable enough, and pretty like her mother, but she was not very interesting. Which meant she was not easy for Vera to love. Still, Vera did her best to remedy any dullness in their lives by pretending to live other stories—mermaid scouting, fairy hunting, mushroom gathering, bird watching. Vera could weave words like silk—Paloma used to idolize her mother for this. All the while, Vera watched her daughter's heels remain firmly planted to the ground, eyes drifting to the pebbles at her feet or the grass swaying in the breeze, always finding beauty in the ordinary, earthbound things.

Many a sunrise passed on those cliffs. Light had seeped over the ocean with the morning breeze, and pelicans flew into the sun, bursting through one reality into the next. Vera would hear Paloma wake, take one last look at the pelicans, and feel trapped all over again. She would laugh, a high, brittle sound that seemed to shatter against the rocks below.

Vera thought about pushing Paloma over those cliffs every day.

The youthful adventures of raising a daughter had stretched on for years. Vera sometimes had fun with it, but when all that became rather mundane, she remembered she was partial to pigeons.

❧

The first pigeon came by accident. No one knew why they came, and why once it started, it never seemed to stop. Paloma overheard her mom call it fate.

"Little girl! On the beach, come look! There's no time to waste!" The little girl was not so little anymore, almost thirteen, but her mother had not aged a day. Certainly, the way Vera leaped down the cliff to the seashore gave nothing away.

The sun baked the sandy shore, and her mother stood with her back to the ocean. Her dull crimson dress clung to her lithe body, revealing the slight curve of her spine. Sometimes, Paloma felt so lonely with only her mom around that she thought they might be ghosts; stuck on the beach like two dead gulls that nature forgot to decompose. When her mother turned to face her, clutching a small bird in her hands, she seemed more tangible, more present to Paloma than she ever had before.

"It's a dove?" Paloma gave her best guess.

"No, not quite. A pigeon." Paloma hesitated but ruffled its ice

gray feathers. It cooed, docile and warm. Always searching for answers, Paloma swung her head toward both ends of the beach, thinking some trail must've been left. But the pigeon arrived with no clue as to a beginning or end.

"How did it get all the way out here?" On their small island, the oceanside cliff where Vera and Paloma resided was about as far as one could get. That way, if there ever was a way, Vera would be the first one to leave.

Vera sighed, a little wistfully. She thought that her daughter had a habit of asking unimportant questions, which bothered her, as Vera did not like wasting time. Keen-eyed and territorial, Vera skeptically assessed Paloma as she petted the pigeon with greater comfort and interest. "Someone must've abandoned it before it found a home… It's alright. It will make it easier to train."

"We're keeping it?" Paloma wasn't exactly sure where a pigeon was meant to fit in their cottage.

"Of course we're keeping it," Vera snapped. The fire disappeared as quickly as it came, and was replaced with an emotion that Paloma had yet to recognize. Vera huddled into her daughter, the pigeon nestled between them like a well kept secret.

"I have always found it cruel that pigeons are regarded as common. Do their wings not trace the same arcs of angels? There is a beauty in the banal, a splendor in the predictable. That's certainly the attraction you drew…" Vera spoke off-handedly. "And still, it manages to find its way back home." She sounded almost bitter then.

Vera held the bird like it was something fragile. She had never once given her daughter so much attention. Vera rambled on for twenty more minutes about the majesty of pigeons, but Paloma kept her eyes trained tightly on the bird. Not so much out of curiosity and more so the worry that if it flew away, the newfound light in her mother's eyes would fly away with it.

"I'll even let you name it." That was the only say Paloma ever got on the pigeons.

❧

If Paloma had ever had Vera's favor, she had lost it to the last pigeon. In all fairness, Vera had lost her daughter's favor by the last pigeon as well. There was something about a beautiful bird that drove the two women wild. At eighteen, Paloma had become the sole keeper of the pigeons, tending to them in the drafty barn Vera had deemed too ugly for

her presence. Some might describe Paloma as chirpy in the absence of her mother, but she knew better. No love had been lost between them—there had never been much love to begin with. She was content to have her mother's waves meet her shore, as erratic as they were becoming. Paloma knew better than anyone that great women did not make great mothers. Still, she lived a happy life many days, and Paloma rushed to document every exact detail of pigeon #367, flipping through pages upon pages of her nearly-filled journal:

❧

#1. The icy gray rock pigeon, with its sleek, frost-kissed feathers, glides through the air like winter's breath. Its wings, edged in silver, catch the light like shards of broken ice, while its soft, stone-gray plumage blends seamlessly into the lighter feathers Its eyes, sharp and gleaming like tiny onyx gems, seem to hold the quiet wisdom of forgotten city corners (Mama's words, not mine). Beneath its humble, weathered appearance, there's an untamed elegance, as if it carries the spirit of both the sky and the earth, forever bound in flight and shadow. Its beauty and grace is on par with that of the dove, but it should not be so pure and clean. It is wild and unruly at times and better for it. I shall name her Waddleton Coldfeather. Waddles, for short.

Mama looks so happy. We danced around the kitchen for many hours and she made my favorite fish stew for dinner. I think this pigeon is the best thing that has ever happened to us.

❧

#42. With its bold stature and regal posture, he looks like a creature carved from dusk and dawn. Its feathers shimmer in hues of stormy slate and twilight lavender, with a chest puffed out like a noble knight's shield. Each movement, whether in flight or a slow, measured step, is deliberate, exuding a tamed power. The deep, iridescent sheen on its neck catches the light like an opal turning in the sun, shifting from emerald green to violet blue. Its round, inquisitive eyes, amber like autumn leaves, observe the world with a sharp intelligence and an air of dignified curiosity, as though it knows secrets of the skies that us humans could only dream of. A bird built for beauty and strength alike, though he is rather fat. I shall name him Plumpington Feathersby. Plumpy, for short.

It's my birthday today. Midnight is drawing closer, but she won't forget like last time. She just wants to give me a good surprise. She was so pre-

occupied today, so I can hardly blame her. We need to build a barn for our flock, winter is coming.

❧

#79. The young pigeon is a small, compact bird with soft, feathered legs and a distinct, rounded head. Its feathers are smooth bark brown and evenly colored, and it has a short beak. It maintains a calm demeanor, but it's still developing the signature elaborate plumage of its adult form. I shall name her Lady Fluffina Beakley. Fluffy, for short.

They won't stop coming. Mother is getting more frantic the colder it gets. She says we need to build the barn faster, and that I'm too slow, and that she could've built the barn in two days when she was my age. Today, I suggested that she could help. She slapped me, and pushed me into the water. My feet are cold, and I think I hate my mom.

❧

#284. My mother is raging–no, she simply is rage. I don't know how I ever saw her as anything else. This one is Peckingsly Muddyfeather. Pesky, for short.

❧

#0. No pigeons came today. I climbed into Mother's bed after a long day of being paraded around and worked tirelessly by her. It's the beginning of winter and the chill has started to set into the house. I reached for my mom's feet. Mine were just so cold, and hers are always warm. I'm not sure why I know that, it feels like lost knowledge, like a relic of a past life, but I'm glad I do. I was terrified that I was making a mistake by reaching for her when she had been so difficult all day. But one toe touched hers and I felt her shift while I froze. We played a game of chess with our bodies. Mom moved her legs toward mine, I crossed our ankles together, she took my hand, I held hers. I keep thinking about the games we play. Like everything about us—it's subtle, intimate, and above all, unspoken. I'm eighteen now, and no one will remember but me, but it's the best birthday I have had in a long time.

❧

#367. A fancy brown pigeon with curled feathers that soften from shades of chestnut into copper under the sunlight. Its body is plump and elegant, showcasing a graceful curve. The wings are adorned with intricate patterns, a mix of darker brown speckles and lighter caramel tones, creating a stunning mosaic effect.

The head is slightly smaller than the others in our flock, with bright, intelligent eyes framed by a delicate, feathered crest that adds a touch of sophistication. The beak is short and slightly curved, perfect for picking at seeds. The legs are slender yet strong, ending in dainty, delicate feet. As it struts around, this pigeon exudes an air of confidence, with a subtle bob in its walk and a soft cooing sound that adds to its charm. It's a true beauty, captivating anyone who takes a moment to admire its regal presence. Surely a descendant of the royal pigeons, I shall name him Prince Percival Pigeonhead III. Percy, for short.

❧

Prince Percival Pigeonhead III had his reign of terror many months later, after a relatively peaceful rule where he was beloved by all his subjects. Paloma never saw it coming. First, it was some minor scratching. Then, the scaly appearance of his speckled feathers. Then, some tiny little holes in his feather shafts. It was only when her scalp began to twitch and itch that Paloma realized what curse had fallen upon them.

"Did you know Percy has lice?" Paloma demanded, all panicked as she stormed out to the cliff where her mother was standing, her arms wide and eyes closed. She debated pushing her mother over, mostly because she already knew what her answer would be.

"Well, of course. I noticed that first little bug weeks ago. You know I have a great eye for those things. I hope you've kept him away from the others. It should be gone by now."

"You already treated him?"

"No, but I imagine it will go away on its own." Paloma fought the urge to scream. She didn't say anything as she headed back inside, there was nothing they could discuss at this point that would in any way help Paloma. She knew she was on her own. Though she did consider rubbing her hair then hugging her mom before she left.

❧

It was a two-day journey there and two more days back to acquire tea tree oil from the closest village. Paloma wasn't sure if this was the best cure for lice, but it was the only one she knew of from her minimal education. As dusk settled over the cliffside, she crept into the rickety barn where Prince Percy III roosted. Paloma's hands trembled as she uncorked the small vial of tea tree oil. The pungent, medicinal scent wafted up, making her eyes water. Prince Percival Pigeonhead III cooed softly, unaware of his impending treatment. Paloma took a deep breath,

steeling herself for the task ahead.

She tilted the vial with the utmost care, allowing a thin stream of oil to trickle onto Percy's feathered crown. The golden sheen of his plumage seemed to shimmer as the oil made contact. For a moment, Paloma felt a surge of hope. But then, to her horror, the oil began to spread, far too quickly.

The viscous liquid seeped down Percy's face like teardrops, defying her attempts to contain it. His eyes, once beady and alert, now blinked rapidly as the oil seeped into them. Paloma's heart raced as she realized her grave miscalculation.

Percy let out a piercing squawk that seemed to shake the very foundations of the barn. It was a sound of pure anguish, a cry that could wake the dead, or her mother. Paloma's blood ran cold as Percy thrashed about, wings flapping wildly, sending feathers and droplets of oil flying in all directions.

"Shh, shh, Percy, please! It's okay. Shh, shh, I can fix this!" Paloma begged, her voice a desperate whisper.

But Percy was beyond reason. And it was too late. The barn door flew open, revealing Vera silhouetted against the dying light. Her eyes, wild and furious, locked onto Paloma. In that moment, Paloma saw something in her mother's gaze that she'd never seen before—a fierce, primal protectiveness that sent chills down her spine.

Vera moved with the grace of a predator, her long fingers wrapping around Percy's trembling body. She cradled the pigeon to her chest, her eyes never leaving Paloma's face. The air in the barn grew thick with tension, the scent of tea tree oil mingling with the musty straw and Paloma's fear.

"What have you done?" Vera's voice was low, dangerous, like the rumble of distant thunder.

Paloma stammered, "I-I was trying to help. The lice—"

Vera's free hand shot out, grabbing a fistful of Paloma's hair. With a strength that belied her slender frame, she yanked her daughter's head back, exposing her throat. "You stupid, worthless girl," she hissed.

The first blow didn't come as a shock. Vera's open palm connected with Paloma's cheek with a crack that echoed through the barn. Streams of light exploded behind Paloma's eyes as she stumbled backward into the hay, her mother advancing on her like some avenging angel. She tasted copper, felt warmth trickle from her nose, but still the blows came. Paloma's world narrowed, but Vera wasn't finished. With

Percy still nestled in one arm, she advanced on Paloma, and she kicked. She kicked until there was some rearrangement of Paloma's organs, and when she was satisfied, Vera crouched down so that she could spit in her daughter's face.

"Never hurt him again." Paloma thought her mother was angry. But this close, she could see that she was more scared, more disturbed than anything else.

❧

Sometime later, after Vera stormed off in a huff, Prince Percival Pigeonhead III, clean, pristine, and lice-free, flocked back to the same spot in the hay where Paloma had been beaten to a pulp, and gave her a shy little nudge against her face. Almost as if to say *are you still alive? Also, are we still best friends?* Paloma couldn't move her face, it hurt too much, but she ruffled his feathers, her own lice be damned. *Yes, you're still my greatest friend*, she thought. She wouldn't despise the thing for being useless, though she couldn't say the same for her mother. God, she didn't even want to think about how many of their other pigeons had lice.

It was freezing in the barn, and icy wind whipped and crashed against her face like it was hurt by her too. Even the other pigeons hadn't been relegated to the barn at times like these. No, they were left to poop and preen as they pleased inside *her* home, *her* bed, *her* life.

It wasn't the screaming that angered her, or even the violent beating— she was more or less acclimated to her mother's fits. It was the way that she looked at Paloma as if she had hurt Percy on purpose, as if she had doused his eyes in tea tree oil and meant to set flame to him only a few moments later. She looked at Paloma like she was evil, when she had always done her best to be good. As far as Paloma was concerned, she was the mother that Vera thought she was to these pigeons. Maybe, just like her own mother had, she failed them miserably. The thought made her completely miserable by extent. Paloma hated, more than anything, the way her mother could make her hate herself.

❧

The broken girl made her way inside their cottage the following evening in hopes of supper, hair itchy, bones brittle and broken, and skin punctured then numbed by the wind. Vera was humming a delightful little melody in the kitchen, Percival cooing on her shoulder. *Traitor,* Paloma thought, *you know I raised you.*

Vera's hair cascaded down her back, clinging to her like water flowing over smooth rocks. As the light hit, it cast her hair in a shimmer-

ing black-blue, like a raven soaking up the sun after many rainy days. Something very ugly and foul and furious began to twist inside Paloma.

It was the ease of the movement that taunted her above all else. Vera was all radiance and smiles, toes barely touching the floor as she pranced around their kitchen, not a hair out of place. Paloma had fought for everything her mother had, and she had paid dearly for it. She paid with lice-riddled hair and infected wounds and sleepless nights and feet that were too tired to carry her on anything but aching soles. It was an envious wonder that consumed her until she finally snapped and lunged forward, desperate to flaw her mother as she had flawed her.

There was not much to see. There was no whirlwind of blood or bruises or broken skin. Paloma had her mother pinned on the floor of their kitchen with both hands squeezing hard around her mother's neck, just until the tips of her fingers could reach each other, and that was it. Paloma was on the cusp of being the monster her mother had given her every right to be. She held her hands tight on her throat, waiting for the satisfaction to hit, waiting for that last gasp of breath to tell her that every wrong had been righted. But time was a turtle waiting for her mother to give out. Paloma's thoughts raced past her, all those unspoken ones, now begging to be free.

Her mother was the person who took everything from her, her mortal enemy. She was the piece of demon in every angel. The culmination of all of Paloma's fears turned true. Distaste was all too easy; thoughts of her mother bubbled up like the bile coming out of her mouth. Thoughts that she once exiled as easily as she washed away last night's dinner.

Something in Paloma always knew to protect herself from Vera, from so-called great women. There was a predator for every pigeon, and a great woman for every bad mother. And yet, Paloma was still reaching for her mom, even with clawed hands and blurry eyes and all her rage. She could never quite shield herself from the life her mother took away from her. The path where she was Paloma's mortal savior, the angel loving all her demons, the culmination of all her fears, a wasteful whisper into oblivion. What would Paloma have been saved from if her mother had loved her as she had hurt her? Would she ever know?

Vera let out a gasp once she felt her daughter's grip loosen around her throat. Paloma said nothing, but closed her eyes and let her tears drip down her mother's face, so that they both may weep.

"Do you feel better?" Vera asked for nothing else.

Poetry

Persian sunflowers in southern American topsoil

Keana Saberi

On the cusp of twenty,
I linger among the memories of marigold kumquats in my grandmother's garden.
I waltz through the aroma of beet and cauliflower torshi filling her fridge,
drink the strawberry syrup from the bottle adorned with her handwriting,
dated from her last December.

I travel there in my dreams:
lie between the tendrils of grass,
arms enveloping
        the gap
                between past
                        and present.
I dream of childhood,
of eating abgoosht stew,
a plate piled with green onions, basil and radish,
adorning the spread,
as I sit cross-legged on the rug in her living room.
I dream of the popsicles she made in July,
sticky mint syrup
dripping
        down
                my fingers with an unknowing
                bliss.
And I always dream of her voice:
Keana joonam, dooset daram.

I linger over her possessions:
her silk scarves,
crocheted tablecloths she brought from Iran with tea stains persisting,
the miniature relic of the Taj Mahal,
a souvenir from her college years in Pune.
Her wallet still has my picture in it,
her appointments marked in blue ink in her planner.
Four pairs of various colored glasses reside at the bottom of her purse.

All meticulously organized as if she was to return and retrieve them.

A “For lease” sign is coated in spring showers.
Wildflowers cover her garden.

Her home is now occupied by a stranger’s furniture.

Chairs,
linen,
cutlery -

all someone else’s.

Persian sunflowers persist in southern American topsoil.

I’d grasp for a time that no longer existed,
in every quiet moment,
in every calamitous one.

What are the monkeys doing today?

Aaryana Sharma

I used to ask my ajji
who still outlines righteousness with rice flour
as she stands below the mango sun. *Aari,* she would say,
the monkeys stole my mangoes yesterday, and the neighbor's pots today.

Nowadays I gather coconut husks and use them as water cups to ambush my cousins.
Nowadays I sit by the carrom board and chide my friends: laughing at accents they don't have, and the way their mouths morph as they try to mimic mine.

The monkeys don't come by like before, laughs my ajji,
though sometimes I see tails on your backs when you kids run around.
After all, your appa's nickname was 'bala'.*

**bala* means tail in Kannada. This was used as a shorthand for 'monkey' because the people around my father considered him a monkey; all he needed was a tail. They compensated for this 'tail' by nicknaming him 'bala'.

Twist this mortal coil ‘til it pops.

Cassidy V. Schultz

21st century woman with
21 good years behind me;
Nothing to show for it besides
a pack of cigarettes and
a pistol in my glove box.

Lisping, tripping, and
nicknaming God’s creatures as
I see them splattered on the side of the highway.
(“don’t you ever get the feeling that all your life is going by—”)
Hurtling.
Incomprehensible.
And faster all the time.
And all the time the road was climbing before me.
(—and you’re not taking advantage of it?”)
I don’t want to hurt anybody,
but——
I’m young, dumb, and
so full on life that I’ve got a hard time keeping it down.
(“don’t you ever get the feeling—”)
Choking back tears, beers, and cheesecake
on a Tuesday night.
Saving my fur coat for the weekend parties,
Cimmerian dark under the freeway.
(“—you’re taking advantage of it.”)
Tangerine and smoke mingle on my fingers,

reminding me that I'm someone who used to know something.
A panopticon of opal animal eyes flash down upon me,
Waiting for the wrong move.
("don't you get—")
There's a rage in me so strong
that I feel it in my teeth.
("—that all your life is going by?")
I'm no longer afraid to dance tonight,
because that is all that I have left.

A Thought Experiment

Aidan Magner

Thought Experiment: explain death to your son, Todd. It doesn't matter if you'd name him that. Todd's like 4'2" and sort of wimpy. He's sat on his bed sniveling because his dog died and even though he's in the fifth grade he hasn't really "had" a death yet and it's all-new terrain for him. And since he's your kid you feel sort of obligated to explain it to him. Can you see it? What does his room look like? Is it messy or is it clean? Maybe there's some sports equipment or an instrument for band lying around. What does his bed look like? And what does he look like sitting there? What's Todd's face look like? Similar to you or more like somebody else? And how do you start this conversation? You're on his bed with him and you feel like you've got to say something but what do you lead with? You took care of the dog and fed it and walked it, and are pretty sad about her dying yourself, but it's different for you, you've seen death before, you know and understand it. So tell him about it. Explain it to him as you know it. Does it seem like he's getting it? Does it seem like you're helping? What are the findings of the experiment?

Conversation at Midnight

Katie Manz

Did you ever figure out what we did this for? he says,
mouth a pleasant keyhole moon, smoking. You recall
a decade in other men's colors. *Naw. You?*
There was a moment, once—I said for
Queen and Country, you remember—he was young
in a way that haunts you, praying for nothing more
than a decade, however—*but no*. Gray from gray,
this could be another baby-soft night, taking mouthfuls
from the lap of frivolity. *They put our faces up there.*
You want it to mean *together*; he laughs.
Hell, baby, they sure did. You could ask him about the taste
of liquor, whether it helped to bruise red and blue;
kneecapped, recalling another dynasty to succumb to.
He's got eyes like ash and dimples; tragic heroes
have a look. You say, *What happened to us, buddy?*
We stopped praying and started running. He swore to stop
smoking to his fingertips eight years ago, back when
you talked. Unbitter: *And how'd that work out for us?*
The night is sunny and he talks slow, straight, and serious,
and always has. *They cut something out of me*
but no one knows, he says. Spits it out and ruins it, still burning.
And you weren't around to tell.

Where Hope is a Tradition

Katie Manz

‘IN
the Middle Ages, the language spoken in Castile was
generically referred to as *Romance* and later also as
Lengua vulgar.’
I hit the pavement bleeding dirty Diet Coke & regular old
platelets. Crack. *huyo antes q puede pasar…*
We grew up together here, we
broke the china all over my mom’s hardwoods & *todavía me tienes en este cuarto, colgado por mi cuello*
smiling with bright shining eyes and sunset lips
IF
‘language is the instrument of empire’,
THEN
todavía te guardo, como conquistador, en mi pecho.
I bring you home - All of you -
I tamp down my little treachery into the fine bone of my
elbow which looks out at me
with wet accusatory eyes
espero toda mi vida
‘English is, by contrast, “satellite-framed”’; hung on the verb, I was so happy we were going anywhere at all.
I insist to everyone: We are so in love;
Wouldn’t hear a word about Rome.
(*Pero cuando se cayó sentí el fantasma también, escupiendo dientes de porcelana*)
until I can say:
Yes, this was bloody all along, yes
I loved it just like this, immoral, oppressive; Yes I believed in it when it lit me on fire;
God damn it all, it was miserable, it was like believing in the fucking sunrise.

The Black Sheep

Presley Shanafelt

A black sheep and a black cat
Share a word, little known
Both scare the duller herd,
Scat!
Off go the syllables
Until two are left,

Alone!

Quartzite

Haley Kilcoyne

The day after the
funeral, my father takes
me to the forest.
We shuck our shoes to walk
without trampling soft & sea-green
grass. My soles are dyed the color
of lake water, algae blooming
around my fingers. My father
points to a cliff
melting into sky & quarry,
its rock like peach skin in the sun
& flaky fish belly in the shadow
& under the stars it becomes
nothing.
I wonder if grief is:

I slip my shoes back
on. I follow my father
along the sandstone,
quiet, & I think of quarrymen
who once carried this
stone, cradling the heat &
pressure of a billion years
between their hands. They
hollowed out the whole
cliffside, stripped it naked
to ship. I think of
my father carrying
his father.
Is grief:

I don't know. My father walks
among birdsong. He never
cries, only carries
forward, his shoulders

starlit quartzite, &
I imagine the casket
lying across, the
cremation burning,
breaking bodies to
mineral, & what is grief
if it doesn't sear,
pockmarking our soles
with tallus, blasting us
from the bluffs?
& grief is:

Aphasia

Byron Xu

I lose with age a capacity
for sweets & defining
what's inside me to salvage my life

I'm drunk
scraping the keyhole of a dictionary
No words scratch my brain itch
Memories fixate then pass
like a pothole on the street

I was a Boy Scout practicing archery
I remember so little of the shooting
field only what was adjacent my dad
& a big rodeo barn I can't recall
why we went or how we got there
but imagine we drove & incomprehensible
& a dream has no *before* only starts
by eluding shape blinding

halogen lights & the musk of horses
A cowboy with a fake gun tearing
into the air
over & over &

I pocketed a blank & the gunpowder lingered
years after until all of my childhood
home dissipated into the cloud
after a gun fires
through which I can't discern
what my father smells like

Only this memory
burning the house only this father
faster & faster

Father I can’t remember
how we got here

Nonfiction

Bowie Knife

Ben Catterton

My first car was a used 2009 Toyota Camry with a V6 Engine and a thick layer of Stick-um on the dashboard, affectionately nicknamed "The Beast." The Beast's check engine light was always on, but after I saw the Stick-um on its dashboard had trapped a mosquito, I imagined the check engine light stayed off a second longer than usual. From then on, I started telling people the mosquito had been digested, and The Beast had miraculously healed from the bugs consumption through its "caloric intake valve." I found the myth of it all charming. But, the nickname mostly came off as an overly masculine invention.

That was unintended. My car was a maternal figure to me. She was a good listener when I needed that, and though it felt (and looked) insane to talk at my car, I often needed that. She brought me to school and work well enough, and unlike my actual mom, she was physically incapable of vengefully misgendering me during the drive—but the same could be said of anything inanimate. Out of affection, or upon any internal examination, or superstition, I tried to ensure I could live out of my car. I hoped that in some hypothetical runaway from my life, I would be armed with all of the essentials. This spartan urging toward "essentials" was in an arms race with my sentimentality to occupy as much space within The Beast as was feasible.

Underneath her driver's seat was a thrifted Bible, with a handwritten message directed to its eventual reader. In her trunk was a sleeping bag, a roll of duct tape, and three changes of clothes. Sliding a hand into the plastic fold behind her seats, I could find my small stockpile of cash and the GelPress nail kit a friend had left behind. Opening her glovebox to grab something, papers would slide out. My insurance and the programs or fliers for my friend's shows. Under them, atop my CDs and everything else, was my collection of lighters. I kept them on top so I could retell their stories. And so I could quickly light up. They were essential and sentimental.

The story I told about my orange BIC lighter began in a museum gift shop a month prior to its purchase. My arm elbow deep in a bin of souvenirs, buried and unseen, I rubbed my thumb against an engraved

leather keychain. Pulling my arm free with a satisfying cascade of plastic trinkets, I was able to see its exact form. It was a lighter case that read *Costa Rica*, with a little grey sloth hanging off the words. I palmed the thing and walked out. Then, a month or two later, while picking up an energy drink at a gas station, I threw the BIC on the counter with it. In my car, I slid it into the sheath, and gave it a couple experimental flicks, producing a tiny flame.

Then, there was the Huntington lighter; the bright yellow piece without a sparkwheel. Instead, you just pressed a red button, and a tall propane flame appeared. My friend Ricky stole that one from his dad, and I stored it for him in my glovebox. He never took it back from me.

Last was the lighter in a metal case. I just liked the way that one looked. Liked it so much I bought it. (Which was rare for me at the time.) Its story's simplicity served as a punchline.

I kept my Bowie knife beneath the lighters and CDs so I wouldn't have to talk about it.

My knife was picked up during a small adventure outside of Austin. Me, Ricky, and a couple others in the backseat of The Beast were looking for something to do. Ricky, half shrugging, mentioned *Cabela's*. He said he went there as a kid, and the exhibits were "all kinds of fucked." So, I turned the key in the ignition, the speakers hummed a shitty cloud rap song, and we drove thirty minutes to the Cabela's in Buda.

Heading into the store, there was an awkward lilt to our movements, something like shame. Stationed next to the row of eight doors with engraved handles reading Cabela's—and their matching eight security gates-was a security guard. A fifty-something year old man with a large bald streak down the center of his head, essentially a reverse-mohawk. He was wearing a plaid Carhartt shirt, a metallic, faux-military holster for his pistol, and a pair of Duluth cargo pants. I was also wearing Duluth cargo pants, but I had a black t-shirt on, with text on the back reading: "NO.9 IN THE UPPER REALM" and four skulls under that with "BLISS" printed on their foreheads. The vaguely pagan shirt and my four similarly-dressed cronies elicited a glare.

Past the entrance was a massive display, a papier-mâché mountain with ugly, out of place, taxidermied animals atop it. A polar bear and a moose stared daggers at me. To our left were aisles of hunter-chic clothes, and to our right was the hilariously detailed in-store aquarium. At the time, hunter-chic had actually picked up a bit of a following in our social circles, so our group drifted left. While inspecting a shirt with

a glossy vinyl print of a bass with the backseaters and laughing about its corny caption[1], I noticed Ricky had wandered off on his own. He was walking with purpose towards an unlabeled section of the store tucked between the aisles of ammunition and the "gun library." I followed him, and found myself in an aisle of knives.

Those days, our friend-set had a semi-permanent sneer when we were together. In the car, we could smile sincerely while we spoke, but in an outside environment like Cabela's, we knew we should sneer. But Ricky's expression was soft as he walked through that aisle of knives.

Ricky grew up in the suburbs south of Austin, but unlike some of his friends in the neighborhood, he also grew up with weekend trips to his grandma's ranch. There, he'd hunt and camp, and do all sorts of other outdoorsy stuff he never really told me about. We became *real* friends a long time after that, around the same time I got a car. By then, all of those things had an ironic charm to them. Thrifting at a Goodwill in south Austin, I found a shirt that said "GET YOUR BASS IN THE BOAT" with a large vinyl graphic of a bass leaping toward the viewer. I wore that shirt with a sneer for two years. Because while Ricky spent his youth shooting guns and punching trees in Texas, I spent my childhood hiding in our condo's basement in Kansas.

I was firmly an indoor kid. I remember in the summer between kindergarten and first grade, I'd do this little ritual involving four blankets, stacked atop each other on the couch. I'd bring my pillow from my bedroom and place it against the furniture's square arm, before finally grabbing my Wii remote and crawling under the blankets. Under the pallet, I didn't have to think about being a boy. Or about being like the other boys. There, I wasted away three months of freedom watching and rewatching seasons of TV.

But at sixteen, I started wearing Duluth cargo pants. And even though I had worked earlier that summer as a brick-layer for Cadence McShane, I felt phony wearing them.

We, Ricky and I, had complicated relationships with the farm-boy aesthetic invading our counter-culture. I had come out as non-binary, and my mom was misgendering me every day. So, every time I was confronted with a symbol of masculinity, I wanted to seize it, and throw it in my car. I wanted to put it somewhere away from her reach, then laugh at it. Ricky's father was drinking again, for the first time since his stroke.

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1 "MINE'S SO BIG I HAVE TO HOLD IT WITH BOTH HANDS"

He was also buying lots of knives. Talking to Ricky about it, I thought there was some prosaic connection between the two habits, something like: "Everytime I drink, I buy a knife." But Ricky pointed to his dad's upbringing instead.

Ricky's dad grew up on that ranch Ricky visited as a kid. Closer to a Cabela's than his public school, he carved wood in his free-time, and did all sorts of ranch work with his brother. Herding cattle, posting fences, maintaining the grounds, hunting deer, and of course, some underage drinking after all that. Ricky's dad grew up using knives. Skinning and preparing dead animals, clearing his path through thick brush, and cutting livestock free. I think he even used a knife to save his brother on one occasion. The details there are fuzzy.

In the aisle of knives at Cabela's, I didn't really talk to Ricky. I just floated between the reliquary. The knives, trapped in plastic, had a mercantile quality about them. To me, they looked like a row of dick-measuring, chauvinistic, archaic toys. I wore a sneer. But Ricky, he seemed meditative. Staring at the wall of knives, he had no sense of humor about the situation. He would just pick up a knife, then put it back on the shelf. Each knife he held, he danced with, moving his hand in these gentle arcs. So I followed him down the aisle, and like when I visited mass with my friend Silvio, I contained that part of myself that sneered, and tried to imitate him. Holding one, this stupidly big Bowie knife in clamshell packaging, I felt this strange fondness for it as I swung it. I imagined myself holding the free thing, slicing through obnoxious brush on a hike, cutting somebody loose from their bindings, or defending someone I loved.

It was then that Ricky and I got a text from the backseaters. They were heading to self-checkout, so we made our way out of the aisle with a nod. The Bowie knife still in my hands, and that fantasy still in my head, I was actually preparing to purchase the damn thing for fifty bucks. But, then I saw a ten-year-old boy holding a similarly huge knife in his left hand, holding his mother's pinky with his right, and I thought better of it.

Stealing the Bowie knife was pretty difficult. The package was unwieldy, about six inches wide and ten inches tall. Sticking it under my shirt, between my arm and my chest, I looked ridiculous. Like hard nipples, the corners of the package poked out of either end, and were totally obvious from any forward-facing angle. The package also had a magnetic strip or RFID tag somewhere inside of it, so I had to time

our exit carefully. My friends weren't necessarily into stealing a weapon with a serial-number on the blade, but I was their ride, so they all dealt with it.

We waited by the guard's station at the doors, just out of his eyesight, but close enough to reach any exit at a walking pace. Seeing a family with a small child go for an exit, we made our move, positioning ourselves parallel to them about two gates down, so they wouldn't notice. Then, as our gate's alarm went off, we lucked out. It set off a chain reaction, lighting up every gate, including that family's. The guard went for the family first and checked the sticky fingers of the toddler as we left the premises of the store. Pattering against the hot concrete outside, we made an awkward, speed-walking break for the Camry. Ricky got to The Beast first. He yanked her passenger door open, and slammed it behind him. Rank and file, our other friends slid together into her backseat, occupying the space like amniotic fluid. Finally, I got in her driver's seat, turned her ignition, and led her out of the Cabela's parking lot.

After finding a pretty place to smoke, me and that small group unboxed the knife together. It looked the same as it did that winter, or as it did this past summer, or as it does today.

The blade of the knife is nearly two inches wide, but as the edge curves up to a point, about six inches up the blade, the spine of the blade cuts into a concave arch in response, narrowing the very tip of the knife to a sheer centimeter. A clip point. The blade's wicked, claw-like shape is what makes it a Bowie knife. Its handle is hollow-cheap plastic, meant to evoke wood, visibly screwed together at the base with the poorly constructed metal pommel, painted gold, and the similarly poor painted crossguard above it. The guard curves around the hand of its wielder, and does so comfortably, allowing full piercing and slashing movements in the wrist and elbow, but still preventing the wielder's hand from sliding up the knife as they pierce their game, especially when their hands are wet with blood. Swinging the freed Bowie knife, it feels rigid, stolid, and articulate, like an extension of the body itself. The massive blade, the massive crossguard, and the overtly phallic positioning of the Bowie knife's leather sheath-hung between two belt loops, essentially bound to slap against the ass or thighs of its owner—make it a de facto symbol of honed masculinity.

Researching the knife's history, it is evident the Bowie knife was *forged* to be a symbol of masculinity. As written by Rezin Bow-

ie—brother of Texan superhero James Bowie[2]—and mythologized by the Texas Historical Association, the first Bowie knife was constructed and designed by James and Rezin Bowie. In this account, the two brothers (Romulus and Remus, James and Rezin Bowie) were forever bound by their invention. Raymond Thorps' account in his book *Bowie Knife* instead attributes the invention to James Bowie and James Black, a silversmith in Arkansas who ran a blacksmithy that James Bowie might have visited once. In Thorps' book, he claims Bowie came down the Chihuahua trail in 1830, and stopped to order a knife from Black. Bowie set down his wood-carved design, and Black obliged, but he created two copies of it. One exactly as specified, and one with his own details, including the clip point. In this myth, Bowie took Black's knife, swung it around, and instantly knew it was better. Then, shortly after, he killed three assassins with the improved blade. Making Black's knife the true Bowie knife, and, by God, "the most terrible blade ever devised." (Thorps, 23)

Picking at the origins of these myths, I mostly found nonsense. The whole James Black story? Hidden away in an unpublished manuscript by Governor Webster Jones the caretaker and family friend of James Black. Rezin Bowie's claim was at least certified by a notary—Herzehian Dunhan-but, Dunhan's only research involved talking to one of the Bowie family's neighbors, Jesse Clifft, at Rezin's recommendation. Jesse Clifft also claimed to have forged the knife at some point in the 1820s for the two boys, two to ten years before Black.

The Bowie Knife's history is one of dead and proud men looking to seize some small glory from their proud and dead friend. It's not particularly exceptional to me, more a symptom of that power struggle inherent to masculinity, another ten-inch phallus argued over by "great men." I feel obliged to mention the only certain fact in Thorps' account of 1830: James Bowie was traveling down the Chihuahua trail to reach one of his brother's plantations in Texas.

Staring at the knife now, it's more embarrassing than sentimental-forget useful. Hell, I've only used the thing once.

Driving to Ricky's house this past summer, at eighteen years old, with the knife still in my glove box, I witnessed a horrible crash on West 71. Parked to the side of the twin-exit to 290 and Mopac, almost sixty feet in the air, someone was trapped in the wreckage of their car.

2 Remember the Alamo?

I was one of the first people to witness it. I pulled over, shifted my car into park, and rushed to the driver's side where a small group was already gathered. The person inside was unresponsive, and their door was stuck on the airbags. After making sure that the group had called 911, I turned around, and saw another car slowing to a stop with two men inside it. One of the men leaned out of his open window, saying something I couldn't hear. He held a pair of safety scissors in his hand, and gestured emphatically toward me. I grabbed the safety scissors and ran back to the wrecked car. I cut the airbags to shreds, and opened the door. As the injured man crawled out of the car, I pocketed the safety scissors, and got back in The Beast.

No, I didn't use my knife to save someone. I thought about it for a moment as I parked, then instantly realized what an exercise in ego it would've been. Imagine someone ignoring a hurt person to grab their knife so they could somehow justify its purchase. What an asshole.

When I was sixteen, the same year I got The Beast, I spent my last Christmas with my mother. She had a new boyfriend then, Steve. Steve was large, easily over 6'2, and slightly overweight. He stomped around the house, with a lumberjack beard and a thin hunting knife on one of his belt loops. He, too, knew to misgender me. So, when our assumed family sat down to open presents, it did not shock me when he took the knife from his hip and carved open my mom's wrapping paper for her. Inserting the blade into the sinewy tape, then gliding it up, unzipping the flaps of the box, which limply unfolded behind his hand. When my sisters needed to open their presents, Steve handed over his knife to Shiloh's husband[3], who showed off his expertise with a proud grin.

No, I didn't use my knife then, either. I didn't have a hero moment. I didn't storm out, then return with my massive Bowie knife. Instead, when attention shifted away from the girls and Steve lumbered over to hand me his knife, I gently shook my head. As Steve retreated and sat next to my mom, she put a hand on his shoulder, as if to say: *You'll get him next time*.

I didn't want Steve's help, but I didn't want to sneer at him either. His knife clearly meant something to him, even if that something was antiquated. I knew it meant something, because he had that same look on his face that Ricky did, searching for his own knife. By handing me his knife, he thought he was giving me one more chance to be a man,

3 The man she shared a handfasting ceremony with two weeks prior.

like he so obviously was.

Parked at the edge of Ricky's ranch, still sixteen, Ricky and I rested in The Beast for almost three hours. It was two in the morning, and the bunkhouse[4] was full of our drunk and stoned friends—an expected consequence of our Spring Break preparations. But Ricky and I had sobered up, so when I asked Ricky if he wanted to leave, he nodded and followed me to The Beast. Inside, I turned the key in her ignition, watched her engine's RPMs flex and then go limp, then let her idle as her console emanated its pale green light. A CD began to play, but I lunged forward and shut it off. The Beast's air conditioning blasted our faces, and I started complaining. About my mom, about Steve, about the "useless gender politics" I had invited into my life by coming out. Ricky, meanwhile, took my knife from the bottom of her glovebox. He inspected it for a moment, then slipped it from its sheath. He placed the edge against the back of his hand, and sawed once. When it cut him without drawing blood, he asked if I kept it sharp on purpose.

The only time I've used my knife to cut something was while writing this essay. Until then, it was just an ornament. At my desk, examining the knife for some inspiration, I pressed my thumb into the blade, only to realize it was dull. Reaching for the leather at my hip, I unhooked the pouch atop its sheath, and slipped out the small, medium-grit whetstone that came with the knife. For some time, I pushed the whetstone across the blade with a screech, only interrupting this flow-state to place the stone into a small mug of water I fetched when it felt dry. I couldn't remember how long I had been at it, but when my hands began to ache, I called it. I placed the edge of the Bowie knife against my skin, and sawed once, producing a tiny cut that couldn't even bleed. Staring down at the small slash, I never wanted to hold a knife again.

4 The small home on the ranch where we stayed. It was equipped with brackish water and harsh cooling, and it had consistent signage throughout. Ricky's grandmother had once attempted to retrofit it into an Airbnb, but no one had bit, so she told her grandson to invite some tenants.

I Still Want My Dad Here

Thierry Chu

I am standing at the threshold of my parents' master bedroom with my younger brother to my left. The heavy beige curtains are pulled back from the tall windows and my mom rests her hand on our little shoulders as we stand there, unsure of what to say, unsure of how to comfort my dad at six years old. My dad turns his back to us and looks out the window to the driveway below – hand covering his face, whimpers escaping his mouth. I cannot see his face, but I can see the way his body has turned in on itself.

My dad is watching someone drive away with his Porsche 911 Carrera – the car he had to sell for the sake of our growing family. That's the first time I see my dad cry.

My father doesn't talk much about his past. I can't tell if it's because he physically can't remember or because he has chosen to forget. He grew up with seven siblings, and luckily his brother Long, my favorite uncle, is a writer. In an interview for the Houston Chronicle, he "recalled the day the North Vietnamese arrived, his sister running through the halls of his Catholic school frantically looking for him so they could go back to their grandparents' house and quickly pack. They were then taken to the airport in Saigon — his parents, six siblings, two aunts, and his grandparents packed into a military plane with dozens of others, and flown to Guam to begin the resettlement process. Had they not moved with such urgency, they might not have made it out." I can't blame my dad if he has chosen to forget the panicked haze of being pulled from school in the middle of the day just to be stuffed in a plane, as if there were an exciting Hollywood premiere to see rather than a deathly reality to escape.

The narrative of my dad's migration is a diluted story of possible things he told me in the past and blurry memories of what others have told me. My dad graduated early from UT Austin – the first of his siblings to reach beyond where they strangle their family roots into

the Houston soil. Something that sticks to my brain's edges is the polar image of where my dad came from and where he is now. In the hazy afterlight of a screaming match between us – probably about my disrespect or lack of gratitude – he walks away saying, "You don't know what it's like not being able to take your college girlfriend out on a date or having to walk under the highway bridges because you don't have a car." And then, on the opposite end of my brain, as if they were opponents in a Burr-Hamilton duel, there's the other memory: a picture of my dad on the front page of a newspaper, buzzed hair, young face, working on one of his first patients out of dental school in New York.

I hold these two things all at once when I think of him: rags to riches.

My dad saying goodbye to his Porsche is like saying goodbye to the American Dream: earning your own money to pay for your fancy car, not held by any obligations. For my brother and me, it feels like saying goodbye to the joy on my dad's face while he jokes about driving race cars in Germany in his Porsche's driver's seat. Now, we are to live in a reality where my dad is obligated by his growing family and little do I know that the pressure is on me as the eldest. The checkered flag is raised, and all of us watch a part of ourselves drive away.

❧

My father raises me to be independent. Maybe it's so I can stand on my own and not tie myself down to anything that may leave – or blow up at the hands of the Communist government. I can only imagine that it comes from a place of trauma. I can only imagine the way your heart hardens at being forced to leave the place you grew up in. I can only imagine because my dad will not tell me about the pressures he faces growing up as both Vietnamese and American – coming from a middle-class family in Vietnam to being viewed as "foreigner" whose economic and social resources are not as accessible in America.

I must imagine because otherwise, I get angry.

When I'm thirteen years old, my dad tells me I'm going to St. John's School in Houston, Texas for high school. My dad lines our upstairs hallway with college flags and the row of Ivy League schools are in front of my door. I memorize the eight schools at eight years old. St. John's School is going to be my straight shot to Harvard. It's what I've always wanted.

My resume crinkles between my thumb and forefinger. I try not to crumble it, lest the St. John's Admissions Director think I'm unprofes-

sional before he lays eyes on me in the interview my dad networks for me. My mind is filled with the names of my dad's friends' daughters who go to St. John's just to get accepted into every Ivy League school they desire. I will be another anecdote for my dad to contribute to his friends' conversations. He didn't immigrate from Vietnam for nothing.

"Thierry, my friend told me about someone who interviewed for Harvard, and all they talked about in the interview was baseball." He laughs. "Seriously, you can just talk about the Astros, and they will find you interesting."

Is this why I love the Astros? The Astros notoriously win the 2017 World Series a couple of months ago. My dad and I develop a system to go to the World Series games and sneak into Minute Maid Stadium's clubhouse: buy cheap tickets, photoshop them to say 'Diamond Club,' and simply flash them to the workers at the entrance. My dad's job is to buy the tickets and my job is to photoshop them. It's our secret language of high crime; we are the deep state.

The first time we successfully sneak in, he high fives me once we are out of any worker's eyesight and whispers under his breath, "We did it!" I can't help but remember moments like this – pure joy with my father, screaming at the top of our lungs, stomach full of greasy food – and how they can be reduced to a helpful interview anecdote.

He makes me who I am, and I believe myself to be his most loved and most hated creation. For in our common interests, we are one. I can fulfill the dreams he watches drive away back when he sells his Porsche. Yet, in our differences and in my doubts, we are no longer kin. I remind him of his lost ambitions and failures.

He never directly tells me that, though.

I nod along as my dad gives me unsolicited advice for my admissions interview, and I fixate on my resume in front of me. It has nothing. At thirteen years old, shouldn't it have more? Some non-profit I started? Some cure for cancer?

I step into the dark mahogany office of the St. John's Admissions Director, taking in a stout white man with a gray beard. I am the picture of professionalism: a handshake, a smile, a compliment. I hope he doesn't notice how my eyes drift away from his face to the family picture posted in his office behind his head, how I lie about loving soccer despite only doing a season of it in middle school because my friends did, and the burning sensation in the back of my throat that signals tears are coming.

A month later, I cry about this interaction for the entirety of my parent-teacher conference with my mom and eighth grade advisory teacher, Ms. Charles. It dawns on me that my interview with the Admissions Director is more than a passing conversation; it's a crucial part of my application to take the next step in my life. I do not know how to get into St. John's, but most of all, I do not know how to please my father.

I feel as though I have done everything right in my application, but it still doesn't feel like enough. My mom tells me it will be okay, that my high school doesn't matter that much, but I don't believe her. Dad said so and look how far he's gotten with what he knows – poor Vietnamese immigrant who started his own dental practice and moved his family to inner-city Houston. I do not tell my dad about this conference.

Days later, the head of my middle school calls me into his office. He hears about my conference and tells me that my school values me for more than going to St. John's. He tells me that I have contributed so much to our middle school by simply being me. I weep because I do not believe him. I do not tell my dad about this, either.

Confucianism deeply impacts Vietnamese culture and gives parents, especially fathers, absolute authority and control over their children; children are expected to show loyalty and respect to their parents. Historical Vietnamese kinship systems are "structured around the patrilineal common descent group (ho or toc), composed of several nuclear families who were the descendants of a common male ancestor." (Kibria 43) In this system, there is a ritual head who is responsible for high-level family duties toward the entire lineage while "each branch of the patrilineage and each nuclear family also has a male head who plays a comparable role" (44). The father is undeniably important in Vietnamese culture, so a Vietnamese man in America must be a representative of their culture. My dad must be better somehow. I must be better somehow.

Yet, no matter how hard I try, I relish my dad's hug the same way you might appreciate a cup of hot chocolate in the middle of winter. It is warm and sweet to taste, yet it sometimes feels confined to specific seasons. Every one of my four younger siblings and I are required to run a half-marathon in eighth grade, raise money for a car, and play a full round of golf in a three-part challenge my dad gives us.

"It's just a mental game," my dad states as we skip together in a square-foot of space crammed between overexcited running couples and pacing groups waving their flags in the air. Although he stopped running routine marathons long ago, he always shows up to the annual Houston

Chevron Half-Marathon – as long as his kids are running too.

No, it's not. It's 13.1 miles on foot.

Yet forefoot bounces after forefoot against concrete propelled by cheers of "Runners have nice butts," and my toes flex in muscle memory, remembering how they bled while training for this. They leak red sticky liquid, creating a stain of dedication and ambition. Everything my dad tells me is true. Suffering and grit produce victory. Maybe the pain isn't so bad if it gets me here, to where my dad and I can cross the finish line *together*.

I cross the finish line and waddle through George R. Brown Convention Center – headphones hanging limp in one hand, death-gripping the celebratory banana in the other, and searching for my dad. He finds me thirty minutes later, following behind, having my back. His hands rise in victory, and his face resigns in exhausted contentment. He reaches out to hug me instead of the other way around like I always do. His firstborn completes his challenge, this game he makes up to teach us the life lessons he wishes he had growing up. I realize that my dad, in all his pomp and circumstance, simply wants connection.

❧

I do not get into St. John's. I am waitlisted which feels worse than being rejected because they think I'm good, just not good *enough*. I end up going to St. Agnes Academy, which is the all-girls Catholic school I secretly pray for. I do not remember how my dad reacts to me getting rejected from St. John's. I wonder if it ever really matters that much to him.

When I apply to college, my eyes are deadest on the University of Notre Dame. It's not the Ivy League my dad intends for me, but he can imagine the potential for prestige. He allows me to apply there.

It's like déjà vu when I get waitlisted again – good but not good enough. I close my computer screen with its ominous, fateful decision. I keep a straight face because "I'm fine." This time, I do remember my dad's reaction because he and my mom find me later that night sobbing on my bathroom floor – lights off, left cheek plastered wet to the tile floor. They both rub my back and he tells me, "It's okay."

He is not mad. I think, *Maybe he is growing up too*.

Instead of Notre Dame, I end up at UT Austin, my dad's alma mater. I am disappointed in myself because I know he envisions more for his prodigy, more than what he achieves. Yet, when he drops me off at my freshman dorm, he cries and says, "I am really proud of you."

I want to be mad at my dad. He has hurt me. He has called me a bad person, criticized the things I love and who I want to be, claimed me to be so many things I'm not. Today, I remember what he said this summer, "You should be more empathetic and think about someone other than yourself for a change." It's funny because sometimes it feels like all I do is think about someone else. Him.

Still, I reach out and try again. I call my dad this past September because I am wrought with sadness that we don't talk as frequently as my boyfriend talks to his dad. I see the way my dad holds the weight of the world on his shoulders, and that often makes me sadder than he could ever hurt me.

"What have you been up to?" I ask him. The phone call pushes out static for a second, and I hear rustling on the other side of the phone. It's 8 AM, and I know I've woken my dad up from his morning nap between dropping my siblings off at school and going to work.

He chuckles. "Just working, you know."

"So, guess what?" I ask.

"What?" he asks.

I tell him about my summer internship because I know that's what he will want to talk about. I know he's going to be very excited at the prospect of my being successful, and I know he's going to throw in mentions of other more prestigious companies I could be working at.

But I don't mind because at least we're talking.

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The Sunrise Soor

Heur Alass

The room was filled with muffled giggles, snorts, and panicked shushing. I stood guard by the door, watching the four girls trip over their prayer skirts as they tried to slip out of them quickly. I froze, hearing the familiar jingle of gold bangles moving against each other.

"*Teta*'s awake," I warned frantically, the sound of my grandmother's anklets clinking down the hallway.

The room fell silent, and each of my cousins stood still until we heard the jingling retreat to the living room, where my grandmother always slept. Once the quiet settled again, we breathed in relief and returned to our mission. Like every morning, we went through our rehearsed steps: Pray Fajr, the morning prayer. Tiptoe to the kitchen and steal whatever dessert is left over. Slip through the narrow hallways to the front gate with our sugar-filled plates. Turn the rust-bronze key. Shut the heavy metal door quietly on our way out. All without alerting *Teta*.

I was the last one out this time, turning the slippery handle with both hands and inching the gate closed. Despite my care, the metal snapped back into place with a loud thud, earning me a unanimous "Shh!" from all four cousins.

We hurried away from the door and made our way around the corners of the cracked clay walls of my grandmother's home. It had been standing long enough for me to make all of my summer memories here. In the forgotten parts of Amman, my seven aunts, my uncle, and all twenty-something of my cousins met here every summer we could for as long as I could remember. When life was easier, we would see each other for three months every summer. And then the world started to change.

Money got tighter, visas expired, and siblings fought. Summers started leaving some people out. One year, all of my cousins would be together while I had to stay back in America.

Another year, I would go and only find half of my cousins there. But this summer was different. This was the first summer my *teta*'s house was full again. After five years, we were all finally together. Wanting to make the most out of it, my cousins and I fell back into our old ways of sneaking out to climb the *soor* behind the house and the fig trees.

The *soor* was a six-foot-tall wall built with clay blocks as old as my *teta*'s house. It surrounded the trees my *teta* planted when my grandfather was still alive. The top bricks of the wall were loose and unstable, with tan crumbles of clay that scattered everywhere when the bricks shifted under our weight. Under it was a den of scorpions and snakes, according to my *teta*'s stories. We were seven when she caught us on the *soor* the first time. She brought us inside to scold and scare us out of climbing the wall again. She told us the snakes and scorpions were waiting to see our legs dangle so they could attack. She warned us with exaggerated stories about the poisonous bites and the death that would await us there. But by the end of that week, we had already found our way to the *soor* again, searching for the fabled snakes and scorpions. I don't remember ever finding any, but I remember scaring my cousins and shouting that I had spotted one. I never had, I don't think. But it was fun to see them scream and jump, nearly pushing each other off the wall.

This summer, we weren't climbing to look for the scorpions or snakes. We weren't climbing to prank each other. We had all grown up. One of us was done with her first year of college now. Two of us had just graduated high school, and one was going into her senior year. We saw the world differently. College scared us more than snake bites now. This summer, we were climbing to breathe in the cold morning air before life hit us again.

This morning was the first of my last week with them for the year. It felt more special as we set our plates on the bricks before lifting ourselves up. I jumped up and swung my legs over before helping one of the girls up with me. We sat in a row, kicking our feet and stuffing our faces with sweets. We had left our scarves inside, going out with our hair and pajamas, playing a game of how long we could stay on the *soor* before we had to hide so the men across the street didn't see us. The way the sun teased the horizon, painting it with the faintest hints of day, was almost surreal. The air was a cool sting against my skin. The only sound was the swaying of the fig trees and the faint hint of chewing. It was quiet for a few minutes, a comfortable softness that surrounded my cousins and me.

"Sunsets or sunrises?" the giggly voice on the far right spoke up. I leaned forward and turned my head to get past the three-person barrier between me and my cousin who had just spoken.

"Sunrises, obviously," I answered quickly, my mouth full with the leftover tres leches cake we had looted from my *teta*'s fridge.

There was something about the dawn air that I had always loved. The fresh chill that signaled a new start. The quiet that settled over the village while everyone except us slept. Sunsets just weren't the same. Sunsets were pretty skies, ruined by the bustling of cars and the busyness of stress. Sunrises were just as pretty, but with the peace that sunsets lacked. I looked over at my cousins, hearing them bicker about where the sunrises and sunsets were nicer. We all lived in different places. I guess that's what happens to families over time. They scatter themselves around the world only to see each other back in a mother's home once a year.

"How are the sunrises in America?" they finally asked, turning to me.

I smiled and opened my mouth to answer, only for the words to die on my tongue. I had no idea. I always woke up before the sunrise to pray and then got distracted by the rush of getting ready to make it to class on time.

"I don't know," I shrugged after trying to find a better answer. "Never seen it." My cousins returned to their bickering, but I felt a strange emotion settle in my chest. Maybe the day-old cake was giving me heartburn. But it felt a little more uncomfortable than food gone bad. Why had I never watched the sunrise? It was my favorite time of day, so why was I never able to see it the way I could when I was here? I looked over at the burnt orange and tan house by the horizon. It was showered in a pink and tangerine light as the sun settled in the sky. I knew the same colors shone on my apartment in America, but I never had the time to go out to see it. I didn't even have time to look out the window. The more I sat there on the *soor* with my cousins, the more the discomfort in my chest grew. I wanted to see the sunrise in America. I wanted to have the time to breathe in the new day the way I could here. So why couldn't I?

There was something beautiful that I had here that I was missing in America. Something that I would never find with the way I live. Back home, there was no *teta* with rattling gold bangles. There was no leftover cake in the fridge. There was no rusty key or heavy black metal gate. There were no fig trees or cracked clay walls. There was no *soor*. Back home, there was my alarm clock. There were overnight oats in the fridge. There was the electric lock on my cement gray apartment door. There were cookie-cutter houses with cookie-cutter bushes. There was no *soor*.

I was always running around. Getting ready. Cramming for my

exams. Going from class to work to my second job to make sure I had enough to contribute to my family. Making sure I got a meal somewhere in between and getting just enough sleep to keep going. Days came and went, and I was too lost in my routine to bother with the sunrise. But right now, sitting on the *soor*, time moved slower. I had time to breathe in… out… and take in what was in front of me. And I realized that somewhere deep inside me, that was all I wanted. A life where I could have the time to remind myself that I am breathing. In… out…

But that life was out of reach, reserved only for the summer, all the way across the ocean from my life in America. I was a week away from returning to the busyness of work and classes and the rush of life. I didn't want to go back to racing through life. I wanted to live it. I breathed in the cold air slowly, relishing in the way it pushed out the discomfort in my chest. I glanced at my cousins again, listening in. They had moved on to talking about the argument we'd overheard our mothers having earlier about selling the house. *Teta*'s house. The same house that brought us all together. The one with the *soor*. They wanted to find a newer and bigger house down in the lively parts of Amman. Such was life, I guess. Homes were only homes as long as they kept us content. Priorities changed, and homes turned into sellable buildings, stripped of their memories and people and sunrises.

It almost made the discomfort return, until I realized how malleable life was. The life I wanted was what I found on the *soor* with my cousins. It was the quiet and stolen moments that we made time for simply because we could. And I could if I tried. I could take it and bring it with me wherever I went. I didn't have to live like a robot running on overly sugary energy drinks. I could go out and watch the sunset outside my apartment, even if it's just for a few minutes. I could find my own *soor* somewhere. My cousins and I could find a new *soor*, somewhere in this new house our mothers would find after selling the home we'd all grown up in.

I felt the ease settle in, and I finished my plate of cake before setting it beside me. I joined in on the new conversation, my cousins squealing about how we all needed to make sure we called every weekend after the summer ended. I felt lighter again as our laughter echoed in the quiet open space. Sure, we would all part ways again for another year. Life would distract us, but I knew I could take this feeling with me and find it in my own life. It might never feel as good as it did here on the *soor* with them, but it might come close, and that was what mattered.

It would always be better than succumbing to the robotic marathon I was running back in America.

The sun was fully out now, bright enough that the neighbor would see us if he walked out to get in his tractor like he did every morning. We saw his door open and we all gasped in panic, the same way we had every sunrise before, covering our hair with the empty plates. We jumped down onto the mulch, running by the fig trees and holding onto our plates and forks. It was time to sneak back inside the way we had left: Turn by the corners of the cracked walls. Open and close the metal gate without a sound. Lock it and hang the rusty key. Tiptoe back to our bedroom. All without alerting *Teta*.

Contributor Biographies

Levy Lu is a Printmaker, Painter, and Comics Artist who had a transformative experience at Ox Bow. They enjoy playing games such as D&D and MTG, and can be found through the handle @leskylentils.

Esperanza Magaña is a current undergraduate student at the University of Texas at Austin. She is from Brownsville, Texas. Her favorite book at the moment is *If Beale Street Could Talk* by James Baldwin. She believes this is all you need to know.

Jude Villarreal is a marketing copywriter and editor by day and a creative writer by night. She has won 16 awards for her writing across multiple media categories, including the Parker Prize in Poetry (First Place), and the Parker Prize in Fiction (Second Place).

Zainab Siddiqui is a 23-year old writer living in Austin, Texas. Belonging to an immigrant Pakistani family, she draws from personal experiences to craft stories that reflect themes of loss of innocence, identity, and relationships. Her stories center on South Asian characters navigating cultural struggles and life after immigration. She is a senior Public Health student at the University of Texas at Austin and plans to pursue a career in law.

Jarob Abbott is a Junior at The University of Texas at Austin. He is currently majoring in the Moody College's Radio-Television-Film Program, with a business minor in the McCombs School of Business and a certificate in Creative Writing. When he is not writing screenplays and short stories, he enjoys cooking, playing piano, and filmmaking.

At The University of Texas at Austin, **Ren Daley** pursued a Neuroscience BSA with a minor in Creative Writing while participating in the Polymathic Scholars honors program. Looking ahead, Ren plans to pursue a Ph.D. in Neuroscience, with the ultimate goal of deepening our

understanding of the brain's role in sleep. Alongside her scientific aspirations, Ren hopes to one day become a published literary-fantasy author.

As an Iranian American poet, **Keana Saberi**'s narrative work is heavily influenced by her Iranian heritage and exploring the duality of identity. She is currently studying journalism at the University of Texas, where she focuses on community-centered local storytelling. Her poetry has been published in Assembly, a Malala Fund publication as well as received recognition by the Austin Youth Poet Laureate Program and Scholastic Art and Writing Awards.

Aaryana Sharma is a junior psychology major at UT Austin pursuing a certificate in creative writing and a BDP certificate in Children and Society. When she isn't working on her independent research project you can find her watching movies or experimenting with words through poetry!

Cassidy V. Schultz is a Junior English Major at the University of Texas at Austin. She writes in her free time, mainly snapshots of evenings out and observations on city-life as a young woman. She plans to pursue a career in law, journalism, academia, or something to that effect.

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Presley Shanafelt is a traveler, writer, and filmmaker based in Austin, Texas.

Haley Kilcoyne is a Literature and Marketing undergraduate at UTD. She enjoys playing around with realistic fiction, poetry, and literary criticism. She can often be found at bookstores and hockey games and hopes to one day write for film and entertainment. At this time, she is working on a high fantasy novel with an estimated completion date of fall 2025.

Byron Xu is a senior at the University of Texas at Austin. A Pushcart Prize, Best New Poets, and Best of the Net nominee, his works are placed in *Poet Lore, Denver Quarterly, Northwest Review, The Florida Review,* and elsewhere. He was Managing Editor of *Apricity Magazine*.

Ben Catterton is a nonbinary student at the University of Texas at Austin, where they are studying English and Plan II. Their works have been previously published on their website *CattertonScribes* and *KVRX Blog*.

From Houston, TX, **Thierry Chu** is a junior at the UT Austin studying Plan II and English with minors in Spanish and Religious Studies. She is fascinated with tension - the intersection of different disciplines, the way people exist in two places at once, the fruit of productive tension - all through solving problems and telling stories. She hopes to land in a professional space that sits in tension at the intersection of humanities and business or technology. She is a profound leader and advocate for others. She enjoys reading, creative writing, babysitting, spending time in nature, and trying new things.

Heur Alass is a freshman neuroscience student at the University of Texas at Dallas with a passion for creative writing. Balancing academics with her love for literature, she writes whenever inspiration hits. Her work is deeply rooted in her Arab heritage, honoring her homeland. Beyond writing and studying, she runs Zaytouna Crochet, her small business dedicated to handmade crochet creations.

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