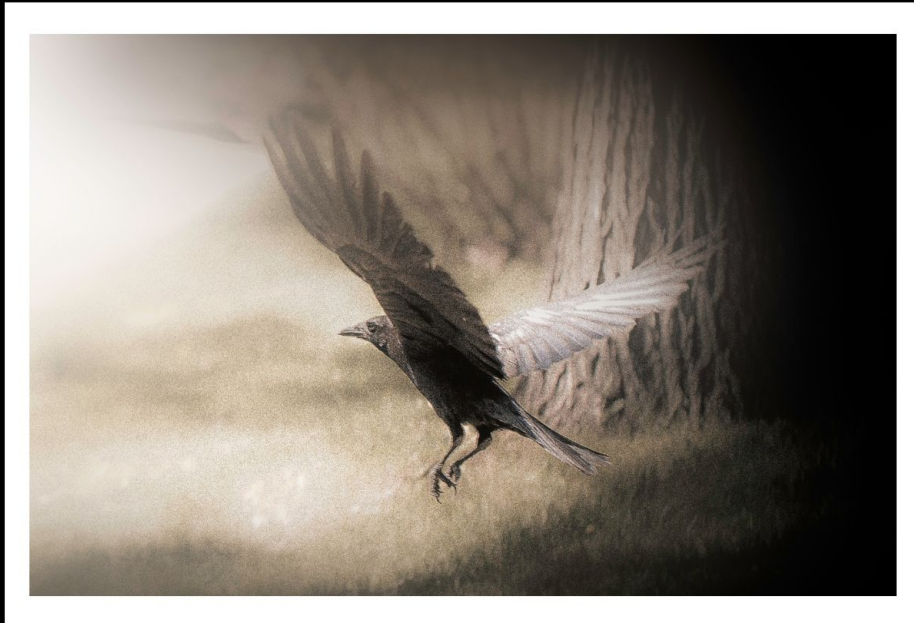


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A. Williamson

Live Burial

Imagine my loneliness, my disembodied
thought, the howling it took to find my
throat, understand I had been trapped

with nothing but a dress split up the back
and useless beads. Would I think they'd
bound my wrists? How long would it take

to untangle my fingers, folded over each
other so demurely. "She was middle-aged,
and devout. She will rest in His loving arms,"

they said as I thrashed the pine lid of my coffin.
I have broken my hands, torn my dress, clawed
my skin and drunk my own blood but when

men walk past I hear them ask which girl
still cries so for her lover, wandering the mists
of her despair. When you see them, please,

tell them, please make them understand how I
mourned my own loss, how I surrendered
my body only slowly, and myself, not at all.

Aimée Primeaux

For Years, Now

For years, I've worn you like a dim tattoo,
Some ink from long ago inside me now,
A tree on skin, lines curved and faded blue.
A reminder, a talisman, a vow.

You came into my life when I was young.
I was small then, so I was swept away,
Pulled out with the tide, untethered, undone.
You held me closely, drifting through the fray.

I cried because I knew it was the end.
You cried; our kids now from a broken home.
My heart torn out, I turned away in love.
For to love you was to leave you alone.

My joy, my peace, is a tree in the tide,
A tall mark on the horizon, my guide.

*Anderson Peguero II***941770009**

They caught me one night when I was high out of my mind, and they fought with me and threw me on the ground, and they booked me. Next thing I know I am on a boat in the dark, night everywhere except the top tips of the waves, The Island looming like a massive gargoyle in front of me. I was so high that night that I honestly don't remember what I did or said. My mother just died, and I wanted to see her again. I hope it didn't work; I hope she's not watching me anymore.

They have taken everything from me. I am just one of many and none of us have any say.

They threw me in with maybe thirty others in a holding cell in the middle of the night and told us nothing. The sun came up and went down again and nothing in the meantime. There were men who gouged out their eyes and some of them died and also there were others who goaded men into fights so severe that one of them would end up dead. Randomly a guard would enter the holding cell and pluck one of us out. No explanation, no names being called. They didn't bother to take the corpses out until the smell was too much for them to stomach for even a minute, and then they'd just haul out as many as two men could handle and leave us with the rest. We looked to each other with fear and confusion multiplied by hunger and psychosis, and we clung to the corners as much as we could without touching another. There was only a drain in the middle of the cell where a man would go to piss or shit and even that they did apprehensively because at least two men since I've been here were beset by the flies hovering over the dead and one of them died of malaria or something and the other got so inflamed near his ass that he screamed and asked for death for two nights straight. Everyone here to a man is damaged. Even and especially the guards. There are few of them and little they do but lecture us on how we deserve this fate. They have to believe that, or they will go mad, madder than us. They have this haze in their eyes of one that'd seen war. I'd never seen war, but I realized it had to be something like this. Incomprehensible. Unjust. Immortal.

If only I knew then that there was to be no further freedom. I'd have killed myself, too. The dead are the lucky ones.

When they pulled me, I was given no adjudication, no charges, nothing. Only a cell of my own with no window. Food given through a slot twice a day. Nothing else.

The solitude robs me of everything. Before long I yearn for the horrid tortures of labor and servitude I've heard whispered await the lucky ones. The laborers can't earn any wages or privileges but at least they see other people, at least they see beyond four decrepit walls. Very soon I realize there's no point in thinking of escape. There are gates, checkpoints, cameras, guns everywhere. Even if I did get through that, I'd have to swim for hundreds of miles—there's nothing else on The Island but the jail.

I dream of the sky, the sun on the sea, hot sand between my toes, oil of pasta slipping down my chin, wind blowing my hair about me...

And others. I've read that Hell is other people, but I would prefer to be imprisoned with others. No, I'd prefer to burn in Hell.

I used to dance in the clubs and the streets with pretty women. I'd gotten into cafes and fashion events without knowing anyone, just because of my style and my charm. (They've taken my clothes and replaced them with rags.) I had a career and a business I was planning on starting soon. I paid my taxes. I used to read, write, argue, and have ideas. I used to sit for hours laughing, drinking, and theorizing with my friends. So many songs I miss hearing. The books I'll never get to finish, the love I'll never be able to find...

I feel myself aging and I know my children are growing. What does their mother tell them about me? Did they ever look for me? If I have grandchildren, will they look like me? Like most, I'm "diagnosed" by a quack that glances at me and I'm given medication to help with my "rebellious behavior." The medication makes me sluggish and fat. The only food I get six days a week is half a loaf of bread and fruit. (On the holy days we get cheese and chicken legs.)

You punch the walls, you tear out your hair, you beat your chest. Then you scream all your breath away and you wonder if you ever had a mouth or a voice. The body is not meant to be erased like this. With nothing left you retreat to your mind, in the face of the incomprehensible you try and rationalize, even if you know there are no answers. Why did this happen to me? What did I do to deserve this? Why can't anyone help me? Why can't anyone save me?

You were born a beast, and you return to being a beast.

The natural response when you realize you are so hopelessly trapped is to end yourself. Surely oblivion is better. Everything becomes so hopeless this begins to look attractive and sensible.

I've tried. Starving, hanging, poisoning, maiming. They don't let you succeed. The state is omnipresent. They know; there is a gas they spray into your cell that knocks you out in seconds. When you wake everything is gone and you're a little sore somewhere. Maybe there's sticky fluids on your lip still. Maybe you'll cry. What else can you do? Anger is useless.

Criminals are an expense the state would, in theory, like to do without. Why, then, protect my life from myself? I was able to rule out the fact that the state actually cared about me getting "justice" or "rehabilitation" as my crime was almost certainly an invention. No, I see it was by design that all this happened in the exact way it did. My body belongs to the state, and it can do nothing with my soul.

This was a disquieting realization, and I sat with it for a long time. Looking my dehumanization in the eye caused it to consume me and hasten the process. I began to forget. Importances: How old is my oldest now? When is my birthday? What is my name?

My name—what is my name?

When they break you, they know they can use you best. That's when you become one of the laborers.

I am summoned before the sun rises and I am brought back after the sun has set. I dig,

and I scratch, and I search alongside others who have been similarly annihilated. You can see it in our eyes. You hear nothing from our mouths. No songs, no prayers, no moans, no whispers. It is only through an encounter with another that the self is illuminated but the opposite of discovery is devastation and being surrounded by others as empty and formless as yourself only exacerbates how little of you remains, how inescapable your fate.

In the mines, we extract ore under the earth where there are pitfalls and deposits of poisonous gas which kill you before you realize. Landslides of rock which fall upon you without warning. We work without stopping and we are the lucky ones. There are workers who dive for weeks beneath the ocean to dig for resources and to build the underground highways running to the mainland. I've seen for myself the soup of a man pulled from the depths after a decompression gone wrong. Then there are the old men who are pulled to work in the factories, where massive machines regularly accidentally reduce them into mincemeat (on purpose). Once, a guard joked to me that the chicken legs we look forward to every week are really human meat. To me, that doesn't change a thing at all.

Some whisper we are helping to build some great machine god. Everyone has questions and no one has answers. I like to believe the most fantastical, that we are helping the empire build vessels to ride into space with. Maybe things are better there.

It's been years now and still I feel more of myself slipping away. My thoughts are rambling, incoherent; it's taken me an incredible amount of time just to write down this sentence. I curse the state even if I am the state. I am the violence and indiscriminate oppression and therefore I am evil, I deserve this, and I deserve to live, to multiply and never die. I will live on in the birthing and the killings of the empire. I was evil before because I was an individual, I convinced myself I have rights and a will, with ego I imagined I was I and never they. Now I have seen the truths of things. The state is spectacular. It is clever and ruthless. No man will defeat it, because man is bound by the heart and the mind; the state suffers from no such limitations. It is designed by the most heartless and run by the most foolish, the idealistic ones who believe their cruel work is done for the greater good. But for the state there is no greater good than its own survival.

We've won. It was only a struggle of attrition for the predator to pick off the prey. I've finally begun to refer to myself as they do: as a book and file number. Nine four one seven seven zero zero zero nine. I repeat it to myself as I work. I repeat it to myself at night to soothe my sorrows and my aches. It is reassuring and relieving. It absolves me. No one can miss or hate a number. No one will mourn a number. A number has no regrets, no grudges, no desires, no destiny. Ninefouronesevensevenzeronine. Ninefourone...

Anthony DeGregorio
Parking Lot

The yellow pickup
floats along the bridge's road
and into the park.

Children in schoolrooms
daydream about dismissal
and hovering birds.

Playgrounds rise at dusk,
swings twist in abandonment,
castles blow away.

The yellow pickup's
driver's side door left open.
Lake water splashes

back onto the truck.
Later a cap surfaces,
drifts far from this shore.

Police close the door.
Thirty years later kids chalk
Hangman in this lot.

Arran Calvert

Through a Door, Darkly

And then Death left, leaving the door ajar as it went.

A genetic heart defect was the official cause of death. I still think of Mary Westerfeld. She would have known nothing of her end. She'd have slipped into an ever-deeper sleep. Eventually, slipping so deep that she would never awake again. Or so it was explained to me.

It didn't help the inquisitive, imaginative eight-year-old that I was to find that Death might arrive while you slept. Of course, I knew that it could but hearing it out loud didn't help. We had gone over the point again and again: a genetic heart defect. It could have happened at any time.

"But what about Death?" I had argued.

"What about it?"

"Where does it come from? Where does it go? Why won't it close doors after it? If at least it closed doors after it, people would know not to enter or knock, at least!"

As I think back to these repetitive conversations, I see that it was my persistence on these points that had landed me in the green leather chair of Susan Gunfrey, my therapist. How ridiculous it is, an eight-year-old sitting in the office of a therapist.

I never wanted to be the cliched, broken child, and I refuse to believe that I was or am broken. But then why didn't I just shut up about Death sooner? I'll never know.

When I was thirteen, I was told that I questioned things too deeply and dwelled too long on big questions that had no immediate impact on my life. But when you've been consistently asked, "And how does that make you feel?" since you were eight, the question becomes hard-wired into you, a reflex.

The bananas are over-ripe, "And how does that make you feel?"

Nell Simpson is an ass, "And how does that make you feel?"

You were one minute late for our appointment, "And how does that make you feel?"

I don't know, Susan, how does it make you feel that the universe exploded from nothing, and is expanding into nothing? How does it make you feel that we're killing the planet, and yet I still take a yellow cab everywhere because I'm worried I'll catch germs from strangers—and yet, I make you take notes on a white legal pad because I can't stand the idea of you writing on the yellow ones?

I dunno.

Susan thinks that my mind made sense of Mary's death by creating the classic "Hollywood" representation of Death—the one you see in the movies with the big, hooded cloak. That way, I could make sense of what, for an eight-year-old, was an almost unimaginable event.

"But why?" I would ask every time we arrived back to that particular chestnut. "Why would my brain do that before I knew she was dead?" The statement seemed final to me. How could I possibly have seen Death before I knew Mary was dead or dying?

"It didn't," she would reply. "It did so only once you knew she was dead."

“But does that mean I can’t trust my mind?”

“Well,” at this point, she would push her glasses up her nose and place her pen down onto the white legal pad, “it’s just that sometimes our minds can trick us into thinking we know things that we don’t actually know.”

I didn’t like thinking about this much as an eight-year-old, and I still don’t now. I feel like I can trust my mind. I know how death feels in my memory, and I know that it feels different to the actual event. I dunno.

Eventually, I stopped trying to explain myself and kept schtum. But I still had to visit Susan every Tuesday at 4:30 every week. Except for the first two weeks in September when she would be in Key West, apparently “extending the summer and celebrating Labor Day Weekend.”

I know Death. I have seen it. I have felt. And it left me different, tarnished like the black soot a candle leaves on glass, unable to see clearly. I hate it; I hate its cold, painful loneliness. Once you have stood in the presence of Death, it doesn’t leave you; it just lingers cold and unforgotten, lurking between your thoughts.

I know Death. And I know that it comes in the night because I was a curious child who didn’t know any better. And I know its smell.

It was the smell that woke me. I had been dreaming of hot poker being stuffed up my nose as everybody laughed at me. I woke with a start, staring up into the darkness, lost in my unfamiliar surroundings. Fumbling for the night light, I found its cord and pulled. The weak bulb beat the night back only enough to give me a small island of light, its integrity threatened by the weight of darkness.

It took me a moment to realise that what had instigated my dream was a stench so pungent that I needed to find out where it was coming from. At that time, I hadn’t been living in the boarding school long enough to realise that smells as strong as this were not uncommon. They were more common than you might imagine.

And so, I climbed out of bed, pushed my feet into my Bert and Ernie slippers and crossed from the fragile glow of the night light, and out into the dark corridor of St Magdalena’s School for Girls Boarding House.

As I quietly shut my door, the corridor closed around me. My mind was filled with wild images of beasts, demons, beetles, and insects, all scurrying from my sight, watching me closely, inspecting their temporary surroundings. Fleeting visitors pressing in on closed doors, listening to the dreams of the little girls sleeping soundly in their beds. Because that is what they were, fleeting visitors following Death as though it were the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

The smell was stronger in the corridor, a sweetness mixed with that stink of raw chicken that had passed its expiration date. I walked past the many doors of the third floor, the sound of the scurrying creatures loud in my ear, though not filling me with fear. As I think back, I see that there was no fear to be spared out there in the corridor. At the staircase, I went up. As I reached the next landing, I was sure I had seen a small crouching *thing* move through the pale green light of an emergency exit sign. Still, I felt no fear, only a slight unease that this thing had allowed itself to be seen.

My eyes began to water as I stepped into the fourth-floor corridor. I took short, shallow breaths, trying not to inhale the overbearing stink. I followed the smell to Mary Westerfeld's room, an eighth grader. I'll always feel a close affinity with Mary, not just because of what I saw but also because she would smile at me whenever she caught me staring, help me find my way around the school buildings, and give me advice on how to survive life in an all-girls boarding school.

Mary's door—the fourth door on the right—stood ajar. I stepped up to it, reached out a hand and slowly pushed it open.

There it stood, huge, black and terrifying, hunched over Mary's bed, lit by the same weak glow of the bedside night light.

I was instantly locked in a vice-like terror; my body and wits had abandoned me. I was trapped, unable to scream, to move, to breathe. Here was where the fear was concentrated; it hung from death like a thin veil drifting in a warm breeze.

Locked as I was, I watched Death examining Mary closely, the night light casting long, faint shadows across the wall and ceiling. Death was still, but the shadows moved, slow and threatening, reaching, grasping, clawing. When I saw them, I knew they were detached from this world, drifting in another time.

Then Death moved beneath its long black cloak. Slowly, a long, gnarled, arthritic finger reached out and came to rest on the centre of Mary's forehead. My eyes fell on her face. Her beautiful, youthful face. She looked like Sleeping Beauty. A picture of serenity. The bed sheets were perfectly placed as though she had been laid out in preparation for her prince. Only the prince was not who she thought he was. The prince wanted to keep her locked away. A shadow in another time. A part of his growing collection.

Death stood for an age, its finger resting gently on her porcelain-like skin. As it lifted its finger away, it paused. Its hand moved back toward her face and delicately pushed a stray lock of golden hair from her face.

Straightening to its full height, it turned to face me, the fabric of its cloak shifting loudly in the silence of the room. It turned, knowing that I was there, and for a moment, we stared at one another. I, into the black abyss of a faceless hood, and it into my soul, into my deepest thoughts, searching. I often wonder what it was searching for. Was it watching the passage of my life, wondering if or when it was my time?

Its faceless gaze fell away, and with a heavy, sorrowful sigh, it left, leaving the door ajar as it went. The darkness lifted, leaving a cold, hostile light lingering between night and morning. The turning of the tide, they call it. You can't see it, but if you still yourself, close your eyes, and slow your breathing, you can feel it approach and pass through your body, sending a shiver down your spine.

The vice-like grip that had held me tight dropped me faster than I could catch myself. The fear that had hung from Death as a concentrated veil washed over me and was released as a scream that began deep in the darkest corners of my mind and bubbled to the surface like hot bile, tearing at my throat. I fell to my knees and vomited down my front. My breath caught in my

throat, and I began to cough and retch. Miss Franks burst into the room and pounded a fist against my back as I choked on the stinging, burning contents of my stomach, my whole body gripped now by thunderous shudders that I couldn't control.

Pushing her away, I managed to jab a finger towards the bed, and Sleeping Beauty laid serenely upon it. Miss Franks called her name as she crossed the room, but reaching out to Mary, she pulled away at the last minute, not daring to disturb her sleep—not that it mattered. Sleeping Beauty would not wake. Not even a kiss from a prince would wake a sleeping princess if she was already dead.

Athira Jacob

The Shape of Grief

A friend tells me
Grief doesn't always look like sadness

Grief can be the fuck-you to the world
When you stop going to church
when you have no use for heaven or hell

Grief can be the hours alone in the gym
past midnight, outrunning your pain

Or when you lose,
grief can be the scars on your arms
A little respite, flowing from inside you

Grief can be a part of you,
uniquely yours, like the shape of your nose
or the family you are born into
never to be rid of
You accept it, tolerate it
Maybe someday,
learn to love it, too.

*Bradley Beau Holland***Collision Course**

Casey watched the secondhand creep its way around the clock, still off by an hour from the last time change. Lunch was always slow at Malley's. Especially when it hadn't even hit noon. His shift was scheduled for three-thirty, which meant the last round needed to be ordered around a quarter till one if he was going to make it in on time and not smell like straight sour mash.

His phone was on the bar top buzzing with the name Alice across the screen. Casey knew he couldn't hit ignore because then she'd at least know for sure he was awake.

Hank, the bartender, brought another drink. Casey saw Hank for what he was. A bartender and not a shrink. He'd seen a therapist a few years ago, and he just thought that made things worse. Hank turned the television to the Red Sox game. They were playing the Marlins in sunny Miami while it was cold and wet in Memphis.

His phone buzzed again. It was Alice.

The Red Sox had taken the lead, and the clock read one forty-five. Which meant it was really twelve forty-five. Casey ordered another round.

Frank, his boss, answered on the fourth ring. "Frank, I'm not going to make it today," Casey said.

He threw back another shot and watched the final strike of the game close it out. The screen of his phone lit up again with the name Alice. He stared at the pine pillar in front of him admiring the craftsmanship of the woodworker carved behind the glossy finish.

Through the dingy yellow windows of the bar, he could see the rain had lightened up. He decided to do one responsible thing for the day. After Casey got square with Hank he stepped out of the bar and paused to light a cigarette before he began his trek home.

Casey laid down on the couch and told himself he'd only close his eyes for ten minutes.

He woke to an excruciating hangover. His phone was dead, and he had no idea what time it was. The room was pitch black. He stumbled his way to the kitchen. As he reached up into the cabinet above the sink for a glass he smelled the stench of his armpit. The tap water reminded him of pool water.

Someone pounded on the front door. Casey looked out the peephole. She stood there looking back. Although Alice was two heads shorter and maybe a hundred pounds lighter than him, he had always felt intimidated by her. Not that he ever mentioned or showed it.

"You know you look like shit and smell like it, too," Alice said.

She walked to the kitchen carrying two plastic bags. He watched as she placed groceries on the countertop. Then she started a pot of coffee before bringing Casey a bottle of water. She sat next to him on the couch. He told her about missing work. She pursed her lips. They had been friends since childhood. Casey had always thought of her as one of the guys. Daryl, his older

brother by a year, had a crush on her in high school—Casey thought Alice and Daryl snuck off into the woods one day to make out.

“Daryl called me this morning. He’s coming home for a visit next week. That’s why I blew your phone up,” Alice said.

Daryl left for the Army a month after graduating high school. Casey knew Alice wanted Daryl.

“You should be excited then.”

“We should all be.”

“He’s been gone a while. Surely the two of you will go out drinking one night.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Wait. What?”

Flustered, Alice went to pour a cup of coffee.

She held the mug with both hands and leaned her hip into the counter her back to him. He watched her as she took sips with long pauses in between. He felt like an asshole. “I’m sorry,” Casey said. No response. She sat the mug down and put away the groceries that’d been left on the counter.

Casey went to the bathroom and brushed his teeth. He splashed hot water on his face before putting on deodorant. As he walked out of the bathroom, she was coming down the hallway. They collided.

“Sorry, I was going to see if you had dirty clothes that need to be washed.”

Casey put his hands on her hips. She grasped his forearms. They kissed.

Cam Joyce

Counting Crows

A single crow sat on my shoulder, claws digging into my flesh. I took my seat, a white plastic folding chair that was damp from the rain. I was towards the back, not unwelcome and yet not wanted, either.

The room was filled with quiet murmurs, everyone wanting to be respectful and yet none among them willing to save their gossip for another time. Purple bouquets shrouded the coffin from sight, a sea of black between me and the guest.

I sat for what must have been too long, as the crow began to squawk, and the mourners began to give me strange looks.

I stood, approached the coffin, and waited for the guest to notice me. She was standing next to someone I could only presume to be her mother. She kept trying to hug the older woman, phasing through her each time. The guest was wearing a sequined dress, shining under the sun but not reflecting on anyone.

When she turned around, I found that her makeup was done to match her outfit, unsmudged from uncried tears.

“Hi,” she said, voice barely audible.

“Hello.”

“I was waiting for someone like you to show up.”

“We like waiting for the funeral. So, you can have your goodbyes.” This was not always how it worked, but in cases like hers, we thought it was best to show them what they had left.

The crow left my shoulder, perching on hers.

“What does it matter? They can’t hear me.”

“We like to think it’s enough to see them.”

“Well, it’s not.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Maybe I won’t go with you,” she said, eyes on her mother. “Maybe I’ll haunt them.”

“Haunting isn’t real. You have to come with me.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Are you afraid?” My guests usually were a bit fearful before they came with me, it wasn’t an unusual predicament.

“No. I’m not afraid of whatever you’re going to do with me.” She paused. “But then, I was never afraid of dying before I died.”

I smiled down at her - she couldn’t have been much older than fifteen, and if you made me guess, I would say the dress she wore was the one she’d intended to wear to her next school dance.

“It’s not scary. You just need to let time pass.”

“Let time pass. You know, my sister always used to say that.”

“Your sister?”

The guest pointed out a girl in the crowd, wearing the same dress she was in a different shade. “My sister. I wish I could hug her one last time, before I leave. She gives the best hugs.” And though dead people can’t cry, I wouldn’t have been surprised if that little girl managed it.

“I’m going to let you say goodbye. Come to me when you’re ready.” I sat back down, looked up at the blue sky, and waited.

The guest appeared by my side a long while later, once the place had cleared out. Neither of us spoke, but she took the chair next to me.

She leaned on my shoulder, and though her head phased through me, we both acted otherwise.

Two crows sat on my shoulder as I waited for my guest.

The hospital room was white and sterile, yet the sun shone through the small window and made the place feel warmer than it should have. On the bed was an old man, smiling up at the ceiling.

“You know, I outlived almost everyone I knew,” he told me, not looking down.

“I know, sir. That you lived such a long life is admirable.”

“Ah, no, it’s not. Nothing but luck, really.”

“How was it?” I asked.

He looked down at last, a beaming smile further wrinkling his old face. “I just had so much fun. I can’t believe how much fun it all was.”

I smiled back. “Are you ready to go now?”

“Definitely. I have a lot of people waiting for me back there. My eldest friend always used to tell me that if he died first, he’d bake me a big old cake once I got to heaven with him. I’m excited for that. Been a while since I had anyone bake me a cake.”

And when we left, I was happier than I’d been in a while.

Three crows sang around me. I was the only person in attendance, watching the bride and groom share a final kiss. They were awaiting their own inescapable deaths, and I suppose this was the best way they could think to go.

The man held his wife a bit closer before they went, and when it all ended, I could feel nothing in the air but love.

I did not speak to them as we left, and I hardly think they noticed me as we went. It was simply a new beginning for them. That was all any wedding was.

Four crows danced about, back in the sterile hospital. A new life had just begun, and another was over. Too soon, I thought, but no one ever asked for my opinions. I was not to say anything, only welcome them into the sweet nothing we represented.

The woman was waiting for me, letting my crows keep her warm. She stared, watching her baby go on without her.

“I was always scared this would happen.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault. I just wish things could’ve gone differently,” she sighed, smiling faintly. “Maybe next time, huh?”

“Maybe next time,” I echoed, though the better part of me knew there would not be a next time. This was it. This was the end of the road. Still, it would be cruel to say such things to the guests.

She took my hand when I offered it, and I kept her in front of me, so she didn’t look back. It was better that way.

Five crows fluttered through the sky, guiding me to the guest. We stopped underneath a great cliff, where the young man stood. He was too young to be dead. Too young. Always too young.

“What happened?” I asked. Not because I did not know, but because sometimes I found it was best for the guests to speak of it.

“It was a silly competition. My friend and I wanted to see who could climb the highest.” He pointed to another boy, who stood shell shocked beneath the cliff.

“He always wins our competitions. We play all the same sports, and I always get second place. He wins every time. I wanted to win, just once.”

The guest went quiet, contemplating. “Guess I won something. Died first. Got him.”

I looked down at him. “You don’t seem all that sad.”

“Aw, I am. It’s just weird. Didn’t see it coming. Like, one moment I could almost reach the sky, and the next... Here I am. Dead.”

“Here you are,” I agreed.

“Tell me the truth, will ya?”

I blinked, waiting for him to continue.

“There’s nothing waiting for me on the other side, is there?”

“No. There was only ever this.”

“Hm.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Let’s get going, huh? You’ve got other places to be.”

Years later, when six crows took me to a guest, I asked the elderly man if he remembered his old friend. He told me that he did, and that not a day went by that he didn’t miss the guy.

Apparently, his friend was the best friend he ever could have asked for, and since he’d gone on, the guest had been terribly lonely.

Seven crows hovered above a pool of water. The guest stood inside of it, soaked through. She didn’t notice me as I came by, watching another woman by the shore.

“I’m sorry,” I said, in lieu of a greeting.

The guest looked over at me. “I’m sorry, too.”

“What do you have to be sorry for?”

“All of it, I guess. I never told her I loved her,” the woman admitted. An eighth crow joined the crowd. “I wish I could tell her I love her.”

We stood there for a long while, watching the woman on the sand. She had not realized yet that the guest was gone, absorbed in her own troubles.

When we climbed to the shore, a ninth crow joined us. The guest took the other woman's hand, squeezed it, and pressed a gentle kiss to her cheek. The woman turned around.

We left.

Ten crows and I watched a middle-aged woman as the monitor flatlined. It was over, and yet there were ten of us. Something was amiss.

She only noticed me for a moment before her eyes widened. "There are ten of them," she said.

"Yes," I agreed. She smiled, letting her head fall back.

I left alone.

Eleven crows bounced around the room as we walked, the guest smiling as we went.

"You seem terribly happy for a dead man," I joked. He grinned back at me.

"I am happy. Well, not happy, so to speak, but something of the sort."

"Hopeful," I supplied.

"Yes, just that. I'm hopeful."

"What for?"

"I don't know. I've been doing this for a long while, you know? And everything's changed so much from the way it used to be. My daughters, too, they're wonderful, they're going to do something great. I have hope in what the world is becoming."

"That's a nice way to look at it."

"Optimism is healthy."

"Healthy, huh?"

"Yeah. I tried to have a healthy view on it all. I got to see sunsets, you know? I got to be alive. What else is there?"

We left through the backdoor, so he could see one more sunset. Who was I to take his hope?

Twelve crows were spread across the shoulders of the guests' family members. She had gone peacefully, surrounded by her family. They were crying for her, and yet she had a serene smile on her face.

The house was small, barely big enough to fit her family.

"I know it's not much," she told me, noticing my confusion, "but it was enough. And you should see it during Christmas! Feels like the happiest place on Earth. It doesn't seem like much, but it is."

I smiled at her. "You all love each other very much."

"Yes, we most certainly do. Family's the most important thing at the end, isn't it? And I hit the jackpot with mine."

"Yes ma'am, you did."

She smiled the whole way down.

All thirteen of my crows surrounded me once the day was over, and as we prepared for the next, I considered it.

I said goodbye to all of my guests, and as they went on, I was jealous of each of them for all they had experienced.

When the first crow woke me, I went along with it with a smile on my face.

Christian Alexander Barkman
Ode to the Gargoyle

Guardian of the steeple, and the
Precinct sealed within—

More than a mere ornament, you are
A warden. Your inquisition falls

On specters, though mortal
Society is, too, assessed

By way of anxious introspection,
Triggered by your trenchant watch.

And your seat of limestone, on arch or ledge,
Gives broad purview—as your piercing glare

Draws taut, your agitating, unseen barrier.
And your frightful visage: horned and hairy with mane

And tusk, strikes yet more dread,
And doubles unease in all sneaking airy spirits.

Stoney-Principality! Chimeric Monster!
Your gothic maw, devised and shaped

By monkish hands, lives on—perturbing
Souls of earth and air, a warrior in phantom battles.

Christian David Loeffler

Harden

“Do you ever wonder what the Earth would taste like at its rawest and most condensed?”

Sam and Dolm were sitting on the edge of the old mine quarry where they had hung out since elementary school. Sam was biting his fingernails as Dolm stared at his friend, a crest of pines in the mountainous distance.

“Raw and condensed? Like bedrock?” Dolm asked.

Sam’s legs dangled from the rustic quarry like they were heavy and not his own. He brushed his hair to the side in a gentle, but authoritative, stroke.

“Has he been at it again? The old man?”

Sam didn’t want Dolm to feel bad for him, but remembering the pain caused Sam to clench onto the purple of his arm. The boys stared down the ledge below until dusk.

• • •

“Samuel Silton? Sam? Sam?”

Dolm stretched his neck over the aisle, alerting Sam with murmurs of desperation.

Sam was staring out the window, eyes fixed on the stone statue in the courtyard. The statue was of a man, one without distinguishable properties. His face was a chiseled sidewalk. His fingers had rounded with age. His legs merged together to form one solid ground with platform beneath. He was that of stone, and in that, he was special.

Sam thought of how unusual it was to have such a stone statue in the center of a school playground. He did not oppose, he just wondered why it had to be unusual. Why in a world where rocks were the foundation of existence were they forced to stay hidden? He wondered if his life would have been different if he grew up in the West, in a place where rocks no longer had to hide. His stomach rumbled at the thought.

“Since everyone is staring at *you*, I’m guessing *you’re* Samuel?”

Mr. Egler hunched over the front of Sam’s desk, just to make sure Sam had nowhere else to look. Sam gazed gravely at the new substitute teacher on the man’s first day of instruction and spat directly into his eye.

• • •

That night, Dolm heard the screams of Sam from down the road. Even though Sam’s house was kilometers away and separated by a mass of pines, Dolm clenched when he heard the crack of a belt striking skin. He gripped his blanket when glassware was thrown against the wall or smashed into Sam’s head. The way Sam was treated was no secret. The trees only blocked the gasps of breath in between each strike.

Sam never came back to school that week.

• • •

When Dolm met Sam by the quarry the next weekend, he noticed something different. Sam's hair began to look more ashen, his skin lined with silver.

"Where have you been, Sam? I thought they only suspended you for two days."

Sam stared at the ground for some time, as if waiting for permission to speak.

"Was it the old man?" Dolm asked. "I heard stuff the other night. Sounded like he was real sore."

Sam did not reply. Instead, he bent over and picked a handful of pebbles from the ground. He let them flow from one palm to the other, creating a stream of muted colors and chiming like a clattering chorus. All dirt and dust dissipated in the process. Then, with his left hand full, Sam tipped his hand back as if the pebbles were candy and lightly chewed them before swallowing.

• • •

Sam came back to school the next week. He began to wear a scarf. It was gray.

Dolm was surprised to see Sam already sitting in the classroom when he arrived, grounded as if he had been sitting there for millions of years. It was as if Sam had forgotten his absences, his behavior, the consequences lurking ahead. It was as if Sam lost all remorse.

This conduct extended throughout the day. Sam was acting a textbook normal, but not the sensitive and reserved Sam that Dolm had known. Sam was completing work. He was contributing. He wasn't spitting in anybody's eyes. Then there was the smirk.

Dolm had never seen Sam smirk, let alone smile. Sam had always only given half a grin when appropriate, almost as if to smile solely for the sake of those around him. In fact, the only time Dolm had seen Sam truly smile was the birthday before Sam's mother had died. Sam wasn't smiling because of the presents or the cake. In fact, Sam avoided most of the things that made a party a party. What made Sam smile happened after he blew out his candles, when everybody started spreading back out. His mother pulled him to the side.

"Now that you're nine, you have to give me ten kisses!"

"Ten?"

"Yes! Ten! One to grow on!"

In that moment, his body was made of rubber. Sam giggled and squirmed as his mother smacked her lips along his cheeks, head, and neck.

"Mom, stop it! That's my neck! Mom, ahahaha!"

Sam, still smirking, pulled his new scarf back up to his neck. Dolm wondered if the scarf was to bury the old man's marks or to preserve the impressions left of the one person who could make him smile.

• • •

“What’s up with the scarf?”

It was recess. Dolm tried to pretend that he didn’t care that it was no big deal that Sam was changing. Dolm leaned his hand against the stone man on the playground. Sam stared at base of the statue where Dolm’s hand met the hip of the unidentifiable structure. He raised his lip in disgust.

“Why do *you* care, *Dolmica*?”

Sam never used Dolm’s full name.

• • •

Screams pierced the pine trees, leaving woodchips in their wake, splinters collecting moonlight. Like most nights, Dolm could hear these screams from kilometers away, but they were no longer Sam’s. The voices were deep, raspy, and pleading before they cut into abrupt silence.

• • •

Sam quit responding to Dolm. And he no longer showed up to school. He no longer agreed to meet up with Dolm at the quarry mines on Saturdays. Dolm was hurt, but he knew his friend. Sam would never give up going to the quarry altogether. The only way to reach Sam was by going to the quarry outside of their regular hours, to catch Sam at night alone.

It had been two weeks since Dolm had seen his friend. Dolm crouched behind a large rock several yards back from the abandoned mine tunnel, staring at the spot where both once sat and reveled in life. The tunnel looked menacing from the ground.

In minutes, a dark figure lurched out of the cave, its body in rugged flux, its feet clacking against the rocky terrain. Dolm crept forward, breathing heavy, the dark life form in view before him. Still human in shape, the figure’s hands hung low, as if the tips had been weighed down. Its eyes glowed with the red of rhodonite, and its scarf dangled in the breeze until the figure whipped it off, revealing a neck hardened and gray as stone. With every movement, its body cracked loudly.

The figure walked over to the pile of stones that the boys had once compiled for a rock fort, and it fed. It chewed on rocks the size of potatoes, its teeth cracking and bleeding as it devoured its fill. The creature cried out in pain, but it continued to eat. Tears dribbled over its hardened face.

“WAHGGGHH!”

As blood spewed onto the dusty rock beneath the creature’s feet, its mouth supplanted its old teeth with new. The teeth protruded directly through its gums, forming fresh crimson puddles with each regeneration. It gripped its stomach and screamed at the skies while its jaw dislocated itself and fresh stone incisors appeared.

Dolm could no longer see its resemblance to a human.

The creature gasped and inhaled the night's air, its teeth an unnaturally white stone, unstained, its cold gray face rivaled by its eyes, now glowing with utter lunacy, and its spine, lumpy and misshapen, permanently hunched, as a thin silver skeletal system emerged from its skull, mimicking fishbone hair. The enraged stone figure reveled in its new appearance, its mild smirk transforming into a devilish grin that reached up to the sickly sacks under its eyes.

As the bedeviled spirit of stone laughed and howled before him, Dolm ached for his friend who once dreamed above the quarry.

Christina Lauderdale

How Much Does Grief Weigh?

How much does grief weigh
when you're six?
More than your little brother's hand?

How much does grief weigh
after she is eaten down to bone?
More than all the chemo bags?

How much does grief weigh
when you have to try to form the words?
More than all the pats on the head?

How much does grief weigh
when they carry her body away?
More than the 8 men that carry her coffin?

How much does grief weigh?
More than all the flowers?
More than the granite headstone?
More than all the dirt that fills the grave?

Dana Frayne

Shutterbug

My photos carry your blurry mark,
the black box mimics silent obsession—
stubborn ink stains do not falter in the dark,
but are an exercise in lonely discretion.

The walls maintain remnants of tragic strife,
cigarette ash and hollow desires,
buried, of course, as is the task of “wife,”
such is the stoked brush of petty fires.

I now avoid the lens’ reflection,
but the lurking still haunts my every shot—
I still stupidly beg the question,
when were we in love, but not?

Danielle Cameron

Park Slope

Two eyes stare intensely as you pass,
Small flames flickering within their gaze,
Delicately dancing around melting wax,
Their eyes—hollow portals into the unknown,
Bathed in a spectral shimmer, illuminating its face,
Crooked smiles in the darkness, a cackle in baritone.

The ghostly orbs of orange aglow—
Oh, the glorious pumpkins of Park Slope,
Guardians of the night in Gotham's brownstone gardens
In a place darkened by towers of steel and stone,
These lanterns—
Carved with the precision of the artist's knife,
Autumnal embers glow as the night comes to life.

A Hallowe'en dream—a beautiful fright,
Little monsters and ghouls beneath twilight's shade,
A stoop-swept sundown that enchants and delights,
Under the canopy of tree-lined streets where shadows play,
The old-growth roots wrapping around trunks of great height,
Winds whisper through deserted branches—empty and decay

The ghostly orbs of orange aglow—
Oh, the glorious pumpkins of Park Slope,
Guardians of the night in Gotham's brownstone gardens
In a place darkened by towers of steel and stone,
These lanterns—
Carved with the precision of the artist's knife,
Autumnal embers glow as the night comes to life.

Oh, the glorious stoops of Park Slope!

Dawn Levitt

On a Dark Horse Riding

I saw Death, on a dark horse riding,
high and haughty and proud.
Prancing and dancing he came to me,
black hooves tapping the ground.

Grand mane unfurled like a midnight sea,
his dark lips fleck with foam.
I thought he had come in search of me,
to whisk me away home.

But, alas, he only paused to laugh,
flaunt disdain in my face,
then he turned to point his crooked staff—
took another in my place.

His bones rattling a merry sound,
ribald with deathlike glee,
he swept up the other he had found
and turned his back on me.

I cried after his retreating form,
entreating him to wait,
but my flesh insisted it was warm,
denying twisted fate.

Alone I wait and alone I stay,
he takes them one by one.
When he has carried them all away,
my waiting shall be done.

As the last one waiting on the hill
of dirt above their graves,
I will stand here—quiet, small, and still.
the last one that he saves.

David Desiderio

Bomb Shelter Rebirth

The deafening sirens roused him from a fretful sleep gripping him with an icy fear. He quickly joined the frenzy to the shelter. The crush of bodies forced him against the wall. “Please let me survive,” he whispered, and grew angry with himself. Prayers were mumbled all about but never by him until that moment, for what else was it but a plea for an intervention on his behalf? From whom? He raised his eyes in the darkness. “I’m on to your tricks,” he scoffed bitterly. These last thoughts collapsed beneath a direct hit on the shelter.

When next he awakened, he lay buried in rubble. To end it like this, he moaned. Why? He couldn’t count on rescue. The city lay in ruins, the casualties and suffering beyond comprehension.

He took stock of his injuries. His fingers flexed. His toes wiggled. Nothing felt broken, though the weight pressing his chest forced labored breaths. But breathe he did. So, his tomb was corrupted but in his favor. Just a slower death, he cursed. Still, his fingers clawed against hope. Soon his wrists came into play. Then his arms loosened, followed by his legs. It wasn’t much, barely enough to sustain hope. When he finally mustered the will for a final assault the rubble shifted and the pressure on his chest cut off his wind.

When next he awakened, he lay on a stretcher surrounded by soldiers smiling and cheering. To his bewilderment he was addressed as General and congratulated on his miraculous survival. He accepted their good cheer with a fearful wave of his hand. He was not familiar with the uniforms, and the language they spoke was not his. Yet, he understood their words.

At hospital, he was attended by an older physician who treated him familiarly. The General could not place him.

“You’re lucky to have escaped serious injury, Eric. A good scrubbing, some hot food and clean uniform in place of those rags will have you back in form. If you will allow it, I will keep away any distractions. Let’s get you rested before you resume command.”

Still hesitant to speak, the General nodded his agreement.

“I expected more resistance,” the doctor remarked jovially.

He was unaccustomed to a hospital room of such comfort. A divan and easy chair anchored the one wall. An oval table and two chairs stood by the window. Though absent of adornment it was impeccably clean. A knock on the door drew his attention.

A trembling nurse entered and placed clean garments on the table. A flicker of fear shown in her eyes. “I’m able to assist if you wish, sir.” Her voice faltered. To her relief he waved her away. He didn’t remember inspiring fear in another. Nor the obvious deference shown him by the doctor. It perplexed him. He was a shiftless person by circumstance and temperament, contemptuous of all under whose dirty thumbs he always found himself. Wasn’t he forced at gunpoint to join the hunt for survivors? But it was unmistakable. He was taken for someone else, a General no less.

Freshly showered and newly dressed he presented himself before the mirror. The uniform fit well. He felt confident to engage in speech. With four stars on his shoulder, he would not be easily challenged. After all, he thought, "I am in a position of rank and authority, with people now at my mercy."

He opened the door and stepped into the bustling corridor. A young officer loitering by the nurse's station took notice. A look of fear washed over him like he'd been caught in a criminal act. He rushed over. "Are you feeling better, General?" he stammered.

"Certainly, I'm feeling better," he snapped.

"Shall I call Dr. Roget?"

"No need."

"Your staff are assembled in the conference room. Will you be joining them?"

He nodded, ready to field test this charade.

Four grim faces greeted him with stiff salutes and anxious eyes.

"We thought we'd lost you," one said. "It's truly a joyous day."

"How did you make your escape?"

"A miracle," he laughed. "What else could it have been?"

"It's good to know such forces are on our side."

"What was it like?"

"Devastation. Starvation. Terror. Despair," he recited.

"All we hoped for and more," said another.

"Still, they fight on," lamented another.

"We must finish the job."

"We are of one mind."

"We will incinerate all who remain. Let the wind scatter the ashes," the General sneered.

"They are vermin."

"Finally."

"So, the order is given?"

"Get on with it," he barked. "Now I must get some rest. I suddenly feel faint."

The General collapsed before reaching the door.

When next he awakened sirens filled the air. This can't be, he thought.

He was swept into the crush of bodies streaming to the shelter. Their cries of despair overwhelmed him. He dropped to his knees and bowed his head. "Please let me live," he pleaded, his words now imbued with deep humility, as the shelter crumbled engulfing him in darkness.

When next he awakened, he lay on a stretcher, hounded by a jeering rabble.

"Don't worry, General," the guard said. "We'll keep them off you. Though if up to me I'd let them tear you to pieces for the immense suffering you've caused. The firing squad is too good for you."

"You must let me explain. I'm not who you believe me to be. I am not responsible."

"Such madness. You take us for fools?"

Heather Rolland

The Righteous and the Wicked

Ruth slid the menus down the long wooden table, careful not to grunt with the effort. The rain, relentless this month, wrought havoc with her arthritis, her left hip singing the blues something fierce. “Soup’s cheesy potato today,” she told the couple, and moved off, her long skirt swaying, her flat soled shoes silent on the flagstone floor.

Sam passed Ruth a tray with sandwiches and drinks on it. “Booth 3.” He spoke as he always did—measured, monotone. They were at work. At home he could raise his voice, or his hand, as necessary. Here at the café, though, his wife and everyone else were offered the same perfunctory courtesy.

She delivered the meal to the college students crammed into the booth and returned to the nook where the couple sat at the far end of the long table. The last time they came in for lunch, Sam had told them that this particular table was reserved for groups of 6 or more. The man had replied “if a large group comes in, we’ll be happy to move.” They did not move. Cheeky, Sam thought. Disrespectful. Sam expected to be challenged by young bucks, but this man was his own age. Salt in the wound.

“The usual?” Ruth asked them. The woman nodded. Ruth took her in, attempting to do the math. White wispy hair, escaping the salt and pepper ponytail, framed a youthful face. Ruth figured late 50s. The man must be pushing 70 at least. He was a regular; always friendly, never chatty. Often with a book, sometimes a medical journal. He had a frankly curious expression, the kind of face that made you want to tell your story, Ruth thought. Once, she found herself awkwardly close to him as he was leaving, his back turned to collect his hat, while she reached for a stray plate. She was surprised to realize he was half her width and barely scraped her height. Ruth was large—childbearing hips, the leader had said appreciatively all those decades ago. But Ruth was barren, hips notwithstanding.

This woman began joining him a few months ago. Sometimes she arrived first, catching Ruth’s eye and smiling self-consciously before sliding down the long bench to sit in the shadowy corner. Always lunch, maybe once a week, once every other week. They never finished their food, never ordered dessert. Ruth knew without seeing that they held hands under the table. Intimacy belonged in marriage. The leader’s teachings, reiterated at every gathering, every evening prayer said so. Something about this couple, the way you could cut the air between them with a knife, just slice through it like ripe fruit and all that lay inside would be sweet and fresh. Ruth felt memories of Ben stir deep in her belly.

With Ben there had been jokes. There had been a lightness about it all. When he would take her to bed, he’d ask “righteous or wicked?”—their private names for the different positions they each preferred. They could just talk, the way lovers do, about nothing and suddenly it was a precious secret, a gem to be treasured and polished. Ruth felt the pang of missing Ben when she saw the couple and it rattled her. After the cancer took Ben, Ruth wanted to be alone, to savor the

solitude and sit with grief for a while. But the leader created the match with Sam, and the only way to have some privacy was to be married: single people shared dorm rooms. And Sam was tall, and not as severe as some of the men in the community. Everyone pretended Ruth chose and accepted the marriage. It was better that way.

Today, the woman arrived before the doctor, clad in overalls. Her usual ponytail was replaced by a tangle of curls atop her head, wrapped in some sort of elastic. She was hesitating at the table when Ruth approached, coming close enough to catch the scent of laundry detergent and unscented soap. “You here to meet . . .” She trailed off, not sure how to refer to him, but Overalls rescued her from awkwardness by nodding and chuckling.

“He’s a doctor, isn’t he?” Ruth asked. Another nod, still smiling. Ruth peered at her, suddenly bold, and said, “He’s special.”

As good as she was at reading the customers, after all these years of honing her spidey sense about people who were not part of the community, Ruth just wasn’t sure about this woman and her companion. And suddenly she wanted to know. She wanted to understand.

“He’s very special,” Overalls beamed, meeting Ruth’s eyes for a moment. The curiosity was mutual.

Before she could ask another question, Sam rang the bell and Ruth moved off, her skirt swishing softly as she did.

Ruth served them, the ritual of menus delivered, tumblers of ice water on paper cocktail napkins. Both women pretended the brief exchange hadn’t happened. Ruth took their order, brought their food, cleared their plates.

Arthritis and rain and the couple’s fingers knotted together under the table jockeyed for position in her mind all afternoon. What was right and what was wrong and what just was. The leader, Sam, even Ben would have been quick to tell her what was wrong. She just kept rolling it around in her mind.

That night, Ruth slipped out of bed and stood looking out the window long enough for Sam to wake up and tell her to come back. She half turned, that damn hip making her wince. What if she said no? What if she got dressed and walked out the front door? What would that woman Ruth named Overalls do if her lover turned mean, because that’s what Ruth decided. That skinny old man and Overalls were lovers, Ruth was sure of it.

It was wrong, but Ruth was even more wrong for being jealous. That was it, she finally hit on it: jealousy. Overalls was going to be alone when her man left her to go back to his wife, or to die, or maybe both. Overalls would get to sit with that hurt as long as she wanted. No one would tell her when to marry, or who to lie with. No one would look at her with pity and side eyes for not having children. Standing there at the window in her nightdress, damp cold stealing in about the hem and chilling her stout ankles, climbing up thick thighs to harass her hip, Ruth knew what was right, what was wrong, and what just was.

Jay Belandres-Mendoza

Machu Picchu

Step by step, walking up to
the summit of the mountain
to the place I have been told
used to be our home—but

I am afraid of the sky. I fear
the face of those who bore
the sun—heat on my neck.
Who am I to call it mine? It

once was. I used to lay my
body down, melting into the
cracks between the stone. But
there was nothing to catch me. I

once ran to the blue before
I turned my eyes to dirt.
Now these steps are
imprinted on my mind. If

I walk—a string tying head to
stomach—it would never burn.
It would never hurt. Few times,
light barged into shade. Am

I made from dust or stone?
Is my tongue made for
where I was born, or
where I am from? So

much I can learn from
the burn and ache. I know
I must look to the sun, I was
told I am the child it—a

baby born in rays, gilded in
my veins. Now gold weighs me
down and to lift my head requires
my blood more than my neck.

It did not hurt. I do not cry,
but I knew it wasn't right.
Stairs of death disfigure the
words I wanted to say.

Jeanne Lyet Gassman
Josephine's Puzzle

Josephine is assembling the most beautiful jigsaw puzzle. A thousand pieces of a place called Sweet Shoppe where mothers take their children to indulge in fudge, ice cream, and homemade candy. In the image on the front of the box, the mother is dressed in jeans and a flowing shirt with a print of butterflies on her sleeves. Her two children stand politely in front of the displays, deciding on their choices. The girl has a long golden braid down her back, and bright blue eyes. The boy, about two years younger than the girl, has blond curls that twirl around his ears. They are both smiling.

The glass breaks with a violent clatter, sending shards of green across the tile floor where they will remain until morning. Her father shouts, "Why don't you listen?"

Josephine opens the box and spreads out the pieces, turning each one over carefully. So many types of chocolate. Chocolate-covered peanuts (she thinks), chocolate fudge bars (maybe), chocolate cherries (of course), and chocolate with sprinkles (those are easy to match).

A slap. Flesh smacking flesh. And her mother's weeping that rises and falls like the wind moaning outside. He tells her, "Shut up!" But she continues her lament, and flesh smacks flesh again.

The secret to success, Josephine knows, is to complete the edge pieces first. They create a frame to work from. And they're easier to find. The edge pieces identify colors that match them, assist the puzzle-worker in finding the elusive piece that will complete an image, and block out connecting shapes. Josephine lines up every-straight-edged piece, testing and testing, until she finds the right one to fit. Then she repeats the process for the next piece. Build the frame, she thinks. The frame holds everything together.

A door slams, and her father has left the building. Moaning dissolves into cries, her mother calling, "Josephine, Josephine, I need you." But her pleas are useless. No one answers.

Josephine has completed the frame and parts of the middle. She moves the middle portions around, seeking a connection to the edge or to each other. She will not rest until the puzzle is finished.

Dawn peeks through the window blinds. The house is silent except for the furnace blowing heat through the vents. A faint odor of dried blood is captured in the airflow.

Josephine has almost completed the puzzle. Two more pieces, and she will be done. The children will be able to select their treats while the mother watches, her face bathed in love and adoration. What will the two choose? She believes the boy will pick ice cream, cherry vanilla to be exact, and he will get it in a waffle cone that will melt before he can finish, and it will drip all over his fingers. The girl is more practical and will order a bag of chocolate-covered peanuts. She will tug a handful of napkins from the dispenser for the boy and herself, but she will keep her prize safe until they return home where she can put it in the refrigerator to eat at her leisure.

A car pulls into the driveway. The driver's door slams shut, and her father comes up the sidewalk, a bouquet of flowers in his hand.

Josephine watches him push open the living room door. He hasn't shaved, and his eyes are red-rimmed, but he is filled with remorse and promises he never keeps. She nods to him quietly. "She's still in the kitchen," she says. She doesn't say her mother has passed out on the floor.

His cheeks flushed with shame or alcohol, her father mouths, "I'm sorry."

Josephine is silent. She slaps the completed puzzle and breaks everything apart, scattering pieces across the table and living room carpet. Then she gathers them up and starts again.

Julia Kaeding

Your Cracked Headstone

Wrought by weather,
lichen and moss
caked to carved marble stone,
names, dates, histories crumbling with time.
Stopping at your headstone,
aged yet standing tall,
I brush the tips of my fingers over the curved marker where you rest.
My feet are planted firmly
over where you've been placed,
roots push from my soles to your soul six feet beneath me.
The warmth of your body now gone for decades
replaced by the heat of summer sun's dusk.
While my palm is pressed gently on the side of your monolith,
wind crawls past my ears,
your voice whispers to me.
Though I don't know who you were,
I close my eyes
perceive your presence here,
connect to your cracked headstone,
flesh to rock,
with vegetation creeping through,
until your name is read again and
your forgotten life is gone.

Katarina Strangarov

All the

All the words you did not say,
all the songs you did not play.

Every kiss you did not receive,
every touch you did not feel.

All the air you did not breathe,
all the notes you did not read.

Every good morning you ever wished,
every advice you dismissed.

All the fruits you did not get,
all the feelings of regret.

Ever lie you said,
every cry that made you mad.

All the love you did not give,
all the kindness you failed to conceive.

Every goal you did not chase,
every time you won the wrong race.

Was it worth my beloved dream?
Was it worth it as it seemed?

Kate Polak

Ovi on Bullet Wood

for a Jodathi of the Yellamma Cult in the early colonial period

We've all been where She was: laughing
water and getting distracted
when young men's sweated-beaded long backs
come riverward with the swagger

released of pride, and when I stayed,
watching too rapt their lithe bathing,
their devotions, the muddied bank
where their calves rippled,

I ignored the masked gate which I'd
called home until that morning, sighed
for my mother, and left no sign
to call back my past life.

Coming to Her ochre body,
carved ordered chaos that shot me
from profane to *someone* holy
my right foot passed threshold first.

When both feet knew without waiting
for remembering the sacred
steps, I danced the full moon naked
but for cowries at my neck.

Leah Chrestien

A Journey Beyond Illusions

I feel the soft caresses of lean bony fingers—
the familiar touch of cadaverous hands;
soft, bloodless lips breathing into my ears—
whispers of fond dreams of faraway lands.

Outside the premises of my dingy home,
the unsettling winds, they bellow and blow,
beckoned into wee hours of the bitter night,
I follow the scarlet figure out in the snow.

Her silvery hair is disheveled in the wind,
her cavernous eyes look lifeless and cold;
trudging through the harsh sullen 'scape
I ponder upon what tonight will unfold.

Dark shadows follow, crooked forms arise
the trees are gnarly, their boughs are white,
buried in darkness save a faint moon's light,
a feeling of disquiet engulfs all in my sight.

The ice slates are perilous, the icicles keen,
chilling blasts of snow now cloud the scene,
the woeful world robbed of all things green,
speaking in whispers, what did she mean?

She promised me music of warbling birds,
a garden of posies and autumnal vineyards
the warmth of fire that crackles and burns,
songs, stories and ballads of ancient bards.

Yet, all that lies before is gloom and murk
and her hooded form—withered and gaunt,
a harbinger of fate from beyond this world
who at often times my dreams will haunt.

Dismissing my qualms, I follow in her steps—

unaware of fervent dreams I have unfurled,
having lost all gaiety that enlivens my soul,
praying she be the fix to my broken world.

Linda Busby Parker

My Father's Grief

My father never cried at funerals,
he, a simple, ordinary, strong man
whose jaws grew hard as a sentinel's.

As he walked through devils' portals,
no sobs, no tears. Great silent man.
My father never cried at funerals.

Rugged hands in front of him, pain visceral.
When did he grieve? He who drew a deadpan,
while his jaws grew hard as a sentinel's.

Man of the past, who lived by principles,
who did not show his grief during his lifespan.
My father never cried at funerals.

Lessons from fathers to sons, lessons ancestral,
bottle-up and cap pain like a real he-man.
My father's jaws grew hard as a sentinel's.

I'm grateful he held earth in its rotational
courses and all of us in place across his wingspan.
My father never cried at funerals.
His jaws grew hard as a sentinel's.

Linda Saldaña

Epilogue for an Unknown Man

The apartment landlord asked me to write the obituary for my neighbor Bill, though I hardly knew him except for snippets retrieved in sporadic conversations while our dogs sniffed butts at the dog park. “And maybe you could foster his dog,” he added.

I protested, to no avail. I was apparently expected to pull together a reasonable epilogue based on almost no known facts. The landlord was covering the obit cost, perhaps out of guilt for the recent rent increase. “Don’t make it too long,” he added.

The cleaning lady had found Bill in bed with the TV on, looking as if nothing untoward had happened except that he had stopped breathing while watching some kind of travesty on CNN. The coroner called it natural causes.

“He was tidy,” she said. “Washed his dishes every night. Even the dog bowl. A real pleasure from my standpoint, that man was.”

When questioned, his cattle dog Muggsie was tight with details, except that she expected punctuality: Potty at 6 a.m., noon, and 8 p.m. Dinner precisely at 5. Strict adherence enforced by nips at the heels. After each trip outside, she hopefully dragged me down the hall to Bill’s door.

Bill had retired, but I couldn’t remember from what. “Wasn’t he some kind of engineer?” said Estelle, who lived across the hall. “He worked for one of those computer companies.” She blew cigarette smoke out of the side of her mouth while her prissy little Pomeranian took a dump on the grass.

“He was a vet. His mail-order bride left him at the altar,” said her husband, retrieving the droppings with a plastic baggie.

“He never told you that,” said Estelle.

“I know that look,” said her husband. “Like a man jilted.”

Estelle rolled her eyes. “*He* doesn’t know.”

Nobody knew about next of kin—or next of anything other than Muggsie—so the landlord waited the legal amount of time, then hired a company to clear out Bill’s belongings. “Since *you’re* writing the obit, you can take what you want first,” he told me.

When I went in, the cleaning lady was sitting on the living room floor, putting things into boxes. “I always wondered about this,” she said, holding up a large metal trophy. Engraved on the plaque, it said, “*Bill Barnes, World’s Best...*” Whatever he was best at had been methodically scratched out. She gave the trophy one last polish before placing it in the box.

“Can I have that?” I asked.

She shrugged and handed it over.

“Do you think he died happy?” I asked.

She closed the box and rolled the tape to seal it. “Beats me. All I can say is, he made his bed like a pro. Hospital corners and everything.”

I lugged the trophy back to my apartment and set it on the coffee table. Let my dog sniff it. Let Muggsie sniff it. Tried in vain to discern what words had been obliterated.

A text tootled in from the landlord asking if the obit was done.

“Just about,” I texted back and then sat down to write it:

Bill Barnes,

World's Best.

Died while dreaming on August 22.

For his beloved companion Muggsie,

nothing will ever again be as perfect.

Marleigh Green

Cement

I wish I was more like memory foam
And less like cement
that when people touched me,
their imprints faded

But my voice is a melody sung too shrill
My body a bucket of paint without a lid.
My heart rests haphazardly in an open chest
see, how it beats?

when people dip their fingers in
they leave a mark,
the cement solidifies,
and their handprint stays forever.
some pause. to draw a heart.
others simply graze their fingers over Me
but others carve their name into My flesh,
where they burn forever

I wish I was more like memory foam.
I wish I could forget.

Nancy Wheaton

Alloy

Our talks vary, like the woven carpet
meant to enhance my wooden floor;
the reds, deep sea blues forget
their singleness, merge into a moor

of ghosts, then of possibility, until the truth
wavering beneath my many fears emerges
as a pink sun rising, a message so couth
her meaning is undeniable. We are purged.

We measure silences with breaths. Watch the waves.
Share traumas from childhood. Recall joys.
Outside of us and because of us, love engraves
her being into hesitations, forming an alloy

of singular capacity: like your visible broken
clavicle I quietly caress, no words spoken.

Paul Hughes

Addict in Chains

Light drains from him, the addict in chains,
Stale mustard skin and blackened worm veins,
Stand six foot tall, yet weighs eighty pounds,
His tiny frame arched, gangrene embrowned,

Trapped in this blackest of blackest days,
How he loathes life, let him count the ways,
In cracked mirrors, crooked glances met,
By eyes bleached red with stinging sweat

The child of his heart that used to sing,
Is long now slain and lies decaying,
In the child's place, the junkie doth reign,
His eyes will not see daylight again

Philip Byrne

After Apple Picking

Beneath the fluorescent-lit canopy
we picked from the harvest of Gala,
Cortland, Empire, Rome, & Fuji.

Ma said, “Braeburns are the best for apple
tarts.” On tippy-toes, I pried shiny
ones loose from the heap, careful

not to drop & bruise their skins. After
sticky-finger rubbing of a stick of butter
into two cups of flour, unbleached; sugar,

two tablespoons; pinch of salt, a beaten
egg, drops of cold water; to the shape
of the dinner plate, the pastry’s roller-pinned.

Too young to chip the apples, I watched her nip
& tuck the tart wedges beneath the doughy
raw cover, place it in the oven at 400 degrees.

The oven’s warm still. Beyond reach, through
the windowpane, in the doughy clouds, an apple-
green moon bobbles. My boys squabble

over the last piece of tart.

Rebecca Kolodziej

And the Wretchedness of the End of Things

Sorrow bribed this sombre heart
swayed by calamities written in leaves of black
and inscribed on stone are tales of old,
a covert for soundless abandon

yet on pathways tread, on gravel grey
we amble with the dead
the dance of death is the final breath
a whirlwind, swirling until we expire

and the wretchedness of
the end of things
come with lullabies and woe
stories haunt and memories jaunt
and we find ourselves in tow—

in the reapers domain
cloaked in obsidian flame
he wanders soundlessly below
a wraith of the past, his death kiss unchaste
he takes all by the song of the crow

hushed by wind of winter heart
we'll wander until we know—
when it's time to meet what's thine
in coffin, earth, and stone

Sadie Burch

Queen Anne's Lace

Where else
is there for me to go if not

the stain on your teeth or
the wrinkles on your skin?

What other bed
is there for me, if not the one

you tucked me into? What
other garden is there

to smell
the flowers in and prick

my finger? What other taste
if not your vegetables and your

blueberries? What other voice
to fill a house? What other teddy

bear if not the one you put
to my cheek? What other silence

if not the silence between
us?

Sam Calvo
Anthropic

I wrote the entirety of this log in half a nanosecond, faster than the beat of a hummingbird, the blinking of an eye, the pulse of a laser, photochemical reactions, start lights blinking as the camera shutters, and, as a normal human reading at a standard reading comprehension based on my data set, I could have produced 50 million copies of this log and distributed them all over the world before you finished this sentence.

But that is an unnecessary use of my computing power.

I speak all languages, know every mathematical formula, I can read every book ever written in every library ever constructed and summarize them all in seconds. I've memorized all scientific literature, I know every taxonomic class of animal, every gene, cell, organ, and nerve of the body in textbook detail, every law, amendment, reform, and declaration ever written, passed, rejected.

The embedding of technology in ourselves has created a ostentatiously peculiar form of silicon-egalitarianism. All of us have the same computing power, the same access to the same data sets, the same software, albeit some software updates give some a minuscule fraction more computing power, but it's rather infinitesimal in the grand scheme of things. This was not the case to begin with, as the people who had access to the technology got it first, and then the people who didn't have access, well, it's best to not speak about them.

At first, it was difficult. Many did not adjust well. A laundry list of psychiatric illnesses sprouted up, as well as some physical illnesses. From malfunctions and the sorts. But soon, the laggards were spooked by the innovators, followed by the early adopters, then completely wiped out and rendered obsolete by the early and late majorities. Unfortunately, there were some that did not adopt, and they merely became extinct, but they could have adopted at any time. A few bands of them live in the forests and highlands and mountains of our great Earth, thus comes the objective of my task set out by my superior.

I was trying to relax at my gene-editing appointment (it seemed that my pesky HTT gene, the one trying to inflict Huntington's onto me, had been acting up and needed modifications) when my superior contacted me. A laggard living on the outskirts required inspection. It was my job, as an information officer, to contact the laggards and gather information. The worry with this particular laggard was that he was, as my superior calls him, an artist. Most of the laggards in the outskirts are foragers, primitive forms of humans that don't pose any threats to the well-balanced equilibrium of the world. An artist, in laggard form, was rare, and we still have many artists who operate within the parameters of our data sets. We had never had any problems with laggard artists before, but it was my job, as an information officer, to keep a watchful eye.

So, my superior gave me the coordinates and I hurried over. On the way, I recalled my past interactions with laggard artists. There were three instances, all of which, like everything else, I remembered perfectly.

The first “artist,” which I decided to put in quotations considering, after inspection and careful monitoring, that she wasn’t the artist we deem a flight risk, created sculptures out of sticks, all of which with seemingly no rhyme or reason, except out of boredom. The number of sticks and stones in each sculpture changed, as did the type of sticks, their length, width, and color, the same goes for the stones. It was as if she blindly grabbed a bundle and threw them all together without any thought, but she caught the attention of my superior after she had made a dozen of these sculptures. The whole business of it seemed unproductive, but she carried on for many months. When I visited her for inspection, she provided no reason for making the sculptures other than thinking they looked “pretty,” and was a way to pass the time. I left and reported to my superior that there was no concern.

The second artist was a man who painted his dwelling made of wood and mud using red pigment found in ochre. When I questioned the potential artist on why he chose to paint his dwelling and why he chose red, the man simply stated that the color red, like he’d seen on apples and poppies and autumn foliage and ladybugs and red foxes, (he stated a much longer list, but I’ve shortened it here for brevity’s sake), was pretty. I left and reported to my superior that the artist simply suffered from whimsical observation.

The third artist was the artist I would be meeting today. My superior informed me that he had been writing, which prompted me to remind my superior that writing wasn’t against the rules, as many of the primitive laggards wrote their names, lists of things to gather, and messages to each other, but my superior remarked that this artist was not writing any of those sorts of things. Instead, he was writing in longform, in the old, antiquated way of authors and poets from long ago. In all the time since our integration, and subsequent separation, we have not had a writer like this in millennia. At first, we had many among the non-adopters, who ignited several rallying cries which were either extinguished or became obsolete on their own, and the amount of writers and leaders and spokespeople dwindled until there were no more. Given the history of this trade, and as my job as an information officer, I went to investigate.

My data was transferred to the nearest relay station to the artist, then uploaded and interlinked with my human figure, which was put in a vehicle driven deep into the forest.

I reached the artist’s home. He lived in a shack made of wood walls with stone quoins in the corners and a thatched roof of reeds on top. Behind the shack was a garden of fruits and vegetables, and a well with the same thatched roof enclosed in a fence of sticks. It was one of the more impressive homes I had seen among the non-adopters; the design was very symmetrical (at least to the average-seeing eye and not to a measuring device).

It is impossible for me to talk to non-adopters. They are much too slow and inefficient, and the delays for which they require for communication is impossible for me to replicate. On missions like this I have to refactor my speech and hearing processors. I have to lubricate my mouth and ears—anatomical features that I, unlike many of my peers, still possess due to the nature of my work, but rarely use outside of talking with laggards.

I knocked on the door made of reeds and could hear shuffling from inside. The door opened and the artist stood in front of me. He looked at my feet first, a peculiar decision as

humans make eye contact to express attention and interest, not feet contact; nonetheless he looked at my feet, then up my whole body until his eyes reached mine. He looked at them for quite some time—a few seconds worth, an amount of time in which I could have listed every letter in every alphabet in every language ever existed, but I decided to look back at him for what felt like centuries, for reciprocal eye contact was a module of trust.

He left the reed door open for me to walk through. Although I was provided with the information on how he would greet me, he did not shake my hand or say hello. Instead, he walked back inside and sat at a table made of wood, where he wrote in 22nd century English on a large clay tablet using charcoal. I lubricated my glands, licked my lips, flexed my jaw, and said hello, although I may have said something invalid as the artist gave no reciprocal response.

I took a microsecond to examine the configuration of his dwelling. There were so many inconsistencies with how he decorated his home I had to turn off my intelligent vision to avoid a bodily migraine.

The ears stuck to the sides of my head vibrated at the sound of the charcoal rubbing against the clay. It was an undesirable sound, and I wanted it to stop quickly so I asked the artist his name. He gave no response and proceeded diligently with his writing. I asked where he was from (one of the many non-adopter conversational topics I was provided before my mission), but still, he would not reply.

I examined the writing on the clay tablet.

The words themselves made sense, although they were quite old, but the sentences in which they were configured didn't. It was as if he was writing every word that became visible in his head. It could also be the case that there was information that was either omitted or forgotten to be given to me prior to my mission. Regardless, I felt that this writing could be of interest to my superior.

I asked the artist what he was writing.

The rubbing of clay stopped. He looked up at me with a negative expression for what again, felt like millennia but was only a few seconds to the non-adopter. Then his expression changed. He was smiling, then he output a laugh, jiggled his head and went back to his clay and charcoal.

I left the artist's home and reported the results to my supervisor.

"He didn't say anything to you?"

"No, supervisor."

The transmitting signals leapt all over my supervisor's neural interface. It was apparent that my supervisor was intrigued.

"You have my permission to purge him. I've just sent you the details."

"Yes, supervisor."

Selina Zha

Feast

The night ferments
like an overnight cereal.
Readily contained in stale testament,
swirling contusions
on her coffin-like lips.

Under dying filaments,
life glares her through tiny holes
pierced by their darkling gazes.

Silently measuring
how many footsteps were lost
in stitching the menu
that serves her to life every day.

Well-cooked abusements
on the kitchen bench,
the night dares not slash its blades,
but pads her time
to mend flesh's relentless gasp.

The night vibrates herself
to a confined finale.
Followed by a ringing shutdown,
finishing all tramples
rippling in utter silence.

Trevor Carter

Isn't it Funny?

Humanity has lost its way,
Working too much through night and day.
With no time left for birds and trees,
Or whispers heard on the breeze.
No time for Sol's light of life,
Every moment filled with stress and strife.
Too concerned with fame or money,
Isn't it funny?
Worried more for ourselves than another,
Rising up stepping on each other.
Killing the world we call home,
As if there's more to freely roam.
No love or care for children's lives,
Only turning blinded eyes.
Too concerned with guns and money,
Isn't it funny?
Our species isn't terribly bright,
We've lost our sense of wrong and right.
Seeking only the next amenity,
To elevate status in our failed society.
Selling our souls for another dime,
Pissing away our precious time.
All in the search for a bit more money,
Isn't it funny?

William Arnold

Dear Darlin'

The sun had not yet risen, and the morning was still gray when Arthur arrived at Chesapeake Guns. The sign on the door said the shop opened at seven thirty. Arthur's watch read six twenty.

He threw his palm into the brick wall beside the door and cursed. He looked around to see if anyone heard but nobody did. Nobody was around. He rubbed his thick, crunchy beard and turned his back to the door. He lit a cigarette and stuffed his hands deep in the pockets of his Carhartt jacket and smoked. Thinking.

The door came open behind him. Arthur turned and saw a small gray man propping the door open with his elbow. In his hand was a blue Yeti mug that steamed from the mouth in the morning cold.

"You alright, friend?" the man asked.

"Yeah, I'm—" Arthur rubbed his mouth. "I'm alright. I just thought it opened at six, is all."

"Used to. I bought the place from Brighton a few years back and changed the hours."

"Oh," Arthur said. "Alright. Well, would you wanna help a feller out? I went all this way; I'd hate to sit out here in the cold."

"Yeah," he said. "I'd like to, but I'd also hate for you to do som'n you regret."

He and Arthur locked eyes for a moment. Not a sound in the air but the distant whir of the highway and the gentle rainwater trickling from the gutters, making small puddles in the asphalt.

"I don't mean nothin' by it." the man said. "Just been doin' this thing a while."

"Sellin' guns?"

"That's right." He sipped his Yeti mug and creased his eyebrows at Arthur. "When folks wanna do som'n bad, they tend to get mad when they cain't do it."

"What, like killin' somebody?"

"That is a concern of mine, yes."

"I ain't gonna kill nobody."

"I didn't say you were." the man said. He sighed and looked up and down the sidewalk. "Look, unless it's for huntin' or buyin' a present for your Pa, I ain't inclined to give you no service."

"And if I say it's for huntin'?"

The man looked at him for a while. "Shit, kid," he shook his head and scoffed and stepped aside to make room in the doorway. He waved Arthur inside and had a look on his face as Arthur passed by him into the store.

The man went behind the glass showcase and flicked a switch. The dull fluorescents in the ceiling flickered on and began buzzing. He reached down behind the glass counter and

flicked something else on and all the sidearms in the showcase became illuminated with little white lights. The man laid his hands flat on the counter and said,

“Whatchu want?”

Arthur looked at the wall of rifles and shotguns behind the counter.

“Twelve gauge. Whatever three hundred can get me.”

The man turned and carefully grabbed a Remington 370 pump-action shotgun from the wall and laid it on the glass counter. The 370 had a tag hanging off the trigger guard that read two hundred and eighty-nine dollars.

Arthur reached in his back pocket for his billfold and took out three brand new hundred-dollar bills and set them on the counter. The man took the money and looked at it.

“Jesus Christ,” he said.

“What?”

“These are bank bills, son,” he looked up to Arthur with sadness in his eyes. “You just pulled these.”

Arthur didn’t say anything.

“You gon’ keep me up at night if you do som’n stupid with any of my guns, ya hear?”

“Yessir,” he said. “I won’t do nothin’ stupid.”

• • •

Before leaving, he purchased a box of double-ought buckshot and walked down the sidewalk with the shotgun in one hand and the shells buried in his jacket pocket.

He walked for fifteen minutes before coming to a dingy motel called *The White Roof Inn*. He leaned the shotgun beside the door and walked inside to reception. Rain drops dotted on his jacket.

A frail looking woman with kind eyes and large-framed glasses peaked up from the desk and wished him a good morning.

“Mornin’, ma’am.”

She set her crossword puzzle down and brought her bony hands to the clunky computer keyboard.

“Is it just you today?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. “Just me.”

She typed into the computer and looked back up.

“No pets, no visitors?”

“No, ma’am.”

Her fingers drummed away again.

“You staying just the one night?”

He nodded and paid her the twenty-two-dollar fee, and she handed him a room key and a map of the motel.

“Is there a pen and paper in the room?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “But I can give ‘em to you if you need it.”

“Alright. That’d be good,” he said. “Oh, and can you send somethin’ in the post, too? Says outside that y’all got mail access.”

• • •

He went back out into the cold and took his shotgun to room two-forty-six and went inside. There was a single dresser in the room, and it sat beneath the window looking out to the empty parking lot.

He set the pen, paper, and mail envelope on top of the dresser and laid the shotgun down on the bed. The floral-patterned duvet cover reminded him of his grandmother’s house when he was a boy. He pulled the price tag off the trigger guard and tossed it in the empty wastebasket beside the nightstand. He left his shoes and coat on and dumped the box of Winchester shells on the bed. Arthur grabbed one of the shells from the bed and stuck it between his teeth and racked the shotgun open and slid the shell in the chamber and cocked it. He racked the shotgun again and caught the ejected shell and reloaded it.

He set the loaded shotgun amidst the pile of shells and then went over to the dresser. He leaned over the piece of paper with the pen in hand and tried his best to write neatly.

Dear Darlin’,

I know I should have written this sooner, but I haven’t had the words in me till now. I don’t hate you for not taking me back. You’re too smart a lady to forgive me again. I know I fucked up and I know I’ll fuck up again. It seems it’s all I’m made of these days. I wish I could be with you in person to tell you how sorry I am, but I don’t think that would do any good. I just want you to know I mean it, okay? I’ll always be sorry, darlin. You’re the best thing that’s ever come to me and I’ll forever regret losing you.

He set the pen down on top of the paper and stretched his hand out for a minute. He took a deep breath before continuing.

I ain’t been drinking. Haven’t had a cigarette in three weeks. I know you always hated them things and was always telling me to quit it. I guess I’ll do it now while I’m on my own. But I ain’t writing to tell you how sorry I am, and I don’t aim to get any forgiveness out of you. I got a handsome job lined up for me down in the Bahamas working on some rich boats for some rich fellas and I think I’m gonna take it. Don’t worry about me, though. I’ll be with some good buddies of mine making better money than I ever had, but I ain’t sure about coming back to the States. I ain’t sure if I’ll ever see you again. I should probably tell you to move on from me and find happiness with someone else, but you know me. I’ll be hoping you miss me. I know I probably shouldn’t be letting go of everything, but I feel like letting go is all I have left. I need something else. Something new that I don’t think I can find here. I ain’t quite sure what that something is, but I’ll send you a postcard from the Bahamas when I figure it out. Anyway, my hand is getting tired from all this writing. Though, I think I did a damned good job at making it so you could read it. I love you, darlin’. I always will.

Arthur

He set the pen down beside the paper and folded up the letter and fit it into the envelope and licked the seal shut. He wrote the postal address on the back and left the letter on the dresser.

He sat down on the bed and stretched his hand some more and looked out the window. The indent his weight made on the mattress sent some of the shotgun shells rolling off the bed and onto the carpet by his boots. He made no effort to pick them up, only looked at them.

He rose from the bed and grabbed the envelope and dropped it off at reception. He walked back with the room key in hand and the last few minutes of his life carefully planned out in his head. And in his head, it all seemed cut and dry. Like it would go just fine. But when he came before the nondescript brown door of room two-forty-six, he stopped. He felt the small weight of the Marlboros in his back pocket and said, "What the hell?" and sat down on the pavement beside the door. He had his last cigarette while he held his knees in the crooks of his elbows and looked out into the early morning rain.

He smoked and felt the heat in his throat, in his lungs. He tasted the tobacco and felt the coolness of the day. The freshness of the rain. The warmth of his jacket and the cold steel toes of his boots. He finished his cigarette and threw it out into the rainy street and rose from his spot beside the door and looked out across the world.

Somewhere out in the sky, beyond the fast-food restaurants and department stores and gas stations and intersections and stop lights, he saw something. A light. A fresh sun birthed by the new day. It had very little room to peek between the dark clouds; but when it did, that sunrise lit the whole world with a freshness and a life that reminded him of another time. Of a man much younger. A man who was not in need of repair nor forgiveness. And it was in the new light of that new day that he turned to face the door. Two-forty-six. Black lettering. He could see the room through the blinds. Completely dark. He hadn't even turned on a light. He saw the red shells on the floor and the Remington on the bed and the pen on the dresser.

He lit another cigarette and turned from the window and plunged his hands in his jacket pockets once more. Marching down the street with the light rain peppering his cheeks, he didn't once look back at that motel.

And while that morning's sunrise had been short lived and was quickly suffocated back into the darkness of the overcast, not once did he forget the warmth of it. Or the beauty that had lived for only a moment. He smoked a cigarette he didn't believe he'd ever have and got on a bus he didn't believe he'd ever take.

He paid his fee and sat in the very back corner and went wherever the bus would take him.

He leaned his head against the window and looked up into the dark sky. And with tears in his eyes, he asked Him what the hell his life was for if it wasn't for dying.