

THE MINISON PROJECT
PRESENTS

TMP Magazine



ISSUE 4



TMP Magazine

The Minison Project

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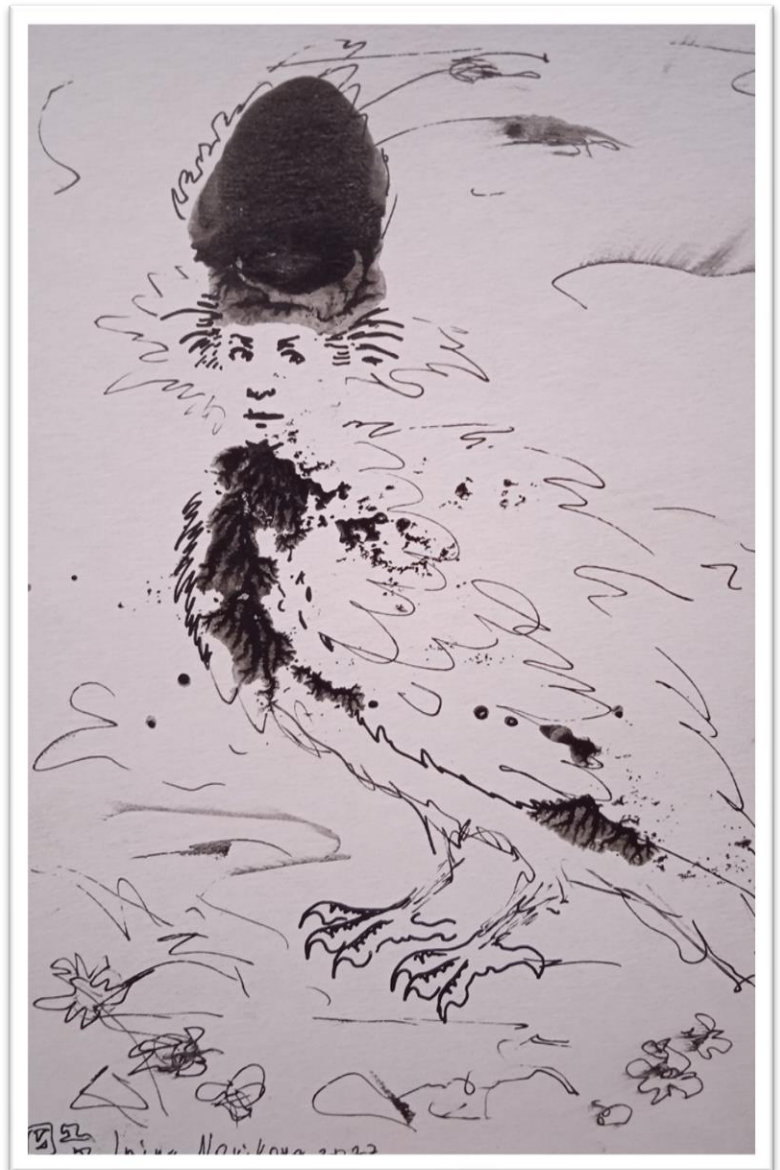
The Winged Sphinx
Frederick Pollack

We came to the sculpture. Wildflowers,
varied and sumptuous, needing no attention,
flourished in her shadow.
Though not the center of the city,
she seemed to exact deference from
the surrounding buildings. Whose purpose,
whose *reasoning*, was obscure.
Randomly windowed;
not tall, or subject to a grid;
demanding space and artful shade, they had
for ages spared and noticed no expense.
One felt, disturbingly, they would make sense
if one abandoned one's own alienness.
And felt the same about her look,
above the breasts, beneath the outstretched wings.

The others felt they had to talk.
How old was it? Which struck me as
inane; she was here, now, with us,
for us, or we for her. What did it represent?
Which to me was the wrong question, the kind
that if you ask distorts the answer.
I leaned back on the bench to watch a bird.
So high, and again ... To eat what?
Or impress whom, peering from where?
Fierce distant cry. The unclouded sun seemed cool,
as if a star grew mild and wise with age
instead of banking helium and rage.
The pack across my knees felt light,
as if she had requested
gravity itself to let her fly.

Now they were discussing the benches.
What kept them clean? and what exactly
were they shaped for? I, quite comfortable, was
recalling not my youth

but fantasies entertained then,
which never involve the choices
needed to make them happen ... I would
explore. But what I saw was *finding*,
not seeking. A buried sea.
A lone weed amidst rubble.
A city, remotely kind or grandly
oblivious – found in the company
of friends, exhausted, proud; prepared to learn
but lost now in the incommensurate,
though still alert for unexpected voices.



Dreams Photoset, Irina Tall Novikova

I Am a Walk in the Woods

Rebecca Iden

At the edge of the forest is a wide flat rock. I unhook my collarbones and drape my body over it seam-side-up. I pull my face away and fold it into thirds, resting it on my body like clean linens. That is where I leave myself.

I thrum through the forest, carried by nothing because I *am* nothing, like the movement of atoms or the smell of wet earth. When I've left myself behind, you can find me everywhere. I am the tufts of moss bubbling on the bark of a fallen tree. I am the air displaced between flinging hooves of a deer scared into flight. I am water twisting toward the ground, changing course on swinging branches; it makes no difference to me because I am the ground, and I am the branch. I am the warm air passing between lovers' lips as they walk hand in hand. I am the pressure she feels in her belly when the fetus curls toward her beating heart. I am the bowing waves of calling birds and the ice hanging in clouds. I am stone and I am fire; I am everything and nothing.

And when I'm done being everything, I return to the rock for my things; I have a dentist appointment at two and I owe Rick Graham an email. I gather myself from all corners of the forest: there I am tucked under a blue jay's wing; there I am turning my shaking leaves toward the sun; there I am passing through the gills of a shining river fish. I gather myself piece by piece and lay me down, filling my body like a breath. I slip the mask of my face back on, checking the ears to make sure they're straight, and tread the asphalt back to my car.



Dreams Photoset,

Irina Tall Novikova



The Green Flame

Thomas Zimmerman

Enchanted eyes can see: the green flame burns
both day and night, glows inside, out. It keeps
the sky above, the sea behind, and turns
the woodland tides. It caws with ravens, sweeps
the dooryard, scares away the wolves and snakes,
and sings the dreaming children flowing songs
of evermore. It frames the mirrored lakes,
it bashes dawn's and sunset's brassy gongs,
and throbs eternal even under ghost-
blue palls of rainy days. It strokes the moon
to rosy glowing, sifts the clouds that coast
from roofs and parapets, and hides the rune
the proud and gauzy-headed fathers thought
they knew the secret name of, but do not.



Rot Photoset, Sadie Maskery

Woodland Reverie

Elizabeth Bates

here in the dream sequence

skates etch figure-eights in the ice since
permanent, eternal love is always
 pivoting;

 it possesses
 a predilection
 to swaying &
leaning on one another through
 the steady winter

embrace dream ice that never melts
that loop of endless fourteens formed for you
in that scene that figure-eights
through my mind where the
time on the clock
is always 8:24



Perch, Erika Gill

A Place to Wipe Your Paws
C.M. Finch

The light from the late afternoon spilled in through the windows, shutters wide open to let in the fresh forest air while Jana stirred the contents in the pot before her. And it was a pot, not a cauldron like so many accused. It was also the beginnings of dinner and not some complex potion. She had very specific pots and utensils she used for those.

She idly wiped a damp hand on her apron before she realized she had misjudged and used her skirt instead. It would not be the first nor likely the last time she did so. A glance confirmed there was no actual staining, and another glance confirmed an industrious little sparrow was attempting to nibble on the herbs she had hung out to dry near the windowsill. A flick of a finger and it flew off, the rosemary and thyme safe once more.

Jana looked around, but there truly wasn't much else to tidy while she waited. The stone cottage was as clean as could be, warm and comfortable as always. She'd like to say they built it themselves, no inheritance or conjuring required, but that would be a lie. They had found the perfect little structure, long abandoned and beginning to succumb to the whims of Nature years before on their travels, and had known the world itself was inviting them to sit back and stay a while.

Of course, it took quite a bit of work to reach the point where they could live within those stone walls. A new roof needed to be thatched into place, the chimney scrubbed and evicted of tiny little beings that they helped find far better places to reside. A garden had been cleared of the overgrowth, and they had even managed to fashion a little fence around it all. All this while weaving and learning and harvesting as usual. Now though, they had the softest of pallets to curl up with together, and even chairs and tables bartered for in trade. While they were off the beaten path, quite literally, the nearest village did their best

to clear that path and welcome them, if only they would be willing to exchange some of their talents for the village's own.

There were still quite a few people wary of them, but the same superstitions that fueled their fears usually kept those individuals away. When that did not work, the other villagers frowned upon any attempts to dare mistreat the very neighbors that had often just saved a family member, or the occasional harvest. The rare grump who could not be fazed by either of those two factors was usually a little more than fazed when they saw just how well the two outsiders could defend themselves. There were seldom problems of any kind for months after such a demonstration.

A pressure against the protections she had cast around their little safe haven alerted to her to an approaching presence. Jana worried for a moment that she had perhaps conjured the very thing she had just been lost in thought about, but there did not seem to be any darkness in the aura of the presence. Danger, yes, but they all had a little bit of that within themselves so that was not nearly as much of a concern.

A glance to the scrying mirror near the door showed nothing of current worry within the village, and even that faded to solely her own reflection. Far too many wisps of hair long since highlighted by the sun – it was not gray, thank you very much – had escaped her attempt at taming them into a bun, and there was a smear of something that might have been rutabaga or might have been the tonic she had been working on earlier across her cheek. She swiped at the latter and managed solely to add some to her sleeve and barely make a dent in the actual accoutrement. There was nothing to be done about that now, as she heard the barely-there crunch of footfalls against the crushed sand and stone that they had laid out for precisely that purpose.

Few others could travel safely through her wards and protections, and fewer still would be able to obfuscate themselves enough to fully hide any true darkness that might

lay within. Because of this, she was not overly troubled, but she was also not naïve enough to not realize there still might be a risk. She held the knife so recently used on the vegetables in her right hand, which meant her left hand was free for casting if necessary. It was also free to reach for some little bottles, sachets, and other bobbles kept on a shelf near the door for them to both take with them upon their travels and to use in situations precisely like this.

Jana opened the door and raised an eyebrow at what greeted her. There, on the path, was a truly massive panther, the light from the downward slope of the sun highlighting the wet glint of something decidedly not water upon its maw and the razor-sharp claws upon its admittedly fluffy feet stained with something far more than dirt. “Really?” she asked, unimpressed.

The giant beast lowered its head and looked chagrined, but the playful thwap of its tail gave away its ruse. It rose and stepped to the side to reveal two small rabbits, already dressed and bound, and a small basket that looked to contain the tiny breads that Marjorie was near famous for, or at least as famous as one could be in a small village next to a river that wend its way through a forest.

“That’s better,” she smiled. She flipped the knife to a less defensive position and gathered the gifts, a waft of cinnamon tickling her senses even as she tried to hide her glee at the tiny pot of fresh butter tucked in beside the gifts.

She brought everything back into the cottage and set to work on it all. There was a shuffle of a step behind her and she did not bother turning around when she called, “Dinner will be ready in a little over an hour. Do wipe your paws before coming in, darling? You may wish to wash that face of yours as well.”

There was a huff of a response, and the shuffle moved away. She heard the pump outside and the trickle of water as it hit the sodden dirt around it. She spared a moment to

toss a towel over the chair nearest the doorway, and then returned to her task. She made quick work of it and, though she was tempted to save one of the rabbits for later, added both to the pot. They could eat the leftovers if needed and she was quite peckish herself.

She heard different footsteps behind her now, and the thud of the door as it was closed and the lock slid into place. "Thank you," the familiar voice of Ajan called, and her lips twitched as she fought the warmth such a simple phrase could create.

She turned in time to watch her beloved set the now damp towel to the side and pull on the robe left near the door for exactly that purpose. The belt was pulled tight, and long, dark hair was pulled free from the collar, still just the tiniest bit wet at the ends. Strong arms wrapped around her and she breathed in the scent of the forest and life and home. "Did you have your fun?" Jana asked as she returned the gesture.

"Yes, and managed to save Marjorie's youngest from an untrained wyvern in the process," came the reply before a quick kiss was pressed against her cheek. "The rabbits and breads are from her in thanks."

She nodded, having suspected the breads but not the reason for them. "There were three to start with, weren't there?" she teased.

Even the sun-stained cheeks could not hide the blush that formed, and she had her answer long before Ajan asked, "Love me anyway?"

"Always, my dear," she promised. "Always."



The Duck, Erika Gill

Heat Wave

Kevin A. Risner

If ever there were a time to pour red wine into a Denver coffee mug, it would have been this afternoon – a glamorous 70 degrees in early March. A joke if ever I saw one.

//

Let's let the buds pop on the magnolias, the crocuses and irises peek out from the underbrush only to let a freak late-season storm, a leftover from Thanksgiving, scream across the lake.

//

Bury all the new births – a reminder that life's only fleeting. Fast it comes in but dies off in one blink. I wait for the solstice. But then the reds of fall are back, and I was just drumming my fingers on the countertop waiting to be served up a helping of May. For longer than 48 hours.

//

The winds are as violent as a lost village after an eruption, ash coating hills and valleys and buildings like it was the depths of winter and there was no way in hell we'd ever see grass again, or robins pulling up worms, or the unforgiving ocean as my skin ambers.

//

Those were the days. Jumping onto boardwalks, peeking out at fathomless ocean. You, wanting to take every single shell and fill the jars on the mantel, every gift from the Atlantic a treasure.

Weathered Return to Columbus

James Croal Jackson

Yes, we are still ourselves– a little faded.
The year took a toll we did not realize
until we revisited Columbus, Ohio–
where we used to live. We were surprised
to see how much everyone changed–
Paige was worn, working night shifts at
the bar after leaving the office. Jeff writes
mortgages more than music. They played
breakup songs on the fourth of July before
fireworks blazed the sky aflame, everyone
content around each other, though Melissa
is engaged to a completely different person–
not in the sense of *you've changed*, though
she has, and he has– we are all trying
to circle around the year, immutable in
its ripples. Neil was in a wheelchair.
Mindi is drinking again. So what?
This life, you have to soften the
edges. We were glad to be back,
having flown in circles around
a place we called home only to
finally land on a familiar
branch, intact after the storm
we have been through.

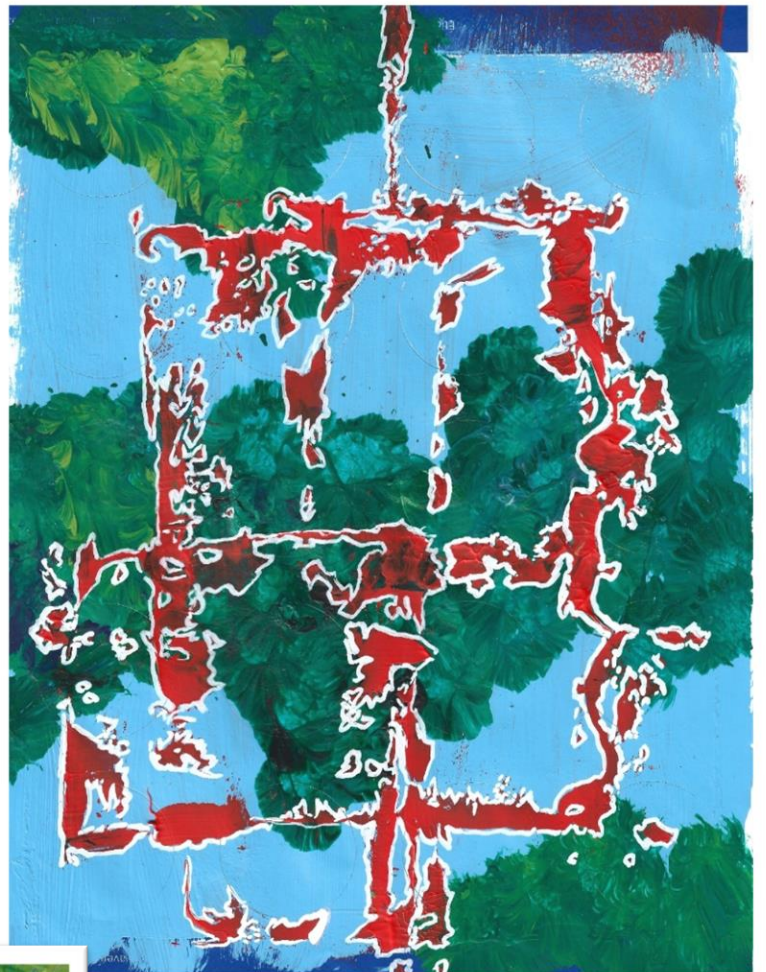
damp grass labyrinth
cleans the bottoms of my shoes



grass labrynth, Alan Bern

and the toe tops

CLOUD CITIES 2 (right),
DARKRECONSTRUCTION



CLOUD CITIES 1 (left),
DARKRECONSTRUCTION



Mrs. Bowley
Ed Walsh

I was recently reminded of Mrs. Bowley. I hadn't thought of her in a long while, but maybe I'd seen someone who brought her to mind, or maybe had a similar voice, quite low and refined in the northern way. She lived above us at thirty-two Osanna Street. We had moved there from the south and had never been in the city before; had never been so far north in fact, not by a long way. We were on the middle floor; Mrs. Bowley was above. Although we could hear moving in the upstairs apartment, it wasn't until about six weeks later that we actually saw her. Or to be more accurate, Sybille saw her - that's Sybille, who was my wife then.

We came to the city because we thought we would be happy there, and that I would sell my paintings. But the nearest I had got to success in that line was working as night-security at the Tallentorf Gallery. *I* never doubted how good I was, but by that time I was coming to accept that I might be in a minority. Plus, we had a kid to raise – Danno, who was then about six – so I had to do whatever was necessary until someone with taste decided to give me a hand up.

One afternoon I was in bed after my shift when Sybille got to talking with Mrs. Bowley on the landing. After a few more such meetings she invited her in for coffee. I was in bed when this happened too, so didn't meet her that first time. But Sybille told me about her. Apparently, she had been an actress, not famous but good enough to make a living in the forties and fifties. It seems she stopped acting and devoted herself to her husband after they got married. They had no kids and had lived in the upstairs apartment all their married life. He, Alfred, had been a professor of literature at the City Institute but had been

bed-ridden with some undiagnosed ailment for the past seven years. 'Except for the bathroom, its wall-to-wall books up there,' she had said. Mrs. Bowley was in her seventies, maybe eighty, when she was saying these things.

After a few weeks I got to meet her. They were having coffee in our main room when I came through. 'Oh, Mr. Doles,' she said. 'It's good to meet you at last. Sybille has told me so

much about your work. I'm a great art lover myself. Not an expert by any means. I leave the expertise to Alfred. He specialises in the renaissance. He's fluent in Italian. You speak Italian, Mr. Doles?'

I said, 'Not Italian, no,' leaving open the possibility that I spoke other languages.

I hadn't realised they were on first-name terms – Sybille called her Madeleine. And Madeleine was what you might term a handsome woman. She did not try to disguise her age, but she clearly cared about the way she presented herself; everything she wore looked expensive and somehow mattered. She looked like how I imagined Sybille might look at that age, and that was nothing to fear. She also had a confidence which seemed unusual for someone who was in someone else's apartment, as if it was her apartment and I was the visitor. She told me that her husband would love to meet me, to talk about the arts and suchlike. Sybille knew I would hate that, but she said, 'Wonderful. Wouldn't that be wonderful, Sorley, if the four of us could get together?'

'You'll have to come up when he's feeling well enough,' Mrs. Bowley said. 'Alfred's a great cook. It's just that he doesn't like the thought of anyone else in the apartment at the minute, with him being stuck in his bed. It's his pride, I suppose.'

‘Of course,’ I said, hoping that I didn’t sound too relieved. ‘It’s entirely understandable.’

‘But soon, hopefully, fingers crossed.’

It must have been about four months after she first came into our apartment that Mrs. Bowley took to sitting in with Danno on Saturday nights so we could go out. It was her suggestion. She asked and we said yes. Luckily, Danno took to her, and he also called her Madeleine. For some reason, I couldn’t bring myself to do that even when I got to know her, she seemed too remote for that kind of familiarity. So to me, if I had to make any reference, she was Mrs. Bowley. And when she came down on Saturdays, she was more casual but still expensive. And she and Danno read, and watched TV, and she taught him to play chess, a game neither me nor Sybille had ever played. On the first couple of occasions, Sybille asked if she was quite sure about the arrangement, and whether Mr. Bowley didn’t mind. But she said that she had left him with his books and his whisky and he was fine. ‘To tell the truth, I think he’s glad of a break from me. He never sees anyone else, not since his brother died, he was the only visitor.’

We went to an Italian place a few streets away and were always back before eleven. Danno was always in bed by then; he was obviously more compliant with Mrs. Bowley than he was with us. And after a few minutes chat, she would go back up to her apartment and we would hear her moving about, tending to her husband. It was a nice routine and in its way helped settle us into the city, because there was no doubt we were struggling to adjust before we had our night out. It helped to have a regular place to go to, a place where we were recognised and people said hello to us.

About a year into this arrangement, we were ready to go out as usual. Danno had had a bath and had his pyjamas on. But, come seven-fifteen, Mrs. Bowley hadn't arrived. 'She must be busy with Alfred,' Sybille said. 'Give her ten minutes.' But after ten minutes she hadn't come down, so I went up. I knocked gently and said her name, conscious of the echo on the landing. I assumed that at least one of them would hear me. The door wasn't locked, so I opened it a crack and said her name again. Nothing.

I made my way along the passageway, calling her name. I could hear a TV. I knocked on the next door and then opened it. It was a large room, and that was where the sound was coming from. It was a quiz-show, one of those where people compete against each other to win a car

or a holiday. I wouldn't have imagined Mrs. Bowley watching that kind of thing. The room was solidly furnished, dark and old-fashioned, and there was a man's suit hanging from the curtain-rail. It looked recently returned from the launderers. I thought of the abandoned ship, but couldn't recall its name. Then from behind I saw her hand on the armrest of a chair which was facing the TV. I guessed she had fallen asleep.

I said her name again and, as I walked around the chair, the reason she had not been replying became apparent - she was dead. I had not seen a dead person before then, nor since. I don't know why, but after staring at her a while I said her name; I didn't say Mrs. Bowley, I said Madeleine, it seemed more intimate; the whole situation seemed *intimate*, and I wanted to touch her hair, but didn't. Then I remembered her husband. He must be lying there, unaware that his wife was dead a short distance from him. 'Mr. Bowley,' I called. There was no noise except for the whoops from the quiz-show audience. It then occurred to me that she might not have been watching the quiz show, but that it might have started after she died.

‘Mr. Bowley, it’s Sorley Doles, your neighbour from downstairs.’ I knocked on the only other door in the room, then I opened it. It was their bedroom, but Mr. Bowley was not in the bed. There were two bathrooms. His was the tidier: shaving brushes and soaps neatly lined up on the small shelf above the basin, one large hairbrush, one small; scissors for nasal hair. Hers had her stuff scattered about and I didn’t like to look too long. They had their own monographed towels - *AB* and *MB*.

I tried the other doors off the passageway. In one they kept their equipment, vacuum, ironing-board, the like; the other, nothing, just an empty room with a radiator. I called his name again, but it was pretty clear he wasn't in the apartment. Maybe we had misunderstood her, or maybe she had been exaggerating when she said he was bedridden. Either way, he must have gone out.

I went back into the front room and switched the TV off, then I looked at her for a long while. If this was what death looked like, it didn't look much to fear. She was ready for a quiet night in with Danno and she had even made the effort for that. Her finger and toenails were painted blue, and she was wearing one of the patterned scarfs that she wore for style rather than warmth. As I was acclimatising myself to the silence, there was a knock on the outside door, then Sybille's voice. ‘Sorley, you in there?’

‘He’s not here,’ I shouted.

She came through and surveyed the room.

‘Who’s not here?’

‘And she's dead.’

‘What?’

'Madeleine. She seems to be dead. *Is* dead.'

'What?'

'Here.' I pointed to her body.

'Are you sure?' She came around and saw that what I said was true.

'She was watching a quiz. And he's not here.'

'Where is he?'

'How should I know?'

'My God. What do we do?'

'I don't know. Tell someone? The authorities?'

'Who are the authorities?'

'Not sure.

'Where are all the books?'

I hadn't noticed that; no books.

I went down and got the number for the caretaker, Dromond. I didn't say anything to Danno.

'It happens,' Dromond said when he came. 'I look after thirty apartments. People are sometimes there for weeks before anybody notices, older people mainly, by themselves. Sad, but there we have it.'

'But she wasn't by herself. Her husband lives here. We don't know where he is.'

'Husband?'

'Her husband, Alfred.'

'Alfred? *Alfred*? No, I've been looking after these apartments nearly forty years. Mrs. Bowley has no husband. There's no Alfred. No husband Alfred anyway.'

'No husband Alfred? That can't be right. I'm sure we've heard him moving around. We've heard her talking to him.'

'Well, I don't want to contradict you good people, but Mrs. Bowley was born in this apartment, lived here with her mother until her mother died. And that was what – twenty, twenty-five years ago? By herself since. I've been in here a few times, repairs and suchlike, there's no husband. Nice woman though, always had a little something for me at Christmas.'

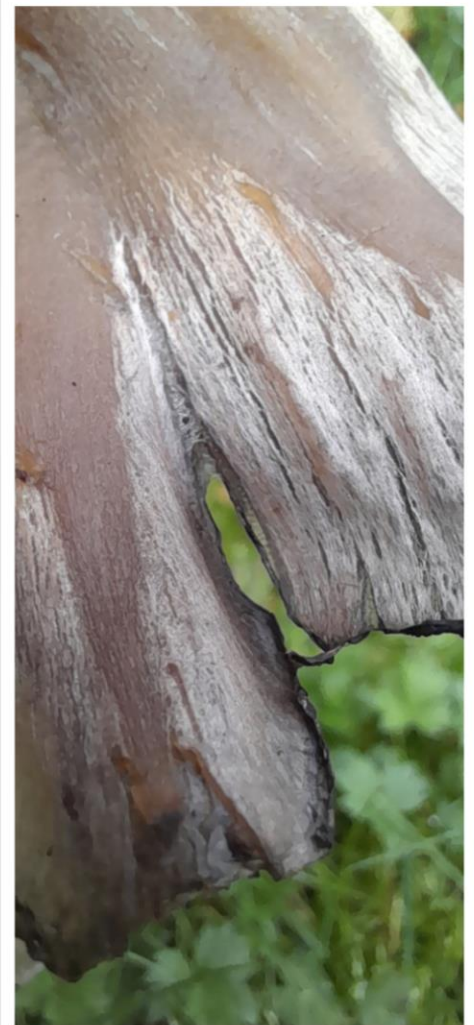
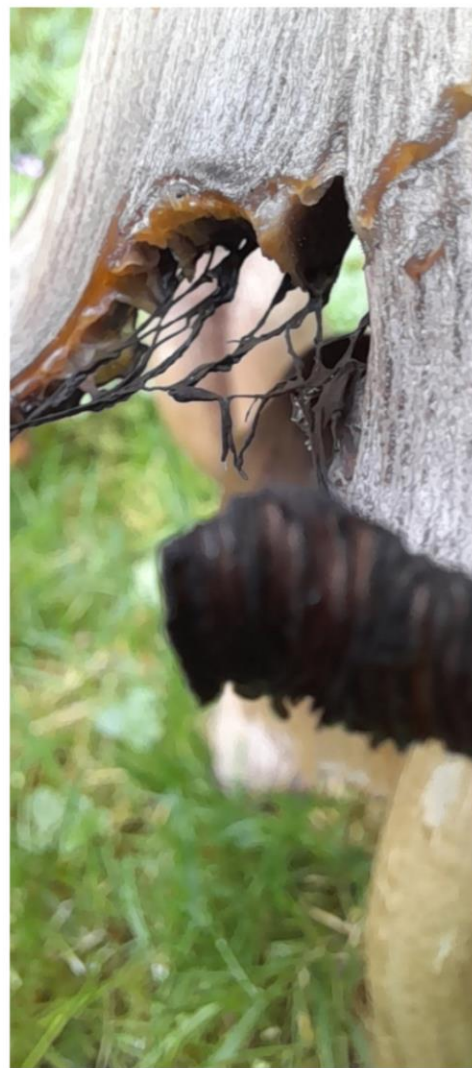
'We must have heard wrong,' I said.

When we went back down, Sybille said, 'We didn't hear wrong.' I said I knew that. That night, and for many nights after, we could hardly sleep. We would just repeat things that Madeleine had said, things which weren't true, or not true in any way that we understood true to mean. And we would try to work it all out. We came up with many explanations but couldn't settle on anything.

Dromond made the arrangements, and the three of us drove through the city and out to the crematorium with her. It was us and the priest. We sang two hymns, and the priest read something from a bible, all done in twenty minutes. We came back in a cab. When we parted, Dromond said he was very sorry for our loss.



Rot Photoset,
Sadie Maskery



Last Sailor

Alex Carrigan

I find myself completely
alone on this ship after
months at sea and shore
far from sight.

There were other footsteps
on the deck before,
the creaking now provided
by the occasional patter of rain.

Even the rats have stopped
making their presence known.
Perhaps they were stowed away
each time we performed a funeral,

gnawed their way under
the cloth we wrapped each person in
before we dropped the plank
and let them sink into the sea.

Or they managed to get
aboard one of the life boats
before they were all cut and
dropped below.

I hear no pattering or
scurrying from anyone or
anything, and I try to imagine
the parade when I alone

reach the shore. An entrance fit
for a pharaoh of old,
but the gold and jewels I wear are
scabs and reddened skin instead.

Tonight, I will tie myself
to the mast and remain here

until the voyage ends. I don't
want to confuse my own

footsteps for anyone who
could be here instead, so
I won't make anymore.
Instead, I'll gaze straight

ahead, and hope that the
winds push me to where
I'll no longer hear the creaking.

After Andres Rojas

SOME KIND OF PRAYER

Isaiah Duey

content warning: sexual assault

on days half my body is sprawled over the edge of the bed, i think about god. or when i forget to close the bathroom door. or when i wear shorts. or when my shirt creeps up as i sleep. or in my sleep. but mostly when i'm alone.

i was in high school when my teacher told me god is a jealous god. that i'd end up suffering when i do things that'd make him jealous, and that making god jealous could give me a VIP pass at hell. i asked what could possibly make god jealous if he's already god, and she shushed me. *just bad things in general*, she said. *so only do good things. remember he's always watching you*, she adds then clicks her tongue like it's a threat—as if she knows something i don't.

so, on days half my body is sprawled over the edge of the bed, i wonder if i ever made god jealous. did i rouse the envy in his eyes as he watched my *lolo* grope me as i slept and cup my backside whenever he gets a chance? did i miss my chance at heaven because i couldn't give him a boner when i switched to jogging pants and sweaters every day—humidity and discomfort be damned? *better than a pair of eyes ogling at whatever flash of skin is exposed on me*, i'd muse while staring at my reflection in the mirror. did i make god jealous because i'd unwittingly check if i locked the bathroom door before i take all my clothes off, just to make sure no one would open it and silently watch me again? the thought permits a scoff, because what difference would it make? do you watch me, god? bathing in my misery, allowing the droplets from the showerhead to drown me?

on days half my body is sprawled over the edge of the bed, i wonder if god sends me these nightmares from childhood to spite me, tell me 'this suffering is yours to bear' or if he enjoys my frazzled state when i wake up panting in fear that someone might be undressing me, or if he gobbles my morning assertions of 'this is not my fault. it is possible to heal' and spits at them, knowing well enough that i won't because i've made an enemy out of a jealous god.

On the Burning Floor
Brian Purdy

On the burning floor small flames sprout
and multiply. Thick smoke rises
Heat magnifies.

Here with the toes of heavy boots
I test the timbers
to know the few that may hold weight
move in flame-proofed clothing
in this alien element of fire
hoarding my supply of air
& listening, listening, listening
for faintest voice of lost or trapped survivor.

My radio spits static and directions.
One step at a time by trial and error
I move from where I stand in this room
to where my tearing eye can barely distinguish
the far wall wreathed in scarves of smoke.
I tell the mike my progress —
news of a world that swims in flames.

How many times have I emerged
from the hulk with my fire-walk partner?
Together we cast off blackened armor
dump the tanks that allowed us to breathe
trade insults with the crew
go home for supper.

I've been good and lucky
twice now found survivors
brought them from inferno
to innocent air. The ambulance bore them
across the night, hoarding the spark
we saved from ash and cinders.

I try to remember successes
push back recurrent dreams
where fire defeats me
spend quiet time at the station
keep myself ready.

In Loving Memory
Cami Rumble

Not actually *loving*, perhaps,
But fond—
Is there another step in affection?

The memory of a neighbor you only met once,
A friendship never forged,
A favorite fish belly up—

Ruefulness compressed into a small space,
A meaningful trice—

What is the word for losing
What you never owned?



The Queen Burned,
Breeann Kyte Kirby

stepping into



of bright ghosts, Alan Bern

Death Takes a Holiday
Shane Thomas

Samael was tired, tired of his job, and tired of covering for his coworker. He had had enough. This was his last day, he told himself as he walked into the Pub. Before sitting at the bar, he straightened the stack of drink coasters and arranged the salt and pepper shakers to evenly straddle the napkin holder. It wasn't even noon, but he ordered a double neat Black Label.

The bartender poured the drink and then placed it on a coaster in front of Samael. Samael centered the glass on the coaster before downing the drink in a single swallow and ordering a second.

"Hey, buddy, rough day? You might want to slow down if you want to make it past lunch," the bartender said with concern.

"Don't worry about me. Just keep'm coming until I say stop."

The bartender poured Samael another drink as requested. "Do you want to talk about it?" the old man asked.

Samael looked around the empty bar save for himself and the graying bartender. "I quit my job this morning. I couldn't take it anymore."

"That's too bad. Things can get overwhelming sometimes, I guess. What was your job?"

"Death," Samael replied.

"I know it can feel that way sometimes. I was in the Army during Vietnam. Every day felt like death. What was the straw that broke you?"

"It's bad enough when I have to collect children, but I don't control accidents and disease, so I don't complain. What I can't take anymore is showing up, and the records haven't been updated. People's actions have consequences. If someone smokes three packs of cigarettes a day, they shouldn't be surprised when they get lung cancer. If you're in the

habit of running red lights, you might beat the odds a time or two, but your luck is going to run out, and you'll get flattened.

People control their own destinies, or at least they should. What I have a problem with is when someone changes their habits or actions, and Fate isn't observing them like he should. Take, for instance, Bob Dobson, not a bad guy, not the best guy. He's a little bored and starts paying too much attention to a woman he works with. Eventually, they start having an affair, and Bob's wife finds out about it and beats him to death with one of his golf clubs.

Well, that was how it was supposed to play out, according to Fate. However, it turns out the woman at Bob's office got a new job in a different city. Bob took up cycling to relieve his boredom and never had the affair. This morning when I came to collect Bob, he and his wife were having a nice breakfast and getting ready to go on a bike ride.

It's my job to keep the books straight, so now Bob is choking to death on his breakfast sausage. Of course, Fate doesn't care. It doesn't affect him."

The old bartender was unsure whether his new friend was being literal or metaphorical but decided to engage, nonetheless. "Why wouldn't you just leave Bob alone? You said he didn't have the affair. Why did he have to die?"

"Because it's in the book. The book must be kept straight, otherwise, everything devolves into chaos."

"Isn't there going to be more chaos now that you have quit your job? What will happen to those people you were supposed to collect?"

"I guess they will just keep living. You should be grateful. I was coming here to collect you."

The old bartender's eyes widened. "What? Are you sure? I feel fine."

"I have it right here: Joshua Franklin Baker, born August 3rd, 1944, in Youngstown, Ohio. Current residence 355 Lehigh Ave, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Proprietor of Frankie's Pub, widower, no children."

Frankie clenched his jaw, and there was sadness behind his eyes. He decided it was time for a drink and poured himself a double. "When you say it like that, it doesn't seem like much," he said before taking a long sip from his glass.

"That's not your life. It's just your contact information to ensure I have the right person."

"So how am I supposed to die? Heart attack? Stroke?"

Samael consulted his book again. "It says here; the men's bathroom toilet is leaking. At 12:31 this afternoon, you will slip on a puddle of water on the floor, bang your head against the sink and die from an internal brain bleed."

"I fixed that toilet last week. The floor is bone dry in there," Frankie retorted.

"See, Fate is useless. If I hadn't quit my job, I would have to come up with a way to murder you in the next hour."

Frankie was not comforted by Samael's reprieve. "So, is everyone going to keep on living now, no matter what happens to them? What would happen if someone were crushed under a car or something? Are they just a talking pulpy mess now?"

"I guess so. At least until someone else takes the job."

"How long will it take to find a new 'Death?'" Frankie asked.

"I don't know. I've had the job for the last 200,000 years. There weren't any real problems in the early days. People were pretty predictable back then. Plus, the old Fate was much more meticulous about tracking people's activities. This new Fate has only been around for about 10,000 years. He's so lazy. He only checks on people once every couple of years. That's no way to predict people's behavior."

Samael finished his drink and returned his glass to the center of his coaster. He laid two \$20s on the bar and made his exit, leaving Frankie to wonder what had happened. Frankie was unsure if the dark stranger he had encountered was Death, but he did check the bathrooms to ensure the floors were dry as he had said they were.

It only took a few hours for people to realize something had changed. Victims of what should have been lethal accidents were surviving. Deaths from natural causes had ceased. There no longer seemed to be fatal consequences for anyone's actions. The most daring of people began throwing themselves off buildings and walking into traffic to test their newly acquired immortality.

While it was true people had stopped dying, their conduct still had ramifications. The damage done to the human body after a fall from a tall building was horrifying but knowing the person continued to survive despite their devastating injuries made it even more frightening. People, contrary to conventional thinking, needed to have the ability to die.

Samael returned to the tavern the following day to again find Frankie behind the bar. He aligned the salt & pepper shakers and straightened the drink coasters as he had the day before. Samael sat at the bar and ordered a whisky. Frankie poured him a double Black Label and sat it on a coaster in front of Samael. Samael centered the drink on the cardboard before taking a sip and returning it to its position.

"I've been watching the news. It's getting crazy out there. I guess you really are "Death." Have you changed your mind about collecting me?" Frankie asked.

I prefer "Samael," and Death is no longer a title I hold, so you are safe for now," Samael replied as he sipped his drink, content to take his time as he had more of it now. Samael looked around the room. It was again empty, save for him and Frankie. It really is dead in here, no pun intended," he said with only the faintest of smiles.

Frankie was still not comforted by Samael's temporary reprieve. "Most of the regulars don't show up until after 1:00 p.m. I could open later, but I like getting out of the house. That's why I haven't sold the place and retired. I wouldn't know what to do with myself if I didn't have this bar to come to every day.

How about you? Are you planning to become a regular now that you don't have to do your collections anymore?"

"I don't know. I haven't given it much thought. I've been doing this for so long I'm not sure what else there is to do. Drinking doesn't seem like a bad choice while I'm figuring it out," Samael said, taking another sip from his glass.

And that is how the day went with Samael drinking and Frankie quizzing him about his Death duties and what his future plans might be. The following day Samael returned to the bar, and he and Frankie continued as they had the previous days.

By this time, the angels in Arcadia were getting desperate. They were beside themselves on what should be done. People's inability to die was creating chaos. They had received messages from hospitals regarding accident victims so injured that there was no hope of healing, yet they continued to live. Once terminal cancer patients were placed into a coma to alleviate their suffering. Michael decided to visit one of the hospitals to see how serious the situation was.

It didn't take him long to realize something had to be done and fast. He found a patient isolated in the ICU that was only a severed head. He had fallen on the train tracks and was decapitated. His body was dragged underneath the train and damaged to such a point as to be unrecoverable. The emergency medical team on the scene had collected his head, and placed it in a bag to send to the morgue. He was removed from the bag once he was discovered to be talking.

Michael was surprised to find the room empty of hospital staff. Several tubes were running in and out of the open wound that was the man's neck. There was no heart monitor since there was no heart to monitor, but there was an EEG displaying some erratic readings.

"Hello," Michael said.

"Hello, have you come to prod me as well?" the head asked.

"No, I am just here to assess the situation."

"You seem less surprised to be talking to a severed head than I am to be one. Do you know what's going on? How am I still alive? Am I alive, or is this the afterlife? Do you think I could get a robot body or something? I can't just be a head."

"I'm sorry you are having to endure this. Unfortunately, you are alive when you should obviously be dead. I cannot grant you death, but I am working on the problem."

"Does that mean I'm getting a robot body?"

"No, but I am working to get Death to come collect you."

"Well, that's good, I guess."

"You seem to be in high spirits for someone that is just a head."

"I guess I'm having a hard time believing this is real, but if it is and I can't get a robot body, then death is probably my best option. I don't think I can travel like this. I appreciate that you are working on the problem."

"It is my pleasure and thanks' for your understanding." It was time to pay Samael a visit and try to bring him back into the fold.

Michael entered the tavern to find Samael and an old gray-haired bartender locked in conversation. He crossed the room and sat on the stool next to Samael. "I'll have whatever this gentleman is having," Michael said, addressing the bartender. "Samael," he continued, turning his attention toward him.

"Michael," Samael replied.

Frankie poured a double Black Label neat and put it on a coaster in front of Michael.

"You know you have created a real mess for us."

"I haven't created anything. I have simply chosen not to make collections."

"Yes, I know, and it cannot continue. I had a conversation with a severed head this morning. He was taking his circumstances much better than one would anticipate, but that does not excuse the situation."

"You could always heal them if you liked."

"That's not how this works, and you know it." Michael was growing agitated. "Why did you stop your collections?"

"You know why. I'm tired of covering for Fate's incompetence. I understand people must die, but they should have some control in the matter. If they change their behavior, it should influence their destiny. There should be some incentive for positive changes. Otherwise, what is the point of it all," Samael replied as he straightened the stack of coasters for the third time.

"What can I do to change your mind?" Michael pleaded.

"I'm finished. You can find someone else to do the collections."

Michael wanted to argue but knew it would get him nowhere as he watched Samael adjust the salt & pepper shakers for the second time since he had entered the bar. "What if you took over for Fate?"

"And what would he do?"

"Well, I would have to ask you to do one last collection," Michael replied.

"You know, you would think he would see that coming, but his ineptness is what got us here," Samael said, smiling at the irony.

"So, you'll do it?"

Samael took a sip of his drink as he mulled the question over in his head. "Yes, I think it would suit me better than my current duties.

Michael let out a long sigh of relief. "Now, I just need to find someone to take over your old job."

"Might I make a suggestion?" Samael posited.

"Please do. I would like to get this taken care of as soon as possible."

Samael turned his attention to the old bartender. "Frankie, how would you feel about taking over for me? I promise to keep the books straight so you would not have to take the actions I have taken."

Frankie's eyes widen. "Do you mean I would become Death? Don't you have to be a celestial being or something for that?"

"I was human before I became Death. It has its perks. You would age backward for a while until you reached your peak physical condition. Plus, the job is yours for as long as you want it. No one else can collect Death but Death himself or herself. A woman could be Death, I suppose." It didn't take long to convince Frankie of the benefits of being Death, and Michael was happy to have the issue resolved before things deteriorated even further.

Michael and Samael departed to pay a visit to Fate. Samael had one last collection to make. Fate, who had become notoriously bad at predicting the fate of others, was surprised to receive a visit from the two Archangels. He was less than pleased to receive his termination notice.

In an act of great charity, Michael gave the people of Earth a "cosmic do-over," ensuring no one, other than those who were fated to die, would suffer from the deadly consequences of Death's Holiday. Frankie sold his bar for a dollar to his most loyal customer with the stipulation that he would not change the name. Before turning over his keys, Frankie had a going away party for himself at the bar without disclosing where he was going away to. Frankie took over as Death. After seeing the chaos of the last few days, he realized the importance of his new job and was fully confident he would not have to deal with the problems that Samael had. Samael took more pleasure than he probably should have with his last collection and embraced his new role as Fate with the energy it had been sorely lacking for so long.

A Craving for The Moon
Yuu Ikeda

Gazing at the moon
every night.
That's all I need.
In velvety night.
In piercing night.
Feeling the moon.
Being merry on the moon.
I have no key
to solve the mystical shadow
of the moon.
So,
all I need is gazing at the moon.



Drowning, Erika Gill

Psychopath Club
Jessica Michalsky

I wish I could say I felt bad for what I've done.

But why lie?

I don't give a shit.

Before you start diagnosing me with a severe case of depression, take a long look in the mirror, because you are probably projecting. My diagnosis is misunderstood, glamorized even. I'm a psychopath.

If my life were a movie, it would probably be some half-baked Netflix documentary where they spend the entire first half with crying violins and an overbearing piano. All over the worst possible photo of me: thinning hairline, sagging yellow eyes, and definitely before I got my veneers. They'll probably get my wife to do an interview, questioning how she survived being with such an abhorrent man, glycerin in her eyes so it's worth watching.

I hate those movies, too flashy for my taste.

For those unsure what psychopathy is, it's a "neuropsychiatric disorder marked by deficient emotional responses, lack of empathy, and poor behavioral controls, commonly resulting in persistent antisocial deviance and criminal behavior¹." At least that's the

¹ Anderson, Nathaniel E, and Kent A Kiehl. "Psychopathy: Developmental Perspectives and Their Implications for Treatment." *Restorative Neurology and Neuroscience*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2014, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4321752/#:~:text=Psychopathy%20is%20a%20neuropsychiatric%20disorder,antisocial%20deviance%20and%20criminal%20behavior>.

definition you'll get if you search for it on Google. Clearly not written by someone with the condition, too judgmental. I would be hurt, but, I have a "deficient emotional response".

That was the first thing we did in therapy, read the definition out loud, all in a big circle jerk. A definition to live by I suppose. We were here because our loved ones said it was a good idea, and a court agreed. It was all in a half-assed attempt to heal. Or to not be on the handle side of a knife. My smart-ass child lovingly refers to these sessions as the Psychopath Club, a name that a group of forty-somethings found amusing despite our hollow dispositions. It's much more entertaining than 'Schema-Focused Therapy'. The researchers had the same delusions but with a quarter of the budget while expecting positive results. Our psychiatrist called it a crude name, and we all agreed we didn't care.

On the final Wednesday of each month, four psychopaths lumbered into a stale community center in the part of the city where none of us are from, all to stare at one another for three and a half hours. Grad students in pastels and wireframe glasses try to "guide us through our shadow selves" with nasal voices that squeaked when we got too close them.

At first, attendance was mandatory, either prescribed with your diagnosis or because you did something that got you noticed that wasn't severe enough to get you thrown into a cage. Our tasks were to pick through our memories and see where it all went wrong, reframing our lives to be something worth looking at while we performed tasks that would give us the tools to do it right the next time. From our first steps to our commute to work, they wanted it all. However, it seemed most of the time they focused on our childhoods, hoping we'd sob about absent fathers and drunken mothers as if what we had

was that simple to explain away. I think it was their attempt to learn how to prevent it in others. To limit the number of monsters under the bed.

I stayed because it allowed me a break from life, to completely zone out while someone droned on about their expertise in the field. All the while I drink half-decent coffee with powdered creamer floating on top. A sentiment that seemed to be shared by all its members. There was me, Monarch, Anchovy, and Radio. Each took their turn complaining about how these meetings were in the middle of the week.

I found it humorous that our little group looked so different from one another; none of us have the typical traits you'd assume.

For instance, we aren't dripping with someone else's blood or have serpent tongues. Monarch looked like his face was pushed into the pavement at birth, his shadow could swallow us all. Radio had freckled cheeks that amplified his constant talking. Anchovy's hair was so oiled up you would think he wanted to slide down the halls with his legs flailing in the air. Meanwhile, I could pass as your average taxpayer with a nicer car and a pinstripe tie. If you saw us all on the train you would get lost in Anchovy's reflective eyes, move away from Monarch, become nauseous at the lips-smacking gum chewing from Radio, and sit next to me because you'd think I'm the only normal person here.

Despite the popular conclusion that our souls are missing, I can assure you, we look like everyone else...even you.

We are often stripped of our humanity because we don't smile on cue and cry when needed. If you ask me, that's a narrow view of humanity.

In the beginning, part of me thought I wanted to get *better*—even if I didn’t know what that meant. I had no concept of what normal was. I was around fifteen when I learned my normal was slightly off. While everyone else was sitting on a raft watching the horizon dip above and below the surface, I was in a submarine moving steadily through the Marianas Trench. It wasn’t till a particular episode involving a tailgating asshole and some choice words that I found the Club.

There were no pills to reset our brains, electroshocks only blew fuses, and calling us crazy proved ineffective. So, that left the Psychopath Club.

Members came and went. Some of them fresh out of prison, others too smart to do time. Most of them were just there to get their hours in. Participants always felt burnt out by the end of it. When presented with the option to continue with the program, a majority chose to go back into the night. We never had many women attend our little meetings, however, the Narcissist Club needed members and the doctors were willing to slap the wrong label on someone to get seats filled. Their meetings were on Tuesdays, so there was little interaction between us. We saw our counterparts once, it happened during a schedule mix-up over the holidays. Both groups were told to meet on Thursday, which made the parking lot interesting. The researchers had us prove we didn’t exchange information.

The Psychopath Club’s goal was simple yet stupid: teach us empathy—or at least make us better at faking it. Members nor the researchers could tell the difference sometimes. Once, the researchers brought a baby in. It belonged to one of the grad students I believe, it wailed, a voice raw from crying.

We were instructed to soothe it.

Glares were shared between members, Anchovy realized that arriving straight from the office in his pressed tailored suits may not be meeting attire. Radio's lungs released a booming laugh at the discomfort of the slimy office manager beside him, quickly covering his mouth to avoid demerits. A smile poorly hidden behind his hands bound with faked attentiveness. Monarch had the most straightforward reaction, which was heavy work boots thumping steadily toward the exit. There were squeaking shoes of a running grad student who tried to catch him, hustled along but one of Monarch's strides was four of his. He was out the door with a cigarette between his teeth before his pursuer even got close. The rush of cold air from the entrance made those in lab coats shiver. Anchovy just stared at the exit, he wondered if it was too late for him to make a run for it. Unfortunately, Radio moved his chair subtly pinning the fish to the wall, his heavysset frame blocking Anchovy's view of freedom. Without saying a word, I could tell Anchovy was debating if Radio would be missed. The main doors closed with the click of Monarch's lighter breaking Anchovy's plan of escape.

I however didn't pay Monarch any mind. He wasn't much of a talker, just liked to sit and observe. However, given his supposed improvement in the program, his ex-girlfriend thought it was only fair to give him his infant twin daughters for the week. Another crying baby was the last thing he wanted.

This left me to deal with the task.

I only have a son, a product of my second wife, he was entering college and seemed to have turned out okay—he got my smile. This gave me an advantage because I was far from the days of sleep deprivation, but close enough to remember some tricks. So, it was

obvious what needed to be done. I took the child from them and looked into its eyes. They were so wide that I'm surprised its skull didn't crack when it blinked. I glanced toward the psychiatrist, watching me through her microscope.

"When's the last time it ate?"

"That is not the issue, how does holding this child make you feel?" Her tone was firm.

"Annoyed. But seriously, when's the last time the kid ate?"

"Maybe you should hug him instead." I raised an eyebrow, not everything needs a hug.

"No thanks. It's hungry."

"David, we spoke about this, you cannot be dismissive of the program. Why will you not hug the child?"

"Because it's not my kid, where's its bottle?" Her expression was unmoving.

"Did you hug your child?"

"No."

"Why is that?"

"I didn't want to." It was becoming increasingly clear that they were not going to provide me with any useful information.

I started for the door that the supervisors came from, expecting to find something to shut it up. The grad student who was trying to tear Monarch from his cigarette break charged towards me, the vinyl floors nearly tripping him up. Unfortunately, before his daring rescue of the baby from the monster, I emerged with bottle in hand. I was right. Those tear-stained cheeks resembled a chipmunk's. The Club was amused at my return.

Monarch poked his head back into the room, a single nod in my direction. Anchovy still looked at the kid with disregard but seemed relieved that the noise had stopped.

“You’re a real mother hen, you know that Davy?” A smirk freely displayed on Radio’s face, arms crossed in a form of satisfaction. He looked over at the people studying us.

“What? It’s a compliment.” He got up and smacked my back, a form of affection I had come to expect from him. A misdiagnosed sadist on a good day, a wannabe beartrap on a bad one. Chastised for disobedience, I handed the child back. I was making my way to my seat when I heard the words.

“I just do not think you are taking your healing seriously.” The ringing in my ears blocked out common sense.

“Stop acting so emotional.” This made Anchovy snicker, but the psychiatrist looked unamused. I got sent home that day with a packet of empathy training that found a nice home in my recycling bin.

I returned to my life, lived among normal people—shook some of their hands and everything.

I didn’t see anyone from the Club. I forced myself to attend date night when I saw Anchovy at a restaurant, he was a few tables down; a blond and brunette giggled at his side. We made eye contact, and he glanced at my companion for the evening, a smirk painted his face. Then, a bottle of champagne came our way, alongside a note in his penmanship: “I didn’t see a thing.” He winked across the room.

I wrote on a napkin in response, getting the waiter to hand it to him.

“That’s my wife.”

He looked confused when he read it. I took a sip of the Dom Pérignon and held up the three fingers.

He nodded and that was that.

My work leads me to do some things that others would not be comfortable with. I don’t understand why, but I guess that’s the point. My wife will often ask me to recount my day and I give her a sanitized version, then drink some bourbon accompanied by a neutral stare. She knows of my condition, so there is little expectation for deep conversation. However, the program demands I keep a journal of my thoughts and feelings, it’s mostly full of half-remembered points to bring up later.

That little notebook cost me at the most recent meeting.

“You’re a monster!” Cried a forgettable grad student, unprofessionally offended, the psychiatrist doing little to stop his outburst. Anchovy dived into the conversation.

“I have never been so proud of you.” The corner of my lip twitched up, I was surprised they didn’t stop yelling at me to praise him for using the word *proud*. No such luck. I had written something worth empathy but in the tone of my grocery list.

“David, how could you not see it?” The psychiatrist questioned trying to emphasize her point with a disapproving head shake. Radio tuned in.

“Not his fault the guy was a moron, good for you man.” I wasn’t prepared for the smack on the back, so my coffee was the victim of inertia. Of course, it was the day I wore my white button-up. A side eye with a fake smile was my response. He didn’t know the difference. Neither did I.

“I see no issue with it”, Monarch spoke diplomatically, each syllable going down like a shot of rye. Someone in a lab coat tried to correct him, however, Monarch hushed them with a look.

It was clear the team sent to fix us was trying to do damage control, addressing what the Club was saying while still providing reprimands for me. They wanted me to feel bad for what I had done, show something—anything. But I was still at the bottom of the ocean.

Yet, the nagging continued.

“Just shut up. You know I’m starting to think we’re not the ones with the problem here. It’s pathetic.” The Club held their breath watching me, a twinkle in their eyes. I continued in a mocking tone. “Yes, I sold him a pricy insurance policy. Yes, he was acting weird when he bought it. But he bought it. I don’t know what happened after that—nor do I care! I got paid and that’s where the story ends for me.” The staff looked stunned. Outbursts were rare, and when they did happen it was blamed on a malformed amygdala or a particularly draining commute.

“David, his name was on the news. He killed himself.”

“So?”



untitled (above),

nat raum

circling to home (left),

Alan Bern



Endeavor(s) to Dispute
Aaliyah Anderson

Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.

— *“The Applicant” by Sylvia Plath*

Easy—cling, kneel,

smart vagabond with no face.

I swear I saw you sprinting on my drive

to the grocery store (your lost features

reminded me to get the soy milk, so thanks). A runner-lady’s

swinging arms just really evoked your presence. I miss you.

When the leaves make their own tornados, you wink:

keep your tongue on your sleeve,

so you might understand how to tie a tie. I hear

they call you nomadic like it’s a slur, but

they don’t understand dresses or

why a woman wearing heels wants to be taller-taller

(they should listen to Andean music,

unhinge their stacked mouths). Well—how does it feel

to be empathetic towards them? To hate how a tree’s other half lying on the road

won’t stop us from going to work? I see you,

anti-capitalist dear with a perpetual

command, trying to talk to me backwards, but if I ask,

you won’t answer.

Beneath a Winter Sky

Maggie Nerz Iribarne

The Ten of Cups card lay upright on the cold bedroom floor at her bare feet – a silvery couple, depicted naked, hands above heads, an archway made of ten cups above them. Winnie wondered how it got there, since she kept her tarot set downstairs on the desk. She wondered further about the card's meaning: a prediction of a long-term relationship. She peaked through the blinds. Across the frost-covered patio, Lloyd's shadow moved inside his since-summer-abode: the shoffice (shed+office). She turned away, slipping the card in her robe pocket.

Downstairs, Winnie watered her house plants while the coffee percolated in its stovetop pot. She did not miss Lloyd's Keurig machine one bit. Since her husband moved out she relished the space, physically, yes, but also emotionally, professionally. Her phone commenced a repetitive buzz, prompting her to put down her mug on the newspaper-strewn kitchen table.

"Winnie," her sort-of-sometimes- best -friend-Mable sobbed into the phone. "I need you to do a healing reading," she said. "Patsy and I got into the worst, most terrible argument about Phil."

Winnie stroked a leaf of a Belladonna plant while withholding a speech about how Mable couldn't control with whom her children fell in love. Instead, she simply agreed to a reading time for the following day. She filled in Mable's name on her calendar and brought her cup to the overflowing sink.

“Oh my good and gracious god!” Winnie cried out clutching her chest. Lloyd’s woolen hatted head bobbed in the window.

“Come in?” His words hung in a cloud of frigid air, barely audible.

“No!” she shouted.

He held up a pan of scrambled eggs. “Want some?”

Winnie thought Lloyd’s eggs were magic, and her stomach had just been grumbling. She opened up, snatched the pan, slammed the back door. Sharp January air snapped in her face.

The following week, on what would have been Winnie and Lloyd’s 25th anniversary, Winnie noted the full moon and the Four of Wands card, with its floral chuppah and castle in the distance, propped on the kitchen windowsill.

“My oh my,” Winnie said, holding it up in the weak morning light, contemplating its significance: joy, celebration, bliss.

She peered into the backyard. No sign of her soon-to-be-ex’s balding head or hunched shoulders. Probably somewhere reading an economics textbook, she thought.

Winnie ignored the incoming messages from tarot clients, sat on the living room couch, flipping her and Lloyd’s wedding album’s dusty pages. Look at us-so young-she thought, pausing at one breathtaking photo: wide-eyed, bespectacled Lloyd watching her enter the reception room, besotted. When we were both grad students, when we still dreamed, when we imagined we’d have children, she thought sadly. She closed the book.

Would it be wrong to invite Lloyd for dinner? she wondered. The sudden impulse brightened her mind. It was their anniversary after all.

Winnie shrugged on her puffy coat and rubber boots, trudging through old snow and past her dead wildflower garden as she approached the shoffice door.

She peaked into the window. Typical. Neat as a pin, she silently scoffed, slipping a scrap of paper through a crack, inviting him for a simple supper to acknowledge our past and celebrate the more positive future.

She hurried back to the house, excitement fluttering in her chest.

Lloyd appeared at the door that night, a spray of stars behind his head, adorning him. He held a plate of warm brie spread with fig jam (They'd had this on their Montreal honeymoon). Winnie rolled her eyes. Of course, Mr. Perfect had to upstage her simple beef stew, she thought.

Seated at the kitchen table, they spread the cheese and jam on baguette, sipped red wine.

"I do love living out there," Lloyd said, jerking his head toward the back door, the shoffice.

Winnie felt a dagger in her heart.

"I guess it's better than living with me," she snipped.

"I didn't say that."

Winnie pushed up from her chair, deepening scratches in the well-worn floor, went to get the stew.

When she returned, it seemed Lloyd's chair had moved closer to hers. Her nostrils received wafts of his familiar smell. She enjoyed a mellowing sensation, stretching her back, uncrossing her legs. She fought the impulse to touch his hand.

As though he read her mind, he put down his fork, turned to her with that, I want you look, his eyes narrowing like he was contemplating a slice of apple pie. He obviously hadn't had pie for a while. Neither had she.

"So-why have you never done a reading on us?" he asked, his face seeming to float in the candlelight.

"I thought you didn't approve of my tarot business?" Winnie could feel her ire rising at the mere mention of Lloyd's disdain for the tarot. Her hands shook as she reached for her wine glass.

"Well. I've reconsidered. I regret my words," Lloyd said. She froze, caught in his grey-eyed gaze, then sighed, walked to the desk, emerging with deck in hand.

"We must set our intention," she said.

"We'd like to know the status of our marriage," Lloyd said firmly.

She pulled a card, placed it between them.

"The Lovers!" they said together, voice volume magnified. Lloyd's lips upturned into his know-it-all smirk. The unclothed man and woman on the card faced them beneath a blazing sun.

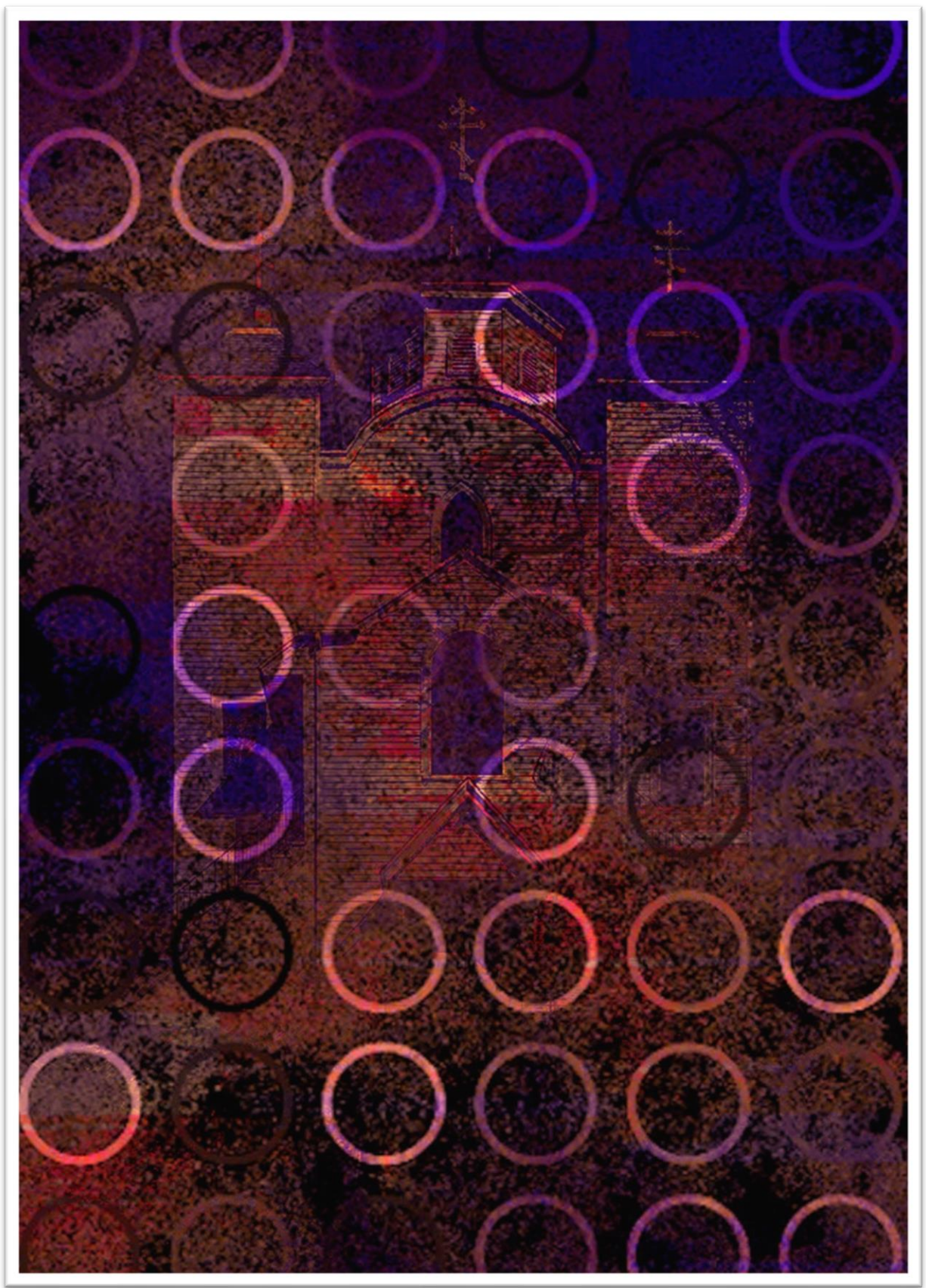
Lloyd grunted as he lifted Winnie, carrying her, she presumed, upstairs.

"Your back," she gasped.

"I am," Lloyd said, kissing his wife's neck.

"No, I mean don't pull your back, remember that time at-"

Winnie's words ceased. She pressed her cheek against Lloyd's, fixed her eyes on Jupiter's insistent glow through the stairway window, surrendered to the universe.



saint mary, nat raum

Threshold Moon

Julie Allyn Johnson

Carrying a satchel of hope lined in white aster
I wade through cattail clusters,
an ebony-handled buck knife held firm
between a mouthful of unsmiling teeth.

I beseech the thunder—
harsh gemstones leap from my tongue
about the difficult life we'd endured,
assuaged now in the common time.

You left me with reassurances.
I believed every one of them,
soft words murmured with a tender touch.
Why would I have doubted you?

Irregular shadows cross the prairie,
the storm is ready with its reply.
Rain in October, sometimes a welcomed deliverance.
The awful silence begins its somber song.

I'll recognize what I'm looking for
as soon as I find it.

A Dance Among the Stars

A.L. Davidson

“Look at that view.”

Johann tilted his head to the side as he stepped out of the elevator. His wheat blonde, soft curls fell over his oceanic blue eyes. Eyes filled with curiosity. Eyes that caught the twinkle of the stars above him. He smiled sheepishly, felt his cheeks grow warm at the sight of the man across the way. The man with the sultry voice like smooth, warm whiskey. A voice that spoke to him with awestruck tones. He waited so patiently for this moment, for so long, and his lover looked so handsome this evening.

Love. Unshakable, unfathomable love. Even the lack of orbit between them since they last kissed could not pull them apart.

“It’s an amazing view, isn’t it?” Johann asked as he set his hands together, “The galaxy is so vast and beautiful, it makes me feel small.”

Marcus laughed and shook his head, “I was talking about *you*.”

Johann gasped, eliciting another hearty chuckle from the uniformed man across the way. Oh, how he missed that soft noise, that soft expression of disbelief.

Marcus pulled his peaked hat from his head, his wavy locks of a chestnut-hued hair fell back to their natural resting place. He set the cap down on the nearby table beside a bottle of wine and two spotless flutes. He popped open the top button of his jacket and sighed with relief. His body was tired, the day was hectic, and the task list seemed to be never ending. Every hour was painfully slow knowing that, at the end of his shift, he’d be reunited with the beautiful man across the way. It made every second feel like lightyears.

He waved a finger, begged his boyfriend to approach. Johann took slow, mindful steps toward him before he ascended the small staircase onto the balcony. It was apparent he wasn't used to the shift in gravitational pull quite yet, the strange uneasiness that came with being away from Earth's orbit for the first time. That first, awkward step - much like a babe - out into the vast expanse of the universe was always a bit wobbly.

It was adorable. He missed him dearly these last few months.

The captain extended his hand. Johann took it. With gentle, sweeping motions, he pulled him in and dipped him gently, kissed his pale lips and smiled.

"My! Captain Santiago, how bold of you," Johann teased.

"No, no. I'm not an officer right now. I'm off the clock. For the next few hours I'm simply Marcus, your incredibly attractive boyfriend who has been so lonely without you, Johann Strauss," Marcus chided playfully.

Johann set his head against Marcus' shoulder and looked up, took in the view. The warmth of the familiar embrace overwhelmed him. He did not anticipate the ship to be so large when Marcus asked him to come along on this inaugural voyage. He could never have imagined the high-class, luxury cruise-liner of the stars would hold such a stunning deck, either. It was so quiet, so empty, especially compared to the other spaces he briefly wandered through after boarding earlier that day. Everywhere he turned he was met with the excited visages of bustling travelers.

"Did you get unpacked yet?" Marcus asked.

"No. The trip up was hard on my stomach, so I've been asleep most of the day," Johann replied with a small yawn as he buried his face into his partner's warm chest, "This is beautiful. It's strange it required a key code to get here."

“This is the captain’s private sitting area, that’s why.”

“Oh, my boyfriend is so fancy now. What a professional!”

“Welcome to Deck Epsilon, the first living garden among the stars,” Marcus replied as he gently spun Johann to face the edge of the balcony.

He urged him forward, set his hands softly against his waist to keep him stable, and let him take in the stunning view. Johann grabbed hold of the railing and leaned over to look at the sprawling ship deck. The architecture was breathtaking, it was unlike anything his eyes had ever seen.

The Olympia, the first vessel of its kind, was small compared to many of its sea-bound kin on Earth. It only held eight decks, but the ship was designed with exceptional care and luxury at its core. Art Deco aesthetics, gilded door handles, and crystalline chandeliers gave one the sense of being tucked inside a jewelry box. Of being whisked back in time to the golden age of The Roaring 20s. It felt ancient, decadent, and out of his reach.

This deck, however, felt like a dream. Like a fairytale that seemed out of place compared to the shimmering bars and ballrooms behind them. The view was picturesque and Johann simply couldn’t believe he was here. That mankind was here. That they made it to the stars. And the glamorous first voyage to christen this incredible moment made it all the more impactful.

What a glorious new step for humanity.

The deck below was lined with thin, slowly moving streams of water. The trickling waterways lined cobblestone walking paths. The balconies belonging to the guest suites looked out across the lush setting, towering up three floors above them on either side. Rows of spotless windows and gold tinted platforms stretched out toward the bow of

the vessel. Hanging rows of ivy rolled down like waterfalls across the walls and flowering plants peppered the pristine garden area.

A quaint coffee shop and small boutiques were visible along the deck's walls, decorative chairs were laid out on the cafe patio next to a small pond where koi fish swam happily. A beautiful grand piano was barely visible beneath the thick foliage that traversed the columns of the gazebo that housed it.

There was nary a soul to be seen. Johann felt so small standing there. The crystal-clear ceiling above them showcased the full of the galaxy in bloom, lingering so close he felt as if he could reach out and touch it. Feel the burn of the stars against his fingertips like the hot end of a cigarette. It was a scene of beautiful, dark hues peppered with glistening, dazzling lights.

"I feel like this deck should be flooded with people. This seems like a lovely place to grab a drink and read. It's not that late and I don't remember there being a curfew," Johann noted as he leaned into his boyfriend's body.

Marcus tightened his grip around his waist and set his chin on his shoulders, "It isn't open to the public."

"Is it not finished?"

"Oh, it is, but we're planning on holding a party here on the last night of the voyage. We have six days of flying around Earth's orbit, then we'll be stopping at that new resort on the moon, The Dionysus Club, for two days. When everyone comes back for our last hoorah, we'll be inviting them here. Going to have a jazz band, champagne, ritzy food. Figured it would be a nice way to cap off our maiden voyage. I wanted to show you first, since I know

you aren't a fan of crowds. Seemed like a waste to not be here alone with you for a moment."

Johann tilted his head to the side and gently pecked Marcus' scruffy cheek with admiration in his gaze. He was so proud of him. So overwhelmingly proud. Marcus worked tirelessly over the last few years to get to here. Long nights of studying, losing sleep, and excessive worrying, all to take on this important role. If things went well on this first trip, the project would be green-lit and soon the galaxy would be filled with excited tourists gallivanting across the starry skies with wide-eyed wonder.

He loved Marcus' passion for advancement and exploration, for unique experiences and the unrelenting expanse of the universe. For the nuances and poetic nature of the constellations and their stories.

The newly appointed captain loved it all so much, so dearly. His office was lined with astronomy books, star charts, and telescope pieces. Dangling, glittery paper stars hung above his desk and hand-stitched planets were woven into the quilt over his bed. A bed that held the couple through sleepless nights of long conversations as they fell in love in college.

Johann took some pride in that passion. Just a bit. He knew full well that Marcus fell in love with the stars and space exploration due to the crescent moon shaped birthmark upon his pale shoulder, where the captain liked to place his lips in moments of intimacy and rest. He'd often set his heavy head against the galaxy of freckles and lay his cheek atop that moon, just as he did in the present moment.

His lover was forever changed when he was hit with the understanding of how beautiful and daunting the galaxy was. When he truly, honestly had something to protect.

Yes, it was the moon upon Johann's shoulder that stirred up the passion, but the weight of the galaxy was now Marcus' self-inflicted burden to lift. Not that he minded. He would become Atlas and hold it all up upon his broad shoulders in the name of love if the Fates demanded it.

"I got your favorite wine," Marcus said quietly.

"I missed you," Johann replied.

"I missed you, so much. I'm glad you're here, it's lonely out in space. The song wasn't just saying that to be poetic, turns out. Who would have guessed it?"

Johann chuckled and let his lover move him toward the table. The deep, blood red wine was poured and congratulatory drinks were shared. The sound of running water below them was soon accompanied by the tune of a sad, wistful violin. Johann turned to look out across the deck, his gaze was drawn to the origin of the soft notes. Below them, in the middle of the walkway, stood a woman with a beautiful black violin. Her bow slid across the strings with grace and agility. Within seconds, Johann recognized the song and felt warm tears bubble in his eyes.

"You sly devil," Johann whispered.

Marcus took his hand, "Dance with me."

Johann could only oblige the request.

Fingers were interlaced. A hand was set upon a waist, another upon a shoulder. The two bodies swayed gently to the well-loved song. A song that still, after all this time, thrilled them. It was ingrained in their souls, in the sinew and bones that rocked and shifted to the familiar melody. It was their song, and it was as fleeting as a comet.

The floor beneath them glistened with the reflection of starlight. The blurry shapes of novas and constellations guided their footsteps as they dipped and spun across the platform. Onlookers from the guest suites were pulled to their balconies, drawn in by the warbling strings down below. Marcus and Johann were lost to the universe, to each other, and paid them little mind.

Marcus spun Johann's body, watched his slender arm stretch out as they separated. Those long, golden curls shifted like fields of wheat in a breeze and his pink-hued lips lifted into a smile. Marcus felt his heart race as he pulled him back into his embrace. He wrapped his arms around his body, felt Johann's spine straighten against his chest. He fumbled for a small box in his pocket, popped it open, and held it up in front of Johann's eyes as the song came to its end.

Johann's lips parted. The beautiful black band was peppered with crushed, inlaid pearls and shimmered like comets through the night sky. He lifted his unsteady hands up and took the box with a delicate touch as Marcus let his head rest against that dearly loved well-worn shoulder with the miniature galaxy strewn across its pale flesh.

"Marcus-"

"Be my co-captain in this crazy life, Johann Strauss. Come explore the stars with me until we're both old and grey," Marcus begged.

"Yes."

"Yeah?"

All Johann could do was nod. The violin offered up a soundtrack to the tender moment that caused Johann's chest to shudder an inhale of disbelief.

Marcus picked up the ring and gently took Johann's fingers in his own. Those slender digits trembled with excitement. He slid the ring on his finger, watched as Johann spun his hand to study the jewelry. The ring caught the reflection of the lights and starry expanse in its polished surface.

"Will you dance among the stars with me as long as we're able?" Marcus requested.

Johann smiled and kissed him tenderly, "I'd love nothing more, Captain."

2 untitled poems by cory joseph

the Achilles' heel of daydreaming
is one's inability to find their place
in yet another temporal plane;

the occupation of empty space.

a reminder of oysters when you show a picture
of a pretty patio to friends -
the salty air, suffering relationships.
the wooden table, swollen from the air
swollen red and damp
"i'll cry on the drive home"
or change your haircut
show less pictures of covering up
the drive home, a tragedy choice
my half rum half bottle of Coke
ten ounces of straight across the eyebrow
individualism next to dependency
covered up in the cold
swollen red and damned
if i do damned if i don't reach outside
the car is covered in less pictures and more songs
and some tragedy
of lovers who don't share love.

Embers in the Dark

Sadee Bee

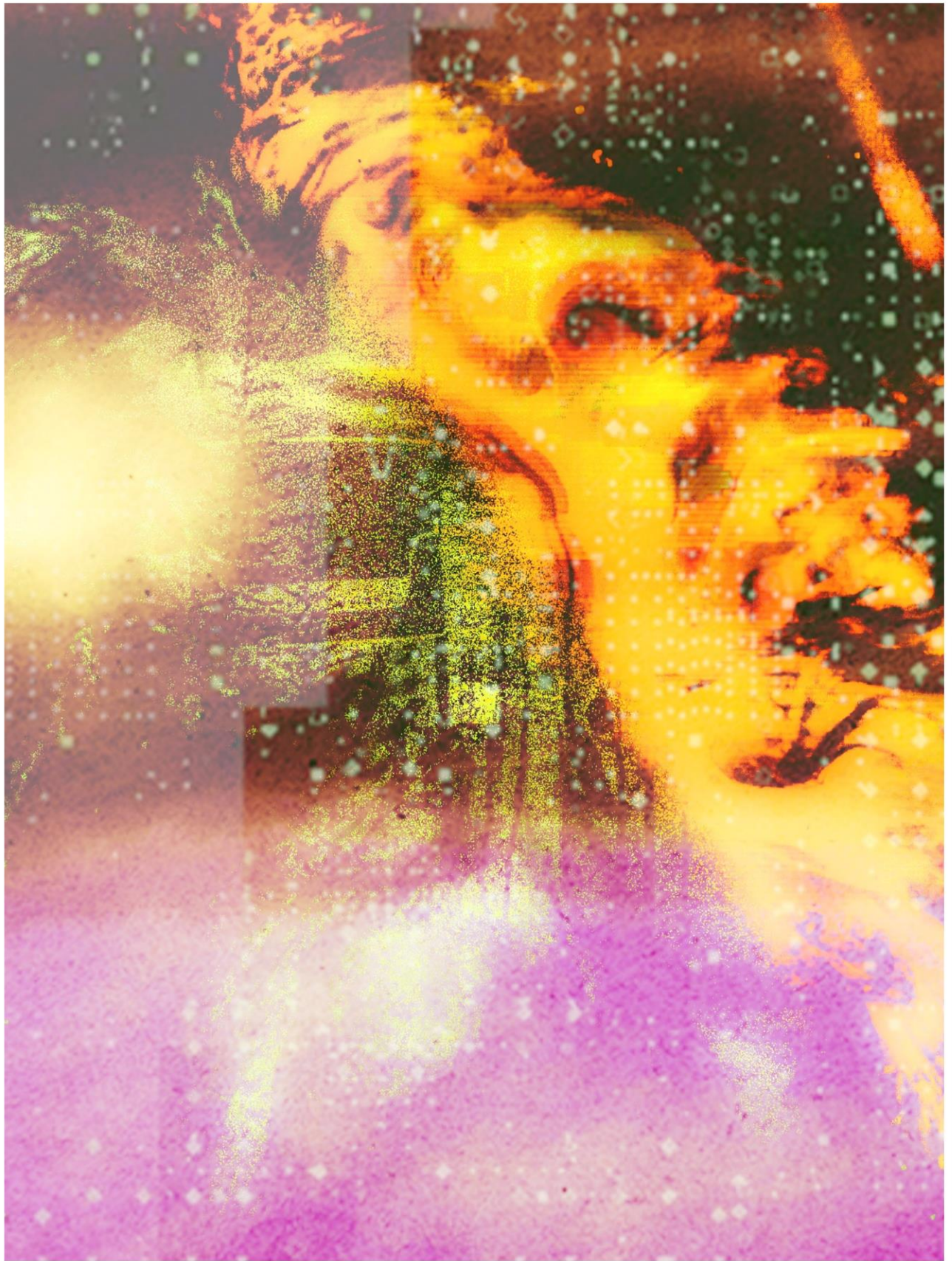
The only light in the dark is the burning ember at the end of my lit cigarette. Each drag is poison but a comfort; I take in deeper puffs of the cool night air. I am a ghost, a specter blending into the surrounding shadows. When sleep eludes, I commune with myself, with the histories of my mind that haunt me, the way I haunt the halls of my home.

So, I wander without direction; If only I could move like the smoke exhaled from my lungs, I would become incorporeal—no need for a home, memories, or a past. That way, I could look into windows and observe lives so foreign to mine; without feeling like an intruder.

Seeing a family sit down for dinner at a table, laughing and talking about their days, tugs at an old rusty heartstring. Our kitchen table was a wasteland of clutter and unopened mail. That Formica slab was the first place I learned to leave my body behind. No laughter or shared meals, only cutting words and harsh truths. Such things are much easier to handle with a practiced detachment. They say kitchen tables are the heart of a home. Ours must have been one long dead, rotting.

When I see a father reading their child a bedtime story, I only feel curiosity. My memories hold no such thing. There is no longing for something I have never known, for a person who always feels like a stranger. Instead, I found him to be a different kind of ghost, not one that sticks around but flutters in and out of existence.

I try not to linger too long. The lives of others are still only seen through panes of glass like a frame on a pretty picture. My glass shattered long ago, but the frame remains. I suppose something must hold me together. I'll make my way home, discarding burning embers in the dark, and try again to sleep.



airplane mode, nat raum

Pinky Winkey
Hsin Trabelsi

One year has already passed, yet my patience is still as strong as ever. The temptation as well was throwing me left and right, just like a wrecked ship lost in a deep sea. Though I haven't given up yet, not now...

Above my head is a wall where all my small achievements are hung, a calendar filled with marks and a dozen pointless quotes to "keep me going" and "be strong". Cute right?!, but here I'm looking at the same ceiling, wrapping my head around the idea. It tells me; since I'm a writer, then life is hiding something great for me one day. I was confident when I decided that picking writing is the struggle that I want to chase.

Like they say, "misery loves company" and love is commitment after all.

Usually, I set my clock around 6 am. I wake up with a dizzy head, aching from last night, marching towards the bathroom, doing what every person with decent hygiene does. I prepare the white Russian cocktail that I learned from the movie "The Big Lebowski", then I sit on the same chair, take the first sip, crack up my fingers, then stare at this white screen for hours and hours... until my eyes begin to play tricks on me.

Well, when it comes to writing, I think one of the following two is true, either you come up with a name first, or the story first. The same old egg-chicken paradox that I don't even call a paradox anymore. I have cracked it years ago, it is simple, eggs came from a chicken, the chicken came from the dinosaurs and all of us came from a single-cell organism, the thingy. Easy!

The chicken came first!... I got sidetracked, where was I... ah! I choose naming first, for a couple of reasons actually like...hum... Naming is more fun, rhythming words like “pool tool”, or “Pinky Winkey” help explore my creative side. I know they sound silly; I’m just making examples. Here I’m not going to name a story “pool tool” or “Pinky Winkey”, but as I said, names are fun and they can help me imagine the whole story.

Right after the naming is done, I take my time thinking about what would the book cover look like. Having a preview would help me for sure to inspire the story. Hmm, let’s see... making the cover pink is stupid right? It is! Well, we can skip this for now.... Let’s get back to the title “Pinky Winkey” for the sake of this example... it could be a tale of 2 brave friends who want to be inspired so they decided to travel the world to discover their inner peace. Well, come to think of it... teenagers won’t read this childish stuff... let me adjust it a bit ... AHA! “Pinky Winkey” is a tale of 2 roommates who took shrooms on a Monday and embarked on a journey to find inspiration! That would sell!!

Well, that was fast. Surprisingly fast, too fast to the point where I thought that it shouldn’t be this fast... I’ll give it more time, now what’s to be done... I didn’t know that writing my thoughts would lead me to a new idea. I should do this more often...

Yes! The other thing I do to write is to record my dreams and recreate them into a well-shaped story. I can’t admit that it worked out, but it is a work in progress. That way I will be able to dig deep into my inner thoughts like a lot of artists are doing, I would even connect with my traumas to make a story more relatable.

I have been living on my own for quite some time now, I don’t enjoy it, but it is better than having someone nagging at me day and night. To this point, I have enough voices inside of my

head. Hey! Do you want to hear a funny story? You actually know it already but here it is... back in fourth grade we wrote a story about two little pigs who decided to sacrifice themselves to the city king to prove that they were the tastiest ones in town, do you remember the ending? It was perfect! I still can't believe that stupid teacher gave me an F back then... Ah, who cares Mr. Stinson, I passed your class anyway, and here I'm still writing to this day. But what if what Mr. Stinson did was right; what if I don't have what it takes to be a writer... I know that I can be whatever I believe I can. At least that's what I have been told since I was a child, but now it hits differently. Being in my late 30s with no major stories that are published, nor a clear career, have I made the wrong choices? Is life punishing my disobedient ass? Or it's worse than that? Has life already given up on me and now I became a shadow, an outcast...not even worth being punished?

RED! The cover should be red! A powerful color with a lot of meanings, it draws a lot of attention. I bet readers will be rushing toward the book like bulls in Spain. Hmm... fighting bulls could be an interesting chapter in my story after all! The two trippy boys spoke with a spirited bull that took them to Spain. The spirit told them that to finish this trial and acquire strength, they have to continue. Bull is also a horoscope, I can use all of them as spiritual animals. "The 12 trials"! That's an even greater name for my story! Catchy, easy to understand, and has a sense of danger in it, I like it! But I need a villain; something that would create trouble for these young boys... My father would be a perfect example in a story like this. What an asshole.

Looking around the house made me realize that I didn't change a thing about the furniture for quite some time now. With the same old dull vibe, I should consider adding more colors

instead of this brown-white stuff. He used to tell me "God has a brown voice..." I don't know from where he caught this, and I have always thought that it is stupid... voices do not have colors and especially God, in the first place he does not even exist, yet, I believed in it for a long time. I would've loved to open a debate with that old asshole about it, however, that would challenge his so-called authority which will lead me to more trouble.

He was both, a religious and a sinner, actually one step away from becoming a drunken pirate, yet there was something about him. It has always left me fascinated. He treated everyone like garbage, me, my two sisters, even mom, but never his dog. Nope, that dog was God in disguise for the old man. You can call that compassion to a certain degree... he was always standing tall, no matter how tired he might have been, his skin looked like a dry ocean, with a look that gives multiple emotions at once, anger, sadness... He is both, calm before the storm and the hurricane... well fuck him... and, God bless his whiny soul.

So, the villain must be some authoritarian bastard, some kind of an omnipotent being who stole inspiration from humans to control their thoughts and motives, and our two heroes are the ones who took the forbidden fruit, heroes challenging a power beyond their understanding.

I like where this is going, though, will I ever find an audience once this one is finished? Well first, I have to go through the pain of submitting it somewhere. Waiting for some bourgeois publisher to read it, and if it gets his attention, then maybe it might get published and that's when an audience will have a look at it. However, what if that person did not like it? Maybe 100 of that same guy felt the same about it? Does that automatically make it a bad story? Not just this story, but art in general, if an art curator does not like a piece of art, does that make

it worthless? Do these guys have the power to decide if art is good or bad? I think it's Bullshit. Nonetheless, that is how things are going and that is how profit is made. If I just look around and see what is trending in our society, what is selling and what is not, write about it, and include some key elements about races, cultures, and behaviors... then I will most definitely fit in the industry in a blink of an eye.

To hell with "Pinky Winkey."

Raw Bodies

John Finnegan

the doctor asks me if I want to die and I stutter as
syllables trip on my tongue, slipping on saliva, my
ticking time bomb bones, run up the odometer,
books on male anorexia have bright covers with pictures
of pretty christian moms caring for their sons, and
when I look at the woman who bore me she thinks of when
I was six and they said jesus loves me,
when I was thirteen they said he wanted me burning,
and at eighteen he was going to save me and I figured
that jesus should make up his mind about me instead of
letting me shuffle from church to office to center collecting
diagnosis like pokémon cards, trading them in
clinic offices with all the other fucked-up tweakers that
hide them between orange juice-stained cushions
when our parents walk in (sorry for the mess) while
we wonder if we're worth the trouble of them listening to
your progeny's mechanical breakdowns and if when
they first looked at your beady little eyes, they knew
they would look up rehab centers and trauma counselors
while knotting your childhood blanket into a pretzel.
ponder it for a while then forget it, makes you scared,
makes you mad and manic and misanthropic and wonder
if your boney legs that don't work anymore could run you
somewhere where you can't scare anyone. hellfire, turf war
of the brain as mother and father do not meet
your gaze at the dinner table.

A clay dish in the back of the cupboard
Luke Carmichael Valmadrid

We were taking that ceramics class
in December, learning that clay
falls apart sometimes, and how to put things
back together, with a little help
and a little water. The other students
had long left for break, for the people
they loved the most. You were making
a little square dish for soy sauce, and we laughed
because you traced the pattern
of Arwen's necklace into the bottom,
a tasty symbol of a love that just
wouldn't end. The instructor had asked
if we needed the glaze, and left, and you
placed your head on a shoulder
the same height as yours, so I knew
you thought it through and I
was happy.

I Walked into my Grandmother's Bungalow

Kevin A. Risner

I was so little when I heard – *ako se máš!* –
bounce off the off-white walls.

My response to my great uncle like clockwork –
dobrý! – then a full-throated laugh, the stubbing out

of a cigar, sizzling like air in the middle of summer.

My grandmother told me how the foundation of the garage

became uneven. It was an earthquake that had brought Ohio
to its knees, similar stories flying through the screen door.

I pawed through magazines, organ music, word puzzles
my grandmother completed religiously. The puzzles eventually lay

open, unfinished. The unfinished ones became more common,
soon not even begun.

Gravity sends me to the ground, like bumblebees that rest on catmint,
and I'm still clutching, clutching, clutching for the past,

pollen all over me like lint. If you're not allergic to the past, you haven't breathed
it in fully, merging languages like jigsaws. Giant red and green

shapes glow up like Christmas. Should I roll through the next holiday
with a New Year's key to unlock every second I want?

Lost words from before lie flat on the ground
for one more moment before I fly into the clouds, never to return.

The Daughter-Mother
Julie Runacres

When Fatemeh's daughters moved away and had children of their own, she thought often how the ache of motherhood would seize each of them in the ways that she remembered - that tug of love that clenched at the breast, the visceral proximity of everything. When they came over, carrying the latest newborn in a sling that was just a fancier version of the one she'd worn for each of them, all quiet and milky and close, she recalled the warm weight of years ago, and the same cord of feeling shot from her, like the memory of something she didn't know she'd forgotten.

She looked forward to their sharing stories of the first smile, first solids – pureed apple or baby rice? – first word, and how they'd record each faithfully in some exquisite clothbound book she'd sourced for them by picking through specialist stationery shops on holiday. She smiled thinking of all the little parental crises they would face that loom so large at the time, as they had for her, and how she would offer her maternal advice, gently, compassionately, and how they'd laugh about them later.

And it had been like that, hadn't it?

Now the eldest one had started school, and the others – well, they would be there too before she knew it. Maybe Zahra would be glad of her taking the little one over to Thame to buy school shoes. She had gone back to working full-time, and Fatemeh felt a little rueful at the thought of the nanny, who came from one of the best agencies and could be relied upon to take charge of everything Zahra said, taking Casper all over the Home Counties in her nifty little Fiat 500 that came with the job, and hanging out with all the other nannies and

only coming over to see grandmama Fatemeh once every week or so, as a duty. She must mention it to her when Zahra came over at the weekend.

*

As it turned out, though, Zahra had quite other plans, which she launched into relaying to Fatemeh as soon as she arrived, not even waiting until she'd got Casper out of his wellington boots, and Fatemeh was still helping Leila unbuckle her Mary-Janes.

Of all the grandchildren, Fatemeh knew that Leila needed her the most. It wasn't a favouritism thing – she'd heard of some grandmothers' unequal meting out of love, and it appalled her. It was Leila's difference, her physical needs, that gave her a special kind of otherness, and made her dependent in a way that spoke to all the muscle memory of Fatemeh's own maternity. Leila, Leila, little one. Ma petite Leila. Leila with the high-flying, big-earning, nanny-employing mother. Mother-daughter. Daughter-mother.

Who was now talking.

- And so I thought that what would really make all the difference would be if you drove over and picked up Leila from school and then brought her home, that way Ava wouldn't have to be chasing around and cutting short whatever she's doing with Casper after pre-prep, because he'll be mornings only for another year of course and it's so important he make friends with the other kids there because they'll be going up to Pinewood together and he really must, you know – anyway, you'd drop Leila off at home and Ava will have left some nibbles for her in the fridge so you wouldn't have to prepare anything, just sit down with her and have a good old chat about how her day was –

Leila was kicking and swinging her legs. Fatemeh held her foot firmly; she was looking at the red leather brogue with an intentness that surprised her.

- Mum? Are you actually listening, like - *at all*?

Fatemeh heard herself mumble something by way of reply. Well, some days, of course, anything that would help out. And she and Leila would have a lot of fun, wouldn't they, in Fatemeh's nice big car? (the shoe finally came off and Leila tumbled forwards into Fatemeh's arms, giggling and nuzzling her head under her chin). But surely Leila will have play dates after school too? Seems a bit unfair to drag her away, day in day out, just to get a lift with Grandmama...

Zahra raised an eyebrow laconically.

- Play-dates? *Leila*? Mum, this is Leila. Mum – Leila. Leila – Mum, Grandmum. Have you met?

Leila laughed at the absurdity of this. Fatemeh felt her stomach clench as though someone had twisted it and wrung it out. She tried again.

- Look. What I meant to say is that the school run is not something I had in mind as something I'd be going back to – not as a regular thing, anyway. And it really hadn't occurred to me that you wouldn't be getting Ava to – I mean, for that money –

Zahra looked quizzical.

- I don't get it, mum, I really don't. I mean, it's not as though you work or anything.

That clenching happened again in Fatemeh's stomach. But it was different this time. It was the pang of loss. The loss of a life she might have had, that she had given up, willingly, oh so

willingly! for motherhood. And now, like all mothers who have fulfilled their role tolerably well (and she had done more than that, hadn't she?) she was being written off as anything other than available when needed, a functional part in the smooth operation of other, more important and visible lives. Even the writing that she had hoped to take up again more seriously, now she had foreseen a little more time to do it, started to swirl kaleidoscopically away from her: all the stories she had of her life growing up in Iran that she had been waiting to bequeath, an enduring gift of herself that her very English daughters had yet but glimpsed, and never understood.

Her grief came out as snippiness. No, Zahra, I don't. Not in *your* way, anyway.

And then Leila tugged at her skirts and pulled her into the kitchen.

*

It was a good job she'd done all the meal prepping earlier that day, leaving only the pouring of syrup and scattering of pistachio nibs on the layers of filo for the children to do when they came. Leila did everything Fatemeh told her with an intense concentration, furrowing her brow and making little squeals of joy and frustration at each stage. Eventually the tray was done and marked in neat diagonals ready for cutting later. Fatemeh put it in the fridge and helped Leila wash her sticky hands with rosewater and glycerin soap. Casper had got bored long before and was playing a game on an iPad mini that Zahra had pulled from her bag. Zahra was sipping tea and scrolling through emails. She looked up when Fatemeh came in.

- So, who's this friend again you've got coming? Does she like kids? Have you told her about Leila?

- Her name's Annie. I met her at writing group. She's a psychiatric nurse. And yes, of course she likes children. She's had four.
- But Leila? She knows about her, right?

Fatemeh felt herself bridle a little again. This quickfire interrogation was something Zahra was doing more and more now she was back at work. She supposed it was part of her assertive woman in business persona, but it was jarring all the same.

- I don't know. I suppose I must have mentioned it. I mean, I talk about them all a lot – Asra's two and yours. But I've not sat her down for a briefing, if that's what you mean.

Zahra sighed.

- Oh well. I suppose she'll just have to find out for herself then, won't she?

*

Zahra sparkled all through supper. She was brilliant at making strangers feel that they were the most interesting person they could possibly be speaking to right now, and Zahra was quizzing Annie about her writing, about psychiatric care and the community and funding for mental health services, while adroitly flicking away the bits of stray freekeh round Casper's mouth with the corner of a napkin. She was voluble, too, about her own line of work, though never with a trace of self-importance. She spoke confidently about the anxieties of working with young children, of entrusting them to the care of a nanny, particularly when there were special needs.

Fatemeh felt herself looking often at Annie, trying to gauge what her friend made of her daughter, and feeling with a certain pride that she'd have made a good impression. She was waiting, though, for Annie to say more about the writing group. She'd told her so much about Iran and how she wanted to set it all down, to make this part of herself real for Asra and Zahra, for all of them.

And then she caught herself hearing Zahra again.

- Anyway, it will all be much simpler once Mum just starts doing the collecting from school. She's putting up a bit of resistance at the moment, aren't you Mum? But she'll come round, eh Leila? She gave Leila a playful nudge with her elbow, laughing conspiratorially.

Fatemeh saw Annie smile politely and turn her head just a little towards her, a question hovering in her gaze. Fatemeh lifted her eyes, imploring. Would Annie see how much she needed her as an ally now? To say something about her writing that would give it validation in Zahra's eyes, not just as Mum's little vanity project?

But Annie just smiled and said Zahra and Leila were lucky to have her to call on, living close by and being so devoted, they must feel very blessed.

Annie left around 10. Zahra had said her goodbyes by this point, whisking the children upstairs to baths and bed (in the room she and Asra had shared as teenagers) before they became over-tired and at risk of becoming less than desirable accessories to the evening. She hovered on the gallery over the hall as Fatemeh was seeing Annie to the door. They embraced. Fatemeh noticed Annie's scent – expensive - Oud, perhaps? Maybe the one she'd given her – and felt the tug of a lost home.

- You will be there, won't you? On Tuesday evening. I really want to talk to you, she found herself saying.

Annie squeezed her in response, drew back to arms' length, and gazed seriously into Fatemeh's face, reading her. Then she left.

Zahra came downstairs.

- Well, that was exhausting, she said dramatically. I need a drink. And she flopped down into a chair.

Fatemeh drew in her breath.

- You liked her, though? Annie? I wanted you to meet her.

Zahra shrugged. Yeah, of course. She's cool.

- Really? I'm so glad you did. It was – important to me.

She could feel herself sounding needy. This wouldn't do. Zahra was starting to smirk.

- Honestly mum, you're funny. You and your writer friends. Do you sit around a big table and free-write about all the bad sex you've had with your husbands and then read it out to each other so you can all have a good laugh about it? Is that it? Does it make you feel better?

There was the clenching again. She felt it, and recognised it. It was anger. How could that be? This pelican-child, whom she had suckled with her own spilled ancestral blood, it felt like, and wanted so badly to nurture with the narratives that had made her, now mocking her and making everything trivial.

And so it went, something like this. No, Zahra. That's not what we do. And it doesn't make me feel better, because it hasn't happened yet. What I'm doing is finding the right language to say things. My story. I want you and Asra to know it, to tell it to the young ones too. It's important. I wish you could see. I want you to see....

But Zahra had stood up now, and was glaring at her.

- Ah, so that's it. That's why you're digging your little heels in about Leila and school. Does she cramp your artist's style, Mum, is that it? Do you need to be Tehran's answer to Emily Dickinson, all sequestered away to be A Writer? And meanwhile your granddaughter hangs around at school waiting to be collected by her nanny? Is that it?

Fatemeh reeled. She'd never known her be like this, never. And it seemed she hadn't finished. She moved towards her, unnerved but instinctive.

- And I saw the way you looked at her too.

What did the girl mean? She had no words, but she opened her arms and she didn't know how but Zahra was inside them and her black hair was all around her mouth and nose and she breathed in the scent of her daughter who she found now was crying, with abandon, and there was something luxuriant in it as she fought and spluttered and needed to be held. Like what, my darling? Looked at her like what?

- Like she was your own daughter. Like you looked at me.

And she lifted her daughter's chin and looked at her face, all wet with crying, and moved her fingers over her cheeks and pushed back her hair, so she could see that she was crying

too, and it wasn't clear whose tears were hers and whose were her own, and it didn't matter because she was still her own daughter, and she was a mother too, they both were.

Zahra, Zahra. Ma petite. Again, again, she said it.

And then the voice of Leila on the stairs. Has the lady gone now, Maman?

Yes, Leila. Yes, she has. You can go to sleep now. Night night, petite Leila, night night.

Sweet dreams, Leila, Maman. Good night.



You Only See Self, Breeann Kyte Kirby

