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Ellipsis

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Issue XLVIII

A Journal of Art, Ideas, and Literature



THE UNIVERSITY *of*
NEW ORLEANS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
AND FOREIGN LANGUAGES

University of New Orleans
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Ellipsis: A Journal of Art, Ideas, and Literature is published annually in both digital and print forms by students in the Department of English at the University of New Orleans. We feature the creative and scholarly work of UNO's students, faculty, alumni, and staff. Contributors are welcome to submit fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, short scripts, scholarly essays, and art and photography. Please read our submission policy for full details.

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Cover Art: "Alight" (Olivia M. Bergeron)

About the artist: Olivia Bergeron, native of Thibodaux, Louisiana, graduated in 2022 with a B.S. in Biological Sciences. During her time at UNO, she was deeply involved in student organizations, the Biology department, and new student orientations. She served as president of Zeta Tau Alpha and Garden Club, along with board positions in Beta Beta Beta and Music Club. After graduation, she moved to Cody, Wyoming to join the Wyoming Service Corps. The mountains have reignited her passion for art and inspired her to explore linocut printing, photography, and gouache portraits.

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Editor's Note

Dear readers,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the 48th issue of *Ellipsis*. This publication represents the culmination of months of hard work and dedication from our talented writers and readers, who have poured their hearts and souls into producing an outstanding collection of art, literature, and ideas.

As always, our journal features a diverse range of pieces, encompassing everything from short stories and poems to essays and artwork. These works showcase the unique voices and perspectives of our student body, providing a platform for expression and reflection on the issues and experiences that matter to us most.

Reading through this edition, I am struck by the incredible depth and breadth of talent on display. From the deep imagery of our poetry section to the insightful observations of our nonfiction pieces, each work is a testament to the creativity and intelligence of our contributors.

But this journal is not just a celebration of individual achievement; it is also a testament to the power of the UNO community. Throughout the process of creating this publication, our writers and editors have worked closely together, offering feedback, support, and encouragement as they refine their work.

As editors, our job has been to guide and shape this collection, to ensure that each piece is polished and compelling in its own right. But in truth, our writers have done the lion's share of the work, drawing on their own experiences and imaginations to craft stories that are both poignant and captivating.

In these pages, you will find stories of death and birth, of trauma and connection, of growth and change. You will encounter characters who are flawed and complex, whose struggles and triumphs will stay with you long after you finish reading. You will see the world through the eyes of writers who are both wise beyond their years and refreshingly unjaded, who bring a fresh perspective to the issues that define our time.

As a student literary journal, our publication is unique in that it gives voice to the next generation of student writers, offering a glimpse into the minds and hearts of those who will shape the literary landscape for years to come. In this way, our journal is not just a reflection of the present, but also a bridge to the future.

So as you read through these pages, I invite you to immerse yourself in the world of our writers, to be moved and inspired by their words, and to come away with a renewed sense of hope and possibility. I am confident that you will find this collection to be a fitting tribute to the creativity, passion, and talent of our students and alumni.

—Jax Borukhovich

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Jumpers

Marlana B. Fireman

Shame on the architect who built this house. Whoever he was, he thought he was being artistic by putting these horizontal bricks sticking out from the exterior wall of the house. They look fine, I guess. But what they're really good for, actually, what they're excellent for, is climbing out my bedroom window.

The drop from my window to the closest brick that sticks out is the longest and hardest drop. By the time my left toes brush the brick, I am hanging from the window ledge by the upper knuckles of my fingers. But when my toes clad in creepers brush that brick, it's ecstasy. The rest of the climb down is easy, easier than walking down the stairs. I step off the last brick and land on both feet, feeling like both Indiana Jones and Elvira.

Cat is waiting for me three houses down in her 1989 Buick, headlights off, dome light on. I clomp down the narrow patch of grass between the street and the sidewalk to avoid the *clunk, clunk, clunk* of my shoes. Cat is applying black lipstick to her mouth, carefully following the angular lines of her cupid's bow. I've never seen more movie-star lips.

"Your turn," Cat says, twisting in the seat. I lean over the console and she pumps the applicator in and out of the tube of lipstick. "Kay." In two quick swipes, like Picasso with a brush, I have black lips. Mine don't need angular strokes, they're just thin and plain and straight across my face.

"Cool outfit," I say. Cat looks down at herself like she's forgotten what she put on: a very short black dress, a black choker, her knock-off Doc Martens, and a gigantic plaid blazer she got at Goodwill.

"You too," she says. She's lying. My outfit isn't uncool, it's just the same thing I wear every single day. Black dress, green flannel, and the blocky creepers I begged my parents to get me for my birthday. I can't wear chokers like Cat does. They make me feel like I'm being strangled. The only different thing is the black lipstick, which my stepmom won't budge on.

“Got everything?” Cat asks, looking me up and down. I reach into my backpack and pull out a half-drunk bottle of Absolut Citron. “Nice.” Cat reaches over my lap, her elbow brushing my bare knees, and opens her glove compartment. She hands me my fake ID, which she locks in her car with her own because I can’t be trusted not to lose mine. Cat grins at me. I think she might be the only good thing about Ohio.

We take off into the night. I rest my temple against the icy window, softening my eyes until the houses and streetlights flying by are just an abstract blur.

I look over to Cat, who is pointing at the bottle that I’m holding between my thighs. “Oh, yeah,” I say, unscrewing the silver lid. I hold the bottle up to Cat’s lips while she keeps her eyes steady on the road. She takes a few swigs and makes a face. Her lipstick leaves a black ring around the mouth of the bottle. I tip the bottle up into my own mouth gently, like feeding a baby rabbit. “Ugh,” I say from a deep, guttural place.

Cat parks under a dark tree a couple of blocks from the venue and we take turns sipping from the bottle. On the last sip, my tongue turns to dryer lint and I gesture that I’m done. “More for me,” Cat says with a sugary grin. She takes another swig and then locks the bottle in her trunk. I follow her down a maze of dark roads, streetlights obscured by masses of nearly dead leaves clinging to branches, and black clouds against a cobalt sky. The maze spits us onto the street, a kaleidoscope of blinking convenience store signs and traffic lights.

“There,” Cat says, pointing to a black and white sign that reads *Ace of Cups*. I stifle a grin when the bouncer nods us in. We exchange devilish glances and plunge into the dark sweaty ether of the bar. Cat clasps my hand and pulls me toward the edge of the bar, waiting for a spot to open up. Electricity surges through me for the first time I can remember since I came to Ohio.

“I’m so excited,” I say, looking down at my shoes. “I can’t believe this is happening.” Cat grins at me again, her teeth brilliant white against her black lips.

“We’re fucking heeeere,” she coos. “Want a drink?”

“A vodka with orange juice?” I ask, and Cat disappears toward the bar.

The spotlights spin from the crowd and onto the stage, where people in all black carefully place guitars and arrange drums. Someone places an overturned blue construction bucket next to the microphone. I crane my neck toward the bar.

“Is my make-up okay?” Cat asks from behind me.

A cloudy-clear cup of orange liquid appears over my shoulder.

"It looks great," I tell her.

Cat leads the charge with me behind her, a tiny baby duckling on platforms. We twist our way through the crowd until we find a perfect vantage point. The lights blink again and the whole place goes black.

Bum

Bum bum

Someone is playing the drums, I can see the outline of her blazer against the red lights. *Bum*

Bum bum

Blue lights begin to flash and two girls run onto the stage, one with an electric guitar slung over her shoulder and the other with a bass. The drummer is illuminated by yellow light, her angular haircut, and razor-straight bangs twisting to the beat of her drums.

Are you here, are you coming?

Come on nomad, one last time

The electric guitar girl half sings, half yells into the microphone. Her black babydoll dress moves around her with a mind of its own, her heeled combat boots slamming down into the floor.

No more waiting, go on, go on

Are you coming?

You could be a neon nomad

Come on

"What's her name again?" I shout over the music to Cat.

"On guitar," she says. "That's Kara Gold. Drums, Jeanette Weil. And on bass, that's Keni Dimant. She's a fucking legend."

Keni's unbuttoned flannel flaps in the wind she makes with her movements. Under it is only a black lace corset and cut-off shorts. I can't help but stare at the place where Keni's flannel brushes her thighs, muscular and clad in fishnets. In unison they step up to their microphones, gazing at each other like lovers, or maybe enemies.

Come on

They sing together.

If you're coming, let's just go

Set a fire, neon nomad

I can feel the drums beating inside my chest. We stomp our feet into the dirty floor stained with black spots of spit-out gum.

“How you doing?!” Keni shouts to the crowd.

Cat whoops and I clap my hands above my head.

“We’re Twins and Extroverts,” Kara says. “Let’s have some fun!” She takes off into a guitar intro, a silver cuff around her wrist spitting the colored spotlights back into the crowd. *That girl thinks she’s the queen of the neighborhood*

They croon, the room becomes electric, hair flying in all directions, the heavy *boom, boom* of feet hitting the ground in unison. I turn my face up to the ceiling to look at the cracked paint and the waving chandelier. I feel devoid of everything but the bass in my chest and Keni and Kara’s words. Like darts, like something only I can feel. Glancing over at Cat, her eyes are bright with reflections of spotlights, pink and yellow, pink and yellow. Her hair is a nest of stick-straight static.

Rebel girl, you are the queen of my world

Rebel girl, rebel girl

I think I wanna take you home

I wanna try on your clothes

Twins & Extroverts careen in and out of their own songs, kicking their feet in the air, slamming hands onto buckets and butts and guitars, tossing hair, guitar picks, triumphant cackles into the air. The colored lights twist us into new people and then back to ourselves, I am blue, I am purple, I am yellow, I am pink, we’re all pink, I’m blue again. I’m alone and in tune, shifting and jumping to the music, tossing my hair, being alive for a few moments. There is no Cat, just me and chorded electricity making me move freely for the first time maybe ever.

Then they stop, the only time they do, and Kara kicks over her blue bucket, clutching her guitar close to her stomach. She leans over and vomits right into it. Keni doesn’t react, she just laughs at the crowd and waits before starting a new song and Kara joins right back in. A man in black takes the bucket offstage, holding it out from his chest like, well, like a bucket of vomit. “Hardcore,” Cat says into my ear.

And then, just like that, they leave the stage, like a triumphant exit from hell. “It’s over already?” I ask Cat, whipping my head around. I can hardly hear my own voice over the ringing in my ears.

“Yeah!” Cat says with a laugh. “It’s been two hours!” She taps her fingernail on the face of her watch. It’s 2:15 am. The show started at midnight.

“Damn,” I say. “Wait, look.” I point to the stage where a woman in black places a stark white guitar. “Encore.” The lights turn black again and the white guitar gets picked up by nimble hands with long fingers.

Ah, I don't hardly know her

The room stays black save for the orange-red exit sign lights making waves over that white guitar. The drums and the guitar slam down together.

But I think I could love her

Crimson and clover

Ah, I wish she'd come walking over

Now I've been waiting to show her

The drums tap into their upbeat, guitars and bass and voices altogether. Everyone in the room is jumping, bouncing, bobbing their heads to our new lords and saviors. I could be in this song forever, imagining Joan Jett up there too, all of us together in this black box flying through space, like there's no outside. I'm not alone anymore, we're all dancing in a void, flinging our limbs like they're brand new, scream-singing the lyrics to each other, a last heroic swan song. The outro arrives too quickly and the urge to cry tickles the back of my throat. I smile at Cat and she smiles back before pointing toward the stage.

“Look,” she says. “This is their thing.”

Before I can ask what the thing is, I see Kara and Keni bowing their heads to the same beat, looking at each other and then away, both shy and confident, like they're the only people in the room.

Crimson and clover, over and over . . .

Keni and Kara hum into their respective microphones. Their lips move against the metal of the microphones like gentle soft sniffs of flowers. The music hardly exists beneath their lustful gazes. And then Kara breaks it all, struts to Keni's microphone, and sings into that, like the steely connection, like the lack of space is what she prefers. They lean into each other, rocking back and forth to the music before their faces meet under an imaginary archway, pressing their mouths together like it's their last action on this earth.

“Whoa,” I say. Kara grabs a fistful of Keni's flannel, pulls her in harder and lets her go. I can see her tongue, everyone can see her tongue, lick the inside of Keni's upper teeth before they part. The room goes black, and then they're gone.

Ellipsis

Cat pulls me out into the biting late fall air, it makes me nauseous how quick we go from humidity and sweat to crispness and cool breezes. Her hand is still locked around my wrist and she runs, flies, her boots slapping against the brick alley.

“Stage door,” she says. Her breath is fast and shallow. I don’t care, she can take me anywhere.

NOMADS

Lin Flores

In every internet passageway I was known as nomad—which is to say surgery was no success to curiosity—the only cure. Even Eve knew exploring is the only sure method. Tunnels took me to Hannah. Her handle did not stick, only stories held me closely. All those secret paths hoped to sloppily collide under earth's warm belly. She asked me once if I knew how to get a girl wet. I said, can I make you a home? Learn to braid your golden hair and swim in your irises, the only pools I let wrap my thighs around their waves. She preferred the ground, how little earth can quake at a text and wait decades for a reply. I never did know her again but never stopped searching in that secret tunnel and through that catchy tune, *secret tunnel, secret tunnel*.

The Ticket

Blair Bundy Jr

Adam was understood to be a pious and obedient boy. One who kept a foot fixed firmly on his breath and a book held steady in his hands. “Amendable qualities”

“A swell son.”

“Little pleaser.”

“Child of God.”

“The nigh-perfect boy.”

He’d heard it all his life. Eighteen years old and considered a well-grown man. He and his younger sister worked with their mama: cooking and selling plates, as well as cleaning the homes of the rich. They split their proceeds sixty/twenty/twenty. Adam and his sister were fine with her taking more. Although their work was equal, she’d taught them everything they knew. Given them life and a home and love in every way she knew how. She was all a mother should be.

In his tiny, close-knit, Southern Baptist town Adam was more beautiful than all the men and even some women. He hadn’t shown interest in any girls and was admittedly not as . . . boyish as the other guys. His voice was softer. His demeanor was at once gauche and graceful. Although well-liked, his name was joined with whispers of a certain deviance. And, as one sister of the congregation reminded his mother under the guise of sanctity, “wounds left to fester often grow into something untreatable.”

Soon enough, decided by his mother, his church, and his self-righteous town at large, it was time Adam began his journey to marriage. And they had settled on the perfect woman for him. Cynthia, the pastor’s dignified daughter. She loved reading, possibly even more than Adam did. By age nine, she’d spent her Saturdays reading to the old, illiterate folks who’d never gotten a chance to finish or even attend school. By ten, she’d led the other kids in Sunday school services. By twelve, she’d led the entire congregation in prayer. All with her father’s subtle push. Ask anyone in town, she was

what every girl should be: a diligent servant to God, a selfless servant to her fellow man, a gleeful servant to the rules of this world as designed. If she so desired respect, that is. And, so, that's what Cynthia was. A symbolic servant as her father, her town, and her faith had called her to be.

Adam knew her his entire life. Like him, she was quiet and kind. While friendly, they were not friends. After all, in the 50s it wasn't the way for boys and girls to leisure together. They did as their sex did. If not, it was a sign of a deep-rooted, dark-sided issue.

The Pastor was Adam's idol. An upstanding pillar of the community. The mouthpiece of God who lived his life according to the commandments as inscribed on Moses' stone tablets. When he spoke, people listened. When he asked, he received. The people were his guide. Their respect and admiration was his to feast on, and Adam gladly gave it all. Outside of his mother, this was the only semblance of a father he'd truly known. His own had died in the second Great War shortly after the conception of his sister.

* * *

The night before his arranged proposal, Adam was, in a sense, summoned by the pastor. His sister teased and congratulated him in a single breath, "My brother, the class climber. The worthy."

"Will you take your little library when you leave us," she teased more, with a whisper of sorrow.

His mother, ever the coach, said, "You may already have it, but it's respectable to ask for his daughter's hand."

"Stand tall."

"Show him you're a worthy and holy man."

"Be the son I raised you up to be. . . . Make mama proud."

Sure, she'd said and he'd heard it all before, but now he had something to earn and something to lose. His mother was a devout and dutiful woman who, like most here, did as she was raised to. She had little clue of the jaws she was sending her only boy into. . . .

The pastor's wife and daughter were away on a missionary trip, "greeting God to those in need [of Him.]" That night, in the pastor's very own southern-gothic abode, Adam sat with him in a candle-lit room without windows. Adam thought it was chillingly charming. The pastor gave him his first-ever taste of wine. It was red and bitter, resembling yet quite unlike

the sweet communion he'd tasted many times before. It brought with it a feeling unlike any he'd ever known.

Ease.

The conversation was not at all Cynthia-centric. But rather the pastor spoke in a way Adam had never known him to. This wasn't the man who had personally bestowed upon him holy advice, baptism, and guidance. This wasn't the man he watched from a distance framed by a podium. In this moment he was a man, not God's mouthpiece. And Adam was the perfectly quiet foil to his pastor's endlessly aromatic voice. It had power in it. A word Adam didn't know but could feel . . . *seduction*. There was something more profound in the way he held onto Adam's sparsely spoken words. He treated them like mined jewels. Adam had never truly been listened to, which was largely fine with him. He didn't have much to say, honestly. He mostly felt. Though, his feelings tended to be fairly quiet as well.

Switching back on the conviction the podium had gifted him, the Pastor told Adam, "There is a reason God's children are known as born again. We are born into sin again and again and again many times in this life. It surrounds us," he said as he refilled both their glasses. "I shall tell you a secret not many of us are ready to accept. We must indulge our birthright. Though, only in small doses. Following the indulgence, we make a plea for penance and we cleanse. That is the true, unadorned way of God."

Adam was confused by this "secret." It was no message God or pastor had preached before. So, he asked, "I thought we were to turn our backs on sin? Completely?"

"No, my boy. We condemn living completely in it." The Pastor's tone was serious and final. So, Adam made it make sense. After all, at times the world existed in a gray place; although merely fantasy, books had taught him that.

Before he could ponder the thought for long, something touched his lips. Something that fit there. It was bitter but warm. Something that felt all at once frightening and primally familiar.

It was the pastor's lips. And it was over just as quickly as it had arrived. "Pastor, I—" Adam began, but never finished, as the pastor rushed in with "This cycle of sin and self-repentance is our ticket to Heaven, Adam." Maybe, it was his own name falling off such respectable lips. Maybe, it was the ease provided by Jesus's special drink. Maybe, it was the way his pastor looked at and listened to him. Maybe, he was beginning to understand why the room was windowless and why the wine was heavy and either way he'd leave this

room with a new secret. He didn't know what exactly it was, but he made a choice to give what was requested. Adam pressed that foot more firmly on his breath and kissed his pastor. Knowing full well it was what the man wanted. *This is my choice.*

They went on to do a number of things that night. Things their townsfolk would label abominable. Things many outsiders would do as well. Although, what Adam felt wasn't so settled. It was soiled. Exhilarating. *Possibly even holy.* Only wrong because of their statuses in relation to one another. *Or, maybe, our similar sex? Not age.* No, for the idea of a 'teenager' had only been invented the decade prior. So, Adam set aside his internal, eternal questioning and rested his eyes solely on the statue that centered this windowless room. A stone Jesus in his most famed position—suffering on the cross. Adam had achieved the destiny of what he was made to be—eager to please. And the pastor? He was God's chosen; and who better to please than God? So the deed was done.

* * *

Later in the night, in the bathroom of this godly, gothic abode Adam stood naked with God's mouthpiece. A numb stillness to him. The pastor said "We have chosen sin together. Now we must take penance together." The pastor held a tiny, adorned dagger; and following his plea, reopened a sealed wound on his forearm. He then handed the stained silver to Adam. He wasn't fond of the idea of splitting his skin, but still, Adam had an ingrained respect for his pastor and his God. If blood was what got him into Heaven then so be it, he had already begun this journey.

As he let his sins bleed out, he hoped it was worth it.

The pastor then led him to the clawfoot tub in the corner of the bathroom. "With baptism, we're made clean again." Together they sat naked in the water, as it was slowly stained wine red and Adam fought off one recurring thought.

Run.

No. He'd follow his pastor and the voice of God anywhere. It was his duty as a man. But still, the thought fought back and with greater force than he had.

Run.

No. The pastor took Adam's hands into his own. "Cleanse yourself with me?" he asked. "Anything for you." Adam responded. "No. For God." To-

gether they submerged. The pale green walls of the bathroom would hold these memories as long as he would.

Run.

No. Beneath the water, he envisioned the rest of his life. He'd never speak of, let alone think of, this night again. He'd marry Cynthia and they'd have a few kids, as is their earthly duty. They'd be happy enough. He'd work himself to the bone to feed the mouth he'd married and the ones he'd make. Or he'd be shipped off to war and die like his papa if the third great one were to come. Or he'd rise to be a pillar of the community like his pastor. Taking secrets to a windowless room like his pastor. Groomed to take his pastor's place as if some chosen heir to God's flock.

Either way, he'd live as all before him and all around him did—in this town forever. With these people forever. Miserable forever. Ashamed forever. He'd love this life. He'd choose this life. As is his earthly duty.

Run.

Together, they surfaced dripping wet. They stepped out of the tub and Adam felt no different, but the pastor seemed renewed. Whether by this ritual or by God was not Adam's to know. So he played the game he'd only just realized life to be. "Are you cleansed, my boy?"

"... I am."

A mirrored, yet one-sided smile. The pastor kissed Adam's forehead. "Now, await my daughter's return 'marrow morning and claim your wife. Be made one with my blood, my child. Your God, your mother, and your pastor have ordained it."

On his way out, Adam had no thoughts, only his feet knew where they'd go. They led him home to where his mama and sister slept. To the underbelly of his mama's bed where an eternally empty suitcase lay. To his room where all his earthly possessions lived. To the shelf where his books rested. To the loose floorboard in his closet where all his savings and secrets hid. And to a halt at the exciting threshold of the only home he'd ever known. It was here that a reckless mix of thoughts, beliefs, and feelings dripped like a faucet. It was here that the two people he knew best slept. The two he'd spent his whole life with. The two people his heart beat for . . .

Choose them.

That was but a moment and a whisper to his feet. And so they walked out and walked onto a bus that led to the train where, hopefully, a true cleansing awaited him.

Ellipsis

Maybe it wasn't a path paved to Heaven. Maybe it led to Hell's fire, but it was his. Something he'd chosen. So, as he held that tangible ticket, Adam ever so slightly raised that foot and took his first ever breath.

To Fathom Damnation

By Zach Damore

Unfortunate, the fate of the
Waterlogged demon.
Isolated, cold, and bound
At the bottom of the ocean.
His name is lost to time,
washed away by the water
and sullied by brine.
He would have cried,
Screamed, begged to be set free.
No one would rescue him
From the bottom of the black sea.
They would celebrate, revel in his death
As he lie trapped in the depths.
His own personal Hell,
But unlike the Hell we know,
Full of brimstone and flame.
It was a tomb filled with silver
That burned all the same.

How unfortunate it was, the fate of
this devil Truly a distortion of poems of old
No rhyme or reason to its meter or timbre,
Just anger and fear in an abyss all too cold.

Nina Encontrada En La Guarida Del Diablo

After Saeed Jones

Lin Flores

Black earth scorched in the place I left
drag marks from fingertips

soaked red. Last sight was fallen
fruit. Dirt in its mouth, the gapping

shape of awe in petals scattered in Tajín, glistening
juices, sweetness in its own teeth, ripeness for

taking. A dare or threat to taste summer's yellow
orange mango. My left hand already reaching,

before we know the Earth as hell mouth,
I bite its flesh. Dirt crumbs freckled my lips,

satiation, satanic in its subtext, in its subject
in the innocence of famine & fasting

when there is nothing else to eat,
when the Devil swallows me whole.

Pale Memories

Samuel Cooley

Ghost didn't know when the plaque had been installed. He just knew that he hadn't been able to look away since. Staring made his mind numb, made him unable to think past the static, made him forget what it was like before he was alone.

Alone. When was the last time he had seen another soul? A month? A year? A decade? No matter how hard he thought, he couldn't remember past the static. It didn't matter. At least he didn't have to listen to squalling brats or listless teachers that wandered the halls in the school above.

Sometime during his long afterlife, he found the old stairwell. Made of concrete, it was built into the corner of the school he had died in. There were three floors: the main floor that led outside, the second floor that led to classes, and the lonely unfinished room at the bottom. The concrete stairs curved on themselves, sharp corners hiding each floor from the other.

His sanctuary was at the bottom. If he remembered right, the intention was to turn it into a basement but the project had been abandoned in the early stages for some reason. No one liked to visit there. With only a few feet between the lowest stair step and the rough walls of the room, it was as cramped as a janitor's closet with none of the interesting tools. He thought he would be left alone there.

He had thought wrong.

The child crashed into his paradise like a meteor, followed by ringing shards of glass and a crooked plastic frame. Ghost winced as her flailing body passed through him, brutally bringing him out of the sweet static and back to the world of the living. More or less anyway.

Ghost turned away from the girl to look up the long stairway behind him, a few of the concrete steps boasting new stains. Two young girls stood at the top, pale-faced and trembling. One looked down at her hands before abruptly running away, quickly followed by the other. Their footsteps

echoed through the stairwell as they turned the corner and climbed another flight, the slamming of a door revealing their exit.

Bullies then. Scared ones at that. Another item on the long list of things he didn't miss about the living. Ghost looked back at the child and winced again. He didn't imagine she would miss them either.

As antisocial as Ghost wanted to be, he made himself stand up, hands clenched by his side as he waited for the child to join his world. Part of him hoped she wouldn't, that she would stay with the rude living, but his optimism had not lasted long after death. The girl's eyes were closed, her leg didn't look right, and he wouldn't be shocked if she had hit her head on the way down. It was an honest surprise that her chest still rose and fell.

He didn't imagine it would last for long.

It was a shame. Children were always the worst ghosts. They were either sobbing and confused or silent and dead-eyed. They needed a guide more than anyone else. Ghost would never wish that more people died in schools, but, well, he just wished there was someone else. He was the last person who should be welcoming children to their little purgatory.

Yet, sadly enough, he was all she had. Ghost clicked his tongue at the thought and waited, avoiding the plaque so his mind would be clear. She should be dead soon. Maybe he could leave the barrier of the school again before it happened, see if he couldn't find a translucent adult outside campus? It wasn't the greatest plan, but it was better than—

The girl opened her eyes. Her very *alive* eyes.

Ghost leapt upwards, halfway through the ceiling before he realized he was scared of a little girl who couldn't even touch him. He was still careful as he floated back down to the impossibly living child. She must not have hit her head then; she would probably still be unconscious if she had. He wasn't sure if that was a shame or not. On one hand, she wouldn't be a ghost, but on the other, she would probably die in pain. Alone.

The girl touched her leg with a flailing arm. A scream echoed through the air, bouncing through the stairwell to land in Ghost's ears. Turns out ghosts can still feel pain from sound. Wasn't that a fun discovery? When the ringing finally went away, hiccupping sobs and sniffles were all he could hear.

For a moment, Ghost wanted to continue his ascent, maybe visit a few rooms he hadn't seen in a while. What else could he do? He had been prepared to comfort a dead child, a living one was something else entirely.

Another sob twisted his chest and he found himself reluctantly hovering to the ground.

Becoming dead didn't make someone heartless. The afterlife would be much easier if it did.

"Hey, hey, it's alright. Don't cry. Broken bones happen to all of us! I should know, right?" Ghost laughed, rubbing the back of his head only for his hand to go straight through.

Ghost kept that position a second longer before sighing. Broken bones happen to all of us? What in the world was he saying? That's not how you comfort a child. That's not how you comfort anyone! Silently, Ghost thanked whoever was listening that the kid couldn't hear him. That would have been embarrassing.

"Is someone there?! Help me!" the girl sobbed.

Ghost took back his thanks. Was she talking to him? No. No, that would be impossible. The girl couldn't have responded to him. At best, she should only sort of feel his presence. His pain, his fear, his anger, his comfort. That's all she was answering. That was how these things *worked*.

"I'm here," Ghost continued, trying to put as much comfort into the words as he could. "It's going to be okay."

"How is it going to be okay?! It's broken!" the girl squalled.

There was no mistaking that.

"You can hear me?!" Ghost squeaked, embarrassed knowing someone could *hear* him. Was she dead after all? No, ghosts didn't feel the pain they died from. But she could hear him. And ghosts didn't carry their injuries with them. Maybe she was near death? Would that even work? She-

"Of course I can! Help me! Please!" the girl wailed. Any more requests were cut short with another scream as she tried to move.

Right. Not the time.

"Okay, um, hold still?" Ghost offered. Help her. Help her, right. How was he supposed to do that? One glance at her leg told him that he didn't have much time to think it over. He wasn't sure how people died of shock or pain or whatever, but he knew it was possible. She might not have much time left if the pain didn't go away. What did the nurses do to help pain? Ice packs?

Ghost blinked, physically floating a few more inches as the thought hit him. Ice packs, right, he could do ice packs. Or at least something similar. With a twist of his hands, Ghost played nurse. The air chilled, dropping degree by degree until the room felt like a freezer. The girl barely noticed. She

continued her wailing until Ghost pointed towards her leg, willing all the cold into the limb.

Ghost was pretty sure it wouldn't hurt her. Pretty sure. The dead couldn't affect the living, but he wasn't sure about one like her. Luckily, all that happened was the girl's sobs slowly tapered to a halt as the leg grew translucent with frost. She stared wide-eyed at it before poking it without so much as a wince.

"It . . . it doesn't hurt anymore," the girl panted, sweat dripping down her face as the pain faded away. "I can't feel it at all. What did you do?"

"I numbed the pain," Ghost panted, leaning an inch in front of the wall as his energy slowly trickled back to him. He wished he could collapse against it and slide onto the floor, but past experiences had taught him better. Physical objects and spirits don't mix.

"How?" she asked. She hadn't looked away from her leg yet. He didn't think that was good.

"Age mostly," Ghost said. "You'd be surprised what you can pick up when you get older."

The girl nodded before freezing, as if the chill of the room had finally poured into the rest of her body. Did he make it too cold?

"People can't freeze things, no matter how old they are," she whispered, finally looking towards him. That wasn't the first thing she noticed? Maybe she did hit her head. Ghost floated closer to get a better look growing confused as her eyes suddenly widened.

Eyes. Ghost glanced at the glass shards and the plastic frame before sagging in on himself. He was an idiot. As far away as he was, she probably thought he was a normal, breathing person.

"You're a ghost!" the little girl gasped, pointing a finger at him as she tried to drag herself away. Tried. Her leg was definitely broken. Ghost tried to approach with his hands up, determined to get a closer look, but he stopped when the girl whimpered. Sighing, he stayed where he was.

He never understood why the living were so scared of the dead. Would he have trembled the same way when he was alive? Why? What was there to be scared of? They all ended up dying one way or another. He was tempted to say those very words but, for some reason, he doubted the kid would want to hear that.

"I'm a ghost?" he asked, making a grand show of looking through his translucent hand before widening his eyes. "Whoa! When did that happen?"

That shocked her out of her shaking. Unfortunately, it was replaced with narrowed eyes and a deep frown. He wasn't that unfunny, was he?

"How did you not know you were a ghost?" she asked, glaring over his shoulder, though he assumed she was aiming for his eyes.

"I guess I wasn't paying attention," Ghost shrugged.

"Who are you?" she asked, trying to be intimidating.

"Who knows? Everyone calls me Ghost," Ghost said, utterly unintimidated by the little girl. "I guess that should have clued me in, huh?"

The girl's eyes somehow narrowed further. "Your name is Ghost?"

"That's what they call me. It's better than nothing. What about you, kid, what's your name?" Ghost asked, trying not to sound too eager.

The girl blinked, and her eyes narrowed in confusion, and Ghost felt his nonexistent heart pause. One day he would learn why his organs still worked, but that could wait until after he knew the girl remembered her name. After she was safe.

"Why do you want to know?" she eventually asked. Her hands were shaking again, trembling against the concrete floor in irregular beats.

"Just curious. I want to learn about the stranger that tumbled into my home," Ghost said, forcing a smile that made his jaw ache.

"Then tell me yours first."

"I did. It's Ghost."

"Your real name," the child said, rolling her eyes. Ghost could feel his eyebrow twitch. He hesitated a long moment, struggling to keep his composure even as the girl crossed her arms.

It wasn't her fault. She didn't know any better. It wasn't rude for the living to ask. Ghost gave himself a dozen more justifications until he didn't feel like scoffing and floating to the other side of the school.

"I don't remember my real name," he said. "None of us do. That's what makes us ghosts."

The kid tilted her head. "That's stupid. What happens to the people who have names? Or people who never knew their original names? Or people who have nicknames?"

"I guess they sort of fade away," Ghost said, thinking back to all of the deaths he had seen. There hadn't been many, being in a school and all, but there had been enough. "I've never seen a ghost who remembered a nickname. I think it goes off of what you call yourself. I don't know."

"How do you not know? You're a ghost!" the kid scoffed.

“Being dead doesn’t make you a genius.”

“Clearly,” the kid said. Ghost rolled his eyes. This was why he avoided the halls. The two of them stayed quiet a little longer until, in the quietest voice Ghost had ever heard, the child whispered.

“What was that?” Ghost asked, inching closer to better hear her.

“Mary,” the child mumbled, as if reminding herself. “My name is Mary.”

“Right . . . well, good news then, you’re not dead!” Ghost said, giving the kid a thumbs up so she would stop looking so sad. It didn’t work. She nodded slightly, looking like she wanted to absorb into the wall. Wasn’t she just giving him back talk a little while ago?

Kids were weird.

“I remember my name,” she muttered.

“That’s right. Which is a very good thing.”

“Does that mean I’m going to heaven soon?” she asked quietly, tears building in her eyes. Ghost stopped everything. He stopped moving, he stopped floating, if he could then he would have stopped breathing. He just stared at the little girl that had asked him a very adult question.

“Maybe,” he eventually decided. “Like I said, I don’t really know how all of that works. Besides, it should be a little while before that happens. Not soon at all.”

That was what he hoped at least. The kid was near death, he wasn’t sure how else she would be able to see him, but maybe someone would find them soon. If someone didn’t . . . Well, at least she wouldn’t end up like him.

“What if I forget my name when I die?!” Mary suddenly erupted. “What if I forgot it after all and am just making one up?! What if I have always had a different one?! What if-”

“Hey, hey, calm down,” Ghost whispered, kneeling into the air to be on her level before she could talk herself into a panic. That’s what the teachers did when they had to deal with a crying child, right? “Why are you asking me all of this? You’re not going to die. It’s going to be alright.”

“But what if I do? What if it happens later and I forget my name?”

“You’ll turn into a ghost,” he said. He wasn’t going to lie to her, he was too bad at it, but he would have traded anything to be a con artist when the kid hiccupped another sob.

“I don’t want to be a ghost,” she whimpered.

“None of us do, kid. It just happens,” Ghost sighed. He remembered the day he had turned into one. The loneliness, the fear, the darkness. A ghost

passing by had only found him because they had noticed the emotions influencing the students.

It had not been a good day.

"You won't be alone when it happens," Ghost said. "I know a few souls who wander looking for the lost. Sometimes they end up here. They'll make sure you find someone. All ghosts are friends, you know?"

Mary sniffled, finally forcing her tears to slow. "They are?"

"Yeah. We always stick together. No matter what. All the petty reasons we stay away from each other in life tend to vanish when you can float through walls," Ghost huffed. Mary didn't respond. After a moment, he turned to see her staring off into space again. "You alright, kid?"

Mary's entire body jerked in surprise before she curled back around herself. "Are any of you friends with the living?"

Ghost blinked. Friends with someone alive? He had never even considered it. What was the point? He stared at the crying child and sighed, itching to rub the back of his neck as he looked away.

"It's never been done before," he muttered, wincing as the kid huddled her shoulders. "But, hey, I'm willing to try!"

Her eyes widened and, soon after, she was wearing a grin so bright it could blind someone. "Do you mean it? You want to be friends with me?"

"Of course! Why wouldn't I?" Ghost smiled, as if he wasn't compiling the list of reasons in his head. She would forget about him. She would die before he noticed. She might not be able to see him forever. She—

"Everyone else thinks I'm weird. That I read too much," she said, her smile slowly fading. "They call me a nerd."

Suddenly, all of Ghost's reasons seemed to disappear.

"Well, they just sound like idiots to me," he shrugged.

Mary giggled at that before she started to fall silent again. But, this time, she didn't seem lost in her own mind like the other times. Just quiet as she squinted at the opposite wall. Ghost turned as well and saw the plaque embedded there, watching them both.

He wasn't sure if the silence was better or worse than the anger and questions. It was certainly better than the crying. Less urgent. Satisfied that he had done all he could, Ghost hovered back to his wall and leaned towards it as they waited for someone to rescue her. The motion was as uncomfortably familiar as always, as if he had leaned against the stone before.

That was the problem with being dead. Or, well, one of them at least. He never lost his old habits or feelings, he just forgot why he had them. Before he could wander down that path again, he shook his head and stopped thinking. There was no use wondering about the past, all it earned was a headache. The best thing to do was to stay quiet and pretend like nothing in the world was happening.

With that in mind, Ghost focused on the only decoration in the room. The static faded in slowly but steadily, carving out his thoughts and replacing them with numbness as he stared. He had never figured out why it did that. Honestly, he had never cared.

Unfortunately, some people still had curiosity.

"What are you looking at?" Mary asked, ripping Ghost back to the present.

"Nothing. A plaque," he muttered, the static slowly leaving his mind.

"What does it say?"

Ghost tried to remember, he really did, but it was useless. He might have known what it said once, but those days were long gone. Words tended to play with him, changing and shifting as the years went by. It had been easier to forget them than to bother relearning all the rules. Not to mention two of the words gave him a headache that felt like dying all over again. It was better he forgot.

"Well?" Mary asked. He was sure she would be tapping her foot if she could.

"I don't know."

"Do you know anything?" the girl asked, but she had the slightest smile when she said it.

"Hey!" Ghost yelped, smirking as the kid giggled at him. She must not be as scared. Good. "This thing is really old, alright? It's a metal plaque, a memorial. I'm sure it's just talking about something boring. Some kid or teacher or whatever."

"Oh. That's cool," Mary said. For a moment, Ghost thought blissful silence would return, only for the child to dash his hopes once again. "So, why don't you know?"

For a moment, all Ghost could think was admitting to a kid he couldn't read was the most embarrassing thing on the planet. Fortunately, he was spared having to answer by the door to the stairwell opening overhead, shepherding dim light into the darkness. Mary tried to curl in on herself at the sound, wincing as she remembered she still couldn't move her leg.

Ghost knew it wouldn't help but he stood in front of her anyway, trying to shield her from whatever she was scared of.

"Mary! Are you down here?" someone called upstairs, wet coughs following every other word. It was a man by the sound of it. An old one. Oddly familiar as well, though Ghost couldn't put his finger on why.

"Mr. Franklin!" Mary cheered, her grin shining in the new light. Footsteps pounded against the steps immediately after she called. Ghost glanced back at her and flowed out of the way with a smile. It seemed she wouldn't be joining him just yet.

"There you are! Now, what have I told you about-" the man cut himself off with a gasp, covering his mouth with a wrinkled hand. Ghost looked the man over as he rushed to Mary, glancing at the wispy grey hair on his head and the wrinkles coating his skin. He didn't look familiar at all, so why did his voice scratch at his mind?

"Mary, child, what happened? Are you alright?" the teacher asked, kneeling next to the girl. By the way his hands trembled and his jaw quivered, he was legitimately worried about the girl. That was good. Some teachers would just be annoyed.

She nodded. "I'm fine! Ghost took care of me!"

"Ghost? Who's-" the man cut himself off for the second time as he looked at where Ghost was standing. His face paled immediately, tears forming at the edges of the man's eyes as they combed every inch of him. "What? But how? You, I-"

Great, was this man near death too, or was everyone just able to see him now? It didn't matter. What did matter was that the teacher was too busy tearing up to get Mary to safety. Ghost scowled at the man until he got his act together.

If anything, that made it worse. The man flinched, stepping back with a hand clutching his chest. Ghost stopped and rolled his eyes. Of course he was scared too. Silently, he began to float away. If his presence was such a hassle, he would just leave.

"Ben," the man whispered before Ghost could disappear. The world stopped spinning. Ghost flinched backwards as knives stabbed into his chest, spreading invisible fire across his skin. "I'm so sorry, Ben. If I had only known you were here I would have, well, it doesn't matter. I should have visited, should have come sooner. When I heard about the stairwell being haunted, I wanted to come but . . ."

The man sighed before moving towards Ghost, stopping himself just within reach, "I was afraid. Ben, you have to understand, I was just playing around. I never meant for this to happen!"

Ghost's breaths came quick and short as he glared at the man. What happened? What had he done to him? **What had he done to him?!**

The static was gone. All that was left were memories. Slowly, Ghost began to remember. The man's face grew younger, a sickening smile spreading across his lips as he ascended. No, he didn't ascend. Ghost fell. Cracks and snaps echoed in his ears as the room grew darker and darker, light dying by the handful.

"You!" Ghost snarled. "You were there! Why were you there?!"

"Ben, I—"

The face vanished. Ghost's head wanted to explode as everything returned at once. Words without meaning or context swirled in his mind. A dare, construction tape, stairs, a push, pain, footsteps, a door slamming, pain, cries getting weaker and weaker. Then nothing. No more sounds. No more doors or steps or voices. Just feelings. He was afraid then angry then numb then . . .

Then he was Ghost.

"I'm so sorry," the man wept, tears tracing his cheeks. As if he had an excuse to cry. As if he had the right!

The air chilled as frost gathered onto the bricks, a breeze infiltrating the room before turning into a whirlwind. The old man's clothes flapped against his wrinkled skin, his face rapidly paling as he stepped back and covered a trembling Mary.

Mary. Ghost glanced at her to see a pale face holding a gaping mouth. Her hands shook against the floor and her leg began inching away from him. She looked afraid. More afraid than when the bullies had pushed her. More afraid than when she had found her broken leg.

And she was afraid of him.

Ghost jerked, releasing his hold on the air. The two stared at him as their bodies trembled in fear. Ghost quickly twisted his head towards the plaque, taking deep breaths as static flowed into his skull, memories fading with each gasp. Soon, he could barely remember they even existed. All he felt was numb.

"Listen, I don't know who this Ben guy is, but the kid needs help," Ghost said after a few moments, ignoring how the name made his skin shiver and

images flash through his mind. When the man didn't budge, he forced himself to focus. "Now, teacher. We don't have time for anything else."

The man blinked a few times until, finally, reality seemed to return to him as he realized Ghost wasn't going to harm him. He nodded quickly and bent down to pick Mary up.

"Wait!" Mary shouted before the man could fully rise. Instantly, the only other two people in the room stopped. Had his patch job failed? Ghost quietly prepared his hands, ready to make the room freeze again to stave off any more pain.

"I want to see the plaque," Mary ordered. Ghost raised an eyebrow before lowering his hands, letting his shoulders loosen while the teacher furrowed his eyebrows. "Please! I promise Ghost won't hurt us. He saved me, didn't he?"

The teacher hesitated a few moments before sighing, a bit of life leaving him with the breath. "Of course, that would be no problem at all. It just surprised me."

Ghost vehemently disagreed that it wouldn't be a problem but still drifted out of the way as they approached. The man trudged to the wall, already sweating under the strain of carrying another body.

"Here we are, child. Do you need me to read it?" the teacher asked.

"No! I can read! I just need to get closer," Mary argued. The teacher only smiled as she turned back towards the plaque, squinting at it and trying to get as close as possible. Silently, Ghost allowed his body to glow softly, giving her some light in the darkness.

"Benjamin Richards," she whispered. The light faded immediately, replaced with a coldness that scratched at his bones. It was worse than the fire from earlier. So much worse. "Who's that?"

The man responded before Ghost could. "What do you mean? Benjamin is-

"Not important," Ghost interrupted, feeling his spine shiver every time they so much as thought of the name. "Get the kid to a nurse or something. I don't know if my patch job will last past the door."

He hesitated. "Right, you're right. I'm just-

"Go," Ghost snapped, narrowing his eyes as a few tears leaked from the man's eyes. He wavered and Ghost prepared to yell at the man until he finally got his act together and got the injured child to safety. Eventually, the teacher did so on his own, trudging back towards the stairs.

He was going to yell at him anyway, old emotions sneaking past the static, but the spite and anger melted away as Mary waved goodbye, her fingers barely visible over the teacher's shoulder.

"Bye, Ghost! You were wrong! That name wasn't boring at all!" Mary shouted back, laughing as the teacher whispered something to her.

Even though she couldn't see him, he dredged a small smile onto his face and waved back. As terrible as it sounded, he hoped he would never see her again. Children had no place in a grave.

Once they were gone, Ghost turned back to the plaque and frowned as the static didn't appear. Instead, all he could think about was a girl who saw a ghost and, instead of remaining scared, decided she wanted a friend. Slowly, he raised a hand and traced the two words he had never been able to read.

"Not boring, huh?" Benjamin Richards whispered with a body that felt lighter than it ever had before. Slowly, his hand faded from view, disappearing into shards of light as the words on the plaque repeated in his mind. Perhaps he would see Mary again after all.

Meditation on My Sister's Will

Nikki Ummel

I.

Last Spring
my sister called.
Phone pinned between
my ear and shoulder
I heard, *We listed you
as Elah's guardian.*
The compost crumbled
in my hands, fell in soft
sucking plops, bombing
my baby tomatoes
into trembles. *Are you
sure?* I asked. Set
my gloves aside, and rose
to lean against the
papaya tree, its soft bark
pressing into my spine like my sister's hands once did when we used to
play
cops and robbers.
She always let me get away.
Yes. Her stern hard voice. My response, *O
kay*, a glass bowl breaking, splintered, sharp.

II.

I imagine the future:
A four-year-old Elah pulled from the smolder of bent aluminum. It will
happen slowly.
No. Maybe tragic-fast.
Too quick to buy a second bed. So we will sleep in layers, my body a
foundation
for her small frame.
Between us,
not enough sheets,
the bed shrinks.

Ellipsis

When she's sleeping,
I will slip from our bed
to rub clean Honeycrisp apples, pack gummies and crackers for her new
daycare.
We'll twist her hair, clip in pink plastic butterflies,
revel in their noisy clinks, young girl as wind chime. Pin feather poofs
over each ear. Someday, maybe,
she will forget and
call me *Mommy*. But when the tears come, she will
smooth my tangled hair
and tell me *hush*.

What Epicurus Said

Nancy E. Wright

Inspired by visits to the Root Cellar Café in London, Ontario, Canada.

I had tasted plenty of fresh-squeezed orange juice,
such that I might have chosen something exotic,
like jalapeño passionfruit with cloves and nutmeg—
but I chose orange juice--
wholesome simplicity from an organic café.
Who would have thought that this nectar
could transport me to Epicurean Paradise in one sip?
Orange was no more a color, no more tropics with palm trees,
no more harvest or Halloween.
Orange was a VERB!
The fruit orange'd its juice deeply into my taste buds.
It reverberated from my tongue to the roof of my mouth.
My cheeks trembled.

When I squeezed oranges,
I felt I was squeezing all life out of them.
Their once plump and symmetrical sections
would become shriveled, lined with tousled pulp remains.
These oranges were born inside my mouth,
with pulp enough to chew, which made one glass last
not long enough.

En route to the homeward bus,
I asked the taxi driver to stop.
Minutes later I climbed into the taxi, recyclable cup in hand,
back to citrus utopia
and Greyhound.

One year later, I returned and dashed inside, anticipating the first sip.
I tasted only a pleasant orange grove, still fresh-squeezed, but different.

Ellipsis

We used to squeeze the oranges ourselves, but now a supplier does it.
We couldn't keep up with the demand.

Epicurus said life was to be enjoyed, with all its pleasures
in moderation.

NEUTRAL JING

Lin Flores

*Definition: when you do nothing. The action of inaction.
—summarized, King Bumi*

The length between tile floor and loose foot
stretch for kingdoms between multiverse
media. Tips of toes move where matter or soot
cannot be a final sight which is the curse

of an overactive imagination; to see burning galaxies
in a moment of terror, where her weight
is enough to escape his grasp. Leap. Believe mom may flee
in time to shield, to evade a strike or fate

dissimilar to mine.
In this universe I never die.
Dad never hits me. Only
makes me

watch.

Against Camus: Sisyphus and Political Doomerism

Sebastian Brumfield Mejia

“If there is a personal fate, there is no higher destiny, or at least there is but one which he concludes is inevitable and despicable. For the rest, he knows himself to be the master of his days.” —Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

The Problem of Doomerism

Doomerism, a radically pessimistic attitude of political fatalism, has become pervasive among younger generations in the West. The reason is twofold. The constant deluge of seemingly absurd political crises (e.g., climate change, global conflict, identity-based oppression, economic precarity, mass shootings, hyperinflation, etc.) drowns the masses in anxiety and despair. Set adrift in vast digital oceans, we struggle to moor ourselves to affirming communities, much less organize political sea changes to wash away the source of the crises. Consequently, doomerism arises from soul-crushing confrontations between our political impotence and despair.

When our only certainty becomes absurdity, all of us (especially doomers) must seek more stable existential ground. To discredit doomerism and renew collective purpose, I will first look to the myth of Sisyphus—as told by existentialist philosopher Albert Camus—whose absurd heroism epitomizes Western cultural understandings and expressions of futility. I will then critique Camus’ interpretation, arguing that his conclusion of Sisyphus’ happiness despite his eternal futility is necessarily false. In this case, Camus’ Sisyphus cannot help us affirm our seemingly impotent yet politically desperate lives. Finally, I will argue that our meaningful differences with Sisyphus present serious implications for our efforts to overcome doomerism.

His Immortal Coil

In Camus' version of the ancient myth, the Greek gods condemned Sisyphus for his hubris in defying Death.¹ As punishment, Sisyphus must roll a heavy boulder up a mountain which inevitably tumbles once he reaches the top. Crucially, he must repeat his futile task for all eternity—time is no escape. Camus claims that Sisyphus' rock is not his true burden. Rather, he argues that "if this myth is tragic, that is because its hero [Sisyphus] is conscious" of his own impotence yet must persist in earnest (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 121). The inherent contradiction between Sisyphus' purposeful intentions and purposeless actions makes his fate *absurd*.²

Despite his absurd, eternal punishment, Sisyphus does not remain a tragic hero for Camus. Against fatalistic interpretations, Camus strangely (and famously) concludes that "one must imagine Sisyphus happy" (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 123). To explain Sisyphus' unlikely affirmation of life, Camus writes:

Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn. . . . If the descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 121).

Sisyphus' consciousness is a double-edged sword. His fate represents a punishment if he wills the impossible: success or defiance of his task. However, Sisyphus may wrest control over the meaning of his fate from the gods by changing his attitude towards it. To do so, Sisyphus must first take re-

1 Indeed, Camus writes that "His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing" (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 120). Camus also mentions numerous other tales in which Sisyphus craftily provokes and defies the gods.

2 For Camus, the *absurd* is "the only bond uniting" (*Basic Writings of Existentialism* 462) people and the world which arises from "the disproportion between [one's] intention and the reality [one] will encounter" (*Basic Writings of Existentialism*, 462, 461). Put simply, Camus' concept of absurdity describes the tension between one's need for life-meaning and the world's refusal to provide it. Using Sisyphus' fate as an example, Camus takes absurdity to be the fundamental condition of human existence.

sponsibility for his eternal burden—he must make “his rock . . . his thing” (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 123).

By claiming his fate, Sisyphus denies the gods’ power over him and “makes of fate a human matter, which must be settled among men” (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 122).³ Through scorn, Sisyphus may deny his suffering; through joy, he may affirm suffering.⁴ Both attitudes ultimately enable his mental transcendence of physical impotence.⁵ Camus concludes that Sisyphus must be happy, if only because Sisyphus wills his rock upward every day.

Freedom and Finitude

Upon publishing his essay, Camus intended for Sisyphus’ affirmation to guide people grappling with the absurd atrocities of WWII, including the Holocaust and nuclear warfare. Much like Sisyphus’ nascent ascent towards the mountaintop, collective hopes for global peace and prosperity post-WWII still appeared within reach.

Now, in our post-industrial, post-internet, post-pandemic, post-ironic, post post-post present moment, those hopes feel hollow. Like Sisyphus on the mountaintop, we watch helplessly as our political progress slides backwards. Though Camus challenges us to affirm life as Sisyphus does, we must question how his eternal fate, chosen attitude, and sense of responsibility bear on ours. I will present a few brief objections before concluding that Sisyphus’ absurd heroism cannot alleviate doomerism.

3 Here Camus—who was influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche—echoes the spirit of the latter’s infamous declaration that “God is dead” (*The Gay Science* 109).

4 What does it mean to affirm or deny one’s life? If affirming one’s life means willing it exactly as is (not in spite of suffering but partly because of it), then denying one’s life means negating its essential aspects like suffering. Willing the denial of life isn’t without its advantages, however. Resentment and regret can be powerful, sustaining forces to motivate people through suffering. As Nietzsche writes, “one still prefers to *will nothingness*, than *not will*. . . .” (*On the Genealogy of Morality*, 123).

5 In 1944, Jean-Paul Sartre strangely wrote, “Never were we freer than under the German occupation. We had lost all our rights, and first of all our right to speak. They insulted us to our faces. . . . They deported us *en masse*. . . . And because of all this we were free.” Like Sisyphus, Sartre—who spent nine months as a Nazi prisoner of war—found escape from his absurd suffering through scorn. Though the Nazis controlled his body, they could not control his attitude.; For this reason, Sartre considered willing the denial of one’s life as the ultimate source of transcendent freedom.

By comparing Sisyphus' fate to ours, Camus fundamentally distorts the human condition. When Sisyphus looks backwards, and "contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him," he sees the will of the gods, not his own. However, our actions are not predetermined as his are. Unlike Sisyphus, we have the potential to develop over time through our constrained (yet willing) choices and actions. Though neither Sisyphus nor we can hope to escape suffering or achieve our purposes permanently, our semi-free human condition enables us to transform our lives and domains in non-trivial ways.

Camus inappropriately characterizes Sisyphus as necessarily happy. How could one measure feelings across eternity? Mortal emotions like happiness demand temporality: they are ephemeral, contingent, and cyclical. Consequently, Sisyphus—whose eternal fate makes him immortal—necessarily lacks the kind of emotional life we possess. Absent contrasting emotions, Sisyphus' happiness loses its characteristic positivity.⁶ Ultimately, resignation represents the only attitude Sisyphus *could* have towards his fate, and a resigned Sisyphus is no hero, absurd or otherwise.⁷

Even if Sisyphus' emotional life could compare to ours, adopting an attitude of scorn or joy does not resolve doomerism. Mere attitudinal freedom may console an eternal prisoner like Sisyphus. For most people, however, a free mind in a trapped, suffering body causes agony, not relief. Given the immense pressure to make our finite lives meaningful, Camus' solution to imagine Sisyphus (and by extension ourselves) happy appears trite.⁸ Worse,

6 Sigmund Freud conjectures that "When any situation that is desired by the pleasure principle is prolonged, it only produces a feeling of mild contentment. We are so made that we can derive intense enjoyment only from a contrast and very little from a state of things" (*Civilization and its Discontents*, 43). In a footnote, he quotes Goethe, claiming he "warns us that 'nothing is harder to bear than a succession of fair days'" (*Civilization and its Discontents*, 26).

7 Karl Löwith makes this critique in response to Nietzsche's similar concept of *eternal recurrence*. Löwith argues that acceptance of metaphysical fatalism prompts one to cease willing anything contrary to one's fate (*Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, 79-80). Applied to Sisyphus' condition, he can affirm life only by resigning himself to his fate.

8 In presenting his concept of *eternal recurrence* (which heavily influenced Camus' absurdist thinking/existential thinking in *The Myth of Sisyphus*), Nietzsche describes the pressure to take responsibility for the meaning of one's life as "the heaviest weight" (*The Gay Science*, 194).

it may represent a form of philosophical quietism which claims we can be happy so long as we stop struggling.

Sisyphus never acts freely, so his claim to responsibility is superfluous and self-deceiving. If some suffering is within our control rather than absurd, then Camus leads us astray by only encouraging responsibility for our attitudes but not our actions. We (and only we) have the power to change our world; we must not abandon hope and responsibility so quickly.

Overcoming Doomerism

After the long walk down, we leave Sisyphus at the mountain's base. The ultimate lesson of his divine punishment is this: absurd attempts to control fate resign one to further absurdity. Yet many of our worldly political problems lie within our control. Overcoming doomerism requires us to anticipate their causes and build collective power to meaningfully address them.

Without necessitating *strong* ideological commitments (yet with strong evidence), we can justly hold racial capitalism and imperialism responsible for many of our most daunting political crises.⁹ Climate change is the effect of corporate resource extraction enabled by states. The same insatiable lust for wealth and power that sustains corporations also drives capitalist imperialist states (like the United States) to instigate global conflict with perceived exploitable or competitor states.¹⁰ Systematic, centuries-long identity-based oppression in the United States (and in various forms elsewhere) persists because it remains the most expedient method to conserve wealth and power for the exclusive, dominant group(s). Periodic precarity and hyperinflation are the inevitable results of instabilities inherent in capitalist economic systems. Finally, ideological extremism—particularly among conservatives and fascists—motivates terroristic mass shootings.

9 The doomer political concerns I mention are not exhaustive and mostly center on Western perspectives (though also Western causes). Since doomerism is an especially Western (and American) phenomenon, this bias seems appropriate.

10 Look no further than the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War, which NATO provoked to extend their sphere of influence. As reported by investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, the United States also covertly sabotaged the Russian-owned Nord Stream natural gas pipelines to reduce European dependency on Russian energy and force dependency on American energy and greater support for Ukraine instead.

Despite claims to permanence by our prevailing political systems, alternatives are not merely possible, but inevitable. A basic survey of history reveals the fundamental impermanence of political regimes toppled by out-matched revolutionaries, natural catastrophes, and internal mismanagement. Economic systems (e.g., bonded and chattel slavery, feudalism) also fade. Sustainable fusion power—which would solve our global energy crisis and reduce climate-changing emissions—is on the horizon. Renewed Cold War conflicts suggest approaching multipolarity between international blocs. And so on. Where there is change, there is hope.

All of these seemingly absurd political issues are traceable to human causes. In fact, many of them depend on the combined wills of relatively few (yet immensely powerful) people. These issues only seem absurd once we lose sight of our power to address them; we cannot expect to succeed as atomized individuals.¹¹

To regain control over our political lives, we must take responsibility for what we can directly affect—ourselves, our neighborhoods, our communities—and gradually expand into an unstoppable combined force.

Expecting perpetual progress or lamenting perpetual failure is absurd; both are temporary and cyclical. For each rock raised, another will tumble down and demand our labor. To dignify our suffering and affirm the totality of our lives, we must endeavor to lift our burdens once more—this time, together.

11 If the American culture of atomized individualism is not intentionally designed to make the masses feel isolated and impotent against systemic forms of exploitation and oppression, then it at least does so consistently and effectively enough to warrant suspicion.

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When my water broke,
I reached down and tasted your coming

Nikki Ummel

I am up to my armpits
in creation.
Your birth-wet mouth. Bawling.
My snuffling mother love.

I am not numb.
 Inside-out undies party, we
 sleep without sheets.
 Goodbye, laundry. Pile yourselves elsewhere.

My naughty daughter.
I stopped waiting for you.
Then there you were. My little deuce coupe. My body
The dark horse
you rode in on.

Born on a Wednesday
by river road.

Us drinking the soil. Us planting the toothache tree.
Yolky child. When will I become too much for you?

A Mother on the Eve of Her Child's 15th Birthday

Nikki Ummel

In the rain, in the car,
 I wait outside
 your best friend's house.
 You come out, beaming.

I cannot hear
 what you call back to her,
 over your shoulder,
 as you trudge toward me
but your face shines.

You climb in without a word.
I do not turn the radio on.
 We sit in thick silence, inch into traffic
 as rain smears the windshield.

I want to reach across the console and
 press you to my chest, like before.

I want to tell you how I dreamed of you—

 How I pulled you from the reeds,
 how I dreamed this for days
 before the doctors called me in,
 emergency c-section.
 How I cupped you with one hand,
 touch filtered through holes in plexiglass.

Now you press your forehead
 against the glass of my Honda CRV,
 create as much space between us
 as if you could part the sea.
Leave me.

Ellipsis

As I turn into our driveway,
your headphones roar.
I swallow my words; they sink,
layer my belly in stone.

But you do not know.
You open your door and go.

Rats

Marlana B. Fireman

David Duke sees rats
in the early mornings,
just before the sun
rises.

They conspire beneath
his screened-in porch.

When he steps out in
the morning to feel
the weather through his
skin

he hears them chattering beneath his bare feet,
wonders what they're here to do to him.

His white robe flutters
in the humid breeze.

That's all

And he returns

inside, slamming the screen door While he dreams of parentheses and
boot stomps,

he tosses, he turns.

The rats make themselves comfortable and loop
their wiry tails between

his toes as he sleeps.

I love those rats.

They are a certain brand of mink.

Mice chatter at the door
of a house on South
Galvez Street on a Sunday morning.

A little girl opens
the door wide for them,
her bare feet on the cold
tile, crouching down in

a nightgown to sprinkle
tiny crumbs of Friday's bread
from her pockets. They've never seen a trap, never will.
They chat on the couch
while adults sip Scotch.

In every peripheral
glance, a tail disappears
from his vision, behind a
bookshelf or maybe
through the floorboards.
Measured turns of tight
muscles reveal nothing new, he can't see their eyes
peering from behind
his signed copies of manifestos, flossing their teeth with the pages, those
rats.
Everyone is so
afraid of me, he muses,
but won't step any closer.

In the house on South Galvez Street, Billie Holliday
creates gusts of wind.
Children unabashedly chew on large pieces of steak,
and the great aftershocks
of laughter rattle the window panes.
Cross-legged on the carpet,
newspaper clippings
in neat piles

He swears he can hear
them conspire, but
when the traps are empty,
nibbles appear in
his bread.
Invisible footsteps
stay stubbornly splayed
across the kitchen

Ellipsis

counter.

Lonely roars of
frustration echo
in file cabinets.
I am those rats.

When tears fall on South Galvez Street, they fall together,
And David Duke still sees rats.

Please Understand

Kylee F. Schexnider

How do I describe this feeling to you? I'm not quite sure, but please just try to understand. To describe this in the best way, think of Dr. Lucille Krunklehorn-Robinson with caffeine patches on her arm.

My body twitches as if I'm the crackhead that you can't help but make eye contact with at the gas station. Only it is not crack cocaine that I crave, but change. Perhaps a change in the length of my hair. I would say a change in hair color; however, my damaged mane has tasted every color in the rainbow. A change in music taste maybe?

Maybe this time my room needs to be changed. I cannot do much in a dorm room, but my bed moves. The nights when Trent Reznor screams into my ears about how he feels sanctified inside of a mystery woman are the nights I feel invincible.

These nights I lay in bed and stare at the ceiling, and I wish you were laying next to me. I long for those deep and long kisses from my forehead to my thighs. Dare I say it, I yearn to be sexualized by you. I'll take pictures in your favorite red lace, and send them to you. I'll get a notification "--- took a screenshot." I'll smile because my ego has an insatiable appetite on these nights.

How do I describe this feeling to you? I'm not quite sure, but please just try to understand. The day after I send those pictures is the day I always tried to avoid. Not a shred of light can be found in my room. I'm sweating from being under a thick comforter, but I will not move. I'll lay there, and stare at the wall. If I move, the fleeting question of what my wrist would look like slit end to end might be answered.

I'll sweat through yesterday's deodorant, but I won't dare go outside of my hot, sweaty, dark room. This is what I deserve, this is where I belong.

My bladder will fill to the top, one wrong move and I will spill onto my sweat-soaked sheets. Sometimes I make that one move, and I still do not find the strength to move. I'll lay there in my own piss. This is what I deserve, this is where I belong.

How do I describe this feeling to you? I'm not quite sure, but please try to understand. I yearn for those endless nights of kisses, but I do not wish to be touched. Those kisses tell me that I'm pretty. Those slight touches tell me I'm broken.

I despise when you tickle me, and it makes me want to cry. This is not because I do not trust you. This is because when I was six, I trusted someone else. I lost that tickle fight. The weekend after he won the tickle fight, he offered a cup of red Kool-Aid while I was watching Dora the Explorer. I'd wake up on his floor and find sweat and other secretions that did not belong to me. Yet, The pink Hello Kitty pajama pants that did belong to me were nowhere to be found. My biggest question at the time was "Did Dora ever find her map?" I asked that same question every weekend. Every weekend until my mother, who brought this man into my life, found someone more fun than myself.

How do I describe this feeling to you? I'm not quite sure, but please just understand. My stomach clenches when I hear a door slam. I still listen for angry footsteps although I now live millions of footsteps from home.

That door slam tells me he's accused her of something she did not do. I know they will be screaming for the rest of the night. That door slam tells me to have 911 ready just in case one of them goes too far. I know she is going to take it out on me tomorrow when he leaves for work.

Those angry footsteps tell me I'll need to find my concealer. I will be told I'm worthless. Those angry footsteps tell me to get ready to cover those bruises up for the next two weeks. I will have to lie to my friends when they ask "Why do you have bite marks on your arms?" Those angry footsteps tell me to be strong because that is the only way I made it out of that hell I call home.

I flinch when you go to hug me because I still do not trust her. Several times after a day's worth of beating she would hug me. My body could not help but tremble; the guilt she felt made her angry. I would always get one last slap, kick, punch, hair pull, choke, scratch, after that hug.

How do I describe these feelings to you? I'm not quite sure, but please I need you to understand. I am not bored. I am manic. I am not antisocial. I am depressed. I trust you. I shouldn't have trusted him. I am not scared of you. I have been living in fear for so long I don't know how else to live.

Please understand.

After Taking My First Dose of Lexapro

Nikki Ummel

Roundness like a drum. Feeling the circle of it all.
Bird bone radiance and a rising tingle. Toes
Looped like friendship bracelets and a quiet bog
mind. No stirring. A face gone fruit soft and
nipples numb as ice cubes. Life grain rubbed to
flower petals. Embroidered breath and the distinct
impression that this moment has already
happened. Kaleidoscopic eyes. Iridescent stillness.
The wolves paw at the ground then lie down to
nap. Safe as paradox. Idle churn like volcano
sludge. Hard to find the mirror to wipe it. Trotting
time and its slinky silk negligee.



“Saint Sparky”
(Rowan Lambert).

Sir Oxford Parker

Nancy E. Wright

You were the only stray dog whose head I dared to stroke
gingerly, only with fingertips.
In front of the Park Hotel, your grey-brown splotches of coat
blended with dusty curb's edge.
You would remain there, sniffing early smoke and cooking spices
until eight, when Kolkata's heavy morning traffic
convinced you to amble to the front of the Oxford Bookstore.
On your side there all morning,
while ever hotter sunbeams bathed your tired ribs,
you never blocked the bookworms' path.
At noon, when the restaurant Trincas opened,
you would hobble to its front door and stretch out.
Sometimes a server would toss you biscuits.
At five, when live music began in the restaurant lounge,
you changed your post slightly,
crawling to the door where the musicians had entered.
You remained on the sidewalk late, your deaf ears soaking in vibrations
of jazz and sometimes piercing treble vocals.

The first food I offered you was lamb lasagna.
The flavor, which you tasted while prone, half-asleep
awakened you to a sitting position.
I discovered you were toothless,
when the little chicken sausages I brought you
rolled from your mouth.
From that point I broke each one in half.
The hotel breakfast staff knew why I loaded my plate
and then asked for a to-go container.
They never said anything.

Ellipsis

I brought you large mutton bones, which I thought you could lick.
You gummed them, your sightless eyes nostalgic.
You turned away from egg drop soup, but lapped mutton gravy
as if it were ambrosia.

Sir Oxford Parker,
your greatest gift to me was aloofness,
which spared me heartbreak when it was time to leave India.
About a month after my departure,
a hotel manager wrote to inform me
that she had not seen you in some time
and thought you may have passed.
I cannot follow you, nor can you follow me.
Thank you for a sweet memory without attachment.

The Poets' Calavera

Nancy E. Wright

We enjambed, breaking
lines in places where nuance was rendered.
No consistency in our days
of feast and famine, in which we reveled in the least—
a perfect verb discovered, or a breakthrough
after we examined a punctuation mark for hours,
only to decide it was not needed. Were we?
The world usually responded, "Indeed!"
But little did they know how we agonized alone,
our solidarity only with others as ridiculous as we.
For who else would spend hours pondering Keats'
negative capability or flowery conceits?
Who else would devour a reader's pondering and praise?

Even our obituary has poetic ways.
Each strophe numbers lines that make a twin prime,
the first an emirp, this one a palindrome.
Here in our spiritual home, we remain unshaken by reversal
from life to death . . . we'll rise again,
for we connect earthly and divine.
We give you time.
We preempt your ridicule with our own parody.
Now if you see the grasses flutter,
as you trudge through your earthly clutter,
that flit signals our vitality We live forever through our poetry.

On Viewing Tim Davies' Frari

Nancy E. Wright

Santa Maria Frari smiles
from the windows of the inside tower.
The largest windows enlighten the inside,
while the smaller adorn the exterior,
much as larger insights of the self are hidden
by squints of protection.
The inside walls enfold the artist
like her womb, that held Jesus,
like a century that held those who built the basilica
to honor her.

From this tall bell tower
eyes watch the boats and ruins
and markets of Venice—
made miniature by distance.
From below, gondoliers, merchants, and sightseers
gaze at a giant monument—
while the artist steps through the cylinder from inside,
rotating slowly, as if turning on a potter's wheel,
earth-colored and smooth, like the first human.

Grande Montagne

Gregory W. Rohloff

At the base of the largest mountain in the entire range stood the village named after the mountain, Grande Montagne. Neither the mountain nor the village carried those names originally; Mount Silvercrest and Silver Point were the names derived from the silver mine that attracted the miners and the merchants who created the village and bestowed the names. The next generation thought the names reflected poorly, for the silver mine brought wealth to a select few, and it kept them there for fear of missing out on the next grand lode. Refinement was the goal, and to the villagers, a French name would turn the village into a refined and cultured place that would attract artisans and entrepreneurs, just as an earlier nearby village grew out of the arrival of Basque shepherds.

Because of the mountain range's mild climate, only the upper reaches of Grande Montagne ever saw snow. Springs that dotted the middle of the mountain flowed down the east side forming a small lake, Lac de la Montagne. On that shore is where the village of Grande Montagne stood, its grandest houses overlooking the lake and its view of the mountain's reflection. The visions of grandeur were a product of Grande Montagne's westernmost side, the location of the mine, and its rich lode of silver. The miners lived just out of view of Lac de la Montagne, for their houses were at the base of the mountain on the other side of the business district and the schools, nearly two miles from the lake. This geographical spread belied the village's importance to the outside world except for its silver.

The onset of winter that year seemed no different from previous winters when a light dusting of snow was all that fell before Christmas. But after that, the hundred-year-snows came, totaling more than thirty feet on the mountain by the first of March. When an early change in the jet stream brought warm air and rain to the mountain range, the snowmelt came so fast that by April, the lower reaches of the mountain were now quite mushy. Mud blocked the springs below ground, and the run-off filled Lake Montagne

until water lapped at Shoreline Drive, the address of the biggest houses of the most important residents.

Unknown to the miners was how the rapid melt and the changes to the bubbling springs would affect the geology below the mountain. A buildup of water that could no longer escape from the springs created a series of new fissures that went far below the base of the mountain, and methane that had been sequestered for tens of thousands of years followed routes that led directly to the mine shaft. When the first crew of miners entered the shaft and struck matches to light their lanterns, they triggered an explosion so fierce it was felt on the opposite side of the mountain. Of the one hundred miners, only ten outside the entrance survived the blast. However, some were so severely burned they were barely recognizable and not long for life, leaving only two survivors.

* * *

Dr. Renaldo was leaving for his clinic when the mine explosion occurred. He stopped for a moment in his driveway next to his car, and after looking around, he started to open his car door. He stopped when he saw the mangled body of a cardinal, its head mostly missing as if it had been caught by a prowling cat in the night. He heard the song of another cardinal coming from the maple tree next to the driveway. He scanned the branches until he saw the red feathers of the bird perched near the top of the tree. He slammed his car door and the bird flew away. He went back inside his house for a paper bag to scoop up the dead cardinal, its red and gray feathers scattered at the base of the tree being the only sign of what had happened.

“Stupid damn cat,” he said as he got into his car and drove to the clinic, thinking all the while how much he had enjoyed the cardinal’s songs each morning. That moment is when the explosion rattled the town.

Dr. Renaldo’s childhood was marred by his extremely short stature. Although his arms and legs were always proportional to his height as a child, his expectations of being as tall as his father and brother quickly faded by his late teens when he was just over four-and-a-half feet tall. His height led him to study biology and physiology in high school. Often he left school early to go to the city library and pore through medical texts, hoping to find an answer to how he could make himself grow. Although he could not find such an answer, he gained enough knowledge that he was easily

accepted into college and medical school. But even there, his height made him a target for jokes. As a child, he wished that he could be like a sparrow or cardinal or any other small bird that could simply fly to a different place when threatened. In medical school, though, he answered taunts silently by pushing himself to excel.

Yet, as an academically honored graduate, he was shunned when he applied to be on staff of medical practices in Bay City. One doctor, though, suggested he answer the call of Grande Montagne officials seeking a replacement for a retired doctor. Dr. Renaldo was the only applicant. He took the slight in the same manner as his academic ranking. He had been downgraded on his internship, dropping him from first in his class to fourth. Although he had a strong rapport with the patients he saw, no one could explain the unsatisfactory report on his internship. In the five years he had been there, he had saved the lives of children stricken with pneumonia and guided adults through bouts of the Spanish flu. Still, the residents murmured that Grande Montagne would not grow into a true city like Bay City until they had a corps of tall and sturdy doctors. And while their words were shielded from Dr. Renaldo, their expressions and attitudes were not. So, he clutched to that escape of his childhood wish of being like the sparrows and cardinals and flying to freedom. Such were his thoughts the morning of the explosion after arriving at the clinic and being told that his facilities were needed for both the living and the dead.

The first to arrive was the mine manager, whose office was in a shack about one hundred yards from the mine entrance. He had burns on his hands and face as he ran toward the entrance to pull those outside the mine further from the flames. Dr. Renaldo treated his burns with a silver compound, before taking the manager out to a car.

"Where are you taking him?" Dr. Renaldo asked the driver.

"Font Azure's hospital," he said. "The road to Bay City has been washed over with mud and would be slow going." Font Azure, located at the base of Grande Montagne on the mountain's north face, was settled twenty years before Grande Montagne and the silver rush. The north face opened to a lush valley suitable for grazing sheep, which attracted French Basque immigrants, and the valley's water came from a deep-flowing spring that formed a year-round brook with the purest of water. The village soon attracted merchants, and when the silver mine was discovered, the merchants worked together to provide the materials for constructing what was then

Silver Point. And as wealth accrued there, the Font Azure merchants then set up smaller shops to sell furnishings to the miners. As Silver Point grew into Grande Montagne, the merchants maintained their monopoly in the shops. The money was funneled back to Font Azure, which gained a hospital instead of the clinic that now belonged to Dr. Renaldo. The transfer of the mine manager to the Font Azure hospital meant Dr. Renaldo would not supervise his recovery; he would be lucky to recoup the expenses of the manager's emergency treatment.

The second survivor, the mine foreman, was similarly burned, and so Dr. Renaldo treated him with the silver compound, bandaged the wounds, and suggested he stay overnight in the clinic. The foreman agreed, and when he was resting comfortably with his family in the recovery room, Dr. Renaldo joined Mr. Baker, the town's mortician. The two men discussed how to handle the victims burned beyond recognition, and those whose facial features partially remained so kin could identify them.

Those bodies would not be gathered for at least another week, Mr. Baker explained to Dr. Renaldo, for fear of another explosion. Once the victims who could be identified were retrieved, those so badly burned would be buried en masse. Their families would only have a granite wall with a brass plaque engraved with the names of their loved ones.

When the time came two weeks later to start the cleanup of those who were recognizable, Dr. Renaldo met with Mr. Baker once more. They had twelve bodies to prepare for their funerals; some victims had severe burns from the waist down, and others suffered partial burns on their faces.

Mr. Baker said that facial burns would be covered with makeup if possible; if the burns were too extensive, a mask would be made of plaster of paris. Dr. Renaldo watched Mr. Baker scrub the victims clean of char and loose skin. The cleaning was followed by a layer of cheesecloth over the burn area, and then Mr. Baker slowly spread molten wax over the cloth, shaping it to match the curvature of the other side of the face. Once the wax was firm, Mr. Baker spread a thin layer of plaster of paris and set the body aside to let the plaster harden.

"See how easy this is?" Mr. Baker said. "When the plaster is firm, I will match the skin tone with paint and makeup."

"What about the missing arm?" Dr. Renaldo asked.

"Each body with an open casket funeral will have a shawl pulled across their chest covering their arms and torso so only their faces show."

Dr. Renaldo nodded and went to the table bearing another victim's body. The facial burn had been so severe that his left eye and most of his nose were missing. As Dr. Renaldo cleaned the victim's face, he wondered who the man was. He stretched cheesecloth down the left side of his face and across his nose. He carefully poured the wax over the cloth, wondering if he was making the layer too thin or too thick. As the wax started to set up, it flattened across the eye socket and the nasal cavity. When he added the plaster layer, the plaster sunk into the hole where his nose should have been. Despite adding more plaster, the paris only stuck to the sides where the nostrils should be before continuing to sink. He tried to shape it, but the more he molded and pressed, the less it looked like a human nose and the more it looked like a pig snout.

Dr. Renaldo worked furiously to no avail. He did not step back from the man's body until Mr. Baker's chuckle broke the silence. Dr. Renaldo turned and glared at Mr. Baker.

"I'm sorry," Mr. Baker said. "I should have taken this one. I neglected to tell you how to keep the rebuilt nose from looking like a snout."

Mr. Baker stepped up and cleared away the plaster and the wax. When he poured wax this time, he carved a wood shim into narrow strips, creating an arch to make a tip for the new nose.

After the wax firmed, he called over Dr. Renaldo.

"I want you to take it from here," he said. "Those little strips of wood underneath the wax will hold up the plaster now. But you still need to be careful with how much plaster you pour. Aim for the cheek and build up toward the tip. Then we can stick in another little strip of wood and give him a septum so your handiwork will last until the coffin is lowered into the grave."

Dr. Renaldo once again mixed plaster and pressed it onto the wax mask's edge on the man's left cheek. He smoothed it gently, creating an even curve for the edge of the nostril. Then he started on the right nostril, and as he smoothed the plaster up over the bridge of his nose, he created a bump-out on the left eye socket as if an eyeball remained under it. Mr. Baker stepped forward again and took over, smoothing it gently so that in the dim light the plaster blended in with the intact portion of his face.

Dr. Renaldo watched, and when Mr. Baker finished, Dr. Renaldo recognized this man as one who had summoned him when his daughter was stricken with pneumonia. The child was nearly gone when Dr. Renaldo arrived at the family's home, and he immediately began to treat the child

with serum. The child rested more comfortably, and as the night wore on, the man insisted Dr. Renaldo stay through the night. By mid-afternoon the next day, the girl's breathing was clearing, and when Dr. Renaldo pronounced her nearing recovery, he presented the man with a bill totaling fifty dollars, equal to the man's salary at the mine. The man threw the bill down and counted out twenty-five dollars.

"Now be gone," he said to Dr. Renaldo. "You won't be getting rich off my daughter's misery."

"The charge lets me order more serum varieties if someone else's child becomes as sick as she was. That's why I wrote the bill for fifty dollars."

"And I paid twenty-five—half the charge since you're half a man."

And the man shoved Dr. Renaldo from the little girl's bedroom and continued pushing him down the hallway and out the side door where he fell from the stoop and splayed across the rock-covered driveway.

Now Dr. Renaldo wished he could have left the pig's snout so that Grande Montagne could see this man for who he truly was. After Mr. Baker moved the body to another table in the workroom, he laid out two more victims, and both men worked late into the night masking the burns and damage so that the explosion could be ushered into the town's past when the time came to resume for making this little village grow like Font Azure or Bay City.

When they had finished for the night, Mr. Baker said he would give Dr. Renaldo credit for his help so the town council would feel obligated to pay more than a mortician's assistant would have earned. "Good to know my physician skills have some use here," Dr. Renaldo replied and left before Mr. Baker could wish him good night. As he walked to his car, a lone cardinal landed in a tree near his car. Dr. Renaldo wished the bird would sing, but as he drew nearer, he saw that this was a male cardinal, so when Dr. Renaldo opened the car door, the bird chirped and flew away.

* * *

The funerals and burials began the day after the last identifiable body had been prepared, and the ceremonies lasted two weeks, for only one of Grande Montagne's four churches was large enough to seat more than one hundred attendees. The enormity of the tragedy—everyone in town knew personally or was related to one of the ninety-eight victims. But by the last of the

funerals, the condolences to the grieving families grew shorter, and talk around town turned to how long the mine would be closed, and if it could be safely reopened. That discussion evolved to an opinion that the town would dry up without the mine, and that perhaps the grand homes could turn into vacation retreats if the lake were stocked with trout, bass, and walleye. The mayor, Brisbane Parker, decided he needed a decisive act, and so he declared a grand ball would celebrate the mine's reopening, promising that the ball would be conducted in a respectful way to honor the fallen miners.

When the last funeral had been conducted, Mayor Parker met with mine manager Booker Carlton to discuss the steps needed to reopen the mine. But most importantly, Mayor Parker assured Carlton that the city would pay half the costs for equipping miners with cap lamps to replace the kerosene lanterns. Carlton smiled at that news. "That allows us to order flame safety lamps at the same time we order cap lamps and Edison battery packs. We can start clearing the mine shaft in three months, and by fall, we should start producing silver again in the upper reaches of the mine."

"Then fall it is for the celebration ball," the mayor said. "You will be the ball's grand marshal; it will be a masked ball to make the two survivors comfortable."

For Dr. Renaldo, though, the news at first escaped him, for what he had been paid was minimal; less, he thought, than Mr. Baker would have received and only a few dollars more than a mortuary assistant would have been paid. Perhaps, giving up his clinic practice and moving back to Bay City or elsewhere in the country would be best. His thoughts turned again to the pig snout on the man who placed such little value on the health of his daughter that he refused to pay the full bill. Only now he could see him still with the pig snout, standing over him as he was knocked to the man's driveway. That image made him laugh, an act so rare for Dr. Renaldo he could not remember any other occasion for laughter since arriving in Grande Montagne.

Dr. Renaldo learned of the masked ball when he went to the café to share lunch with Mr. Baker, for the two developed a friendship through their emergency work together. A nearby table of women from the town chatted about the ball, wondering how soon they would need to order their gowns if they were going to Bay City to get them. Neither Grande Montagne nor Font Azure had a dress shop that offered anything other than the simplest dresses.

“Baker, what’s this that the women are talking about—a masked ball as if we were back in the seventeen hundreds in Versailles?” Dr. Renaldo leaned toward Mr. Baker. “Is the official mourning period now over?”

“You are full of sass,” Mr. Baker replied. “But, yes, the period of mourning is over. The safety equipment has been ordered and will arrive in August. So, the last Saturday in September will be a celebration. Booker Carlton and his wife will preside over the ball, so their masks need to be truly magnificent. Carlton has a wicked sense of humor.”

“Have invitations been sent, if they have, it is just one more that I have not received.” Dr. Renaldo opened the menu, but before he could decide on what to order, Baker spoke up.

“You have yet to be slighted this time around. I have not been invited formally, but Carlton’s secretary came to my office to inform me that I should be prepared to make masks for the occasion.”

“From funeral to fun, then, Baker. You are a man of all occasions here.”

“Renaldo, they want three hundred and fifty masks,” Baker said. “Most would be half-masks over the eyes and bridging the nose, but she said Mr. and Mrs. Carlton needed full facial masks, and they should not be boring.”

“So you want my help,” Dr. Renaldo said.

“If you don’t mind. We can make the partial masks over the course of a few evenings,” Mr. Baker said. “And for those wanting a full mask, Mayor Parker said he would be generous. We can split the five hundred dollars evenly, now that you know the secrets of mask-making.”

“As much as I make in a month preserving the lives of those with the misfortune of falling ill in Grande Montagne,” Dr. Renaldo said. “I will do it on the condition that I have free rein with the Carlton’s masks.”

“OK, what do you have in mind?” Mr. Baker asked. “The Carltons will pay nicely if they are eye-catching. A thousand dollars each is what Mr. Carlton said when he and Mayor Parker approached me about their masks.”

Dr. Renaldo smiled. “Eye-catching they will be, so long as I can use some surgical skills so their masks do not look at all like masks. They will be worth every penny of what the Carltons will pay. And now for lunch.”

Mr. Baker took up the menu and scanned the entrees list. “The baked chicken, I suggest.” And he laid the menu down as he looked at Dr. Renaldo. “Of course, and I’ll treat.”

* * *

The road to Bay City had been cleared by early August, so the women who wanted to create the greatest impression began their jaunts to find their gowns. The selection soon turned sparse because in Bay City, spring was the season for galas. Thus, those women who did not find a suitable gown on their first trip to Bay City turned to a seamstress there who made costumes for theatrical productions. She showed them how she could turn a simple house dress into a bejeweled gown by adding layers of lace adorned with glass beads. She explained that she could order powdered wigs with ringlets of hair that flowed to shoulder length, for only a few dollars each.

"I will be back tomorrow with an ankle-length dress," said Bonita Carlton, wife of the mine manager. "I want seven layers of lace the full length of the dress, and I want a beaded wig."

When the dressmaker said such a creation would be quite heavy, Mrs. Carlton cut her off. "I am the grand dame of the ball. All eyes must be on me."

* * *

A week before the ball, Mr. Baker and Dr. Renaldo started work on the half-masks that gala-goers would hold in front of their faces whenever they addressed each other. Mayor Parker ordered one-hundred-fifty half-masks and one hundred full masks. Mr. Baker started on the full masks while Dr. Renaldo started on the half masks; they created exaggerated lips on the full masks painted a deep red, and on both, arched eyebrows in a variety of colors. After working for an hour, Dr. Renaldo set aside his twentieth half-mask and asked if he could join Mr. Baker on the full masks.

"I'd like to do something extravagant with the noses that just don't seem right with the half masks," Dr. Renaldo said.

"Of course," Mr. Baker said. "Take this mold and build your mask over it. I do hope you can fashion a bird beak—like a heron. That would be magnificent."

"A heron?" Dr. Renaldo said, tilting his head back as if this were a weighty decision of life or death. "Yes, and perhaps a tiny elephant trunk, and a porcupine face with quills. Is that possible?"

"Quills? I think so just as long as they were flexible and in no danger of stabbing anyone while they danced," Mr. Baker said. "Ooh, you are good at this. What about a pig's snout?"

"I would like to do that for Mr. Carlton, and something that would go with it for Mrs. Carlton, something totally outrageous."

With that change, they continued working through the evening, creating a hawk's beak on one mask and matching it with a duckbill, and another pair with a heron's beak matched with a heavily furred dog's muzzle complete with an array of black and white whiskers. Each creation bordered on humor and terror. By the end of the evening, forty full masks had been completed, and Mr. Baker motioned for Dr. Renaldo to arrange the masks so that they could firm up and dry.

"Tomorrow, I can finish the full masks and you can resume making the half masks," Mr. Baker said.

"Of course," Dr. Renaldo said. "When I go home tonight, I will sketch out the masks for the Carltons, and I will make them after the half-masks are completed. I have been studying some books explaining how such a mask could be created that could be attached with surgical stitches to their faces so they could be heavier than other masks, thus, more noticeable and more outrageous."

"Stitched?" Mr. Baker said, drawing his hands toward his chest.

"The idea comes from masks created after the Great War for soldiers so badly wounded they needed a full face covering from just inside the hairline to the tip of their chin and along the jawline. They were quite successful, and with just four stitches above the hairline, and three into the chin, the masks were never in danger of slipping."

"That's interesting," Mr. Baker said.

"And even more interesting is that they can be removed the next morning with no fuss for the Carltons," Dr. Renaldo said. "The only matter is the expense, at least a thousand dollars each."

"For this," Mr. Baker said, "Mayor Parker and Mr. Carlton would certainly be all in without a question. And if we finish the masks as quickly as we are going, I can plan my own costume and mask. Are you going?"

"I think not," Dr. Renaldo said. "Who would I dance with? Besides, by the time we are finished with the masks, I will be ready for an early night in. Particularly since I will have to install the Carltons' masks at the clinic the night before the gala so they can be more comfortable and will be used to wearing their masks by the start of the ball. They can be quite heavy compared to these full masks."

Mr. Baker nodded as if he understood and agreed, but the look in his eyes as Dr. Renaldo glanced across at him when he finished speaking was as if the doctor was speaking in Latin.

* * *

Dr. Renaldo sketched out the designs of the masks with little detail. For Mr. Carlton, he arched the eyebrows halfway up the forehead and colored in a wisp of a goatee on the chin. And when he showed it to Mr. Carlton, he explained that the design of the two was not to be the shocking grotesquery that Mr. Carlton had wanted, but they were aimed at focusing attention on the nose piece, which he waited to draw until he was seated at Mr. Carlton's desk, and then he raced through the strokes as he spoke. "It will look something like this, a bulbous snout turned up so that the nostrils point out instead of down."

Mr. Carlton chuckled as Dr. Renaldo continued. "And it will be powdered with a pinkish-hued powder as its finishing touch so that in the bright lights of the Hotel Montagne's ballroom, it will glow."

Then he showed a sketch of Mrs. Carlton's mask, the lips fashioned as if they had been rotated a quarter turn, and her eyebrows below her eyes. As Mr. Carlton gasped, Dr. Renaldo placed the sketches in his bag, and as he stepped toward the door, he turned back toward Mr. Carlton.

"One thing, sir, you need to come to the clinic tomorrow night. Do not eat before you come. Because of the weight of the masks, I need to stitch the masks in place—a very fine stitch in no more than four, maybe five places, so that when you are dancing the mask will not bounce around. The stitches come out the next morning with barely a hint that they'd been there. To get the stitches in, you'll need anesthesia, hence no eating beforehand."

Mr. Carlton leaned back. "I had no idea this would be such an ordeal."

"You're not thinking of switching are you?" Dr. Renaldo asked.

"No, no, my good man," he said. "We need to make a splash to show that Grande Montagne is back in business."

* * *

On the morning before the grand ball, the song of a green warbler perched in a tree near the bedroom window woke Dr. Renaldo. He did not arise immediately because the song was continuing, causing him to smile. This is the day I break free with flight for how I've been treated by this place. And after he had eaten breakfast and had gone out to the car, the fluttering of a hummingbird caught Dr. Renaldo's attention, and he stopped to look

for it. Not far above him, he spotted the bird, with a green throat, purple forehead, and dark tail. He recognized the bird as one that would soon take flight from these mountains and return to the highlands of Mexico. "Go, my friend, I will join you later," he whispered.

All through the day, he counted the hours when the Carltons would come in. Before noon, he called the mine office and asked the receptionist to remind Mr. Carlton to eat lightly and to call Mrs. Carlton to remind her, too. And in mid-afternoon, he checked his anesthesia supplies, starting with nitrous oxide administered with an occasional stream of oxygen. And when the mask had been attached to the chin, ready for the cuts that would show Grande Montagne what monsters they were, he would apply ether to knock them out for the completion of his plot. When he felt comfortable that the remaining three patients' minor ailments could wait for treatment, he ushered them out and went to the bank to take out a thousand dollars from his personal account.

Shortly before five o'clock, the couple arrived, and Dr. Renaldo gave them gowns and directed them to neighboring exam rooms where he would start their anesthesia, and then transfer them individually to the procedure room where he would apply ether.

"And just to be safe," Dr. Renaldo said, "you haven't eaten this evening, have you?"

The Carltons assured him they had followed his directions completely and Mr. Carlton waved an envelope. "Two thousand dollars in cash, as you requested."

Dr. Renaldo smiled and tucked the money in his lab coat pocket. He then arranged the nitrous oxide canister in Mr. Carlton's room. Soon he was in a drowsy state, and Dr. Renaldo pushed the gurney into the procedure room where he fitted a wire mask over Mr. Carlton's face and measured out ether into gauze. He watched for a moment and then took the nitrous oxide into Mrs. Carlton's room and started her preparations.

"I will be back in a few minutes after I fit your husband's mask to him," Dr. Renaldo said, but the woman was already drowsy and did not reply or react.

Dr. Renaldo took a scalpel and immediately cut around the tip of Mr. Carlton's nose, clamping sponges on the sides of his face to control the bleeding, before stitching shut the wounds on the sides of the nostrils. Then he dropped the tip of the nose into a cup he buried in the bottom of the trash can. Within minutes, Mr. Carlton wore a mask that featured black stripes

that ran from the edge of the mask to the focal point—a plump, bright pink snout that would have looked perfectly natural on a hog.

After returning Mr. Carlton to his room, he wheeled Mrs. Carlton into the procedure room, where he repeated the ether process. Now he worked more delicately because a sense of madness welled up in Dr. Renaldo. Mrs. Carlton was a beauty, but he braced himself to carry out this act of revenge on the town's power structure. He made slits from the base of her nose through her upper lip, and then from the lower lip for an inch toward her chin. The lines were jagged for he had to clamp sponges on the sides of his openings.

He stitched her lips together so that her mouth opened side-to-side, matching the vertical mouth opening of her mask. Next, he cut in a circular fashion around each eyebrow, and carefully set them aside on a tray. After stitching these wounds shut, he attached these brows to again match openings in the mask below her blue eyes, and then her mask, and her beauty was blotted out.

Dr. Renaldo waited for the anesthesia to wear off—now it was quite late in the evening—and as the couple started to move around on their gurneys, he measured out a shot of morphine for each.

“This will help with the discomfort,” he said as Mr. Carlton sat up. “When you feel steady, get dressed and I will drive you home in your car.”

Mr. Carlton started to object, but Dr. Renaldo cut him off. “When the morphine kicks in, you will feel too woozy to drive. The distance is one that I can walk back to the clinic.”

Soon they were dressed and wobbled to their Packard. While Mr. Carlton insisted he could drive, Dr. Renaldo guided him to the passenger seat and took the wheel, driving carefully to avoid any jolts or attention from anyone passing on the street. Then, Dr. Renaldo walked briskly back downtown, whistling softly and thinking of his escape from Grande Montagne. When he passed the Post Office, he pulled out an envelope bearing a letter of resignation addressed to Mayor Parker. His whistled song grew louder and brighter as he drew near the clinic. Dropping the letter late on a Friday night meant the letter would not be processed until the next morning, and if the postmaster was headed for the ball, perhaps it would not arrive until Monday afternoon, by which time, Dr. Renaldo would be in Bay City and calling on medical practices to see who would need an additional physician, confident his classmates would steer him wisely, whether in Bay City or in a neighboring state.

Saturday morning, he took his medical kit and called on the Carltons. Neither had slept well, but with the ball just hours away, they were too excited to complain about discomfort.

"I will be back around four o'clock to administer a slight dosage of the morphine to each of you—no more than one glass of champagne each to-night—but the morphine will keep you in strong spirits," Dr. Renaldo said. "Any questions?"

"This whole business has taken away my appetite for breakfast," Mr. Carlton said. "Any suggestions?"

"Yes, a broth soup—chicken would be perfect if you like that—and a slice of soft bread—something bland that won't upset your stomachs," Dr. Renaldo replied. "Avoid exertion until after you've eaten." He turned to Mrs. Carlton as he continued.

"Do you have some help with your ball gown; I've heard the talk about it being so bejeweled and heavy, I don't want you to strain getting into it."

"Of course," she said. "Eva is here and she will help me dress; she has done this before, so I am in good hands, Dr. Renaldo."

"Very well," he said. "I will see you tomorrow." And with that, Dr. Renaldo returned to his apartment to pack books, clothing, and personal effects so he could load them into his Model T and be gone first thing Sunday morning, joyous at the thought that this tomb of an apartment would be empty.

When Dr. Renaldo returned in the afternoon, the Carltons were already dressed for the ball—Mr. Carlton in a black Tuxedo coat trimmed with silk lapels, and Mrs. Carlton, barely able to stand in the seven-layer gown with jewels scattered randomly across the flowing top layer that ran from her shoulders to the floor.

"I have smaller doses of the morphine so that the weight of the masks will not be a burden as the evening wears on," Dr. Renaldo said.

"It is a shame you will not be there to see the reaction to our masks," Mr. Carlton said. "I love how you painted vertical lips on Henrietta's mask. It is such a shock."

Dr. Renaldo nodded. "I'm not much for parties and balls," he said. "I'm sure you will be the hit of the night."

"If you don't mind, sir, the shots we had last night were quite overwhelming," Mr. Carlton said. "We don't want to miss a moment tonight."

"Very good, sir," Dr. Renaldo said as he snapped shut his medical bag. "When would you like me to come Sunday to remove the masks?"

"I'll send for you Sunday morning," Mr. Carlton said. "Will you be at the clinic or at home?"

"Home. But I do have some errands so your messenger can leave the message at the small table near the stairs that lead to my door. I won't be gone long, so I will come immediately when I get back from the errands if that suits your desires."

With that, Dr. Renaldo tipped his hat and left for home. Now the time for leaving would be changed. He would load the car as soon as the street outside his apartment was dark, and he would then disappear into the night before the ball was over. He stopped at the clinic and boxed his medical books. And when he arrived home, he realized how each box of clothing, kitchen items, and bedding, brought a greater sense of joy. This was his escape.

Shortly after nine o'clock, a smattering of rain started to fall and Dr. Renaldo looked back at the mountains, now shrouded in clouds. Little of value was left in the apartment. Leave it; when I mail the key to Mrs. Sims, I can instruct her to dispose of what's left. And with that, he carried his bags to the car and set them in the passenger seat. The going would be slow as the rain now fell steadily. The hour drive to the bridge across Crystal River now would take three hours or more, time he wanted to reach Bay City so that he could freshen up before seeking out his classmates.

The runoff that had been contained in the ditches alongside the gravel road now lapped into the roadbed, washing away gravel, and causing the Model T to slide across the larger muddy patches. As Dr. Renaldo neared the bridge that crossed high above the Crystal River, he saw small black birds stalking around the side of the bridge. He slowed down first, and when he saw what the Chihuahuan ravens were dancing around, he pulled the car over to the left side of the road and got out. Immediately the rant of ravens took flight down the mountainside, leaving Dr. Renaldo alone to ponder where the rain had washed out the right-side bridge support that connected the road to the bridge.

He threw a stone from the roadway into the abyss, and silently thanked the ravens, for he was uncertain if the Model T could stay to the left side on the bridge and make it the one hundred yards across the chasm. He would need daylight, and even then, he realized that a doctor was not a bridge engineer. So, he returned to his car to sleep until daylight, and if he could not sleep he would comb through memories of past patient calls down the side roads to homesteads and cabins that would give him an alternative

to returning to Grande Montagne. Perhaps a road led to Font Azure so he could take a highway there along the valley that also led to the coastal plains and Bay City.

He was certain that in daylight he would recognize such a road and he would be in Bay City by nightfall. He went to sleep and dreamt of a green-throated hummingbird, which circled him momentarily in the dream and then he joined it in flight leaving the mountains behind.

At daybreak, the song of another hummingbird awoke Dr. Renaldo, who twisted around in his seat until he saw a Blue-throated Mountain Gem. "Ah, my dream bird sent you to be my guide from this accursed mountain," Dr. Renaldo said as he left his car and looked once more at the other side of the bridge. The damage was much worse than he could see in the dark; the bridge tilted slightly toward the failed support. The hummingbird flew directly over the gap and disappeared among the pines. Dr. Renaldo dug through the boxes hoping to find a map that could show him the routes other than the one he had known from his arrival to Grande Montagne.

The search was futile, and so Dr. Renaldo sat in the car trying to recall his visit to the cabin of a trapper who had broken his foot when he stepped on one of his own traps. The road was nearly twenty miles outside of Grande Montagne, but it was not as steep as this road. Even though it was narrow, the road switched back and forth down the mountain until it came to a creek that fed into the Crystal River, and that is where the trapper's cabin sat among the pines. Now, he tried to recall if that road looped toward the creek and then back to the main road, or did it cross another road that continued through the valley, past the river bend and led to Bay City? He sat for two hours, panicking at the thought that he would get on that little road only to find that it too was a victim of a mudslide, or that the trapper's cabin had long been abandoned and now was no longer a landmark he could trust. And so he sat, admiring the beauty of the mountain range and the towering pines and the sound of the rushing river below, wishing that another possible escape route could come to mind.

Instead, by mid-morning, the noise he heard was the sound of an automobile engine, an engine more powerful than his Model T, for it was the sound he had heard when he drove the Carltons home. He turned to look at the car—the Packard, indeed—and he saw Mr. Carlton striding mightily toward him. He sat still until Mr. Carlton was next to the Model T. His mask was slightly askew for the stitches on the right side of the mask had been

cut. In his hand was an ax, and Mr. Carlton pulled the ax over his head and swung down on the hood of the Model T. The ax handle split and the head of the ax bounded away from Mr. Carlton.

"I ought to beat you to death with this," he said, waving the splintered handle over his head. "My assistant went to your apartment only to find the door open and the landlady sweeping the floor. She told him you had left Grande Montagne and would not be back."

Then Mr. Carlton jabbed his finger at the mask near his nose. "This is what you did to me. Me! Me! I put up the money to equip the clinic so you could have a job. And this is how you repay me."

He flung the ax handle into the gap where the rain had washed away the bridge support. And he grabbed Dr. Renaldo and pulled him from the Model T. Then he turned to a strong box on the floor. "Is my money in this?"

Dr. Renaldo, now prone on the ground, muttered a soft yes, and Mr. Carlton grabbed the strong box and carried it to his Packard.

"May God have mercy on you, Renaldo, for no one in Grande Montagne will have mercy if you show up there; I've already seen to that."

"Did you call the police?"

"No. If you can find your way clear, then go." And with that, Mr. Carlton tossed the strong box onto the floor of the Packard and started the car. "I will take care of Bonita first, the monstrous act that you committed on her beauty. I will take her to Font Azure, and when I am assured that whatever can be done for her mouth is done, then I might call authorities." And he drove away, and all Dr. Renaldo could hear was the rush of the river far below him and the squawking call of a Chihuahuan raven gliding overhead, cutting lazy circles far above the treetops and the river gorge.

Two hours later, still stretched out across the ground, a voice called out to Dr. Renaldo. "Hey sir, you all right?"

"I could not be better, for I did not collapse the bridge in the middle of the night, and the man who robbed me did not kill me." Dr. Renaldo stood up. "Are you with the police?"

"Nope. the county roads department office in Font Azure. The Bay City office called me to check the bridge. So that's what I'm here for."

The man lumbered past Dr. Renaldo and, after inspecting the chasm where solid ground had been the day before, he returned to Dr. Renaldo. "I can call the police when I get back to Font Azure and send for a truck to pull your Model T. Never saw one with a gash in the hood like that."

"I don't think I need either one."

"What about the man who robbed you? Where'd he go?"

"Font Azure I presume."

"Well, there you go; I can turn him into the police when I get there. What did he look like?"

For a moment as the whole scenario ran through Dr. Renaldo's head, from the mortician work to the grand ball and the miserly ways of Grande Montagne, Dr. Renaldo held his tongue for several moments before answering. "He has a nose like a pig's snout, and his wife's mouth goes from up and down and opens from side to side."

"Well hell, Buddy. You're drunk. I can't let you get on the road in that condition. Now you hop up there into my truck and I'll send for a tow to get your car. You can spend the rest of the day in the drunk tank. In the morning, you can see the judge, pay a little fine, and be on your way."

Dr. Renaldo shook his head. "I told you I was robbed, but I suppose one could say the man took what had been his. The Font Azure drunk tank will be good, and I will agree to whatever the judge orders tomorrow, other than a fine."

And Dr. Renaldo climbed up into the truck under the gaze of the county roadman.

"Pretty spry for a little guy," he said as Dr. Renaldo closed the door. He looked out the window as they took off down the road. He did not look at the road as the truck jostled along the washed-out gravel. Instead, he looked up at the ravens gliding from their perches amid the pines to a spot on the ground, and then taking off again, circling overhead.



“Out of Yellowstone” (Olivia M. Bergeron).

Over the Rio Grande Line

After Glenis Redmond

Lin Flores

It is curious how the stories
migrate along the family trail
with night-sight eyes in daylight.
How Mexican myth melted its Duvalín
chocolate in our jort pockets across the heat,
smeared and sticky it is all there was to eat for days.
I carry the guilt. One dulce especially,
how dad hid and one patrol officer found him
separated from the rest, dad ran through the oaks
the way “beaners” do—looking for the wall.
Concealed for two nights. That is how I got here—
born of bravery and vision and refuge.

The first time he crossed though, only river
lay to land. Dad had a trash bag of things, a best friend,
and a dream. Made it to America. Made America. Until
the liquor was stronger than he was
with so-called “wetback” wasted warped tongue
to phone my sister in slurs: *fucking cry baby*.
Father warned: *better not date a black guy*.
Was father trekking toward villainy or
lost in entitlement? We were borders
apart. Never heard “I didn’t mean it.”
Or “I was wrong.” I carry the crusty candy
shame of what my father said when drunk.

How Do The Crows Know?

Mark A. Folse

How do the crows know
when I am awake, caw-ling
for the peanuts I will
scatter in the street?
I have made this arrangement
to rekindle every morning
a forgotten relationship
with Creation, to unbuild
the walls our so-called
civilization has erected
against Nature. I call them
the crow cousins, adapting
the Native arrangement
of a family of life.

Someday, I will shut-off
the alarms demanding
timeliness in obeisance
to the unnatural construction
called modern life &
wake when the cousins call.
I will make a Newer Covenant
& abandon dominion for
the company of familiars,
bring back the magic
we have abandoned
& repose in a whole world.

A Blue Kazoo

An Homage

Mark A. Folse

I do not sing things as they are.
I do not have a blue guitar.
I blow instead a blues kazoo
of all the songs I ever knew.
Relearning what I knew by rote
& pile up new ones note-by-note
upon the staves, which quiver
as if I owned a blue guitar.

In a Crowd / In a Courtyard

Mark A. Folse

In a crowd, in a courtyard
backstopped by jasmine,
blessed be the mixed scents
of flower & the queenly perfumes
southern women favor.

I realize I can no longer name
the most popular scents;
too long off the market,
too long in the deep north,
too long in lockdown.

I must reacquaint my senses,
as I did my skin going from
April snow to August thunder,
and push my bashful self
to ask a woman, "That's

a lovely scent. What
is it called?" and be
thought an old Hank
when I have no ill
or other intention than

to recover entire
the self that left
New Orleans, New Year's
Eve in '86 & became,
for a long time, someone else.

Brody

Ellis. R. Veret

Tonight is the first night in five days that I could see straight, though, I don't intend to keep my vision sharp for much longer. Sooner or later, I'm going to turn to my left or right, sit at a bar and chase shots of well liquor down with bottles of cheap beer. I don't have a specific bar in mind, so I let my feet lead the way. I'm looking at the ground as I walk, stepping over Mardi Gras beads, murky puddles, horse shit, and vomit. I look up to see a man in a three-piece suit, motioning groups of drunk men with a silent invite into a strip club. I veer onto the next off-street to avoid the crowd. It's busier than usual for a weekday.

I can't even remember the actual day. Tuesday, I think. Maybe Wednesday . . . Possibly even Thursday. It doesn't really matter. Dates only matter to the employed, and I'm a no-call-no-show for five days now. Every night I tell myself that I'm going to call them first thing in the morning to apologize but then I sleep through the entire day. Working at a brunch diner leaves very little hours to get in touch with the boss. Correction: ex-boss.

"Aye! Aye, light skin!" a voice calls to me from behind, standing out against the drunken howls coming from the popular neon-lit street from two blocks away. I turn slowly. Does this motherfucker have a tracker on me? "Let me borrow another ten from you."

"Borrow?"

He snickers like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "You know what I mean."

"I gave you money last night when I saw you off St. Charles. And the night before that in the parish. And the night before *that* night at Lost Love Lounge." Papa Smurf has to be the only bum in New Orleans that gets around as much as he does.

"This is the last time I'll ask you for anything," he pleads with prayer hands. I give him a single dollar that he examines quizzically. He looks as if he'd

never seen a \$1 bill before. Or that he's never seen one from me. "That's it?" he asks.

I shrug. "I haven't been working."

Papa Smurf's ungrateful ass squints and turns away, mumbling under his breath. I began walking again. I haven't had a drink yet but I already taste the vodka. My body's yearning for the dizzying sensation of alcohol in my system. The next bar I come across will be the first bar that I settle in for the night. As I walk through a residential strip, I spot someone at a distance. His silky black hair is a travesty on his head. He's squatting on the curb of the next street with his head buried in his hands. I'm walking towards his direction with every intention of pretending he doesn't exist but as I get closer, I find it difficult to ignore him.

"Hey," I call out before realizing I was going to speak to him. He groans and shifts only slightly. "You don't look so good."

He lifts his head to look at me. He looks a little older than me. Late 20s to early 30s. His face is drained of color and his lips are starting to chafe. Surely, he's no stranger to hard drugs. Yet, amazingly he exudes a charming innocence. His bright eyes, surrounded by red, compliments his handsome face much more than his gangly figure.

Hesitation ignites in me as I walk away. My heart is heavy while I enter what I thought to be a completely random Irish pub across the street. I have absolutely no recollection of ever being here but the bartender greets me with familiarity. He probably doesn't know my name but he does know my drink order.

"Shot of Titos and a Corona?"

"With a lime, please."

For a few minutes, I can't keep from looking out the window and across the street. Anytime someone gets close to the guy on the corner, I involuntarily stir in my seat. I start to wonder if anyone had ever given my safety a second thought those six nights ago. I wonder if the thought kept them up at night. That person doesn't exist, I'm sure. I wonder if that nonexistent person thinks about me still, hoping that everything turned out okay.

I wish I could let that person know that it hadn't.

"What's the deal with that drunk guy out there?" I ask the bartender.

"The white boy across the street?" He grimaces, wrinkling his own white face. "I'm pretty sure he's fucked up on a lot more than alcohol."

"So you don't know anything about him?"

“Nothing.”

I try to convince myself to drop the impromptu investigation. He’s far from the only strung out addict wandering the French Quarter tonight or any other night. He’ll be fine. . . .

He’ll be fine. . . .

The devil on my shoulder is dancing.

“Damn it,” I swear to myself.

Finishing my drinks in two fell swoops, I walk out the pub and approach the incapacitated fellow once more. His face is still buried in his hands while he’s sitting. He hadn’t moved an inch since I’d left him.

“Hey,” I kick his feet. “You got a name?”

He squints at me with bloodshot eyes. “Brody, is that you?”

I snort involuntarily. Brody has to be the whitest white boy name in America. Brodys play Lacrosse in high school. Brodys spend holiday weekends skiing the Swiss Alps with their best friend, Hunter. Brodys’ moms get biweekly colonoscopies. “Do I look like a *Brody*?”

“Brody, man,” he continues as if he didn’t hear me at all. “I don’t feel so good. Take me home.”

He sounds like a little kid after riding on the spinning teacups at a carnival one too many times. His greasy hair falls over his face while he’s looking up at me and I resist the urge to brush it back.

“Where do you live?”

“Not far,” he answers lowly.

He hangs his head once more. I open my mouth to speak but a thought holds me back. The devil on my shoulder starts to toy with the idea of walking away. I haven’t fully committed to helping this stranger yet. I could go to another bar and drink until I forget to stop worrying about his well-being. I would be better off if I drove to a mid-city bar. It lessens the chances that I’d run into him again.

My mouth is still hanging open when he falls over. His head slams the pavement with an echoing bang. He catches the attention of a couple of stragglers outside of the bar across the street. One of the loiterers takes a hesitant step in our direction.

“Is he okay?” he asks.

“He’s fine.” I lie.

He’s conscious but barely. His forehead is already starting to bruise. I lift him up, supporting most of his weight on my shoulders. I slap him, lightly,

in the face a couple of times. He opens his eyes and starts to support his weight by only a little. If he cooperates enough, I could get him to my car. We start walking and I turn back to look at the drinkers outside of the bar. The curious man hasn't broken his gaze yet. It could be pure curiosity but my body shakes as I start to consider that he has more cynical intentions. He takes one step in our direction and I start walking faster, taking an immediate turn to the next corner.

I pause to catch my breath. I practically carried the guy to this point. The entire left side of his forehead is dark purple now. I touch it only slightly with my middle and index finger. He winces.

"I gotta get you to a hospital, guy."

"No," he pleads frantically. "No hospitals. Home."

"You hit your head really hard. You might have a concussion."

"Please, Brody." He places both hands on my shoulders and looks at me square in the eyes. For a single conscious moment, I think that he truly sees me. Just as quickly, the brief moment passed.

I roll my eyes. "We can argue about it when we get to my car."

Guy doesn't reply. We start walking and for the entire six-block trek to my car, I damn near carry him. He calls out the name Brody a few times in the beginning. I try asking him questions about his name or where he lives but the most I can get out of him are mumbles. The more we walk, the less coherent he becomes. By the time we finally make it to my car, his feet are no longer touching the ground.

I lay Guy down in the backseat. He tucks his knees into his chest and lays his head on both of his hands. His hair is resting on his bruised face. He starts blowing sharp breaths out of his mouth as he unconsciously tries to get the hair out of his face. I thought about tucking it behind his ears but I don't want my actions to come off the wrong way.

Now that Guy is in my car, I start contemplating the next step. My home isn't an option. I mean, it is, but I don't seriously consider it. Not even for a second. Guy seems harmless enough while in a stupor but it'd be careless of me to bring a complete stranger into my home overnight. The hospital and his home are the only realistic options, but I have no idea where Guy lives. I call out to him to try and get an address. He's completely unresponsive. If it wasn't for his obnoxiously loud snoring, I would have been worried that he's died of head trauma in the backseat of my car.

My phone starts to ring. I know it's my best friend before reaching into my pocket because of the designated ringtone: *go best friend, that's my best friend, that's my best friend*.

I know immediately that whatever reason she's calling for is urgent. Shelby is more of the texting type. It's how I've been able to easily avoid her for the past few days. She has sent text after text to no avail. For only a fraction of a second, I consider ignoring the call.

"Is it possible that she's calling just to talk?" I silently ask myself. It isn't. She's calling because she *needs* me.

"Hello?"

She sounds relieved when she says my name. "I need you."

Guy sleeps like a baby during the short drive. It takes less than a couple minutes to reach Shelby. I park a block away and walk to the corner of Frenchmen and Esplanade, where she's waiting for me. Blake is behind her, biting down on his bottom lip while his hands are holding on to her waist. As I get closer, I realize that he's dry humping her. My stomach starts to turn.

Only a few feet behind them, a group of wandering drunk girls start to snicker and point as they become aware of Blake's shameless behavior. He turns to look at them with a proud grin and then proceeds to thrust harder at Shelby's ass.

"You like that, babe?" he asks, never looking away from the group of girls.

The girls cover their mouths and cackle in a huddle. Shelby rolls her eyes and points a thumb over her shoulder, as if to say: "do you see what I have to deal with?" I don't know why Shelby puts up with Blake's bullshit. Before Blake, no guy had ever stood a chance with Shelby. If her boyfriend had so much as liked another girl's Instagram picture, she would send him a breakup text and find a new boyfriend in the next hour. I learned early on to never get attached to any of Shelby's boyfriends. Sadly, most other boyfriends in the past I had truly liked. For the handful of her boyfriends that I didn't like, it was never a problem because they would break up in a few weeks anyway. When Shelby first began to date Blake, I didn't bother to manifest an honest opinion about him. I didn't even think he would last the usual two-to-three-week trial. Blake radiates a toxic dude-bro energy that Shelby typically despises. Or she used to. It used to be that Shelby would mimic a gag at the sight of a guy like Blake. Yet, here we are; a year later and Shelby is getting dry-humped on a street corner while a barely legal audience gapes in amusement.

"Can you stop?" she finally says to Blake, nudging him with her elbow. The girls snap out of their cackles all at once and start to scurry off. Blake turns back and sees me.

"Hey!" he says, smiling. It takes a literal strength in me to force myself to wave and smile back. "Thanks for coming to our rescue. I owe you one."

"I was already in the quarter." I state matter-of-factly. I redirect my attention to Shelby. "So, explain to me what happened again."

"I told you," she says. "I lost my purse somewhere on Frenchmen. I don't even knowhow. Blake and I were looking for it all night. He had to have called my phone at least a hundred times before some bummy dude answered. He said that he spent \$300 to buy myphone from a stranger."

"Okay?" I say, genuinely trying my best not to sound condescending. "So how areyou stranded Downtown?"

"We took an uber to get here."

"And?"

"When we met up with the dude who had my phone, he asked for \$200 to make upfor the \$300 that he spent for it."

"And you believed him?" I ask in disbelief.

"Not really but I just wanted my phone back. Blake emptied his bank card to get themoney for it but I still don't have my purse, so we have no way of being able to pay for an uber."

"Where is he?" I ask.

"Who?"

"The bum."

"We met up with him a few of blocks down the street."

She points in the same direction as my car. Without saying a word, I march off to mycar at a heavy pace. I could feel my ears steaming with anger. I can hear Shelby andBlake a few paces behind me. I enter the car from the front passenger side. Shelby stops dead in her tracks when she notices Guy sleeping in the backseat.

"Who the fuck is that?" she asks.

"I don't know."

"You don't know?!" Blake interjects.

I use my key to open the glove compartment. The door flaps open, revealing a gun. Shelby screams.

"When did you get a gun?" she asks.

"A couple of days ago."

“You’re going to shoot *him*?” she points to Guy.

I hold the gun in my hand, studying it for a spell. I answer without looking at her. “No,” I finally say with a dramatic beat. Both Shelby and Blake are positioned with a cautious stance. “I’m going to get your money back.”

* * *

The three of us trot down a (relatively) quiet residential side street off Esplanade. I leave Guy sleeping in my car. Sure, it’s just as possible for him to steal from my car as it is for him to steal from my apartment, but the only thing of real value that I ever keep in my crappy car is currently stuffed in my waistband. As we search for the bum, I explain to Shelby how I met Guy. I expect her to call me an idiot but she doesn’t. She calls him a lost puppy.

“You should hang *found* fliers of him near the area,” she jokes. “He’s probably worth a hefty reward.”

“Shut up.” I laugh.

“If no one responds to the fliers then we should keep him.”

“But what if he doesn’t get along with Spot?” Blake mocks concern.

“You’re right,” Shelby says. “Spot is extremely territorial. This could be quite the predicament.”

“Keep it up. I will leave both of y’all stranded here.” I retort. Shelby gasps. I exhale in defeat. “That was a joke.”

“No. It’s him!” She says, pointing ahead.

She’s pointing at a tall, young-ish black man with very slightly unkempt hair. He’s sitting on a patio bench while smoking a blunt. I can smell it half a block away.

“That’s him?” I ask in surprise. Shelby nods. “I thought you said he was a bum.”

“I said he was *bummy*.”

Other than his hair and his oversized attire, he doesn’t give off strong “bummy” vibes. I was expecting to point a loaded gun at a conniving, toothless crackhead. Lookin’ at this extremely ordinary man, *almost* makes me regret what I’m going to do next. Almost.

“Aye, motherfucker!” I yell. “Don’t move.”

The three of us are standing right on the bottom step of the man’s porch while I point my gun at him. He jumps to a stance, dropping his blunt to the ground and holding his hands up above his head. “Don’t shoot.”

Both Shelby and Blake are reacting with severe shock. However, Shelby's reaction is a lot louder than Blake's.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Shelby shrieks.

I roll my neck at her. "I'm getting your goddamn money back. What'dya think?"

"I didn't know you were going to use the gun."

The man attempts to take a step towards his door. Before he can even finish making that slight movement, I shake the gun at him, followed by a verbal threat. He stiffens his posture. I look back at Shelby, continuing our discussion. "Why else would I bring the gun?"

"I don't know," she shrugs. "I thought it was a backup plan. I didn't know it was *the* plan."

"Can we talk about this later?" I ask. I look back at the man. "You stole my friend's purse and then scammed her out of \$200. I want it all back."

He says "I didn't steal no purse" with quivering knees and a cracking voice. "Bullshit."

He insists once more that he didn't steal the purse. "But I have the money in my pocket," he adds. "I'll give you the money and I won't call the police. I swear to God." He says God the way that my mom does.

Gauwd—with a barely audible D sound.

I clench my jaw. I hate that I believe him about the purse. In reality, I have no choice but to believe him. Even if he had the purse, he would have to go inside to get it. That alone complicates everything. I could follow him, but he knows his house better than I do. I could easily get outsmarted. There's no easy solution to getting Shelby's purse from inside the man's house. Assuming it's in there at all.

"Blake," I start. "Search his pockets for the money." Blake starts to walk up the porch steps.

"If you try anything," I warn the man. "I will shoot you." Shelby is looking at me as if I had killed her hamster. I can hear quivers in her breath. Her eyes are wide and welling with tears. "Who are you?"

"I'm the guy who just got you your \$200 back."

"I can't watch this. I'll meet you at the car," she announces.

I wish I knew the perfect words to say as she rushes past me, purposely shouldering me in the process. I know that I don't want her to walk away with this tension still hanging in the air but it's best that she goes back to the car, anyway. The less involvement she has, the better. Besides, she can keep an eye on Guy.

Blake is behind the man. He begins searching his back pockets first.

"It's not in there." The man says. A moment passes and Blake's hands were still planted in the back pockets. "I said it's not in there. It's in my left pocket."

Blake's smiling at me; that same sinister smile that he flashed at the giggling girls. I notice the man's face twisting in horror and my stomach starts to turn. I wonder if Blake wore that same smile six nights ago. Vague sensational memories start flooding in my head. I remember so little, yet, so much from that night.

I don't remember all of the drugs I did but I remember snorting and swallowing more in that one night than I had in my entire life combined. I remember Blake walking up to me while I was losing consciousness. I remember the relief I felt thinking that a friend had just rescued me.

I remember the drive to his apartment the most. I remember his grip on my wrist before my hands were forcibly placed in his lap. He asked me if I liked it but I couldn't answer. I tried but the only thing that could escape my lips were violent hiccups. By the time he had found me, I had lost control of my body.

I remember dry-heaving into his leather couch while he did what he did to me. I used what little strength I had to simply breathe while his weight was on top of me. I felt like I was dying. By the next morning, I was dead. Dead on the inside. I woke up on his couch, lying flat on my stomach with my pants down to my ankles and my face covered in tear stains. I genuinely tried to tell Shelby but I physically couldn't. My body and my voice freeze when I think about it. I'm incapable of telling a single soul. I swear he has a spell over me. The only way that I could go on living was by pretending that nothing had happened. So, I pulled my pants up and left his apartment before he woke up. I hadn't seen Blake since. Until tonight.

* * *

The walk back to the car is quiet. I have to swallow back vomit twice. Blake walks with a victorious strut right beside me, counting Shelby's \$200 repeatedly. Shelby is sitting in the passenger seat of the car, toying with her phone. I notice as I close in on the car that the backseat was empty. When I ask Shelby about Guy, she answers nonchalantly that he was already gone when she got there. We don't speak for the rest of the car ride. Shelby pays me for gas, which she has never done before. I know that accepting that

money would be a major shift in our friendship but I'm too broke and too broken to decline.

After I drop off Blake and Shelby at her house, I go back to the city. I admit that I go in search for Guy. I stay out until the sunrise, never settling in one bar for more than a couple drinks. I run into Papa Smurf once more but Guy is nowhere to be found.

I toy with the fantasy that he spent the rest of that night searching for me. I know that in reality, he probably only cared about finding more drugs when he woke up but maybe, just maybe, he remembers something about me between the highs and lows. I could be a vague memory in his head; a puzzle that he can't quite piece together. I wonder if he can hear my voice sometimes, or see a blurry vision of my face. I wonder if he can feel me picking him up off the ground when he's too fucked up to walk on his own. Does the memory of my scent linger at any given moment for him? I wonder about the real Brody sometimes. Is there a real Brody or was it just a random name that he pulled from the rabbit hat of his drug-altered brain?

"Another beer?" the bartender asks, snapping me out of a daydream. I decline. I finish my bottle and walk onto the streets. It has been over a month since that night. I haven't gotten a single text from Shelby, nor did I ever text her. I justify the lack of communication from my end by telling myself that I'm avoiding Blake, but I know it's much more complicated than that.

I'm walking down Bourbon St. when I see silky black hair that makes the rest of the world flow in slow motion for a brief second. Just as I had given up hope that I would ever see him again, I see him walking towards my direction. To avoid embarrassing myself, I won't speak to him unless I know for sure that he remembers me. We're both in the center of the street, walking at a similar pace. As we're merely feet apart, I watch him as he looks at me. We both twist our shoulders instinctively to make room for us to pass each other along this hallway of party-goers. Our eyes meet as we cross paths. His glazed eyes don't react in any way.

At least, not at first. Our backs are facing each other now. I can hear footsteps walking further away behind me but a part of me believes that they don't belong to him. He must have paused mid-step. He must have remembered that he knows me. He knows that I can save him. He wants me to save him. I slow my pace to a full stop and wait; wait for him to call out to Brody.

The Future of Librarianship

Lawndon Forte-Thomas

“Welcome to Greenville. The Blackest Land, The Whitest People” was a sign that existed in Greenville (Hunt County) Texas from 1921 until it was removed in the 1960s (Popik). My mother’s maternal grandmother, Lovie, decided to make Greenville her home in 1959 after leaving the small village of Ida, Louisiana. She brought with her three children, an infant grandchild, courage, and a desire to make something of herself and her family despite the disapproval of her mother and husband. She worked extremely hard for the next decade to obtain shelter, food, and clothing before her private employer agreed to help her buy her own house on Park St. In 2022, Park Street is still known as a part of town where not many Black families live. It is the same house my mother lived in when I was born and the address that allowed me to attend Lamar Elementary School. Apart from a few lunch ladies and a couple of students that lived in the area, the school was as white as the town, and Black students allowed to attend were expected to assimilate. I managed to thrive academically, but I struggled socially and developed some identity issues all while dealing with deployed parents. While on leave, my mother returned with a English-French Dictionary and proceeded to teach me a few words every night before bed. It was an ambitious attempt that didn’t produce the desired effects, but it was my first book and my first informal Black teaching experience. I am confident that having academic role models that have overcome similar racial and socioeconomic barriers can improve a student’s overall self-esteem, educational performance, and lead to an increase in the number of individuals that identify themselves as Black enrolled into institutions of higher learning.

My mother was the only granddaughter out of Lovie’s nine grandchildren in Texas and the first person from the house on Park Street to complete college. I have the same expectations with a few more privileges due to the sacrifices made by the women in my family. For instance, while attending the

University of New Orleans, I was invited to apply for a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) grant. I considered my educational goals of going to a graduate school for Library & Information Science (LIS) while questioning if I should even apply for the grant being that “Science” doesn’t include librarians in most cases. While Black-identifying (BLI) students only make up about 7% of STEM graduates (Graham), numbers for BLI librarians are fewer, and I would prefer to work in a field that speaks to me personally. It was my relationship with BLI educators and literature that brought me back to college after a ten-year break, so I have chosen to stay on my current path of becoming a librarian. My goal is to provide those who seek information the means to find it and to support current and future students in their academic journeys. The role-model effect has influenced my decision to attend a university in a city where more than 50% of the population is BLI (QuickFacts: New Orleans City, Louisiana) and I will pass my experiences on to the pupils and patrons I encounter in my future career.

Alan Kruger and Diane Whitmore detail the findings of The Tennessee Star Experiment (TSE), initially conducted in the mid-1980s to determine whether students would benefit from smaller classroom sizes. In their 2001 working paper they suggest the race of the students and teachers involved was also documented. In 2018, Cassandra Hart, an associate professor of education policy at University of California, Davis used the same students of the TSE study to learn if their experiences had any effect on them pursuing further education. The role-model effect was the outcome of Hart’s research, concluding that the Black students introduced to Black educators by third grade were 13% more likely to have gone on to college after high school (Ahébé). I was introduced to the first BLI educator I met years after she retired from teaching. Her name was Mrs. Owens, and she was my mother’s paternal grandmother and grade school teacher, although, I believe her academic advice would have been the same for any small child with dreams of becoming an English teacher. She simply encouraged me to become more familiar with the English language through literature. My mother followed orders and took me to get my first library card shortly after this discussion and I can still remember my first visit to the public library. It was colorful, organized, and it felt safe. It had more books than I could ever read and yet I was assured that I could read all of them one by one if I promised to bring them back in good condition. It was better than Christ-

mas, and I believe it has led me to want to work in a library because to date, I feel the same joy every time I enter a library.

Many college students do not become professional educators, but for those who do, it is essential to have academic role models and it can be more beneficial if the role models have overcome the same societal roadblocks common to many BLI people in America. In addition, BLI librarians make a difference in the educational success of BLI students by having academic and life experiences relative to both. Even in personal situations, there were many times that I needed help with things I could not articulate, and books offered me the verbiage to do so in addition to some good advice; but it was the knowledge of the librarians that led me to the right publications. I can only imagine my identity issues being repaired sooner with more exposure to literature tailored to and for BLI readers. Assistant Professor Constance A. Lindsay is conducting research that aims to create a high quality, diverse educational workforce. Students who attend schools with a diverse staff have shown greater promise to close educational attainment gaps. Although I have not met Lindsay personally, I am encouraged by her work to stay on the course of becoming an educator. Her contributions are not only advancing her career, but also inspiring me to want to be a part of the workforce she is aiming to create. It is nearly impossible to obtain a college degree without ever setting foot in a library yet only about 6% of librarians in America are BLI (admin). Since the late 1800s librarians have been predominantly white middle to upper class women because they could afford the training and they provided cheap labor. (“Why Are Most Librarians White Women?”) In 2022, this still holds true, but there are more opportunities available for women and people of color in academia.

While it can be argued that credentials are more important than race and ethnicity, it is important to note that Historically Black Colleges or Universities (HBCUs) have a higher retention rate among students of color than Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) (Lynch). This information provides some evidence that BLI students are more likely to return to school if they are taught by someone that has a similar identity. BLI librarian Lindsey Simone offers: “By truly realizing workforce diversity on par with our communities, library services, programming, and resources will be more tailored, equitable, culturally relevant, and inclusive. Then libraries will genuinely be for all, and the question of our relevance and funding

issues will be diminished. The people in libraries (workers and patrons) will feel comfortable. They won't have to defend, explain, justify their existence, or that they deserve to be treated with human dignity and respect regardless of the darkness of their skin, and these socially prescribed and constructed identities and categorizations," in an article initiated by The American Library Association. School librarians focus on furthering students' development as lifelong learners, users, and producers of knowledge. Librarians must build relationships with teachers, other staff members, and students to build a safe and welcoming environment ideal for learning. As a descendant of enslaved members from America, I know that it was not always legal or safe for everyone to read or possess books. I wonder if by becoming a librarian, I will encourage more BLI people to find solace or careers in libraries. According to research already conducted, I can be sure that my presence will at least have an effect on their academic careers. I have much to learn from all of my professors despite their racial identity and I will apply my school and public experiences collectively to become a librarian that will have a role-model effect on students and assure them that it is possible to not only further their education, but also to become role models for others. There may not be as many grants and scholarships for LIS as there are for STEM careers but, I will be filling a void in the workforce as well as my personal life. Indeed, I think of LIS as a social science and a part of the humanities and art world which means I will come into contact with thousands of patrons in my career and I will always have the opportunity to access and share information and knowledge.

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A Mother's Love

Han Huynh

As I got closer to the kitchen, the familiar smell of raw seafood hit my nose. It was a smell that I could almost instantly recognize the moment I caught a whiff of it. I'd describe it as smelling salty and fishlike, similar to the ocean. It was a smell that I had found unpleasant at first, but eventually grown accustomed to over time. So much so that I had even begun to find it comforting in a way, because I knew that certain smell could only mean one thing: my mom was home from work.

I found my mom hunched over the kitchen table, unpacking her lunch bag. She was wearing a dark purple puffer jacket layered over a thinner gray hoodie, along with a pair of baggy black sweatpants. Her short black hair was haphazardly tied up into a ponytail, which was beginning to come undone. It was all held together by a black baseball cap, which was starting to show signs of wear by the discoloration on random spots and fraying on the brim. Working at a seafood factory meant that she had to wear clothing that would keep her warm all day, as it was always cold in the factory in order to keep the seafood fresh. When she heard my footsteps approaching, she looked up for a brief moment, revealing her squinting, bloodshot eyes. She quickly returned her focus to removing the empty containers from her lunch bag and placing them in the sink.

Beside her lunch bag was a white plastic bag, labeled "Pho Bang." Some days after work, she'd stop by a nearby restaurant on the way home and grab takeout. Today was one of those days. She ordered Banh Mi, a Vietnamese sandwich made up of pickled carrots, cilantro, chilies, pate, a slice of cucumber, and a meat of your choice. In this case, it was roast pork slices. Banh Mi had always been a favorite of mine and my sister's, so my mom would try to buy it as often as she could. Despite my efforts of assuring her I could make my own meals at home, she'd still insist on buying them. Even

if it meant that she had to sacrifice a part of the few hours she had before going back to work again.

On the days when she didn't bring home takeout, she'd cook dishes and prepare leftovers for me to eat the next day after making her own lunch for work. Despite her wanting to, I couldn't help but feel guilty whenever I saw how much time she spent cooking for me. With the little free time that she had whenever she wasn't at work, it seemed like she was always in the kitchen cooking something. Pho, noodle soup, spring rolls, miso soup, banana and coconut ice-cream, coffee jelly, Vietnamese yogurt, etc. When I'd ask her why this was the case, she'd respond with, "It makes me feel good when I cook for you, especially when I'm able to cook you your favorite meals." I've come to realize that cooking was something that brought her joy because the dishes that she made acted as a physical embodiment of her love. Each dish was created with love and care, so it made her happy to see me happy while enjoying something that she made herself.

After she finished unpacking her lunch bag, my mom continued with the rest of her usual routine after coming home. She began by cleaning around the house, taking a straw broom to the kitchen.

Keeping the house clean was something that she was very specific about, so she always felt the need to do it herself or go over it a second time after me and my dad cleaned. "There's a certain way that I like the house to be cleaned, and I feel like I do a more detailed job out of you and your father," she always told me. Making sure everyone in the house wore slippers, carefully cleaning the dishes, cleaning out the filters of the air humidifiers, dusting, and cleaning the bathroom are just some of the things she does. I thought this was unnecessary and took up the time when she could be resting for the next day. I wanted her to prioritize sleeping as much as possible, but she worried more about me getting sick or having my allergies flare up if the house wasn't clean enough. Despite feeling tired, she always felt the need to put my well-being before her own. I always had a hard time understanding why she did this, but thinking this made me realize how selfless of a person she was. She didn't see anything wrong with staying up late to clean, as long as she was sure that she did her best to make sure I wouldn't get sick.

As she swept the floor, I followed not too far behind her. I usually always kept her company while she was doing her tasks around the house, asking her questions like how her day went and what time she had work the next day. Today, she told me that she had work at 4:00 AM the next day. I glanced

up at the digital clock mounted above the wooden cabinet in our living room, which read 10:26 PM. Having work at 4:00 AM meant that she would be waking up at 2:00 AM to get ready on time to leave at 3:00 AM. It was around an hour drive from our home to the seafood factory. 2:00 AM was only about three hours away, and considering the fact that my mom was in the middle of cleaning and still needed to pack her lunch, it would mean that she wouldn't get much sleep before she had to get up again.

Since she worked in a seafood factory, this was normal for her. She had to stick to a tight schedule that had her working for up to 10 or more hours per day. It left her little to no time to get a full night's sleep on most nights. Staying awake was a challenge, and she, along with many other workers at the factory, often found themselves nodding off to sleep. Working at the seafood factory also had other hardships. The constant contact with shrimp left her hands itchy and irritated after work. Standing all day also caused her to feel discomfort in her feet that she had to try and relieve by wearing gel insoles in her shoes. Crouching over the conveyor belt meant developing back pains and aches over time. This job was far from being an easy one.

Despite this, my mom always found ways to keep not only herself, but other workers at the factory positive. Sharing a laugh with other workers by telling each other funny stories was one of those ways. Once she recalled a funny story to me about my aunt, who also worked at the factory with her. My mom was working at her station, which had her sorting shrimp that came down a conveyor belt. She was responsible for putting the shrimp into the correct boxes to be transported. While doing this, my mom noticed that the flow of shrimp suddenly became slower. Finding this unusual, my mom and the other workers at her station decided to go investigate, and found my aunt fast asleep on the conveyor belt. Her head was resting on her arm that was blocking the shrimp and causing a buildup behind her. "We all had a good laugh about that," my mom chuckled while recalling the moment. The story with my aunt was something that she'd retell to the other workers from time to time, to lift up their spirits. She told me that she'd also sometimes take pictures of her coworkers when they were falling asleep, and laugh about it with them when she showed them later. "Working at the factory is hard for all of us, but moments like that keep us going and our spirits up," she'd tell me.

My mom was now in the bathroom, taking a shower. I had followed her in, continuing to have a conversation with her while leaning on the bath-

room countertop. She asked me questions that she always did every night.

“Did you have anything to eat yet?” she asked over the pitter-pattering sound of water.

“Had some ramen earlier,” I replied nonchalantly.

“You know that’s no proper meal,” she criticized. “It’s not healthy to eat that all the time.”

I heard a shampoo bottle being cracked open, followed by the sound of its contents being squirted out. “I made some bitter melon soup; you should fix a bowl,” my mom suggested.

“I will, don’t worry,” I replied, trying not to let my tone of slight annoyance be heard in my voice.

Questions like these made up most of our conversations. How is school going, did I finish my homework yet, did I study, and how much money am I spending. In the past, I would find these questions to be annoying and repetitive, so I’d avoid having long conversations with her to avoid giving an answer. But now that I’m older, I’ve learned to appreciate them.

My mom’s life has been far from easy, ever since being born in Vietnam to now living in the United States. In Vietnam, my mom and her family lived in poverty, struggling to put food on the table every day. Her parents couldn’t afford to send her to school, so she never had the opportunity to have a proper education. When she came here to the United States with my dad, it didn’t get much better. She felt “out of place” because she didn’t have a degree or speak English like everyone else around her.

That was why she decided to work at the seafood factory, because she felt more comfortable being around other Vietnamese people. I can’t change my mom’s past or make it any better, but I can try my best to make her as happy as I can in the present. If that means having to sit through her long lectures and listening to her worrying about me, I’ll do it every chance I get. I’ve realized that her doing little things like cooking food, buying takeout, cleaning the house, and asking me these questions was her way of showing me she cared. Despite being sleep-deprived and feeling worn out almost every day, she always had the energy to worry about and put others before herself. That’s a mother’s love.

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