



Issue One  
The CelestialGlossarypresents

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Thank you for reading our inaugural issue of The Celestial Glossary!

In this issue we asked authors and artists to submit the work nearest to their hearts. We were absolutely blown away by the quality, creativity, and beauty in all the works submitted.

Thank you to all who submitted and made it hard to select just 13 contributors. Thank you to the contributors for your trust. Thank you, reader, for your support of these artists.

Happy Reading!

Ailiyah & Anna

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## Nikoline Kaiser

### Puppet Show

After the car-wreck that Anthony insist happened because the other driver was texting while going over the speed-limit and Ellie is sure happened because Anthony had been drinking too much at poetry-night before getting behind the wheel, she decides that she needs a re-do of her life. Ellie thinks, in the broken recesses of her mind (not as broken as her leg, but close enough), that Anthony is expecting her to come back to him at some point. He broke his nose against the airbag and has whiplash, but he can walk around and leave Ellie behind in the hospital-bed when she tells him it's over. He's just given her a long speech about facing death and how much he loves her, and how he sees now that he needs to do something good with his life, and that's why he's going with his sister to Florida to pick up plastic and waste. Ellie tunes him out at some point, not entirely because she means to, but mainly because she has a headache, the tension in her neck and shoulders ever-present since one car collided with the other at too many miles per hour. He reaches out to hold her hand at some point. She pulls away.

"I want to break up," she says, and he cries and then later tells everyone that it was mutual, that they both needed a do-over. She doesn't correct him or anyone else. Truth be told she'd wanted to break up with him for a while, but her mood had kept waxing and waning, a moon-tide of what-ifs and regret and the fondness build up over three years together. This gives her an easy excuse. It is clean. Anthony can mull over it and decide that he will never drink and drive again, because that was the reason his girlfriend left him. She is probably not doing any of his future partner's any favors, but Ellie isn't responsible for the whole world.

When she is discharged from the hospital her mom picks her up and drives home so slowly, so carefully that Ellie thinks they might be going backwards. She is too tired to say anything, only grateful when they're at home. She almost slips on her crutches. She puts weight on her leg by accident. She makes it to the couch, teeth gritted in pain and lets her mom fuss and bring her painkillers.

"Eight weeks," says Ellie, already feeling every minute of the time creeping by slower than her mom's car. "Maybe more."

“Well, your uncle Tom had his cast off after only six weeks.”

“I think his was cracked, not broken. Incomplete fracture.” Hers had broken through the skin. She still remembered waking up in the car to the shrill of ambulance sirens, staring at the vibrant red against the white bone.

Her mom gives her a Look. The Look is usually accompanied by at least a hint, at most (and most often) a small lecture about how she has wasted her talents dropping out of medical school. This time, because Ellie has an open fracture and a recently broken heart (so her mom thinks), she says nothing. It stays at the Look.

“I’ll make you something to eat. A sandwich?”

“I’d like just a cup of tea I think.”

“You need to eat something.”

“Sandwich is fine.”

Her mom, because for all her worrying and lecturing, she is still her mom, leans down and presses a kiss against Ellie’s forehead, which is damp and too-warm from pain and strain. “I’ll make the Jasmine tea you like.”

A minute later, from the kitchen, she says: “We need to keep you still while you heal. Maybe you could pick up knitting again, or drawing. You used to love drawing as a child.” She is, undoubtedly, looking at the uneven lines on paper still hanging on the fridge. The one most prominently displayed was one Ellie had made at age five, the first gift she ever gave to her mom aside from rocks found in the yard.

“Mommy, for you!”

“That’s lovely, dear. Is it our house?”

Ellie is not sure if she can remember the feeling of incredulity from that time or if it has just been described to her so many times that the memory feels real. “Mom. It’s a horse.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, mom. I’m sure.”

The car crash does not haunt her nightmares; only her dreams. Flashing lights. The crunching sound of metal slamming into metal. Ellie wakes not with a pounding heart but with a sense of foreboding. She always remembers the dreams, though in vague images. It is a memory, after all. In her dream, Anthony is not always there. Sometimes she is driving, though she's never driven a car in her life. Sometimes she's in the other car, telling the faceless driver to put his phone down and focus on the road. Sometimes, she is the one who asks him to check the messages constantly ringing in and annoying her.

Most of all, she wakes up feeling empty. She opens her eyes at the early hours of dawn and goes through questions in her mind. Is she traumatized? Is she missing Anthony? Regretting their parting? She finds only a no in her head, but though she knows this, she cannot go back to sleep. She lies awake listening to the bird's waking, singing and gets out of bed when she hears her mom rustling around.

It is a week and two half-knitted kitchen towels later that the sun comes out shining. Ellie grabs her crutches as soon as her mom leaves for work and settles herself out on the grass. The fresh air eases her headache, the warmth helps with the pain and aches. Nothing can quell the restlessness for long though, and she is fiddling with her hands and her good leg, digging up chunks of dirt and grass, when she looks up and spots him across the street.

He is in the thrift store that opened just a couple of months back. The large storefront window shows old hookahs, stacks of dusty books, a large teddy-bear with one drooping ear and a heart in its hands saying I luv u. Today he is there as well. His eyes are very blue, so blue she can see them clearly even from across the road, and he is wearing a faded black suit, collar open, clearly missing a tie that must have been forgotten or left behind somewhere. Before she can think too much about it, Ellie grabs her crutches in grass-stained hands and makes her way across the road to the shop.

The woman, pensioner and volunteer, who minds the shop on Thursday, Fridays and the Saturday of the even weeks, opens the door wider for her so she can get through without knocking down the open-sign or anything else. She smiles in the way of grandmothers everywhere, as if they are squinting at you in both wonder and bewilderment at your existence.

“What can I do for you today?”

Ellie does not think she has ever been in the shop before. It has always felt strange, to make business in a place that can look so directly into where you live. As if she might get the teddy bear or a book, and the shop itself will spot, through the windows, how she dog-ears the pages or lets the bear sit alone, unloved, gathering dust. But today Ellie does not want to hesitate.

“How much for the puppet? The one in the window.”

“It’s creepy,” her mom says.

“His name is Henry.”

“That makes it creepier.”

Ellie moves him across the floor. One of the strings was broken, but the lady in the shop attached an elastic band to it. Up close he had not been as beautiful as when the sunlight had hit his spot in the window, but Ellie does not mind the fading paint of his face, the missing heel of one little dress-shoe. The lady in the shop had said: “He didn’t come with a name, but I call him Henry.” And he looked like a Henry, so Ellie kept it.

“You’re really going to learn?”

“There’s some videos online. And it’s something to do with my hands while my leg heals.”

Her mom sighs. “I thought you were knitting again.”



Ellie doesn't know how to explain that knitting occupies her hands but not her brain, and that there's only so much X-Files she can watch before she goes crazy. She can't explain that with her hands busy, her brain feels so idle she's scared it might burst. She does not think her mom will understand how, with Henry, trying to move and twist her wrists and fingers so he moves, walks, dances across the floor, her whole being is engaged. Time no longer crawls, it runs. She watches Henry as he finally lifts his arm in a wave that looks effortless, looks real, and a whole day has passed. A waste of time, her mom calls it. Ellie can't remember ever feeling happier.

Progress with Henry, much like with her leg, is slow. There is a check-up at her doctor's (Henry not allowed to come along, as per mom's orders) and they frown and poke and prod, and two more weeks is added. Ellie wants to scream. Her mom tries to engage her in conversation on the ride home, but Ellie remains silent. As soon as she is back in the living-room, she picks up Henry from his spot on the couch and makes him walk across the carpeted floor. His steps are jittery. One leg seems to be dragging after the other. It is the first time Ellie has felt anger at the puppet. She wants, for a brief, alarming moment, to throw him across the room. He looks up at her with his beautiful blue eyes, and she doesn't. Instead she pulls him up to sit on her knee, as she's done so many times before. She is assessing the damage. Her nail catches against the paint under one eye, scraps off another layer of wood-skin. She sighs. She is only vaguely aware of her mom standing behind her.

"Don't you think it should get fixed up?"

Ellie had, at first, thought the worn appearance part of the charm, but the more she neglects it, the worse it gets. Henry is starting to look less worn and more mournful. In decay.

"I'm not sure how. It looks complicated." Special paint and treatment for the wood. What if she fixes his shoe and he walks uneven? What if she gets him a new tie that only highlights how frayed his suit is?

Her mom sighs, deep and long. And then, like she is making a great sacrifice (because she is a good mom), she says: "I've been looking up some places. There's one that's a four-hour drive away but I can take a weekend off and we can go there."

Ellie blinks. Turns around to stare at her mother. Her hand, cradling the back of Henry's head, automatically moves so he is staring as well.

"Really?"

"Yes, they have a workshop that makes dolls."

"Puppets."

"Yours might have even been made there. It's called Kemp's or something." She gives Ellie the Look. "It'll be expensive though, and I'm not paying. But I'll take you there."

Kemp's School of Puppetry is situated at the heart of town, in a building melting into an ally. Ellie and her mom walk past the place twice before finally realizing the low door to the right of them has a paint-stained sign saying Kemp's – Opening hours: 09:00-16:00. Closed on Mondays. They both feel embarrassed at wandering around like headless chickens for half an hour. It's almost three thirty. Ellie walks inside, ducking, but keeping her balance with the crutches. She is getting better at it.

There is an old-fashioned bell over the door, and it rings clearly through dust-filled hallways. Everything inside seems compressed, the whole building made in a time when people were smaller. Or maybe, Ellie thinks, maybe it is a building made for puppets.

There is no-one in the hallway, but a sign saying Workshop and the sound of light hammering leads them forward and to the left. The workshop is large, with several tall and slim tables lined up, an old-fashioned chalkboard and rows and rows of tools hanging on the wall. None of them look electric, all of them look as old as the building. At one table stands a young woman – Ellie estimates her to be no more than two or three years older than her – leaned over what looks like a dollhouse, short black hair falling into her eyes. She is tall and lean, tan only because she was born this way, carrying the sallow pallor of someone who spends most of their time indoors. Even hunched slightly, her shoulders look broad. When she rights herself, she looks right at Ellie.

"Ellie and Henry?"

"That's us."

“Let me see the damage. I’m Daniela.”

Her mom walks forward with the box they’d put Henry in. She places it gently – gentle because she knows that’s what her daughter wants – on the table. “That’s a nice name,” she says, coughing a little from all the dust. The floor is littered with wood-chips and pulp. The window is open, but the heat is still oppressive in here. Ellie moves forward. One crutch bumps against the table. Daniela watches it with a careful eye.

“What happened?”

“Car accident. Everyone lived.”

“Good.” Only then does she turn to the box and opens it. Henry is placed in there lying down, on his back, the marionette controller under his head like a pillow, the strings carefully folded so they won’t tangle too bad. Daniela reaches down and pulls him up.

“Marionette. From the sixties.”

“You can tell just like that?”

Daniela smiles, just one corner of her mouth lifting a little bit. Self-satisfied. Proud. Ellie stupidly thinks she looks handsome like that. “It’s my job.” She takes off one shoe, the one not damaged. “And – yeah, here it is. Year. Designation. I think that’s the mark from a workshop in Switzerland.”

Ellie peers a little closer, careful not to lose her balance. Her hip presses against the table.  
1967. Henry is a grandpa.

“Mind if I open another window?” asks her mom.

“That’s fine.” Daniela does not take her eyes away from Henry. The sounds of people outside come in through the window, intruding. A child crying, shoes hitting against the pavement. Ellie wants to tell her mom to close it again. Instead she says to Daniela:

“Have you been doing this long?”

“About ten years. Wood-work, I mean. My ex used to run this place.”

Ellie asks: “Used to?”

“He injured his hands too much to keep doing it.” Daniela looks at her, and though her eyes are living and brown and slim were Henry’s are blue and wide and only living wood, Ellie cannot help but compare the two and find them the same.

“I’m sorry.”

“It happens.”

“Hazard of the job?” She looks at Daniela’s hands, at her slender fingers and the many callouses and scars that litter them. They don’t look strong; they don’t look delicate. They look like fine-tuned instruments made to put things together and pull them apart again. She’s taken out a notepad, ready to write down Henry’s condition, the necessary treatments. She answers her:

“No. Car crash.”

They end up staying far past four o’clock. Daniela closes the door and as evening falls around them, Ellie’s mom volunteers to go hunt for dinner. Ellie thinks she just wants to get out of here; she’s been sneezing for the past ten minutes. She stays away long enough that Ellie’s leg and arms grow tired from holding herself up. She has just gathered the courage to ask for a chair when Daniela says:

“You must be tired. Wait here.”

She comes back with a plush, green chair that looks as old as Henry. It is surprisingly comfortable. Ellie leans her crutches against the edge of the armrest and leans back. Daniela finds a low stool for her to prop her leg up on.

“Thanks.”

“No matter.”

Daniela is not talkative, but Ellie does not find the silence awkward. It seems to float around them just like the dust, a part of the room as much as the tools are.

Daniela plucks at the rubber band still holding one string up. Ellie feels suddenly embarrassed.

“The lady at the store did that. It was broken.”

“All of the strings need changing. More of them should have broken by now.” It is a simple observation, but it feels almost like praise. Like Ellie has been doing something right, untrained as she is. She feels heat on her face.

“I don’t really know what I’m doing. With this, I mean. I just picked him up. I saw him in the store.”

“You couldn’t leave him,” Daniela said, and the complete understanding settles on Ellie’s shoulders like a warm blanket, soft and inviting.

“Did that happen to you too?”

Daniela looks up. She gently places Henry back on the table and leaves. Ellie bites her lip and tries to be patient. She can hear rustling in one of the other rooms, the sound carried through the long hallway. Daniela comes back with two puppets – marionettes – both slightly smaller than Henry. Sisters, Ellie thinks, looking at the blonde curls and orange dress of one, the black hair in braids and blue dress of the others.

“I made them. Helena is older.” She gently lifts the blonde one. Then, the other: “This is Kara.”

“Hello,” Ellie says to the two of them and Daniela smiles, a real smile this time.

Repairs for Henry would take longer, so Ellie agreed to leaving him at the workshop. When they drive back home it is closing in on midnight.

“Thank you,” she tells her mom. “You didn’t have to do all this.”

“Well, that damned doll’s made you happier than I’ve seen since you were a little child.” She stops at a red light, on a deserted road in the middle of nowhere. After two heartbeats of waiting, she hits the gas again, looking only a little guilty. “Did you and Daniela decide on a price?”

“There isn’t one.”

A frown. A twitching of the face – the start of the Look. “What do you mean?”

“She’s going to teach me. I want to do what she does. I’m going to work there.”

Her mom’s mouth drops open.

“That’s…”

“It’s what I want.”

“It’s so different from what you did before.”

Ellie shrugs. “I want to. You keep telling me I can’t stay at home forever.”

Ellie looks away.

Her mom cannot – and also will not – take the long drive on a weekday, so Ellie has to take the train. She packed an old backpack of Anthony’s that he hadn’t come back for. She hobbled along, exhaustion already creeping in. She slept the entire ride, almost missing her stop. It was a five minute-walk from the station to the workshop. It took almost twenty minutes with the crutches.

Daniela is sitting outside in another old, plush chair, like the one she’d fetched for her. A low wooden table next to the chair holds a coffee-pot and Helena, sitting primly leaned against the wall, her hands folded in her lap. Ellie notices for the first time that her nails are painted blue, the same shade as her sister’s dress.

“You made it. You look tired.” Daniela got up, not to help her (she wouldn’t have accepted), but to lean in through the door and pull the other chair outside. “Sit down. Do you want some coffee?”

“Yes, please.” She lets her help with the backpack. She’s getting adept at moving with the crutches, and she often finds herself thinking of it like the marionette controller, like the strings, and like the puppet, too. Her mom still thinks it looks unnatural, but Ellie knows it’s not; it’s just another way of moving.

“You mind drinking from the same mug?”

“No.” The thought sends a thrill through her, and there’s another when Daniela pours and hands Ellie the cup. She takes her time to savor it, feeling both wrong and delighted at the illusion that she can taste her lips, that they’re almost kissing. When had she turned into a silly schoolgirl, a young teenager with a crush? When the cars hit each other, she thinks, and rattled her brain.

“I meant to do the dishes yesterday, but inspiration hit for a project.” It’s an apology, but there is a hint of searching in Daniela’s voice. For what? Ellie takes a moment to look.

“What project?”

Her eyes are alight, eager to share. Ellie wonders if this is what Daniela looked like when she first started, when she realized that the puppet in the workshop was something hers. “A client, these smaller dolls – they fit with the house I was making when you first got here.”

She is struck by how much Daniela is talking now. She doesn’t know how much is due to the shyness of a first meeting, how much is general mood. The fresh air and sunlight. Her company. She leans back and lets Daniela’s voice roll over her.

The work is hard and she gets more splinters than success. She ends up staying a week, having only packed for three days. Daniela lives above the workshop, living-room, two bedrooms, bathroom, small kitchen. Ellie can’t get upstairs, so Daniela puts a mattress in the office downstairs. The office has several old circus-posters, a wide desk with two laptops and a book-case. The room smells of wires and warm dust from laptop-fans, but it’s the cleanest room she’s yet seen in the building. Ellie already likes it.

Daniela makes vegetable curry for dinner, and Ellie sits on an old bar-stool and dries the dishes after. Her fingers sting and ache; two are covered in band-aids after Daniela had pulled large splinters free. Ellie was proud she had not cried – in any case, the pain was nothing compared to her leg.

“How is it healing up?” Daniela hands her a plate.

“Fine, you’re good with pincers.”

“Good. I meant the leg.”

“Oh. It’s fine. On Monday it’s five weeks and I can get the cast off.”

Daniela hums. Ellie thinks of the books on anatomy she’d seen in the office – now her bedroom.

“Did you want to become a doctor?”

“No. Puppets are simpler. Joints, legs, arms. A head. The strings to move them.”

Again that wonderful feeling of swimming in the same waters. Of walking in the same forest, while everyone else was jogging by the road. “I feel the same way. I went to Medical school. Lasted two semesters.”

“It’ll serve you well with this job.”

She looked down at her hands. “I don’t feel good at it.”

“It will come.”

Despite herself, she believes her. Daniela serves her coffee, in her own mug this time, and while they drink she brings Henry into the kitchen, shows her what she’s gotten done. Explains what still needs doing.

Ellie can’t sleep that first night. It’s because of the coffee, because of the new place, because of the clown staring down at her from one of the posters. She can’t really toss and turn with her leg, but she’s busy doing it mentally. She’s awake to hear the footsteps, someone coming down the stairs. Daniela, awake.

She lies with bated breath as Daniela moves past the office, further down the hall. She can hear a humming, low and melodic. She thinks Daniela is singing to the puppets, to Henry and Helena and Kara. To the little family, meant for their dollhouse, as soon as it is ready. She falls asleep.

Ellie is very aware that her mom is worried about how much time she’s spending at the workshop, but she isn’t expecting her to bring Anthony into it.



“Hi,” he says, appearing on their lawn two weeks before Ellie is due to have her cast removed, and one day after she’s come home from her third visit to Kemp’s. She’s sitting with her mom on uncomfortable plastic chairs, drinking tea and eating overpriced cupcakes from the little bakery down the street.

“Um,” Ellie says.

“I’m so sorry, I forgot to mention,” says her mom, who only ever forgets things when it’s convenient for her. “I invited Anthony! I ran into him at the grocery store the other day and he mentioned being worried about you and I just thought it would be good if you could see each other, you know, after everything that’s happened.”

Her mom rarely rambles like this. Ellie can feel another headache coming in. Anthony gets a chair – he knows where they are – and sits down, graciously accepting a cupcake and the tea poured into the extra cup her mom ‘accidentally’ brought outside.

“You look good,” Anthony tells her.

“I look tired.” She hasn’t slept, doesn’t sleep well in her room. Not since Henry went to the workshop. When she’s there, she sleeps like a dream, unless Daniela’s made too-strong coffee again. She still sleeps like a dream – it just takes longer to get there. They don’t open the shop until nine anyway, and they rarely have customers. She wakes up and she is at work. Most of what they do at Kemp’s is commissions. Personal projects. The night before she left the last time, Daniela gently held her hand while she held a paintbrush, and she guided Ellie in re-doing the paint of Henry’s cheeks, adding a little bit of red, making him boyish and young again. She’d felt the touch like a brand on the back of her palm ever since.

“Your mom told me you’ve gone into – puppetry?” The way he says it, she already feels bad. Guilty. Ashamed. Then angry that she should feel like that.

“One of the oldest professions in the world.”

He laughs, stilted. “I suppose so.”

She thinks of Daniela's fingers, wrapped around the handle of the coffee-pot. Ellie had watched her restore a small dining-set for the dollhouse, and they had talked about favorite foods. When she said tomato soup, Daniela had made it for her the next day, despite the unbearable heat of the summer. Her shirt had been stained with small spots of red, of orange.

"It's fun." She forces herself to think of something, a normal reason to care this much. "It's really intricate. Like anatomy at Med school, but less complicated and less you know, life or death."

Anthony smiles, softens up a little. "That makes sense. It does sound interesting." He had once said that to a guy going on about the praying mantis, just to be polite. "But it's not really a field that there's a lot of money in, is there?"

Even without the way his eyes flicker to her moms, she would have known what was going on. Oh god, Ellie thinks. This is an intervention.

"You earning a lot of money on your poetry lately?" she asks. Her mom spills coffee on the grass. Anthony goes a little gray around the edges. On the inside, Ellie crows in delight.

It doesn't stop there. Her dad calls. Her dad who, when Ellie was five – roughly about a week before she painted a tragically misunderstood horse for her mother – went out to get cigarettes and didn't come back. For seventeen years. He even had the indecency to quit smoking in the interim. Ellie cares little about him, and a little more about her step-sisters who she sees twice a year, once for each of their birthdays. It is laughable that her mom thought going to him would sway Ellie.

"You know, you don't really know that much about this Daniel," he says over the phone, after half an hour of talking around the subject. "He could be anyone. He could be a criminal."

"It's Daniela. She's not a criminal, dad." They'd smoked weed one starry night and a lot of the puppets in the workshop were from people's trash. She didn't think that counted.

"I'm sure she's nice and all, but just be careful. You never know."

"Yeah, dad. You never know."

She tells Daniela about the phone call on her next visit. “They sound very protective,” is her comment on the whole thing.

“It’s gotten worse as I got older. I mean, my mom took care of me when I was little of course, but I was always a resilient kid and now it’s like the fact that I can face a lot as an adult means I’m broken somehow. Like I should be having a breakdown every other Wednesday like everyone else.”

“Everyone is doing that?”

“Maybe not everyone.” She stares down at the wood-chips she’s made, the main evidence of her work for the past few hours. Daniela had set her to work making Matryoshka dolls, telling her the design and aesthetic didn’t matter, so long as she made three to five women who fit in each other. “What about your parents?”

Daniela is fixing the bathroom of the dollhouse. There are spots and flecks of whites on her fingers from painting the tiles. “Disappointed they don’t have a lawyer for a daughter. Accepting of what I’m doing now.”

“That’s good.”

“Took a while. Now they’re happy. I’m happy. Helena and Kara are happy.” She looks over at Henry’s spot, a shelf close to where the sisters sit when they’re in the workshop. Henry is leaning slightly against a book about Grimaldi.

“And Henry?”

“Henry’s getting happier and happier,” she says, and Ellie believes her.

It still doesn't stop there. Ellie takes Henry home when Daniela is finished with him, because she has some vague notion that Henry would like to see his old home before she moves him to the new one. It's been decided, after all – she's moving to Kemp's, taking the second bedroom upstairs as soon as her leg is healed. Daniela is paying her an assistant-fee and it's more than she expected. Ellie has been actually earning it, not just apprenticing but organizing files and commissions, going through e-mails left unanswered for months. Daniela is absent-minded about anything that isn't the workshop or coffee-making.

Her mom is home when she arrives, which is a bad sign because she should be at work. She's been cleaning the kitchen, scrubbing the counter-tops until they gleam and her hands are red. Ellie thinks of Daniela's hands, the reddening of skin from where she'd gotten a splinter last night. "Didn't think you'd be home." She moves carefully to take off her backpack and set it on a chair. Henry is strapped to it carefully, partly because he couldn't fit in there with her other things and partly because she wanted him to see the journey they went on, like he hadn't been able to the first time.

"I took the day off. I wanted to clean and to spend the day with you. It's been so long since we've had proper time together, don't you think?"

Ellie does not think her mom absent or unloving, not at all, but their time together has always been acts of duty; making food, cleaning up, hanging up the laundry. When she was younger there were many moments of Ellie's homework spread out across the dining table while her mom pulled an armchair closer to the TV, the sound turned down so Ellie could concentrate. Ellie doesn't think those moments count as proper time together the way other parents might define them, but she doesn't think they don't count either.

"Sure. Anything you wanted to do?"

Her mom's smile seems forced. "I thought we could talk."

There is no Look, but perhaps the smile is a Smile: Ellie feels a foreboding in the pit of her stomach.

"About?"

"Your new... hobby."

She frowns. “Mom, it’s not a hobby. It’s actually the opposite, I’m getting paid.”

“But it seems... strange, doesn’t it? Being so obsessed.”

“Obsessed? Mom, I’ve found something I’m passionate about and I have the chance to pursue it. What’s wrong with that?”

Her mom puts the dishes in the sink with a clank. “I just think it’s weird.”

It still does not stop. Ellie comes home, cast off, feeling wobbly still on two legs that feel as different as night and day. She is thinking of a newborn giraffe and how much they have in common, when she walks inside the house and sees the mess.

Her first thought is that she is home early. That they had meant for this to be over and done with before she came home. But there he is, caught red-handed, Anthony with Henry’s hand cradled in his hands, her mother with the old foam stuffing on her fingers, stuck and staining like blood.

“What the hell,” Ellie says, too shocked to get angry right away. He is just a puppet, but there is a hollow gleam in Henry’s eyes, the faintest flicker. He is holding on by a thread. Literally.

“We’re trying to help,” Anthony says. “You can’t see how far your obsession has gone.”

Yesterday, Ellie got her first customer. An elderly woman had a very old porcelain-doll, all Victorian hairstyle and clothing. The features had faded with the years, graying and cracking in some places. The dress was fading, and one shoe had gone missing. The elderly woman wanted it all fixed, paint and stitching, dyed and braided. Ellie did not think she was ready, but Daniela had said right away, “my partner can do that” and the swoop in Ellie’s stomach had been more than dread, more than excitement, more than joy. Daniela had promised to help, but it was Ellie’s commission.

“Obsession,” she says now, looking at them both. Her mother looks guilty. Anthony looks righteous. “I have an obsession.”

“You’re at the workshop all the time! For god’s sake, Ellie, you picked a doll over me.”

He's a puppet, she thinks, but she doubts that'll help any. "It's a craft," she says instead. She is expecting the anger to come barraging out of her any moment, but instead she finds she is just welling up with pity. "It's a craft I'm training in and that I am going to work with. That I am going to enjoy. And I broke up with you before I even found Henry."

"You're even calling him by name!"

She rolls her eyes. "You know who seems obsessed? The two of you. All of you, really. If I'd started making jewelry and left pearls and strings everywhere and spent all my time with a goldsmith or whatever it's called, would you think I'd gone crazy?"

"It does seem like a less secure career choice," her mom says, but she has such doubt in her voice, on her face that Ellie knows she's winning the argument on that front at least.

Ellie reaches out her hands. "Give him – give it to me."

Anthony hugs Henry's head as if he cares for him. "No."

"You're being childish."

"I'm worried about you!"

"You shouldn't be. I'm happy." She goes for the killing blow. "Without you, I'm really happy."

Anthony looks like she just sucker punched him, or like he got in another car crash. She feels guilty, but then she looks at Henry (his torso is on the ground, his legs hanging limply, one arm twisted out of the socket. An ambush).

"I'm going to burn it," he says, threatens – it finally makes the anger rise in her, and Ellie is ready to march forward, to attack him, and maybe she is too attached to a puppet with no life, no soul aside from what she ascribes to him, but what's it to Anthony? What's it to anyone, that she is happy, that she is not hurting, that she's breathing easier for the first time in what feels like forever?

But she doesn't have to do anything. Her mom takes a step forward, foam falling from between her fingers. She grasps Henry's head and frees it from Anthony's grasp. He hadn't seen the attack coming from within, and so he has no counter for it. Her mom walks over and deposits the head safely in Ellie's hands.

"I'm sorry," she says, and in that moment Ellie has already forgiven her, not just for this, but for all of it, her dear sweet mother who is too easily convinced by loud men and who never managed to see her daughter for who she really is. Who stuck around anyway.

"It's okay," Ellie tells her, because it really is. "I can fix it up again. I've learned how."

Daniela is painting the tiniest bathtub, its clawed feet flecked with gold as she works. Ellie has been watching her for the better part of an hour, forgetting her own work.

There are questions on the tip of her tongue. Do you think I am weird. Do you think this is weird. Do you think that, together or apart, we are the outcasts, the freaks?

She says none of it. Daniela looks up from her work. There is gold-paint on her nose. Ellie wants to taste it on her lips. The cast is off and she is free to move around, free to go where she pleases.

She leaves the workshop without a word, though all she wants to do is speak. She hears Daniela raise her head, feel her eyes following as she moves up the stairs. In the bedroom sit the puppets in a row. They look as if they are holding hands. Ellie's leg aches, still sore and thin after those long weeks in the cast. She has physical therapy tomorrow. She is going to bring Henry along, for support.

The stairs creak under Daniela's feet as she comes upstairs. She hovers in the doorway for a little while, then she walks to stand behind Ellie, right behind her. Ellie wonders if there is still gold on her nose. She does not turn around to look.

“Are you alright?” Daniela asks. Ellie nods – she reaches out, touching the puppets, the sisters and Henry. Then she turns, meeting Daniela’s hands raised to meet her shoulders. She is pushed back on the bed and Daniela crawls on top of her, and there is that glint of gold, right before Ellie is being kissed. She imagines that the wooden necks of the puppets creak as they turn their heads to look at them.



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Maya Williams  
On Building an Assignment at Birth

I come from the placement

of oldest daughter syndrome.

I am banshee yelling upon entry into the world. Scaly new skin reaching for comfort in the midst of confusion. The light is too bright for me to open my eyes. I twist my tiny head back and forth as I continue to cry and yell. Little do I know I won't have permission to be this wild ever again. Blood, sweat, and shit is wiped off of me. A light breeze blows upon my head. I won't have a full head of hair until I am three or four years old. Time has no definition yet; I have no recollection of when my animal ends for my human to begin. My hands stretch out for the amniotic sac I once called home. No amount of swaddling will ever replace my first home. I open my eyes that confirm my point of no return.

I come from the firm socialized politeness

of smooth stones pouring from my mouth.

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Grant Moore  
Holly Trees

Under the holly tree  
bough of berries,  
its siren red  
temptation.

Where life began  
on skinny knees  
retching out  
my guts.

Waxy saw-tooth skin,  
prickly leaves,  
the sickly buds  
of poison seeds.

The tangy tongue  
of Christmas  
funerary rites.

Ispewed  
through chrysalis,  
entrails slick  
with acid grease,  
thickly dripping  
afterbirth.

Gazed upon by  
ageless tree,  
received in holy  
communion, my first  
memory:

The pluming rack  
of tight blue  
veins  
that hung about  
my neck.

The womb of black  
that forked  
the branching  
Earth.

The world that hid  
in bitter leaves  
and pushed me  
into it.

Imade a wreath  
ofholly limbs  
toprick my head  
with thoughts.

I keep its berries  
bright as death  
and touch the skin  
that baptized  
me.

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Michael Chin

## As Far As the Headlights Shine

“You can’t just look a couple feet in front of the car,” Dad said. “You’ve got to look out and all around.” He fished his phone out of pocket. It made Rob nervous when his father moved around in the passenger seat, long-limbed enough he might knock into the steering wheel, knock into the volume control and put the radio on blast. All these possibilities for the car to descend into chaos.

“That goes double at nighttime. You can’t see the whole road, but you have to look as far as the headlights let you.” In three weeks of driving lessons, they’d only now ventured from empty parking lots onto the road. The idea of night driving felt impossibly far away.

“Look at the light. What do you do?”

Rob hit the brakes harder than he meant to. The traffic light was amber, and he eased off the brake to edge up to it. Mercifully, early Saturday morning there were no other drivers to honk their horns or speed around him. Rob rubbed at his eyes, his head still fuzzy with sleep.

His sister complained in the backseat. An exaggerated *oof* followed by a whine that she was getting carsick.

“Maybe we shouldn’t do driving lessons with Cece in the car.” Rob said.

Cece was seven, still small enough to sit in the car seat with the five-point harness. By the second foray of driving around parking lots, Rob had felt comfortable enough with her in the car, but actual street driving introduced new variables. In March, the roads could still be slick, and would Rob really know what to do if one car or the other lost control or if someone came up behind them and rode his bumper. Accidents felt like inevitabilities. He could bear the responsibility of damaging the car, maybe he and his father getting banged up. If Cece got hurt, he’d never forgive himself.

“It’s good practice,” Dad said. “There are always going to be distractions. *Always*. Maybe it’s someone else driving crazy or it’s raining. Once you get more confident, you start fiddling with the radio or trying to hold hands with a pretty girl riding shot gun.”

Dad gave him a smile and clapped a hand on Rob’s shoulder just as the light turned green. Rob transitioned from brake to gas more abruptly than he meant to, shooting the car forward in a spasm, prompting another *oof* from Cece and an *easy on the gas* from Dad.

“Trust me, a kid crying in the backseat is nothing when you look at the big picture.” Dad sighed. “Get in the turn lane to take a left up here at the light. Let’s get some doughnuts.”

“Doughnuts!” Cece pumped her fists, a motion big enough to catch Rob’s eye in the rearview mirror as he stopped at the next red light. A better, gentler stop.

Rob was surprised to catch his father not looking at the light or the road, his eyes fixed on his lap instead. His iPhone glowed, and Rob presumed he was texting Mom, because even since the separation, they still kept in touch constantly.

His father’s text bubbles were going out green, though, rather than the tell-tale blue of iMessages. He was communicating with an Android user. Rob tried to make out the name, but couldn’t. Dad had the screen tilted a little away from him, maybe in an effort not to distract Rob. Maybe to hide something. The gray circle at the top, the first initial of the contact, was a J.

A car horn broke his concentration.

Dad’s head shot up. “Green arrow. What’s that mean?”

Rob let off the brake but hesitated. A yellow Jeep coming in the opposite direction inched forward, bumper crossing into the thick white line under their own traffic signal.

“You’ve got the right of way.” Dad’s voice was sharper. A sense of urgency.

“I know.” Rob did know but was still wary of the Jeep.

“Rob!”

Rob went, hitting the gas harder than he meant to, veering toward the median once he’d made the turn and swerving clear of it at the last moment before he eased off the gas.

Moments later, in the Dunkin’ Donuts parking lot, Dad took a deep breath. “If you’re not up for driving, you’ve got to tell me. I’ll always drive if you need me to.”

Rob remembered how the drive had started. Rob saying he didn’t feel like driving. Rob reiterating the point as Dad tightened Cece in the car seat. Dad telling him, *You’ve got to practice or you’ll never feel confident on the road.*

Rob stifled a yawn.

“Why are you so tired?” Dad asked.

Shortly after 2020 had turned over to 2021, the typical haze of the holidays combined with COVID lockdown ennui to render time meaningless. Rob got up early to pee. He looked out his window and spied Hannah Jane Watkins running down the road.

Hannah Jane was pretty. Probably no taller than five-feet-flat, with paper white skin and fair blond hair. She was athletic, always a bounce to her step. Rob’s brain fogged with sleep, but he watched her jog past his window. The pre-dawn streetlight cast a shine on the film of sweat over her forehead. She was the stuff of dreams.

Rob spent the next week thinking of how he might capitalize on his house falling in Hannah Jane’s jogging route. He set an alarm early enough to watch for her, to be sure he didn’t miss her, and sure enough, she ran past every morning within the same eight-minute window, between 5:26 and 5:34.

Finally, Rob got out and ran.

Timing was tricky. He couldn't very well come out the door just as she was running past. Maybe a friend could get away with that, but he and Hannah Jane were *friendly* at best. Maybe she'd give him a cursory wave as she went on running and he'd find himself chasing her. It'd be obvious he'd been waiting for her, and though he might get to run with her that morning, she'd change up her route to avoid Rob the stalker.

He got out and ran early, shivering in a sweatshirt and wind pants, lungs burning from not only the exercise, but the winter air. He left the house at 5:15, running in the direction Hannah Jane came from and ducking down a side street, perpendicular to his own. Rob's plan worked out, as he caught sight of Hannah Jane minutes later and intercepted her course. He turned back onto his street and ran a couple steps ahead before settling into her pace.

"Hannah Jane?" He affected surprise.

It took her a moment to overcome the disorientation of seeing a person she didn't expect in a place and time she wouldn't have expected. She got there, though. "Hey Rob."

From there, it was all alarmingly easy. Not the running itself, which Rob thought might kill him. But Hannah Jane didn't seem annoyed at him for interrupting her exercise—if anything, grateful for the company to the point Rob didn't feel weird about repeating his running and walking on the side street the next morning and didn't bother with that part of the charade the next day. Instead, he jogged slowly down the street starting at 5:25 and waited for her to catch up.

It became the weekday routine—all the days he was home with Mom. A week and a half in, Hannah Jane caught him coming out of the house just after 5:30.

Then that became the pattern. Hannah Jane waiting, because now she knew where he lived and they'd established a routine of doing the last mile and a half of her run together. Before



long, they recognized neither of them would freak out about running just a couple feet apart, even unmasked.

Rob noted that Hannah Jane owned an impressive array of brightly colored leggings—pink one day, yellow another, then neon blue, orange. He assumed the brightness was for visibility, in contrast to a sleek black coat that looked as though it were made for a runner. Or maybe Hannah Jane just made it look that way in her easy, athletic stride. They talked, first a little stilted, about school and their English class. He was surprised at how readily she slid into talking about her popular friends, though, as if they were his friends too.

Rob built up his lung capacity and ran past the initial shocks of soreness in his calves and knees. He even worked his way up to the point he didn't have to limp home once he'd left Hannah Jane at her place, but rather kept jogging, in the best shape of his life.

He had a crush on Hannah Jane, of course. But it had started as a general sort of crush, like he had on a lot of girls, and grew more specific, unmistakably deeper for getting to know the ragged edge her breath took from exertion toward the end of a run or the way sweaty wisps of hair clung to the back of her neck. The way she paused to really think when he asked her the most pedestrian questions like *what's your favorite movie* or *how was your weekend?*

Rob had imagined a lot of girls naked. He pictured hazy images of breasts and hips and thighs. But also their soft tummies. With Hannah Jane, his fantasies took on a sharper focus. Not a soft tummy. Sweat running down the indentations between well-defined abs from all that running.

He spent long enough in those post-run showers before he started in on school work for the day, the bulk of it *asynchronous* (a word Rob only learned after the onset of the pandemic). He didn't have much faith anyone was checking his progress all that carefully.

The runs grew longer, taking the long way around the park between their houses, then out of their neighborhood even.

Hannah Jane made these suggestions. Rob understood she wanted to spend more time with him. And so, he came to recognize the global shutdown as one of the best things that had ever happened to him. He had Hannah Jane all to himself.

“It’s great you’re running,” Mom poured spaghetti and boiling water from the big stainless steel pot into the colander. “I’ve been reading articles about the best ways to take advantage of the pandemic, and all of them mention exercise.”

Rob set the table for three. It had been his instinct to keep the running a secret, but when Mom asked where he was going every morning, he couldn’t think of a good lie. Mercifully, Hannah Jane hadn’t come up.

“The articles also talk about family time.” Steam rose from the sink as Mom shook the colander. “Now that we’re stuck together, it opens these opportunities for connection.”

Cece ran to Rob, Mom’s iPad in hand, to show him the red car she’d drawn in the art app she preferred to crayon-and-paper drawing. Mom had fought her on that for a month or so, then given in and bought a Bluetooth color printer, a compromise, so she could still have tangible art to put on the refrigerator.

“I was thinking to myself, why don’t we put these things together,” Mom said. “You’ve been so disciplined about running. I think Cece and I have a lot to learn from you. Maybe we could all run together—not so early in the morning like you’ve been doing. Cece needs her rest. But maybe in the afternoon after school.”

There was something especially grating about Mom when she not only brought up a bad idea, but laid out all her reasoning to sound like she was serving his interests, and it would only be natural for him to agree. The tactic worked on Cece. But Rob, who'd spent most of his childhood finding his mother the more present, more caring, generally *better* parent couldn't help considering maybe it was not his father's aloof nature that drove him and Mom apart, but rather Mom being such a pain in the ass.

"We'd have to start a little slower, but maybe you can teach Cece how to pace herself and breathe." Mom said. "Cece, wouldn't it be cool if you were the fastest kid in your class when school opens again?"

Cece didn't say anything.

"I've got a tight schedule," Rob said. "School's harder online. The teachers never really explain anything."

"You have to tell me if a teacher isn't explaining things," Mom broke in. "That was in the emails from the school. The teachers are learning how to do school online too."

"It's fine." Rob set down a plate harder than he meant to, then delicately adjusted as if that proved he wasn't mad. He felt guilty. Like him, most of his friends had computers in their rooms and they'd coordinated to mute the Zoom lectures, turn off their cameras, and play *Fortnite*. They'd alternate who played lookout, actually paying attention in class to let everyone know if the teacher called on someone. If there were a delay or no response at all, technology offered a plausible out, like *sorry, my Internet glitched* or *my mic isn't workin'xg*. "It just takes a lot of focus." He sighed. "And you know how you've been bugging me to join extracurriculars? I joined Car Club. So that's one more thing."

He'd said the right thing. Mom congratulated him for getting involved and talked about how good Car Club would look on his college applications. He couldn't get in a word edgewise before she was off and running about what a good, practical education it would be, too, to know how to change his own oil and tune up an engine. She wished she'd learned these things.

In not mentioning it again, he understood she'd accepted he'd keep his early morning runs to himself. He'd keep Hannah Jane.

Rob didn't have any illusions Hannah Jane wasn't texting with her friends from school or interacting with them on Instagram. He knew he didn't literally have her all to himself.

And yet, Rob suspected he had a connection to Hannah Jane like no one else, if only because she had a connection to him like no one else—the only person he saw on a regular basis outside his nuclear family.

So, Rob had a sinking feeling with Hannah Jane first mentioned the party.

“I think it's going to be lowkey,” she said. She'd shed layers as late spring settled in and ran in a red Shermantown High t-shirt she'd cut to hang over her shoulder, a sports bra underneath. Black leggings now. “Ten, maybe fifteen people, however much beer Hunter can get together. He says it'll be easier to use his ID in a mask, but Kelsey says all the stores are cracking down.”

Hannah Jane had told Rob months back about Hunter using his older brother's expired license to buy alcohol and how Brian took a more brute force approach of shoplifting individual bottles of Sam Adams, liberated from six packs at ShopSmart. The two of them were the steadiest sources of alcohol for Hannah Jane's friends, though some of the parents would buy

them a case of beer now and again on the premise they'd rather everyone drink safely under their roof than go off on their own.

Rob had never been invited to one of these parties.

"Anyway, we'll be at Janelle's in Washington Heights. Thursday night." Hannah Jane said. "You in?"

Hannah Jane pulled up on the neck of her shirt to rub sweat from her eyes. When the shirt fell back into place it was a little off. For a beautiful moment, when Rob's eyes landed just right, he could see where her breasts cleaved.

"I don't have a car," Rob said.

Hannah Jane tucked her hair behind her ear. "Nate's coming to get me. He can give you a ride," she said. "Just be at my house by eight. Make it seven-forty-five, actually. He'll be pissy if he has to wait."

Everything had gone smoothly. Rob told Mom he had a headache and he was going to bed early. Cece was being a pain trying to show Mom all the pictures she'd taken around the house for a photo scavenger hunt her teacher assigned, and it was just the right level of distracting and annoying for Mom not to give him much scrutiny. He hadn't even had to sneak out his window, just closed his bedroom door and snuck back downstairs, button-up shirt wadded in his hands so it wouldn't arouse suspicion if Mom caught him. He slipped out the backdoor, around the house, and to Hannah Jane's.

In the car, he'd been surprised Hannah Jane, Nate, and his girlfriend Tracy all went unmasked, and he got self-conscious about his face-covering. When they got to the party, no one wore masks either—the ten-to-fifteen people Hannah Jane had predicted in the living room and

plenty more in the kitchen, in the stairwell, a rumble of footsteps overhead. Rob discreetly took off his own mask. Brian Hine and Janelle Thompson made out in a recliner. Big Dustin Jones, a linebacker for the football team, a menace in gym class dodgeball games, wandered barefoot drinking from a Solo cup. Hannah Jane led Rob to the kitchen, stopping to hug different girls along the way, before she took out bottles of Coors Light from the fridge for each of them.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “Everyone got tested before the party.”

Rob was skeptical because he himself hadn’t been tested. He was conscious of so many bodies around him after months of isolation. Body odor that was par for the course at school but he’d grown unaccustomed to after a year away.

How long before Hannah Jane felt smothered by Rob? He imagined her saying, *We run together everyday, can’t we spend five minutes apart?* or *Don’t you have any other friends?* He did have other friends, but they were the kind who, even before social distancing guidelines, stayed home and talked over headsets while they played *Among Us*. But Hannah Jane never tried to shake him off, if anything staying close to Rob, so close she always had a hand on his arm or her chest against him, her breath on his neck each time she looked up to talk to him. The only times she left were to get more beer—starting her fourth while Rob nursed his way through the first half of his second. It tasted stale.

Rob was telling Hannah Jane about Car Club when the song switched to one with blaring trumpets Rob didn’t recognize but everyone else seemed to, registering their delight with a collective, *oh!* Dustin Jones lifted a girl in the air in one arm, another, smaller guy from the football team in the other and bounced. They both laughed. This wasn’t their first time in this position, maybe not even the first time during the pandemic, because didn’t everyone else at the party seem so at ease, unfazed by human contact and noise?

“Do you want to go somewhere quieter?” Hannah Jane asked.

At last, Rob thought, a reprieve. A moment, beyond physical proximity, to register a connection, an understanding between them. He thought they’d go outside, or maybe to a private study in this house where they could sit together on a leather loveseat and talk without shouting.

Hannah Jane laced her fingers between his. Her hand was small and hot to the touch. She led him away, upstairs and past two closed doors. She knocked on a third and when no one answered, she opened the door so they could go inside. She locked the door behind them.

“Keep telling me about that car thing,” she said.

“Car Club?” He wondered if Car Club were actually the most interesting topic of conversation he had to offer. “It’s OK, I guess. Mr. Fusillo posts these videos.”

Hannah Jane let out a little *oh*, quieter, softer around the edges than the chorus of ohs downstairs. She pressed her body against his, his back to the door.

“He was really trying at first. I think he wore a GoPro and he narrated while he changed his spark plugs.”

“Yeah.” Hannah Jane flicked her tongue against his Adam’s apple.

“But now he’s just posting videos from YouTube anyone could find. And he leaves a discussion board open for people to ask questions, but no one does.”

“Car. Club.” She said it like a breathy incantation, hand beneath his shirt, exploring his abdomen.

Then she was on him, her tongue filling his mouth. They lay on a bed covered in olive green sheets that smelled a little sweet, a little sour. Hannah Jane’s breath reeked of beer. She sat up, straddling him and peeled off her shirt. Her skin smooth to the touch when she pulled his hands up against her, over her stomach, up under her bra.

“This is Sex Club.” She moaned. “No videos allowed.”

She swiveled over him. He was erect, but it wasn’t like he was about to pop the way he thought he might if they so much as closed-mouth kissed. Her hair got in his eyes.

“How bad do you want this?” Her voice had taken on a higher pitch, a whine. Her tongue flopped into his ear. “Hold on a sec.” She got up and knelt by a wastebasket where she puked her guts out. Her eyes were on him again a moment later as her thumb and forefinger disconnected a string of drool from her bottom lip. “Curtis has condoms in the nightstand.”

Rob put it together. Janelle Thompson’s house. Curtis, her older brother, who’d graduated the year before. Maybe he was at college. But didn’t dorms close for the pandemic? Had Rob seen Curtis at the party? Had Curtis seen them go upstairs? Had Hannah Jane slept with Curtis? Or had she slept with a different boy in this bed? She’d talked about *Sex Club*, hadn’t she? A riff on Car Club. A joke. Right?

Hannah Jane’s breath was hot, acidic. The taste of not only Coors Lite, but barf. She smelled like the back of Mom’s car after Cece got car sick. She always got car sick.

“I have to get out of here,” Rob said.

He registered Hannah Jane saying *What the fuck?* as he got on his feet and a yelp as he opened the door—he hadn’t given her time to get dressed. He hesitated, which made things worse, then got out of the room, closing the door. The lock clicked behind him.

Rob left the party and walked down the street. It would be too far to walk home.

Mom and Dad had each, separately, given him a year-and-a-half back. They both said he could always call them, always get a ride home if he were in a bad spot. The content of what they said, down to the phrasing of *no questions asked* suggested they’d coordinated the messaging, but miscommunicated about which of them was going to have this particular to talk with Rob.



He couldn't imagine having Mom get him. He'd snuck out of her house in the middle of a pandemic. No way she'd wouldn't ask questions.

He texted Dad.

*I need a ride.*

Rob walked on. No direction. More distance from the party, though.

It took a couple minutes, but Dad replied. *What do you mean?*

Rob took a deep breath. *I'm stuck in Washington Heights. Please.*

*How did you get to Washington Heights ? Then, Your mom's got you out tonight. Have you tried her?*

He wasn't sure what he'd expected. Of course there'd be questions.

But then Dad texted again. *Drop a pin. I can get there in 15 min.*

Rob updated his location a few times. First, he got spooked about standing outside someone's house—that they might see him and call the police. Then from an empty stretch of road where he imagined someone speeding by and running him over.

Rob settled on a playground. Public property. No one around. He sat on a swing.

A black Subaru Impreza pulled up. Not his father's car, but the driver's side window rolled down and Dad called for him to get in.

This car was older than Dad's. Analog gauges on the dash where they were digital in his father's Corolla, the steel on the seat belt buckle scratched up, worn. This car was cleaner too. No half-drunk soda bottle in the cupholder or Snickers wrappers on the floorboard.

"Are you gonna tell me what happened?"

Rob fiddled with the seatbelt strap. "I don't want to talk about it."

Dad sighed. “You’re OK going back to the house?” He rubbed at the stubble on his cheek. “You can stay with me, you know. I just wasn’t expecting it. And we have to tell your Mom so she doesn’t freak out, thinking you got abducted or something.”

The idea of someone taking Rob as if he were still a small child felt absurd, though he knew Dad was right that’s where Mom’s head would go long before she considered he’d snuck out. Mom worried like that.

“You can take me home.” Rob said. “To Mom’s.”

This different car hinted at a whole other life his father lived five days out of the week. Rob wanted to ask about it, but when Dad didn’t volunteer an explanation, it registered they’d both be happier with *no questions asked*.

It was dark on the main drag back to their side of Shermantown, dark masses of trees to either side of the car, all blackness past the headlights. Dad took his foot off the gas and coasted toward an intersection. “This light never stays green long.” True to his prediction, the light was yellow about fifty yards out, red by the time they reached it.

“You can always call me,” Dad said. “I’ll be there if you need me.”

“I texted you, didn’t I?” Rob said.

The light turned green again.

Rob felt terrible, like he did when he’d helped Dad load up the car to move out of the house in the first place and lost his grip on a plastic bin of full plates and glasses that clattered. Some must have broken, and Dad had scolded him to be careful and he’d yelled back because of course he hadn’t meant to drop the box and dropping it itself was a reminder to be careful.

“Thanks for getting me,” Rob said.

They didn't say anything else. Dad cut the headlights as they pulled up two doors down and advised Rob to go in the backdoor so Mom wouldn't hear him. Rob said thanks again and got out. He expected the Subaru to pull off right away, but Dad lingered. Rob figured he waited to make sure his son got in OK, even though Dad wouldn't be able to see him once he circled around the back of the house.

After Rob got inside, he walked carefully not to make any noise tripping over one of Cece's toys. He made his way to the living room, overlooking the street, and turned the light on and off and on and off again. A signal they'd never agreed on that he'd made it inside. Sure enough, a moment later, headlights drove past, then everything was dark.

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## QudusOlowo Hallucinations

i had a dream of horned vultures singing apala at a bus stop, millions of motorists throwing coins at them as they drive by, purple-skinned children danced to the subtle tune with their legs sprouting out black flowers // in that dream, my ex forgot her last kiss at my apartment // she returned with bruised metaphors on her shoulders and cobwebs masking the regrets on her lips // i had a dream of being a warthog, outrunning my grief into a pace of nothingness // the sun fell on me and i became a fervid paradox in my poem. in the poem // i sold bliss to a perfectionist and he said it wasn't enough. i carried with me this dunya // mapped out where I came from, —it is how I cease to exist // in my last dream, a goat carried his master for sale around the market, roared at penniless buyers. i wanted to buy the master but the coins in my pocket have grown wild into a gun // so I stole the goat, I stole the master, and I stole survival //

**Apala** - *This is a genre of traditional music from Nigeria that features drums and percussion.*

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Barlow Cassmont  
*The Eternal Edgeiness of Edgegrove Estates*  
Everyone knows Marsha Meadow is kooky but this is different.

When I show up to her weeknight tea invitation, there are no cups on the table, no kettle either. How've you been? I say.

*You better sit down, she says. I have a favor to ask.*

I detest conversations that start with such warnings, but what the hell, I'm already here. When she offers me a scotch, my antennae goes further up.

*Look, she says. My salary has been stagnant for the longest and this place keeps raising our rent every six months. It's hard to keep up.* I listen attentively, yet fail to see what any of it has to do with me.

*Everyone knows who your grandmother was. You've inherited her gifts.* Will you get to the point, please? *The only way to bring the rent down is for these estates to become... you know.* She twists her mouth, flails her arms, and makes strange expressions. *You still have her book, right? She did leave it to you?* Oh no no no! Not a chance. Are you crazy? I say. Do you have any idea how dangerous that could be? *It can't be worse than ending upon the streets. If you don't do this I'll be sleeping in a tent or cardboard box as sure as the sun rises in the east.*

I grab my purse from her couch and storm out without saying another word. Marsha may have been merely kooky at one time, but at present she's lost her mind completely. On the way home, several panhandlers approach me. Old, young, tall, short, men, women, what have you. These days they come in all shapes, genders and ages. I give out the few coins I have, but they still curse at me as I walk away, calling me a soulless cheapskate, in addition to the glorious C word. It's hard to please people anymore - the destitute especially.

That night I toss and turn, haunted by Marsha's request. My phone's bombarded with her messages. *Please please please do this for me or I'll be ruined come springtime. I won't tell anyone it was your doing.* Covering my head with the pillow doesn't grant me the desired escape from reality, so I'm in and out of sleep continuously, meeting the incoming dawn with heavy bags under my eyes.

That week I'm a zombie at work, barely able to focus on any task. My boss notices my lethargy and glances at me sideways while passing by my cubicle with his late afternoon coffee. Real nice. That's all I need: to lose this job in a crashing economy and find myself in Marsha's shoes.

In the evening, I find her sitting on the steps of my building. Sobbing, shivering, nearly shaking. Her eyes are redder than a pair of dark cherries. *My landlord said if I don't come with the rent in two weeks, I'll be evicted.* Wow. How exactly did I inherit her problems? By association alone, seemingly. I shake my head, curse at myself within, then give her a hug. At length, I whisper fine but this is the first and last time. And just like that, Marsha's sobs turn merry. Suddenly she's showering me with smacking kisses, loud, and nearly obnoxious. *Thank you thank you thank you!* I'll come tomorrow after work, I say.

As I promised, my grandma's black book in tow (it's aged; its physical makeup now more dust than binding, but the interior content is all that matters), I ring Marsha's buzzer as the sun is casting long shadows on the adjacent buildings. Soon I'm inside her unit. The table is laid out with drinks hot and cold, soft and hard.

*Anything you want, she says. I will forever remain in your debt.*

Marsha, I say. I need you to understand that once I do this, there's no putting the paste back into the tube. I won't have any control over what or who crosses over.

*That'll be my problem. After all, how bad can spirits be when compared to the greedy landlords and banks that suck working people's souls on a daily basis?*

Fine, I say. Your funeral. But what about the other residents?

*Don't worry, she says. They're in the same boat as me. Chomping at the bit to spend less and save more.*

I contemplate her words, narrow my eyes, then, at last, shrug approvingly. Then, I open the book and soon the ancient words unroll off my tongue with the gracefulness of a cat being skinned alive. Outdoors the darkest clouds suddenly emerge out of nowhere and distant lightning manifests itself in roaring thunder that explodes as if only a few feet away. My eyes close, and I see everything and nothing, hear silence and otherworldly boisterousness, witness the beginning and the end, experience all life that ever existed and simultaneously nothing that ever was and never will be. It's a momentary vision, but one that shakes me from within and without, making me involuntarily retch all over her table, on glasses half filled and those still empty. Luckily, she doesn't mind my vomit in the least.

It's done, I say.

*Thank you thank you thank you!* Marsha hugs and kisses me again, nearly strangling me with her excessive jubilation. I down a few shots of scotch (from a clean untouched glass), hoping it'll make me forget what I just did. But instead, the drink burns my throat and causes me to cough half a lung. Meanwhile, Marsha is radiating with newfound happiness. Hard to believe how miserable and frail she appeared only yesterday.

*How long before they're roaming the hallways and units?*

It could be anywhere from six hours to two days, I say. Secretly, I pray and hope I didn't recite the words correctly and that none of it will come to pass. Then again, that would hardly solve Marsha's dilemma. Her hardship would only escalate. I don't exactly dislike her, but if she becomes unhoused, I wouldn't want the burden of having her crash on my couch. It's bad enough living in my tiny studio as is. One person's elbows can't go a day without banging against the narrow kitchen and bathroom walls, much less those of two neurotic underachieving women.

Days go by, and I don't hear from Marsha. Despite my increasing curiosity, I refrain from texting or calling. My fingertips merely graze the tiny keyboard, without ever pushing. At night, insomnia grips me again, but this time it's heavier than before. I struggle breathing as a stuffy nose forces me to open my mouth to compensate for the lack of air.

Three weekends later, after she ignores all my messages and calls, I'm unable to keep inquisitive urges at bay. At length, I venture to Marsha's place. Sweaty palms, escalating heart rate, and pessimistic thoughts consume me on my way. Calm down, I think to myself. Relax. Stop biting your nails. Everything will be fine. Marsha especially. But it doesn't work. None of it. I'm a nervous wreck, through and through.

Her street is quiet, chilly, consumed by darkness. The building's stature is ghastly. Not a human soul in sight. No postmen, no delivery vehicles, not even children playing in the intermittent spots of greenery. Some of the windows appear broken. The pavement below is painted in splotches of red. A perpetually black cloud hovers above the Edgegrove Estates, and a muffled ominous howling emanates from within. The closer I approach, the more the hairs on my arms stand.

*I wouldn't go in there if I were you*, a ragged man in filthy clothes says to me. He's pushing a flimsy cart with squeaky wheels full of plastic bottles and aluminum cans. Before I can process his words, he disappears around the corner, like a spirit that never was. I hesitate and think about his warning, but the image of Marsha, helpless and desperate and likely in need, nudges me forward.

Inside, the hallway is colder than the Arctic. My breath is visible, despite the warm spring weather outside. The elevator is out of service. Lights are off everywhere. By the time I climb to Marsha's floor, I encounter several bums, who've turned the stairwell into their new dwelling. Smell of feces and urine overwhelms me, so I knock on her door with a fervor bordering on desperation. It takes her longer than usual to open, and when she does, I'm shocked at her appearance.

Paler than a snowman in January, Marsha's bloodshot eyes stare past me, unblinking, as if looking *through* me. Her hair is clumpy, messy, emitting an unfamiliar foulness.

*Hey there. Nice of you to come by.* Her voice is reminiscent of a robotic unit at an automation exhibit. She walks away, implying I should follow after her. So I do.

In her living room, dirty cups and glasses and plates are scattered all over. Filth is abundant, as is the smell of rotten food. How are you holding up? I say. I immediately regret uttering the words, for they serve only to imply my spinelessness.



*I haven't slept in days. They won't let me, especially at night. I suppose this'll take getting used to. I just hope it's sooner than later.*

Marsha, upon even closer inspection, is the epitome of the undead. No color suggesting life or vivacity remains in her. Charred lips, cracked skin, and a newfound thinness that turns her previously full frame skeletal. Her words are spoken automatically, any emotion in them as absent as sunlight struggling to invade through her windows. This is my fault, all of it. Sure, Marsha did beg me to help her, but I should've refused, no matter how dire her desperation. I should've known. But I did, of course I did. And yet, I went through it anyway. What does that make me?

Shit.

*Mrs. Ascher jumped out of the window a few days ago. The Mostovs and the Rosenbaums, too. Kate and Adam Reznick slit their wrists in a bathtub after sending their children upstate. Others ran away in the middle of the night, like sewer rats at the sight of a famished feline. The police won't come anywhere near the place.*

So... I say. You're the only one left? She nods, grinning. *I wanted lower rent, but now it's been reduced to nothing. I live free of charge, despite the night horrors. But look at the bright side: I won't be going homeless. Whoo-hoo!*

To say she was out of touch was an understatement. Marsha, I say. Why don't you come with me? My place is small, but it's safe. We'll make it work, I'm sure of it. You don't have to pay anything, I'll cover the bills, all of them. Please... come with me, and leave this place. This building. This life. I made a mistake, and I'm sorry.

In lieu of a verbal reply, she chuckles. Her extended cackling echoes deep into the hallway, even into the stairwell that spirals like a vortex of infinite madness, if looked at from above. When her laughter ceases, she shakes her head.

*No, thanks. I have my own place, and no parasitic landlord will ever bleed me dry of my wages to cover its cost.*

I try grabbing her arm, but she swiftly flinches it away, and angrily flashes her teeth. They're as rotten as the maggot ridden food on her scattered plates. I'm sorry, Marsha. For everything. But she isn't listening. My words are as inconsequential as the howling whispers and sinister wailing that periodically emanates within and without her walls. I nod and say goodbye, but she doesn't hear me. All I get is a mechanical half-wave of her arm as I close the door behind me.

On the way out, I see additional impoverished individuals on the stairwell. They move effortlessly under the haunting shadows, and smell like rodents of the underworld. Before I reach the front door, familiar voices cry in my wake.

*There goes that miserly wench. She may shower us with pennies again - although I'd rather she shove them up her twat.*

The last thing I hear before I reach the outdoors is the emblematic C word. Normally, its utterance in my direction would beget a clenched fist, a furrowed brow, even a malicious F-bomb re-directed at the sender. But today, I take it with shrugged shoulders, for it's hard to argue with its validity.



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SonaliRoy  
Thorns of Life

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Alexis Ames

## To the Person Who Loves My Husband

*To the person who loves my husband.*

*I don't know who is reading this letter. Maybe it's you, Maryanne, the best sister I could ever have asked for. Maybe it's you, Allen and Alice, the neighbors who welcomed us to Fenwick's End all those years ago and made this place feel like home. Maybe it's you, Charlotte, who watched Cam as a baby so that we could work, and became a lifelong friend.*

*Or maybe it's you, the person Darrell falls in love with after I'm gone.*

"Pops really wrote this?" Cam asked.

He held the letter gingerly, backpack hanging off his shoulder as he scanned the neat handwriting once more. Brad had already been at the house when Cam came home from school that afternoon, having let himself in with the key Darrell had given him for emergencies years ago, the letter burning a hole in his back pocket.

"You'd know his handwriting better than I do," Brad pointed out as he searched through the cupboards for what he needed: a mixing bowl, pans, a cooling rack. "But yes, he must have. I found it in that desk your dad gave me."

Cam swallowed hard, fingers brushing the neat script. "August fourteenth...he died a week later."

The letter had been unfinished, the envelope blank. Dan must have intended to return to it later, and then later never arrived, so it had sat abandoned in the desk all these years.

“You can keep it, of course. It belongs to you and your dad,” Brad said. “I’m using a photocopy to make the cake. Didn’t want to get chocolate on it or something. Want to help?”

*Whoever ends up reading this, we share something in common: loving Darrell. Birthdays have always been hard for him; now they’ll be even more difficult. I hate to think that he’ll go the rest of his life never having the cake I used to make him; it was the only part of his birthday he liked, aside from Cam’s cards. It’s simple enough that even I couldn’t mess it up.*

*Step 1: Gather the following ingredients...*

“How long until your dad gets home?”

“Said his shift ended at five.” Cam leaned a hip against the counter. “What are you looking for?”

“Vanilla.”

“Second cabinet to your right.”

Brad had been in this kitchen dozens of times over the years, but usually just to grab beers from the fridge for him and Darrell during commercial breaks of whatever game they happened to be watching. “Grab the eggs and milk for me, would you? We’ve got less than two hours to get this cake finished for your dad.”

Cam ambled over to the refrigerator. He must have grown three inches since the last time Brad saw him. He’d be as tall as Darrell soon. “How many eggs?”

“Two.”

Cam brought the eggs and milk over to the counter. “You know how to bake?”

“Used to help my mom. I’m no chef, but I know the basics.” Brad ran his finger down the list again. “Let’s see...we’ve got the salt, the baking soda, cocoa powder—”

“Don’t you mean you’re no baker?”

“Whatever.” Brad snapped the hand towel in his direction. “Set the oven to 350, smartass.”

*Step 3: Add eggs, milk, vanilla...*

“You were fourteen when she died?”

Brad let Cam crack the eggs in a bowl while he measured out the other ingredients, one eye on the clock. It was supposed to take less than an hour for the cake to bake, but then it needed time to cool before they could frost it.

“Yeah.” A year younger than Cam was now, but four years older than when Cam had lost Dan. It was the first thing they had bonded over three years ago. With Darrell, it had been college basketball, and with Cam, it had been the experience of losing a parent young.

“But you had your dad.”

“Not like you do,” Brad said. His father had retreated into his grief, and Brad had left home the moment he turned eighteen. “We don’t really talk anymore. Wanna help me mix this?”

Cam used the mixer on the batter while Brad greased the pans.

“You don’t need him,” Cam said suddenly. “You’ve got us.”

Brad nudged his shoulder. “Yeah, buddy. I’ve got you two.”

*Step 5: After you’ve greased the pans, pour the mixture...*

“He left me a bunch of letters,” Cam said. He was watching Brad carefully pour the mixture into the two pans. “He wanted me to open some of them after he died, and then he gave others to Dad so he can give them to me on my birthday every year.”

“Do you like that?” Brad’s mom had died in an accident, sudden and brutal. He sometimes wondered if it would have been better if they had known it was coming, if she could have given them a long goodbye. He still wasn’t sure.

“I didn’t, at first,” Cam admitted. “I was really angry. I didn’t want the letters, I wanted Pops. But now I look forward to it. I always wondered why he never left anything for Dad.”

Brad placed the pans in the oven and set the timer. The cake wasn’t large, so hopefully they could get away with only letting it cool for an hour before frosting it. They were cutting it close enough as it was.

“He left things for your Dad; they just weren’t letters.” Darrell and Dan had said their goodbyes differently—not that Brad knew all the details, but Darrell had opened up a bit about his dead husband three years into their friendship. “Except for this one, I guess.”

“Do you think Dad will ever marry again?” Cam was reading the letter once more. He must have read it five times already, not that Brad could blame him. “Pops seemed to think he would.”

“Dunno, buddy. You know as much about his love life as I do.” It was the one thing they never talked about. Mostly they laughed over Brad’s disastrous attempts at dating. “How would you feel if he did?”

“They’d never be my pops,” Cam said. “But...I’d want to like them. And for them to like me.”



“Anyone who doesn’t like you is an idiot,” Brad said. “And your dad wouldn’t marry someone like that in the first place.”

*Step 7: This is the most important step of all—make sure Cam gets to lick the bowl.*

“So, you made this every year with your pops?”

Cam nodded from his perch on the counter. He had a smear of chocolate at the corner of his mouth, and for a moment Brad could easily picture the eight-year-old version of him in this kitchen, helping Dan break the eggs and pour the batter into pans and lick the bowl clean.

“Yeah, Pops would send Dad out on a bunch of errands or something and then we’d have the cake ready by the time he came back. He always acted surprised about it.”

“But no presents?”

“Nah, he hates them. I always made him a card, though.” Cam swiped his finger through the bowl and licked the chocolate off. “This is *so* good.”

“It’s literally just raw eggs and cocoa powder,” Brad laughed, though that hadn’t stopped him from licking the spoon earlier. “Want to play something?”

Cam perked up. “Really?”

Brad shrugged. “We’ve got to let the cake finish baking, and then it’s got to cool. Why not?”

“Aren’t you supposed to make me do my homework or something?”

Brad laughed. “I’m not your dad, kid. It’s not my job to be the responsible one.”

“*Awesome*,” Cam breathed. “Mario Kart? I’m definitely going to win this time.”

“That’s what you say every time, Cam.”

*Step 9: Make sure he knows he's loved.*

Cam's head shot up when they heard the crunch of wheels in the driveway. "Dad's home!"

A car door slammed. Brad frosted the last part of the cake and hurriedly tossed the butter knife in the sink. Darrell called out a greeting from the hallway as he took off his shoes and shed his coat.

"Happy birthday!" Cam and Brad called out in unison.

Brad was willing to come over to his best friend's house and make him a cake for his birthday, but *singing* to him was out of the question, so he played the song on his phone while Cam lit the candles, all forty-four of them. Darrell stood frozen on the threshold for a minute before coming into the kitchen. When the song ended, he blew out the candles. He cleared his throat, and then asked, "What's all this?"

"Brad found a letter from Pops!" Cam brandished it excitedly. "He wrote down the cake he made you every year for your birthday."

Darrell stared at the two sheets of paper like they might be a bomb about to go off. After a moment, he reached out and gingerly took them from his son. He scanned the first page. Brad watched as his throat worked, but he said nothing.

"We thought you'd like it," Cam said tentatively, some of the excitement leaking out of him.

Darrell reached for Cam and wrapped him in a hug.

"I love it," he said, pressing a kiss to his son's hair. "I'm just surprised. Thank you."

“It was Brad’s idea,” Cam mumbled, embarrassed.

“Cam was an excellent helper,” Brad said. “Want a slice?”

“It’s five pm.”

“I think you’re allowed to have dessert before dinner on your birthday.”

So they sat on the stools at the kitchen counter and had a slice of cake each, and Brad pretended not to notice when Darrell discreetly swiped a knuckle under his eye as he ate that first bite.

Eventually, Cam went off to his room to start on his homework, and Brad put the rest of the cake in a container to store in the fridge while Darrell set about making dinner. He grabbed a couple of beers after setting the cake on the middle shelf, cracked them both open, and handed one to Darrell.

“Where did you find that letter?” Darrell asked after several minutes of companionable silence, Brad sipping his beer at the counter while Darrell worked on the meal. It was chicken tikka masala tonight, and Brad’s stomach growled despite the cake he’d just eaten. Darrell didn’t ask if he was staying for dinner, just automatically took out three plates from the cabinet and set them on the dining room table.

“Remember that desk you gave me last year?” Brad said. “The one that’d been taking up space in your garage? Finally got around to using it. The letter had fallen behind the drawers. I only found it because I pulled them out to clean them. I found it a few days ago. I wasn’t keeping it from you.”

“Thanks,” Darrell said. “It...means a lot.”

“You ever think about dating again?” Brad blurted, and it must have been the beer that loosened his tongue.

Darrell turned around, and their eyes met. He held Brad's gaze for a moment, and then his eyes flicked to Brad's lips and back up again. "Yeah," he said quietly. "Once or twice." "Dad!" Cam shouted, and the spell broke. Brad leaned back, drawing a breath. "The wifi's stopped working!"

"Of course it has," Darrell muttered, wiping his hands on a towel. He tossed Brad a smile. "Duty calls. Be right back."

He left Brad alone in the kitchen with a pounding heart and an ache behind his sternum.

*Voilà ! You've made a cake! Don't worry if it's barely edible—Darrell will eat it regardless, because you're the one who made it for him.*

*I wish you well, whoever is reading this. I hope Darrell has you in his life for many years to come. Look after my husband, please. It's the last gift I can give him.*

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Nnadi Samuel

## Ecdysis//After the Shedding of Skin

Language is raw persimmon,  
& the permission of teeth wrapped against its yellowed sweetness.

here, I am—jaw ajar before my windowsill, licking a phrase to its seeded white. my gum,  
redolent with bees, you'd mistake me for a humming

knelt against the tight throat of cloud  
stretching above a bushy existence that is me without a haircut.

in my open-mouthed plea, I gnaw a fiber thick stain of sound.  
a blooded sigh, streaming from its fleshy exterior: an agape feeding of my reptile tongue.  
everything on earth demands a swallow that leaves one begging to be quenched:  
the grappling of neck, a failed gymnastics—useless at first try.

my barrenness begs to train a garden of stone fruits, to harden my resemblance towards life.  
their squeezable blessing of mouth-watery vitamins, chowed in rushed silence.

I volley the seed out of my breastbone & it lands on a skin of glass: a loudness planted in  
amorphous solid.  
I cross-pollinate into breaking. the crack of my spine, a stigma shaped like a U-turn.  
a curved rage, lengthy on transparent surface.

see, how I bold letters into chaos theory,  
yet cannot pronounce my joy in hollowed fonts.

I milk a deciduous tooth on the black architecture of the night sky. my childhood squats in its  
ravenous light, housing an internal bleed.

I own a silence that curls on the inside like adult wisdom, & do not grow a body to elongate into  
shouting.

in my echo, I commit a spit to memory, relish the infant white  
on the walls of my gullet. I foam with a cheerfulness that is  
near-diabetic. know of any happiness that is healthy & without  
medication?

I roam the wild of my organs, practicing woolgathering with a sheep's leftover fleece.  
in a daydream, my mother clots without help from a bite that has my name on it,  
& I wonder how I ghost between countries, stinging my relatives.

I tremor in slimy water coming from my raised head: a call to attention that elicits running—  
a helter-skelter of *'help-me'*.  
my pity party outfit—a shiny scale of keratin.

the hotness of summer, honing a bright language on my ribs.  
I strain a cold distance to wean off this hissing costume,  
tie a towel of flesh on both ends of me & peg a bone to the exercise.  
I think ecdysis, as if sun-drying my better half.

I own this moment like a stolen body, this shiny black bag of terror.  
its presence on my back—a battle to be dragged everywhere,  
in spite of the hemorrhage in my lung.

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## SadieBernard

### Birdy

I wish we had left him there. Mom found him under abushin our backyard. He was wet; it had rained the night before, and like the grass, his shiny black body was damp and covered in beads of water. He had awkward, twig-like legs and a black, razor-sharp beak. Mom thought his wing was broken, so that's why she brought him in. It turned out his feathers were just stuck up in an odd position.

It had always been only Mom and I so when she brought him in, I was angry. She said: Here's your new brother! And lifted him over her head. He pecked at her hands. Mom turned on ABBA and danced around the kitchen with him under her arm. The floorboards creaked. He cooed. I stood in the doorway, hands on my hips and my mouth in a downward U. I felt the tears beginning to well in the corners of my eyes. But it was not the time to cry. We were supposed to be celebrating our new family member. I squeezed my eyes shut and let the tears seep back into wherever they came from. Mom smoothed a feather down on the top of my new brother's head and made a shhhhhhhh sound of love. He closed his eyes and snuggled into her arm. I hung back, unsure where I fit in. Usually, it's only Mom and me dancing to ABBA. Not anymore. Mom said: Sweetie, pull out your trundle and make it up for Birdy. Sweetie, light a candle in your room so it smells like vanilla and lavender. Sweetie, turn on the heating pad and put it under his sheet so it's nice and toasty when I tuck him in. But not too hot, please. Sweetie, you and Birdy will be best friends forever.

I did as I was told. I made the trundle and even used my favorite sheets for him: the ones with little blue stars. I lit the candle by my window. I turned on the heated blanket and put it on the low setting so Birdy wouldn't get burned. My sunflower-yellow room filled with heavy, perfumed smoke. Mom and I had picked the color out on my eighth birthday, and spent the week painting the walls, and ourselves, together. A plastic chandelier hung from the ceiling—an estate sale find of Mom's.

Birdy! Mom! I called for them, up the stairs. Mom appeared at the top of them, with Birdy in her arms bundled in an old, raggedy towel. Only his little round head poked out of the burrito. He cocked his head to the right.

The room is ready, I said, I even dimmed the lights.

Once Birdy had his well-deserved nap, it was time to get to know my new brother. I decided to play with him because normal kids do that with their normal siblings. I pulled out my bin of plastic dolls from the closet. They were off-brand Barbies with large, round foreheads, black eyes, and narrow hips. I had two girls and a boy. There were many outfits to go along with them: business casual tweed suits for the office, slinky silver night-out clothes with an added-on fedora for the boy, and stretchy floral-patterned swimwear. Birdy pecked at the fake-ken doll's face and poked a hole in one of its eyes.

Birdy, you're supposed to hold up the doll by its waist and walk it around like this, I said. I moved around my own doll on the carpet floor, to show him. She teetered this way and that, her plastic legs stiff without joints.

Brrrreeep, said Birdy.

He shuffled his wings.

Oh, I said, I see. You don't have arms or hands or fingers. I forgot.

The next day we went to three different doctors. Mom said this was an important thing to do since Birdy was performing well below the average social, cognitive, and physical levels of a young child. First was the pediatric doctor, Doctor Dupont, who was a very short, wrinkly old



woman with cold hands and a face fixed in an expression of surprise. She told us Birdy was probably a month old, but she wasn't a bird specialist so she couldn't be sure. Doctor Dupont said we'd better go to someone who knows stuff about birds because all her patients are humans. Her eyes were very wide when she said this, with almost a crazy look in them. Mom did not like this comment but kept her mouth shut. I could tell she was angry though, because whenever Mom gets angry the crease between her eyebrows gets so deep and it looks like she's smelling something really, really bad. Birdy got six shots, and they took his blood, but the princess band-aids wouldn't stick to his feathers and kept falling on to the office floor. Dr. Dupont grumbled, loudly.

After reapplying them for the tenth time, she finally gave up and threw the pile of used Band-Aids into the trash can. Silly people, she said, thinking a bird is a child. Mom threatened to ruin Doctor Dupont's career. She said: how dare you? Birdy is no different than any other child you treat! I sat on the chair in the corner of the room, kicking my feet. I was already bored.

Next, we went to a speech therapist. She was tall and sort of sickly-looking and wore a silk headscarf with a lion on it. Her name was Ms. Clark. I asked if she liked lions, but she ignored me. Instead, she tried to forcibly open Birdy's mouth. She pinched two fingers on the top of his beak and two on the bottom. I wanted to tell her how exceptionally sharp his beak was, and that he ruined the only boy doll I owned, but Ms. Clark seemed like the type of lady who didn't take no for an answer. A popsicle stick lay on the table.

We will have your son speaking in no time, she said to Mom.

Mom smiled, politely.

I use a reward system, said Ms. Clark, children respond well to it. She grabbed a large container of gummy bears from under the table. Birdy flapped his wings.

I'll hold up an index card with a letter on it. For Birdy to receive a gummy bear, he needs to make the sound of the letter.

That sounds easy enough, said Mom.

Ms. Clark held up a card with the letter R on it in front of Birdy's face. She smiled expectantly. He stared through it, black eyes unblinking.

Birdy, can you say Rrrr? Ms. Clark said. He cocked his head.

Rrrrr, she said, again. Mom looked at Birdy, waiting. Even I was looking at him too, but with much less hope than the adults. Ms. Clark frowned. I sighed. Birdy stayed absolutely silent. I thought about how wonderful and sweet a gummy bear would be. I could almost taste it in my mouth.

Well, there is definitely room for improvement, Ms. Clark finally said. Ms. Clark was getting on my nerves at this point. Mostly because she and Mom were completely ignoring me, but also because I was craving a gummy bear.

I can make the sound! I said, standing up. Both Mom and Ms. Clark turned to me.

Well of course you can make that sound, Mom said, you're in the third grade.

After the failed appointment with Ms. Clark, we went to see Birdy's new physical therapist. I had told Mom about the attempted play time Birdy and I had together, and how his wings stopped him from being a normal boy. Soon after, she booked an appointment with Brad, a physical therapist who was very large and muscular. His head was shaved and looked like a thumb. Brad gave Birdy some exercises to strengthen his wings. Birdy did not like the exercises. He screamed very loudly when Brad lifted his wings above his head. He also screamed when Brad tried to bend his wing in half. I covered my ears. Mom felt so awful about the ordeal that she bought us vanilla soft serve after the appointment. I licked mine hungrily. Birdy didn't touch his, so I ate it too.

On Monday, school started back up from winter break. I was in Ms. Woods' third-grade class, and Birdy started as a new student, in Mrs. Russel's kindergarten class. I had Mrs. Russel for kindergarten too, so in the back of the minivan on our way to school, I told Birdy all the fun facts I knew about her. He didn't say anything because he was nervous. I smoothed down one of his head feathers, in a loving way. Mom was humming ABBA to herself.

During quiet reading time, Ms. Woods left the room. A group of girls came up to my desk and peered down at me. I put down my book about the ocean and I smiled. They smiled back. One with two long braids spoke.

Aren't you that girl with the weird brother?

I don't know what you mean, I said.

Yeah, another one of the girls said. She had blonde hair and bangs and a large nose. He's strange. A bird.

He's a crow, I said.

He's slow, the girl with the braids said. He's stupid.

No, he's not! I said. I don't know why I stood up for Birdy. I wasn't really. I just wanted these girls to think I was cool. I didn't want them to think I was stupid, like him. The girls laughed, and I hung my head so low that my nose rested on my book. I had left it open to a picture of a whale shark. I didn't want them to see me cry.

Ms. Woods walked back in. The girls dispersed as if nothing had happened. Once I lifted my head back up, the whale shark was covered in a large pool of snot and tears.

One night, I found Mom sitting alone in the kitchen. Birdy had gone to bed. She looked tired, with heavy bags under her eyes. I sat down next to her. Mom and I hadn't had a lot of time

alone since the adoption of Birdy. She stared ahead. I knew that taking on a new child was hard on her. Mom gave herself up endlessly. This was always something I looked up to her for, but now, as we sat at the table across from one another, I felt something different. A bad taste in my mouth. I wanted to reach for her hand. I wanted to hug her and have her tell me that she loved me.

How are you? I said.

I'm okay, she said.

I can watch Birdy tomorrow if you want to do something for yourself. She stared at me for a long time. Then she sighed.

Oh, Sweetie, she said, I know you mean well.

January turned into February which turned into March. The girls at school still taunted me because Birdy had not improved very much with his social, cognitive, and physical skills. He could, however, say something that sounded like my name. Shweeeeeee! He yelled, high-pitched, as he flew around the living room. Schweeeeeee! Mom told him to get down. Normal boys don't fly, they walk, she said. He landed on her shoulder and kissed her on the cheek.

Meep, he said.

Mom said: oh my god, he just said my name. Her eyes filled with tears. I rolled my eyes and sunk into the couch.

Mom? I said. She told me to be quiet and smoothed down the feathers on Birdy's head. My throat closed up, and I didn't say anything else after that.

I spent most of my free time searching things up on Mom's laptop while she was out with

Birdy at his many appointments. She left me alone by myself, which I didn't mind most of the time.

Sometimes though, the sudden passing of a car on the street made my heart stop. Or just the silence itself was enough to give me goosebumps. I sat at the kitchen counter, eating raspberries, and typing away. I searched: can birds become your siblings? And: lifespan of a crow. Birdy was supposed to live up to eight years. That's not so bad, I thought to myself. But then I took the thought back. I was an awful sister. Good sisters don't wish their brothers dead. I should love Birdy. But I missed how things were when it was just me and Mom, and when the girls at school were nice to me. Since Birdy joined the family, life felt a lot heavier than usual. When I walked, it felt like I was carrying ten backpacks, forty pounds each.

After spending an hour on the computer, I got bored. There was only so much one could

learn about crows. I wandered into Mom's room, the only bedroom upstairs. The walls were off-

white. Large, delicate flowers and vines were painted along them in a happy blue. She had painted them herself. I traced my fingers along them, remembering a time when mom still felt like mine. I was her real daughter. I had her red cheeks and pointed nose and detached earlobes. We both shared a love for rice pudding and metal slides.

By her bedside table were stacks of books, balls of tissues, uncapped pens, loose change, and a card I made her in kindergarten with a crude smiley face that read: I LOVE YOU, MY MOMMY! All the books were on birds. I grabbed one from the top of the stack and opened it to a random page with a photograph of a group of crows sitting on a telephone wire. The pages were thick and glossy. Without thinking, I ripped out the page and crushed it in my fist. It felt good, the crumpled paper between my fingers. I pulled out more pages, squashing them and throwing them into the waste basket by the bed. I pretended they were my angry feelings towards Birdy. Once all the pages were completely detached from the cover, I closed the book and recognized a small barcode in the upper right-hand side. It was a library book. My stomach sank. Mom would kill me.

I did what anyone would have done in that situation. I went outside, grabbed the garden shovel from the garage, and dug a hole in the backyard. The dirt was coarse and full of rocks. It was hard, but important work. I hacked away, the waste basket and torn book beside me. Dark dirt stained my jeans. It looked like melted chocolate on my knees. There was so much emotion inside of me I felt it spilling out onto the ground. I felt sick; I wanted to vomit. When I figured the hole was deep enough, I poured all of the ripped pages and the book's carcass into it. The sky began to drizzle. I wiped the back of my hand on my forehead, and I think I accidentally smeared some dirt on it. I began the meticulous journey of covering up what I had done with the loose dirt. Everything ached. I was cold and covered in dirt, but I kept going because all I could see in my head was mom's disappointed face. Inside, I ran to the bathroom to wash off. My hands were red, stiff, and covered in mud.

When Mom and Birdy got home, she asked me to run the bath for him. I didn't say anything about the snooping, or the library book, or the freshly filled dirt hole in the backyard. Guilt was eating me from the inside, but I tried to keep a straight face. The water for Birdy had to be not too cold and not too hot. I stuck my hands under the stream to check the temperature, and to finish getting the dirt out from under my nails. I poured in bubble bath soap and Birdy's essential oils that were supposed to remove toxins from his skin. I lit a few candles. Bath times were stressful for Birdy because of the noise and water, so we tried to make the surroundings as peaceful as possible. Mom always was the one who held Birdy in the water, even though I had asked several times if I could try. I straightened the bathmat on the floor and waited on the closed toilet seat until they both came in. Only Birdy appeared in the doorway, cocking his head to one side.

Shweeee? He said.

Hi Birdy.

Schweee? He said, again. We stared at one another. I tried to figure out what he was trying to convey. He ruffled his feathers. At last, I made the responsible decision that because Birdy attempted to say my name twice in a row, he wanted me to bathe him instead of Mom. I picked him up and he flapped his wings a few times to signal he was happy with the turn of events. I smiled and walked him over to the tub. His wings began to move frantically as I lowered him in; the water sloshed up the sides and spilled onto the ground. It's okay, I said, trying to calm him down. I became strangely aware of my power as I held him in the water, his wings batting against my hands.

Birdy was much more delicate than I had realized. Without feathers, his body was no bigger than the torso of one of my plastic dolls, and compared to plastic, his body was malleable and soft. I could feel his bones, like toothpicks, that sat right under the skin.

I plunged Birdy completely under water. His wings beat against my hands so hard that I knew they would be scratched and bloody. I didn't care. I closed my eyes tight. Water splashed up my arms and onto my front and down the sides of the tub. Shut up! I yelled. His wings beat harder. I screamed, as hard as I could. Mom burst into the bathroom and said: STOP! so loudly that I let go of Birdy, who was still alive, somehow. He shot into the air and bounced off the ceiling with a thump. Water and foam sprayed down onto every surface in the bathroom. I began to cry. Mom didn't say anything. If she did, I couldn't hear her over the noises I was making. She grabbed Birdy and wrapped a towel tightly around his body. They left the room. I closed the door with my foot.

I sat on the bathroom floor for a long time. My back was against the base of the tub, my

knees tucked under my chin. The white tile floor was cool and slippery underneath me. The sun set; the room slowly became dark. I let my mind slip between every bad thing I had ever done. The time I wet the bed, the time I broke Mom's favorite necklace, the library book fiasco, and everything and anything to do with Birdy. The water on the front of my shirt dried in a dark oval shape. Mom was moving in the kitchen. Pans clanged together. I assumed she was making dinner for her and Birdy. And then there was a knock at the door once some more time passed. I ignored it. My eyes got heavy. I thought about the water and Birdy's little body, tightly clasped in my hands. I could run away. Things would be better for everyone. Mom didn't want me here anymore. Birdy was a much better child than me—needy, quiet, and special. There was another knock, a peck. I ignored it. I felt tears and then they dried and then I felt some more. There was another knock, and the door creaked open.

It was Birdy. All I could make out were his beady black eyes in the darkness. His feathers were dry and shiny. I sniffled. I told him to go. He didn't need to see me like this. Birdy hopped onto my shoulder and pecked at my hair. It hurt a bit, but it seemed to bring him joy, so I let him continue. After a while, I started to like it as well. I pretended they were quick, sharp kisses. Then he stopped and began to coo. His call sounded as if something were stuck in the back of his throat. Almost as if he was crying. But I wouldn't know. And even if Birdy was, he wouldn't have any way to tell me.

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JenniferMolnar  
Copper

I.

Though considered a stable element,  
when exposed to air for long periods of time  
copper takes on a greenish tint. Reacts  
with oxygen almost as if breathing—

II.

How do I name this corrosion? What chemical  
interface breaks open the pure/volatile  
atomic world and seduces electrons loosely  
spinning in the outer rings of orbit,  
or else shrugs them off carelessly as  
a caress from a lover one plans to leave,  
even as or because the touch floods nerve  
endings, barely subcutaneous?

III.

The valence electrons located in the outer-most  
shell of an atom are responsible for that atom's chemical  
properties, much as one's most recent interactions  
shape the types of reactions that occur



during any subsequent interaction.

IV.

Copper is easily malleable.

The alchemical symbol for copper is the same  
as the universal symbol for female.

V.

Your associate at the bar, already balancing  
two women—each not his second/current wife—  
bought me a drink and asked Irish or Scottish?  
Though my hair was dyed to copper  
I humored him and replied Both which was not a lie.  
He went on to tell me with a conspiratorial wink  
that he left his first wife for a Scottish girl,  
one of those wild redheads. You swore in pain  
when I turned unexpectedly and nipped your face.

VI.

Isotopes are created when an atom gains or loses  
atomic mass in the form of electrons—  
how often have I modeled such behavior,  
clinging to another in an effort to create a semblance

of wholeness, and in doing so, disrupted and redefined boundaries?

VII.

How can two adjoining valence shells be satisfied

sharing electrons with the knowledge that the coupling

can be easily split with the introduction of an unexpected catalyst?

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OladejoAbdullah  
Daytime

My father's sun  
grew legs,  
wore a Sunday suit  
and a honeyed tie.

Each room knotted itself  
into arms.

Time flies—  
my eyes return  
to that boy in high school,  
his pockets spilling hands.

I spent the night  
counting the names sorrow bore  
before it married time.

I freeze my mother's hand  
into all my minutes.

These eyes—still mine—  
refuse her melting.

Below,  
in the deep trench of nightmares,  
a root tightens into a fist.

The dream turns over  
without my body,  
toward the younger north of day.

All roads—  
confused coordinates—  
burn into an embrace.

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Johanna Hall

## quest for meaning during one of the imperial months

itrained this year on thefourthof july  
andwhile i don't like readinginto things, it waslike  
theearth had to nourish the scorched earth  
ofwhat we've made here. Except  
itwas just rain, of course.

theother day i found a hair from my lover  
tangled in my rosary beads.  
which doesn't mean anything but i almost didn't  
throw it away, almost prayed over it,  
almost curled it into a victorian locket  
and wore it for the rest of my life.  
ididn't, though.

but sometimes when i'm happy it feels  
the way going down a hill feels  
when you know you'll have to  
climb up it again later, or  
the way thursday the twelfth feels,  
realizing you haven't appeased  
your ghosts. only sometimes, though.  
mostly it's just happy—

so i don't look at the sky during midnight walks  
or in the mirror after crying  
and i don't play out-of-tune pianos  
and i don't assign meaning to  
picked scabs or broken nails or  
holding hands till we're sweaty.

the thing is, i don't have to.  
it all means something  
without me, the way summer is a verb  
and what happens in the space  
between us and the sun  
we tried to name july.

Nikoline Kaiser (she/they) is a Danish fiction author and poet, with a degree in

Comparative Literature and Museology. Most of their work focus on queer <https://nikokaiser.dk/>

## Author and Artist Bios

Maya Williams is a religious Black multiracial nonbinary suicide survivor who was selected as Portland, ME's seventh poet laureate. Eir debut poetry collection *Judas & Suicide* was selected as a finalist for a New England Book Award. Their second poetry collection, *Refused a Second Date*, was selected as a finalist for a Maine Literary Award. They won two chapbook prizes in 2024 and 2025.

Grant Moore holds a Master of Science in Mathematics from Towson University and a Bachelor of Science in Physics from Frostburg State University. After several years teaching mathematics at the university level, he transitioned to a career in technology, where he currently works as a Senior Site Reliability Engineer. His poetry explores the intersections of memory, nature, and the systems—both formal and emotional—that structure our lives. He lives in Cumberland, Maryland.

Michael Chin was born and raised in Utica, New York and currently lives in Las Vegas with his wife and son. He's the author of seven full-length books, including his novel, *My Grandfather's an Immigrant*, and *So is Yours* (Cowboy Jamboree Press, 2021) and his latest short story collection *This Year's Ghost* (JackLeg Press, 2025). His short work has previously appeared in journals including *Bat City Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Pinch*, *Passages North*, and *The Normal School*. Find him online at [miketchin.com](http://miketchin.com).

Qudus Olowo popularly known by his stage name 'Blacc' is a Nigerian poet, rapper, singer, and songwriter. He is the Founding Editor of Afrihill Press and currently an Editorial Intern at Another Chicago Magazine. Most of his works have appeared or forthcoming in *Lolwe*, *Temz Review*, *Funicular Magazine*, *Sunlight Press*, *April Centaur*, *Consequence Forum*, *Poetry Column NND*, and elsewhere. He was longlisted in the Brigitte Poirson Literature Prize 2024. He also served as a mentor at the SprinNG Writing Fellowship from 2022 to 2024. You can reach him via X @iamblacc and on Instagram @iamblacc\_

Barlow Crassmont has lived in the USA, Eastern Europe, Middle East and China. When not teaching or writing, he dabbles in juggling, solving the Rubik's Cube, and learning other languages. He has been published by British Science Fiction Association, Wilderness House Literary Review, and in the upcoming 41st anthology of Writers of the Future.

Sonali Roy is a freelance writer taking interest in holistic approaches for maintaining good health both for humans and their nonhuman friends, business management, latest science discoveries, health & medicine, technology, robotics, archaeology, architecture, food & nutrition, history, astronomy, spirituality, unexplained, and art & culture. Besides, she's a passionate traveler & photographer, music composer, singer, painter, 3-D art designer and practices yoga & meditation regularly. Devoted to vegan diet, she enjoys creative writing. Sonali is accompanied by the sweet memories of her 8-yr old canine friend Fuchoo, who left her forever in 2023.

Alexis Ames is a speculative fiction writer with works in publications such as Pseudopod, Escape Pod, and Radon Journal. You can read more of their stories at [www.alexisamesbooks.com](http://www.alexisamesbooks.com).

Nnadi Samuel (he/him/his) holds a B.A in English & literature from the University of Benin. His works have been previously published/forthcoming in FIYAH, Fantasy Magazine, Uncanny Magazine, The Deadlands, Heartline Spec, Timber Ghost Press, Haven Spec Magazine, Utopian Science Fiction, Penumbric Speculative Poetry & Fiction Magazine, Liquid Imagination & elsewhere. His poem "Wormhole" was an Editor's Choice @Star\*Line(Science Fiction Poetry, SFPA}. He was recently nominated for the 2024 & 2025 SFPA Rhysling Award. A 3x Best of the Net, and 8x Pushcart Nominee. His third micro-chapbook "Biblical Invasion, BC" is published @Bywords Publication (Ottawa CA) in 2024.

Sadie Bernard is a writer from Seattle, USA, currently based in Melbourne, Australia. She is a graduate of Bard College where she was founder and editor-in-chief of the literary magazine Feeding the Crows. When she isn't reading or writing stories, she likes to study astrology charts and sit outside in the sun.

Jennifer Molnar the author of the chapbook Occam's Razor, and her work has appeared in New South, Hawai'i Review, So to Speak, Best New Poets, Duende, and elsewhere. She received her MFA from George Mason University and resides in New York.



Oladejo Abdullah Feranmi, a black writer, won the 2025 Rehumanize International Contest and SEARCH Magazine's Poetry Contest. His work appears in POETRY, Oxford American, Strange Horizons, Blue Earth Review and elsewhere.

Johanna E. Hall is a Pushcart-nominated poet from Charlottesville, VA whose writing generally features lesbianism, God, disability, and/or various troubled pasts. Find more at [johannapoet.com](http://johannapoet.com) or on Instagram @johannahallwrites.