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# *Abigail Lloyd***Painted Room**

We’ve painted this room

Too many times to count

And every application the space around us shrinks

Beginning with ochre —

When those trees sat overgrown

They eclipsed the sun

So it shown from the walls

—in mocking flare

And the space around us shrinks

Then green—like clover

In the delay of winter

It glowed in crassness

Against the bare scene

And the space around us shrinks

Next mauve —

That summer the heat

Crept in the cracks

—Locked us in

And made us look at every crease

And the space around us shrinks

finally —that blue-like slate

Fading this mess we’ve made

Warding off our ghosts

That plague us till year end

And the space around us shrinks

Here we sit—this room thick with paint

two sitting mollusks

—encroaching each other’s shell

And the space around us shrinks

# *A.N. Oberlander***Inhale, Exhale**

Inhale, exhale

Step toward the blossoming lavender

Inhale its calming, vibrant scent,

Embrace the happiness you feel in the present tense.

Exhale the pain you felt yesterday,

Expel the nightmares you endured last night.

Remember this scent, this moment in time,

When all was right with your world.

May each inhale bring you peace

While each exhale relieves you of agony.

# *Anna Bankston***After Class**

Unlike most kids, Rosalie loved school. She’d wake up eagerly every morning to brush her hair, pick her outfit, and pack her bag. She’d arrive at the bus stop fourteen minutes early and sit quietly, listening to the soothing ballads of the mourning doves. When the battered yellow bus would finally pull up onto her street, she’d hop on and find her usual seat in the fourth row, right side, next to the window. Then the doors would screech shut and the long bumpy ride would begin.

 In class, Rosalie always willed the clock to go slower. She wished the school day was longer and the hot summer months were shorter. She’d spend every minute of her time in the old brick school building if she could. In the beginning, her teachers were confused. Rosalie was an oddity. She would arrive to class before the bell and line up her sharpened yellow pencils at the corner of her desk. She would take pages upon pages of notes during lessons, showing the attentiveness of a well-rounded student. But she never answered questions. She never raised her hand. She never did well on her exams. Rosalie would come to school with her straight blond hair laying neatly on her back. Her outfits were a combination of strange, patterned clothing, often a size too big or too small. She seemed to be both put together while also a disjointed mess. Eventually, her teachers stopped speculating over her strange behavior. They figured it was just a variation of the typical angsty attitude they’d witnessed in other teenage girls. Rosalie was left to her own unusual routine.

 For many years she continued to go unnoticed at school. She blended in with the crowd, a faceless figure amongst the masses. However, at the start of her sophomore year, she encountered an individual who would be even more baffled by her.

 Mr. Barnes was a first-year teacher. This, of course, meant he was doing everything in his power to win over the hearts of the students he taught. He would show up in his wire-rimmed glasses and skinny striped tie and try to make sophomore English as fun as it could be. He would greet all of his students by name when they walked through the door, and for sixty minutes his attention was devoted to each and every one of them. As the school year went on, Mr. Barnes prided himself on the relationships he developed with his students. It seemed they were all becoming fond of him. All except for one.

 Despite her early arrival in class every day, Rosalie didn't engage in conversation with Mr. Barnes. He would inquire about how her new assignments were coming along or ask about how her day was going, but she'd only greet him with nods or one-word responses. She was resistant to his attempts to win her favor. One day, fed up with his many failed attempts, Mr. Barnes requested she stay after class.

 Rosalie observed how different the classroom felt when she was sitting there alone. The halls were filled with noise from students packing their bags with textbooks while discussing the latest gossip. Rosalie’s foot tapped anxiously against the floor. English was her last period of the day. Her bus was going to leave in five minutes, and she couldn't miss it. Mr. Barnes stood up from his desk and moved over to Rosalie, squatting to meet her at eye-level.

 “Rosalie,” he said in a calm, pleasant voice. “I wanted to speak with you to see if everything is okay. How’s the school year been going for you?”

 She studied Mr. Barnes carefully. Behind his glasses and tie, she could tell he was a fairly young man, just a few years under thirty. His eyes were the same muddy brown color as his tousled hair and there was a small circular scar above his left eyebrow. She wondered what it was from.

 “Fine,” she finally responded, shifting her gaze down to her sweaty palms. “I need to go.”

 Mr. Barnes shook his head, biting his tongue to control his temper. He’d had enough of her disinterest. “Now, Rosalie, I’m asking for just a couple minutes of your time—”

 “I’m not staying. The bus leaves in three minutes.”

 He opened his mouth to reprimand her for interrupting when he looked at the expression in her eyes. They were terrified. The large, ghostly blue orbs stared at him, sending shivers up his spine. He’d had no intention of frightening her and felt an overwhelming sense of dread at the notion that he might have done so. “I’m sorry, I just wanted to check in with you,” he said in a soft voice.

 She nodded twice, showing she understood. But the fear remained. “I have to go.”

 “Alright.” Mr. Barnes turned around with a shake of his head. He reached for a red pen and post-it note from his desk drawer. Scratching down his number he said, “If you ever need anything you can always call me,” but by the time he turned back around there was no trace of the blue-eyed girl.

 The next day, Rosalie was late to English. She slipped quietly into the room and slid into her desk. Mr. Barnes, who was in the middle of a lesson about symbolism, stopped for a moment and frowned at the unusual occurrence. Studying Rosalie, he noticed that in addition to her late arrival her appearance was rather strange. She wore a black jacket many sizes too large for her and zipped all the way up her neck. Her straw blonde hair stuck out at odd angles, sitting loosely just above her shoulders in a disheveled tangle. A pair of large, tinted glasses rested on the tip of her nose, and she sank so far down into her chair that she almost disappeared altogether.

 Blinking out of his observant trance, Mr. Barnes coughed and continued on with his lesson. After he’d concluded and left the students to talk amongst themselves, he called Rosalie over to his desk in the far corner of the classroom. Reluctantly, she rose from her seat and slowly moved to meet him.

 “You were late today,” Mr. Barnes stated.

 “Sorry,” she mumbled. “I was in the restroom.” Her feet shifted back and forth as if she was counting out seconds.

 The final bell of the day rang, and the students all rose to leave. In his excitement to escape, one young boy bumped into Rosalie, knocking her tinted glasses to the floor. Mr. Barnes bent down and picked them up. As he extended his hand, her blue eyes struck him once again.

 Her left eye was surrounded by a halo of purple and black; the white was tinted pink like sprouting azaleas. It was so swollen only a small sliver of blue met his gaze.

 Mr. Barnes observed everything in just a fraction of a second before Rosalie snatched the glasses from him. “I missed the bus yesterday. I can’t miss it again.” She turned and was gone in the blink of an eye, leaving the poor teacher with feelings of confusion and dread.

 Rosalie had worked hard all her life to keep to herself. Her mother had always told her to keep her head down and mind her own business. So, when Rosalie discovered her mother was having an affair, she did exactly that. In fact, she became quite good at it. So good that the affair continued for months before her father came home early and was enlightened to his wife’s infidelity. Then there was the yelling and screaming that seemed to last for hours, days, years. Rosalie prayed it would stop, and it did. Her mother walked out of their house and took all of the yelling with her.

 That was the beginning of her father’s drinking. He downed bottle after bottle and with every sip his temper grew. She wasn’t surprised when he started hitting her. She wanted to plead that she wasn’t her mother, that she wasn’t going to leave him. But all he could see when he looked at her were those pale blue eyes. Her mother’s eyes. For that reason, she couldn’t bring herself to hate him. So, she continued to keep to herself.

 But now, her father had gone too far. Rosalie had missed the bus and was home twenty minutes late. When she arrived, he was furious. He accused her of trying to leave him, of trying to get away like her mother. In the midst of her hurried explanation, he lost his patience. She couldn’t cover up these bruises with long sleeves or high necklines like she had the others. Now someone knew.

 Rosalie stepped off the bus and the brake release squeaked as the vehicle left her lonely figure on the corner of the street. When she entered the house, she found her father passed out on the living room couch, dead asleep. Careful not to disturb him, she crept upstairs to enjoy a brief moment of peace. Throwing herself onto her bed, she closed her eyes and drifted into nothingness.

 She woke to the sound of her door being thrown against the wall. “Rosie!” her father roared, red-faced and fuming with anger. “Why didn’t you tell me you were home?” His words slurred as if they were all forcibly connected by an invisible string. He rushed toward her, the smell of alcohol making her dizzy.

 “You were asleep,” she whispered softly. “I didn’t want to wake you up.”

 He scoffed. “Really? Excuses? Even if that’s true, look at you now! It’s almost eight and you haven’t even started dinner!”

 “I’m sorry—” she began to stutter but her apology was interrupted by a quick slap. She grimaced but kept quiet.

 Her father gripped her arm to pull her roughly to her feet. “I left groceries in the trunk of my car. It’s probably spoiled now, thanks to you. Take care of it; maybe we can eat before nine.” He huffed and turned, disappearing into the blackness of the hallway.

 Rosalie stood numbly in place as a small silver tear rolled down her cheek. With a shaky breath, she wiped it away and forced her heavy feet out of the room and down to the driveway.

 The produce in the back of the rusted, red Toyota was emitting a pungent smell and made her nose crinkle. As she gathered the plastic bag handles into her sweaty palms and slammed the trunk shut, she heard the murmur of a distant voice. “Rosalie.”

 Her heart raced, fearing her father was upset about some other inconvenience. She heard it again: “Rosalie, come here.” The sound wasn’t coming from the house. It was coming from the street. She squinted out into the dim evening light and spotted a car parked down the curb. Its engine hummed silently as it sat idle. Rosalie set the bags down slowly and felt herself moving, drawn forward by an unseen force.

 Nearing the open window of the car, she stopped in her tracks. “Who is it?”

 The engine continued to hum. “Come closer, Rosalie.” She took a couple more steps and the figure in the driver's seat was visible at last.

 Mr. Barnes looked different. He wasn’t wearing his collared shirt or his skinny tie or his toothy grin. He was wrapped up in a large navy coat with his hair laying loosely over his forehead. His familiar wire-rimmed glasses framed his dimly lit eyes. The heat from the vehicle seeped out into the cool evening air, sending shivers through her body as it touched her bare skin. “Rosalie, I’m here to help.”

 She shook her head in confusion. “How do you know where I live?”

 “I’m here to get you out of this. To help you.”

 “I-I don’t need help,” Rosalie stuttered.

 “Come on,” Mr. Barnes said, almost raising his voice. “Look at the bruises on your arms and your face and tell me you don’t need help!”

 She chewed on her tongue and her heart stopped. “How did you know?”

 “I know the signs. I know when someone’s in need.” Her eyes darted to the circular scar above his eyebrow again, a mark that now brought new questions to her mind. Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of yelling and crashing pans coming from the house. Mr. Barnes flipped the switch from inside the car, unlocking the doors. “Get in.”

 She frowned, shaking her head. “No. I’m not leaving my dad. I can’t.”

 “It wasn’t a suggestion,” Mr. Barnes said sharply, his hands tightening their grip on the steering wheel. “Now get in before he comes out here!”

 Rosalie searched her teacher’s face for some explanation as to why he was doing this. Her fingers drifted up and traced the red mark on her cheek which still burned from her father’s hand. She took a long breath and forced one more glance toward her childhood home. With that, she hopped into the passenger seat. The headlights turned on and the hum of the engine turned to a roar as the two disappeared into the night.

 After half an hour of uncomfortable silence, Rosalie dared to speak. “I shouldn’t have done that. I need to go back.”

 “No, no you don’t. And you won’t.” Mr. Barnes was struggling to light a cigarette as his knees worked to control the steering wheel. “You had to get out of there, even if it wasn’t your first choice. It’s never anyone’s first choice.”

 They fell back into silence and Rosalie watched the glow of neon diner signs and yellow street lamps blur before her vision. Her eyelids grew heavy and the colored lights outside her window turned into distant images of red and blue and green until all she could see was darkness.

When she awoke, Rosalie realized she was unfamiliar with where they were. There were no buildings or lights or landmarks anywhere to be seen. By the look of it, there weren’t any other cars either. There was only her, Mr. Barnes, and the lonely road. “Where are we?” she yawned sleepily.

“On our way.”

“To where?”

“To get help.” Mr. Barnes wasn’t meeting her eyes when he spoke. He still hadn’t smiled since she’d gotten into his car and his tone was cold and more removed than it had ever been in eighth period English.

“I want to go home.”

Mr. Barnes laughed a hollow chuckle, shaking his head. “We’re going home. Don’t you worry, Rosie.” He fumbled around in his pocket and withdrew another cigarette. He placed it between his teeth before handing Rosalie the lighter. She flipped open the cap and gazed at the flame. In it, she saw the ruins of her old life being left on the road behind them.

# *Ashton-Taylor Ackerson***Green Demise**

Wicked green-skinned gremlin,

With ornate orbs for eyes,

And teeth that could tear apart my flesh,

Ruthlessly you emerge from the vast sea of stars,

Only to wash ashore,

On this suspended self-destructing island,

Ripe with water and flame,

Its life choking on poison,

Clinging to the air,

Laden with unwavering disease,

My gaze flicks across this wasted land,

You are the greenest thing I see,

Each breath you take enthralling,

Teach me your native tongue,

A symphony of clicks and pops,

Teach me how to rule,

Your clawed hand in mine,

Teach me how to leave this galaxy,

And this life of mine behind,

Or launch me into the sun,

You decide.

# *C.G. Nelson***The Moore Theatre**

Down a dim staircase

and into an even dimmer room,

you see the mirror.

The mirror spans almost the entirety of the

far wall and it seems to be

behind a bar that you have never

seen in use.

The joking, laughing students say

that this room is haunted

and people see things in the mirror

that they did not expect to see.

In the mirror,

you see yourself toothless,

all your teeth falling out of your mouth

as you gasp in horror.

There’s someone in the mirror

beside you, you think.

No, not beside you.

Behind you.

# *David A. Gray***A Mercy**

Age, the patient sadist

Motionless in the seconds, sneaking close in the years,

Feints with a dusting of silver hair,

Wraps gauze over eyes and wads cotton in ears

Siphoning off confidence, and while we fret

Replacing vigor with doubt

Pouring ground glass into knees

Transforming the smug atheist into the eagerly devout

Watching his handiwork work with a rheumy leer,

Taking back our inches, pounds,

Stealing companions and memories

Until the simplest task confounds

Only to be thwarted at the end,

By merciful Death,

Who, scornful of Age’s torture,

Carries us away to safety with our last feeble breath

# *David Wasserman***After the Piper**

I am what comes after the Piper.

I am the beanstalk carcass, a giant rotting in the yard. I am

dead wolves and witches and abandoned candy cabins in the wood.

I am the sticks and straw left on the road and a sea foam sacrifice. I am

the one thousand and second night.

I am the Earth, danced to death in hot iron shoes. I am

abandoned poems left crying in cages.

I am happily ever after.

I am living happily until there comes the One who Destroys all Happiness. I am

good days and bad days. I am dying together on the same day.

I am broken

promises to a generation.

# *Duane Anderson***Night Highway**

Darkness gathers

as I travel on,

headlights pass by me

like stars falling from the sky,

each without a name

speaking words that say

“I have no place to rest,

tonight, I must travel on.”

reminding man, he is mortal.”

# *Elizabeth Enochs***Eli**

Eli was tall and thin with big hands that were always surprising me. Sometimes, when we were lying down, he’d raise my shirt and rest his palm on my belly button, sliding his pinky finger under my panty line while his thumb wriggled beneath my bra, and we’d lay like that for a while. I remember him running the soft pad of his thumb across my bottom lip, biting me gently and kissing me, lightly wrapping a hand around my slender neck.

Eli brought me flowers and told me I was too good for him. He trapped love notes under my windshield wipers and wrote me letters when we were apart. He liked grabbing my ass in public and kissing me hard—harder when he caught people looking. Sometimes, he’d whisk me to the library so we could kiss in front of the books.

The first time we were alone in the dark Eli pushed two fingers deep inside and I could barely speak until he pulled them out. When it was all over, they moved from my warmth to his mouth in an instant—like he was licking icing from a spoon. I fell asleep with my head on his chest and woke up so sore I had to ice my pussy with a can of frozen lemonade I found in the freezer. His whole body laughed when I told him about it. “What the hell are you going to do when we start having sex?”

Eli drove a manual pickup truck and held my hand when he wasn’t shifting gears. Sometimes, I’d toss sandwiches and cola in a cooler and we’d roam back roads until the sun set on a clearing worth pulling over for. He’d pile the truck bed with blankets, and we’d watch stars fall to a deafening chorus of whip-poor-wills and cicadas. I remember how he’d hold me close and point to Sagittarius—then tug on a fistful of curls and trail my neck with kisses while the archer watched.

One time, Eli raised my skirt to nibble on my inner thigh until the soft meat blushed purple-pink. “I like that,” he’d tell me later, caressing the bruise with a grin.

We started planning a courthouse wedding after Eli’s unit was ordered to deploy. I bought a white dress on sale and he drove me to Sioux Falls to meet his dad. We picked a date and told our friends. I even spotted a small velvet box in his boot once—but I didn’t open it and he never showed me.

Sometimes, I imagine that box living in a dusty pawn shop near Kansas City, its gleaming contents always on display in Midwestern sun.

# *Eman Ahmad***The Liberosis**

*Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is an anxiety disorder in which people have recurring, unwanted thoughts, ideas or sensations that make them feel driven to do something repetitively.*

 • • •

My coworkers had become concerned about the number of times she would call me at work. Or maybe it was my strange replies that alarmed them.

“I’m okay.”

“I’ll drive slow.”

“Yes, I’m okay.”

Our house was clean and bright—not too bright but not too dull—just right. Two couches beside four bookshelves with twelve books on each row arranged in alphabetical order. Walls were adorned with photographs and paintings hung vertically, four frames dangling side by side.

She would say that she’s a free bird who doesn’t know its way but flies nonetheless, never settles. She was right. I remember how one moment she would grab my wrist, the next she’d slide her fingers between my knuckles. And finally, after another fleeting moment of disconcertment, she would place her palm on mine. “Never settle,” she would say.

I would lose track of time when I was with her. I had to. We were always late for dinners, parties, movies. She would check and recheck all the locks and windows. We’d drive back home to check and recheck the gas burner.

She was sick but she was a lover. A caring, gentle lover. A lover who would not let me take a sip of my tea for hours for it might burn my tongue.

I didn’t realise I was losing her when my *I love you* and *I am here* were not enough to arouse a feeling of reassurance in her. When my arms failed to be her safest place.

Holding her hand in the hospital, I was vaguely recalling that innocent look of discomfort in her eyes upon seeing something odd when the doctor muttered the number of pills she took that cruel night: forty... two.

It wasn’t easy to love her. And it certainly wasn’t easy to live with her. But I would do it all over again. I would sit on that uncomfortable couch with six cushions. I would sleep with two layers of blankets all summer. I would have bland, cold tea for the rest of my life without a word of demur.

# *Frank Modica***A Brother’s Love**

I contemplate pictures of you in a yellowed photo album.

How many memories do I hide between the pages?

My dry eyes contemplate the color of your eyes,

the sound of your voice echoes in my ears.

A brother is a tangled spider web of love,

the grief and anger inescapable.

After 59 years of wearying strife

you succumbed to your illness.

We don’t even have a gravestone to mourn you,

a patch of grass to hold our flowers and grief.

# *Jeffrey Hantover***The Man in the Moon**

“Anything unusual about him?”

 He didn’t look like an astronaut. I imagined thick-necked guys with crew cuts and big toothy smiles. Like Ed Harris playing John Glenn in *The Right Stuff.* David Evans didn’t look like a movie star. Just an ordinary guy, like a million other ordinary guys. The investigator from NASA nudged the tape recorder towards me across the glass top table.

 “No, not really.”

We were sitting on my balcony, his back to the early evening sky-streaked orange and pink. He finished his sun tea in three long gulps and put the tape recorder back in his briefcase. Pink faded to bluish gray over his shoulders. For a moment everything was hushed and expectant –as if God had turned off the sound and was about to tell us something important. Just the kind of sunset David liked.

 “Cost our government millions…millions. Robbed each-and-every one of us taxpayers.” He shook his head and snapped shut his briefcase. I could have grabbed the guy and given him a bear hug for opening my eyes. My money, the deductions that disappeared from my paycheck every two weeks gave David what he wanted.

 “Thank you for your time.”

 “*Thank you.*” He must have thought me an odd duck, beaming a have-a-nice day smile as I led him to the door.

 I sat smiling on the balcony until the first stars flickered in the darkening sky. Until some jerk pulling out of the parking lot turned up his radio so loud it shook the sliding glass doors.

 The white circle on my finger had almost disappeared by the time I unpacked the last box and dragged it stuffed with crumbled newspaper down the hall to the trash room. In six years of marriage, I accumulated more stuff than I imagined but was damned if I was going to leave any of it for my soon-to-be-ex-husband. If he wanted to sleep with his dental hygienist, he could sleep on the floor. I wasn’t half as bad as my friend Lacey who unscrewed all the light bulbs and left her husband nothing but dust balls. Trying to find space in a one-bedroom apartment for what fit nicely in a two-bedroom town house made me think I should have been more generous, but the thought didn’t take hold. Better to dump it all at Goodwill than give a stick of furniture to that liar.

 What I didn’t take was a plunger–that was his department. So, when the kitchen sink stopped up, greasy water lapping at the counter’s edge, I figured I’d borrow one from someone on the floor and meet a neighbor at the same time. I knocked on the door across the hall, the sound of my fist on wood echoed as if in a cavern. Without asking who it was, David Evans opened the door. *Oh my God, his wife left him, too.* One spindly lamp arcing over a bleached wood chair ribbed with strips of black fabric, a faded red Oriental rug, a low black bookcase with books in neat rows. The only thing on the bare white walls a Chinese scroll with a slash of black ink. Fifteen minutes down the road from Cape Canaveral was a man without a television, without all those sleek, black boxes studded with buttons, knobs, and pulsating lights, without thin speakers like sentinels guarding the corners of the room–it was positively un-American.

 He didn’t have a plunger either. Before I went banging on doors down the hall, he said he would take a look at my sink. Unclogged it with his bare hands. (“David Evans unclogged my sink with his bare hands,” a headline that would have had the hair curler set grabbing for the *Enquirer* at the check-out counter.) He cupped his hand over the drain and pressed down fast and hard, over and over, a rhythmic, thwumping, sucking sound until the water swirled down the drain with a whoosh. That’s how I met David Evans, six months before he flew to the moon, six months before he made the cover of *People.*

Photos pulled from family albums and high school yearbooks, the article told me more about David than he had, and that’s not to say I didn’t see him a fair amount of time in those six months. David was one of those persons with whom you think you’re having this great conversation, but when you run it back in your mind, you realize you’ve done all the talking. Most of us jump in somewhere between comma and period, eager to footnote a friend’s troubles with our own. He asked the right questions, sat quietly, and listened.

 With a clean sink, I learned over iced tea and watermelon that there was a wife who left, but that was long ago when he was in graduate school. He worked at NASA and had lived at Ocean View for almost two years.

 “Engineer?” I didn’t know what an engineer did, but it was the first thing that jumped into my head.

 “No, physicist.”

 “I thought a physicist made good money.” I couldn’t believe I said that. It just popped out.

 “They do. Why?”

 “Your apartment’s so sparse.”

 “I have what I need.” Very matter of fact, like there was nothing more he wanted or needed to say on the subject. It was only after a few more dumb questions showed I knew next to nothing about the space program, did he tell me he was an astronaut.

 “So, you going to the moon?” It was more a joke than a question. He nodded his head “yes.” A dreamy, faraway smile flashed across his face. The kind of smile that used to come over me late at night in bed when I imagined myself nestled against a man I really loved, not the one snoring and rasping next to me.

 I didn’t see much of David over the next two weeks. An astronaut training to go to the moon and an ex-secretary working full-time at Century Realty and studying for her agent’s license didn’t have the same hours. Two or three times I slipped a note under his door inviting him for dinner. Each time I got back a note with the neatest printing I’d ever seen asking for a rain check and giving a reason that didn’t sound like an excuse.

 One Sunday, I planned to spend the whole day beachcombing, looking for the perfect shell – I had given up looking for the perfect man. I awoke to find my day off scuppered by a sky gray as a camp blanket and heavy, slanting, wind-whipped rain. I wasn’t happy with the prospect of being cooped up all day. Just before noon, a car alarm went off in the parking lot. Even with the wind and rain beating on the balcony doors, I could hear the shrieking wail, feel the waves of sound pierce my body. On for a minute, off long enough to raise my hopes, then back on again.

 I can’t explain why I did it. I’m coming to believe that reasons are hard to pin on any act. There isn’t a straight line from what someone did back to one final reason that stands there pointing to itself, shouting, “It’s me.” What some people do remains a mystery, even to themselves. So, there I was in the middle of the parking lot, hair plastered to my forehead, t-shirt and shorts sticking like a second skin, gripping a hammer, trying to decide whether to spider web the windshield or smash the driver’s window when David drove up. I was in no state to do much analyzing at the time, but later what struck me as funny was David didn’t ask what I was doing or volunteer to drive me to the nearest mental hospital. He opened his trunk, took out a small crowbar and a thin strip of metal, jimmied open the door on the driver’s side, and unlatched the hood. His hands moved with seemingly practiced swiftness. The alarm died in mid-shriek. Before the alarm began to wail, there was a muffled mingle of wind, rain, and distant car horns. The silence now was different, deeper than the absence of sound. The silence’s felt presence surrounded me, washed over me, drove away my anger. David handed me the crowbar. He pointed to the windshield. “Go ahead,” he said smiling, “I won’t tell.”

 David was a neighbor, a friend. Nothing more. We passed each other on the way back and forth to the trash room and chatted on my balcony over iced tea and chips when he had time, which wasn’t too often. He worked long hours and when he had free time went snorkeling down the coast or flew gliders which at the time struck me as just another macho pilot thing. Now I don’t think so. He invited me snorkeling once. The launch date was confirmed, and he was in a good mood. He rarely talked about work, and I didn’t ask. I figured it was all government hush-hush and honestly, I wasn’t that interested. There was a lot better uses of that money than sending over-age Boy Scouts, David excepted, off to play Buck Rogers. Why I wanted to ask did a smart fellow like him want to spend his time in a floating aerosol can? I figured he’d go to the moon, get it out of his system, and settle down to a steady job.

 We started side by side, skimming over a forest of staghorn coral. I veered off toward a school of glass fish so transparent they seemed floating skeletons. David glided toward deeper water, his flippers trailing a wake of bubbles. I trickled frozen peas from a Ziploc bag and floated above rippling rainbows of fish the green pellets attracted. I was content to dead-man float while hundreds of fish glided and darted beneath me. After an hour, I waddled out of the water, shoulders aching, exhilaratingly exhausted. Far from shore David’s snorkel jutted a thin red line above the water. I dozed off under the warm sun. When I looked at my watch, a half hour had passed, and David was still floating a hundred yards or so from shore. Another half hour went by before he kicked his way back to shore and flapped across the sand. He was smiling, his face alive with happiness. “I could stay there forever…forever.”

 “Do you go scuba-diving?” I asked.

 “I live all day with machines. Gauges, dials, flashing numbers. I want to get away from all that. Only the fish and me. Sometimes the fish are just decoration. Just an excuse.”

 “For what?”

 “The silence.” He turned away–a bit embarrassed it seemed–fiddling with a towel, going through the motions of drying his face.

 Driving back, we had the road to ourselves. David took the coastal road long orphaned by the interstate: boarded up gas stations, a few roadside stands where hopeful teenagers pyramided watermelons to lure wayward Winnebagos, and a deserted Dairy Queen, its grimy glass spray painted with red spirals and faded middle fingers. Every time I was with David, he avoided highways cluttered with tacky malls, car lots blaring bargains in electric lights and neon, and every cholesterol clogging fast food outlet you ever saw on tv and a few local ones to finish you off. He took county two-lanes, their dividing lines faint shadows, and meandering back roads in need of asphalt and a grader. He admitted they were longer but claimed they were quicker. At the edge of town, there was no way to avoid a two-mile strip of tackiness. Despite the cool air that whooshed through the open windows, David buzzed the windows shut and turned on the air conditioner. We drove the rest of the way quietly cocooned in our own little space capsule.

 I saw little of David between that day at the beach and the launch – a fleeting few times in the hall or at the mailbox. Thinking they would quarantine him a day or two before launch, I slid a *bon voyage* note under his door in what I was sure was plenty of time, but he never called or came by. I never saw him again.

 My mother, who always asked her unmarried daughter about “my astronaut friend,” called with the news. I was showing a retired couple from New Jersey a nice three bedroom on Laurel Drive. I don’t remember what she said, all I remember is standing in a strange kitchen staring at a beige refrigerator door stuck with pink and green-haired troll magnets, tears streaming down my cheeks.

 They played the audio over and over on tv. The mission controller’s voice grew more agitated and shriller until his flat, professional cool exploded into a chorus of “Damn it, come in.” First, they said it was a computer malfunction, then bit by bit the whole story came out. No public hearing like the *Challenger.* Just a steady trickle of revelations till the truth was undeniable: it was no accident.

 *People* put David on the cover, ramrod straight in his silver space suit, cradling his helmet, smiling a thin, almost quizzical smile. He was analyzed and dissected, and his past was read through the lens of the present. Hindsight made everything fit, drew a straight line to the moon. He was a loner–even his third-grade teacher in Topeka said so. “I was with David almost every day for a year,” said one of the crew, “but I didn’t really know him.” NASA muckamucks scrambled all over themselves claiming they had their suspicions, but no one had listened. He scored high on the flight simulation and stress tests. Nothing in any of the psychological profiles pointed to a problem: one man’s social isolation was another’s self-sufficiency. They couldn’t do anything. It was only a nagging feeling he was hiding something, that he wasn’t quite one of the boys.

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 The moon lander floats to the surface, jets fire, swirls of moon dust curl and billow around its spindly legs. The pilot in the orbiter tries to raise David in the lander. No reply. Mission Control tries. No reply. Mission Control tries again, a faint edge in the studied anchorman voice. David lumbers one step at a time down the ladder to the surface of the moon. Cameras mounted on the outside of the lander record everything. The pilot tries once more to make contact, then Mission Control, then the pilot again. You hear the worry in their voices, their stoic masks are cracking. David galumphs away from the lander, almost bouncing the last few yards. At a slight dip in the moonscape, he sits down, his back to the lander. He is too far away, and the camera angle is bad, but it looks like he is turning off the transmission knobs on the front of his suit. His gloved hands rest on his knees. All he hears is the soft hush of his breath in and out. No horns honking, no sirens wailing, no convertibles blasting heavy metal across three lanes. Perfect quiet, perfect solitude. The earth is a distant bluish white disc. He sits in the quiet and breathes slowly, very slowly.

# *John Benner***Other People’s Ashes**

On a weekend hike alone, Emma saw that a cabin she had admired for more than 40 years was for sale. The tiny home had no room for visitors, which seemed perfect. Without notifying the children, Emma made an offer on the cabin that was accepted. Back home she met with a real estate agent, and soon a red sign appeared on her own front lawn like an accusation.

Shelley called that afternoon. “Mom, what the hell is going on? Deena Rochelle called and told me there was a For Sale sign in front of the house. I told her that wasn’t possible. I told her *my* mom would have talked with me before doing something like that.”

Emma wouldn’t miss Deena one bit. That woman never could manage to mind her own business–yet, she somehow never seemed to know who her own husband was sleeping with. “I don’t need to explain myself. This is something I wanted to do, so I did it. I’ve never done that in my whole life.”

Emma listened to Shelley breathe on the other end of the line for a few moments until it became a contest of who was going to say something first. Finally, Shelley spoke. “I’m sending Marcus over there.”

“Please don’t,” Emma said. But Shelley had already hung up.

Two hours later, Marcus knocked on the door. Usually, he just let himself into the house, so Emma assumed he was trying to make a point. When she opened the door, he stood there with his hands on his hips, looking at her. She rolled her eyes, left the door open and walked into the kitchen to start her dinner. Marcus shut the door loudly and joined her. “Mom, are you okay?” he asked.

“Of course. I feel fine. Better than fine, in fact.”

“That’s not what I meant. Is anything wrong?”

“Wrong how?”

“Did we do something?”

She thought for a long time before answering. The only thing her kids had done wrong was cause her to give up everything. But that wasn’t their fault. They didn’t ask to be brought into this world. And it wasn’t their fault that they had grown up weak and needy. Gordon’s coddling was to blame for that. “No,” was all she said.

“Isn’t this all a little sudden? Are you sure you’ve thought this through?”

How could he really not understand how long this had been in the works? To her, this seemed like the least-sudden decision she had ever made. And how dare he question her ability to reason, as if she were some doddering biddy? She could feel her face turning red as the anger welled up in her. “It’s time for you to leave.”

“But…”

“But nothing. I’m making my dinner and going to bed. I’ll talk to you later.”

During the following weeks, Emma tried to distract and console her aggrieved children by giving them most of her things. She traded in the Lexus for a pickup truck, which would be considerably more practical in the country. On moving day, the job went quickly as the workers loaded up what was left inside the house, including a comfortable chair that Gordon had never liked, a few paintings that looked like scenes from where she was about to move, several boxes of books that she’d never had enough peace to finish, and a couple of crates of brand new yoga paraphernalia. While they worked, Marcus put the things from the yard into the bed of the pickup and covered it over with a tarp. She hugged him and drove away, following the moving truck west on the interstate, then south on poorly maintained state roads. Shafts of sun cut through the low gray clouds and she smiled at the mountains, color-rinsed a light green by springtime leaf buds.

At the cabin, the men began to unload the truck and she went inside to direct them. When they were nearly finished, one of them asked whether she would like them to unload the pickup as well, and she said yes. When they were done, they collected the moving blankets and drove away with a check and a $20 bill for each of them, which she assumed they’d spend on beer, the way men always did.

As the taillights of the moving van disappeared in the dusk, she turned toward the cabin and pulled up short when she saw the sundial sitting next to the wheelbarrow and the lawn chairs. Marcus must have loaded it into the pickup when she wasn’t looking, even though he had agreed to take it to his house. “Shit,” she said to no one, partly to see how her voice sounded in the yard that was hers and hers alone. The mere sight of the sundial drained the remaining energy out of her, and she gave it a wide berth as she headed into the cabin.

The rustic and open floor plan soothed her, even though the cabin was about the same size as her grandfather’s tiny house in Arlington, where she and Gordon had lived when they were first married. That house had given them so little privacy it was a miracle they’d been able to produce three children there.

When her grandfather died and was cremated, she thought she’d store his urn at the back of the overfilled hall closet–only to discover it was already being used as a crypt. On a high shelf across the back wall, she had found an urn with her grandmother’s ashes and a brown plastic container labeled “Heidi,” which contained the remains of her grandfather’s flatulent but beloved dachshund.

She recalled how she had sat on the closet floor in a dusty nest of coats, gloves, and scarves, sobbing until Gordon returned home. “Hello!” he shouted as he shut the front door. When she didn’t answer he called out again. “Emma?” She continued to weep until he cautiously pulled the closet door open. “Honey? Are you OK?”

She nodded and sniffled as a slurry of snot and tears dripped off her upper lip. Gordon ducked into the bathroom, returned with toilet paper spooled around one hand, and gently wiped her face. She wasn’t certain why she was crying so hard. Maybe it was because her grandfather’s passing meant she would inherit the crummy little house and would have to keep living in it. And maybe it was because any world in which your life could end with your ashes stored in a metal vase in a closet was too futile to endure.

Emma had been a light sleeper and got up at 3 a.m. most days, wandering the tiny house, watching Gordon and the children sleep and tiptoeing around so as not to wake them – because then they might need something from her. She sat sometimes in the chair in the nook in the living room, staring at the pictures of her parents and communing with them silently. Her father had been killed while fighting in North Africa and her mother had been in charge of the steno pool at the Pentagon during the war and for a few years afterward until she died, and Emma was sent to live with her grandparents. Her mother had been buried at Arlington Cemetery in her own plot next to her husband when real estate there wasn’t so scarce. These days, spouses were buried on top of spouses, the headstones updated with an inscription on the reverse side explaining that two people would share the same space for eternity whether they liked it or not – many of them closer in death than they had been in life.

The closet of ashes had established with fearful clarity the way life repeats itself as it circles and draws tighter like a noose. One early morning Emma suddenly found it hard to breathe. The house simply was too small to hold them all, too many generations and too many memories.

She’d retrieved her clothes from the bedroom and dressed quietly in the hallway. In the closet she found a duffel bag and placed into it her grandparents’ urns and the plastic container of dog ashes. She got the trowel from the bucket she kept under the sink and put it into the bag. She considered leaving a note for Gordon but decided against it. If he awakened while she was gone, it would do him good to wonder where *she* was for once. She put on her coat and gloves, opened the front door as quietly as possible and pulled it shut behind her until it clicked.

A full moon made it easier for her to find her parents’ graves among the endless ranks of white headstones at Arlington Cemetery. It was a mild night for late January, and she was barely able to see her breath as she passed under the street lamps that lit Grant Drive. At Section 12, she stepped off the roadway and onto the grass. Partway down the hill she located them, side-by-side and oriented toward the Washington Monument in the distance. She looked around but saw no one. She hoped soldiers didn’t patrol the cemetery at night, because if they discovered her, she would have difficulty explaining her errand.

She’d selected a spot midway between the graves, used the trowel to punch a circle ten inches in diameter in the turf, lifted a cap of sod and set it to the side. She dug a careful hole nearly two feet deep and set the three containers of ashes into the ground. She filled the hole with most of the dirt, replaced the sod and tamped it into place. She scattered the extra dirt, gathered her things, and walked quickly back to the road and toward home.

Emma pulled sheets and a blanket from a moving box and made up the bed in the cabin. She slept fitfully in the silence of the countryside and got out of bed before dawn, after finally giving up on the idea of a full night’s sleep. She parted the living room curtain and looked out at the sundial, which she had hoped someone might have mistaken as a thing of value and had run off with in the night. Instead, it sat as if it had always been there, having an effect on her that was likely the reverse of what Marcus had intended.

Gordon had had a heart attack at work and his boss had called to tell her to go to the hospital. When she arrived, he was on a breathing machine and a young doctor told her to prepare for the worst, which came before any of the children could get there. Emma knew Gordon would have been unhappy that she alone had attended his death, but there was nothing to be done about it now.

The boys had accompanied her to the funeral home to make the preparations for the service. The funeral director handed her a catalog of possibilities, including a dozen styles of wooden caskets that looked much too nice to bury, and urns like the ones her grandparents had ended up in. She leafed through the pages, not really listening to his presentation, until Marcus lifted the book out of her lap. He and Jimmy talked with the funeral director as if she weren’t there and ended up selecting a sundial that Gordon’s ashes would be inserted into, with hers to follow one day. This all seemed cramped and disquieting to her, but she felt too numb to object.

At the funeral everyone had cried except her and she hoped no one noticed. The children each gave tear-filled eulogies that included recollections of Gordon teaching them to ride bikes, to swim in the neighborhood pool, and to conquer the basics of algebra. The stories all had the same thing in common: She was not in them.

As a young mother, she had waited to feel the deep motherly attachment for her children that she’d read about in magazines and heard about incessantly from neighbors and her two chubby sisters-in-law–who never really warmed to her no matter how polite she was to them. The years slid by at an astonishing speed as she tended to her family and rarely took time to do anything for herself. Instead, she staged a seemingly endless parade of family gatherings for birthdays, Christmases, graduations, and summer vacations.

And whenever the kids acted up, Gordon somehow got the play the nice guy while she was forced to apply the discipline. When Jimmy turned 16, he wrecked the family car while goofing around with some friends on a road that ran along the golf course. Jimmy called Gordon after the accident, interrupting him at work rather than calling her. Gordon raced to the scene and somehow persuaded the superintendent of the golf course not to call the police even though the car ended up on the 16th green, causing a great deal of damage and expense. She made Gordon demand that Jimmy take a job to earn the money to repair the golf course and the car, only to discover a few months later that Jimmy quit the job after a week and Gordon secretly paid for everything himself, working overtime to do it. In her opinion this made him a bad father, but the kids certainly seemed to see things differently.

A few years later, in early fall, they had driven three hours away to drop off Marcus at college, which would leave them alone for the first time in more than 20 years. Outside the dorm, Gordon hugged Marcus and wept openly while students and parents smiled at the spectacle. Before the onlookers’ eyes swept to her, she moved away from the pair of them and stood near a bench, watching and waiting for Marcus to pull away in embarrassment. But his face never reddened, and when Gordon finally released him, Marcus waved casually at her and strolled away to start his new life.

The fresh tears on Gordon’s face, rather than spurring sympathy in her, had the opposite effect. He seemed to save his most emotional moments for when he had an audience. On the way home, she struggled with how to tell him she wanted to leave him. She couldn’t remember when the thought of leaving had first occurred to her. Honestly, she couldn’t remember *not* having the thought. She knew her words would devastate him. After 100 miles of false starts and stammering that he mistook for her composure being stripped away because they’d just left their youngest kid at college, she discovered that she lacked the courage to say what she wanted to say–to say the words that would finally free her.

When the sundial arrived a few weeks after the funeral, Marcus had slid the container of Gordon’s ashes inside and placed it in a prominent spot in Emma’s yard where it was visible from the kitchen window. She planted a rose bush in front of it, and after two years it was hidden from view. Emma had asked Jimmy to take it to his house two weeks ago, before the move.

“Don’t you want it in your new yard?” Jimmy had asked.

“Let me get moved in and pick a spot for it first,” she had responded, though she’d had no intention of doing that after finally being rid of it. Either Marcus and Jimmy had got their signals crossed or Marcus had hoped she’d change her mind and had loaded it into the pickup truck for the move.

She dressed and headed into town to buy groceries at the 24-hour supermarket and make good use of her early rising. She parked the pickup under an overhead light in the parking lot, got out and stopped short when she saw that the bed of the pickup truck was dusted in a gray powder. She stared at it for a moment until she realized that Gordon’s ash canister must have come open inside the sundial during transport. As she leaned over the side of the truck she coughed and wondered suddenly whether she was inhaling his ashes. The thought of him invading her body this way infuriated her.

She drove back onto the highway. A mile down the road, she saw what she was looking for and pulled into one of the bays. She dropped the tailgate, fed money into the machine, grasped the water wand, and rinsed the gray dust out of the truck’s bed and into the drain at the car wash. Soon her truck looked clean again and she could feel the tension leaving her shoulders.

She did her shopping and returned to the cabin. As she steered the truck onto her property, she considered for a split second pressing down the accelerator and smashing the sundial to pieces with the grill of her truck. But Gordon had done nothing to deserve such violence. He had never beaten her, he had simply suffocated her slowly with his stupefying concern and his perpetual need for her time.

She found a screwdriver in one of the moving boxes and removed the plate from the bottom of the sundial. From the cold and confining metal cylinder she slid out the cracked container that held the rest of Gordon’s ashes and put it into a plastic trash bag. She tossed the bag and the sundial into the bed of the pickup and drove toward town again. At a pretty spot along the highway downwind from her property she scattered Gordon’s ashes, taking care not to breathe him in again. She dropped the sundial into a dumpster behind a gas station. She would need to make up a lie for the children about what had happened to it, but she’d worry about that later.

Back at her cabin, she hiked across the fields and tipped her face up to feel the warmth of the sun. She followed an ancient footpath for half an hour until finally, satisfied that she was alone, she stopped and stood in the tall grass to savor the silence and enjoy the exquisite lightness of an indifferent sky.

# *Jonathan Worlde***Interstellar Hallowed Eve**

All the TV and radio news had been warning for the past month about an extraterrestrial; an interstellar large oblong object that had intruded into the solar system from parts unknown. Width 40 meters, length 200 meters. Destined to pass within 40,000 miles of Earth during Halloween week. NASA signaled it could be a remnant of a disintegrated rogue comet. But other experts indicated it could be the product of an intelligent civilization. It did not appear to be tumbling through space but rather smoothly rotating. Given its projected speed and path, it was not expected to be captured into the Solar System. NASA warned the object could possess electromagnetic properties which would interfere with Earth’s electronic systems, satellites, radar, and possibly have other unpredictable ramifications for life on Earth.

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A brisk October wind was rattling the cabin door an hour after sunset. Robbie had his fire burning brightly in the old wood stove, flooding the single room with the warm scent of cherry wood. A barred owl in a tree just behind the cabin called in that lonesome plaintiff voice, and seconds later another from over the hill responded. They continued to call back and forth, the prelude to night’s romance.

Robbie loved this time of year after the hot humid summer. Harvest is in. Last thing was the corn, it’s all in the silo and the grass bales are in the barn. Slaving away as a farm hand for the farmer whose guest cabin he occupied. There’d still be helping with the feed for the steers and occasional wood to cut and deliver, a part time endeavor. Nothing major to do these next few days but kick back, drink, and play the banjo. Sometimes go into town to get laid or bring a friend down here to enjoy a romp by fire and candle light.

A new eerie sound joins the wind’s cacophony. Startled, he knows her voice immediately, though he hasn’t heard her in a year, since he buried her last October. His German Short-haired Pointer, Charlie Bird, howling above the wind, serenading the nearly full moon. He’s surprised she’s come back to visit, but it’s not unheard of. His mother’s Cherokee ancestors down in the Smoky Mountains told of such apparitions. But he’s afraid to open the door to the dog. Who knows whose bidding she might be doing tonight, fresh from the grave? The howling chills him to the bone. He breaks out the Wild Turkey and tunes to reruns of Twilight Zone to ease his thoughts. Drinks past midnight and collapses into bed.

Middle of the night he’s awakened by the sounds of a fight to the death, two vicious varmints, loud as banshees right outside his door. Must be coming from the chicken coop. He reflexively grabs his gun, a Winchester .22, but then remembers he heard Charlie Bird earlier that night and prefers not to venture out. The dog used to protect the coop from predators.

Comes morning he opens the door, his gun ready. He explores the area around the fenced-in coop. Sure enough, there’s the dirty-grey stiff carcass of a raccoon just outside the coop’s door. Closer inspection reveals deep lacerations on its throat and backside, its mouth afoul with gelled saliva, eyes vacant like fisheyes. Charlie Bird’s teeth marks, no doubt about it. It’s as if the beloved dog wants to stand watch and protect the chickens one more time before permanently submitting to the cold ground on the slight rise behind the cabin. A year to the day he dug her grave, planted a wooden cross, shedding tears when it was done.

He hikes up the hill, through the underbrush to the little clearing where the wooden cross still stands. The ground is untouched, weeds collecting. He wonders now, how did Charlie Bird get loose to kill that varmint if the grave is undisturbed?

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Halloween night. He’s cooked himself a nice meal of rabbit stew and collards with cornbread. He’s got a buzz on from Wild Turkey and reefer. Charlie Bird has visited every night for a week outside the cabin. Killed a possum and another raccoon, still protecting the chickens. The news is still rambling on about that interstellar piece of rock shaped like a missile flying by.

Time to go down the dirt road to the farmer’s field for the annual celebration. There’s always a nice bonfire with mountain music; there’ll be a few guitars, banjos, fiddle, washtub bass, harmonica. The farmer and his neighbors drinking peach brandy moonshine; teens in costumes cutting loose; everyone getting crazy till the early morning hours. He never misses the fun. He’ll end up playing drunk on his feet, keeping the tunes coming until dawn, the musicians grouped in a circle, leaning in, playing for themselves, for the night, for the stars.

Walking slowly, banjo slung across his back, his feet shuffling through the fallen oak and sycamore leaves, Robbie reflects on the past year and what’s ahead. What is there to look forward to? What’s he really accomplishing in this world? Will he ever stop being lonely? He had shared the cabin with Charlie Bird longer’n he ever lived with any woman. His mom’s no longer around to nag him about finding a wife, but some such arrangement wouldn’t be too bad at his age. Someone who can look past how he never graduated from high school, don’t have much money in the bank. Someone who can accept him for who he is, like what Charlie Bird always done.

Coming over the rise he sees the fire down the hill, just now lit, blazing high in its glory. The sound of instruments tuning up. Folk talking and laughing, happy to be alive, plunging into this brisk Hallow’s Eve. Up in the clear sky he can see a new object on the horizon, brighter than Venus or Jupiter, that wasn’t there a week ago.

He feels Charlie Bird walking beside him, hears the leaves rustling under her feet, feels her breath on his hand, her muzzle wetting his palm. Somehow, he suspects this will be her last night afoot.

# *Kelli Simpson***Outside**

We were 14 and fragile

that summer.

Lonely, unsupervised,

unlikeable girls.

We made worlds

of each other's empty spaces.

We invented places

where mothers came home.

We drank ourselves stupid

that summer

with shoplifted beer

from the Stop and Buy.

And we loved each other

through learning that loss

can bitter every taste on the tongue.

We were the shame of the town

that summer.

Odd, almost orphaned,

awkward girls;

our eyes,

hungry and haunted;

our houses

thick with ghosts.

# *Margo McCall***Pioneers**

When I get back from washing clothes in the stream, a classic white Chrysler Imperial has pulled in next to where Cal and I are camped. Hanging our dripping t-shirts and shorts on the line, I imagine the driver’s a glamour queen straight from Mad Men, a Marilyn Monroe type with frosted lipstick and tight capris.

But the woman who drags herself from the driver’s seat is nothing like that. She’s dumpy, with stringy yellow hair and a sunburned face. Two miniature versions of her hop from the backseat.

Like us, they must have been camping for awhile. I’ve lost track of time. No radio, television, computers, or phones—just one sunny day blending into the next. Summers in the Sierras are beautiful, no other word for it.

Cal and I are filling with sunlight and happiness. The smell of pine is everywhere—in the air and water, bursting from the needle-covered dirt, exploding from our crackling campfire at night. The stream has been speaking to me, and as I walk over the ancient granite, I feel its age.

Crawling in the tent to tell Cal about the new development, my weight on the air mattress wakes him from his afternoon nap. “Nice snooze?” I ask as he opens his eyes.

“I’m sure going to miss this,” he says, pulling me toward him. We roll around and kiss, but when he starts pulling at my tank top, I say, “Hold on, let me zip the tent. We’ve got neighbors.”

Cal’s eyes widen. “Neighbors?”

“Looks like a mom and two girls,” I whisper. “You should see what she’s driving—a classic car in mint condition.”

Cal’s forgotten all about taking off my tank top as he peers out the tent door. “What a beaut,” he says. “Kind of weird to bring a car like that camping, though.”

Seeing the car is the most exciting thing that’s happened all week. We’ve been getting up early, going on long hikes all day, then returning to the campsite for dinner and evening fire.

We’ve gone wild. Cal’s chin is covered with golden whiskers and his tanned skin smells of earth. Without soap and lotion, my skin smells the same way—not yet like pine, but of soil and running water. I looked at myself through the truck’s side mirror earlier, and barely recognized who I saw.

Sam, our Shepherd mix, has become wild too. On high alert, especially after dark when the bears come through. He’s been running free, splashing in streams, clambering over boulders, chasing squirrels. Right now, though, he’s tied to a tree in accordance with campground rules.

“Well,” says Cal, getting out of the tent and grabbing his fishing rod. “Guess I better try and catch us some dinner.” He unties Sam and off they go.

I use the time to think about what to make. Last night, it was bean burritos. Sorting through the food bin, I wonder what I can make with a couple of potatoes, a red pepper, an onion, and the last two cobs of corn. I hope Cal catches a trout. We’re almost out of food.

Being from the city, I mind my own business. But my eyes keep sneaking back to the glamorous car, running over its sleek lines, taking in the gleaming chrome crown on its bumper.

The trunk lid protests as the woman lifts it skyward, foraging for something in its depths. I’m guessing she’s trying to figure out what to make for dinner too.

Cal returns empty-handed, so it’s just corn on the cob and fried potatoes. We sit down to eat just as the light around us fades.

“Corn, huh?” says Cal. The little black kerosene lantern, strung up on a cord above the table, casts a glow on our food, making the corn look like chunks of ore.

I try to make dinner conversation. “Think there’s any gold in this creek?” I ask.

“Didn’t see any.”

Cal’s off his gold kick now. He used to watch that show where some guy tries to get you to sign up with the American Gold Miners Club. You get your pan, shovel and cap emblazoned with the club’s name, all for $29.95. Last year, after heavy rains, we filled three trash bags full of gold stuff that Cal said might be placer. The bags sat in our yard all winter until I finally dumped them.

Ruckus from the next campsite floats through the dusk. “You better eat that, cuz that’s all yer getting,’” says the woman, followed by the girls’ whiny protests.

We look at each other and roll our eyes.

Cal and I haven’t had a fight all week. Back in the city, we bicker. Stress of our jobs, commutes, and household responsibilities. But up here in the Sierras, we can’t find anything to disagree about.

I wash the dishes, while Cal stacks wood for the evening’s fire. By the time I’ve made our after-dinner drinks—bourbon on ice, washed with a splash of Coke—Cal’s got the fire going. As we stand around it, watching the flames, Cal talks about some movie he saw about a future time when everybody lives underground because the world’s out of oxygen. That happened because people cut down all the trees.

We’ve seen a lot of logging trucks, driving up to the mountains empty and leaving with centuries-old redwoods. “I wonder how many trees there are? I suppose there are some biologists counting them,” I say.

“I know some survey estimated 20 million have been killed by the drought,” he says.

“Did you hear about that report that predicts that climate change could put California in a drought for two centuries?” I ask.

“When you stop and think about it,” Cal says, “Humans aren’t all they’re cracked up to be. We survive seventy-seven years, outlasted by all the garbage and destruction we leave behind.”

I like it when Cal gets philosophical. It reminds me of what I loved about him in the first place. Our conversation is interrupted by more yelling from the neighbors’ campsite, which is bathed in an eerie green glow.

“What did I tell you about graham crackers?” the woman barks. “I told you five or six times.” Her yelling is followed by one of the little girls crying.

 The next morning, I see the woman in Wishon Village as I’m buying ice and something for breakfast. I told Cal I’d get orange juice and eggs, but they’re out of both so I end up with a box of Cheerios, a quart of milk, and more ice.

The woman is outside at the payphone, trying to talk and keep track of her daughters. “Hold on,” she says, placing a hand over the receiver. “Hannah. Sarah. Get in the car,” she yells. “And stay away from that highway.”

Inside the truck, Sam barks at the commotion. I’ve brought him along, thinking he’d like the ride. The whole eight miles he stared out the window at the trees, maybe hoping to catch a glimpse of some wild animal.

As I fill the coolers with ice, I overhear the woman’s conversation. “I’m rationing food, and down to my last twenty bucks.” Pause. “I’m at some place called Buck Creek.” Pause. “No, I don’t think he’ll find me here.”

The road back is straight downhill. I hardly have to use any gas, and I feel good about reducing my carbon footprint for at least a few minutes. Back at the campsite, Cal’s untangling his fishing line. I can’t wait to tell him what I heard.

When the Chrysler Imperial pulls in, I wave. A minute later, the oldest girl walks over. She hesitates, standing on some imaginary boundary between the two campsites.

“Hi,” I say. “What’s your name?

 “Hannah.” She sways back and forth on the balls of her feet, then blurts, “I saw that dog at the store.”

“Yeah, I saw you guys at the store too.”

She sways some more, then asks, “Can I pet your dog?”

I take Sam over on his leash. “Just put your hand out and let him sniff it first,” I say.

“Are you our neighbors?” Hannah asks, holding her hand toward Sam.

“I guess for a couple of days.”

Hannah’s worried eyebrows are several shades darker than her hair. “Can I hold the leash?” she asks.

“Sure, but hang on tight.”

Just as I hand her the leash, Sam lunges forward, dragging Hannah behind him. I end up at the Imperial’s bumper, where the woman is pawing through stuff in the trunk.

“Hi, I’m Tracy. That’s my husband, Cal,” I say, pointing back to our site, where Cal is still fussing with his fishing gear. He looks up, and I gesture for him to come over.

“Teresa,” she says, smiling broadly enough for me to see she’s missing an eye tooth. Her face is round and happy, but there’s a jagged scar below her right eye.

Cal wanders over. He nods at Teresa before letting his eyes roam over the Imperial’s fine lines. Close up, the car’s even more magnificent, with red leather interior and miles of shiny chrome.

“Nice car,” he says.

“Got it for eight hundred from some guy going into a retirement home, but people tell me it’s worth four grand,” she says. “This is the first summer I’ve had a car. We’ve been all over the place. Right, girls?”

The girls nod, then go back to letting Sam lick dirt from their faces.

Teresa reaches into the red leather side pocket and arranges a fan of maps and brochures on the hood. “Check it out—Disneyland, Magic Mountain, Fisherman’s Wharf, even the Hearst Castle. Trying to give my girls a good summer.”

Teresa smiles the whole time, seeming lit up from within. I wonder if she’s one of those religious fanatics or is just on some really good antidepressants. Then a crease appears between her eyebrows. “One thing though. I hit a rock and cracked something in the engine.”

She bends to retrieve a pail full of what looks like red transmission fluid from under the car. “I put a bucket under here to catch the drippings,” Teresa says. “We should have just enough to make it home.”

Cal opens the hood and takes a look. “You should get more fluid. Transmission goes, fixing it will cost more than you paid for the car.”

Later that afternoon, Cal catches two trout. As he’s cleaning them, Hannah again approaches the imaginary boundary. “Do you have a shovel?” she asks.

“Sure, hang on.” I pull out the Army shovel we use to spread dirt on dying campfires. When I get over there, Teresa’s digging in the dirt with a spoon.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I thought it would be fun to make an oven. Something I read about—you dig a hole and throw in some charcoal and build up some coals.”

“How big do you want it?” I ask.

She points to a fire-blackened pot. “Big enough for that.”

I place the tip of the shovel in the dirt, then press it in with a boot. “It helps if you have the right tools,” I say.

“Yeah, we just grabbed a few things from home. The first few nights we didn’t even have a light. Then I got this glow-strip at the store for five bucks.” She points to the greenish strip hanging from their clothesline.

I look at what’s scattered on their picnic table. No cooler, no cook stove—just stuff from their kitchen at home. I admire her courage. “Seen any sign of B-E-A-R-S ?” I ask, spelling out the word so as not to alarm her daughters.

Teresa laughs. “Don’t bother. They can spell.” She scratches at a mosquito bite on her arm. “I feel a lot safer here than in Fresno. Down there, somebody’s always calling the cops. Shots fired or somebody getting beat up.”

One of those somethings, she tells me, is her ex-husband. “He’s always pulling some shit, trying to break into my place when he’s drunk. Last time I had him put away. He’s gonna come after me when he gets out.” She laughs. “He won’t find us here.”

“So, what are you gonna make in your oven?” I ask, changing the subject.

Her face lights up. “Well, I have potatoes and onions and Spam, so I thought I’d make a kind of casserole.”

“That sounds really good.”

“Hope the kids eat it,” she says with a flash of disappointment. “They haven’t liked anything so far. They keep wanting pizza or McDonald’s.”

As Teresa slices up squares of Spam, we get to talking about the various places to go up here in the Sierras. Dinkey Creek Campground. Gigantua, full of huge cedars. Lake Huntington, which feels like a 1940s resort.

“Been to Big Creek?” Teresa asks.

“Is that the place where the Edison people live?”

“Yeah, just a bunch of old shacks carved into the mountain.”

Cal and I once drove from the King’s River into Big Creek, the Edison company town. There were places the road was no more than a few logs jutting out from vertical rock. I faced mortality sitting in the passenger seat looking down into that three-thousand-foot gorge.

“You know, those people live here year-round,” Teresa says. “Heard the kids have to ride horses through the snow to get to their one-room schoolhouse, just like pioneers.”

“I wouldn’t want to be here in the winter,” I say.

“I’d love to be a pioneer,” says Teresa, looking all dreamy-eyed. “It sounds kind of exciting, being up here in the mountains on your own. Everybody taking care of each other.”

Later, Cal and I are looking at the map by candlelight, trying to figure out where to stop on our way home, when I hear Teresa yell, “Then you’ll have to go to bed without dinner.”

“Guess they didn’t like what she cooked in the oven,” I say.

It’s our last night. We stand by the fire looking up at the sky, which is a galaxy of stupendousness. I move into a clearing to better see the piercing points of brightness suspended in the milky halo of distant stars. As I stand, head bent back, I think of constellation names: Capricorn, Orion, Gemini. For just a second, I feel united with the ages of people who used the skies to navigate, then I remember that tomorrow we’ll be back in the city, getting ready to go back to work.

“Don’t you wish we could stay here longer?” I ask Cal as we snuggle in our sleeping bags.

“It’s like this every time we leave,” Cal says, stroking my hair. “We go through all this anxiety about leaving our possessions, then once we’re free of them we don’t want to ever see them again.”

I fall into a restless sleep where I dream, I live in a cave carved from rock by water and wind. It’s cozy and protected. I’m woken up by Sam’s barking.

“Leave me alone, you motherfucker,” screams someone. It sounds like Teresa.

Then a man’s voice. “Give me the goddamn keys.”

There’s some banging, grunting, and cursing, followed by someone’s anguished wail.

Cal pulls on his jeans. “Don’t go out there,” I plead. “What if her crazy ex has a gun?”

Cal doesn’t seem to have heard me. He unzips the tent and runs into the night. Sam’s going crazy inside the truck. From the next campsite over, the girls’ cries are heartbreaking.

By the time I get there with the flashlight, Cal’s got the guy in a chokehold and Teresa’s delivering somebody blows.

“You useless shit,” she roars. “That car is mine.”

I shine the light in the guy’s face. Blood from a gash on his forehead drips into mean, red-rimmed eyes. He tries to explain. “She stole the keys. Check the car registration in my pocket.”

“Grab Sam’s rope,” Cal yells to me.

I do as he says, and together, Teresa and I manage to tie his hands behind his back, while Cal presses his arm into the guy’s windpipe. There’s even enough rope left to bind his ankles. Cal lets go of his neck and he falls to the ground like firewood.

The girls approach in their pajamas, rubbing their dirty, tear-stained faces. I have the image of covered pioneer wagons huddled in a tight circle against a blizzard moving in from the north. “What happened?” I ask Teresa.

She shrugs. “He came in the tent. I whacked him with a piece of firewood. Didn’t think I’d be waiting for him. Well, I have. Every night. Surprised it took him this long to show up.”

I barely hear Cal say, “We better call the paramedics—he looks pretty banged up.”

Teresa laughs. “No, just let him die.”

Cal looks at her with disgust. “Call 911,” he tells me.

I walk to the edge of the campground where there’s cell reception and tell the operator what happened. She puts me on hold, then comes back on the line. “Forest Service is en route.”

When the Forest Service arrives, they cuff the ex-husband when they find out he’s on parole. “But wait, she stole my car,” he protests as they load him into their vehicle.

They don’t arrest Teresa but tell her not to leave the area. They also take our contact information in case there are questions later.

​ After they’re gone, Teresa lets out a whoop. Cal gives her a hard stare. “Did you steal his car?” he asks. She just smiles.

It’s hard to get back to sleep, but we finally catch a couple of hours. And in the morning, when we wake up and break camp, the Chrysler Imperial is gone.

# *Milton P. Ehrlich***Make a Wish**

I thought it was a caw of crackles

or the sound of my rusty gate

when it was just a memory

of loved ones singing me

Happy Birthday every year.

When I was a kid,

I made the same wish

at my birthday parties—

or sighting the first star,

or pulling the larger part

of a chicken wing—

and promised not to tell

or it wouldn’t come true.

As I enjoy my 90th birthday,

I still make the same wish

and can’t tell you what it is.

# *Robb White***Easy Money**

Stevie Malone and I grew up across the Hudson from New York City. We used to drive out dates down to De la Torma Park by the river, watch the New York skyline glittering like millions of fireflies in the dark and brag about the things we’d do after high school. His bedroom walls had foldouts of porn stars from *Juggs* and *Score*. My walls were decorated with sports cars— Lamborghinis everywhere: the Miura, the Murcielago, the Diablo, and my all-time favorite, the Countach Periscopo. Another wall of Ferraris: the 250 GTO, the F40 with its elegant Bizzarrini-designed bodywork, the 365 GT4 BB, the “Berlinetta Boxer.”

I went to work for a meat-packing plant that made deliveries into Manhattan. He forgot the things we said back then. I never did. The straight-and-narrow had no appeal to me. I helped myself to cargo which led to a felony conviction that sent me to Torture Island, better known as Rikers.

Thanks to the Coronavirus, overcrowding, and my non-violent offense, I was given an early release. I took my experiences, including a 5-inch scar around my neck from some guy’s sharpened toothbrush, and a determination never to return, no matter if they did vote to close the place.

Petey Catano called me the day after I got out and asked me to meet him in Soho.

“This your place, Spider?”

“This my place? Naw, a guy lets me borrow it when he’s out of town. I feed his cats. Nobody’s called me that in a long time.”

He got the nickname because he seemed to have 8 eyes in his head, always looking around, nervous, never focusing on one thing at a time. I met Spider at an Irish wake in the Bowery years ago. He never did crime, but he knew beaucoup criminals in and out of slammers all over the five boroughs.

I didn’t ask if the drinks were provided by the friend. That first whiskey and beer chaser after years of no booze and starchy food tasted like an angel pissing on my tongue. A Dixie cup of pruno might cost two weeks’ worth of snacks back on the island. The first swallow scorched a path down my esophagus.

Catano began talking. An old story. He knew someone who knew someone—that old story. The long and short was that a Latin Kings shotcaller was doing a bid for manslaughter and looking at serious time. He had contacts all over the city doing scores. “Dude’s a regular clearinghouse for crimeys like you,” Catano said. “He’s looking for ex-cons willing to put in work for the LK.”

“Steve said you were doing OK, babe.”

Catano called everyone “babe.”

“You know the saying, ‘Do the time, don’t let the time do you.’”

 “‘Don’t let the time...’ Good old convict wisdom, huh, Sonny? I meant, you know, this.”

Catano repeated everything you said, a human parrot. He mimed taking a drink.

“So, why are we here, Petey?”

“Catching up on old times, maybe do business.”

“What kind of business?” As if I couldn’t guess.

“What kind? The kind that puts money in your pocket, laddie.”

“What’s your cut?”

“No wasting time, huh? I like that.”

He collected a “finder’s fee” for recruiting; a percentage of the take was parceled out to addresses around Brooklyn. These “associates” of gang members would funnel money where they ordered and dribbled a few bucks into the shot-caller’s commissary account.

Fine by me, I told him. When my time got short, word got out in the yard to give me space. The shot-caller was grooming me, I figured, because cons will try to screw up your release date when you’re doing “the short and shitty”—what it’s called because you get jumpy during those last days, nerves get frayed, and diarrhea is one of the symptoms. Getting chalked up for dumb infractions prolongs your time. A con’s idea of a joke, in other words.

“No strongarm,” I told Petey; “I don’t do gun-pointing; no banks, no cowboy stuff.”

He looked at me as if I’d asked if his grandmother was into cannibalism.

“No way, babe! A child could do it,” he said. “Easy-peasy.”

I thought of all the guys back in Rikers, packed in like sardines, telling lies in the chow hall about how “easy” their crime should have been if it weren’t for some rat, some unexpected glitch they didn’t plan for. Nobody stays up after lights out in Rikers worrying about quark entanglement.

“You used to drive for Nolan Meats, the Bronx.”

“Queens,” I said.

That was before I sold frozen turkeys to an undercover cop.

“But you know how to drive big rigs, right?”

“A delivery truck.”

“Whatever, same thing.”

I’d always dreamed of gearing down a Porsche Carrera at my age.

He outlined it while he poured me a double shot of single malt.

“A truck heist,” I repeated.

“Easy-peasy.”

“I’ll get you details. Meet me here Wednesday.”

“Should I ask what’s in it?”

“Fifty-five-gallon drums of ammonia nitrate pellets,” Petey replied. “A fertilizer bomb.”

“You asshole.”

Petey’s idea of humor.

“You don’t gotta know. Don’t worry about it, neither. The driver’s in on it. He’s gonna leave it idling. You just climb in, shift the gears”—adding in a noise like worn-out brake pads for effect.

Then he mimicked hand washing. “Done, like that. Five thou. Easy money, babe.”

Everything’s easy to guys who never do it. Besides “fuck you,” *easy money* are the two most common words you’ll hear at Rikers.

They say you lose ten-thousand brain cells with every sip of alcohol. Dwelling in that mystical cloud of booze fog where everything is alright with the world, I felt invincible.

“I’m in.”

“Good,” Petey said. He gave me a reassuring clap on the back. “You won’t regret it.”

That might be the other most common expression heard around Rikers.

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 Learning to shift an 18-speed transmission is like building an airplane while you’re flying it. All standard shifting follows an H-pattern. If I could get it out of low without grinding the transmission, I’d be OK. New York streets were deserted. Tumbleweeds blew down Times Square.

 No matter what the cargo, it was a guaranteed trip back to the island. Skip MCC—a bad enough hellhole with mold on the walls, bugs in the cells, and feces in the shower stalls—go straight to Rikers.

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Five people on the bus to Soho wearing homemade face masks. Petey had the shot glass for me when I knocked. I demanded a couple hundred front money. He told me the pick-up and drop-off spots.

“Why a shit hole like Hunt’s Point?”

“Who cares, Sonny?”

I was familiar with that section of the Bronx; it’s all abandoned warehouses, a place full of street hookers and meth addicts before the virus, now as deserted as Manhattan.

“They got the precinct patrols timed out in that section,” Petey told me, “so be on time. One more thing.”

“Yeah?”

“Go easy on the booze, huh?”

I smiled with convict sincerity. “One day at a time, Petey, like they say.”

Another cliché that never panned out when you were up against it.

The driver met me in front of my old house in Corona—the name a cruel reminder of some of the virus’ worst damage since the lockdown. Kids, parents, and grandparents packed together in one house just like when I was a kid. Migrants who used to have low-paying jobs in the city moped around with panicky looks in their eyes. Food lines stretched around the block. I told the cabbie to take the Roosevelt Expressway and get off at the Broadway exit.

New York’s streets deserted at rush hour—surreal.

I walked past the place and found an alleyway off 82nd Street where I could keep an eye on the back lot from the opposite end. A pint of Jim Beam kept me company. Some homeless people living under cardboard midway down the alley made snorting noises every now and then.

Catano could kiss my ass. I carried a go-bag with tools, including a pair of bolt cutters, and a map with my escape route highlighted. I wasn’t going where he expected.

From my vantage, I could see the back lot where the semi was sitting behind a fenced-off parking lot surrounded by apartment high-rises and a yellow-brick three-story with a loading dock.

I passed the time drinking, enjoying my buzz. Ten o’clock, a full moon—if you could see it—and I was half-blitzed. I hadn’t eaten. Every time I popped my head out, I saw the same man on the loading dock. He could be an employee, or he could be security.

I was close enough to hear the big diesel running. I’d made it to the cyclone fencing and snipped through the links to crawl under it.

Hours passed. When I didn’t show at the drop-off spot in the Bronx, calls would be made.

I was warm from the booze, but my limbs were cramping up in the night air. I couldn’t see worth a tinker’s damn. I watched the glow of a cigarette at the top of the arc as he inhaled. More minutes passed. Then the butt traced a crimson zigzag as he flicked the butt off the dock.

The go-bag slung over my shoulder, I broke from cover to the fencing and worked my way along it to the section I’d cut. I jammed my bag under and belly-crawled after it.

The lot’s overhead lights made me visible to anyone standing on the dock. I ran to the cab, opened the door, and flung my bag in. My legs gave out just as I hoisted myself up, lost my footing trying to get all the way in, and went down hard ass over teacup to the concrete. The air was knocked from my lungs. I wheezed, struggled to my feet. Red spots appeared in my vision. Too late to regret the whiskey, and too terrified to go back, I reached for the handle, adrenalin pumping.

A shout from behind: “Hey!”

I vaulted inside this time. My hand reached for the gear knob and I slammed it into what I hoped was first. A hellish noise, the truck lunged—and stalled out. All tunnel vision now, I turned the key, the semi bucked again, stalled out again. Sweating, I started the motor again, slammed the clutch to the floorboard and worked the shift until I felt it slip sideways in neutral.

Voices, more shouting. The side mirror showed people running toward me.

I slammed the gear shift into what was either going to be a low gear or the end of me when the gears meshed, and the semi moved forward. I eased off the clutch and gave it gas. The noise and the shouting directed at me was pure pandemonium. I risked another gear and there was more speed. I almost took out an unmanned gatehouse and nearly sideswiped a row of parked cars.

Getting the feel of it, I gained speed with less grinding of gears. My heart hammered in my chest. Having room on the empty streets helped my confidence—that and the hour spent checking out online big-rig driving lessons. I held it to a steady speed, my knuckles white on the steering wheel and my eyes darting to the side mirrors for cops.

I knew from the second Catano gave me the Hunt’s Point location, I was being set up. Toll booths have cameras. No way off an island without hitting one. The goods, whatever was in the back, would be my fuck-you money.

My route took me to the southeast of Queens down Lafayette to an abandoned textile factory where I planned to unload the cargo, a place I’d used before my Manhattan pinch. I’d done a recon before I met Catano Wednesday; it was exactly as I remembered it years ago. I’d unload, wipe down the cab, leave the semi close to the Bed-Stuy projects, and move the goods at leisure. Furs and hi-def TVs were easy. If what was behind me wasn’t packed with cartons of pizza shells, I could start dreaming of owning a Lamborghini again.

The high-beams showed me the old cinder path beyond a cement-block foundation half-obscured in dock weed. I drove around to the back out of sight and reversed into the sloped loading bay. I cut the lights and engine and sat back against the seat. My head pounded with tension and the onset of a hangover. My breathing slowed and the circulation in my aching hands returned to normal. I remembered Norwegian rats the size of house cats scampering about, their red eyes glowing at me in my flashlight beam.

Grabbing the flashlight and bolt cutters from my bag, I hopped out and went around to the back.

It took more time with the bolt cutters than I expected, and I was almost sobbing when I cut through the padlock. The door handle didn’t open; it had a separate locking mechanism.

*What the hell?* I swung my beam over the floor of the factory and spotted broken chunks of concrete block with rebar sticking out. I smashed a couple blocks together and jerked the rebar free. I used it to pry the entire handle off.

Flinging the single panel door wide, a wave of chilled air hit me in the face. *Please be high-end furs, not sides of beef or crates of lettuce…*

My flashlight swept over racks of elongated objects crammed floor to ceiling all the way back. Maybe it was the headache, the dullness after so much anxiety, the booze fog still lingering. I wasn’t thinking clearly, and I couldn’t see well enough to determine what the cargo was.

I worked my way down the center aisle between the stacks. Leather was also shipped in cold storage vans. Not like furs but less risk and much easier to unload to a fence.

Halfway down the truck, I stooped over one pile of these tarp bags and rubbed my hands along its surface trying to feel what was contained inside. My mind raced with possibilities—all but the obvious one.

My fingers touched metal—a zipper. Instinctively, still not registering, I tugged the zipper.

A white human face stared back up at me. Lower jaw wide open in rigor, milky eyes unseeing, yet staring into my flashlight.

The odor walloped me like a fist, blasting up my nostrils into my brain. I doubled over, spewing the contents of my stomach, mostly undigested liquor, all of it adding to the reek.

*Body bags—a morgue truck. I stole a hospital morgue truck full of corpses--*

The shock made me reel backwards in horror. I dropped my flashlight and stumbled against a metal framework attached to one side and collapsed it, body bags tumbled off the rack, one hitting me in the shoulder and propelling me forward into the opened body bag.

In the blackness, I flung my hand out and did the very thing I tried to avoid: my hand slammed into the dead face, raking my fingers over the teeth, slicing a long gash along the palm, accompanied by the sound of a twig snapping—my wrist.

I grabbed my wounded hand tight against my chest, blood flowing down my shirt, and picked myself up. Dizzy, nauseated, I made my way toward the door like a drunk stumbling into traffic. My mind was shutting down, terror oozed from every pore.

*Coronavirus . . . dead bodies . . . infection--*

I groped toward the door feeling my way like a blind man at the bottom of a mine shaft. My foot banged into the door. I felt around for an inside handle—nothing. I got down on all fours and felt for the hold-back designed to keep flush swinging doors from closing shut. I found the door’s hold-back and its protection plate lying on the floor, snapped off at the welding joint.

Sick with panic, I slapped at the door, screaming with all my might: “Out! Let me out!”

Exhausted, I fell back. It was as if a switch had been thrown in my brain. I remembered nothing, seeing only blackness in front of my own dead eyes.

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 They told me later I was trapped in there with 38 Covid-19 victims for twenty-six hours. Some taggers with spray cans heard moaning inside.

They said I was slumped against it, gibbering through cracked lips like a lunatic.

Six fingers and four toes had to be amputated. I woke up from surgery long enough to see I was bandaged and restrained to the bed rails. An exhausted surgeon in protective garb and face shield stopped by to tell me I was positive for Covid-19 and would remain in quarantine until I recovered--*or not*, he said, disgust in his voice, and went on with his rounds.

When I woke up again, a chubby detective in full-body PPE sat beside my bed. He looked gleeful behind the plastic shield.

“You’re a big joke at the Two-Five,” he said, the smile widening. “Doc out there says them little Coronaviruses can infect either lobe of your brain, some mumbo-jumbo about a half-life of decay. Depends, he says, where the viruses landed while youse in that truck wrestling around with dead bodies for two days—not that you have much of a brain to lose," I told him. "My, my, Sonny. What the hell were you thinking?”

He laughed. A puff of condensation misted over the plastic hole where his mouth was.

“How much does a corpse go for nowadays, I wonder.”

Too groggy from the anesthetic to tell him where to put his jokes.

“Youse s’posed to grab the semi in the next parking lot over, dummy. Some hedge-fund manager on the Eastside bought himself a couple pricey sports cars. A McLaren FL—never heard of it, did you? Thing tops out at 240, they say. The other’s a Testarossa F50. Candy-apple red, got these nostrils and wings, a real Italian beauty...”

His Bronx honk is a fingernail swiped down a blackboard. My lungs are filling with more fluid by the hour, slowly suffocating me. That TV image of the Coronavirus with its spiky red tendrils is burned into my brain where I see them roaming, replicating. I imagine them clamped onto my lung and brain cells like climbers wearing crampons. The cop drones on, adding to my torture, relishing my suffering. I’d give anything right now to be back in my cell on Rikers…

I close my eyes, seeing swollen body bags bursting in the darkness, covering me with slime. One bag looks out with my own face, stares with my own dead eyes.

A nurse beckons him from the window and points at her wrist: *time to go*. The cop stares down at me, thrusts home the *coup de grâce*: “Yeah, real classics, those babies in that other semi, worth about five million each...”

# *Samantha Moya***Hands Grazing Poems**

Thumbs touching metaphor,

scrapping,

pulling apart riddles and anagrams.

Open the black box under the bed,

peek in at its secrets, dust it off.

But quickly, ferociously, you wipe the dust from your hands,

Put the box back into the dark.

It was a futile venture to you,

you never were good at figurative language,

it was all nonsense in your brain,

maybe even a weapon to be used against you,

to confuse you,

but you never understood that it’s also

where love hides

between the similes and half rhymes.

# *Sarah Frank***Jekyll & Hyde**

what she says can be venomous,
carrying the sting of a thousand snakes,
not the words themselves
but the way she says them,
the *context* in which she says them.
I know it’s not her talking
but it’s hard to separate.
she is Jekyll, then Hyde,
hiding an arsenal of words
beneath her tongue
concealing the artillery until she switches,
until we mess up,
until we say the wrong words,
until we do the wrong thing,
and she releases all she has contained
into the atmosphere.
she lights the word aflame
and let us burn in it
because it doesn’t matter,
because she doesn’t care.
the next day she is Jekyll again
as sweet as the maple syrup
on my pancakes
when she comes in to tell me good morning.
I try and separate it.
*That was not her*I say.
*That was not her speaking.
This is the real her,
sweet like syrup.*But it’s hard to separate words
when they are said
in the same voice.

# *Sean Platt***Boat**

The hull,

with its clotted throws of paint,

cuts through mounds of broken glass.

Oars sound their locks,

blades catching

releasing soft fragments.

Throbs of wind,

caught by granite walls,

scrape across the lake.

I feel apart—

vulnerable.

My trespass marked

in rims of tattered lace

confessed upon my wake.

# *Shannon Cuthbert***In Light of the One Left**

The poetry of you reached me

Long before your branches,

Before the mourning dove you sent

Brimming with sky.

You slept in my wings, curled up

So long I had to dissect you

At the root, grafting.

Your language rode through me

In waves as all leaves do,

Falling and beginning over

Things we take for granted.

Behind my pillow you

Smile pale stitches on the mouths

Of flightless birds,

On flowers breathing into their sleeves

The secret of being, of remaining.

# *Sheldon Hubbard***Puppy Dog Eyes**

My furry friend has laid their head

down to rest, just past the dawn of seven.

Frying the frays at the end of my threads,

following their gaze all the way to heaven.

Ocean waves lapping the lids of my eyes.

Soaking the morning in saltine cries,

because my dearest friend has died.

Puppy dog eyes now twinkling from heaven.

# *Sophia Vesely***Out of Place**

Ten years passed,

I asked my grandmother

what happened to the swans.

The two of them

we always fed,

in the pond behind her house.

The water parted in two parallel lines:

they glided together or not at all.

They never left the cattails’ homely confines,

never gave an audible squall.

My childishness

approved only

of their form of kissing:

the creation of a heart,

like the one I dotted my i’s with.

She told me one was eaten

on a winter’s night

by the neighborhood coyote.

The guts, shredded and strewn,

pulsed purple on the lawn.

And the other journeyed to the

forest in an awkward

stumble, grace was never

built for

twisted roots and

cracked soil.

She said it was

to seek revenge,

but I know better.

It was the grandest gesture of lost hope—

because for him,

there was no longer such a thing as

comfort.

# *Tanner Muller***Your Protégé**

My spirit used to be etched on gold-plated shields,

My soul full of childish optimism.

But you thought it necessary to leave me

With the everlasting knowledge of

Being (desired, yet) unloved.

You danced upon the grave of my securities

And taught me how to give my power away.

You were the unforgiving ringmaster,

And I, your submissive, non-consenting protégé.

You took command of my atmosphere,

And corrupted my sense of being.

I was your prepubescent genie,

Your desires my guidelines,

Your wishes my every command.

 *I was only a child*

 *I was only a child*

 *I was only a child*

If only my skin could document the history of

Its touches and record them into a rolodex.

Then I could start to reveal these gaps

And allow myself to heal.

Now take a seat and bear witness to my process.

Watch how I weave this thread and

Stitch these open memory wounds.

# *Tiffany Washington***The First Frost**

*For my Love*

Foggy street lights

by the only bench

I can see outside my window

illuminate a morning not quite ready.

Pen in hand, I wait for rusty words

(once poetic) that now slip

between mortgages

and dentist appointments.

It is this morning when I finally

understand my grandmother’s

desire to never leave the house.

Now I see the decision

to stay below the window

whenever anyone knocked.

It is in this morning

I finally fear this world

that makes some women widows,

too young,

after too-quick stops

on highways during rush hour.

My only consuming thoughts:

You. Here. With me.

(Protected from this outside world,

past this door that only has one key

and is always locked.)

# *Yun-Fei Wang***Last Train**

and as the last train approached the station,

i thought i saw her in the blur of people–

chipped nail polish and a leather watch,

bubblegum lipstick smeared by city lights

beneath the ground, time slipped away

the only sky was the depths of her eyes

i thought i saw her in a ripped-up dress

champagne gold the station almost felt real

 *in the first life my thoughts were wild*

 *believing you were paradise on earth*

 *and i could only dream of a world where*

 *underneath velvet white veils your smile*

 *stays, even when you know i obsess*

 *over the sugary gleam of your lipstick*

 *and how your eyes enchant skies into*

 *ombre sunsets in a colorless world*

 *you made me believe in heaven*

 *hologrammed by your pastel voice*

 *before your ring with his initials and*

 *a date years ago scratched me when*

 *your fingers laid against my skin*

 *a crescent scar that would never heal*

 *and now i feel your touch on me*

 *haunted, even when i'm sober*

my fingernails dug into my train ticket,

locations unknown, without a time of arrival.

through misted windows i saw her silhouette

light blended into darkness i couldn’t breathe

the back of her hand pressed against the window,

her head slumped restless in her palm unmoving;

firm, slender fingers entangled with waves of

soft black hair scattered on her stiff shoulders;

 *in the last life i needed you most*

 *but all i was left with was silence*

 *of late nights lost in empty bottles*

 *once overflowed with your soft voice*

 *echoing the melancholy of loneliness*

 *sounded like glass panes shattering*

 *until your name suffocated every star*

 *but for you i’d take all my last breaths*

 *as blades sharpen blood on my skin*

 *drowning in pain from your soft glances*

 *the lines of colors you’d never read*

 *every lifetime wishing i could be yours*

 *i reached to grasp for one last chance*

 *to only be devoured by hollow darkness*

 *never thought i’d see you in this world*

 *and now i’m at the edge of insanity*

in the crests and valleys of her chiseled clavicle

i found the faded answers to endless moments of

all these lives and the coldness i’d suffocate for.

on the station display was no longer today’s date

and now the air entangled with blood, i held back

my tormented heart from boarding onto the train

the ticket slipped from my fingers onto the tracks,

just as her last train drifted away from time–

# *Zoe Cunniffe***Fever Dream**

you came back with brand new eyes,

bobbing bloodless beneath your skull.

i stretched out my hands in the boiling heat,

thread my fingers through your hair.

you used to be saltwater: splashing,

seeping, soaking. now you’re golden

like a gut-punch, edges melting,

seams splitting, coiling around me

like steam. you are a heat wave and a human,

a flame i can’t fan.

you used to be silk and distance,

the creak of a sunrise, untouchable.

you used to creep into my dreamland,

and now the sheets are sweat-stained,

and you are a fever dream: noxious, blazing,

and impossible to miss.