34 Orchard

Darkness is just across the street.

ISSUE 14 AUTUMN 2026



34 Orchard

Issue 14, Autumn 2026

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This issue dedicated to Julia and Meghan, who not only handled their shock with grace, they dusted themselves off, found new careers, and are happier than ever.

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Santa Walkup ♥ © Stacy Horn, 2025

Editor

Kristi Petersen Schoonover

Editorial Assistant

Anne Cummings

Staff Contributing Artists

Brandon Kawashima ♥ Jen Connic ♥ Page Sonnet Sullivan ♥ David H. West ♥ Brenna Monaghan Behel

Publisher

34 Orchard

249 Great Plain Road

Danbury, CT 06811

34orchardjournal@gmail.com

www.34orchard.com

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From the Editor's Desk

Earthquakes shake foundations. They destroy lives or end them. They show us what was built to last, what wasn't, and in their aftermath, what we can do to build something stronger. While the USGS has recorded over a hundred significant earthquakes in 2026—and "significant" is a label awarded only if a specific equation yields a certain value—personally, if it shocks our world into something we don't recognize, that's significant enough for me.

Eighteen months ago, the manager at my office job of twenty-five years sat me down in a tiny room and delivered the news: *Your position has been eliminated*. It had always been just a job; given company history I should've seen it coming, and its severity certainly didn't crush other pieces of life-altering news one could receive. But it was still a shock.

Shock is more than its terse Cambridge Dictionary primary definition of "(the … reaction to) a sudden, unexpected, and usually unpleasant event or experience." It's a lead ball in the chest and numbness in the legs and feet. It's wandering through a dream landscape where sounds are muffled and sentences are only half audible. It's tunnel vision and isolation, it's *I can't believe it*, *where's the liquor and candy* and ADD TO CART. It's *what do I do now* and *who am I* and *what's going to happen to me*, or even *I just don't want to get up tomorrow*.

Shock, no matter its cause, inspires a myriad of gloriously complex reactions—and these are what the twenty-one artists of Issue 14 depict in sad and humorous, subtle or punch-in-the-face strokes. In these pages are people just like us whose foundations have been shaken: in Louise Worthington's "The Support Group Meets in Sandra's Kitchen," marginalized parents gather for a reason no one, not even themselves, anticipated; in J. Kelly's "The Note," a shattered wife considers extremes when she learns her husband's life won't end—but his ability to enjoy it will. And in a *34O* first—a piece from Nepal—Ayush Pokheral's "The Town in the Sky"'s touch of magic thinly veneers what was very real in those dark days following the country's

devastating earthquake in 2015.

In this issue's photography, Stacy Horn and Brenna Monaghan Behel memorialize moments of shock, while William Hall and Michael Takeda snapshot the consequences. And some in these pages find themselves in new places to marvel at their own resilience: In Eric J. Guignard's "It Clucks with Abandon," a broken, terrified chicken endures the worst only to realize it was all for the best; in Elsie Raymond's "Hollow Pines," a mother accepts an altered version of the truth simply because it's easier to explain away than embrace; in Eve Naden's "Pallbearers," an uncomfortable aunt discovers an inappropriate kids' game may be the best thing for her nephews after all. Because sometimes, shock is *I can't believe that's what I wanted* or *what I did*, *look what I accomplished* and *isn't that astonishing*. It's *Happy New Year, everything looks different now* and *it doesn't matter what fresh hell comes along, I got this.*

As for me, I am joyfully working in a perfectly-suited career. I wake up every day thinking *look what I survived* and *wow, all those deep negative shock reactions turned out to be keys to this new door!* I *don't even know how I tolerated going to that office every day.* I'd once told someone 'don't ever get up at my funeral and say how much I loved life because I will come back and haunt you from beyond the grave.' But I'm having second thoughts about that now. Could that change tomorrow? Sure. Could there be yet another shock coming? Sure. There's always that potential. But for now, I'll take it.

Most days, I don't recognize who I've become—but shocked as I am at the lady in the cracked mirror, I know what I need to do to keep her strong.

Welcome to the house where the shaking's over … but the settling has just begun.

Welcome to *34 Orchard*.

34 Orchard

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In the Dark

Alyce Lomax

Somebody lives in your back yard. Somebody lives crouched in your arborvitae, perched high amidst the limbs and leaves of the closest tree, making a fool of you and the boundaries you believed were unassailable.

If you don't know they're there, does it matter? Or does it make you feel slightly uneasy, a little bit haunted?

Somebody lives in your backyard shed. Somebody lives in your apartment building's trash room. Somebody lives in your crawl space.

Don't worry, it's only at night, in the alone time, in the dead time, when no one would notice. That in between this and that—the void, as far as you're concerned!

Don't think about it.

It's not your fault.

You didn't know.

How could you know?

Or *is* it your fault? Is there something you failed to do, somebody you didn't help, a someone you looked right through? A soul you abandoned? Or is it just random. The luck of the draw. The squatter between consuming and disposing, the unused, unoccupied empty spaces in the anonymity and anesthesia of the night.

Somebody lives in your cellar. Somebody lives in your pantry.

Sometimes you notice the missing things, often in the morning. Was it you, suffering from Ambien syndrome, or something even worse? Or maybe your household harbors some secret somnambulist who swipes one of your favorite hoarded wine bottles here and there, draining them dry. Maybe at some point, some random sleepover or tryst friend found it funny to unjar the last cookie and leave that sweet space populated with just the right amount of crumbs to mock you and your petty wants. Maybe that was the crunching sound at the edge of your senses as your consciousness gave up and collapsed into sleep.

Somebody lives in your driveway or garage, takes ownership of the back seat of your car when you're otherwise occupied, going nowhere.

Is there harm in it? After all, it's only when you've parked it for the night, after you're long asleep having one of those bizarre throwback anxiety dreams about sweating through some college exam you'd forgotten to study for, so it's not like you would know. It's an empty space within a space within a space within a space within space. That unmanageable, regrettable monthly car payment, that burgeoning insurance bill—none of that investment defends it from a simple opportunistic clutch of the handle you blew off locking because *For Christ's sake, it's in my own driveway!* Somebody slides in a sleeping bag, and voila! A fine place to escape the elements, the reality of the world with a pipe and one of those dirt-cheap see-through lighters that exposes its accelerant and sparks in the dark.

Oh, and by the way, sometimes somebody lives to welcome the surprising glory of one more sunrise by licking your steering wheel, long and longingly; don't worry, it dries well before your lonely commute.

Somebody lives in your walk-in closet. Somebody lives in your attic. Somebody lives behind whatever door in your domicile you're most afraid to open.

Because, why not? It *is* after all the one you never use. It's nothing short of amazing that somebody can fit in there, as it holds all the stuff you've doggedly acquired just because you could, all the stuff that once acquired, rapidly lost its luster or drummed up shame, so you'll hardly ever open that door. Trust me, somebody understands this better than you do, knowing they will rest easy and unbothered by your inadvertent screams of discovery.

Somebody lives under your home office desk, tucked and retucked and tucked one more time into the tiniest ball of malice aforethought. They know that when you're on the clock, there's never time, never time, never fucking time to notice they're there at all. They steal your pens, move your tchotchkes just a millimeter, and whisper constant hindrances so very quietly: *imposter* this, *everyone's going to find out one day* that.

I have heartening news though.

Maybe you've guessed. Somebody lives in your heart.

I jest; it's not necessarily encouraging at all, people being the wild-ass array of somebodys that they are. Because maybe *you* take them for granted, or maybe *they* abuse that space at the core of you. Dwellers of the heart can be so dangerous, means-to-an-end manipulators and careless renters, thoughtless tourists only there for the fun, the sights, sullying the ecosystem with their contaminated shoes stomping all over, carving graffiti into the bark, sneaking out clippings without a care. Meanwhile, the bulldozers of

disappointment, betrayal, or loss are always threatening to break it all down.

Somebody lives in the dark corners of your bedroom. Somebody lives under the bed, crawls up the walls, hides in the corners, silently giggles behind the door.

They leave invisible residue.

They watch you at night, while you sleep, I'm very sorry to say!

Maybe they're malevolent. Maybe they're memories. Maybe they're both, circling you, weaponizing your past, choking your dreams.

Somebody lives in your mind. Somebody lives in your feelings. Somebody lives to expose you and exploit you and they're as close as your pocket, your handbag, might as well be glued to the palm of your hand, the constant *check, check, check me, I could be important, I could make you feel good, I could make you feel bad, I could be something to worry about* notifications.

You invited them in through a digital dopamine machine, their gluttonous outpouring of outrage and attention tactics and soulless algorithms irresistible and infesting, perfect possession. You think maybe they're right about the things to fear, things to hate, things that whip you into frenzy because they rewired your synapses, making you crave more just because then you feel *something* and being content, being kind, somehow feels so fucking empty.

Somebody lives just beyond the edges of your awareness, slipping into the in-between spaces, violating the fabricated boundaries that, as it turns out, are so pitifully thin. Is it your fault? Does it make you feel a little bit haunted?

Hollow Pines

Elsie Raymond

The first time the deer came for my baby, I thought he was there for the blueberry bushes. I'd planted them the spring after moving to Hollow Pines and the bushes were finally waist-height with juicy green leaves. The deer stood tall and stared at me with black eyes reflecting the light of our security system.

The baby squirmed and wailed when I elbowed the window open. *Shoo,* I yelled. Those bushes had taken two years to grow into something like a landscape, and I didn't want them stripped to the bone. I would have sent my husband outside to defend the garden, but I was alone, always alone, when the deer came.

♥

We moved to Hollow Pines to start a family. Our price range in the city barely covered a one-bedroom condo. *Children should play in a yard*, my husband argued. At night I listened to sirens and the hush of tires through puddles and scrolled myself to sleep watching internet moms in aprons, filling hand-woven baskets with homegrown produce. It would be nice, I agreed, to get out of the city.

The Hollow Pines housing development had been a strawberry farm and before that heavy conifer forest. Behind the development grew an original stand of old-growth, the real estate agent had pointed out.

The house we bought looked like what a child would draw if asked to sketch a house. It was all right angles and cost-effective prefab shutters. In front of the house, a lawn rolled into the fence line of our neighbor Bea, who lived in an almost identical house but yellow where ours was blue.

Some garden beds and a few blueberry bushes would make this house a home, I thought. A play set in the grass too, but I didn't dwell on that. Excitement had curdled into foreboding after a year of trying to get pregnant.

My husband switched to the night shift at the hospital for a better commute. I bought overpriced cedar planks and hammered together raised beds, which came together rather lopsided. Bea, an empty nester who always appeared in elbow-high gardening gloves, gave instruction over the fence when I attempted the first year's carrot crop.

Nothing grows close to the trees, she warned.

♥

The night shifts at the hospital made a lot more money than the day shifts. So, after the baby finally came, it was hard to justify my husband switching to a more family friendly schedule. I would handle the nights, we decided, and not take on any work until the baby was sleeping well.

But the baby—Henry, we'd named him—did not sleep well. He did not like his crib under the window and half the time did not seem to like me. I nursed him. Rocked him. Shushed him. He was inconsolable.

During the day, he smiled and cooed. I wondered at the miracle of his small, articulating fingers pulsing against my breast and cataloged the eyelashes growing crosswise against the others. Henry kept me company as I prepared dinner, which was the only time my husband and I saw each other.

The difference between day and night was stark, and I began to track the waning daylight like a forecaster watched a storm. When the sun fell behind the treetops and the pine stand draped the house in heavy shadow, the hairs on my arms rose. Another night with the baby was coming.

Watching my husband pull the front door shut with the toe of his sneaker, balancing a coffee mug, keys and lunch, felt like the lid closing on a coffin. The darkness pushed through the windows, and I would pray that the night would not be so terrible. That tonight, the baby would not become something else.

The deer visits started in the night, when, I admit, I was not at my best.

The books told me to keep the lights low when sleep training, so the baby would know it was not time to wake up. In practice, that meant blundering around at all hours of the night with a bundle of baby I couldn't quite confirm was Henry. Sometimes he looked like my baby, and sometimes his features became grooved, gnarled and unrecognizable. Through the hole in his binky, a portal opened to his dark gullet and an inexplicable ringing would fill my ears.

♥

When we first moved to Hollow Pines, the silence was louder than the sirens and honks that kept me from sleep in the city. With my husband gone, I lay awake listening to the sound of the wind skulking through the woods, wondering why my body refused to carry a child.

After Henry came, white noise became the soundtrack to my nights. The baby books advised a sound machine playing at about eighty-five decibels, but it didn't help. For months, he slept only a few hours at a time.

One night, I lay on the carpet and stared at the Sweet Sunrise Baby Clock, wondering how many minutes remained until the baby woke again. I smelled of spit-up and diaper cream, but couldn't summon the energy to change.

The sound machine chugged along. *Wom wom wom*. But below the white noise, in a different register, something spoke. Like low throat singing or a prehistoric prayer. They were words; I was sure of it, but not in any language formed by the human tongue.

I searched for the source of the chanting. My headphones playing somewhere? A radio? I even pressed the sound machine to my ear. But the more intently I listened, the less sure I became.

A small movement drew my attention through the nursery window. In the blueberries, as still as a topiary, the deer watched me.

♥

About a month after he was born, I took Henry on a walk while my husband slept. Movement was important to feel like myself again, my doctor said. But between the feedings and naps and laundry and dinner, I often forgot to brush my own teeth, let alone exercise. That fall day the leaves fell like snowflakes, and I put Henry in the carrier.

He hated the carrier and cried down our driveway, along the winding cul-de-sac road, and onto the country lane that bisected the Hollow Pines forest. I bounced a little with each step. *It's going to be ok,* I told him. I was in the habit of telling Henry this though I had no idea if it was true.

The sharp autumn air roused me from my sleep deprivation. Pine needles rained down on the pavement and landed in my hair. It was a fine, crisp day, and I felt the tight muscles of my face relax in the sun.

I was trying to work a binky into the baby's mouth when a figure caught my attention. It stood still, with small paws on either side of a yellow median stripe.

At first, I thought it was a dog—unleashed dogs were a common complaint on the Hollow Pines neighborhood email chain—but I noticed its sloped haunches and overlarge ears. A coyote.

Get. My voice cracked. But the coyote didn't move. It only swiveled its satellite-dish ears toward the carrier where Henry wailed. I picked up a pinecone and lobbed it several feet short of the animal. The coyote spooked and trotted to the forest line, disappearing within a thicket of salal.

I bounced in place to calm Henry and my own pounding heart. I picked up another pinecone, put it in my pocket and walked on.

Past McPherson Road, I turned toward home on a path that cut through the woods. There were no residences here, just the old-growth trees that shaded our backyard. The pines grew as big as a person, smothering the light where I walked, and it seemed much later in the day.

I quickened my pace. My neck prickled as if watched. Impulsively, I stopped in the path and turned.

Not forty feet behind me, the coyote stood with a cocked head. I could not say how I knew it was the same coyote other than that his eyes held recognition.

The baby yelped and squirmed, his frog legs kicking my belly. I pulled the pinecone from my pocket and shouted again. This throw glanced off its mangy brown back, and the coyote jumped.

I stumbled backwards, scanning the brush and shushing Henry. A root caught my heel, and I fell, catching myself from landing on the baby. A dim splinter of pain shot up my arm as I scrambled to my feet.

I ran, wrist throbbing, and held the baby in place with my good hand. The daylight peeked between tree trunks. Through the gaps, I saw Bea's butter yellow house and let out a sob.

♥

Every evening, I bathed Henry, and every morning he woke with black moons of dirt beneath his nails. I could not explain it and took to putting mittens on his hands, which always disappeared by morning. Occasionally, they would reappear in the oddest places. The garage. The porch. Inside my grocery totes.

Eventually, I had enough of the dirty nails. I sat with Henry and a pair of nail clippers in front of the big square window overlooking our shady backyard.

The sun was mottled over the grass and little black and orange thrushes swooped in packs from my blueberry patch to the chokecherry at the forest edge.

Henry cried, sputtering like an old diesel engine. I glanced down. Blood streaked his face and panicked swipes of red colored his clothes. I'd cut a nail too close. I dropped the clippers and grabbed a cloth to wrap around his

wound, which only made him scream harder.

Then there was a bang like a gunshot. Bang. Bang, bang, bang, bang.

Clouds of feathers exploded. Blood smeared the window and, on the deck, lay five dead thrushes, eyes glassy and open. Pools of blood dripped in perfect circles beneath their heads.

♥

It wasn't that I had trouble getting pregnant, actually. Before we'd moved to Hollow Pines, I had been pregnant three times.

I just kept miscarrying.

After so many losses, I should have accepted that I couldn't stay pregnant. But the Hollow Pines house, with its perfect play set lawn, tricked me. The next time I held a pregnancy test with a thin pink line developing in front of my eyes, I imagined my child's chunky legs pedaling a bike around the cul-de-sac.

When I sat on the toilet a few weeks later, I wiped a smear of blood absently from my thigh before doing a double take. It's funny how quickly you could become not-pregnant.

I dug a hole in my crooked raised bed and sliced through the earth, bisecting worms and releasing beetles from damp tunnels. When the spade's sharp tip lodged in a wayward tree root, I'd dug far enough.

I wiped snot and tears and dirty hair from my face. *Please,* I said. But I didn't know what I was asking for or from whom. I wanted a baby, but also, I wanted my body to just do this one thing for me. To answer the question I asked month after month.

I buried a bloody wad of toilet paper there. In it was a small white embryo, no bigger than a grain of couscous. I tucked him in and spread dark soil over his little black dot of an eye.

But when I closed my own eyes that night and for many nights afterward the black dot stared back.

♥

When Henry was about four months old, I called my sister who had three older kids.

Is it weird that Henry screams when he sees himself in the mirror? I asked.

No no no, she said. *That's normal.*

I looked it up in the baby book because I didn't trust her, but the authors agreed. New babies are often frightened of the mirror.

Still, Henry's terror unnerved me. I covered the mirrors in his room and the bathroom. My husband brought it up to me at dinner the next night.

I'm worried about you, he said.

♥

I'd intended to plant something beautiful where I buried the embryo. But after my miscarriage the cold rain came, then the frost, and then a blanket of snow. I decided it could wait until spring.

In deep winter, I fell ill.

I could barely stay awake during the day, and I slept sixteen hours a night. Food was repulsive. I hibernated like a bear, vomited through the night and wrapped myself in blankets until they sponged with sweat. My husband bought me a pregnancy test, but I would not take it.

I hoped I had cancer.

When the hollows of my cheeks reached bone, my husband packed me and the blankets in the car and drove to urgent care. I peed in a cup and a gray-haired doctor congratulated us. I cried then, because it was so unfair to my husband and this kind doctor to get their hopes up.

"Don't worry about the weight loss," the doc said. "Babies are the world's most effective parasite."

My parasite grew and the day the last snow melted, my pants would not button.

When mint-colored sprouts appeared among the blueberry bushes, I stepped into my garden again. There, where I'd buried my not-baby was a small mound. I knelt to examine it, and it moved. After a moment, I realized ants were flowing over and into the bump on some urgent business.

I tried to exterminate them by dousing the mound with vinegar, but a week later it reappeared, larger.

Ants are very beneficial for the garden, Bea said while retrieving her escaped Havapoo.

♥

At six months old, the books advised, start introducing solid foods. Puree something simple like apple or pumpkin. I would have chosen something from my garden, which is what the internet moms would have done, but everything I'd planted had inexplicably died a few weeks before Henry was born.

So, I purchased a butternut squash from a local co-op. Henry flashed me a gummy smile while I worked in the kitchen and my heart shook like a

rattle. During the day, when the cool sunlight lit up Henry's face, it was as if the horrors of nighttime had never happened.

I scooped seeds from the hollow squash wombs and put them in the oven to roast, but couldn't recall the correct temperature. I guessed and then started on dinner. Stir fry, again. Something even I couldn't mess up.

Henry gurgled wetly while I sliced the bell peppers.

What's burning? My husband stood in the doorway, with the puffy eyed look he wore just after waking. Hazy smoke filled the room. The squash was on fire in the oven. I pulled open the door to the porch as my husband carried out the flaming squash and trod on the dead birds I'd forgotten to deal with.

I'm calling out sick. You need a full night's sleep, he said, looking at me strangely.

♥

I'd been complaining to my husband that the baby didn't sleep for almost six months. Of course, the night he called out the baby didn't wake up. Not once.

I, however, woke covered in a thin film of sweat at 3:30 AM. The baby should have been screaming by now and everything felt crooked.

My husband breathed heavily next to me. I knew he would tell me to let the baby sleep. But I pulled the door open to the baby's room and peered out of the nursery window. In the blueberry bushes, looking at me unblinking, was the deer. When it saw me in the window, the deer lowered its head and walked toward the forest.

I followed it with my eyes until it disappeared amid the chokecherry. The deer's departure unnerved me, and I realized what had woken me. The sound machine was silent.

Everything was silent.

I stood over the crib and waited for my eyes to adjust.

There was no baby. I swiped my hands to the edges of the mattress, along the crib bars. Nothing but a few stray pine needles.

The baby was gone.

I ran downstairs, shoved on boots and jumped over the pools of thrush blood on the back porch, past the withered black stalks in my raised beds, around the abandoned anthill and into the blueberry thicket.

The deer. Where was the deer?

Henry, I screamed.

It could have been my voice winding back through the trees, but it wasn't. It was a cry. Thin, wailing, and barely audible.

I scrambled up the slope of slick needles where the deer had disappeared. I grasped a branch to pull myself up and sticky rivers of sap wept down the bark, clinging to my fingers.

The moon lit the pines in shadow.

The baby cried again, louder now. I crashed, crazed, through the underbrush.

I heard Henry cough and gag like he'd taken too large a mouthful of milk.

Where are you, I screamed. He was choking.

In my panic I whirled around, and in the bark of a nearby tree a face appeared. Grooved, gnarled, unrecognizable. When I blinked again, only strips of white moonlight remained.

The baby gagged again. Panic hijacked my lungs. I ran in circles trying to locate the cries, but he was getting quieter. Henry was dying.

I ran back to the tree where I'd seen the face. It was impossible, wasn't it? But I wedged my nails into the bark and pulled. A sheet peeled away as easily as a scab.

Dark sap coated my hands and splinters slid beneath my fingernails, but Henry's cries grew louder.

I pulled off more bark, frantic, until a hollow well of pine needles appeared. I scooped out handful after handful of needles. Then I raked them out with both arms.

My fingers caught a warm, chubby arm. I squeezed.

A sputtering cry emerged from the mass of needles. I swept them away from his face, out of his mouth. He was sticky with sap and buried to his chest.

His red face contorted into a twisting cry, and I knew in my stuttering heart that this was my baby.

I ripped another corner of bark away and the tree groaned. The branches moved and showered me with pine needles. But there was no wind tonight.

Hurrying, I cleared the brown needles, exposing my baby's belly and finally his fat wedge-shaped feet.

I pulled him out of the tree, pressed him to my breast and wailed.

Mine.

♥

Bea found me on MacPherson Road with Henry near morning. We were both covered in blood.

The first responders brought me to the police station and took Henry

away while they questioned me.

They tested the blood on me and Henry, but it didn't match either of us or anything in their database either. No one believed me about the pines, but Henry was unharmed, and that was all that mattered.

It was decided by my husband and a state psychiatrist that I should spend some time away. Away was a hospital, and I agreed with one condition: Henry was not to go back to Hollow Pines. My husband listed the house and sold it to a young couple who loved my rustic raised beds.

The psychiatrist said I recovered exceptionally fast, which was an easy thing to do as I was never ill in the first place. But post-partum psychosis is how my husband makes sense of things, and it's better for us all to move on.

We live in the city again, as I've lost my interest in gardening.

The Support Group Meets In Sandra's Kitchen

Louise Worthington

We gather like survivors of a war
nobody else can see, compare our wounds
over coffee gone cold, over biscuits
nobody has the appetite to eat.
Here, we can admit the things that stick
in our throats at school gates: how we flinch
at our own child's footsteps, how we've learned
to sleep like soldiers—one eye always open.
Sarah's boy put his fist through another wall.
Jenny's girl hasn't spoken for a week.
My latest bruise blooms purple on my arm.
We nod, we know, we've all got galleries
of similar marks. Our children's rage
has painted us in matching watercolours:
blue-black, yellow-green, the shade
of dawn after a sleepless night.
No one here offers easy answers,
no one claims to know the magic words
that turn our tigers into tabbies.
No one needs to say—
I thought it would be different.

“we live on the fourteenth floor. there’s no thirteenth. no one wanted it, so they skipped it. bad luck.”

– Bruce Thierry Cheung
“Load Bearing”

The Note

J. Kelly

It wasn't right yet. People were outside the door. But it wasn't right yet. Mildred held the two pages in her hand, reading and re-reading. How to explain? Words so crisp on the page. The reasons in stiff black letters stark against the white paper, intentionally brief, with clear instructions. When she wrote it, she had wanted no confusion. Wanted no one to be able to question her sanity.

But now. Now she worried it was too cold, too calculating. What she felt were colors, angry reds, sudden stabs of yellow, deep velvety purples swirling like wet watercolors into muddy hopeless browns. She worried that without those emotions coloring the words, no one would understand.

It was hard to concentrate with all the noise. She'd already unplugged the machines and the phone that kept ringing. But there was an alarm in the hallway with flashing lights, and even though the accompanying sound had been silenced, it still rang in her mind. If she could just focus. She read again. The same sentence, hoping this time, the words would mean something, but there was knocking at the door, and people calling out. She lost the thread.

She just needed a few minutes. Starting from the beginning might help.

She read the first line, "I, Mildred Rose Winsten, being of sound mind and body…"

Body. Just a body. That's all. Even when he was alive, he was still just a body, she reminded herself. But it *was* different now. She guessed it might be, which is why she had planned it all out in advance, why she had decided to use the gun, the fastest, surest way.

But she had been thrown by the recoil. Surprised at her own surprise. In all her planning, she hadn't accounted for her own reaction to the mess. Hadn't considered there would be a moment in between. A moment of shock.

A delay just long enough to allow panic to set in, and now she was going through the note one more time; to calm the panic, to appease the

horror, to remember why. To justify what she knew had to come next.

There were no good reasons left to hold on. But she did anyway. Held on to the paper. After all, what would it matter if they understood or not? They hadn't listened before. Did she really think these three paragraphs would make them understand?

Mildred didn't want to go on. But she didn't want to leave without knowing her children would forgive her. They would. Eventually. Hopefully. But only if she could convey the unalterable reality they were facing and the bravery and beauty in choosing your own exit.

The legal stuff would be taken care of at least. She'd had a lawyer see to it. There would be no bills. The sale of the house and what was left of their retirement accounts would cover what the insurance was refusing to pay. There wouldn't be much left for the children, but at least there wouldn't be any debts. The funeral home was prepaid. She had even cleaned out the house in preparation for its sale. Everything had been sold, or boxed and labeled. There should be no problems.

The banging on the door resumed, and the sirens in the distance seemed to be asking, "Why, why, why?" And here they were, the reasons, listed out as clearly as she could make them, tangible in her hand. But she pictured Judith, shaking her head, and mumbling, "I just don't understand." And Brad arguing, repeating, "But it's just not right." It would be easier for them to say these things now because they wouldn't have to talk over her to do it.

She wanted them to say, "Oh," and "I see." She wanted her children to think of her as strong. As someone who loved enough to do the unthinkable. As someone who, after a life of sacrifices, died as she had lived. She wanted them to know the kind of pain he was in, and that nothing was going to bring him back. She wanted them to honor their father's wishes.

She wished they could have known him better. Could have understood how in this proud, stubborn man, there was softness, a desire to be held, to be allowed to let go.

It was true, Calvin had been the rock they'd built their lives on. She knew they believed that without their father, everything would crumble. In their youth, they hadn't yet discovered their foundation was not the man, but the things the man stood for. She knew that clinging to his body the way they had, insisting on the tracheotomy, desperately breathing life into his lifeless body, was what they thought they needed to do to survive. But Mildred knew they had enough of him in them to keep them going.

Mildred and Calvin had seen over seventy years come and go. They had lived good and mostly happy lives. The last six months had been torture. Watching him suffer, knowing nothing could be done, and that it would just

get worse. Calvin had told her, gasping, to remember what he'd said to her the night his best friend, Richard, had died. And she had closed her eyes, trying to hold back the tears because she did remember. Of course, she remembered. A promise made over twenty years ago, believing, hoping, to never have to fulfill it.

She recognized the nurse's voice calling to her. Asking her to open the door, but she didn't move, back still against it. How long had she been reading this? Minutes? Hours? They would break down the door soon. She was running out of time.

Funny, how just yesterday, the thought of all that time, endless days of caring for the lifeless shell of him seemed unbearable, and how equally unbearable the thought of living without him.

This nurse, the one calling to her through the door, maybe she could read it and tell her if the note made sense. If her children would understand. Brittany, was it? Or Bethany? She was near their age and had tired but gentle eyes. If Mildred gave it to her to read, would the nurse try to talk her out of it? Or would she just say "I'm sorry," and rest a cold hand on her shoulder like earlier? Mildred shook the image from her mind, knowing it was too late for any of that. She would go to jail if she let them in.

There was only one thing she could do. Mildred stood up, set the paper down in front of the door, walked to the bed, and picked up the gun she'd dropped. She looked up at the ceiling. Perfect rows of textured squares held in place by long metal borders. White, except for a brown stain where water had dripped down from somewhere. She didn't want this stain to be the last thing she saw, but couldn't bring herself to look at the bed, and in the small room, there wasn't much else.

The alarm lights were still flashing, but they'd been joined by red and blue police lights outside the window. The lights were chasing each other, red, then blue, then white, then dark, then red, again. Fear followed by grief followed by resolve. It could be Christmas lights, she thought, or a dance party.

Mildred closed her eyes and tightened her grip. She remembered a party years ago, dancing in Calvin's arms under a disco ball. Resting her head on his chest, feeling something cold against her temple. *It's just his lapel pin*, she imagined, smiling, and squeezed.

Load Bearing

Bruce Thierry Cheung

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everyone says kowloon walled city is loud. that's how you know they're tourists. the noise disappears when you live here. what's left is pressure. pipes arguing. electrical wire running through our shower at neck height. a body learning how to be a wall. we've been walls for a long time. mama taught me that.

we live on the fourteenth floor. there's no thirteenth. no one wanted it, so they skipped it. bad luck. the numbers jump and everyone pretends it makes sense. means we're really on thirteen. doesn't matter what the button says. but if you're living in a building they're tearing down, probably doesn't matter which number was unlucky.

mama's getting worse. everyone knows but no one says it. she forgot auntie fong's name last week, auntie fong who used to bring over oranges and cheap mooncakes. mama pointed at her. "her. the fake watch lady. what's her name again?" she didn't come back after that.

she forgets everything but the wrong things. english goes first. always does. then names. places. how to work the stove. but fuck stays. diu stays. diu lei lou mou stays even when she can't remember how to unlock the door. yesterday she asked three times if i'd eaten.

"sihk jó faan meih?" did you eat?

"sihk jó."

"jān ge?" you sure?

"mm."

ten minutes later: "sihk jó faan meih?"

made rice anyway. left it burning. she didn't notice when i turned it off. next morning she braided my hair without asking. hands steady. didn't say a word, just did it.

the demolition notice came six months ago. cheap paper, ink that smeared. most people left in the first week: the chans, the wongs with the three kids, the dentist on four whose drill you could hear through three floors. each time someone leaves, routes close off. the stairwell that cut through the tangs' place, gone. the passage behind the mahjong parlor,

sealed. the cut-through behind the wig shop, blocked. rooftop shortcut to block c, padlocked. the way past the tailor's room, the mannequins in the same grey suits my whole life, boarded up. used to take four minutes to reach ground level. now it's fifteen. down, around, through, back up. it's like the building's getting smaller.

now it's mostly empty. the lees two floors down. mr. lee coughs like he's clearing gravel. his wife still hangs laundry between buildings even though there's more space now. they used to touch. ah ming on three, always on the landing smoking. leather jacket even in summer. hair in his eyes like boys in movies who ride motorcycles.

mrs. lee grabbed my arm yesterday. "you really staying until friday?"

"yeah."

"aiyah." she let go. kept looking at me. i kept going.

mama made fish balls at ground level. ground the paste by hand, shaped them without looking, dropped them in the pot. curry or clear broth. everyone wanted curry. spicy enough to make you cough. she was fast. hundred in an hour easy. never burned herself. never dropped one. people waited in the alley even when there was a line.

she stopped two years ago. one day she left the oil on. went upstairs. i smelled it from the fourteenth floor. by the time i got down the rag by the stove was smoking. she was sitting in the corner, hands open. "i was going to make fish balls," she said.

bàhbā was gone a month after that. didn't even wait to see if she'd get better.

yesterday morning she was fine. made tea. asked if i wanted eggs. told me to tie my hair back. normal. by afternoon she was asking where bàhbā went. by dinner she didn't know my name.

she asks what time it is. "géi dím a."

"what time do you want it to be."

"nine," she says. "i like nine. gáu dím."

"then it's nine."

she nods. satisfied. repeats it. "gáu dím. gáu dím."

been doing this for three months. doesn't matter what the clock actually says. nine works. nine means she calms down.

the walls are covered in notes. some mine. some hers from when her hand still worked right. glue fails before paper does so new notes cover old ones:

take medicine 8am
    唔好鎖 door
turn off gas
阿媽 keys in drawer
    medicine drawer left

there's a mirror in the bathroom. cracked at the corner, brown spots spreading where humidity got in. i catch myself in it. my face is wrong. sharper than it was last month. jaw different. mouth thinner.

i look like her. not now–her. her from before, from the photos. fifteen. she was fifteen when she had me. same age i am now. same eyes. same mouth like she's biting the inside of her cheek.

i do that too. didn't used to.

when i lower my chin i look like him. just for a second.

i turn the light off.

♥

i go to the roof when mama sleeps. sometimes i hope she stays asleep a long time. fourteen flights. stairwell smells like damp concrete and smoke. there's a chair up here someone left. plastic, one leg shorter than the others. i sit in it anyway. planes fly low here. you can see the people in the windows if you look fast enough.

kids still come sometimes. three of them today, maybe eight or nine. playing tag between the antennas.

one runs toward me, stops. "wéih. you play ah?"

"no lah."

"boring."

later the girl yells, "you play or not?"

"okay," i say.

we run. weaving between antennas. jumping puddles. the girl tags me, laughing. i chase the smaller boy. he's fast. almost slips on algae, catches himself. my chest burns in a good way.

one boy stops near the edge. below us is the drop.

"you can see our school from here." he points.

"mm."

"you go to school?"

"used to."

"why you stop."

i don't answer.

"you ever jump the gap?"

"which one."

he points. between our building and the one next to it. maybe three feet.

"no."

"chicken."

he grins. runs back to the others.

when i go down, ah ming is on the landing.

"loud up there."

"kids."

he lights a cigarette. offers me one. i take it. he lights it for me. his hand cups mine. there's no wind but he does it anyway. we stand there smoking. i cough. try not to. cough again.

"first time?" he asks.

"no."

"okay."

fluorescent light buzzing. someone yelling in Cantonese three floors down. pipes knocking. he's looking at the wall. not at me. just the wall with the paint peeling off in strips.

"you ever think about not leaving," he says.

"what."

"not going. staying."

i don't answer.

"stupid question," he says.

"yeah."

i can still smell smoke on my fingers at dinner. mama doesn't notice. later i smell them again. just to check.

♥

the next day mama disappears. sandals gone. door open. i run all fourteen floors. i find her at the fish ball stall. her slippers are on the wrong feet. she's trying to unlock the shutter. pulling at it.

"stuck," she says. "help me."

"it's closed, mama."

"i have to open. people are coming."

"it's closed," i say again.

"no. no, they're coming. i have to … " she pulls harder. the metal rattles.

"mama."

she stops. looks at me. doesn't know who i am but knows the tone. knows she's being told no.

"i'm waiting for my daughter," she says. "she helps me open."

i stand there. she's looking past me. waiting for someone who isn't me.

"okay," i say. "i'll wait with you."

we stand there. five minutes. ten. she won't look at me. just the shutter. her legs must hurt but she won't sit.

finally she shifts her weight. winces.

"tired," she says.

“yeah.”

she lets me take her arm. her hand is cold.

on the way back up we pass doors that don’t belong to anyone anymore. second floor: the toy factory. plastic molds scattered on the floor. the smell still there, baked in. burnt sweet chemical. third: ah ming’s door is open.

i stop.

empty. lighter squares on the floor where furniture was. the wall where he always leaned, cleaner than the rest. his jacket gone. cigarettes gone.

there’s a butt on the landing. lipstick on the filter. not his. maybe his sister’s. maybe his mother’s. i don’t know. i pick it up anyway. put it in my pocket.

mama counts the stairs under her breath. she always has.

halfway up she asks what time it is. “géi dím a.”

i check my watch. four-thirty.

“nine,” i say.

her whole body relaxes.

“good. gáu.” she smiles. “i like nine.”

i know.

♥

at night mama won’t sleep. she sits up. looks around like she’s listening for something.

“where is he,” she says.

if i tell her the truth she won’t sleep. if i say nothing she’ll keep asking until morning. so i stand. move behind her where she can’t see my face. lower my voice. drop my chin.

“i’m here,” i say.

she goes still. listening.

“you’re late.”

“work ran late.”

“mm.” she pats the mat. “come lah. cold.”

i sit. not too close. she reaches for my hand in the dark. she takes it. turns it over. runs her thumb across my palm.

“your hands are soft now,” she says.

i don’t say anything.

“used to be rough. when did that change.”

she’s still holding my hand. looking at it in the dim light from the window.

“the sink is dripping again,” she says.

"i'll look at it."

"you always say that."

"i know."

she makes a sound. not quite a laugh. pulls me down next to her. blanket over both of us. i keep my head down. she can't see my face from this angle. just my hand in hers.

"your daughter asked about you today," she says.

my throat closes.

"what'd she say."

"wanted to know when you're coming home."

i can't answer.

"i didn't know what to tell her."

we sit there. i can hear her breathing.

"what'd you say," i ask.

"soon." she leans back against me. "i always say soon."

her breathing slows. then she shifts. slides down. puts her head in my lap. her hand finds the hem of my shirt. holds it.

"my feet hurt."

"i know."

"i don't want to go to school tomorrow," she says.

i keep stroking her hair.

"you don't have to."

she curls up tighter. smaller than me now. i don't know who she thinks i am. i don't move.

♥

the last time i go up, it's dark. nobody's here. just me and the antennas. i go to the edge. look down. fourteen floors to the alley. too dark to see anything. the gap between buildings looks wider at night. maybe four feet. maybe more.

i count. one. two. three.

i run. feet slapping concrete. wind in my face.

the gap coming fast.

feet hitting concrete. wind cold on my face. i think about cartoons. doraemon. sailor moon. the ones where something impossible happens right when you need it. i used to watch them every afternoon after school lying on the floor eating pineapple buns mama brought home from the bakery. before she got bad. before bàhbā left. when the tv still worked and the tangs upstairs were so loud you could hear their daughter singing along to the theme songs.

the gap is coming.

i jump.

i think about the time i broke my wrist falling off the playground bars in primary three. how ms. wong drove me to the hospital herself because she couldn't find mama. how my wrist still clicks sometimes when it's cold.

i land hard.

my ankle rolls. i stumble.

my knee hits concrete. catch myself with my hands. palms scraping. the water tank right there. i grab it. metal freezing. my whole body is shaking. my knee hurts. my hands are bleeding. i'm breathing so hard i can't hear anything else.

i made it.

i sit there. back against the tank. look at my hands. blood on my palms. not a lot. wipe them on my pants. i stand up. look around. scanning the roof. looking for pink.

i cup my hands around my mouth. "anywhere door, appear!"

nothing.

i wait. listening. like maybe if i'm quiet enough i'll hear it. like maybe it's already here and i just can't see it in the dark.

"anywhere door, appear!"

nothing comes.

i yell it again. louder. "anywhere door, appear!" throat starting to hurt. "anywhere door!" keep yelling until the words stop sounding like words. "appear! appear!" i want it so bad. want that stupid pink door to materialize right there between the water tanks. want to see it. pink and steady and impossible. want to open it and step through. anywhere.

i sit back down. wipe my face. my hands are still bleeding.

tomorrow they'll make us leave. the roof will be gone. but for a few seconds just now, i was in the air. nobody saw.

♥

they come for us. workers. hard hats. one keeps saying we have to go now. have to go now. like saying it more will make it easier. mama stands. walks to the doorway. stops.

"is it okay," she asks.

i walk through first. turn back.

she asks what time it is. "géi dím a."

i check my watch. "six forty-two."

she counts. soft. under her breath. then follows. down the stairs. fourteen flights. the handrail ends halfway. we both know where. our feet

know every step.

outside the fluorescent lights are still buzzing even though it's morning. mama shields her eyes. looks back.

"i thought it would be bigger," she says.

i adjust the bags. one handle breaks. digs into my palm. i don't fix it.

"it was," i say.



The Shallow End

William Hall

Memory of Mycelia

Cyrus Green

They say when someone you love dies, it leaves a hole in your heart that, with time, can heal. But when someone disappears without a trace, the hole becomes a wound and refuses to mend. The lack of closure, the unknown, is continually painful. You expect to hear her voice every time the phone rings. Or pass her on the street. Every day, the wound re-opens, festers. And, while the rest of the world has moved on and forgotten, you live in the past, in the memory of her. And you would do anything to get her back.

♥

Graham honks the horn of his Subaru at exactly 8 a.m., which is earlier than I've been up in a long time. I trudge down from the second-floor apartment and get in the passenger seat. Though the sun's out, the weather has turned chilly, and I don't want to be outside.

"I brought coffee." Graham holds up a cardboard drink holder with three cups in it. "I just got black, but there's real cream in the small cup there." Graham is heavy-set and already balding at thirty. He keeps his hair short and his beard long. He's wearing a multi-shaded red plaid shirt and khaki pants. All he needs is suspenders and an ax to round out the cliché.

Not that I'm the queen of fashion or anything. It took all my effort to throw on jeans and an oversized Tufts sweatshirt. I didn't even comb my hair or put on earrings.

Graham called two days before and said he needed me to see something important, something amazing. I hadn't heard from him in the year since Celia disappeared. They were lab partners and working on a grant to study fungi in White Mountain National Forest. I only met him once during the three months Celia and I dated. He acted antagonistic, and I thought he was jealous of me. Celia said I was being silly, that Graham was just focused on their work, though she fell short of calling him obsessed.

"Thanks." I pour some cream and two sugars into one of the coffees. "Where are we going?"

"Up to the Kanc." The Kanc is what locals call the Kancamagus Highway. Ask any Granite Stater and they'll tell you it's the best road to see foliage in North America, especially in October. "We're going to hike the Mount Hancock trail. The leaves are peaking right now. It's beautiful."

The Graham I met last year wasn't the nice guy who picked you up, brought you coffee, and took you hiking. "I'm not really in the mood for the loveliness of leaves. What's going on Graham?"

"There's something you need to see."

"Would you just tell me—is this about Celia? I hope you're not taking me up there to say goodbye or some other stupid healing bullshit."

He chuckles and shakes his head. "It's not that. Something amazing has happened."

♥

Celia and I were in bed, our arms pretzeled around each other's bodies. She said, "You should see the leaves when they are in peak season. They don't seem real. It's like looking into a new universe. Each leaf is a star. Every tree is a galaxy."

I cuddled up closer to her. "It's amazing how you see such beauty in everything."

"There's beauty everywhere. I'll take you to see. Maybe next weekend? We could go for a hike."

"I don't think I can next week. Work is too busy."

"Peak leaf season ends in a few weeks, so we better do it soon."

"I'm just not sure I can get away."

She sighed. "You have to make time for beauty in your life. Otherwise, you'll wake up one morning and realize you missed it all."

I didn't know what to say. I wanted to explain the feelings surging through me, but I didn't know how. Instead, I blurted, "I love you."

Celia looked at me quizzically.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I know we've only been together a few months, I just wanted you to know. And I'm trying to make room for more in my life, it's just hard. But you've helped me see I want to be someone who is worthy of you."

She smiled and kissed me. "I love you too."

Celia disappeared three weeks later. She was hiking Mount Hancock. She and Graham had taken separate trails down to look for study sites, and Celia never made it to the bottom. They sent out search parties. Dogs sniffed

scents and followed trails, but they never found her. The police said people got lost in the forest all the time, but they didn't know Celia. I mean, she was always ready for an adventure. Her tan waterproof hiking pants, rainproof jacket, and backpack with the little blue water hose that hung over her shoulder, made her a walking REI commercial. She carried supplies for three days, even if she was going out for three hours. There was always a compass in her pocket, but she didn't need it; she knew where she was on a map just by looking around. Unlike me, she was much more comfortable in the forest than on Mass Ave.

She carried all kinds of gadgets in her backpack. She showed me one day when she had them all out. She was using a label maker to stamp her initials onto little blue tape and affixing it to each piece of equipment.

"This is a bark gauge, metric of course." She handed me what looked like a gray metal syringe with a large black needle on one end and a big, black round handle on the other. "It's used to measure the thickness of a tree's bark. And this," she held up another small device that looked like an old-school taser with two prongs on one end, "is for measuring a tree's moisture."

"Why do you need this stuff?" I asked.

She explained that knowing about trees helped her understand fungus. "Things are so interconnected. Fungi and trees communicate using pheromones they pump into the air and electrical signals that travel through a system of mycelia. New generations of fungi can remember defensive measures first taken by the previous generations. We've learned that the nutrients—the molecules and minerals used by fungi—get passed on through their spores. They literally absorb the memory of the past and pass it on. Nothing ever dies in the forest. The molecules live on, they just take different form."

♥

Graham and I drive through Lincoln, New Hampshire, the last vestiges of civilization before we enter the White Forest. The Kancamagus Highway curves like ribbon through the trees, a two-lane blacktop with foliage growing close to the road and hardly anywhere to pull off. A kaleidoscope of colors flashes outside my window. Red and orange, like a blaze burning along the mountainside. I think about Celia, how she should be here, showing this to me for the first time.

After a tight curve, Graham pulls over into a parking area. A few spaces are already filled with Subarus and Jeeps. A mountain looms before us.

"We hike from here," Graham says, pointing to a sign that reads

HANCOCK TRAILHEAD. Graham dons a backpack filled with three large water bottles, some trail mix, a slew of different kinds of snack bars, and a first aid kit.

Once we are out of the sun and into the shade of the forest, I hug the sweatshirt to me as my skin goosebumps. The trail is hard packed and easy to follow, but there are rocks and roots that try to trip me. The trail thins in places, the forest closes in, and vines and branches reach out for me, snag on my clothing.

"I'm not really prepared for this," I say. "I'm not much of a hiker."

Graham takes off his backpack and hands me a jacket. "It's okay. I've got you."

The forest smells damp and rotten. All around us are the previous years' old, decaying leaves. But from the dead springs new growth, green and vibrant. *Nothing dies here,* I think, but it's Celia's voice I hear.

"We've got a three-mile hike ahead of us, so pace yourself."

I don't know the last time I walked three miles on flat city streets, let alone up a mountain. Why did I think I could do this?

The trail cuts through the forest floor as we consistently move uphill. We pass over a few small rivulets of water trickling from the mountain, and cross over them using rocks poking up like the bald heads of ancient warriors trapped beneath. The forest is quiet except for a few bird calls and the sound of my own heavy breathing.

After an hour, we stop for a break, and Graham hands me a bottle. The water is fresh and cold. I drink half of it without realizing I'm doing it.

"We're almost there," Graham says. "It's going to get steeper for the next half mile, then the trail levels off for a bit as we move around to the west side of the mountain. Then we go off trail."

"Graham, I don't know if I can keep this up." Already, there are blisters on my feet, my legs are cramping, and I've developed a sharp pain in my knee. I'm not meant to perform this type of labor.

"Look at this," he says, ignoring me and bending down to look under a fallen tree. He points to a group of white fungus. He pinches one off at the stalk with his bare hands. "*Pleurotus ostreatus*, the oyster mushroom." He holds it up, showing me the soft, smooth gray cap, and then turns it over so I can see the ribs underneath, like a skirt with hundreds of pleats. "These feed off dead or decaying trees. They release the nutrients from the tree back into the soil so they can be used by other plants." He stares at the mushroom, as if entranced. "The nutrients flow from one being to another. They are never lost. Everything here holds the power of all that came before it, as far back as the dinosaurs."

"You sound like Celia," I say.

Graham nods and smiles. “It’s what we were here trying to prove.”

“You were harnessing the memory of dinosaurs?”

“In a way, yeah. Science has known for a long time that energy from dead things is passed on to new things. And what is memory other than simple pulses of energy. If something could harness that energy, it could create from a memory of the past.”

The trees around us are dense. The canopy above barely allows light through. Everything is damp, rotten. “I don’t think I understand.”

“You will,” he says and starts off again.

After a while the trail levels out, just as Graham said it would. The woods thicken and the forest darkens. The temperature drops. I notice birds less the farther we go. Graham walks ahead and I try to keep up, but I'm tired and my legs hurt. I feel isolated and there’s a tingling at the back of my neck, an eerie feeling I’m being watched. I keep turning around, expecting someone to be there, but the trail is empty. The canopy high above blocks the sun and I can barely see into the forest. On its underside, the leaves are a melancholy brown color, as if they’re already dead before even falling to the forest floor.

Suddenly, my feet are squishing into leaves with every step. I’ve been following Graham, not really paying attention. I don’t see the trail, and we aren’t leaving tracks in the leaves. *How do I get back to the trail? I’m going to get lost in here, just like Celia.* I’m about to scream to Graham to stop when there’s a skittering in the tree next to me.

It’s the sound of little claws digging into the bark.

At first, I thought it was a squirrel, and I looked up expecting to see the grayish-brown fur I’m so used to seeing in the city. Instead, the animal in the tree is the right size and shape for a squirrel, but it is hairless and white. There are little black and white mushrooms growing out of the animal’s back. The mushrooms seem to have some sort of unintelligible writing on them. The thing’s face is amorphous, and there are places for eyes and a mouth, but there is no definition, just indentions in the soft flesh.

I let out a strangled cry. The animal runs up the tree and out of sight.

“What’s the matter!” Graham asks.

“There was … something.”

Graham looks up the tree then back to me. “It’s nothing to worry about. Come on. It’s not far now.”

Twenty minutes later we enter a small clearing. The sunlight reaches through the canopy here, and little shrubs are fighting for existence in the small space. The trees, all with different colored leaves—red, orange, yellow, even a dark purple—tower over us. Little black and white mushrooms litter the forest floor inside the clearing. Bending down, I see a blue hose once

attached to a backpack lying limply on the ground. In the middle of all this is a bark gauge that looks like the one Celia showed me so long ago. Mushrooms grow out of a slimy mess that resembles mucus.

I find it hard to breathe, let alone speak. Are these Celia's things? If so, it is evidence that Celia was here. It's the only clue anyone has had of her whereabouts. "Wha-what is this?"

"*Amniotreformator*. At least, that's the genus I'm thinking of giving it. Although it may be a new family. No mycologist has ever described anything like it before."

I pluck the bark gauge out of the mess. It makes a sucking noise as it detaches from the slime. The little bit of blue tape is there, and I can still make out the initials Celia stamped into it. "This belonged to Celia."

"Yeah, the fungus doesn't eat the inorganics." He breaks off one of the mushrooms and places it in my hand. The pattern on the cap is crisscrossing, curving lines that remind me of an ancient Celtic pattern. It's the same lines I saw on the squirrel thing earlier.

I feel like I'm going to be sick as I try to understand what Graham is saying. I remember laying next to her in bed, the joy and love I felt; I can still, even, feel her rough callused hands as they glided sensuously over my body, can smell the musky scent of her skin and now—how can she be … this pile of goo on the forest floor? The woman I love. In it, I try to see something, anything, that will show me this isn't her, but the tape, her initials … I have no choice but to accept reality.

"This is a new type of fungus with a unique life cycle," Graham says. "When it feeds on living tissue, the spores that germinate form into a mix between the fungus and whatever it consumed. The fungus then uses this new body to find food, keep it alive, and spread more spores that then eat and make something new again." He clasps my hand around the mushroom. The flesh is warm and squishy. "It's truly a remarkable species. Come on, you need to see the next step."

I follow him out of the clearing. The finality that Celia is gone leaves me shaky and light-headed. I hear a rustling in the leaves. Something white moves through the dark forest. I can't see it well, but it's small, the size of a house cat, and like the squirrel earlier, it seems to be hairless and eyeless.

Graham talks as he walks. "I fed it mice for a long time and then moved up. Squirrels, racoons, skunks." He laughs. "God, the skunk was awful. I never did that again." We climb a small rise and on the other side of it, he stops. "Those mushrooms back there are the first stage in the cycle. They eat the animal and produce spores. Those spores blow in the wind and germinate once conditions are right. What that first stage fungus fed on is then recreated. Reanimated." There is a large fibrous lump lying among the leaves. More of the Celtic-patterned mushrooms grow on this lump. "She is being reborn from their memory of her."

The lump moves and something long and gracile unfolds from it.

Only once it's fully extended do I realize it's the shape of an arm.

Another arm unfolds. They swing out slowly, arcing like a ballerina and a head that is smooth, lacking hair. The eyes are open but there are only whites. The lips are parted but there are no teeth or tongue. One of the arms reaches for me. I scream and pull my leg away before it can take a hold. The thing's head rears back, and the nebulous face stares up at me.

"That's amazing. She recognizes you," Graham says. "Probably senses your pheromones, knows who you are."

I suddenly, painfully, recognize the woman I love in the face, but it is like looking at a department store mannequin that looks like someone you know. I don't fully understand what Graham is telling me, but I realize this was probably not an accident.

"You ... you killed her." I fall to my knees and run my hand along the smooth surface of the face, cradle it in my palm. The texture is like the top of a button mushroom. Fleshy and soft, but firm enough to hold shape. The thing leans its lips into my palm and kisses them.

Graham takes off his glasses and cleans them with his shirt. "For the record, it was supposed to be you. All she had to do was get you up here and I would have done the rest. But she had to fall in love with you." He sneers in disgust. "Since she refused to do what was needed, she became my first test subject. It took the entire winter to devour her. Her spores were released in the first few weeks of June. And now, she lives on."

I can't believe what I'm hearing. "You're a monster."

"This was done in the name of science." He kneels and places his hand on mine. "Think of the possibilities. We could stop death. If we save the spores, the memory of us could be reborn over and over again." He sounds like all mad scientists—daydreaming that their creations are more than monstrosities.

"This isn't Celia," I say.

"Not yet. But it can be. The transformation isn't finished. If I feed it more, she might come back. The squirrels ate six, seven times their weight and still they weren't exact replicas, so it will take a lot to feed her. Already her memories are there. She recognizes you! One day she may be fully sentient, able to live another life. A fungus that resembles Celia, with her thoughts and memories. It will be an amazing triumph for humanity!"

He's raving now, lost in a delusion of grandeur.

I shake my head. "I won't have any part of this insanity"

I want to be away from this nightmare, away from Graham. I try to stand, but Graham pushes me to the ground and places his foot on my back. I struggle, feeling like a mouse being toyed with by a large cat.

"You don't get to go. You think I asked you up here just to show you. The fungus needs to feed so it can survive the coming winter. So it can grow.

Sadly, you won't be reborn. When it feeds from this stage, it's only for nutrition. But you can die knowing you are helping Celia become herself again."

I scream as adrenalin floods my system. I kick and my foot makes contact with his leg. Graham cries in pain and releases me. I scratch at the ground, looking for a root or something to grab onto. I realize I'm still holding Celia's bark gauge. I swing the gauge, holding it by the black metal handle. The four-inch needle strikes home and embeds in his leg, just above the knee. Graham screams and pulls it out quickly. Dark blood spurts from the marble-sized hole.

I scramble back, dragging across the dirt and leaves. He moves quickly, trying to subdue me, but there's movement behind him as the Celia thing stands on wobbly legs. Before Graham can notice, the thing's arms reach out and grab him. Graham struggles and grunts, but the Celia thing pulls him in, holds him tight, drags him to the ground. Small tendrils, like angel hair pasta, erupt from the Celia thing and dig into Graham. He screams as the worm-like structures puncture him. The tendrils writhe under the skin and look like bulging veins as they move throughout him. His body convulses, his eyes roll back, showing only the whites. He chokes, spits, and is then still after one final gurgle of air.

♥

"How much farther do we need to go? Feels like we've been hiking forever."

Ken isn't as used to hiking as I am. He's sweating profusely, and his breathing is ragged, even though we aren't on that much of an incline. His dating profile said he is a computer programmer, so he doesn't get a lot of exercise. On our first date, he said he'd never seen the foliage from Mount Hancock. I told him it was a must see before he died.

"It's not much farther now," I say as I leave the trail and head off into the forest. "Stay close. People go missing in this forest all the time."

Ken follows behind, close enough he's almost stepping on my heels. "This view better be worth it."

It's been three years since I came up here with Graham. Every year I bring someone new to see her, and every year she becomes more like the person I remember, the woman I love. I don't know how many more people I will have to bring, but I will continue until my Celia is exactly how I remember her.

Because when you love someone who is missing, you will do anything to get her back.

“When my only daughter fell from the sky, her wings folding weakly under tender starlight, my heart plummeted with her.”

– Kaitlyn Downing
“A Fairy Tale”

It Clucks with Abandon

Eric J. Guignard

Behold the chicken. Its feathers are pale, its shanks less so. It has gazed upon itself in the lapping waves of a great river that rises and falls along a bank of loam and sparse weeds. It has considered its visage in a sort of prescient wonder: eyes, wattles, a comb as red as the fat pigs that spray their defecation across the grains the chicken wishes to eat. Such act of malfeasance does not stop the chicken from consuming, but it wishes for better circumstance. Imagine unsoiled mounds of seed and corn towering to the sky, as large as the great triangular shapes the two-legged mortals labor at tirelessly. Those monoliths reflect the sun in a radiant glow as golden as any foodstuff the chicken could envision. It would eat endlessly there and never know hunger again.

It clucks with abandon at such fancy.

The chicken knows not to tarry long at the river's edge under such dreams. The hateful, hideous snout will soon emerge from the water, and below that snout the clamp of murderous teeth, and then the emergence of dead-yellow eyes, and an explosion of splashes and snaps and rapid footfalls through the mud. The crocodiles are legion in this water. Worse than the cobra, worse than the hippo or hyena, the crocodiles have chased the chicken many times back up the bank past mud hovels and half-flooded crops, past canals and shadufs, past statues of Sphinx-gods and word-symbols, past the two-legged mortals who only look up from their labors and laugh, past the vulgar pigs, past horned oxen and worshipped cats and other chickens, who all shriek and scatter, and none offer aid for its own flight, but the chicken has always managed to escape. It has not been so for others.

Two seasons past, the chicken's favored mate was taken by the loathed crocodiles. That rooster—*her* rooster—had been majestic. The rooster would gaze at her with understanding and discernment in its approval. The rooster's neck had shown the most majestic ruff of feathers

the chicken has ever seen, shimmering golds, rich reds, iridescent indigos, all a mesmerizing display when it puffed its mighty chest and crowed its regal voice, all glory, all declaration of dominance and wonder and passion when she inverted her cloaca, and they would arrogantly mate before all eyes. The rooster would chase off lesser roosters that came bawking after her scent, and the rooster kept her busy with laying eggs, oh so busy, but then it was all taken away, torn asunder with blood and squawks and shattered wings once the crocodile snatched her mate out from the dark shadows of the riverbank.

The chicken lays eggs still, but it is futile. Without adoration, without enthusiasm. Without the intent for brood.

It is half-wild, this chicken, and mostly left to roam. It walks the land and scratches at the soil, clawing for seeds or grains or perhaps a slow-moving worm. The two-legged mortals toil past, wrapped in loose dresses the color of clouds. Their skin is dark, their fingers wondrously dexterous, their eyes hard from fear or worry. Perhaps, the chicken wonders, that is why they laugh when the chicken is in distress, being chased by crocodiles, as if some escape from their own unease. What such unease may be, the chicken does not understand, for the mortals seem to have all they need, shelter and tools and weapons, and so much food, storehouses and graineries that overflow with wheat and maize and rice, and they share scant little with the chicken or other animals that wander, grazing this fertile valley.

Nearby birds coo. Cattle lull. The chicken's thoughts are deep and enigmatic. The sun, hot overhead, blankets the chicken with lethargy. Its eyes are downcast, searching the soil for food, so it does not detect several of the two-legged mortals advancing with critical intent.

The chicken is seized, it shrieks in alarm, screaming for help, screaming to be released, but it is not. It snaps its beak at the mortals' arms and draws blood, and there is a cry, and a confusion of moving parts and views, of a curved blade, of a gold headdress, and then a cloth hood is placed over the chicken, and it can no longer see.

It is held tight and jounced along for some time. There is clamor and noise, and the mortals' voices, commanding, obeying, plotting. The sound of stone slabs slide apart, and the chicken feels itself descending down steps, where the air is cooler, staler. It is terrified. It urinates on the mortals. They thrust the chicken about in their disapproval. There is some recitation of words given with urgency, and the chicken then feels itself placed upon a cold surface like the smooth arc of carved gemstone. The chicken's legs are bound together. Its wings tied tight along its sides. It sheds tail feathers, and a precious claw snaps off one if its toes. The pain is severe. It is the least of what is to come.

The hood is removed.

The chamber is dark but for torches at every end and corner. Four mortals stare down with sickening frenzy. They wear glittering adornments upon their robes and jeweled circlets upon their hairless heads. One wears a mask of gold that appears as the face of a jackal. The stench is heavy here, of incense, cedar, myrrh. Blood, viscera, desperation. The chicken sees a rack of dangling knives. A tray of hooks and tubes. Rows of stiff-limbed creatures wrapped entirely in linen cloth. A small, open sarcophagus. The chicken struggles to no avail; it screams again. A mortal leans over, his sweaty hand pressing down on the chicken's hackle, and he makes a small incision. The chicken feels its flesh rent, feathers falling, hot blood leaking. Exhalations and exclamations both come from the mortals. They recite prayer. A thudding claps from below, a drumming or heartbeat of malevolence. The chicken's beak is forced open and salt poured down its throat. The reflex and gag is immediate, but the mortals clamp its beak shut, massage the salt down in agonizing wrings, and repeat that mantra of a prayer. An incredible new pain, somehow worse yet, arrives in its skull, and only afterward the chicken realizes it's been skewered in the brain, but it is still alive.

The chicken is then defeathered. It is impaled through the rectum. It is disemboweled. It is anointed in spices. It is filled with more salt. It is still alive.

The torches waver and grow, splashing their frightful red flames across all in this room of torment. The mortals pray and sing in increasingly more impassioned, zealous tones, and roll the chicken over and lift it and prod it. Scented oil is poured upon it, kneaded into its naked, torn body.

The chicken thought no fear could be greater than that of the crocodiles, yet it was wrong. The torture and horror here is electric, like fire from the sky, and what is effected by these monsters dwarfs all the chicken has ever known. Its head is listless now, its vision waning. It watches one mortal raise a long, thin knife. Another unwinds rolls of linen.

They begin wrapping multiple layers of the cloth around the chicken, working upward from the feet, crisscrossing at every joint. The chicken is immobilized, drooling. Its heart is stabbed and set on fire in a bronze basin.

The chicken is dead.

♥

Drifting, searching, lost in time and space, alone and wanting, soaring with stars and currents that climb, fall, liberate, enlighten, transcend. The chicken remembers its life, every marker and moment of existence relived a million times over, the joys, the hopes, the prod and thrust of its rooster mate, the exhilaration of its first egg, the sorrows and frights of its times, the

wonder, the despair, the great exigent question of why had the mortals done such things to it? The chicken had once clucked with abandon and now it exists in the muck of eternity, neither dissolving nor ascending, but floating on the tempestuous tides of infinitude, where planets roll like loosed cart wheels and moon geysers spit rainbows into the nether. Something is wrong, something watching, waiting, and some breath of discoverability is all the chicken silently begs for. Otherwise there is no sense, no tactile feel of cold nor hot, no taste but of the salt lingering in its throat, no sound but for its own howling thoughts. No other sensation but for a gnawing, hollow hunger that has taken root within its breast and cannot be eased.

The chicken exists in such numb state, until there is a blinding flash of sudden light, and the chicken's terror reignites—

♥

Two mortals stand over it, and these have skin pale as milk and with reflective discs over their eyes, and the two mortals screech with fright at the chicken, as does the chicken screech at them.

It is an immediate realization to the chicken, however, that its own screech is nothing more than the creaky opening of beak and exhalation of susurrant dust.

Its body is still bound in the linen cloth, but its head has been freed, and it swivels, observing all it can; it is in a room brightened from light that is not from the sun, nor the moon, nor flickering torches. There are instruments and implements the chicken has never seen, and colorful images hung on each gleaming wall. The chicken is astounded, yet it does not blink at these sights. It understands, somehow, it will never need to blink again.

The two mortals have rushed from the room, but the chicken can hear their loud, excitable ways. There is a convulsion in the chicken's body, and by spasm, it flings up one wing. The bindings, the linen cloths, tear and fall apart. They are rotted and brittle as the chaff of sun-beaten flax. The chicken kicks its legs, and likewise they too are freed. It is an exquisite feeling, this revitalized motion, albeit languid, slow to bring about. The chicken jerks, has another convulsion; it carefully rises upon its eight toes, shaking away lint and salt and soil. It sees its sarcophagus displayed on a shelf, and that itself (the chicken), is on top of a silver table.

The mortals return. One has a device that emits flashes of lights and the amplified sound of a beetle clicking its hind legs together. The chicken takes a step, staggers in their direction, and the mortals shriek again and run off.

The chicken looks below to the floor, thrice the distance of its own

height, and spreads its wings to step off, to flap and flutter down, but its wings are skeletal now, leather-shrouded sticks, without feather, without muscle, with little strength. The chicken cannot flutter, and so instead plummets to the floor with a sudden and sickening thud. There are snapping, crackling sounds from the chicken's bones, but it finds it can rise again, and step again, trailing long ribbons of the filthy, unravelling linen. There is a clatter behind it, doors slamming, voices shouting, and the chicken fills itself with resolution and stumbles the other direction, toward an open exit …

And the chicken steps outside to a world unknown, as terrifying and incomprehensible as drifting through cosmic limbo.

Hideous. Frantic. Violent. The sounds here are cacophonous assaults: squeals, blasts, clacks, thuds, yet none by natural means. Massive metal carts zoom by with thunderous roars. Mortals walk in droves, yet seem to speak only to themselves in loud tones. Sounds like gongs ring out, rattles like linked collars, moans and whispers like unnerved poultry gods. And shapes fly through the air that are no type of bird the chicken has ever known, while images flash from tall towers, and lights swirl, and the ground rumbles, and it is life disguised as something else entirely.

The chicken squawks in dismay, though no sound emits but for a low-echoed sigh of air whisking through emptied chambers.

Shelter it needs. Safety, food, relief from these nightmare constructs battering the chicken's sensibilities. It plods down a white stone walk, dodging the footfalls of inattentive mortals. An unfamiliar shadow that is thin and long and impure reflects back. The tiniest dog the chicken has ever observed crosses the other way, then sees the chicken and turns unnerved, growling and yipping, straining away on a pink tether. The mortal holding the tether looks down at the dog's commotion and sees the chicken and cries sounds of hostility and dismay. A nearby girl in dainty pale gown screams. And like ripples in a pond, other mortals turn in succession now and point and howl.

The chicken knows not what to do but flee.

Its wings thrash in a parody of flapping, its feet drag as if mired in river mud.

Someone kicks it, and the chicken rolls, and metal carts swerve and emit horrible screeches as they sail past. Mortals drop boxes, leap, exclaim. More of the devices are produced that emit clicks and flashes of light.

It is instinct drawn by survival, panic, that the chicken rises, lunges at the mortals, snapping its beak. The screams are a storm now, the hostility, the flashing lights, the fright. Stampedes of panicked feet. Someone else kicks it again, and the chicken lashes out with its claws and rends fabric and flesh.

It is then smashed from behind and thrown through the air; the chicken has never known flight like this. By happenchance it lands with a crunch inside the open back of one of the carts roaring past, and it is thus ferried far away.

♥

The sun overhead has moved much by the time the thunderous cart stops, and the chicken hops out. Its legs are stiff as masts, its wings cracked and enfeebled, but it can walk, albeit in a strange, shambling ambulation, like a tortoise stood on hind tiptoes, lurching side to side. It crosses a road, and ahead there is water, a lake. Ducks, its fowl cousins. Strands of stinking linen remain clung to the chicken, snagging in cracks and abutments, but the chicken is not deterred in its passage, and soon it feels grass under its feet and is elated.

A wriggling motion catches its eye, and the chicken twists and bends down to snatch a small worm in its beak. It swallows with delight. Somehow, the worm reemerges from between the gristle of the chicken's neck and crawls up and over its wattle. The chicken is confounded.

It continues to the lake's edge and beholds itself in such reflection as it did upon the great river. Yet now the chicken does not recognize itself. There are no feathers, no fluff. What flesh remains is shrunken and inflexible. Its eyes are colorless orbs, stuck inside the dark sockets of a skull. The once-vibrant comb is reduced to a lump of cold marl. The chicken's bones poke and show at all angles from under linen rags.

It knows not when it was born, nor the circumstance of its own inception, although there is a process in the chicken's life of mating and laying eggs that it can understand occurred also to those that came before. The chicken knows death as well. Its ancestors, its mate, others prior and since. There is a cycle and closure to life, yet what now it sees is unknown and incomprehensible. Perhaps such is the end for all creatures.

An alarming squall of quacks alerts the chicken to a mob of nearing ducks. Though cousins, these ducks are not welcoming. They shriek their accusations at him, spiteful, venomous recriminations that sound of *Unholy! Unholy!*

The ducks are not wrong. The chicken flees again, and if it could manifest tears, the world would drown.

Trees, carts, trappings of man and beast, the chicken absconds through all. The sun turns to streamlets in a vast horizon, and the chicken sees a fire pit ahead, a group of mortals cooking food on skewers above it.

Fire …

The chicken remembers when it was alive, clucking with abandon. The only sound to come up its desiccated throat now is something of a pestle dragged across rock. But the chicken tries. It clucks, it bawks, it screams in grief. The hollow-gourd rattle in its breast echoes, amplifies, and suddenly there is a terrible roar. The chicken has found its voice.

The mortals at the fire pit look up in dread and they behold the advancing, roaring chicken in its filthy mummy rags. They shriek. They run away.

The chicken makes its way to the fire pit. It is now alone.

A fire, a chance to end it all, and on the chicken's own terms. It does not belong here. This world, this place, this epoch. Perhaps the chicken is a god in its own way, taken by the chariot of fate, brought to a wanting peoples, brought as a sign of the miraculous, a token of hope or reverence. Perhaps the chicken is a prophet, heralding sermons of the past, gladdening portents of what is to come. Perhaps the chicken is misunderstood. Perhaps it is a monster. It does not matter.

The flames lap, invite. The chicken gazes into this funeral pyre that it must throw itself upon, destroying what it knows should not be. Yet what then? Can the pebble destroy itself? Can the moon? Might the chicken still live on afterward, a blackened, melted ruin of cinder and self-awareness? The doubt is sudden, honest. It cannot leap into the unknown in such a way …

A crunch of sod comes from behind, and the chicken looks back to see the largest mortal it has ever viewed, holding a massive wood log in both hands. The mortal swings the log down onto the chicken's head.

And swings again.

And again.

And again …

The chicken, if not already dead, is now inanimate.

♥

And thence it trembles, the chicken hurtles through time and space again, but with direction now, with purpose, upward and on, faster and faster, through ribbons of nebulae, a miasma of comets, starshine-falls of cosmic dewdrop, until suddenly all things shrink to a singular mote of chaff and fade into oblivion …

And the chicken finds itself returned to the fertile valley alongside the great river.

Its favored mate is there, and many more chickens and roosters as well, and there are no crocodiles in this place, and no two-legged mortals, and all around are unsoiled mounds of seed and corn towering to the sky, and the chicken clucks again with abandon forever.

Being Polite

Sunayna Pal

Someone who stays
two mailboxes above me
asked me about family back home

I told her, *Mom's doing good*
keeping herself busy
after retirement.

As I threw the mail in recycling
She probed
How's your father?

I could have lied. He is fine
Why burden her
with morality?

I could have had some fun
He's doing great
He's found the cure for cancer

I could have taught her a lesson
Don't ask personal questions
without even knowing if he exists

I should not have embarrassed her
by staring at her
for a full five seconds

The Scarecrow

Avery Zappone

Ma always said the Devil thrives in the Arizona heat. But she has been off her rocker for a while now.

The front porch's floorboards squeal with each rock of my chair. The evening air is thick and suffocating. Smoke from my cigar rises to meet the scalloped ceiling. The smoke tastes like summer trips to Ma's house and Nancy nagging me to quit. I've tried to stop, for her, but the scratch at the back of my throat has become too therapeutic.

"It's hot like Hell out here," Nance says, balancing a pitcher of fresh lemonade in her rough, working hands. She joins the rocking chair beside me, their creaks creating an agitating harmony. I accept a cup of the cold summer's nectar, and can feel it slowly move down my throat.

I watch Janie and Peter play on the chalked-up sidewalk. Their jump rope steadily hits the pavement. The rope's reflective stripes are lit by the porch light that's luring the mosquitoes into its electric trap.

The wheat field across the street stands unmoving in the still, hot air. Stalks of gold rise near hip height. It'll be a good harvest this year.

The hay-stuffed scarecrow stares black at me through the dense grain. Janie sewed a face on the burlap sack last year. An exaggerated u-shape smile grins at me in black embroidery thread. Peter's contribution was a triangle red nose drawn on with marker. The marker has faded from spring showers, leaving splotches of red, keeping only a vague resemblance to its past shape. Dried hay pierces its arms and neck like needles. It looms over the field, with a crow perched on its fence-post arm span.

The dinner bell rings, cutting the still silence. The nostalgic smell of chili and sweet tea slithers through the open front door. I crush my cigar into the ashtray, extinguishing the barely-burning flame.

"Janie, Peter, it's time to come in!" I call.

They drop their jump rope, abandoning it at the lawn's edge. "The last one inside is a rotten egg!"

The dinner table is set with five bowls, spoons, and cups of iced tea. Lace doilies cradle the china heritage plates. The tablecloth is decorated with robin's eggs and dainty chickens. I slump a heaping portion of beef chili into my bowl. The first few bites are so hot I can't taste it.

After dinner, I tuck Janie and Peter into their beds. Their sheets carry the dusty smell of being left in the linen closet too long.

I go to turn off the light when a small voice peeps, "No Pa, leave them on. I'm scared."

"Okay, Peter. There's no need to be scared."

"Pa," Jamie chirps too, "we left our jump rope outside and I don't want it getting lost. Could you go fetch it?"

In my Christmas-patterned pajama pants, I go outside. The temperature has dropped a striking amount. The hair on my arms and legs stands up from the chill. No cricket chirps, no pond frog croaks. Not even the crows say a goodnight call.

I scan the lawn for the jump rope. Not a star speckles the sky, and I can only see where the house's flood lights illuminate. There is no jump rope anywhere.

There's a slight glimmer ahead in the forest of wheat, a reflective sparkle. Squinting my eyes I can see the stocky shape of the scarecrow. Did the marker from the nose bleed onto his flannel shirt?

I see Nancy's lifeless frame tied to the scarecrow with a bloodied jump rope.

It could be fed by insanity, but I could have sworn the scarecrow's stitched smile has grown.

The M-Mode Trace

Raymond Brunell

The room is 68 degrees, policy for intrauterine fetal demise (IUFD) confirmations, though Nina keeps the thermostat three degrees lower than the placard states because mothers in active grief generate heat. The ultrasound, a GE Voluson E10, hums at its baseline frequency, the cooling fan cycling at ten-second intervals, and she's already checked the transducer array for debris, already verified the firmware update from two weeks prior, already warmed the gel to 98.6 degrees in its reservoir. Everything ready. Everything correct.

Beth Carrig's chart shows 38 weeks, confirmed IUFD just two weeks short of full term 36 hours ago via external Doppler, scheduled for medical induction tomorrow morning pending this anatomical confirmation scan. Standard protocol. Nina has performed 43 of these since January. The winter months are heavy for demise workups—flu season, the way bodies metabolize stress when daylight thins to nothing by 4 p.m. She stopped tracking the statistics in her first year. Numbers don't help.

Beth enters Bay 2 with a nurse escort, both standard, and she's still wearing the hospital wristband from her initial visit, the paper dulled from two days of wear and washing. Her knuckles are raw. Three distinct abrasions on the right hand, two on the left. The kind of damage that comes from methodical scrubbing with a brush or rough paper towel. The compulsive handwashing. The attempt to sterilize what's sterile. Some part of the body trying to fix what the mind cannot.

"We'll do a quick anatomy survey," Nina says.

Beth nods and positions herself on the exam table without being asked, muscle memory from previous scans, and Nina applies the gel in smooth vertical strokes, the transducer in her left hand, thumb positioned at the ridge she has worn into the plastic grip over six years of daily use. The transducer is the probe: a handheld wand she presses against the skin, which sends sound into the body and catches the echoes the machine turns

into a picture.

The screen initializes. She selects the fetal cardiac preset. Places the transducer at the standard intercostal approach for a vertex presentation: the baby head-down, the probe on Beth's belly just below the navel, over the baby's chest, angled so the sound slips between the small ribs to reach the heart. Adjusts the gain. The image resolves: the 4-chamber view in correct position, structures sharp and clear because there's no motion to blur the capture.

She activates M-mode—motion-mode imaging—to check for cardiac activity.

The trace appears. A perfect sinusoidal wave at 142 beats per minute.

Nina's thumb goes still against the transducer. The ridge in the plastic grip presses into the permanent groove in her thumbnail. The screen continues its display. The wave persists. Rhythmic deflection at 142 cycles per minute, with the cursor measurement function confirming what the visual data states: a heartbeat.

This can't be right.

She removes the transducer. 142 is mid-range. Textbook. The number she types on charts for mothers who go home the same afternoon, and it belongs to a baby confirmed dead 36 hours ago. Her own pulse is loud in her ears. The gel on Beth's abdomen catches the overhead fluorescent, forms a reflective surface. Nina's hand holds steady, but the tremor comes from deeper structures, beneath voluntary muscle control. She unwraps a fresh piece of wintergreen gum and places it in her mouth. The cold spreads across her tongue.

"Is something wrong?" Beth's voice is steady. Rehearsed. The voice of someone who has absorbed the worst possible news and now exists in a state beyond additional damage.

"Checking the settings." Nina looks at the patient ID displayed on the screen's upper right corner: CARRIG, BETH A. DOB 08/14/1995. Patient ID 847-392-1847. The wristband on Beth's wrist shows matching numbers. The chart clipped to the mobile workstation shows 38 weeks, confirmed IUFD, no maternal complications, no indication for immediate delivery, and scheduled induction at 0600 tomorrow.

She positions the transducer again. Same approach angle. Same intercostal window. Same gain settings. The image resolves in an identical fashion. 4-chamber view. Perfect stillness. She activates M-mode.

The wave appears. 142 beats per minute.

Check the equipment.

A heart the Doppler heard as silent 36 hours ago does not start again. Hearts do not do that. Machines do: probes crack, cables fray, software

counts a maternal pulse as fetal. The machine is the thing she can test.

The machine's calibration sticker shows verification from February 12, eight days prior. Biomedical engineering signature, countersigned by the department director. The firmware version number displays in the system information menu, updated February 6. No error codes. No artifact—something that could distort the true signal—warnings. The cooling fan cycles at its ten-second interval, on schedule.

Nina reaches for the backup transducer. The broadband probe, used for second-opinion verification on ambiguous cases. She breaks the sterile seal, connects the cable to auxiliary port 2, and waits for the system recognition chime. The screen updates: C4-8-D CONNECTED. PERFORM ZERO-DEPTH CALIBRATION? She selects YES and holds the probe in the air while the machine establishes its baseline, then applies fresh gel to Beth's abdomen and positions the probe at the same intercostal approach.

The image is different—lower resolution, different frequency spectrum—but the anatomy is identical. 4-chamber view. Vertex presentation. No movement.

She activates M-mode.

The wave appears. 142 beats per minute.

Beth's respiratory rate has changed. 18 breaths per minute, down from her baseline of 22 at intake. Tidal volume decreased. She's stressed—the kind of respiratory adjustment that accompanies elevated cortisol. Her hands rest on her thighs, palms up, fingers in slight curl. The raw knuckles are visible in the examination light.

Nina removes the transducer and reaches for the portable Doppler unit in its charging dock on the equipment cart. She applies gel to its faceplate, positions it at the standard auscultation point for fetal heart tones, and activates the speaker.

Silence. The empty static hiss of amniotic fluid, maternal vasculature, bowel sounds. No cardiac rhythm. She adjusts the angle. Increases the gain. Moves the probe to alternate positions across the fundal region. Static. Maternal pulse audible at 98 beats per minute when she passes over the abdominal aorta, but nothing else. Nothing fetal.

See? Nothing there.

She deactivates the Doppler and returns to the E10. Same transducer. Same position. Same preset.

The wave appears. 142 beats per minute.

Two instruments. Two answers. The Doppler hears zero; the E10 counts 142. Both calibrated, both in her hands within the last four minutes. She runs it again in her head, zero against 142, and there is no correction factor that turns one into the other.

"Can I—" Beth's voice cracks, resets. "Can I hear it?"

Nina isn't sure how to respond. If she presses it and the sound is there, she hands this mother a heartbeat the afternoon before she delivers a dead child. If she presses it and the room stays silent, she takes the child away a second time. Her hand hovers over the audio activation control. The button is circular, red, and located in the lower left quadrant of the touch interface. She has pressed this button thousands of times. The moment when visualization becomes sound, when the abstract mathematics of M-mode deflection translate into the audible thud that mothers recognize, that waiting rooms hear through closed doors, marks the transition from maybe pregnant to alive.

"The external Doppler didn't pick up anything," Nina says, and the statement is factual, clinical, and inadequate.

"I know." Beth's hands remain palm-up on her thighs. "But the screen. I can see it. The line. It's moving."

The monitor displays the sinusoidal wave in continuous rhythm. The numerical readout shows 142 BPM in white text against a black background, updating with each systolic peak. The measurement cursor tracks each deflection, the algorithm performing its designed function.

Beth bites her lip. "Please."

The word is barely louder than her breathing, her hands still open on her thighs, asking only to hear what the screen is already showing her. Nina hesitates, but even she has to admit she can't pretend anymore. She presses the audio button.

The sound fills Bay 2. The rhythmic *thud-thud, thud-thud, thud-thud* at 142 cycles per minute, the characteristic doubled beat of fetal cardiac auscultation. The sound is clean. No artifact distortion. No maternal pulse overlay. The steady, impossible rhythm of something that should not be producing sound.

Beth makes a noise. Not a sob. A sharp exhalation. The sound pressure level registers at approximately 65 decibels, measured against the room's ambient 42-decibel baseline. Her hands curl into fists, the raw knuckles disappearing into her palms. Her eyes are filling, the lower lids brimming, and Nina logs it the way she logs respiration.

"I'm not crazy," she says. "I told them. I told them I could still feel her."

Nina's thumb finds the ridge in the transducer grip, and she pushes it down into the worn plastic, deliberately, harder. The pressure is grounding. Mathematical. She counts the force in her head. One pound per square inch. Two. Three. The pain arrives at five pounds, a hot line under the nail, and she stops increasing pressure but does not decrease it. The ache holds her in the chair.

"What do you feel?" The question violates protocol. IUFD confirmations follow a script: explain the procedure, perform the scan, document the findings, provide the images if requested, and schedule the induction. No provision for "what do you feel" because the answer is irrelevant. The fetus is deceased. Maternal sensation is neurological noise, the ghost of proprioception in a body that no longer corresponds to its gravid state.

"Not movement," Beth says. "Not like before. But something. Like she's still there. Still taking up space." Her voice has the quality of someone describing a phenomenon she cannot verify. "Dr. Morrison said it was normal. That I'd feel that way for a while. That the body takes time to understand what the mind already processes."

The audio continues. *Thud-thud, thud-thud, thud-thud*. Nina reaches for the freeze button, and the sound stops, and the wave stops, and the screen shows a single captured frame: the M-mode trace frozen mid-deflection, the cursor marking 142 BPM, and the timestamp reading 14:47:33.

She powers down the unit. The screen goes black. The cooling fan spins down over eight seconds, the frequency dropping from its baseline of ten hertz to silence. She waits. Counts to thirty. The room's HVAC system cycles, the air handler producing a brief pressure change that equalizes in two seconds. Beth's respiratory rate remains at eighteen. The wintergreen gum has lost its flavor.

Nina powers up the unit. The boot sequence takes forty-three seconds. The GE logo appears, then the main interface, then the prompt to select a preset. She selects FETAL CARDIAC and waits for the system to initialize. The screen displays READY in green text.

She applies fresh gel. The glycerin smell is faint and sweet, like something that should be pleasant but exists in a context that forbids pleasure. She positions the transducer at the intercostal approach, and the image appears, and she activates M-mode.

The wave appears. 142 beats per minute.

Beth's tear production has increased. Bilateral lacrimal drainage, no vocalization: tears running from both eyes down her face, and no sound from her. Her hands have returned to their palm-up position on her thighs. The abrasions on her knuckles are weeping clear fluid at the margins of disrupted skin.

Nina takes screenshots. Four angles. Multiple measurements. Femur length: 72 millimeters, consistent with 38 weeks. Biparietal diameter: 94 millimeters, consistent with 38 weeks. Abdominal circumference: 338 millimeters, consistent with 38 weeks. And the M-mode trace, crisp and undeniable, the wave that should not exist.

She prints the measurements. The laser printer on the equipment cart produces each image on thermal paper, the chemical smell of the development process mixing with the glycerin and wintergreen and the underlying scent of the room itself, something like industrial cleaning solution and something like ozone and something like nothing at all, air that has been cycled through HEPA filters until it contains what policy permits.

"I'm going to get Dr. Morrison," Nina says, and Beth nods, and Nina removes the transducer and wipes the gel from Beth's abdomen with disposable paper towels, two sheets, standard protocol, and she places the used transducer in the disinfection tray and removes her gloves and discards them in the medical waste bin and washes her hands for twenty seconds, warm water, antibacterial soap, the procedure so automatic that her attention is elsewhere.

In the hallway, the fluorescent lights hum at sixty hertz, the standard AC frequency, and the sound of other ultrasound machines in other bays performing other scans, the various frequencies of their cooling fans creating an interference pattern that produces a beat frequency of 0.3 hertz. Someone is laughing in the break room. The medication dispensary at the nurses' station beeps as someone retrieves a dose.

She finds Dr. Morrison in the physician workroom, reviewing lab results on a wall-mounted display. Morrison is fifty-three, obstetrics for twenty-six years, the kind of physician who has seen enough impossible outcomes that nothing generates visible surprise. She looks up when Nina enters.

"The 38-weeker in Bay 2," Nina says. "The IUFD confirmation."

"Carrig." Morrison nods. "Straightforward case. External Doppler was definitive. We're set for induction at 0600."

"The E10 is showing cardiac activity."

Morrison's expression doesn't change. "Artifact?"

"Verified on backup transducer. Multiple imaging modalities. M-mode trace is clean. 142 BPM. Doppler auscultation is negative."

"Machine malfunction?"

"Calibration current. Firmware updated. Biomedical verified eight days ago. No error codes."

Morrison sets down her tablet. "Show me."

They return to Bay 2 together. Beth is still on the exam table, still in the same position, hands palm-up on her thighs. Morrison greets her with the voice reserved for mothers in grief—gentle but not soft, professional but not cold. "Beth. Nina tells me we're getting some unusual readings. I'd like to take a look myself if that's all right."

Beth nods. Morrison washes her hands for twenty seconds,

antibacterial soap, puts on gloves, takes the transducer from the disinfection tray, applies gel, and positions the probe at the intercostal approach. Nina has returned to the operator's chair. The screen is still active, still showing the last frozen frame: 142 BPM, timestamp 14:47:33.

Morrison activates live imaging. The 4-chamber view appears. She adjusts the gain, improving the contrast. The anatomy is what it should be for 38 weeks' gestation. Everything in correct position. Everything developed. Everything still.

Morrison activates M-mode.

The wave appears. 142 beats per minute.

Morrison's hand on the transducer doesn't move for eleven seconds. The cooling fan cycles. Beth's respiratory rate remains at eighteen. The M-mode trace continues its perfect rhythm.

"Get me the portable Doppler," Morrison says.

Nina hands it to her. Morrison applies gel, positions the probe, and activates the speaker. Static. Empty fluid sounds. Maternal vasculature. No fetal heart tones. She adjusts the angle, increases gain, and covers the entire fundal region. Nothing. She deactivates the Doppler and returns it to Nina.

Morrison removes the transducer from Beth's abdomen and turns to face her. "Beth, I need to ask you something, and I need you to think before you answer. Have you felt any movement? Anything at all? Kicks, rolls, hiccups?"

"No." Beth's voice is steady. "Nothing like that. Not since Tuesday."

"But you said you felt something."

"Not movement—presence. Like she's still there."

Morrison nods. Removes her gloves. Discards them in the medical waste bin. Washes her hands again, the same twenty-second protocol. When she speaks, her voice has the quality of someone choosing each word with surgical precision.

"The external Doppler is the gold standard for fetal cardiac auscultation. Direct acoustic measurement. No image processing, no algorithmic interpretation. Just sound. And it's showing no cardiac activity, which is consistent with Tuesday's findings and consistent with the clinical presentation."

She pauses. Beth looks at her with the expression of someone who has already calculated what comes next.

"The ultrasound is showing something. I don't know what. It could be artifact—some kind of electrical interference that's mimicking a cardiac rhythm. It could be a calibration error that's not flagging in the system diagnostics. It could be—" She stops. Recalibrates. "I don't know what it is. But the Doppler is definitive. And the Doppler is showing fetal demise."

"But I can hear it," Beth says. "You played the sound. I heard it."

"The machine generates sound based on its visual interpretation of the M-mode data. Not a direct acoustic measurement like the Doppler. The machine produces sound based on what it interprets. But that doesn't mean—"

"It doesn't mean she's alive," Beth finishes the sentence. Her hands have curled into fists again, the raw knuckles hidden. "That's what you're saying."

Morrison sits on the rolling stool, bringing herself to Beth's eye level. "The definitive test shows fetal demise. That hasn't changed. The induction is still scheduled for tomorrow morning. You'll deliver, and we'll provide all the support you need for that process. This—" She gestures at the ultrasound machine. "This is a technical anomaly. It doesn't change the clinical reality."

Beth nods. The lacrimal drainage has stopped, the tracks drying on her cheeks. Her face has the quality of something that has been smoothed over, all the complex emotions compressed into a flat, manageable surface. "Okay."

"Do you have questions?"

"No."

"The nursing staff will come get you in about twenty minutes. They'll go over the induction protocol, what to expect, and pain management options. Nina will print out whatever images you'd like to have. All right?"

"All right."

Morrison stands. Touches Beth's shoulder, brief and professional. Exits Bay 2. Nina follows her into the hallway, and Morrison walks fifteen feet before stopping and turning.

"Document everything," Morrison says. "Every reading. Every measurement. Every modality you used. Screenshot the M-mode trace. Print it. Put it in her file. And send an email to biomedical. Tell them the E10 in Bay 2 needs a full diagnostic workup. Don't use it for any other patients until they've cleared it."

"The machine is functioning."

"Then document that it's functioning while producing impossible data. That's a different kind of malfunction." Morrison's voice has no anger in it. The flat affect of someone managing a situation that has no good solution. "I'll note in my assessment that there were equipment irregularities during the confirmation scan, but that clinical findings remain consistent with IUFD. The induction proceeds as scheduled."

She walks away. The hallway fluorescent lights hum at sixty hertz. Someone's pager goes off, the tone a perfect A-sharp. The medication dispensary beeps again.

Six years. Every confirmation she has run, the image and the Doppler have said the same thing, and that agreement is what the word confirmation means. The protocol has a step for one instrument failing. It has no step for both instruments working.

Nina returns to Bay 2. Beth is sitting up now, feet dangling off the exam table, hospital gown still open in the back. The ultrasound monitor is still active, still showing the frozen M-mode trace from 14:47:33. 142 BPM. Perfect sinusoidal wave.

"Did you want any of the images?" Nina asks.

Beth looks at the screen. Studies it. The trace is optimal. Precise. The kind of textbook-perfect reading that sonography students use for training. Every deflection timed within acceptable parameters. Every measurement within expected range.

"No," Beth says. "I don't think I do."

Nina nods. She powers down the E10, the screen goes black, the cooling fan spins down, and silence returns to Bay 2 except for the HVAC system, the sixty-hertz hum, and Beth's respiratory pattern at eighteen cycles per minute.

"When you said you could feel her," Nina says, and the words come from somewhere she doesn't recognize, some part of her professional architecture that has developed a fissure. "What did it feel like?"

Beth takes time to answer. Her hands are palm-up on her thighs again, the raw knuckles visible. "Like she was still there. Not moving. Existing. Taking up the same space she did. Like my body had data that didn't correlate with what I'd been told."

Nina unwraps another piece of wintergreen gum. Places it in her mouth. The cold spreads across her tongue. "A lot of mothers report similar—"

"But you heard it too." Beth's voice is quiet. Matter-of-fact. "The machine. It detected something. Or interpreted something. I wasn't the only one to hear it."

Nina removes her gloves. Discards them. Washes her hands. Twenty seconds. Antibacterial soap. Warm water. The protocol is so automatic that her body performs it while her attention exists elsewhere, in some space where the question "what did the machine detect?" has no answer.

"I'll print the measurements for your file," she says, and Beth nods, and Nina returns to the workstation and selects the four screenshots and the M-mode trace and sends them to the thermal printer. The chemical smell of the development process fills Bay 2. She retrieves the images, still warm, and adds them to Beth's chart. CARRIG, BETH A. 38 weeks. Confirmed IUFD. Scheduled induction 0600 02/21/2024.

And beneath that, in the SONOGRAPHER NOTES section, she writes:

Fetal cardiac activity visualized via M-mode imaging. 142 BPM. Rate

consistent with 38-week gestation. Confirmed on primary and backup transducer. No artifact flags. Doppler auscultation negative. External examination consistent with IUFD. Anatomy measurements appropriate for gestational age. Recommend obstetric consultation prior to induction.

She timestamps it: 15:22, February 20, 2024. Signs it with her credentials: N. Delgado, RDMS. The documentation is complete. Factual. Accurate. Impossible. Six years of her signature under readings that matched each other. This one sits under a zero and a 142, and her hand wrote the letters at the same speed it always does.

The nurse arrives at 15:25 to escort Beth to the consultation room where they'll review the induction protocol. Beth stands, adjusts her gown, and follows the nurse into the hallway. She doesn't look back at the ultrasound machine. Nina remains at the workstation. The woman whose body is producing signals that shouldn't exist. Whose child is both dead and not-dead depending on which instrument produces the measurement, which frequency the system selects.

When they're gone, Nina sits alone in Bay 2. The equipment cart holds the disinfection tray with the used transducer. The thermal printer holds three blank sheets of paper. The E10 remains powered down, its screen black, its cooling fan silent. On her workstation, the screenshots are still open: four angles, multiple measurements, and the M-mode trace with its perfect 142 BPM rhythm.

She creates a new file. Labels it EQUIPMENT ANOMALY REPORT - BAY 2 E10. Attaches the screenshots. In the description field, she types:

During IUFD confirmation scan, M-mode cardiac imaging showed persistent rhythmic deflection pattern consistent with fetal heart rate (142 BPM). Pattern verified across multiple transducers and imaging presets. External Doppler auscultation negative. Machine calibration current per 02/12/24 biomedical verification. No error codes or artifact warnings generated. Request full diagnostic evaluation.

She sends it to biomedical engineering. Copies Dr. Morrison. Timestamps it: 15:31, February 20, 2024.

Then she sits. The wintergreen gum has lost all flavor. She spits it into the medical waste bin, unwraps another piece, and the cold spreads across her tongue. Bodies that produce data brains cannot process. Machines that detect signals that violate biological parameters. The space between alive and dead where something else exists, some third state that has no designation because medicine doesn't have language for things that contradict its fundamental premises.

Bay 2 is 68 degrees. The thermostat on the wall reads 71, but the actual temperature is different. Nina has maintained this differential for six years.

Mothers in active grief generate heat. The only available intervention is a room cold enough that their bodies might, for a brief interval, require fewer compensatory mechanisms to maintain homeostasis.

The HVAC cycles. The fluorescent lights hum. Somewhere down the hall, another ultrasound machine begins its scan, the familiar sound of another transducer finding another heartbeat, another mother hearing the confirmation that all parameters are within the normal range, all measurements appropriate for gestational age, and all systems functioning as expected.

Nina closes Beth's file. Logs out of the system. Rises from the operator's chair. Tomorrow morning at 0600, Beth will begin her induction. She will labor for eight to twelve hours; she will deliver a child that has been deceased for seventy-two hours by that point, and the medical team will provide all appropriate support, documentation, and grief counseling.

And in the pathology report, there will be no notation of a heartbeat at 142 BPM. No mention of the M-mode trace. No record of the impossible data. Just the standard findings: intrauterine fetal demise, cause undetermined, and no maternal complications.

The machine will go to biomedical. They'll run diagnostics. They'll find nothing wrong. They'll clear it for clinical use. And Nina will perform her next scan, and the next, and there will be another IUFD confirmation, another mother in Bay 2, another body that produces signals that the machines cannot explain.

She turns off the lights. Closes the door. The hallway stretches ahead of her, fluorescent and infinite, and she walks its length toward the break room where there's coffee and a chair and a window that faces the parking lot. Beth Carrig will be getting into someone's car. Still wearing the hospital wristband. Still carrying the weight of something that exists in the space between heartbeat and silence, between confirmation and impossibility, between the data the Doppler reported and the data the ultrasound displayed.

Both true. Both impossible. Both waiting in the dark for morning.



Disruption

Brenna Monaghan Behel

“I think I may have died somewhere
between the bloody sockets of youth
and the orthodontic smile I wear...”

– RJ Aurand
“Blossom-End Rot”

Human Bottleneck

Jack Powers

SONYA

"She's beautiful," Gabe said.

He walked below and behind us, finding relief in our shade, keeping eyes averted, making sure not to look like he was ogling as I nursed Mina. Three bots carried the baby and me on a canopied platform. Their boots trampled the dry grass.

"My heart aches for her, Sonya," he said. "So much suffering ahead."

"And joy, too." I looked down, but he turned away. His sepia skin was more suited to the desert than mine. Alabaster, Ben called it, but if it weren't for the purple veins, I wouldn't be any color at all. I needed long sleeves, hat, gloves, the whole nine yards to avoid turning red and blistery.

"I suppose you have to believe that." Gabe walked like an athlete—a high school wrestler, I later learned—a couple inches shorter than me, tattooed arms bent slightly as if ready to grapple. Black hair close-cropped in a military cut. He stared ahead, toward the miles of cracked earth turning to sand.

Empty creek beds. Dying trees. If I hadn't known others had done it before us, I'd have thought this thirty-day trek to Denver was impossible. Our five-family caravan seemed pitifully small against the backdrop of Missouri turning slowly into desert.

"As a mother, I mean," he said.

"But it's true! Come on, look at her!" I wiped a squirming Mina's mouth and held her out so Gabe could see her smile. Eight months old now, she was *Da-Da*-ing and reaching for everything. She'd probably be crawling too if I could trust her not to eat the sand.

"I suppose," he said. The heat was intensifying. Soon we'd have to stop and tent up for the mid-day siesta. Gabe smiled at Mina and tickled her feet. You could tell he didn't have much experience with babies. "Was she an

accident?"

"An accident?"

Gabe had been quiet the first two or three days out of St. Louis. I was starting to wonder if he'd talk at all—that maybe he secretly hated us for having the means to make this trip, to hire him, to hope for something better. Gabe herded the bots, helped with security, searched for edible plants and water, kept an eye on our route—even though the caravan captain was in charge of navigation. Gabe quietly did everything I'd hired him to do. Or fed him to do, more accurately. He was more indentured servant than employee. The boyfriend of Yasmin, my husband's cousin, I'd hired him to make sure we made it alive to the Rockies where we hoped to find Ben, the baby's father—and to find Yasmin, who'd left with her parents in Ben's caravan. And—I'd hoped—to have a human to talk to along the way. On the third day, Gabe's curiosity must have gotten the best of him.

"I mean, given the world seems to be ending." He squinted either from the sun or from concern he'd gone too far.

"Really? When you look at this little miracle, all you see is the world ending?"

"Miracle?" He chewed his lip, shook his head, seemed to consider before asking. "You think some savior will make this all miraculously go away?" He waved a hand across the withering landscape, but I knew he meant everything: the rising oceans, the droughts, the Have-Nots teeming into St. Louis, the extremists instigating.

"Why not?" I laughed so he'd know I wasn't delusional. "Maybe she's the savior."

"Ha!" His head snapped back. He started to laugh, but stopped himself. "You're serious?"

"No. I don't know. Maybe," I said. "It ends when we give up. Post-natalist, anti-natalist, pro-mortalists. They're all just quitters. Extinctionists, really."

"Or rationalists. Responding to the evidence: the race to see what wipes us out first. The fires, pandemics, nuclear bombs. Haven't you read 'Eleven Ways the World Could End'?"

"It's fiction, Gabe. Have you read 'It's About Believing in the End'?"

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry, Sonya. I don't wanna argue. She is beautiful. I'll give you that. But honestly, was she an accident?"

"No!" I turned away until he got the hint and circled back to work. I liked him better when he was quiet. Ben was supposed to send the bots back for us when he settled on the small farm we'd bought along the Colorado River. After six months, I finally got tired of waiting. The St. Louis streets were filling with increasingly desperate refugees and radicals urging

them on to revolution or suicide or both. I'd figured even the desert would be safer.

GABE

"Yasmin's parents made her go," I said. "I should've gone too, but at the time I was in a bad place."

Sonya hummed a lullaby as she tuned and lubricated Bot-7 or "Sven" as she called him. We'd fallen into the habit of talking after breakfast in the big tent. Ten days after our narrow escape from St. Louis, we were walking at night to avoid the heat, keeping off the roads to avoid trouble. I'd wrapped Sonya's blistered feet in aloe gel. The baby slept. Sonya dismantled and cleaned each bot, checking circuits and trying to undo the damage the desert was doing. They'd become too wonky to carry her and the baby. Fortunately, she was a bot whisperer with the hands of a master mechanic. Her dad'd been a famous computer nerd.

"A bad place?" Sonya tilted her head, like she did whenever she thought I might spill more of my story, her black hair falling onto one shoulder, blue eyes wide and curious. "I'm sorry, Gabe." She was an open book, had long since told me everything—more than I'd like to know, actually. Mostly about how wonderful Ben was. Funny, charming, smart. Rich, obviously. Mr. Perfect. I was starting to hate him. Made me go on and on about how tall and beautiful and smart and kind Yasmin is. I'd hinted around about my mother and sister's death in the fire, but I was not going to share the guilt and gory details.

"Yasmin had so much faith in me," I said. "Sounds stupid, but it got to be a thing, you know. In my head. Like I didn't think I could measure up." Feeling I'd revealed too much, I shifted topics. "I was spending too much time in the streets with the loonies. They love ex-military like me. The ones who take you in are usually the craziest." I removed the spines and bristles from the plants I'd scavenged, separating the hardier bits from the cactus fruit we could eat while walking. My grandfather had written the book on foraging in the desert—literally. I had it in my bag.

"Aren't you supposed to say, 'present company excepted'?" She tried to suppress a smile.

"Have you taken me in?"

"What else would you call it?"

"I'm an underpaid employee providing desert flora expertise, occasional childcare, and disarming charm to this cockamamie expedition."

Her laughter woke the baby. I picked Mina up, pulled her to my shoulder and patted her back. "I got you," I whispered. I'm all thumbs with

the bots, but I'd grown oddly competent with Mina—oddly since I'd never been within five feet of a baby before this trip. And I got a strange comfort from it, as if she was nurturing me.

"Disarming charm?" Sonya looked up from her bot care. "Hmmph." She returned to her work, humming again. To Sven as much as to Mina. She dismantled an arm, cleaned out the sand with a brush and a cheek-blast of air, dusted wires, sprayed the joints with lubricant before reassembling and rubbing the sand-pocked exterior as if massaging an aching limb. She claimed she was better with bots than babies, though she handled Mina with the same gentle care. I loved watching her work. Her long, elegant fingers smudged dark with lubricant. Her brow knit in concentration.

The silence made me talk more. "Her parents were probably relieved. I wasn't exactly husband material." I paused, waiting for a comment, but she said nothing. "A bad influence probably with all the crazy ideas I was sharing from the street." Had Sonya figured out that silence would make me talk? "I was probably a project for Yasmin. The bad boy she was going to save."

She didn't look up from dismantling Sven's left arm. "Seems like you're saving yourself."

"I—" She had this way of catching me by surprise, with a compliment or by unexpectedly agreeing with me. "I'm trying," I turned Mina around to watch her mother do her magic. Stood her up and balanced her on her toes. Ever since we'd crossed into what used to be Kansas, she'd been looking like she wanted to start walking. "Don't they have to crawl first?"

Sonya didn't answer. She was staring down the inside of Sven's forearm, trying to fish out a wire that had rattled loose. "Hmmph?" she asked, though I didn't think she really heard the question.

"Look, Mina, Mommy loves her robots more than she loves you."

That made Sonya laugh again. Almost a giggle—too teenagery for a grown woman. Especially one as imposing as Sonya.

"Maybe it's not Mina I'm ignoring." She grabbed the baby under her armpits and swung her back and forth in the air, singing "Ba-beee! Ba-beee!"

Mina belly laughed, which always made me laugh, too. The two of them were so full of hope and beauty, it was a shame Ben and Yasmin probably wouldn't meet us at Mama Nando's Colossus near Denver. Or that we'd probably die of heat stroke on the way.

SONYA

"A bottleneck?" I asked. We'd been holed up for two days and the sandstorm showed no signs of abating. At this rate our thirty-day trip to Denver would take sixty. Gabe dangled some keys over the baby. Trapped

like this with Mina and the bots, I was thankful I'd hired him. I'd programmed the bots to protect us from harm—but they weren't much for conversation. And the sand and sun were making them slow and unstable.

"Nine hundred thousand years ago," Gabe said, "climate change or a volcanic eruption killed the plants and game and whatever." Talking about end times animated him. His eyes shined. His hands became birds weaving his story. "And wiped out like ninety-nine point something of our human ancestors. We were twelve hundred and eighty individuals from extinction. Twelve eighty!"

I enjoyed my chats with Gabe despite his propensity for conspiracy theories. "And your source for this?" We practically had to shout to be heard over the roar of the wind and sand.

"*Science Magazine*? *The New York Times*? There're naysayers, of course, but it's legit. Nothin' fringe about the facts."

"And you're telling me this because …"

"It's going to happen again. And this time the Extinctionists want to take us down to zero."

"How do you know so much about them?" I couldn't help teasing him. His eyes widened and smile broadened when he started doomsday-ing, though I understood why he might think the worst given what little he'd shared about his past. "Are you one of them?"

He smiled then frowned, drew his brows together, jingled the keys for the baby. "To be honest, I was. Sort of. I thought about it, but chickened out. Or opted out. They're all so depressed. And angry. I decided I'd like to live." He shrugged. "At least give it a try."

"How are they going to do it? The Extinctionists?"

"They want to extinguish us—like the passenger pigeon." He shook his head. "Discourage breeding. Destroy habitat. Back the desperate into corners and rile them up to violence. That's the scene in St. Louis now."

The more he talked, the more I realized how narrow our escape had been.

"'From Billions to None!' they say. And they're gathering weapons." His hands started weaving again. "Big bombs—fire bombs maybe. Hoping the survivors will get herded into little pockets of habitable land. Become easy targets."

"So why didn't you try to stop them?"

"Stop them?" His laugh turned sour. "I was lucky to get away. They think killing you is doing you a favor."

We stopped when the baby started yammering. I wondered if it was a good idea to talk about all this around her—especially since we were yelling. Gabe picked her up and rocked her. "Da Da! Da Da!" she said almost like she

was calling Gabe "Dada." He might as well be. I'm sure she doesn't remember Ben. And she needed a father. Doubt she'd find one stronger or gentler than Gabe.

"She sure is beautiful," he said again, but this time added, "A little miracle."

"Uh oh," I said. "Are you becoming a believer?"

GABE

We were almost to the Colorado border when the biggest sandstorm yet hunkered us down for a week. We had enough food for another twenty-five days, but the other families in the caravan had starting cutting rations.

"We have to share what we have," Sonya said. The sand whipping into the tent was so loud we had to lean in and practically read each other's lips.

"That's crazy!" I said. "That's twelve more mouths to feed! We need to take care of ourselves first. The world is not what you'd like it to be, Sonya."

She smirked.

"And they laughed when I pointed out the yucca and the prickly pears. Tried to teach them to forage. They spit out the samples I gave them!"

"So we're going to watch them starve?" She'd run out of bots to clean. "And you think they're going to just watch us eat?"

Crammed into the tent with the bots, the baby and the supplies, we'd begun to smell. We had nothing to do now but sleep and talk and sleep some more. And argue.

"I couldn't live with myself," she said, "if I let them die."

"Won't have to worry about that if you give our food away."

Sonya was smart, a tough woman, but sometimes her sheltered childhood clouded her thinking.

"Forget about right or wrong." I curled my fingers high in air quotes. "This is about survival." Before she could respond, I played the trump card. "Think of the baby."

"I am thinking of the baby," she said, an arched brow hinting at her irritation. "I'm thinking of the world I want her to grow up in."

I took a deep breath. We'd been down this road before. Her idealism made me want to shake her. To wake her up. Here I'd finally decided I wanted to live and she wanted to live only in the past. In the old pretty-much-gone world. "Look," I said. "We need to be realistic—"

"Realistic?" she said. "It's realistic to share the food. We don't really have a choice." She pulled up her shirt and started nursing the baby. We'd lost all sense of modesty in the face of our cramped existence, the unrelenting desert. "When the food gets tight, we all need to squeeze

through."

"Or die?"

She looked like she hated me for asking the question. "We're not going to die, Gabe. All your death talk is exhausting. And too easy!" She cradled the baby's head as she nursed. "You want to do something hard? Believe we're going to make it. Believe all your ists and posts and antis won't win."

Despite the dirt and the stink and the exhaustion, she looked beautiful. I tended to focus on how fragile she was. But I saw now she was a warrior. The most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. I leaned in and kissed her.

And she kissed me back! A hungry kiss. An open-mouthed face-sucking kiss that was unsustainable with a baby between us. I lifted Mina, rocked her until she drifted back to sleep and put her in her make-shift crib. Then we picked up where we left off.

♥

Later that night when the winds had eased, I distributed our extra food to the other families and made a plan to take them foraging in the morning. The desert looked like a desolate abandoned planet. Sand and dirt. Cactus. Distant mesas. The dry smell of dust and dune. An easy place to feel hopeless. But the sky was a swirl of purple and pale blue and white. The storm had cleared the air. Stars upon stars splattered the deep blue forever. The choices seemed stark. Look up or look down. "Keep the faith, y'all," I told the others. "We're almost there!"

SONYA

"When Yellowstone erupts," Gabe said, "all that roiling magma will squeeze through the relatively narrow rim." He held his fingers together in a small circle. "Like if you opened a shook-up soda bottle. It'll rise thirty miles in the air." He had an oddly dreamy look when talking about mega-destruction. His voice deepened and sounded almost poetic.

We'd been walking all night, but as the sun rose behind us, the captain thought we were close enough to see the mountains soon if we kept going.

"And this," Gabe spread his arms wide, "will all be three feet of hot ash." Strapped into the carrier on Gabe's chest, Mina seemed lulled by his words and steady stride across the sand. Eyes closing and opening, closing and opening, she fought the urge to sleep.

"Gabe," I said. Sometimes I wanted to open up that head of his and flush out the dirt and sand, dump out the years of accumulated debris and air blast everything back to its factory setting.

"The ash will spew to Iowa!" He smiled and pointed a thumb back behind us. "The world will be covered in gassy, ashy cloud."

I'd gotten used to walking—I was even proud of my callouses, proud of myself for powering through after the bots got glitchy and started stumbling. But if we didn't get there soon, we might have to pile them on the platform and Gabe and I'll be the carriers.

"Gabe!" I said louder, but he was on a roll.

"That would cool the world, kill the crops and cause the bottleneck. And then—"

"Gabe!" I shouted. "Look!"

"At what?" He seemed almost irritated I'd interrupted his doom roll.

I pointed to the horizon. After a week of absolute flatness, it was starting to wrinkle. As the sun rose behind us, a thin, dark outline of mountains peeked up over the miles of sand ahead. "The Rockies!"

"Jesus!" Gabe said.

"Jesus," I agreed. "We're going to make it."

"Jesus!" he said again.

"I hate to say I told you so." I shook my head, pretending to be sad, "But … "

He lifted Mina out of the carrier strapped to his chest and held her up for a better view. "Look, baby! I told you we'd make it!"

♥

We set up camp a short time later. Despite having a bead on the mountains, the captain said we probably had a three-or four-day walk ahead. Maybe little less to The Colossus and Mama Nando's Robotorium, the first trading post at the edge of the desert. We'd sent word with an earlier caravan for Ben and Yasmin to meet us there. Gabe's positivity lasted until right before we were nodding off.

"What if they're not there?" he asked.

"I think they will be," I whispered. I didn't have the energy for a long discussion.

"But what if they're not?"

♥

Gabe was a surprisingly gentle lover, always asking: "Can I?" "Would you like?" "Does that feel good?" He talked too much to tell you the truth. Quite a contrast to Ben, who was more quiet, selfish and hurried. For our last few days, we travelled at night, ate breakfast, took turns taking care of Mina

while I cleaned and tuned the bots, and he chopped and sorted his plants. And made love once the baby was asleep. I don't know what the rest of the caravan thought of us, but it was too late to start worrying about that now. I hoped they allowed us some grace since we were helping them survive.

And right as I was nodding off, Gabe would say, "What if they're not there?"

And I'd say, "I think they will be." I wanted to say, "Let's worry about getting there first. We're one big sandstorm from running out of food. And who knows what crazies are hanging out in the desert waiting for a small exhausted caravan like ours?" I wanted to say, "Compartmentalize, Gabe! Don't worry about Yasmin finding better husband material or Ben finding a hardy, tan beauty more suited to living off the land. Just enjoy this little surprise between us without worrying about what's next."

GABE

"It's not like we thought they'd be at the door holding signs," I said.

Sonya stood silent beside me. Mama Nando's Robotorium—in a former hanger from the days of working airports—cast a long afternoon shadow. And behind it, looming larger, was The Colossus, an eighty-something-foot silver sculpture of a woman, arms-raised. Facing the mountains. Her head and arms not yet completed. We'd been watching it get larger on our last night and half-day of walking. Lit by spotlights at night and reflecting yellow sun and blue sky by day, it had called us forward. But up close, I realized she was facing away as if to say, "Don't count your chickens!"

Sonya grabbed my hand and squeezed. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw her eyes wet with tears or exhaustion, but before I could turn, she said, "Okay," released my hand and wiped her eyes with her forearm. "We should set up camp first and then see to the bots." Maybe she was less of an open book than I thought.

By the time we'd settled, showered and wolfed down a hot dinner at the café, the sun had set over the Rockies. Sonya'd hit it off with Carlos, the owner, and he was helping her rebuild the bots at one of the repair stations while chatting about servo motors and actuators and a bunch of other stuff I didn't understand.

He'd sent a bot-runner to get Ben and Yasmin so there was nothing to do but wait. I strapped Mina face-forward in the baby carrier and went out back to check out The Colossus. Spotlights reflecting off the welded aluminum and titanium bot parts almost blinded us. I shielded Mina's eyes. Closed my own. As we adjusted to the brightness, I began to see the discarded bots and bot arms and heads welded together, crawling across

each four-yard-long foot and climbing upward winding around the calves and knees and giant ass. Giant everything! Giant beacon for night-traveling refugees in the desert! Amazing, beautiful and kind of creepy.

When I rubbed my hands along the ankles, Mina reached out too, her little hands patting the sand-pocked metal. We backed up twenty steps to take it all in. The Colossus (Did she have a name?) was striding forward. Her unfinished wire-and-frame arms raised in triumph.

"It's something, huh?" A woman's voice startled us from the shadows. The back door slammed behind her.

Mina gave a little cry, but I bounced and cooed, patted her back and she quickly calmed.

An older woman, gray-haired, Hispanic maybe, stepped into the splash of spotlight. "A little crazy too." She pointed up with her thumb, then dismissed it as if she'd seen it too many times before. "I'm sorry, little baby," she said as she got closer. "Did I scare you?" She reached out and massaged Mina's feet. "So beautiful! Look at these little toes. We don't get too many babies." She rubbed Mina's toes between her fingers and turned to me. I'd seen her behind the counter. She was very short—five foot one, maybe—and wore a grey button-down with her name in script over the left breast. "I'm Mama Nando. That's my son, out front whirling and twirling. " She pointed a thumb again to the sculpture. "This monstrosity is his. That your wife he's working with now?"

"Oh, no, she's not—"

"She's a beauty. Got him in full-charm mode, but don't worry," she said, "he can't sustain it."

"My boss, actually."

Mina smiled at the toe massage and closed her eyes.

"Your boss? Hmm." Mama Nando raised an eyebrow as if she knew something. "Once the crowd leaves, he'll be back moping and welding." She laughed, perhaps thinking she was revealing too much.

Seemed time to change the subject. "Her husband and my girlfriend are supposed to meet us here, but they didn't show."

"Hmm," she said again and smiled at the baby. "I came up from Santa Fe to tell my son I'm dying. Cancer." She waved her hand as if it was no big deal. "But whenever I open my mouth, we end up arguing."

"Oh, God! I'm so sorry." I wondered if I should hug her or something. Sonya would've probably hugged her. "Can I–"

"You're the nanny?" she asked, nodding to Mina and releasing her toes. The baby was nodding off. Mama Nando tilted her head, smiled at Mina. "Don't you wish they could stay this age?"

I looked down at Mina. Her head flopped to the side, half smiling, arms

and legs hanging out of the carrier, and I felt a surge of love for her that surprised me. "I do, in a way. Never really thought about it." Then before I could stop myself, I started spilling. "Traveling with her and her mother … is the happiest I've ever been. Has to end of course, but—"

"Ah," she said. "I could tell there was something more. The way you look at her. The easy way you have with the baby."

"Is it that obvious?"

"Mmmm."

"That's not good. It would never work. I mean her husband's perfect. And rich." I swayed slightly to keep Mina sleeping. "And I'm poor and younger than her and—" Why was I telling her all this? "Anyway, she's better off with him. Mina too. And there's Yasmin, of course."

She nodded as if she knew what I was talking about.

"No chemo or radiation?" I noticed the dark circles under her eyes, her sallow skin, loose like she'd lost a lot of weight.

"No more." She shook her head. Pursed her lips. "At the point where I need to accept my fate."

"Are you in pain?"

She shrugged. "Sometimes."

"And your son hasn't noticed?"

"Carlos is too wrapped up in his rage," she said. "Mostly at me–I apparently wasn't a good mother. Pushed too hard. But everyone's wronged him somehow."

Unsure what else to say, I looked up at The Colossus, outlined against the black night.

Mama Nando followed my gaze. "I don't really understand art, but I guess that's what this is about."

The figure was curved, muscular, like an Amazon. The roughed-out face had a pronounced brow, a square chin. From a distance, the bot parts blended into muscle and bone and looked less creepy.

Mama Nando shrugged again. "I think it's mostly a big F. U. to me."

"Really?" I asked. "Seemed to be calling us from the desert. 'The New World! Right this way!'"

"Brings in the customers."

We stared together. Heads tilted upward. Mina babbled something in her sleep that sounded like agreement.

"Maybe it should stay unfinished?" I swayed my hips side to side and hummed to keep her sleeping. "You know, like, we're not done yet."

"Looks like a cave woman now, doesn't she?" Mama Nando asked. "Like one of those what-do-you-call-'ems? Nandrothals?" She shook her head. "Sounds like I'm trying to name them after myself."

"Neanderthals? Or Mama Nandro—no, *Nando*thals? That actually sounds better." She chuckled.

The desert night hummed with wind, faint coyote howls, owls, nightjars.

"Does she know you love her?" Mama Nando asked.

I was too stunned to answer.

"I should have told Carlos I loved him more," she said. "You should tell people you love them."

She held my gaze as if expecting an answer.

"Not sure that's a good idea," I said to break the silence. "I mean for me. But you should tell him."

"Too late," she said. "I was afraid he'd end up like his father. And I never understood his art stuff. Afraid he'd go off and—"

The reflected light caught stray silver strands in her hair.

"Do you want me to tell him?" I asked. "About the cancer?"

"You're very sweet." She took both my hands in hers. Squeezed. "No, that's my job. If it's meant to happen … " She stared off into the night, holding my hands until it began to feel awkward, but given all she'd said, I couldn't pull away.

"Don't be afraid," she said finally, "of choosing what makes you happy."

"Yeah," I said. "It's complicated."

"Wait! Wanna see something cool?" Without waiting for a response, she released my hands, walked to the door, opened a wall panel and pulled a lever that turned off the spotlights.

For a moment, we were surrounded by pitch black darkness. And silence. As if the whole desert was shocked too. But slowly, the hoots and howls resumed, and the sky revealed itself. The arc of the Milky Way, like a cloud breaking apart into bright stars and planets. White, red, blue against the black. The Colossus now a negative of itself—a silhouette blotting out its shape of the sky.

Mina stirred, raised her head, looked up at the sky and smiled. Two teeth just breaking through the top gums. She flailed her arms and slapped her hands as if trying to clap.

Mama Nando opened the back door and motioned for me to follow her. "What happened to the Nandrothals?"

"Extinct," I said as we followed her through the door. "Wiped out by diseases the *Homo sapiens* brought." We squinted against the fluorescent light of the warehouse. "Or maybe just absorbed into our ancestors by cross breeding."

Across the room, Sonya and Mama Nando's son bent over a work bench repairing a bot–Sven, I think, by the tint of his skull. On one side of the

warehouse, row after row of benches with other refugees leaning over and rebuilding their bots led all the way to the door out to the cafe. On the other side, shelves of refurbished bots and salvaged parts and tools rose twenty feet in the air.

"Wouldn't that mean there's a little Nandothal in all of us?" she asked.

"I guess so.Tiny bits of them still here under the same stars. Extinct but not extinct."

When the front door jingled open in the distance, it took me a second to recognize him. When he wiped sand off his jacket and took off his hat, I knew. It was Ben.

"What's the matter?" Mama Nando followed my gaze to the door. "A ghost?"

Sonya looked up at the sound. I watched her face ripple with surprise, joy, confusion, sadness and back to joy in a microsecond. I wondered if my face did the same. She turned to me with open eyes, raised brows and tilted head as if to land another, "I told you so." Then dropped her tools and ran to Ben.

And before I could even decide what I felt, the door opened again and Yasmin and her father stepped in. Older, tanner, hardier, she looked even more beautiful.

I realized Mama Nando was staring at my face, watching the whole cascade of emotions. She threw up her hands. "Well?"

SONYA

Ben seemed taller—and tanner—than when I saw him last.

"We sent two teams of bots. And we never heard from them." He kept hugging me, then stepping back, staring like he couldn't believe his eyes. "The news out of St. Louis was not good. And we didn't hear anything from you. Oh Sonya, I thought I'd lost you. I was just putting together a caravan to come get you."

Gabe arrived, kissed Yasmin, gave her a careful hug to avoid squeezing the baby, shook Yasmin's father's hand and lifted Mina out of the carrier to give to Ben. The baby blinked her eyes and began to cry as Ben took her in his hands. Her wail rose into the high ceilings, startling the other refugees from their bot repair. The others turned to look—Carlos with a scowl and Mama Nando standing beside the counter with an expectant smile. As if she were watching a movie.

Ben pulled Mina to his chest, but she wailed more, pushed him away. I could see Gabe's hands opening and closing as if fighting the urge to take her back.

"Maybe turn her forward, so she can see her mom," Gabe said. "She likes that." He took off the baby carrier and offered it to Ben, but Mina calmed at the sight of me, reaching out both arms, teary-eyed and snot-nosed. I took her in and hugged her, patted her back, cooed, bounced a little.

"I can't believe she's so big," Ben said. "I can't believe I left you both behind."

"We talked about it," I said. "She was too young. We both agreed." I pulled Ben in for a careful hug. Everyone needed comforting. I resisted the urge to grab Gabe's hand and give it a squeeze. Tears rolled from Yasmin's father's eyes. Mateo, I remembered, was his name. He didn't look good—like he'd aged ten years.

"I'm sorry for crying," Mateo said. "She's just so beautiful and we're so happy to see you all." He squeezed Gabe's triceps to show he was included.

Yasmin put an arm around Gabe. He wrapped his around her shoulder and pulled her close, but continued to stare at Ben and me. And Mina. I wished I knew what he was thinking.

I wished I knew what I was thinking.

Ben hugged me and the baby in a tight grip as if we'd disappear if he let go. My whole body relaxed. I resisted a soft moan. Had I been clenching every muscle since Ben left St. Louis?

I watched Gabe and Yasmin over Ben's shoulder. She was so young and tall and freckled and beautiful—just as Gabe described her during the first weeks of our trip. Their contrasts—tall and shorter, tan and darker, willowy and muscled—made them seem like the model couple for this new world we now lived in. A pang of jealously battled a surge of happiness for them. Could you love two people equally? I guess. After all, I'd already loved Mina as much as Ben. Just different. I knew I couldn't have it all, but could I have some version of it? Loving Mina and Ben, loving Gabe and Yasmin, living along the same swatch of river, leaving all the craziness behind. Could it all really work? Seemed like maybe it could–unless I was pregnant, of course.

GABE

"She's so beautiful, Gabe," Yasmin said.

Ben was bigger and brawnier than I remembered. Sonya's shoulder fit neatly into his chest. Her head tucked under his ear. Pink-cheeked Mina gurgled happily between them. A perfect trinity. Could be a painting, framed and hung in the drawing room of an old-world Victorian. I still hated him. The feeling was etched in my bones from the early days of Sonya's descriptions. Mr. Perfect. He seemed to have encircled us all in his musky scent. Cologne? Where would he get cologne when the world was falling

apart?

But I could see how happy Sonya was. The tough desert warrior melting away in his arms. The old world not faded away quite yet. My chest ached to hold Mina, lift her high in the air to make her laugh just to see that smile, the white nubs in her gums ready to break though. Yasmin radiated warmth beside me. I knew she was watching me, wondering, probably, what I was seeing. What I was thinking.

Choosing happiness is complicated, Mama Nando. What I wanted. What choices were real. Happiness now or a lifetime full. How could I know? I wanted to finish my conversation with her under the stars. At the other end of the long aisle, she stood now behind the counter, half smiling. A subtle nod. Carlos beside her, tall and dark, brow scrunched, chin squared, snarling at all our public displays of bliss. Charm shifted already to rage. I shook my head *no*. Maybe the question was what would make everyone I loved happiest. Ben and I both loved Sonya. And I think she loved us both. Maybe in another life I would have met her first, but … in this one, she was already taken.

I could feel Yasmin's gaze. Had she grown? She'd always been an inch or two taller than me. She definitely looked stronger. And more beautiful woman now than beautiful girl.

"I'm so happy you're here," she said, "that you saved Sonya and Mina. It's like a miracle." She kissed me. then pulled her head back as if assessing me anew. "I knew you could."

Finally, her faith in me rewarded.

"You're so tan," I said.

Her smile was contagious. Lit up her face. Lit up the whole room! Soon I couldn't stop grinning too. In the desperate exhaustion of the desert, I'd forgotten she was the reason I'd decided to live, to risk the whole cockamamie trip. She was the better life I hoped for. "Looks like mountain living agrees with you." I held my forearm against hers. "Not quite as dark as me."

"Not yet!" She rotated her wrist and took my hand in a firm grip.

We both watched Ben, now organizing the room to pack us up and do his bidding. And Sonya humming to the baby in her arms. Mina babbling *ba ba ba* and fingering Sonya's collar.

"You want one of those?" Yasmin asked.

"I do," I said.

A Fairy Tale

Kaitlyn Downing

It's a lie that we steal your children. At least not in a long time. And not for the reasons you think.

Like you, we love our children. Sometimes, like you, we do what is necessary to save them.

♥

I hovered at the open farmhouse window, the dying fire casting slight warmth on my face and shadows on the crib against the wall. Snoring came from the other room. The farmer's wife slumped in a chair by the hearth. Nothing stirred in the crib, but I was patient. The pregnant moon in the bed of clouds said it would be tonight. I stared at the lump of blankets, ears tuned to the sound of its breathing getting slower and raspier. Soon.

♥

When my only daughter fell from the sky, her wings folding weakly under tender starlight, my heart plummeted with her. If Alder had not caught her before the Mother's apron could … I would not have had the choice I did that night.

The farmhouse wasn't far from our forest, and the farmer and his wife had nine children. Cradling my dying child against my breast, I fervently whispered the words that would allow her spirit to enter the human child's body, where it would dwell until it grew strong again. When my child's last light entered the mouth of the youngest, I knew my child's life would be bought by their child's life.

Of *course* I felt bad. Of course I did.

Part of me did. Part of me was so hopeful my Fiadh would live I couldn't allow myself to remember it was a trade, an unfair, unknown

bargain. She was my only daughter despite attempts at every Alignment. I couldn't lose her.

Human lives were so short anyway. And there were so many children, hungry children. One less meant more for the rest, right? I knew that I was fooling myself, but when I thought of Fiadh falling, Fiadh fading into nothingness, I couldn't care enough to stop it.

As she had grown colder, Alder and I tried every magical cure we knew. Nothing worked, and we watched her grow dimmer in the starlight. My sister, Willow, held my hands, pressed her forehead to mine.

"I don't know what else to do." My voice came out like a wail.

"You do." She squeezed my hands.

"No." I shook my head. "Not *that*." It was all but forbidden now. Who was willing to accept the cost? And the risk.

"What choice do you have?"

♥

A choking gurgle snapped my attention back to the crib. More choking noises awakened the mother who, crying, snatched it up and patted its back to ease the labored breathing. Sobbing, praying, she clutched her child as it took its last ragged breath, then wailed like the banshee. The family came running, rubbing sleep from their eyes.

Unable to stop myself, I flew through the window and perched above the mantel. Soon, my baby would fly renewed from the dead child's mouth, and we could go home.

Soon. A light would bloom like a vaporous pollen, lifting on the air, spiraling into Fiadh, healthy, new. Soon.

The wails subsided to sobs and muffled sniffles, and still no light. Dawn kissed the sky and still no light, still no Fiadh. The body shrouded and cold and no Fiadh! I no longer cared who saw me or what happened. I screamed at her human host, yanked at the shroud, kicked the head, tried to pry open the tiny mouth to release my beautiful girl.

When no light came, I closed my eyes to the stars and wailed.

Pallbearers

Eve Naden

I ask what they're doing, and they say, playing funerals. This is one of the many reasons I don't have children. But when Meg called and asked if I could watch the boys for a bit (an hour tops, Meg said, which in her mind means six,) I couldn't say no. I had nothing else to do and the boys were nice enough. Unlike my adult relatives, they knew not to bother me when I was working. Isaac, the youngest, even asked what I was working on. Dark eyes. A pale, disc-shaped face. Cherubic, like his father. I glanced at my manuscript notes, wondering how to explain Nassau concubines to a five-year old before deciding against it.

"It's about pirates," I said, which seemed to satisfy him.

The eldest, Elijah, asked if he could help around the house.

"Can I help make dinner?"

"Do you really want to?" I asked.

Elijah shrugged. He was all bones and moved like a puppet. "Not really. My Dad told me to ask. He says it's polite."

I laughed. "We'll order takeout, eh? I don't really feel like cooking either." I knew I should have been teaching them differently, but I'm also not their mother. And I'm glad of this, looking at them now. They don't even look like Meg. Then again, Meg doesn't look like Meg anymore.

They've rearranged my living room into a makeshift church, complete with cushioned pews and scented candles. Elijah has one of my nightgowns draped across shoulders. He looks like an emperor. He recites scripture—what little he knows—from my copy of *Housekeeping 2025*. Isaac must be a pallbearer, because he drags his elder brother, Joe, across the carpet. Joe helps him along, shuffling as best he can without disrupting his funerary blazer—another one of mine. His arms criss-cross his chest, and I fight the urge to tell him no one's really laid to rest like that outside of horror movies—not that I've seen anyway. Their grandma had her hands in her lap. My boyfriend was the same, though his head had been turned away slightly, as if

merely sleeping, forehead nestled in a crease of silk. Joe has his back straight, his shoes off, and he's wrinkling my best work blazer. A thin layer of foundation covers his face (I'm not sure how he found it) and in the half-light, he's a marionette, his face thin and cracked.

"You hungry yet?" I ask. "Pizza or Thai? Or burgers. I could go with a burger."

Elijah shushes me. He says you don't eat at funerals.

"Speak for yourself. I put away a whole buffet at your grandma's."

Elijah ignores me and continues. He says Amen a lot when he can't find the words and asks why I don't have a Bible.

"I'm sure I do somewhere," I lie. Anything to stop them playing this game and do something else—even if that something is looking for a Bible and criticising my atheism. Elijah just sighs and, for a moment, he looks so much like his father that I want to scream.

Finally, Isaac drags Joe to the front of the room, setting him by the fireplace. Joe lies with his eyes screwed shut, hands still crossed atop his body like a sacrifice. His mossy hair drips with sweat. He wriggles, scratching at the blazer. Isaac kicks him.

"You're ruining it," he says. "Stop being alive."

Joe's twitching now. His legs become a spectacle, jerking and trembling. He looks like a Victorian experiment. A galvanised frog, surrounded by a thousand eager faces. I reach for him. Elijah grabs my arm, gives me a look. A teacher's glower. The irritation of a middle-aged man disappointed I missed the purpose of his lesson.

"You guys should wash up. We'll eat soon. Please. Guys. C'mon, let's set the table." I fumble for the words.

"We're not done with the game," says Elijah. Below him, Joe shuts his eyes. He's more pliant now; the twitching's stopped. He's perfect again.

Isaac stands by one of the scented candles. Coconut and fresh linen. Covered with a lid, the lid covered with dust. Isaac picks his nails—Meg's habit. He asks if we can light one.

"Makes it better. So we can't smell the body," he says when I ask why. I tell him I don't have any matches, though of course I do. Isaac looks away. I want to hold him but I'm sure not how such a small body could fit against mine.

"We'll now sing hymn 63," says Elijah to the room. He searches for the melody and comes up short, mouth opening and closing like a camera shutter. I swallow around my own voice; it's cold and thick.

The boys are tuneless. They can't manage a single note. I want to correct them. I used to be in the choir, you know. Meg was a soprano, I was an alto. Her voice cracked against mine and we sounded beautiful.

I look down. Joe's sweating beneath us. The foundation runs down his face in pale beads.

I take a breath.

"Can I join?" I ask.

Isaac finds a place for me on the makeshift pew. These cushions are decorative. They're thick and red, not unlike bibles. Plucked straight from a catalogue—almost literally. Scrunched up paper balls, covered in gloss. I didn't buy them for me. I don't remember buying them at all. My house is a showroom and I'm disgusted by this, but not enough to do anything about it.

The funeral goes on.

I hold Isaac's hand as Elijah tells us about the life of the deceased and how this is the way of things, how it's only natural that people come and go.

♥

My sister comes for them at five. Their car pulls up behind my Volvo and I help the boys back into their coats, wipe the remnants of foundation from Joe's pale cheeks. Meg's paler, I realise. She doesn't leave the car but she waves from the front seat, grinning. Big smiles, everyone. She says this often, like Mum did.

"I hope they weren't too difficult?" Ryan smiles. He's a good man but I hate him anyway. I hate him for being a parent, even though I've never wanted kids and my dead boyfriend froze his sperm anyway, so I have the option to own a piece of him if I want to. I hate Ryan for ridiculous things. I hate him because I need to hate someone and I can't hate Meg for having cancer.

"They were fine," I say.

He turns to the boys. "Did you have fun?"

"We had cake," says Isaac.

From the car, Meg shoots me a look. "You're not supposed to give them junk food. They need to eat healthily." She chokes.

I walk to the window and place my hand on hers. She's driftwood against me, small and brittle. Her hair is so much thinner now, like string. I want to tie it round my wrist and see what happens when I pull, to see if she'll stay longer.

"We've got an appointment next week," says Meg. She doesn't ask.

I nod. "Sure. No problem. We'll manage."

She smiles. Her eyes are overripe. She needs to go home. I tell her we had a great time, I'd love to see them again and no, they're no trouble, no trouble at all. They could come for the weekend, I say. The whole week, even. It's half-term soon. I could take them pumpkin picking, like our Mum did.

I turn to the boys. Six little eyes, staring back at me.
“We’ll play that game again,” I say. “How about it?”
Elijah nods.
We need the practice.

Blossom-End Rot

RJ Aurand

My mother gives me
a bone rattle; an amber plastic
vial of baby teeth. Little shards
of porcelain, pulpless, crumbling
into smaller fragments as I shake.
What do I do with them? Even
in isolation time turns bone to dust.
The body that shed these teeth
was small and tender, unscarred by loss.
I think I may have died somewhere
between the bloody sockets of youth
and the orthodontic smile I wear
as the vial is placed in my hands.
She confesses that she planned
to scatter them in the family plot,
let that dirt get a taste of me now,
know to expect me later. It seems
as good a resting place as any.
But since it's up to me,
in spring I'll take them to the garden,
dig the earth with my bare hands,
and lay that innocent child who never
watched a baby die to rest
beneath the heirloom tomatoes.



Hourglass

Michael Takeda

“The town stood strong enough for now, but uncertainty ruled the hearts of its people. They feared being buried in a landslide, crushed by falling debris, or swallowed by the earth’s gaping mouth.”

– Ayush Pokheral
“The Town in the Sky”

The Town in the Sky

Ayush Pokheral

The year was 2015; Nepal had been dealt a severe blow. A massive earthquake shook it from its core.

It took countless lives while injuring many more. The epicenter of this violent disaster was barely eighty-five kilometers northwest of the city of gods, Kathmandu.

No one was prepared for this disaster.

Even the government could only reassure the scared citizens.

They broadcast over and over on the radio, like broken records: "Everything is fine. No need to panic" while the servants of society plunged themselves into every nook and cranny, every crevice checked for signs of life while fearing their own.

It shook not only the earth but also the nation's faith. Children were scared, women were scared and men were too.

Three days after the earthquake, far away, in a small hilltop town 512 kilometers east of Kathmandu, life tried to hold its ground against the cold winds, the storms, and the dread of aftershocks.

The town stood strong enough for now, but uncertainty ruled the hearts of its people. They feared being buried in a landslide, crushed by falling debris, or swallowed by the earth's gaping mouth.

So many ways to die.

Every whisper carried the same word: "Earthquake."

Whenever lips moved, it was about the quake. The old spoke of the 1934 earthquake, spinning stories of survival as they huddled around rusty heaters.

No major damage had yet been done to the town, but tomorrow was uncertain.

The once cheerful town had begun to change. Even laughter hid a dark undertone. A town shivering, witnessing the ground shake under the feet, at any moment it could split open and swallow them whole.

Children sneaked out of houses. Shops opened half-heartedly; even a scared belly must eat. Police patrolled the nights for raiders and vagabonds. Dawn was no brighter.

At the town crossroads, the fruit vendor, preaching to his customers, cried in superstition, "This is God's punishment; accept the Lord," and so on.

The old blacksmith on Green Street, near the wire transfer building, east of the crossroads, killed himself shortly after the first shock.

Crowds gathered at the funeral of the lonely blacksmith while fearing for their own safety. People who knew him, people related to him, and passersby. Everyone attended the funeral.

Among some familiar faces, there was a new one: a stranger.

He had arrived just the day before the earthquake and was staying at the Hotel Yarsa near the square. A middle-aged, scrawny man dressed in an old suit, a decent brown overcoat, and boots worn at the front, he lingered like a mysterious scent around the town.

Closed-off, hardly speaking.

Rumors spread like wildfire: some said, "He's a runaway criminal," others, "A stuck tourist from the city," but nobody could say for sure.

He walked through the town, the surrounding villages, and the forests; he seemed to be enjoying himself, no matter what anyone thought. Some were concerned: "Why would a man his age find pleasure in such disastrous times?"

But there was no answer.

The road, poorly built and fractured, led nowhere now. No one dared travel; the little traffic it saw had been cut off by a tree that fell near Purity Boarding, south of the town. The town was struggling financially and couldn't make ends meet.

People were seen hiding from bankers and loan sharks; the quake killed in an instant, but the debt took its sweet time.

People slept in masses, families huddled together, strangers clinging to strangers. For some, it was safety. For others, opportunity. Lovers whispered promises of past lives. Perverts laid hands on women. Thieves broke into abandoned homes. Shadows moved in the dark, some seeking pleasure, others looking for prey.

The stranger watched it all, the town's innocent life unraveling amidst terror. He saw theft, betrayal, and despicable acts louder than prayers.

People stole from one another even when tomorrow was uncertain. Envy among friends, wives cheating on husbands.

The town mirrored the city in miniature. Yet it wasn't all bleak and cruel; he also saw kindness: folks rebuilding damaged houses together, children sharing food with the needy, and neighbors caring for the old, the weak,

and the sick. Animals treated kindly in the harsh cold world.

Nine days after the massive earthquake, the roads were still closed. The man wandered along the River Maya near Sacramento School on the outskirts of the town, skipping rocks and watching fish; the ground shook again for less than thirty-nine seconds.

It spooked the townsfolk, leaving everything in chaos once again. As the man came to his senses and returned to the Maya Bridge, he saw a glow—fire.

Across the river, a house burned, flames devouring its bones as a woman screamed, while her son and husband doused water from the river nearby to tame the untamable.

In a rush of adrenaline, he almost jumped off the bridge to run to their aid.

He was stopped by sounds of laughter.

He looked around hoping someone could help, only to notice a group of high school boys laughing and filming the chaos, turning tragedy into entertainment.

The man stared at them, wondering how someone could laugh at another's ruin. He, too, turned his old camera phone on himself and captured a picture with the little burning hut shining to the left of a bushy, scrawny old man across the river.

Behind the house was a steep hill covered with lush green vegetation.

He saw that no help was coming; the town was isolated. Seeing there was nothing he could do, he left the family to fend for themselves.

Dust in homes is comprised of about 20-50% dead skin cells.

Kathie Quinn Yang

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with any luck, it'll all end in a whimper
I don't like to make a big deal of
these things, you know that about me already
I want to go like the dog to sleep, the way
the moon wanes after becoming full, back into newness
the ink off of skin or the skin off of skin

if I'm lucky, there won't be a hullabaloo
about past choices and mistaken worries
I want a funeral like an afternoon tea
sunny days on the porch (or
cloudy days on the porch) rocking
the old chair, back and forth, until you doze off

I want the after to be like any other sunday
not much happening today, just some spring cleaning
tying up loose ends, clearing cobwebs, and I'll leave you
my passwords so the paperwork is a total breeze
another round of dusting the house off and wiping
yourself clean of the dead

“You might as well be a mannequin with a strap-on.”

– Karin Marvel McRae
“The End of Murder”

The End of Murder

Karin Marvel McRae

It first hits you two weeks after your daughter is born, when sleep deprivation and a churned-over schedule have had plenty of time to wear you down. Your wife, on the rare occasions when you both have downtime at the same time, likes to make you watch true crime documentaries with her.

So there was a man who strangled his girlfriend in a fit of rage. Jealousy? Unknown. History of abuse? Not confirmed. Drunk or drug-fueled? No. It might have begun in rape, or progressed to necrophilia—it is known that he ejaculated, but his subsequent clean-up made it impossible to tell at what point.

He did conceal her body, and later dumped it in a lake. But there is remarkable footage of him while she was still dead in the house, maybe still unmoved. The footage, taken at an awkward angle by a neighbor's security camera, shows the man stepping out of his back door and slumping against the wall beside it. His face stretches into a mask of tragedy, and he beats his head back against the brick wall, and then he doubles over with his face buried in his hands and his shoulders shake. Pure regret.

Not remorse. He did, after all, go back inside and do cold, methodical things to the body. But first he had to purge some part of what he'd done.

The editor obviously knows what a fantastic image it is, because it gets repeated in the documentary a few times. The third time, you realize you have a hard-on.

It's probably a coincidence. Certainly an inconvenience. Nothing for your wife, in her still-tattered state, to know.

But these moments keep turning up in these documentaries, usually in jailhouse interviews, but sometimes relayed secondhand by profilers or the narrator: killers' expressions of despair or horror or astonishment or grief. None are quite as strong as that first one. Many are fake—and your radar for

fakery is excellent all of a sudden—but there are enough real ones to form a pattern, and you don't look away.

And they stay with you all day, a slow drip of arousal, as though the air were filled with some sub-vibration of orgone that only you can feel. Your wife is wholly insensitive to it. Not since high school study halls spent hidden in the stacks of the library have you so assiduously cultivated the art of masturbating with unwitting people nearby.

You're not a goblin about it. You still give your forty or forty-eight hours, and twice a week you put on dry-cleaned pants and drive to the office. You brush and floss. You grocery shop. You go on jogs listening to podcasts about ancient Rome, which doesn't *really* count as true crime. And you parent.

At twelve weeks postpartum, your wife gets the go-ahead from her OB/GYN. She's glad you still think she's sexy.

But then your daughter starts sleeping through the night, and you and your wife both start paying off sleep debt, and somehow it causes your circadian rhythms to diverge. You've gone biphasic with no premeditation, sleeping for a few hours in the early morning and a few after work. Your wife now goes to bed at nine. You don't even eat together anymore, except lunch when you're not at the office. You don't watch TV together anymore. The new honeymoon certainly doesn't last.

There are a good four, five hours in the middle of the night when you're effectively all alone.

You try to wean yourself off the crime shows, because it's just too weird. You used to be able to respond to normal things; there must be something in you that still can.

It turns out that porn is repellent. Women are right about it: everything is fake, including the feelings. Occasionally the performers' sense of absurdity breaks through, a stray giggle, a shared knowing look. But it's still not *that* appealing, and it doesn't happen often enough.

Porny books are just as bad.

You try romance novels. The sex in those is better but the plots are still fake enough to ruin it.

It wouldn't be that hard, all things considered, to have an affair. Except you can imagine the fakeness of that, too—one of you (which?) pretending to be in love, the other (which?) pretending it's okay not to be—and that on top of the artifice that dating always entails.

The crime shows are always there. Those moments of authenticity: the catch in the voice, the eyes that look downward or seem to go blank, the single sob before the camera cuts away. You have never seen exactly that emotion in real life.

Maybe a hint of it, on your wife when she was in labor. But better not go there.

No, the real emotion seems to belong exclusively to sensitive people who have killed. And if looking at it can get you this hard—not just hard, but alert: tense, body and soul, with pleasurable longing—then what must it be like to *feel* it?

♥

You let the idea lie there for now. You do still have a life to live. Without the compromise of shared dinners, you're eating a lot fewer carbs; and after the weight loss by itself stops looking good, you start going to the gym.

Two days before her first birthday, your daughter says a word: "Dazzy." She got it from her mother, who calls you "Dadsy" because some possibly trollish friend of hers convinced her that "Daddy" is too sexual to say around a child.

You get a raise. It doesn't come with a new title, but it amounts to a promotion, and your forty or forty-eight hours go up to fifty-six. You're in the office more often, too; you can't just sack out at six every night the way you used to. So your sleep schedule knits together, and once it converges with your wife's again, your sex life comes back online.

But now that feels fake, too. The fakeness is on your end, and it's a vicious cycle: If you ignore her and set your mind hard on those moments of videographed regret, you can just manage to come. But that maneuver shows the whole thing was mentally unreal to begin with, which disgusts you so that all you can do is ignore her …

You might as well be a mannequin with a strap-on.

The baby's two now. Playdates and potty training. She goes through a phase of picking her nose and eating it. She's getting to an age where she repeats things she's overheard and asks what the words mean. If you want to watch a crime show, you have to do it on your phone with your AirPods in.

(Your wife develops a rash on her face. It turns out to be rosacea. She cuts down on dairy and that helps.)

For that matter, you might actually be running out of crime shows. It seems impossible, like reaching the end of the internet. But more and more you're seeing new episodes about the same old cases, and as the perpetrators die off there are fewer new interviews, and when there are clips of old ones (the ones you've seen before), they're increasingly bowdlerized, leaving out anything—despair or horror, astonishment or grief—that might evoke sympathy for a murderer.

You have a dream one night that a demon comes to you. Inside the dream you wake up like Howard Beale and talk to it. It offers you protection. If you kill, you will not be caught. In exchange, or rather as a necessary condition, no one will ever again recognize you or remember your face or your name. If you come back home to your wife, she will think you are a stranger and your child will be afraid of you. But you will not want to come home, anyway, because you also will not remember the names and faces of those you used to love.

It ends, as nightmares tend to, in a brief estuary-moment: you have awakened, but the dream still seems true. You squint at your wife's face, but it's a gray blob in the darkness. You try to recall her name, and it comes to you.

You get up and go out to the corner of the living room that you screened off for an office. There you sequester yourself, mainlining regret clips, coming twice, until it's light out and you can reasonably make breakfast.

By the next day you've forgotten what the dream was about. The day after that, you've almost forgotten you had a bad dream.

But one part stays with you: the knowledge that someday you are going to kill.

♥

The day comes, and it's miserable. The electricity cuts out for two hours late in the afternoon, leaving chicken and caulirice half-baked in the oven and bath towels trapped in the wash. You argue with your wife over a game of Scrabble, and the kid pisses on the sofa somehow. When the lights come back on, nobody feels comfortable reheating the bake, so you have Atkins lasagnas from the freezer instead.

While your wife's in the bathroom taking charge of the handwashing, you retrieve the vial you've been keeping in your briefcase. Luckily, she's one of those psychopaths who puts hot sauce on everything: three bitter drops will vanish under that.

Your daughter gets one drop, which is plenty even if she smears half her dinner on the table. The bitterness shouldn't be a problem for her, either, because she's never had lasagna before and doesn't know what it's supposed to taste like.

It doesn't knock them out so much as make them spontaneously decide it's bedtime.

"I'll clean up," you say, as they head down the hall. The last you see of your daughter is her face over her mom's shoulder, asleep already, eyelashes casting faint shadows down her cheeks.

And you do clean up, because you don't know if you'll be back.

You've got two other things hidden in the briefcase: Money—more than you're likely to need, because you socked most of it away before you had a concrete plan. And, since you'll be out past *your* bedtime, an energy shot.

The only other supplies are already in the trunk of the car.

♥

As soon as you're both inside the motel room, you take out the roll of bills and set it on the nearer of the two nightstands. The idea is to make yourself look both generous, so she'll warm to you, and foolish, so she won't be wary. You have no idea if that's good psychology or not.

You sit on the edge of the bed and slip off your shoes. They're water shoes from the grocery store, never before worn. You pat the spot beside you on the duvet and put on what you hope is a friendly smile. "Come on, have a seat."

She sits and kicks off her heels.

"How have you been doing this evening?" you say.

"Good."

"You ready?"

She smiles. Her lipstick is a dark cherry red. "Sure."

You lean in as though to kiss her, though really you don't want to get any of that lipstick on your face.

Her eyes flutter closed, and then your hands are on her throat.

Her eyes open and she wheezes. She bucks and fights. You can't control her hands, but rolling on top of her takes some of the force out of her kicking. Your crotch presses against hers and you feel the first twinge of the pleasure to come. Her eyes widen; her tongue lolls. Her flailing becomes twitchier, more erratic, but not less strong.

And then she goes slack.

You loosen your hands but keep them in place for a few seconds. Her eyes slide shut. You feel your own pulse pounding heavily in your thumbs. The only breathing you hear is yours.

Wetness touches the top of your pubes. You reel back and stand. She's pissed herself.

Her face is motionless. The lamp on the opposite nightstand throws long shadows of eyelashes down her cheek.

You take a step toward the chair that's next to the dresser, but before you can get there you're sitting on the floor. Your limbs are shaking. Your jaw is shaking. Your heart is shaking.

You could have done anything else. Anything, *anything* else. But instead you did this.

And for what reason? Your dick is as withered as a pulled-out taproot now. You might never use it again.You get *nothing* in return.

You lie back on the floor, closing your eyes against the brassy light, waiting for your legs to feel strong enough to stand again. When they do, you're going to go get the leaf bags and the jumbo storage bin out of the car. And then, when your brain can remember again, you'll do everything else the way you planned.

This is regret. Fine.

It would be easier to crawl to the room telephone and call the police.

But that would be remorse.

You raise one arm off the floor, not sure what you're going to do with it. After a while your hand gets cold and you put it back down.

You stand stiffly and look at her again. Her posture is undignified, legs hanging off the bed and splayed apart, the skirt so short that as you grab her ankles you have to turn your head away.

You shift her to the center of the bed and arrange her limbs as neatly as you can, crossing her ankles, making her ready to be found. The lamps shine on the nightstands on either side. Under one lamp is your money; under the other, the phone.

You sit on the edge of the bed, hand on the cradled receiver, and throw a last look back at her.

Weren't her eyes closed before?

"What the *fuck*, man?" she says. Her voice sounds awful. But she's alive.

You whirl away from the bed, eyes on her, ready to back away.

She levers herself upright. She looks down at the wet spot on her skirt, then up at you, fingers feeling delicately at her throat. "You abusive bastard," she says, matter-of-factly. "You could have killed me. What the hell?"

You watch her: the disheveled hair, the blood coming back into her cheeks, the black-cherry lipstick glistening like tears.

"I've never done this before," you say at last, and your shoulders slump.

She stares at you, motionless except that she's blinking a little fast. Finally she gives a big sigh. "No," she says. "I guess not."

You step around the foot of the bed, keeping your distance, headed for the other nightstand, for the money.

She follows you with her sad, wary gaze.

You grab the whole wad and come back, holding it to her at arm's length, trying not to be a threat. "Here," you say. "You'd better take it all."

She shakes her head. "Just count out what we agreed on, and then go away."

You jerk the money at her again. "For your dress."

"I have a washing machine," she says.

"For lost work, then?" You're pleading. "And maybe a doctor, just in case I hurt you bad?"

She sighs, takes the money, and makes her way shakily off the bed and out of the room.

♥

Outside the apartment building, you sit in the car a long time, looking up at your daughter's window. The nightlight's glowing around the edges of the blinds. Before you go up, you throw your water shoes and new white t-shirt in the dumpster. You don't need to get rid of any evidence, but then again, maybe you do.

Inside, you take a warm shower and crawl into bed beside your wife, glad that it's a big bed, that there's room between you. You don't know what rights you have anymore. But this itself is a privilege, to listen to her breathe.

CONTRIBUTORS



Alyce Lomax (“In the Dark”)’s short fiction has appeared in *Penumbric Speculative Fiction Magazine*, *Macabre Magazine, Gargoyle, Maudlin House, Dark Horses: The Magazine of Weird Fiction, Coffin Bell Journal*, *The MacGuffin*, *Pindeldyboz*, and many others. She has also participated in the Grace and Gravity series, which showcases women writers in the Washington, D.C. area, having first appeared in the *Gravity Dancers* anthology and subsequently featured in its From the Attic project in 2023. Alyce lives in Alexandria, Virginia, with her husband and two cats.

♥



Elsie Raymond (“Hollow Pines”) writes horror and dark speculative fiction influenced by her abiding love for pop culture and genre fiction. From a background in politics and economics, Raymond swerved into creating fiction that pairs complex worlds with unhinged ideas. An alumnus of Viable Paradise, her work has been published in literary magazines, anthologies, and a podcast. Raymond lives on an island in the Pacific Northwest, hunting wild mushrooms and spending too much time reading about the mysteries of the cosmos.



Pushcart Prize-nominated author **Louise Worthington** ("The Support Group Meets in Sandra's Kitchen") writes haunting, psychological narratives and poetry. Her emotionally authentic poetry and flash fiction appear in prestigious literary magazines including *Dream Catcher, Reflex Fiction*, the HWA Poetry Showcases, and *Boston Literary Magazine*. She lives on a farm in the UK with her family. **https://louiseworthington.com/**

♥

J. Kelly ("The Note") is a recently laid-off data analyst using her newfound free time to attempt short fiction. Her previous non-fiction work appears in the *Saudi Voyager Magazine* and various dry and technical annual reports. She looks forward to the first spring blossoms, pomegranate season, and bedtime.





Bruce Thierry Cheung (“Load Bearing”) is a writer and filmmaker based in Los Angeles. His debut feature, *Don’t Come Back from the Moon*, was a *New York Times* Critics’ Pick, and his most recent film as cinematographer, *Drifter*, directed by Sung Kang, premiered at the 2026 Toronto International Film Festival in the Discovery program. His novel-in-progress, *Ash Bone Coal Stone*, won the 2026 Gina Berriault Work-In-Progress Award. His fiction appears or is forthcoming in *34 Orchard, West Trade Review*, and *Fourteen Hills*. Find him at **brucethierry.com**.

♥

William Hall (*The Shallow End*) lives in the tropics by the sea. He loves to game fish, but unlike Hemingway’s Santiago, he’s rather lucky at it.

♥

Cyrus Green (“Memory of Mycelia”) is a scientist and lover of dark fiction. As a paleontologist, he digs up long-dead bodies, but he is usually burying a few new ones in his fiction. He is a member of the New England Horror Writers and lives in the Boston area with his girlfriend and their amazingly cute cat.





Eric J. Guignard ("It Clucks with Abandon") is a writer and anthologist of dark and speculative fiction, operating from the shadowy outskirts of Los Angeles. He's twice won the Bram Stoker Award, won the Shirley Jackson Award, and been a finalist for the World Fantasy Award and International Thriller Writers Award. His latest book is the collection of short stories, *A Graveside Gallery: Tales of Ghosts and Dark Matters* (Cemetery Dance). Visit Eric at: **www.ericjguignard.com** or elsewhere via **linktr.ee/eric_j._guignard**.

♥

Sunayna Pal ("Being Polite")'s poetry graces the pages of numerous international journals, anthologies, museums, poetry festivals, textbooks, and libraries, resonating with readers worldwide. Her debut book, *Refugees in Their Own Country* (B&W Fountain), narrates the Partition of India through verse and illustrations. Her second book, *Please Go to the Park* (Bottlecap Press), is an invitation to embark on a journey of self-discovery. As the Director of The Poetry Academy, Sunayna nurtures a deep appreciation for poetry in others. She is dedicated to Heartfulness meditation. For a deeper insight into her work and journey, please visit **sunaynapal.com**. She lives in Maryland with her family.



Avery Zappone (“The Scarecrow”) was a 2025 Nook Farm Writers Collaborative at The Mark Twain House & Museum apprentice, and has her writing featured in the program's literary magazine, *Journey 75.* She is a senior at Miss Porter's School, and serves as a staff writer for the school's newspaper, *Salmagundy.* In her spare time, Avery likes playing lacrosse, field hockey, and reading.

♥



Raymond Brunell (“The M-Mode Trace”) writes literary horror and speculative fiction that examines grief, complicity, and the spaces where measurement fails. His work has appeared in *Necessary Fiction, River and South Review*, *The Drift, Flash Fiction Magazine, Across the Margin, Horrific Scribes, TrashLight Press, Skeleton Flowers Press, Moss Puppy Magazine,* and elsewhere, with new work forthcoming at *The Rebis*. He is pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing at Southern New Hampshire University and lives in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.
More at **www.unbound-atlas.com**.



Brenna Monaghan Behel (Staff Contributing Artist/*Disruption*) is an award-winning photographer who first picked up a camera at the age of fifty-two. A graduate of Trinity College, DC, her career has taken her from serving in the military to operating a pipeline before discovering that her true passion lies in art. Her photography has been featured in *V2M: The Veteran Magazine, Virginia Conservation Network's Agenda Briefing Book,* and *Beautiful York County* calendars. Her work has also placed or won at the Gloucester Daffodil Festival, the Yorktown Arts Foundation Veterans Art show, and several photo competitions. Her current project, *70-over-70*, celebrates senior citizens by capturing their stories, strength, and individuality through portraiture. She is available for portrait shoots, and her work can be found on Facebook, Instagram, and at **b2portraits.com**.

♥



Jack Powers ("Human Bottleneck") is the author of two poetry collections: *Everybody's Vaguely Familiar* (2018) and *Still Love* (2023). His poems have appeared in *The Southern Review, Rattle* and *Salamander.* His fiction has appeared in *Abyss & Apex, Flash Fiction Magazine* and *Fiction on the Web*. He won the 2026 Maureen Egen Writers Exchange Award for Fiction from Poets & Writers Magazine, the 2015 and 2012 *Connecticut River Review* Poetry Contests and was a finalist for the 2013 and 2014 *Rattle* Poetry Prizes. His work has been nominated for the Pushcart and Best of the Net Prizes. Learn more at **https://www.jackpowers13.com/**.

Kaitlyn Downing (“A Fairy Tale”)—part fairy, part mermaid, and part cat—lives in Florida with her husband and four cats, though her soul inhabits her pool or her garden when she’s not teaching English. Most recently, her work has appeared in *The Hemlock, 34 Orchard, Corner Bar, Club Plum* and *The Wise Owl*, among others. Kaitlyn has a both a BA and MAT in English, and currently teaches at Pasco Hernando State College in Florida. Links to her published work are on her website at **https://kaitlyndowning.com/**



♥



Born in France, **Yvette (Eve) Naden** (“Pallbearers”) is a writer based in the UK. She graduated with a degree in English from the University of York. Her work has been featured in *The Roadrunner Review* and *The Elmbridge Literary Magazine*, and she won the Zealous Short Story Competition in 2021. In 2025, she won the Creative Future Award and was shortlisted for the New2theScene Novel Prize. Diagnosed with autism and ADHD in 2024, she works as a neurodiversity ambassador within the Civil Service. One day, she hopes to become a published novelist. When she isn't writing, she spends her time baking inedible brownies and knitting scarves no one asked for.

♥

RJ Aurand (“Blossom End-Rot”) is a southern Appalachian writer, poet, and lover of the bizarre whose work has appeared in *The Deadlands*, *manywor (l)ds*, *s(c)rawl*, *Small Wonders*, and others. Connect on Bluesky **@rjaurand.bsky.social** or at **rjaurand.com**.

Michael Takeda (*Hourglass*) is not only a writer of speculative fiction that has been called "dark" by *Publishers Weekly,* he is an artist and illustrator. His art and illustrations have been featured in and on the covers of many publications, including Trisha J. Wooldridge's collection *Where Monsters Pray* and the anthology *Darkness Most Fowl*. He has also worked as a translator and teacher of English and Italian language and cinema, completed two degrees in Italian literature, holds a master's degree in Nursing, and has published various novels and other fictions. He currently lives in Worcester, Massachusetts where he serves as Editor-in-Chief of Pink Narcissus Press. Follow his art and illustrative work on Instagram **@theoctoporium** or visit his Etsy shop to get a print of your own at **https://www.etsy.com/shop/TheOctoporium**

♥

Ayush Pokheral ("The Town in the Sky") is a twenty-three-year-old writer based in Nepal. He writes about things people don't want to talk about—things that make them uncomfortable and things they refuse to witness, choosing instead to close their eyes or turn their heads away. He doesn't. He believes that if we are willing to witness happiness, joy, and peace, we must also be willing to witness sadness, sorrow, and violence. Both are part of this world, and neither should be ignored.



♥

Kathie Quinn Yang ("Dust in homes is comprised of about 20-50% dead skin cells.") (she/they) was born in Massachusetts, studied in Boston, and hasn't yet found a reason to leave the the foggy, damp days of New England. Published in *Acedia Journal* and *Spectrum Magazine*, they hope to embody both a woman in STEM and a man of letters.

Karin Marvel McRae ("The End of Murder") is a horror writer from Dayton, Ohio.

♥

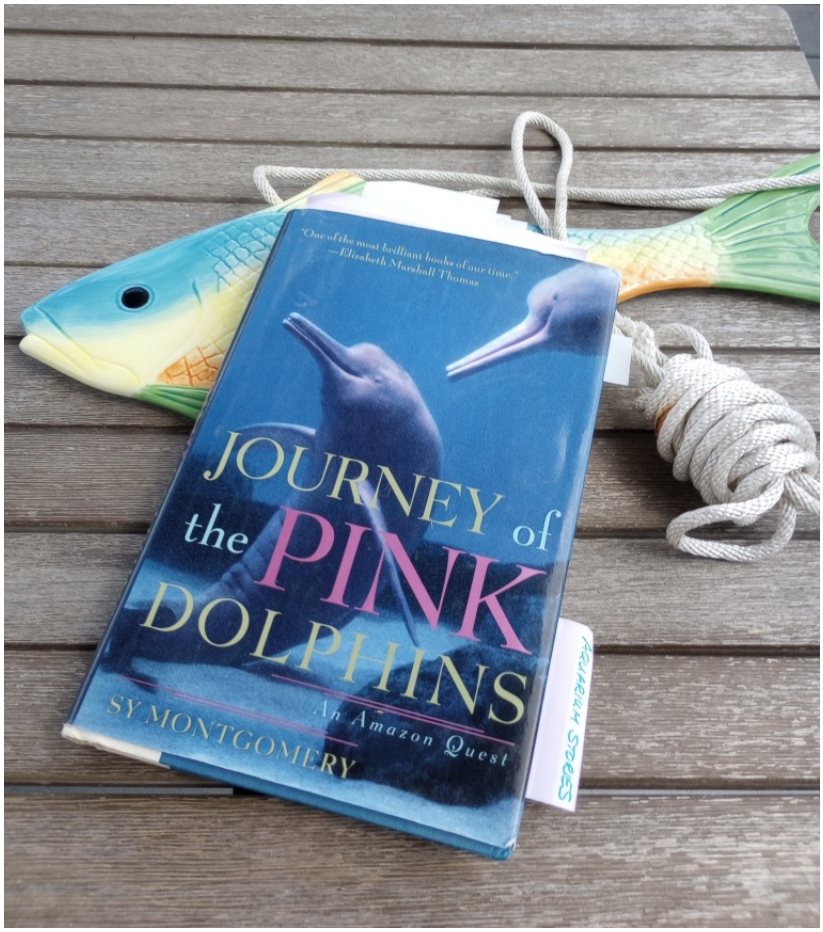


Stacy Horn (**Cover Art:** *Santa Walkup*) is the author of non-fiction books including *Damnation Island: Poor, Sick, Mad & Criminal in 19th Century New York* and *The Restless Sleep: Inside New York City's Cold Case Squad. Damnation Island*, described on The Bowery Boys podcast as "your page-turning horror read for the summer," turned out to be excellent preparation for the horror read she was to write next, *The Killing Fields of East New York: The First Subprime Mortgage Scandal, a White-Collar Crime Spree, and the Collapse of an American Neighborhood.*

Editor's Note: *If you are a fan of all things New York City, I invite you to sign up for Stacy's blog and follow her work here:* ***https://stacyhorn.com/***

34 Orchard

recommends the creative nonfiction



Sometimes we have to dive unfamiliar waters

While naturalist Sy Montgomery is known for the exceptionally touching, perspective-changing *The Soul of an Octopus*; before that, there was the eloquent, poetically-penned *Journey of the Pink Dolphins*. While octopuses are so commonly known they're often depicted on everything from housewares to beach towels, the just-as-intelligent, mysterious pink dolphins of the Amazon would be lucky if they found themselves drawn on the sole of a shoe. While that's part of the reason why Montgomery went in search of these enigmatic creatures, this book is well more than just a tale of scientific exploration. Montgomery discovers that these beings aren't just residents of the jungle; they are part of the landscape, the culture, the very rhythm of daily life itself. This exquisitely-written masterpiece illustrates the secret to successful conservation doesn't lie in forceful action, but in empathy and understanding—and we couldn't put this down.

This recommendation for readers is the opinion of the *34 Orchard* staff and is not a paid endorsement.

34 Orchard

recommends the poetry collection



IMMERSION IN HUMANITY'S DARKEST MOMENTS

***34 Orchard* was fortunate enough to feature "1963 (september whitecaps whip up in the bay)" in our Spring 2026 issue, ahead of the publication of Kate LaDew's stunning—and visceral—collection. Reading these is immersive time travel: we stand next to Joan of Arc on her pyre, hear Kennedy beg Judy Garland for a song, helplessly witness the death of the last great auk. This slim volume is not an assemblage of works, but a tapestry woven around a single thread; it flows well as a whole, and carries astonishing weight. It isn't just to be read, but absorbed, and will stay with you long after you've lingered over its last lines. If you're a fan of the gut-wrenching story-based poems we feature here at *34 Orchard*, LaDew's debut is for you.**

This recommendation for readers is the opinion of the *34 Orchard* staff and is not a paid endorsement.

34 Orchard
recommends the films



Cobweb (2023)

A friend recommended this film, citing it as "a very old-school ghost story, but actually scary in the way you like." She was right: it's real-world scary—bullying, gaslighting, fight-or-flight, trapped in life circumstances and everything else in this world that preys on us every day at the root. And it gets major points for its atmospheric imagery (for example, the rotting pumpkins are a little less abandoned property and more tainted earth). But what we love most is the way it plays with expectations—if there's a movie which holds true to the theme of "everything is not what it seems," this is it—although, fair warning, even what the viewer *thinks* is happening isn't where it goes. And the ending? It'll haunt you forever.

House of Spoils (2024)



A sous chef trades a secure position in bustling New York City to head her own restaurant upstate—only to discover that she might have been wise to accept her boss' offer of a doubled salary instead. While we're often taught "if we seize and pursue our dreams, we'll go far," this Blumhouse Original's excellent script, acting, and atmosphere is about being haunted—less by a ghost, more by our own failures, challenging us to seriously consider the cost of dreams and whether or not the chase is always better than just plain old stability. It's also an excellent rendering of what can happen when we want something so badly our anxieties spiral out of control and we fall prey to imposter syndrome. Extra points for the "haunted restaurant" setting—because most of the time we only get to see that in ghost hunting reality shows—and stomach-churning rotten food moments.

This recommendation for readers is the opinion of the *34 Orchard* staff and is not a paid endorsement.

34 Orchard
recommends the films



Space Shuttle Columbia: The Final Flight (2024)

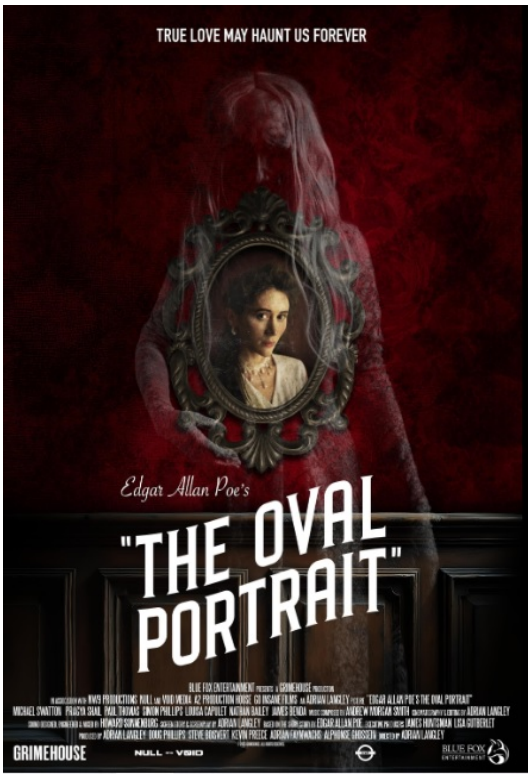
In early 2003—when the country was still raw from 9/11—space shuttle *Columbia* broke up on reentry over Nagadoches, Texas. While there are many documentaries chronicling this accident and its causes, few—if any—up until this one relive the trauma in heartbreaking detail through interviews with the astronauts' parents, spouses, and—in the most shattering of all—(now grown) sons and daughters; NASA staff members, reporters, and witnesses on the ground. This four-part entry is the emotional side of the story, and reminds us disasters may fade from the headlines, but never in the hearts of those affected.

Together (2025)

This raw, intense ride through the rollercoaster that is a young couple's relationship is rendered within a framework cosmic horror fans will love (can't reveal much or we'll spoil it). The gore, which is only enough to get the point across where necessary, is toe-curling, and there are some unforgettable "Colour Out of Space" visuals. But anyone who's been in an unbalanced romantic situation should respond to this film, which questions what it means to exist with or without love, how it shapes our identities, what we're really giving up and is it worth what we get in return. The ending is also one of the most unexpected twists we've ever seen, and might leave you questioning whether or not "toxic" is really just an opinion.



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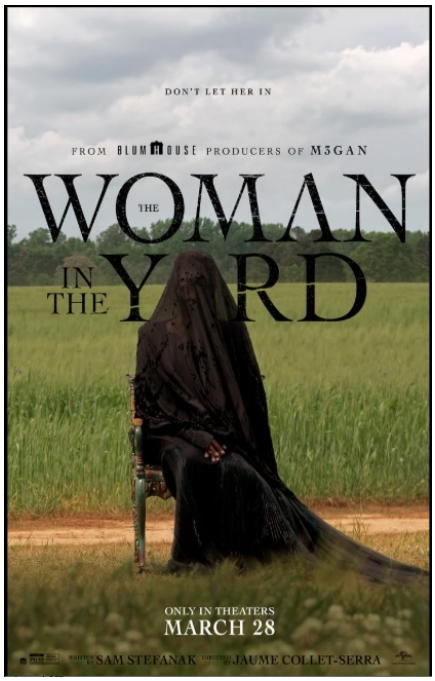


Edgar Allan Poe's "The Oval Portrait" (2025)

"The Oval Portrait" is a favorite tale by Poe, and only in recent years has it started getting more attention. This story, which hovers around a thousand words, is more of a description than an actual piece (I've often wondered, although it was published and I have no supporting evidence for this, if it was something Poe later meant to expand); still, it's a gut-punch sketch of the sacrifices we make for obsession and art. Many creators—including this *34O* Founding Editor—have used this "snapshot" to build a new tale, and this film, which debuted at 2025's H.P. Lovecraft Film Festival, tops the list. While it's loaded with indie charm, the script is clear and inventive, the special effects are high-end, and its score is big-budget sweeping and grand (and is available to purchase on Amazon—if you're looking for a Gothic movie score to create to, grab this, *stat*!). Above all—it's sad; have tissues at the ready for the ending. Want to read the original before seeing the film? You can read it for free as a PDF here: **https://loa-shared.s3.us-west-2.amazonaws.com/static/pdf/Poe_Oval_Portrait.pdf**

The Woman in the Yard (2025)

Ripe with genuinely terrifying moments, this tale is an accurate, painful depiction of a woman struggling to cope in the wake of her husband's death. While there's definitely a tonal shift at about the halfway point that pulls us away from the film's titular character and is often cited as a major fault, in this case, that's not a reason to avoid this fresh, original horror piece that defies same-old, and is a provocative study on how much we ruin when we fail to move past our grief and trauma.



This recommendation for readers is the opinion of the *34 Orchard* staff and is not a paid endorsement.

COMING APRIL 25, 2027

In Issue 15, artists mull over what it means to be broken.
Here's a glimpse of what that looks like.



"Out in Apache Junction, it was better to be tough and not care. When you didn't care, it was almost like the bad stuff didn't really happen."
Andrew Maust
"The Boneman of Apache Junction"

♥

"With every stroke, I told myself I was erasing fingerprints, smoothing over screams, sealing up memories."

Alexandra Tait
"Still Wet."

♥

"Even here, halfway across the country and nestled beneath the safety of skyscrapers, I still dream of lights in the night sky."

C. Payne
"Daddy Doesn't Raise Cattle Anymore"

♥

"Prudence, the girl who sits next to me in homeroom, says she was glad the 'mancers all died … Prudence has the popular opinion in our school. I keep my opinions to myself."

David Farrow
"The Wicker Girl"

♥

Cover Art by David Nickle ♥ Interior Art by Brandon Kawashima

Welcome to the house where no superglue is miraculous enough.
Welcome to *34 Orchard*.

COMING SOON!

A Cosmic Western Serial
by
C.R. Langille



At *34 Orchard*, we believe westerns endure because they remind us the most dangerous, forlorn and savage frontier is actually inside each of us.

With that in mind, *34 Orchard* is pleased and proud to announce we've commissioned C.R. Langille to write us a four-episode western serial which will appear across our 2027 and 2028 issues!

Langille's stories have been widely published, and she's also taken her deep love for weird and creepy tales and poured it into Timber Ghost Press, a Utah-based independent publisher of multi-genre dark books. You can learn more about her here: **https://www.crlangille.com/about-cr-langille--press-kit.html.**

While it might seem like a ways off, the first installment'll be here faster than a jackrabbit on a date. Want a little taste? Langille's work has graced our pages in the past—she is the voice behind Issue 4's "Rocky Mountain Hocus" and Issue 11's "It's Electric." Read them both at the links below.

"Rocky Mountain Hocus": **https://34orchard.com/issues/issue-4/**

"It's Electric": **https://34orchard.com/issue-11/**

Photo Credit: *David H. West,* 34 Orchard *Staff/Boothill Graveyard, Tombstone, Arizona, 2023*



The twenty-one artists of Issue 14
absorb the nature of shock.

Stacy Horn ♥ Alyce Lomax
Elsie Raymond ♥ Louise Worthington
J. Kelly ♥ Bruce Thierry Cheung
William Hall ♥ Cyrus Green
Eric J. Guignard ♥ Sunayna Pal
Avery Zappone ♥ Raymond Brunell
Brenna Monaghan Behel ♥ Jack Powers
Kaitlyn Downing ♥ Eve Naden
RJ Aurand ♥ Michael Takeda
Ayush Pokheral ♥ Kathie Quinn Yang
Karin Marvel McRae

Welcome to the house where the shaking's over ...
but the settling has just begun.
Welcome to *34 Orchard*.