



FICTION.



TOAST

Makayla Sileo

Most days Grace did not mind that her dad didn't exist. She didn't even seem to mind how her mom was pretending to be one from two states away. But today the heater broke. The house was as irritable as usual, clothed in wallpaper from the '70s, rooms swollen with knick-knacks from her grandmother's uneventful life. When her grandmother passed seven months ago, she left a void, a void that was quickly stuffed with unpaid electricity bills from a log mansion deep in a Missourian forest. The forest forgave often but the house refused to, and this made the days long for Grace.

When she got to the house, the sun was setting and draped shadows over everything but the tips of the towering pines. In the distance the school bus gurgled away, taking half a dozen high schoolers and their immaturities with it. Grace clenched her fingers sluggishly, the cold already persistent as she walked from the road to the house. She walked around the back, tripping over rusting gardening tools until she reached the back door. The quieting buzz of Missourian insects alluded that winter was approaching quickly, a whisper for Grace to find shelter somewhere, anywhere, and to do so quickly. The garage was dark and cluttered, lined with shelves of paint thinner and broken pots and her grandfather's large rubber boots. Though she'd never met him, she had loved her grandmother, and so she loved him by default. Grace kicked something away that clattered as she tranquilized the memory of her grandmother and tucked it into a darker place to rest. The garage hadn't changed in the six months Grace had lived there, and although she hated the musty weight of dusty shelves and disuse, she felt understood by the room. It opened into the kitchen, though Grace never stayed there long. *That's where the people gather, Grace.* She plucked this thought from her mind with false indifference and tucked it below her ribs. *You need people to gather.* Her stomach grumbled.

Grace abandoned her backpack and phone on a counter which was still decorated by stale coffee rings and toast crumbs from the morning. She found a soured rag but she cleaned the counter anyways, making a mental note, *Google how to get mold out of dish rags.* She stepped into the pantry. She was thankful it was empty. It usually was, due to a lack of time or something like that, but she checked four or five times after school, as if her mom had suddenly returned from her job in Oklahoma, or as if her grandma was home baking cookies, not lying beneath a cheap headstone. Grace was held up by empty shelves, the single lightbulb dimmer now, 'light' still idling on the grocery list from where she scribbled it a week ago. Behind her, the kitchen frowned deeper, slowly digesting the room and everything in it, which wasn't much because the girl was alone. It was a familiar and prideful hollowness. She collected her AP chemistry book, a glass of water, and shuffled through what should be the living room.

The house settled as Grace paused at the bottom of the stairs. She climbed one floor, two floors, three floors, the hallway parting with cranky sighs with each of her steps. She found herself in her room. The bed stretched from wall to wall and was dressed in a tired duvet that no longer smelled of home. It had been too long. The room was small, but it was hers. Through the walls, the crickets harmonized and Grace put on another sweatshirt and listened. The sound swallowed the house and the girl too. Grace began to hum along, but the sound was tired and she swelled with emotion, quickly collecting herself in embarrassment as if someone was watching. *No one is watching.* The crickets listened. *No one is here.* Grace had never really minded being alone except solitude was no longer a choice. Solitude was an obligation.

She rose from her bed, grasping her other arm to keep the chills out, and flicked on the bathroom light. To the left was an outdated bath and shower, the toilet to her right, and in front of her, the mirror. A girl stood in the reflection. In the mirror, she watched herself. She was average in height, with long legs and thighs that touched. She had grown into her womanhood at the age of 14 and she blamed her wide hips for her early isolation. She turned to the side and quietly cringed at her lovehandles. With both hands around her waist, she measured how close to her belly button both her fingers reached. *Not close enough.* Behind her, the house stirred as it cooled. Grace wrapped her thumbs and index fingers around her thigh, just above the knee, where she knew her leg measured 18 centimeters around. Slowly she slid her hands upwards, all the while keeping her thumb and fingers locked in a circle; she stopped when her fingers spread, indicating her thighs changed diameter. With her fingernail, she scratched a line into her fat, a centimeter higher than the one before and the one before that. *Eighteen centimeters is all I want.*

Her face was very Irish, delicate and pale, with freckles scattered across her cheeks. She glowed, not from joy or health, but from transparency; skin so sallow she sometimes wondered if she might melt in the bathtub like tissue paper in water. Most nights, this wonder becomes a quiet and demanding desire and so one day in August, Grace broke off the bathtub spout. *Showers only, Grace.* There was no hot water and so it didn't really make sense to bathe anyways. *It's for your own good.* In the mirror, her eyes met the gaze of eyes as complicated and green as the forest that spanned in every direction. Apart from her eyes, she was plain, and her mind never let her forget it.

Grace looked absent-mindedly, not quite there but not quite gone. *Maybe this is all there is.* She'd grown used to the idea that life was just a series of lame attempts to cope with existence. As a kid, she was raised in movement. Without a permanent sense of home, independence and

isolation felt inexorable yet somewhat desired. She attended seven schools within three years and didn't gain many friends or memories along the way. After a few years of living life on a roulette wheel, Grace stopped crossing her fingers that her chances would improve. *Grace, you know this, bad events are independent. Just because you get 'bad' every day before doesn't increase your statistical chances of getting 'good' any day after.* Grace and her mom were compelled to become friends because they were all each other had. They often bickered in the car because each new city and apartment and job was one more reason to keep distant and that somehow that felt safer. Grace found separation to be the only asset of change. *The less time in one place, the less to attach to, the less to lose, the less to hurt.* She sought safety and though her mom worked three jobs at any given moment to provide some sense of this, it never seemed to manifest. As Grace mulled over this thought, she flicked off the bathroom light. She loved her mom. *I love my mom.* But her mom wasn't there.

Grace's mom found a partially stable job in Oklahoma back in January. So when Grace's grandmother passed in March with lots of land and no other children to tend to it, Grace was promoted to the lonliest of positions. At 16, she was solely entrusted with a million dollar log cabin to live in while her mom remained in Oklahoma. It was an impulsive and desperate decision, but Grace didn't spite her mom for making it. She assumed physical distance wouldn't have that great of an impact; a drop of water into the ocean wasn't as detectable as adding a drop of water into a half-filled glass. The same was true for loneliness.

The night was full now. Somewhere in the distance the forest was shifting. Grace hadn't ventured into it since she was a tomboy, but she was content avoiding whatever lurked there that her kid self hadn't seemed to mind. The trees were untouched and mossy with roots spurting out of the ground. They often tripped little tomboys trying to run through. Through the window, Grace could see dark silhouettes plastered on even darker backgrounds. The vastness chirped louder. She could never find silence. Even when she was little, she found herself submerged in her own mind, asking herself the questions that no one could answer because she never spoke them. And while she explored both thought and forest, she wasn't searching for knowledge; she was searching for perfection. Everywhere that her life felt incomplete was a means for her to alter herself to fill in the cracks. *My existential and uncalled for obligation.* Though, with enough time, Grace morphed into so many different people that she was unable to trace her way back or remember if back was where it was better. Somewhere in the mix, she shed her tomboy spirit for porcelain, and any smudge or crack made her worthless. *Place me on a shelf,* she thought. *Look at me but never come close.* She scoffed. *Ain't that what you did, dad?* Her jaw hardened around that thought, *didn't even have to meet me to shatter me.* She couldn't decide if it was worse to hate someone you'd never met or to be begrudgingly adopted and carted around by your own mother. That's why she hated her father: not for abandoning her, but for abandoning her with a mom that wasn't particularly interested in her daughter. Grace couldn't blame her. The roulette wheel spun faster.

She opened the window, not to breathe in the fresh air, but rather, to avoid looking at her reflection. The air was fully cooled now but the house continued to adjust to the onset of darkness. The floorboards fidgeted underneath Grace's feet as she sat on the bed, still looking out the window. Something felt missing in her ribs. It wasn't a sudden sadness, but the cumulation of too many nights spent alone in a log mansion in the middle-of-nowhere Missouri.

All she could do was sigh. The house responded with a mechanical yawn as dusty as a Texan drawl, and after a sudden clang deep in the house, Grace perked up in fear or curiosity or maybe hope. The old house was falling apart. *You and me both,* she thought. Maybe the house was growing on her after all. *We could be friends.* With bare feet and her chemistry textbook in hand, she trotted down to the first floor, careful to skip the third step from the bottom which was caked in splinters. She peered around to see if something had fallen or a pipe had burst, but everything was as normal as it could be. *This is the part where the murderer comes out of nowhere, isn't it?* Grace giggled slightly, buoyed by black humor. *Maybe my murderer would stay for a cup of tea.* The faucet patted with its usual and torturous leak. The light cast a murky haze over everything and only then did Grace realize just how ugly the old house was. It was made of dust and pipes and books that would never be read and paintings that were beautiful but briefly noticed.

Humph. After another skeptical glance around the kitchen, Grace settled on the couch to do work and wait for whatever her gut said was about to happen. But she felt no fear. Within three minutes, the house cried out again, this time ending with a bloody screech. *Fuck.* Total darkness slapped Grace in the face like a familiar abuse. She was absorbed in a thick, black, stale air while her flashlight taunted her from two stories above. A chill caressed her spine.

Grace attempted to navigate out of the room by memory, but when memory failed, crawling followed. Now on all fours, she bumped her way into the kitchen. Her foot caught on a cord and a small table lamp clattered and shattered around her, as if verifying that Grace will be without light tonight. Two steps up, pivot to the right, she reverted to her toddler years where everything was to be learned, except now, everything unseen was a threat. The stairwell greeted her with a thud. One, two, four, *how many stairs are there?* She never thought to pay attention to these things. *Maybe you really don't see until you're blind.* Two flights of stairs later, Grace surfaced on the third floor embarrassed to be so uneasy by such a thing as darkness. Since there was nothing better to do, Grace fell into a brief and numbing sleep.

When morning awoke, Grace could see her breath. Frost licked the floorboards and her eyebrows and it was then that she wondered if her mom had told her what number to call when things broke. Grace buried herself in layers of clothing and went about her morning, assuring she wouldn't miss the bus. She flicked on the bathroom light by habit. Nothing happened. She showered in the familiar but worse cold water, shivered herself into her clothing, and stared at a partially frosty, partially foggy mirror. Nothing but shapes and colors could be seen in this state and for once, Grace felt beautiful. *Today I will have toast.*

As she descended the stairs, she discovered that the heat had only gone out on the third level. Feeling proud to still have two-thirds of a working house to come home to, Grace congratulated herself by allowing a bit of peanut butter too. For today, and today only, Grace allowed toast to be more important than 18 inch ideals. She was convinced that she had earned fuel by enduring a power outage, and she ate the toast furiously. *Maybe everything is going to be okay.*

After school, Grace fiddled with her phone before calling her mom. "Hi mom. The power went out. Yep, no lights. No, you didn't show me where the switch is. It's where? Why is it in the wall of the pantry? But there are black recluses everywhere. No, I don't have gloves. Okay, I'll try it. Talk later? Oh. Maybe another time, then." She hung up and fell away from herself for a moment. It was her and a long wooden spoon against the darkness and the cold and crawlers in the pantry wall. While on all fours, Grace reached for a hastily cut out part of the wall, no more than a foot by a foot, and stuck the spoon in. It caught on the switch and she jerked her hand up to flip the lever. As she did so, she wondered if she was allowed to hope. When it fully flipped, the world remained as it was the moment before. Dark.

Nighttime was arriving again, so Grace hurried to the second floor before it was pitch black. She tucked herself into her new room on the second floor. Her eyes were beginning to adjust to the lack of light but she wasn't sure how temporary this situation was. The thought spooked her. *Come home, mom.*

Morning came, school passed, evening settled in. But when Grace went to study on the second floor, there was an eerie bite to the air. *Another heater broken.* Her skin was unprepared and so she went to bed without dinner to escape the cold.

The days passed similarly, and it wasn't until four days later that the last heater broke. The house had given up and Grace's mom had never called. Winter was approaching and appeared unforgiving, and Grace was falling further from herself. She ate bread now on the days that she ate, because the toaster became useless the day the last darkness came. No one was there to keep her warm or fed, and while she shivered constantly, she relished in the freedom from judgment. It was a paradoxical existence, a drive for something she couldn't have but didn't want. Some nights, when the darkness had settled in and there was nothing more than the beam of her flashlight, she would look in the mirror and whisper, *"I just want to be your friend."*

The house never warmed. Days became weeks, and as the log mansion in nowhere-Missouri grew colder, desperation set in. After school, Grace would turn on her electric blanket and light a candle and undress. She opened the windows more often now, again not for the air, but for warmth. It was 25 degrees outside, but colder within, and so she let the outdoors warm her room while she showered. She would shower for as long as she could endure the piercing water, often a minute at the most. She choked on air as it numbed her further. Then she'd stumbled over splintered floors to her electric blanket, paralyzed by chill or hunger or surrender, and fell into a deep sleep, where she was grateful that she couldn't consciously acknowledge the world.

Grace accidentally went days without speaking to anyone. She'd eat bread but refused herself more. She existed too many days without hope or kindness. And at some point it all became routine. Most nights she would whisper to whatever would listen, but even the crickets refused to hear her sorrow. *Is this what I deserve?* She grew angry some nights, but often fell into resignation. Consistent anger would have been better. Anger was better than emptiness and she knew this because Grace was starved.

When December came, so did her mom. While she felt something resembling excitement, she was cautious. Grace dreaded the caloric home cooked meals and unenthusiastic *"how are yous"* that she brought. *No more starving.* She rolled her eyes. *Great.* On Saturday she heard a knock on the back door, and weaved through the living room where no-one lived, through the kitchen that fed the demons in her head, past her grandfather's old work boots, and her grandmother's memory. She sighed at the door, unprepared for what to say to the person that loved Grace so conditionally. Another day, another spin to the roulette wheel that Grace couldn't stop losing too, another piece of toast to rest her worth on, another night shivering in an old log mansion in Missouri. *Maybe another body will warm this house into a home,* Grace wondered. She wanted love but knew that her mom gave it randomly and sparingly. *Maybe today is different.*

Grace opened the door. *"I'm cold, Mama."*

THE GARDEN'S COMET

Kenlie Roher

The old man threw me out on the porch, swamped in sky and summer and the folds of pink fabric he always made me wear. It could've been yellow, or pea-stalk green, but the fabric was always sun bleached and faded and it was never as bright as it could have been. I always wanted it to be a red dress, something where the color was so lush that you could have seen it from anywhere. But we never grew roses, and so I never even had anything similar to a red dress.

As soon as she heard the boards clatter under all that fabric, Sissy came running out from the boarded up house, probably with something like a tea kettle and pot stove, a few washcloths... and for what? She could've been carrying something along the lines of a large pot of every-flower, sprigs of green-blue and braided grass hanging down from her shirtfront. Or she could've been holding a baby, her baby, someone's baby, clinging on to everywhere, with blue-green skin glimmering against the light from the moon.

Old Man and Sissy and her not-baby stood out in front of me on that rickety porch, the one that didn't even have a swing. I felt like some sort of stupid maiden, laying in my puffy skirts like it was blood and guts, all because I couldn't find the decency in me to move.

The morning creatures stirred around the land, frothing up and down out of the blue grass like all of that bubbly water swirling about in Sissy's pot stove. The cicadas and the locusts that once buried this house knew we had to leave, and they were ready to reclaim what was theirs.

We were bathed in a glowing summer season, but the entire world glinted purple, because the sky had taken to changing colors at night. Nobody could really see that far, so no one ever knew why. No one questioned it; because how could you? The sky just glinted like the firmly pressed opal that danced on my finger, but was there anything to show for it? No, and there never would be.

But there was the comet. It hadn't quite been in the papers, other than those old loons at the gossip corner writing up a storm until their fingers bled. That's why nobody believed it until the professor in town made the telescope, and he showed us a big blurring picture of what we assumed was our universe, or somewhere between where we were and where God was, hiding. I had waited in line all night to look into that telescope and see what I saw. I was wearing a white dress, and the wind finally took up as soon as I got up there, whipping around my thin skirts so that they stuck, plastered to my body like the stench of dead skunk.

As soon as I peered through that telescope, I saw a bunch of blobs and blurs and colors and shapes. But I looked past all that, and I looked for someplace that you could maybe make yourself believe was heaven, but I didn't see anything. Hadn't I looked?

I was looking for something that looked like a pillar of white clouds, but by the time I remembered I didn't know where clouds came from, my dress was wrapped up over my head and I heard everyone behind me howling with the wind, a terrible laughter. I felt bad for looking at heaven, and I scuttled away, no better than a rat from the gutter, my face a beaten red, and looking no lovelier, though they always wanted me to be.

At the house, we knew the comet was coming, but we didn't really think twice about it. Maybe it was fear, of being swallowed by the unknown, of going past God. We didn't know, and we didn't dare ask, because something told us that just by the church being closed, with the windows boarded up, that the nuns were going to board the comet too. We knew they were in there, and we heard them and their legs scuttling around like bugs trying to get everything ready. We wondered if they'd packed the Bible, or if it really even mattered anymore. Maybe they'd tell us we were all trying to get to heaven, and this was just the easiest way. I always thought that God didn't want us to go the easiest way, but that was before I realized I'd never even touched a Bible, and wouldn't be able to read one if I had the chance.

I wondered if the nuns would teach me how to read, when we were on board the comet, with our boxes and bags and trunks all wound up with what-stuff, with Sissy's baby and her pot stove and washcloths and her full bouquet of flowers that would've probably tilted over and wilted by now.

I thought of all this as I watched the rain start, lying there on the porch in a huge dress, that I all but wondered how I had got put in it in the first place. This rain wasn't the kind any of us had ever experienced, and it certainly wouldn't be good for the crops. The people in the town would've wailed for days after their lost money, but now, they had packed all their roots up into a case, stuffed their carrots and potatoes into hat boxes, and were ready to ascend whatever staircase was placed in front of us, that is, to board the comet.

"When will it come?" Sissy asked Old Man as the landscape began to blend and blur around us. The rain was liquid, but it was heavy, more dense than the bricks of yellow cornbread Sissy always baked in loaves. It looked the color of honey, dripped sticky like the draining of maple syrup from a tree. I wondered if this was revenge. It looked of melted amber, of vaporized stars falling from the darkness of nowhere. It felt like the beginning and the end of the world all at the same time.

And then it was there, submerged in the ruined corner of our string-bean patch, the mud thrown up against the rain, splattered against the shuddering wooden house and all of us, drenching my dress in sand, water, and splitting beans. I couldn't help but cry out for the ruin of the dress in spite of myself, but the fear got caught in my throat; everyone from town was flooding onto our land, their lives packed up and shut away, all heading to our destroyed vegetable patch. I saw the professor and the nuns, and all the girls from the grammar school that had always laughed at me with pastel baskets strapped onto their heads, as if they had come from another planet themselves. They all ran towards the comet like their lives depended on it, the comet upended in our garden. All I could do was stare as they passed me by.

Sissy and Old Man had gotten mixed in with the crowd, and soon I was sure that everyone was on board except for me. I still couldn't bring myself to move, watery tears of disbelief collecting in my eyes. I couldn't see straight, and I tripped and fell into the mud as I ran towards the comet, the sludge collecting in my hair. My dress was a torn brown.

"Wait!" I tried to scream, but the rain coursed down my throat. I was almost certain it was too late.

Then, an arm, extending, alien-like and solid from the base of the comet.

At first, I thought I was seeing God for the first time, but it was the arm of the professor, his glasses splayed, his normally neat comb-over flying wildly in all directions, fraternizing with the wind. His hand beckoned to me, and he looked into my eyes like he was trying to tell me something.

I stood up, grabbed his hand, and boarded the comet.

2:26

Elena Miller

Josie decides that she isn't going to start worrying about how long she's been on the train until 2:30. She had gotten on at 1:22 a.m. exactly, surprisingly punctual for The Rapid, and it should've only taken about 40 minutes to reach 79th Street. It's currently 2:24. But hey, sometimes trains are slow, or maybe there was some maintenance or something. To be honest she doesn't really know how trains are supposed to work, but maybe sometimes they just go slower to save gas, or something. There is no way she could've gotten on the wrong train, the Red Line started and ended at the airport. But no, she isn't freaking out because this is the way she comes home every day and she is going to make it back to her shitty apartment like she also does every day.

It hadn't even been that bad of a shift today. Working as a janitor at an airport wasn't really her favorite part of life, but no one had thrown up in her area of the terminal and the usual hyperactive children seemed quieter than normal. Now though, at the end of the day, everything was catching up. Her back hurt, her hands were chapped from the cleaning solution and her shitty bra was poking into her side, the wire starting to break free. She just wants this godforsaken train to get to her stop so she can go back to ignoring the cockroaches in her floorboards till her shift tomorrow.

As she sinks deeper into her seat, her eyes drift around the train car. The ads plastered to the walls are vibrant, almost sickeningly so, and contrast with the dingy gun-metal of her surroundings.

"Do You Feel Stuck?" A grimacing woman looms from an orange background, holding some kind of self help book in her hand.

"Do You Want To Meet New People?" A blindingly happy couple clutch at each other, their teeth like bone-white tombstones.

"Were You In A Train Related Accident? Call Johnson & Gray Law Firm Today!" A man in a poorly fitted suit gives Josie a violent thumbs up, as if wishing her a very happy train accident. Josie has never really cared for the ads in the train, but this late at night they seem menacing rather than simply annoying.

Has the train always been this empty?

She could've sworn there had been other people getting into the car with her. Late night fliers or employees like herself. But now, as she looks around, she's the only one here. The sudden realization of her loneliness sends a shiver up her already aching spine. But it isn't 2:30 yet, so she isn't worried. The train is just going slower than usual.

Looking out the window, Josie rests her head against the cold metal of the sill. Outside the landscape zips past, the moon glinting off snowy buildings, creating an almost ethereal effect on the otherwise dull view. The stars shine bright, little pinpricks in the sky that reflect off the dark waters of the lake. As the train moves it rattles her head and blurs her vision, but that's better than having to keep her neck up for however many more minutes she's going to be here.

Several minutes later, when she checks her phone again, it's still 2:24. It shouldn't be, logically, but glancing again at the cracked screen, Josie is faced with the undeniable truth. Either her admittedly old phone has finally broken, or it is still 2:24. It's not 2:30 yet, so Josie is still calm, is still completely in control. She quickly enters in her passcode and swipes to the settings. She knows she can change the time manually somewhere in there, and hopes that this is all it will take. The Date & Time tab sits quietly in the general settings where Josie goes to turn off the Set Automatically switch. Pressing on the little Cleveland she types in 2:25, but before she even gets to the end of the time her phone shuts off. Josie is left staring at the blackened screen, her own confused face grimacing back.

"Hey, Siri," she says, pressing the home button, "set an alarm for 2:25 a.m."

"2:25."

The voice comes out of nowhere, quiet and hissing, like steam from her mother's crockpot. Josie shoots up, phone still clutched in her white knuckled grip.

"Hello?" Her voice is shaky and uncertain in the rumbling air of the train car.

"2:25."

The voice sounds like it's behind her now, louder, more real. She isn't freaking out, she isn't, she isn't she isn't she is not freaking out. She can feel something behind her, she can feel a gaze on her back. The prickle of awareness drifts around the nape of her neck, raising the short hairs that have escaped her tight bun.

She doesn't want to turn around. That would make it real. She didn't think there was anyone on the train but now images flash through her head. Women like her, broken and abandoned, left to freeze in the backroads of the world. She doesn't have a lot of people to miss her and she

wonders if the person in the seat behind her can tell.

“2:25.”

Again, those same numbers repeated. Josie grasps sideways, towards her bag that rests on the seat next to her. She has no illusions that she’ll be able to get her pepper spray out from the pocket, but at least she’ll have something to hit an attacker with if push came to shove.

“2:25, 2:25, 2:25.”

And something brushes her shoulder. Josie whips around, swinging her bulky tote bag, heavy with her salvaged laptop, and hits nothing.

There’s no one there, just rows of grungy metro seats and a shadow. Or not quite a shadow, it’s too defined, too physical. Sitting behind the seat where her bag used to lie, it almost looks like a woman. Dark strands of shadow make long hair, and if Josie squints she can parse the shape of a nose, a rounded jaw, and gently sloping eyebrows. But that’s where any similarities end. Its eyes are dark, hollow and pupiless, its mouth is one long slit across its face, and its body is a formless thing, the shade that makes it up constantly shifting.

“Oh dear fucking lord,” Josie gasps, the hand holding her bag now pressed to her racing chest, “What the hell are you?”

“2:25,” the thing whispers, its slit-mouth gaping slightly as the words pass through its non-existent lips.

“Yeah, not very helpful.”

As she stares at the thing, and it stares back, her racing heart begins to slow. It isn’t moving, just undulating in place, and it didn’t react at all to her tote bag going right through its shadowy head. It just sits, and stares unblinkingly forward.

“So,” Josie says, trying to adopt a joking tone, “is this the moment you kill me, for like not being a virgin or something? Cause if that’s the case I could name some better reasons to do it. Virginity is such a dated concept anyways.”

“2:25,” it hisses back, still very unhelpful.

“Ok, so I’m going to take that as a no?”

At this point Josie is just lost. Her initial panic, first at the voice, then at the thing itself, has mostly faded, leaving behind just a sense of confusion. She is still on the train and it’s still 2:24 and she doesn’t know what to do about it.

“Ok!” She exclaims, standing up, “I’m going to figure out what the fuck is happening, you stay right there.”

The shadow doesn’t acknowledge her, just continues to exist quietly. Josie begins to back up slowly towards the door separating the front of her train car from the back of the next one. She doesn’t really want to turn her back to the thing, afraid that the moment she lets her guard down it’ll snap. So she faces it even as her back hits the cold metal and glass of the door.

“Ok,” she starts, addressing the shadow. “I’m going to turn around and look out the window, I need you not to attack me or like, to start whispering creepily or anything like that. Because this night is weird enough as is and I don’t feel like fending off a ghost attack.”

She gives the thing a thumbs up, as if it’ll respond any differently than it has before. It continues to stare, which she decides to take as a positive sign. With one last glance she turns around to the door.

Outside there is nothing.

No train car in front of them, no tracks on the ground, no snowy Cleveland streets. Just a void. Just shadow.

Josie isn’t going to freak out. She isn’t going to cry. She is not going to scream in frustration or anger or anything. Instead she is going to quietly sink to the ground and put her head between her knees. It seems about as productive as anything else she could do.

“2:25.”

The shadow had gotten up. It’s leaning its face against the pane of the window by the seat and seems to be looking out, almost longingly. Josie scrambles up from her crouched position and stumbles over to the window. The view is about the same as the one out of the door. Nothing familiar, just miles of inky blackness. Josie has never loved her home, Ohio isn’t a particularly interesting place and Cleveland is simply Cleveland. But at this moment, she would give anything to see the moon over Lake Erie.

Next to her sits the shadow, the two of them separated only by the rigid backs of the subway seats. The shade that makes up its lower body is formed like a pair of kneeling legs. Its face is pressed against the window and shadowy limbs reach up and seem to claw at the glass. The darkness of that face doesn’t seem to really make clear expressions but it looks frightened, almost desperate. To escape perhaps? Is this shadow stuck here as well?

“Please,” Josie begs it, “do you know what’s happening? Do you know why I am here? I’m just a fucking janitor, I don’t know what to do!”

“2:25”

“God fucking damnit, that isn’t helpful!”

She’s crying now, tears trailing down her cheeks, staring at the thing that’s probably trapped here with her. It doesn’t move from its position, pawing slowly at the window pane, and pressing its blank face against the glass. Josie tries to touch it, to shake it, to force it to notice her, but

her hand passes right through the shadowy form.

And then it's moving again, pushing itself off the window and stumbling, almost human-like, towards the doors on the other side of the train. It hits them hard, and tries to shove them open, wedging shadowy fingers into the cracks. It's useless, even if the door gets opened there's nothing out there now.

The thing has started sinking down, the impression of its forehead pressed to the door as it kneels on the ground. It still hasn't acknowledged her.

Then she blinks and it's gone. She swivels her head frantically, only to stop abruptly when her gaze lands on the shadow again. It's sitting in the seat behind her, staring straight ahead, as if it never moved in the first place.

"2:25," it hisses. "2:25."

"What the hell?"

"2:25."

"No, shut up. What the actual hell?"

"2:25, 2:25, 2:25."

It reaches out its hand to touch the back of the seat. Josie remembers a brush against her shoulder, a gaze on her neck. The thing has returned exactly to where it was when it first appeared. Like a song on repeat, like a never ending story. It strikes her suddenly that she may not be getting off this train. That the shadow before her had probably never gotten off of the train. That a lot of people have gotten onto the Red Line and have simply disappeared. Shadows forgotten in the a.m. hours, left behind by the bustle of the rest of the world.

At Josie's elementary school there had been a yearly assembly about danger and the police. She doesn't remember what the speaker looked like, but she remembers the humidity of a couple hundred kids shoved into the school gymnasium, can feel the cool polyurethane on her calves and the press of her light up sketchers against her leg.

"A lot of people disappear," the speaker had said, "but not a lot get found"

How many had disappeared here? How many had never been found? Her life feels like a ticking time bomb. The shadow, the woman, had started moving again, clawing at the windows. When she had existed was there a shadow acting out its final minutes, like a death march. Josie doesn't want to disappear, she doesn't want to become a shadow. She wants to save up enough money to go to college, or at least to afford a better apartment. She wants to have kids, she wants to grow old, she doesn't want to die on a train, with only a shadow to keep her company.

"Please," she says again, "isn't there anything I can do?"

"2:25."

The woman seems to respond to Josie, in a way. She may not be able to speak but maybe she can hear her, maybe they can figure something out.

"Is there a way out of this?" Josie asks, "Say 2:25 if there is and uh, don't do anything if there isn't." There is a moment of silence, where Josie can feel her final hopes crumbling, like a seaside cliff worn by the wind.

"2:25."

"Oh thank fuck, you really scared me for a second."

"2:25, 2:25."

And then the shadow is flinging herself up again, towards the door. It's tragic to watch, knowing that once upon a time this woman had desperately tried to free herself and had failed. But Josie won't be this woman. There is a way out of here and she will find it or, quite literally, die trying.

She takes a second to reach into her pocket for her phone. It's 2:24. She presses in her passcode and scrolls to her contacts. It didn't work earlier and it isn't going to work now, but Josie would feel like an idiot if she didn't at least try. Pressing on her mom's number she holds the phone up to her ears. Maybe if she closes her eyes it'll feel like a normal day, calling her mom in the early morning to let her know she got home safe. A drowsy greeting, a quiet goodbye. But the phone isn't even ringing. Looking at the screen again it's as if she never even turned it on. All she sees is her lockscreen photo and the white numbers 2:24. It wasn't going to work but the confirmation still hurts.

The shadow is beside her again, sitting in the seat. Josie takes a minute just to observe her. Her body is still mostly just a blob of void, but Josie can almost make out hands in her lap, crossed legs, slumped shoulders. Her dark hair grows long over her shoulders. She could be anyone. She might've been a traveler from the airport, just in Cleveland for a day. Maybe she even passed by Josie while she worked, two people who had nothing in common. Someone who just had somewhere to be, then was nowhere at all.

"You said that there's a way out of here, but what is it? How can I get off?" Josie says this, but doesn't expect a reply.

"2:25."

"Yeah you've said that a couple times."

"2:25."

Josie knows this is all she's going to get, she knows. But it's so frustrating, like trying to scratch an itch on your back, out of reach until you can get a friend to help. Sitting here begging a dead woman for help isn't doing anything, it's time to get to work.

She starts by checking the windows. The ones on these trains barely worked on good days, but she has to try. The first one rattles promisingly, but doesn't budge any further, the second one doesn't even move, but once she gets to the third, after a bit of a struggle, it cracks open.

"Yes!" She exclaims, "That's progress!"

But now looking outside she can see the void, previously a solid black, is roiling, pressing close to the window. A little tendrel of midnight slips through the crack she made and brushes the back of her hand. Suddenly she hears a song a few seats in front of her.

"I've been ghosting," it plays quietly, "I've been ghosting along."

It's the alarm she set earlier. The time is 2:25.

It's 2:25 and Josie's body is disintegrating. She falls off the seat away from the window, her legs no longer able to hold her weight. Her shadowy hands grasp at her face, but pass through her skin.

"No, no, no, no no no nononono-" Her voice cuts off abruptly, leaving only a hissing noise behind.

"2:26," she croaks involuntarily, with words no longer hers. "2:26, 2:26, 2:26," her mind is fogging, filled with shadow and smoke.

"2:26, 2:26, 2:26."

The Red Line stops at E. 79th Street Station. No one gets off.

FLORA

Kenlie Rohrer

The Festival of Demeter and Persephone only came once a year, and with it, hundreds of spectators would gather at the center of the capital, waiting in long lines just to get a glimpse inside. The building was not permanent, a square box of thin sheet metal, one that the service workers hammered together every year before it came to town, one that could be discarded and sold for scrap easily, only to be reconstructed again the next lunar year. The box building looked large, deceptively so; after all, how large could something really be that only consisted of four corners? For some reason, the Festival always came at the end of the year, when the weather was about to tip towards the dry season; no one knew much about what the plants had been like, but most knew that plants did not appreciate dryness. There was something called “seasons” that used to take up all the time during the year, the plants changing as the weather changed, and the people were fascinated by this, and so, they were fascinated by the box, or at least what was inside it.

My grandmother had always wanted to go and see the inside of the box, and this year she thought I was finally old enough to go with her and experience it all. That day we got up early, darkness still sweeping the streets, and got into line with the rest of the people. From farther away, the line always seemed like it never moved, like it never got any bigger or smaller. Now that my grandmother and I were in the line, I knew that was not the case, as we seemed to be at the front near the entrance in no time.

I soon noticed something odd. “Where’s the door?” I asked my grandmother, as I could see where the line backed up all the way to the edge of the building. I blinked a few times while focusing on the spot where the people began and ended, and couldn’t see where they were entering the building. I looked at my grandmother, but she was facing straight ahead. She didn’t say anything and she didn’t look at me.

We finally reached the border of the building. I could see the little knots and imperfections in the metalwork of the box, and wondered for the millionth time what the metal had been a part of before it was made into this building, what it was used to make after the building was taken apart again. I was just about to reach out and touch the grains in the metalwork when my grandmother said, “You know, as long as I have lived in this city, I have never once seen them take apart this building.” She still didn’t turn around and look at me. “Now, isn’t that strange?”

I shrugged, even though she wasn’t looking at me. “Maybe it’s all supposed to be part of the magic.”

And it was, because at that moment, we were inside the box. I still never remembered going through a door, but I supposed it was one of those new transmitter things that were popping up all over the place now.

It was a kind of museum, but one unlike anything I had ever seen. There were museums that displayed images of what plants and animals had looked like at one time, but they were poor copies, drawings based off of drawings, not real things at all. I remembered sitting at one of the museums when I was younger, with my grandmother, some other children and their grandmothers, watching the flickering image against the metal wall panel, wondering what it might be like to smell a flower, eat a non-synthetic piece of fruit, or touch the muzzle of a horse...

But this place was full of flowers. Real flowers.

My grandmother immediately sagged against me in awe. I heard her whisper “Praise Demeter. Praise Persephone.” I felt dizzy. I barely knew where to look first. The heads of the things were mounted on handsomely carved plaques; they were made to resemble actual wood, but of course they were only made out of scrap metal, as everything was. They were spaced evenly apart, some far larger than others, some far smaller, so small that I couldn’t even make them out from where I was standing at the very front of the box. I longed to get a closer look.

My grandmother and I rushed like children to each and every plaque, examining the head of each specimen, and laughing aloud to ourselves. “These are just how I remembered them,” my grandmother said at one point, even though I knew it was impossible for her to have been alive when there was any sign of plant life. The plants had gone before the animals, just slightly, or so we had learned at the other museums. The heads of the flowers were almost as large as ours, sometimes even larger. We put ourselves next to them, comparing their size with ours.

We learned the names of the specimens. We learned orchid, lily, rose, tulip, gardenia, amaryllis. There were some with remarkably long green branches coming from underneath the large heads, sticking into the plaques against the wall. I couldn’t believe that the small, frail things could support the entire head of the flower. I couldn’t believe how many different specimens there were. It just seemed too good to be true.

There were so many different colors. Brown, black, white, gray, and green, and all different shades as well. There were even some that had been soaked in a kind of dye; some of them were brighter green, and some were a violent shade of orange. I was unsure that any of the flowers had ever been that shade in real life.

There seemed to be many rooms of the flower heads, but I knew the building had only one room. I decided it was another optical illusion or transmitter like the door had been, and followed my grandmother to the one.

More and more heads. I was starting to tire of the newness, the effects of the initial surprise wearing off quickly. I squinted my eyes and peered down the never-ending hallway; or were they rooms? There seemed to be no end to the flowers. Just how many specimens were there? Surely there were never this many. I looked around for my grandmother, but didn't see her anymore. I shrugged to myself and continued on down the rows, thinking I'd find her a little farther down.

The more I looked at the heads, the more uncomfortable I began to feel. I stared into the face of one of the flowers, a particularly large one called a cactus blossom. I didn't think it looked like a very nice flower at all. The lighting behind it was flickering, and it looked particularly ominous against the dark metal background that made up the walls of the box. I moved on down the row, this time skipping a couple of the heads and settling on one of the dyed flowers. This one was a lily, a calla lily, or so it said on the small line of metal next to the plaque. I thought the brightness of the color would make me feel more comfortable, but what it conveyed was just unsettling. There was a small stick protruding from the center of the head, and if I peered close enough, I could see little beady feelers attached to the stick, fuzzy pinpricks of dust, somethings... I wasn't entirely sure what to make of it, but the thing looked alien. It seemed an orange head pulled taut against a white, white skull, a mouth far too wide and gasping. I saw veins pulsing against the skin, black and sickly looking; they disappeared down the throat and into the body, which was a pale green, jutting into the plaque. The shadows of the thing were all wrong, and seemed to fall to the floor in a massive puddle. They were leaking onto the metal walls of the place, along the back of the flower's skull, down its curving mouth; it almost looked like it had eyes, like it was observing me instead.

I pried my eyes from the sight and looked around again for my grandmother. I still didn't see her anywhere, and by now I was starting to panic. She would understand that the flowers scared me. They came from a different time altogether, they weren't something I was used to. And how were the flowers fed? Didn't flowers need some sort of liquid to survive? Didn't they need sunlight? What was sustaining them behind the metal walls, behind the plaques, behind the heads?

I looked back into the calla lily's face, one last time, and saw there, nestled in its mouth, a human head.

I froze, and my eyes locked with the human's eyes. I noticed immediately that it was my grandmother's head, but it was completely white, as if it had been carved out of smooth alabaster. But everyone knew alabaster didn't exist anymore; the only thing we had was scrap metal.

"Grandmother?" I gasped, and tears pricked the corner of my eyes. I stepped closer to the mouth of the flower where my grandmother's head lolled on its orange tongue, almost as if the flower were taunting me. I always wondered what a flower smelled like, and as I got closer, I could smell its breath, its blood. It didn't smell at all like I thought it would. It just smelled like death, like rotting meat, like blood.

I backed away from the flower, from the head in its jaws, the face, eyes blinking at me, and I bumped right into something. I turned around, and it was my grandmother, with the strangest look in her eyes.

"Where have you been, child? I have been looking for you all day," she said, and her face contorted into a smudge of wrinkles. I realized it was the first time she had looked at me since we had gotten to the Festival. I blinked at her, turned slightly, and looked at the calla lily. "But that flower..." I began, but the calla lily was just a calla lily, stained orange. There was no head, and there was no alabaster, just the slight stench of iron lingering in the air. I still didn't like the look of it staring at me, and I followed my grandmother towards the front of the building without looking back.

We walked for what seemed like hours, her walking several paces in front of me. We walked for so long I didn't know whether we were going to the front of the building or the back of it, but I assumed my grandmother knew where she was going. We walked past hundreds and hundreds of spectators, all ogling at the precious flower heads dangling upon their plaques. I had heard of zoos being a thing in the distant past, but I wasn't sure if there had been zoos for flowers or other plant life; I thought it was only animals. I tried not to think about this as I passed each flower, tried not to think of the mouths snarling at me, the tongues rolling open, the heads that might come out, the smell of human blood...

I realized I had almost lost my grandmother again, and jogged to keep up with her. Since when was she this fast? Perhaps the presence of the flowers was giving her strength, or maybe it was just her motivation to leave this place. Perhaps she was just as freaked out by the flowers as I was.

As we got farther and farther down the rows of mounted flower heads, the fewer people I saw. The box had looked large from the outside, but it was massive from the inside, an uncountable number of flowers, infinite metal panels. My grandmother herself seemed fuzzy in the distance of my vision, stretching into somewhere else entirely, past the boundary and just about to reach it at the same time, crossing the threshold. Maybe there was another transmitter here too, the one that would let us back into the real world. I couldn't wait to feel the stagnant air on my face again.

But it wasn't the front of the box that came into view, or at least not what I remembered to be at the front of the box. My grandmother stopped next to a bunch of stacked metal tables filled with experimental equipment. A bunch of people in stained orange coats were waiting there beside the tables; some of them were fiddling with the equipment, some were standing there patiently, watching us approach. Had the coats once been white? They held their hands behind their backs. I wished they wouldn't hold their hands behind their backs. And on the tables were a few of the plaques, sitting flat, the heads sticking up, mouths wide and begging. The people were measuring out vials of thick, red liquid; the stuff looked gelatinous as it spouted out into multiple different glass tubes.

Glass. They had glass.

There were no other people around, and no mounted flower heads either. The tables were pushed up against the metal walls, and I could see no transmitter, door, or exit in sight, but after all, I had never even seen an entrance. I looked to my grandmother for some sort of explanation, but she was facing towards me, looking back the other way to what I assumed was the actual entrance where we had come in, a strange look of far-away yearning on her face, like she couldn't wait to get back to where the flowers were.

"Thank you for your gracious gift, Mother Demeter," said one of the people around the table. He was speaking directly to my grandmother, and bowed slightly before her. She turned her back towards him, gave him a sharp smile, and said, "Of course. I am only sorry that it took so long."

Before I knew what was happening, my grandmother was walking away, towards the front of the box, towards the flowers, towards the outside, and the people in orange coats were walking towards me. They removed their hands from behind their backs and put them on my skin, bringing me closer to the table with the red liquid. I could see it pulsating and squirming beneath the glass like it was alive, and I knew then what would happen to me. I focused on my grandmother's tiny form until she faded away completely from my sight.

"It is because of you, Mother Persephone, that we are allowed to keep life going," said one of the orange coats as he raised a white suchter to my throat. I recognized it from medical clinics I had been to; it would drain all the blood from my body in seconds, depositing the contents into the suchter to be transported anywhere the user pleased. The orange coat raised the suchter to my neck and breathed into my ear: "Most thanks for your gracious gift."

The Festival of Demeter and Persephone was not just a Festival, but a part of the culture in each capital city that happened to gain its presence. The lines were long and winding, and children were not allowed in unless they were of a certain age. A number of complaints were lodged against the specific construction of the building at one point in time, around the age when the Festival first started coming to town, although no one can quite remember that far back anymore. They said the box-like structure was confusing, maze-like, and was not suitable for a number of spectators, specifically those who were particularly young. They said the flowers were too alluring, too fragrant, and a number of people got lost in the building each year, never to be found again. It is assumed that they made it out, but after that, where did they go? The people who lost family members could only hope and pray to Demeter and Persephone that their loved ones might be found. They would continue to visit the Festival each year, in hopes to see the faces of the lost ones hidden among the blooms.

A DEGREE IN UNDERWATER BASKET WEAVING

Riley O'Byrne

You said it wouldn't be useful, you did, to get a degree in underwater basket weaving. You told me, I'll never have a stable job if you get that degree! *To hell with you*, I thought, *to hell with you, there's a use for everything!* And lo and behold, I was right.

When the world flooded and the seas rose; when cities drowned and continents became islands; when humanity had to learn to swim instead of run; when we had to learn to hold our breath instead of learning to speak; my skills of underwater manipulation became handy.

So, father, do you dare criticize me now? When I am the wealthiest person on this soggy planet. And you, an astrophysicist who would make more than me, are without a home, without a job, and without a son.

“THE BIRDS”

Kenlie Rohrer

The second week that I went to the clinic was the first time that I saw the birds.

The mother, or what I presumed to be the mother, was holed up in the narrow hollow of the oak tree in the front of my apartment building. It was a twenty-one minute walk to the clinic. I heard the baby birds before I had even turned the corner, even stepped back a few paces so that I could see up into the tree and find out where the chirping was coming from.

It only took me a minute to realize that the birds had actually created a nest in a hollow at the bottom of the tree, not the top, like I had initially thought. This worried me. Why would they make their nest so close to the ground? What was the mother thinking? I tried not to think of the chirps as I backed away from the tree, headed down the street. I had other things to worry about.

The clinic was nothing but a whirl of death and confusion. I tried not to look into anyone's eyes as I took care of each patient, trying not to scream when a dozen more were brought in around lunchtime. I visited the same patients over and over until they weren't there anymore, and today was no different. I knew nothing about medicine and I felt like I had never done anything important in my life, but someone had to do it. Someone had to do it.

They couldn't all just die.

I gently reeled back the flimsy plastic shower curtain we were using as makeshift separators for each patient, knelt as I said hello to Jon. He looked even more pale than I remembered from yesterday night; not a good sign. I really didn't have any experience, but after the first week of volunteering at the clinic, I knew more than I ever cared to. I wanted to explore queer America, and I wanted to run away from home, and I had gotten far more than I had bargained for.

No. This *was* queer America. But why did I feel like I hadn't gotten what I wanted?

Jon tried to smile at me as I looked uselessly at his bed trimmings. He looked as if he hadn't moved since I last saw him. His eyes were purple and green, bruised. I knew he couldn't speak thanks to the hoarseness in his lungs, cutting off his voice, but his eyes still held their light. Veins strangled through his pale body, spider-webbing out through his arms. He looked like he had been poisoned. *Poisoned since birth* they would say, but they said that about all of us.

I knew his eyes followed me as I tried to do whatever I could, looking back at my clipboard, looking back at the wires, checking to make sure everything was in its place. I wasn't sure why I always expected to find some sort of relief after I had finished checking on some of the worst patients, but the minute I let the flimsy plastic of the shower curtain fall behind me, I was just stepping into more of it. More patients were being wheeled in every day, the volunteers at the clinic keeping their eyes averted, darkened, down at the ground. Was this where we belonged? I was so afraid that I felt nothing, but I couldn't ignore the feeling that I was holding my breath the entire time I was at the clinic.

Night fell eventually, as it always does. A lot of the women stayed at the clinic overnight; not in case anyone were to need them, but in case anyone passed away. It was a terrible thing to go wherever queer people went after they died, and to go there alone? It was much more frightening to pass over because a lot of us didn't have any of the answers. And what's more; where did people go if they had this sickness? Would we all be next? Would we all die?

My mind was blank as I walked the few blocks back to my apartment building. I thought of absolutely nothing as I counted my steps, my eyes glued to the dirty cement, used to the downcast. I counted my breaths until they seemed to return to a normal pace, but I didn't really know what normal was anymore. It had been ages since I had been anywhere except the clinic. I wondered bleakly if I had any food in the fridge for that night's meal, and then realized I had been wondering about that for the past two weeks. There was nothing, I knew. There was always nothing.

And then, just as I rounded the corner, I spotted something on the sidewalk. I had almost trodden on it; it was lumped in the small gap of space between where the cement ended and the grass began. It was small and brown and slightly fuzzy. If I hadn't been trained to look for the slightest bit of movement, the slightest bit of breath, any indication that the body was still alive, I might not have even realized that the lump was the baby bird I had heard earlier that day. I had almost completely forgotten about them. I looked up, and sure enough, I was standing right by the oak tree, the hollow that was too close to the ground lingering at the corner of my vision.

I peered into the hollow, where I had seen a shadow of a mother that morning. If you hadn't looked very closely, you would've thought she was still there, sitting on her eggs, that they hadn't hatched yet, that everything was normal. Everything appeared normal, until I realized the mother was nowhere to be found, the nest covered in shadows. Where was she? Had she flown away to look for food? Maybe she was looking for her baby, or maybe she had abandoned it all together.

I wasn't used to wasting time, so I walked up to my apartment, put on a pair of rubbery garden gloves and walked back down to the sidewalk where the lump was still heaving. Had it tried to fly to its mother? How had it gotten out of the nest in the first place? Had something tried to eat it? Was there a predator around? And where *was* the mother?

I knelt and gently scooped the frail thing into my cupped hands. It was no bigger than my palm and seemed so, so afraid. I could feel its life quivering against the gloves, against my skin, and I felt it all the way up my arms. I walked carefully over to the hollow where the shadow of the mother bird had sat, and slid the small baby bird onto the clump of dry leaves. Its tiny eyes blinked up at me, and I couldn't help but feel like I was back at the clinic, staring into the dead, glassy eyes of another person who had passed away. Would Jon be dead when I went back tomorrow morning? Or was he already dead?

The next morning, I came out early to check on the baby. I had reassured myself that the mother would be back, but as I peered inside the hollow, it was still completely empty. No mother and what's more, there was no baby. Panic rose in my throat, and I immediately went back a couple steps to check the sidewalk, the place where I had found the baby before. I didn't find it there, and I ran along the entire length of the sidewalk by the oak tree, still not seeing anything. I was afraid I stepped on it, so I looked at the bottom of my shoes, tears pricking the corner of my eyes, but I didn't see anything there either. What had happened to them? What had happened to us?

I was breathing very fast, and people were starting to come out of the apartment building. They were looking at me funny, but then again, they always looked at me funny because they knew I was gay. They knew I spent every day working at the clinic. They probably thought if they got too close to me they would catch the "gay cancer" too. And what if that's what it was? None of us could tell them they were wrong, that they were wrong about all of us. That they should be wrong for wanting us to die, for wanting us to take the blame.

And where was the baby bird? Where was the baby bird's mother?

After another half hour of searching, I found it, nestled in a grove of saw palms by the entrance of the apartment complex. No one would've ever seen it unless they had thought to look between the fronds, but if you were walking by and just happened to look down, there's no way you would've missed it. It looked the same as the night before, but I couldn't help wondering if it was actually dead. I think I would've found more relief if that were the case, but I took myself back up the apartment steps, put on the gardening gloves, and lifted its frail body once again. I wasn't sure how, but I swear I felt the heartbeat against my own skin. It was alive. It was alive.

I turned around and started heading towards the oak tree, but stopped. The hollow was far too close to the ground. Wouldn't the baby just get out of the nest again? And the mother still hadn't returned, so how would the baby get any food? How did biology even work? Did it even work at all? I didn't know that much about birds.

I thought about taking the baby bird back into my apartment building and nursing it back to health myself. I could be its new mother and feed it from a tiny baby bottle just like it was a doll. Just like it was my actual baby, the one I would most likely never have. People hated gay people so much that they let them die, day in and day out. There would be no chance I could ever have a child. I didn't even have a partner, didn't even have time to go out and find one. The other lesbians at the clinic were far too busy averting their eyes, far too busy working to save the men from a death they knew was only too certain, far too busy pretending and avoiding and hiding their tears and then waiting in line to give blood once they were done working and not working all day. I know that's what I did, and I knew they were all the same. After all, how could there be love at a time like this? And wasn't it love that had gotten us all into this mess in the first place? Some sort of messed-up, non-biological love that went against nature itself? Isn't that why we were infected in the first place, why we were all dying?

We were all the same.

I felt something break inside me, and I walked the baby bird back over to the oak tree, bent down just slightly, and tipped it back into the empty nest. I would've liked to be its mother. No, I would've loved to be its mother. I would've loved to be something, someone I am not. No. Lesbians could not be mothers. Gay people could not be parents. How could they be parents if they were dead? And after all, what if the true mother ended up coming back? What if she had been there during the night, and had flown off this morning to find more food for her baby? No. I had better let the true mother take care of this. If she came back and found out her baby had been stolen, well... I didn't know much about biology, but I would've been upset.

I went back up to my apartment, threw off the gloves, ate a crust of stale bread, and headed down to the clinic, counting every sidewalk panel that fell in between.

As soon as I walked inside, I stopped breathing. I wondered if Jon had died during the night, had also stopped breathing, and thought better than to ask one of the other volunteers, since their eyes were perpetually facing towards the ground anyway. There would be no chance for me to ask. There was no casualty. I just had to wait until I made my rounds through all of the patients. I could do nothing else.

There were a few new ones today, and I had to take an extra long time getting them all comfortable and set up, but I couldn't help thinking

I was only setting them up for their deaths, which I guess I was. I tried not to think of the baby bird, sitting alone in the nest, wondering where its mother was. Wondering where I was. No. I was needed here. Where were the mothers of these people?

I was so busy thinking about the birds and mothers and fertility and motherhood and what it all meant that I didn't realize when I was standing in Jon's screened-off room. He smiled at me like he was glad to see me, like he was glad to see another day. I couldn't imagine the pain he was in, though I'm pretty sure he looked the same as yesterday. That's what they always said; that it started off really bad, and then got worse, and then it just settled in, the pneumonia or bronchitis or whatever it was that targeted us. That targeted them. None of the lesbians in the clinic or the ones I knew had ever contracted anything like it. We all wore protective gear of course, whatever we could afford, whatever we could scrounge up, but I had never known a lesbian to catch it. We didn't know why, but that didn't make it any less real, any less scary. Yes, they had called us "fish", yes, they had mocked us constantly, but we were the only family any of us had. We had to stick together, or else we would be out there dying on the street. Dying on the street, just like the baby bird.

I nearly flew out of the clinic that day, and counted my breaths and steps extra fast as I made my way back to the apartment, to the oak tree, to my baby bird. I could see the oak tree from all the way down the block, and had to do everything in my power not to run all the way there. Maybe the mother had come back only moments after I had left for the clinic that morning. Maybe everything was okay. Maybe God would actually forgive us; and if not us, maybe he would forgive the birds.

I finally reached the tree, bent down slightly, and peered into the nest, holding my breath.

The mother was there, or what I presumed to be the mother; a large, plump bird whose girth covered almost the entire top of the nest. My heart nearly plummeted into my chest when I realized I didn't see the baby bird at all, but then I noticed, just underneath the mothers' heavy layer of feathers, something small and quivering, brown and fuzzy. I couldn't help it; I burst into tears.

That night, I dreamt of motherhood, of a small child wearing green gardening gloves and my eyes, following around a woman with no face. Everything was fuzzy, vague, but it felt so real, as dreams often do. The first few minutes after I woke up, I stayed with my eyes closed, trying to fall back asleep, anything so that I could fall back into the dream, but the knowledge of it faded with every second that passed, until I couldn't even remember why I had been lying in bed for so long, or why I felt so exhausted, so drained, and so hopeless.

I went downstairs, stepped up to the oak tree, and bent down to look inside the hollow. The mother was there, sitting on top of her baby like it was still an egg. If I had known anything about biology I might've thought that was a bit strange, but I thought nothing of it. After all, I was already late to my shift at the clinic. They needed me more. The baby had its mother now, didn't it? Perhaps the mother was just trying to nurse the baby back to health. Perhaps the baby was cold. Cold, yes.

New patients again. It was all a blur of eyes slashed towards the floor, eyeless patients, bloodshot eyes, tired eyes, death. I went to Jon's bedside, filled up his glass of water. There was word of him possibly needing a feeding tube. There was fluid in his lungs. Hadn't there always been fluid in his lungs? Wasn't that what pneumonia was? But it didn't matter what pneumonia was, because he was gay, and no one was going to help him except for a couple of lesbians playing doctor, or more appropriately, playing nurse. I didn't say anything, just listened as they spoke of Jon's impending death. I thought it was strange; they spoke directly to the floor. Couldn't Jon hear them, or had his ears gone too?

The afternoon came, and I had moved on to my other patients. There were more and more of them now, and the days got longer and longer. I felt horrible after thinking I would be too tired to take care of them all, that some of them had to be let go. What were we even trying to do here? We could never have saved them.

Jon ended up passing away right before my shift was over. I stayed to watch him become covered by a black sheet, trash bag. What would they do with the body? I found myself wondering, and then realized I didn't know what they did with any of the bodies, where they were disposed of. No one wanted a gay body, dead or alive, not even their families. Not even their mothers. So where did they go?

I decided once again to avert my eyes, to not think about anything other than the fact that Jon was, finally, no longer in pain, but even that felt like a lie. I counted my breaths and I counted my steps until I was right up against the base of the oak tree, but this time, it wasn't dusk like it normally was. It was past dusk, but not quite nighttime yet; a gathering of darkness, you could say. I peered into the hollow, saw the mother in the exact same place, the baby, quivering, fuzzy, brown, underneath her once again. It only took a few seconds to check on them, and I felt happy. At least they had made it.

That night I dreamed of a graveyard, and I knew I was looking at the graves of my family, the ones from the dream the night before. The faceless, eyeless woman, my partner, the mother of the little boy with garden gloves, the one who wore my face. I was the mother too, but I was also looking at my own grave. I woke up with tears wet on my face and I screamed and screamed and screamed until my throat was raw and I was sure my neighbors wouldn't wake up and call the cops on me. It was just enough and not enough. Why couldn't I ever have enough? Why couldn't I ever be enough?

I stayed up so that I wouldn't see the graves, but every time I closed my eyes they were there, just at the back of my eyelids. I ignored them and tried to keep my eyes open for most of the day, tried to not even blink. I forgot entirely to check in on the birds that morning, but part of me was glad that I didn't see them. Their love and happiness would be too much for me to bear.

Instead, I busied myself at the clinic like I always did. A dozen new patients today, and some new information about the virus. Another volunteer sidled up next to me as I was walking between the curtains and said they finally had a new name for the virus that wasn't "gay-related immune deficiency." She said it was now proper to call it AIDS, or acquired immune deficiency syndrome. The volunteer had curly auburn hair and smelled of coconut shampoo. She walked away before I could say anything, and before I could think not to, I blinked and saw the backs of the graves etched against my eyelids.

I stood completely still for a moment. What did a name mean? Did it mean they cared about us? Did it mean they cared about the ones who were dying? The ones who were already dead?

No. I certainly knew better than to think that way. But I couldn't take it. I saw my child, all my children, being wheeled out of the clinic, their body parts stuffed in black trash bags, saw my wife, my partner, faceless and screaming, pulling at her sockets, until she too was wheeled from the room, her body dumped into a sewer, or burned, incinerated, the ashes only to be forgotten and thrown away, onto a huge pile with all the rest. What would happen to them? What would happen to me? What would happen to the birds?

I excused myself and threw myself from the clinic. I ran down the block, faster and faster, the number of sidewalk panels throwing themselves up against my brain. I kept my eyes peeled open, and I saw no darkness except for the outline of the oak tree against the blue, blue sky. It was too blue, too happy. Nothing should be that blue.

I made it to the tree, and lowered myself to the ground, turning away from the mouth of the hollow as I heaved and panted. I didn't want to scare the birds away. Once I had finally regained an ounce of my breath, I turned and looked at them, into the mothers' wild, wild eyes. They had not moved an inch since last night. I felt furious. I wanted to fling them both from the tree, the baby gently, the mother more roughly. I wanted to shake the feathers from her body, pluck her like a chicken. Why hadn't she gotten the baby any food? Why hadn't she left the hollow in days? What was going on? I knew she didn't fly away while I was gone; she never went anywhere. Why was she sitting on her baby like that, like it was already dead? I dared not move her to check, but I knew with all my being that I hated that mother bird, that I hated her more than the people that hated me, that hated all of us, that caused us to die, that didn't care enough about death to find a way to stop it, but only could think about it long enough for a name, a more a suitable name...

I stood up, wiped my face on my sleeve, and walked my way, slowly, to the clinic again. I still had a few more hours of time left there, and I had probably wasted far too many minutes being gone. The birds were fine and I had to accept that. They were fine without me.

By the time I had finished my shift, I had seen the volunteer with the auburn hair four more times and six more patients had died. I guess now I could say for sure they died of AIDS, but somehow those words together in that order seemed like a poison, like their lives were cheapened due to the term. I could imagine why it felt that way, tried not to think about it, and averted my eyes until the sun dipped behind the clouds.

That night, I walked home far slower than normal; or maybe it just seemed like it after my rage-induced run during the afternoon. Jon was dead and gone. My imaginary family was dead as well, but that one was far worse because they had never even existed in the first place. They would never exist. They could never even hope to exist.

I traipsed my way up to the oak tree, slowly, as if a part of me never wanted to look inside the hollow ever again, as if my body had developed a natural aversion to the entirety of the tree. A cricket chirped nearby, announcing the arrival of night. It wasn't quite nighttime yet, but it was past dusk; a gathering of darkness, you could say.

I looked inside the hollow tree and saw immediately that the mother bird was no longer there, though her shadow still remained, etched upon the bark like some sort of permanent looming ghost. I looked down farther into the nest and saw the sharp outline of the baby bird, but something was wrong; it was dead, and it had been long dead, a few days at least. The tiny white bone of the beak was starting to peek through the decomposing brown fuzz, and I could see the skin beginning to fall away from the ribs. Inside the stomach, a few wasps buzzed and ate their way through. The baby bird had been dead for days.

And where had the mother gone?

But that night, despite it all, I dreamed of doves nonetheless.

WHISPER IN THE WIND

Keaghan Banaitis

Asteriea exists, yet she does not.

She did once, in a village that no longer lives, in memory or word. She was a daughter, a sister, a friend. But, long ago in that village that she alone knows the name of, she made a deal. Or, not a deal exactly, but whatever best describes the moment when there is only one option but it is still presented as though there are two.

Her fate is her fault, though she likes to blame it on a bad bet or divine punishment for her greed. She rages against anyone she can think of as she slips between trees and houses and the spots where this world intersects the next, never quite able to blame herself.

In rare moments of introspection, she can admit she tampered with the lives of her friends, though they got to live. Cormac and Rowan and Moira and Isolde, all as forgotten as the village, were allowed to grow and age and love while she rots, forgotten.

She does not have the worst luck, supposedly. Seamus gave his life.

Then again, is a half-life without need for nourishment or sleep any kind of life at all?

She longs for the nothingness Seamus fell victim to. For she knows, truly, deeply, that there is nothing after this existence except darkness. No loving reunions, no palace in the clouds, no greater punishment for her sins.

There is just endless night.

Once upon a time, as stories go, Seamus found a book.

Out hunting mushrooms or truffles or adventure, as twelve-year-old boys do, Seamus stumbled upon it in the woods. Unassuming and bound with a red cover made of leather, it was easy to see amongst the green of the forest.

It was Asteriea who wrote in it.

He gifted it to her, red-cheeked and nervous until she accepted it with a grateful smile. Seamus was kind and comely, but Asteriea longed for more than their village. He would have been an anchor, burdening her with love and children and labor.

She used the book as a diary, practicing her letters and sketching the flowers that grew between the stones of the street. It never seemed to run out of space, no matter how much she wrote, but even then it took Asteriea until she was six and ten to realize that something—the old gods or the new, the eyes in the forest or the whispers between houses—had enchanted it.

As a child, she had written half-demands, petty boons. She wrote about her father's complaints about a dry season, about the heifer bearing twins on Cormac's farm. They weren't wishes (or prayers, if the gods were to have meddled, though she knows now they didn't) but the book still listened and improved the lives of those around her.

And then, naturally, Seamus asked Asteriea's father for her hand. She did not want to give it, for it was *hers* to give away. She had seen so little of the world. But Seamus was a firstborn son and heir to a prosperous farm.

So, at first, she prayed. To the new God that she was told to believe in; to the old gods that spinsters and witches still worshiped with hand-carved altars. She lit candles and gave up sugared sweets and begged her father to reconsider.

To no avail.

Foolishly, in retrospect, but desperately in the moment, she poured her anger onto the pages of her diary the night before her wedding, leaving scathing indentations and deep black marks on the curve of her hand. Words spilled out, white-hot with anger, slick and freezing with sorrow.

As her eyes grew heavy, her hand seemed to move on its own as she wrote—without meaning, without knowing the weight of words—that she wished that Seamus would die so she would not have to marry him.

And he did.

And she was free.

But one brush of power wasn't enough.

Moira had loved Rowan in secret so Asteriea used the book to nudge them together. Cormac wished to attend university in the capital so she lined his pockets with enough gold. Isolde, sweet gentle Isolde who had carried and lost babes thrice over, wished for her fourth child to live.

Asteriea gave them all they asked for and more. Money, love, knowledge, family—none of it took away the sin of killing Seamus, but soon enough she was able to forget the transgression. She was benevolence, she was power, *she was a god*. Gods do not suffer the emotions of man.

And then, Gregor came.

Asteriea was one and twenty. He looked older, by a bit, with ruddy gold hair and deeply pockmarked skin. He stole into her home—larger now, after listening to her mother bemoan the holes in the thatched roof, her sister complain of sharing a bed—in the dead of night on feather-light feet and smelling of the crisp ocean air.

She did not run or call for help.

His voice was silk, was the night, and crawled down her spine like a thousand ants. “Asteriea Ó Foghladh. You have taken what was not yours to take.”

Her voice did not shake. “I know not what you mean.”

Between one blink and the next Gregor was at her side, prying open the lowest drawer of the vanity and removing the false bottom.

“It was a gift,” Asteriea insisted.

Something flashed across his face, akin to understanding. “And who gave it to you? Where is Seamus?”

“I—he died,” A half-truth. The words caught in her throat, painfully tight.

Understanding gave way to satisfaction. “Then you must pay.”

“Pay?” she echoed, fingers tightening on the golden comb in her hand. His eyes flit down seemingly amused at the sight of a makeshift weapon, and her grip slackened.

“Seamus agreed to take my place.”

Asteriea knew that Gregor was not lying, but she was loath to admit it. Power had made her headstrong and untouchable. “Seamus was *twelve* when he gave me this. You cannot—”

“And he was seven and ten when you murdered him,” Gregor interrupted, voice laced with the power of a thunderstorm. A greater force than she could understand was at play.

“Why do you need me, then?” Asteriea demanded. “Seamus and his debts, whatever they may be, are buried in the sea. I have no quarrel with you.”

“The book must always have a guardian.”

“What?”

“Magic like this is dangerous, ancient. It is not of this realm, but someplace more sinister. It cannot fall into anyone’s hands with impunity; it is my duty to keep this world in balance.”

Asteriea glanced down at the book, heart pounding, palms slick. “Yet you were tricked by a child.”

“Seamus had ten years before I claimed him. I am not in the business of being cruel or unjust, Asteriea Ó Foghladh. I do not wish to trick others as I was tricked myself. Ten years to arrange his affairs, that was the deal.”

“So you manipulated him, then?” Asteriea said, lip curling.

Gregor laughed, though it was cold and brittle. “I offered him what he wanted. It is not my fault that twelve-year-olds are single-minded.”

“And if I had married him?”

“The affairs of mortals are of little interest to me anymore. With time, they will disinterest you as well.”

“Why is it my debt to bear? Why not his sister or mother or father? They share his blood.”

Gregor dropped his head to the side as if faced with a particularly difficult word problem. His eyes, which she could have sworn were brown, gleamed deep green. The exact shade of Seamus’s. To mock her, Asteriea concluded bitterly.

“You killed him, Asteriea Ó Foghladh. Nature demands balance.”

“Where were you then? When I was—when everything with Seamus happened. Why not intervene and stop me if I’ve disrupted nature?”

Gregor’s mouth thinned in annoyance. He reached out as if to cup her cheek and Asteriea, too slow to dodge, flinched when his hand made contact with her bare skin. Images flooded through her, dark creatures with legs bent the wrong way and eyes that glowed like embers and fangs as long as her forearm.

“This is what you must protect the world from,” Gregor said simply, as if he was discussing the weather. Asteriea’s stomach roiled. “As I said, the affairs of mortals are of little importance when the boundaries of this world are threatened.”

She opened and closed her mouth, words lodged in her throat. They clawed at the soft skin of her esophagus, leaving deep gouges to fill her mouth with copper and iron. “And if I refuse?”

“Do you think your neighbors will take kindly to knowing you manipulated the world around them? Or perhaps you would like Isolde to die in childbirth, Cormac to be killed in an accident at school, Moira and Rowan to be torn apart by infidelity and murdered by grief? I offer you

freedom in oblivion, in eternity. But, I am all too happy to sow discord until you are alone by your own designs. I grow impatient, but I can wait a year or two more.”

Her blood heated, burning from head to toe as rage pulsed through her. How dare he? Who was this man, *this creature*, meant to force her to sign away her life? “You have no right to come into my home, to threaten me, to—”

The walls around her fell away, turning to silt and drifting like dust. “I am not asking Asteriea Ó Foghladh. This has been my burden to bear for nigh on two hundred years. I have grown weary. I crave the escape of death.”

The cool winds of autumn kissed her cheeks, stealing away hot tears. She imagined her sister, away at their aunt’s with her mother, and her father in town visiting the pub with friends. She wondered what they would say if they were to come to a house of ashes and a witch of a daughter. The shame weighed around her neck like a yoke, dragging her off her cushioned stool and to the ground.

“What am I to do?”

The anger and urgency on Gregor’s face gave way to sorrow. “Merely sign the book in your blood. Scratch out my name, and free me from my servitude, Asteriea.”

Her name was a whisper on his lips, a promise of adventure and life to come. Her stomach twisted. Her skin chilled.

What could she do in two hundred years?

What could she do with *more*?

So she took the book from the drawer, and the quill he had procured from everything and nothing, holding both in her lap. “I have never seen any other names in the book. Nothing except my writing.”

“Open it.”

(When she tells this story, Asteriea says she had a choice. She says that she offered to trade places out of the kindness of her heart. She never mentions the fact that, once again, she had no other choice but the one thrust upon her.)

Asteriea opened the book. Written in thick dark ink—blood her mind supplied, and she suppressed a shudder—was the man’s full name: Gregor Yarwood. There were three above it, faded and flaked with age. Her head hurt trying to read them. Gregor handed her a narrow blade, and for a moment she wondered what would happen if she simply thrust it into his stomach.

Would the rest of her world unravel until her life was a husk of the fantasy she had created?

So, Asteriea pressed the tip of the blade into her thumb and wrote her name neatly under Gregor’s. The wind whipped her face and Gregor let out a sound between a sigh of relief and a scream of agony. Holes punched through his skin like he was a pincushion, and then he was simply gone.

Asteriea has guarded the book for four hundred and seven years. She has watched the world unfold and refold, shaping itself as empires fell and the common folk rebelled. She has seen nearly every inch of the earth, as far as she knows: mountains capped in snow and deserts with sand as far as the eye can see.

Sometimes, she is summoned by children at sleepovers playing with forces they do not understand. Sometimes, wayward souls beg her for the book, wanting to cheat to improve their lives. They offer themselves in her place, pretending to know the cost of immortality, but she refuses.

Asteriea does not regret what she did to Seamus, not entirely, but after four hundred years, she does not wish the cost on anyone.

She has become all too aware of the thinness of the barriers that seal off this world from the next. Of the creatures strong enough to break through to barter and mislead the foolish. She spends a century keeping them at bay before relenting and policing the ones that do come through. There is little else to do as immortality takes root within her.

The cost for such a fight is her human appearance. Her once brown hair turns mossy, like the grass beneath her feet. Her fingers and toes grow, gaining an extra joint. Her eyes become too wide, her teeth become too sharp, and her voice is a whisper in the wind, no matter what language she speaks. She never notes losing her humanity.

Eventually, she realizes it died with Seamus.

Like Gregor, she tires. It takes twice as long, but her feet grow heavy, her breath labored. When she meets Salem, sweet Salem, he is unlike those who have plied her for the book before. He finds her in the woods and does not make demands. Instead, he peels away four centuries of caution with kind words and sad eyes, until she finds herself giving him the book as a gift.

He misses his friends, she tells herself. They have abandoned him, as she once abandoned Comac and Moira and Rowan and Isolde. He has no one, as she does now.

Perhaps she is foolish or perhaps Salem is more conniving than he seems to be.

~~Perhaps it is the fact that he has Seamus's green eyes and black hair and strong nose. Perhaps he is Seamus, sent by the old gods or the monsters in liminal spaces to punish her for what she did.~~

But she gives him the book and makes him promise to visit her once in a while. She does not tell him the nature of the curse, knowing deeply, instinctively, that he will abandon her if she does. She resolves to tell him of the life he has condemned himself to when he returns, about the eventual isolation that will envelop him.

Asteriea will be benevolent, she decides as she folds his hands around the book and whispers instructions in his ear. She will give him twenty years, or perhaps thirty, before she collects his soul.

Salem does not come back.

He tears apart the fabric of the world at the seams, more greedy than she ever dared to be. Than she ever imagined she could be.

He wards himself from her with words, creating walls of steel and tungsten and pure magic to keep her out.

And Asteriea rages, heartbroken and all too aware of her faults, condemned to walk between the trees and houses and spots where this world intersects with the next forever.