



infinite

Con Amore

Sage Jordan

There was something about him that was just... unreal.

Lithe and small, back against the mirror, legs slipping over the bathroom counter so easily, in a way that reminded inebriated Coda of running water spilling over the lip of a sink—too full. His feet fell from underneath him and his toes so delicately brushed the tile of the bathroom floor. He caught himself with almost intentional poise. His fingers curled over the edge of the counter. He pressed a cigarette to his teeth and locked it there. Smoke. White, feathery smoke almost like spider webs tangled around the loose locks of his nacre hair. The room was full of people, but this one—this one, Coda thought, was just unreal.

The lights were dim and murky in here, greenish in tint as though the bulbs hadn't been touched in ten years and their wire cages were left to oxidize. Soap scum was crammed in the grooves of the faucets, handprints blurred the mirror in long smears, yellow water damage patterned the ceiling, and strange brown spatters covered the floor. Echoing inside the walls was the discordant, dissociated thrum of club music. They could feel the bass vibrating in the floor, throbbing in the walls, humming all around their heads. But this was not a crowd that cared. In this falling-apart bathroom existed an entirely different world, rocking back and forth in an almost impenetrable haze. Coda breathed and tasted a dozen different bodies: sweat, liquor,

ecstasy, cut and chewed and burnt tobacco, dead saliva. He didn't remember how he ended up in this upside-down, seaweed-colored world surrounded by obscured, unfamiliar faces. It was like a tea party in slow motion, a masquerade ball in a black-and-white film, the obfuscated fever dream of a deranged witch doctor. Coda choked on the thought that he was flanked by unknown bodies, tasting the exhales of so many complicated souls just like his—lost souls that had wandered all over the earth, wandered in and out of a thousand other lives, and somehow ended up here, with him, in gently swaying foggy evening silence. What luck. His head was full of cotton. What luck, that this one—this unreal man—be sharing his air.

Arden was an unreal man. He was murmuring something through light, puffy pink lips that were more like cotton candy than human skin in between drags of the cigarette he had clearly pawned off of someone else because no man that attractive ever bought his own addictions. Every one of his motions was smooth as the bars between movements in a symphony, which Coda could say for certain because he wanted to be a composer, once, when the world was still in love with classical music. And this man, Arden, was a delicate concerto; a perplexing cadenza; a white-clad, over-confident, very drunk but not too drunk to understand the line between himself and the end of the world, symphony. He was a lonely soul in a room full of

blurry faces, and he fit in so well he could have disappeared into the fog, but Coda saw him first. Coda couldn't stop seeing him, and he did not necessarily know why.

As if by command, the pearl-haired man's perfect features cleaved through the mist, and it was there that Coda saw them. Like two crystal snow globes on the mantel above a fireplace, the captivating smoky ring around the moon, the hue of the sky just before it kisses the horizon, the very first layer of waves as they peel away from the ocean, ghostly—his eyes were a pair of blue spirits, glittery as his white hair but so petrifying, pulchritudinous, incredible. Coda thought he was sober enough to keep his composure, but he wasn't: his jaw fell on instinct. Arden gave a very small grin. Cigarette smoke tickled through his teeth. Coda watched it snake around his sharp but delicate jaw, in the hollow of his cheeks right beneath his high cheekbones, in between gaps in a button nose; dancing across skin as deliciously white as itself. His cigarette remained clenched between two fingers as he tapped his hand, maybe to an unheard song, on his knee. Then he brought it to his lips again, took a drag, and looked away. The spell was broken. Coda blinked quickly.

He could get addicted to that stare, he knew, if he let himself.

He nearly brought himself to stand, pulled toward the man by an almost tangible drawstring; but in this hallucinated realm, his legs were useless. When his hands fell to the floor, the tiles sank underneath his fingers like the keys of a grand piano. He tumbled through halls of increasing violent noise, brilliant throws of Liszt and Mendelssohn and Bach. He fell back against the wall, defeated. He looked up. Arden was watching again. He blinked, shifted those breathtaking blue eyes, and laughed. His laugh was entirely silent. Coda smiled back. What was he doing?

In fleeting exhales, he recalled how much

more composed he could be in clearer air. Slammed by intense rehearsals, teaching and reteaching himself the music for his upcoming show, wondering if anyone he knew would be watching him from the crowd. Would they care? These countless faces he had memorized, once—would they shift at the taste of his art? Would they hum, cry, applaud the way he moved between emboldened notes? Would he ever begin to impress them? Or would he stand there, making too much sense of such an abstract, antique thing as classical music, and they would grow bored and walk away? What was the point? Under the cloak of this underwater heaven, his efforts appeared so much more useless, rational, and complicated. But this green world was simple. Arden was simple. He was music in its clearest, crispest form. An exhale of gossamery focus, intense and wandering interest, violent intimacy, black and white brilliance, fortissimo temptation—it encircled his blue eyes the way nimble fingers encircle silver tuning pegs. Coda found the longer he stared into those eyes, the easier it became to fall into them. How could he ever fall that easily into music? It was an art, not a drug. Or was it?

Arden was not leaving him any time to decide. When Coda looked up again, he noticed the man was no longer on the counter, but approaching him slowly; his small, dark figure breaking the haze off into curls. He walked with delicate intention, the way a conductor walks to his orchestra, and found a rather close seat on Coda's left. Coda could feel his heat through the fog, even though the closer he became the less he seemed real. Neither man said a word. Coda knew they didn't need to. In music, and in this murky world, they only needed their bodies to communicate.

Coda discovered that he now had space to think. The haze had cleared just a little inside his skull and he took a careful stroll over Arden's features: sharp but hazy, spattered in pretty freckles like paint on a canvas, flinching so subtly at the

tickle of smoke up the sides of his cheeks. Every time he breathed his cigarette, white cobwebs poured between his lips and wavered around in the air. Coda could taste the exhales. They traced around his chin and nose, dove into the belly of his cupid's bow, coated his eyes in diffused fragments of tobacco and made them burn. It was a very numb, almost delicious burn. He forgot, for a moment, how close he and his muse had become.

The air was hot, humming, very peacefully buzzing like a dull throb of electricity around their heads. Two oxidized light bulb cages. Two fascinated souls. Two silent men, making invisible music out of their shared and sudden heat. Coda wished he could thread Arden's hair between his fingers like rows of violin strings and play it. He wished he could capture their fascination in the maple body of a woodwind, and play it. He wanted to press into Arden's skin the way he could press into a piano, and make a symphony out of him.

But did he want it? Coda did not know. He inched so close to Arden's lips that he could almost taste them without touching them. And maybe he didn't need to be intoxicated, because those eyes made him feel so hopelessly high, like plunging into ponds of blue syrup. He figured Arden tasted like syrup, too. And sweat, and ecstasy, and conclusion. Not that Coda wanted an ending. Not that he wanted to let go, of course. Or perhaps he did.

Coda studied him again, but found nothing. Not a wrinkle in his skin, no scars, no imperfections. He was fuzzy at the edges, like a hologram. Barely real. But Coda could touch him. He lifted a hand to Arden's face and ran his knuckles across his cheek. He was so cold. Cold enough that, if Coda closed his eyes, he could picture the polished keys of a grand piano sitting right underneath his fingers. Cold enough that he almost gasped at the shock, because it cleaved through their intensifying heat and made his heart race. The curtains were rising. The instruments were tuning that one perfect middle C.

The composer was lifting his hands. Ten, nine...

Coda's hand fell onto Arden's chest.

Through the layers of clothing, he felt his heartbeat, like a coarse vibrato across his rib cage and along Coda's knuckles, forcing his exhales to become uneven. The smoke was puddling all around them, curling all around them, tying together their blurry edges. Coda was beginning to forget where his body ended and Arden's began. The green air was pulsating. Lights were flickering. The stage was waiting. Five, four...

Arden smelled of cold dust and fresh brass strings. Arden felt like holding a brand new cello, like the hot skin of a passionate virtuoso, like the chills of performing for the first time after so long. His white hair brushed against Coda's forehead. His blue eyes closed. Coda grasped his clothes like a conductor's baton. Three, two...

The lights went out.

One.

The performance was over. He waited for the last G sharp from the violin soloist to drift off into the air, like dissipating mist, until there was nothing left. A silence—a silence so heavy, bottomless, like the gaping mouth of a monster—greedily consumed the air. Coda clenched his breath between his teeth. He lowered his baton and closed his eyes, trying to picture a bathroom full of bodies, a bathroom full of clouds, where no one need applaud because he wasn't putting on a show; where he could bask in his fluttering anxiety and bitterness; where he could wait, forever, for the first set of hands to meet. Coda opened his eyes. The audience erupted with applause. Maybe he expected it. Maybe he didn't. Maybe it made his heart race, just a little, when he realized he was no longer dreaming, and this was it.

He finally let himself exhale, so slowly. The green overhead lights gently faded to yellow. He turned to face the crowd. They were all on

their feet now, cheering. He counted the number of weeping faces, the grins, the fallen jaws that meant he had done something spectacular. But it was him. Him—the snow-haired angel of wavering wonderlands and endless incantations—among the audience that caught Coda’s eye. He had been there the whole time, watching. Marveling. Smiling, so beautifully. Coda had finally performed his first original symphony, and yet, for an instant, it didn’t even seem real. A very soft chuckle escaped him—he couldn’t hold it in. His lungs were throbbing with uncertainty, but also, perhaps, exhilaration. He bowed. The curtains closed.

“How do you feel?” Arden was waiting for him outside, when the crowd had eventually left, the stage had been cleared, and it was official—everything Coda had been wanting for his entire life was his.

“You aren’t allowed to smoke in there, you know.” Coda pulled his jacket on.

“Answer the question.” Arden puffed his cigarette in dissent, and smiled. “How does it feel?”

“A bit like a hangover.”

“Like the best high of your life?”

“Like the first and last.”

Arden laughed at that. He hooked his hands around Coda’s arm, leaned into him, and they began to walk. Rain peppered the street outside the theatre, reminding Coda of mourning tears, or the storm during a funeral. Not that music had died, of course. But that, perhaps, he came here to put it to rest.

“I might just compose from now on, by myself. Does that make me a terrible person?”

“No.”

“Am I the death of classical music?”

“Of course not.”

“Thank you.” Coda hid his red cheeks by turning down his head. Water fell from his hair. “For getting me here, I mean. I never would have done it without you.”

“You would have.” Arden grinned. “But I made it better.”

Arden always made it better. Coda wrapped an arm around his partner, and squeezed him, hard, to remind himself of that. Arden was unreal.

“So, what will you write next?”

“An ode, I think.”

“An ode to what?”

Coda looked over at him. They locked eyes. They were close enough that he could taste Arden’s cigarette, the dripping blue from his oceanlike eyes, the strung-out heat between their fluttering chests. Green light made the bathroom hazy. Ancient grime made the tiles sink. Distant club music, like a patient ghost, hugged them close, and they stayed there for a very long time, in the fog.

“That’s for you to figure out.”

A Mallard in a Pond

Joseph Martensen

A mallard sits before me in a pond. His colors are duller than those of his peers. Yet, he feels special, holds some sense of purpose and meaning that, he naively feels others lack. A group of gnats, minuscule but persistent antagonists, surround the mallard. His feathers seem to shudder, and his beak and tail tense. His eyes narrow on his new adversaries. Suddenly, he snaps at them, aggressively at first, but by the fifth try, his attempts show only desperation. His first strategy having failed, he considers a new option. The mallard dashes away splashing the water and creating great waves around him. The gnats however are determined. The mallard has weakened further; it cannot even take flight. Perhaps he is tired, or perhaps the unknown sky is too unknown and imposing to take on. But, the most likely and disturbing possibility is that my friend has grown to accept the gnats. He has come to see their presence as an inevitability rather than a nuisance. All of this I can see clearly in the mallard's eyes, but what I do not know is far more frightening. The question I cannot seem to answer is whether he has made a wise choice. Does coming to accept his pain show strength of will or weakness in ignorance? My friend comes to a stop and turns his head to look at me. Where his reflection lies in the water I see my own face instead. His beak creaks open and a voice comes out "what should I do?" I shrug in response and the mallard simply lowers his gaze, disappointed. He blinks once in grim resignation and then slowly the mallard spreads his wings. He does not fly, instead, he lies down on the surface of the water, body splayed wide. He closes his eyes and throngs of gnats swarm around him. They land on his wings and back and head, and slowly, I sink.

The Rule of Wild Dogs

Elena Wilson



The following is an excerpt from a longer piece. For the full text, please visit <https://journals.colorado.edu/index.php/honorsjournal/article/view/1661>

Today, as the sun rises to unbelievable temperatures, there is no savior for liars. Lying makes the heat worse. A guilty conscious develops a red-hot itchiness on their necks. The guilt won't subside unless the person absolves themselves of it. Here, in the desert, was great absolution. Sins do not survive underneath the hot cushion of atmosphere. They burn and swell and become ash. It is the way of the desert creatures. To be absolved, to repent, and to punish those who do not.

The velvet interior sweltered with a humidity that made it hard to think. He felt the onslaught of a headache. The half-empty can of Sprite sitting in the cupholder was warm and flat. It had no purpose except to keep his hands and mouth occupied. He kept flicking the aluminum tab on top of the can while staring at the back of the bank's exterior. He knew the time it would take to get in and out. Five minutes to wait in line. Once I get up to the far-left window, I'll pull out the gun. Then it should only take about 20 minutes to get everything in the bag. 25 minutes. Keep the engine running. It was a simple but effective plan. He worried it would take longer. He dreaded sirens pulling down the street.

Being the driver was a lot of waiting. Waiting to breathe for the first time. Putting the car in neutral, ripping out of parking lots without screeching the tires, practicing on abandoned roads, all while in a 2004 Saturn ION. He glanced at

the back of the bank again. His heart was beating faster. Only slight ticks came between pumps, but it was enough to raise his blood pressure. Unable to relax, he thought about the inside of the bank. His partner would no doubt be filling bags at this point and screaming for everyone to follow his directions. He would flail his gun at everyone. Even though he was wild, he still had complete control. He had dirt all over his hands from fixing the car earlier this morning. His hair was barely brushed, and he wore a red Hawaiian t-shirt. He looked regular, except for his eyes, a gaping chasm to his brain. He's a gunslinger and deeply psychotic. This got them inside the bank. This would not help them escape though. Only he, sitting in the car, could help them get out of here. The engine was running. The sun was blistering. But no sirens.

He knew this alley and the corresponding roads. He knew that even if cops were to the left or straight ahead, he could take a right and then zip through a tighter alley but still take it downtown. If the cops were positioned to the right, he would take a left and speed through the intersection, even if it was a red light. He studied this area, he drove it through many times, he practiced, but he still sweated through his shirt. Time was now on the very beginning of running out. 18 minutes were left. His partner was still in the bank. No sirens still. But he's quick. Too fast, like an apparition. He swore that his partner could move through walls. He would sometimes sit in the car for a moment and watch

quietly. It's like he could hear the ground shake and move. His partner could smell blood like a shark. He was a brutally unemotional man. But still, he thought of his partner as wickedly efficient. They were close in age, maybe even a month or two apart. What his partner was after, he never asked. They didn't discuss much of their lives in between jobs. He never even knew his partner's name. When he asked all his partner said was: Call me Lee. That's not my real name. But we shouldn't know each other's real names. Lee called him Paul.

He hadn't even noticed his leg begin to twitch under the wheel. His heart was skipping jump rope. Sweat accumulated on his scalp. He was hot. Breathing in the air of the outside was like breathing in black coffee. It smelled like gasoline. The car started to smell. Even in this street, which looked towards the bank and a few other backs of buildings, the car smelled like it was running inside a garage. The air was spewing it back at him. 16 minutes.

You got a car?

After being arrested for stealing cigarettes, Paul had been tossed in a North Carolina County jail cell. Paul was grabbed outside by a deputy who wore aviators and sported a mustache that screamed Southern Fascist. The jail cell reeked of urine and contained nine other gangsters whose crimes ranged from petty vandalism to armed robbery. That, of course, was Lee.

"Got a light?" Lee leaned to Paul with a cigarette in his hand. Ironical.

Paul wouldn't verbally acknowledge him, just pulled out loose matchsticks from his pocket, hardly looking in Lee's eyes.

"Thanks, partner." Lee smiled as he scratched the head across the back brick wall and held it carefully to the grains of the cigarette.

Paul didn't turn towards him. Just kept a low profile waiting for bail to be posted. Doesn't matter who would. But Lee interrupted.

"Drag?" Lee pushed him the cigarette, Paul

hesitated at first, but grabbed it between his fingers without saying anything.

"Thank you." Paul said. He still wouldn't look. One of the other kids started shouting expletives at the deputies. The others either told him to shut up or laughed. You could hear desk chairs creak or the sound of boots moving around in the other room. The click of the bars, or the beep of a release.

"You got a car?" Lee said amongst the hum of incarceration.

"What?"

"Do you have a car?" He asked again.

"No." Paul wasn't interested in becoming friends.

"I'll buy you one, for bail." Lee whispered.

Paul's ear pricked up. Who was this kid? Why did he have such an offer to make?

"You got money for a car but not for bail?" Paul looked at him. The first time he'd laid eyes upon that bloodthirsty gaze; the insanity glare.

"I got money for bail, no one to post. If I'm lying you can shoot me. I got a gun too." Lee promised.

Paul had underestimated his own stupidity because he did it. After receiving his release, he scraped his cash from the bottom of his sock drawer and ran back to Lee. The promise of getting out of agrarian hell was too rich to turn down.

Lee bought him the car, if Paul drove them, and the deal was made. That was a year ago.

Yesterday him and Lee had sat around waiting for the day to end. The two were bored out of their minds, sitting in the sweaty motel room watching the VHS player. Lee was pacing back and forth like a vulture with not enough flesh in his belly. Paul was nauseous watching him.

"I'm hungry. Let's go eat," Paul suggested. Lee jumped at the idea and practically dove for the keys. Paul let him drive occasionally in case he ever needed to know how to in an emergency. He wasn't

exactly sure if Lee had even gotten his license.

The two drove into town to a diner with fat, greasy portions. Hamburgers there were as large as someone's fist. Lee got an entire breakfast with pancakes, eggs, bacon, fruit, and coffee. He didn't drink the coffee. Paul got a turkey sandwich with French fries and a coke, and by the time the two were finished they could hardly move. Paul looked across at Lee as he gazed out the window to the traffic light. There wasn't a car in sight. Paul thought the heat might melt tires. There was a man sweeping in front of a drugstore, and two kids leaning against a building eating ice cream in the shade. Nobody really looked at him or Lee. But Lee looked at everybody. Lee wasn't going to hurt anyone that didn't deserve it, but sometimes Paul was unsure. One gas station employee suffered a serious pistol whip from Lee, so much so that blood spat out from the attendant's forehead and onto the glass counter. Paul had never seen blood like that.

Lee watched the kids across the street. They were unaware of his gaze and continued sitting together laughing. He was watching them like he longed to join them. To sit there in the cool, tasting sweet ice, going home at dark.

"It's hot today," Paul said, looking up at the ceiling fan.

"Just wait 'til you get to hell," Lee snickered. Paul stared at him.

"Oh, you believe in hell, Lee?" Paul asked.

"Look," Lee pointed to the man across the street. The two turned and watched as he solemnly dragged his broom.

"Do you think that's where you'll end up?" Paul asked him, staring at how the man moved his body; slow and crooked.

"That's where we're both going," Lee kept his gaze on the man. Almost envious.

"This place is like hell." Paul looked out the window. The kids were now walking down the street, towards the movie theater.

"It's not so bad. There are worse places." Lee leaned back.

"Like where?"

"Where I'm from."

Paul waited a moment for Lee to correct himself. He hadn't told Paul any personal information before this, not even his age. The two had agreed that no one would share anything about themselves to keep from snitching. But Lee didn't take back what he said.

"Where's that?" Paul asked.

"Good ol' South Dakota," Lee said sarcastically.

"What's wrong with South Dakota?" Paul asked.

"What's wrong with right here?" Lee asked.

"It's hot."

"So? Buy a fan." Lee played with his knife on the table.

"What, are you going to live here?" Paul leaned forward.

"I could." Lee shrugged again.

"You're not law-abiding enough for here." Paul said.

Lee picked up the knife and started to push the blade into the table.

"Well good luck." Paul threw himself back into the booth. He looked outside the window, the old man sweeping before had sat down on a wicker chair, now staring at Paul.

12 minutes. Three whole minutes had gone by. Still no sign of Lee. Not even sound from inside the bank could be heard. No screams, no gunshots, no yelling. Paul was parked in a spot that no one could see, but he could see them. A dirt road that was covered by a willow and some dilapidated houses was not visible or important enough to see from the road. Even if someone did spot the car, they would think it would belong to one of the two houses he was sandwiched between. Still, he should be able to hear what was going on. Paul thought

about getting out and running up to the window just to peek. Don't ever get out of the car. So, he never would.

Paul's leg bounced uncontrollably now, his stomach doing complete 180s. Paul's sweat was getting out of hand. He was breathing in steam. All he needed to do was crack a window, only for a few minutes. Lee said to keep the windows up in case anyone saw him, but the sun was unforgiving. He rolled down the back two windows and the driver's window all the way. He inhaled a slow, exhausted breath. The air felt too good on his face. He breathed the sweet, delicious South, and it smelled a great deal better than the exhaust from his car. He peered through the small crack between the bank and the building next to it. Trying to catch a glimpse of a flashing light or even a police officer. But he saw nothing. Lee impressed Paul, every time.

Just then, a small creature darted into Paul's view. He was so alert that he stomped on the brake to shift the car. It startled him so bad that his eyes darted around like minnows. He couldn't figure out what he saw, until a small, gray coyote walked out in front of the car. Paul had never seen one. It was so skinny its coat clung to its ribs like a furnished skeleton. It looked as sick as a dog, in fact, Paul mistook it for a dog at first. But this was a wild animal. Its cheeks were slender, and its teeth sharp. These things weren't supposed to come out during the day, and Paul thought that they were supposed to fear people. But here it was. It came from down the street. It slunk around, looking for prey. Its sly head down, the coyote didn't seem aware of Paul. Paul's hands wouldn't let go of the wheel. The coyote stopped right in front of his car. It lowered its head to the ground to sniff the dirt, and its tail hung low. It looked relaxed. Paul released the brake, making a rattling sound inside the engine. The coyote turned his head and saw Paul. Paul looked into those black eyes and felt his heart skip again. The coyote looked plainly, for a moment, like he

would begin speaking. Paul opened his mouth. The coyote didn't move. He just stared at it. The coyote blinked, then turned its head, then trotted away, down the street and gone forever. Paul watched it go, his hands slipping down the wheel and into his lap.

Then, he heard an explosion. Glass shattering explosion. It hurt his ears so bad that he thought someone had shot him in the head. He panicked. Heart rate was back to 180. Sweat now dripped down his neck and to the small of his back. He looked all around him frantically. He looked towards the bank.

Lee was sprinting towards him through the small slip between the buildings. He hugged a black bag to his chest. His eyes were psychotic. He was pale and sweaty. He never looked so sick before.

He ran so fast to the car that Paul believed he teleported. Paul was so startled by the noise he had forgotten to press on the brake to shift the car. Lee had cleared the hood and panickily dove into the passenger side.

[...]

To read the rest of the piece, please use the QR code to access it online.

Fate and Folly

Joseph Martensen

On 15th and Broadway, on a rather gloomy morning, a girl walks into a coffee shop. She makes herself small, drawing her shoulders in close. A bell sways above her as the door opens, but she takes no notice of it. It is a new coffee shop, the kind that is firmly knotted in the gentrification of an older community—all wooden walls and fresh plants and chalkboard menus. Behind the register, a young man's mouth moves. "What can I get you?" the girl guesses. "A small latte, please," she says, but something is wrong, the barista looks confused, almost disturbed. She has said the words, they are there hanging in the air, but they are a foreign thing. It is as if the barista has passed an old schoolmate whose hair has changed style. There is a striking flash of familiarity, but the difference from expectation is significant enough that he does not say hello. Such is the nature of the girl's words. Whether it be her timbre or inflection (or lack thereof) the girl's words are just unfamiliar enough that they defy comprehension. He repeats his question as if he has not heard her, and the girl suppresses her annoyance. With a tight smile, she reaches for her phone and types out her order. With her drink in hand, she heads for the door, but as she opens it a black cat runs out into the street. She had not seen it in the shop before. The rain spatters silently but she does not pull out her umbrella. The rain is a blessing. There are fewer people to bump into her, fewer people to ask for directions, fewer people to call out to her, fewer people to show her pity. But, the rain understands. It soaks her and chills her and matts her dark hair like it would any other. Each drop is a reminder that she is a part of this world. The rain is a blessing.

Two blocks away a man, a gritty figure aged past his years, sits under a construction placard. The man is a listener. It is the foundation of his success, but luck was too difficult a mistress to keep. He still listens though. To names of orders at the new coffee shop a few blocks up, to credit cards and room numbers when they are read aloud, to a businessman's phone call to exploit his biases for some made-up charity. Today, however, it rains, and the rain is a curse. There are fewer people to walk, fewer people to talk, fewer people to show kindness, fewer people to show pity. He sighs, his blanket is wet, it will be a few cold days ahead. A meow bubbles up above the sounds of traffic and raindrops as a black cat slips around the corner.

In a basement apartment on the other side of town in a dark room with no windows, there is a boy reading. He sits in his chair and reads a book on chess. Perhaps "sits" is not the right word. He is coiled, delicately balanced on his tiptoes as if ready to pounce like a cat. He does not seem the sort to be alone in a dark room. He is young, attractive, and athletic, and yet he struggles to make friends. Perhaps it is his demeanor, a cold biting silence. Perhaps it is his smile, always a bit unsettling as if he is analyzing the person

before him. Or perhaps it is his posture, hunched over like Atlas carrying the weight of the world upon his shoulders. In the corner of the room lies a mirror image of the boy's crouched pose. Veiled in darkness there sits a cat, solid black, with two intelligent eyes.

Now, the observant reader may at this point have guessed that either coincidence or fate has something of note in store for these particular individuals. The observant reader may fancy himself clever, having deduced that these eccentric members of society are important far beyond their humble appearances. That these individuals will meet a certainty, and that these characters will provide insight into human growth and goodness is seen in much the same way. The observant reader, however, could not be more wrong.

This Is Dedicated to the One I Love

Ava Morgan



The following is an excerpt from a longer piece. For full text, please visit <https://journals.colorado.edu/index.php/honors-journal/article/view/1839>

“On second thought, just the number three,” Sandra called, glancing over the back seat. Though Jack had started his growth spurt—they’d had to start buying pants a few sizes up, the cuffs rolled over four times to reveal his ankles—he could make do with a double burger split between them. He was still asleep (thank God), his legs chicken-winged into his chest.

Hell, he could have the whole thing. She could lose weight—at least her boss thought so.

“The guys that come round here want to be wowed,” he’d call after her as she made her way through the back wings for a drink before her next dance, shoving aside racks full of rhinestones and feathers as he struggled to keep up. “They want to see the kinds of girls that get stuck up on a lunch box. And while you’ve got an ass that can move mountains, Mama, it ain’t making up for much.” They’d leave it at that, and she’d spend the night trying to ease her hips into the slimming silver straps of a bikini, trying to make the stars on her bra stretch wider than they were ever really meant for.

Sandra pulled the car forward, took her receipt from the pimply kid leaning out the window. It was always more than she expected.

So much for her hair; even now in the rearview mirror she could make out the brown rootline trying to reclaim its territory against the blonde fry. She’d have to call Tammy to cancel this weekend.

The car made its way past streetlights, past mobile homes bundled in chain-link fence, until it found the highway, steering west along the Vegas strip. She always liked this time of day. Liked how the sky swirled before her and the high-rises as grease in a kitchen, expectation rising in the heat of a frying pan.

Jack was starting to come to. His face scrunched into a sharp inhale and he readjusted his legs. His hair, darker than hers, was already sticking up in the back.

“Late night?”

“You could say that,” he mumbled, not even opening his eyes. With his voice dropping, he sounded more like his dad each day.

“Here, I got you something.”

She passed the bag his way with a wad of napkins from the glove box.

“Thanks.” A pause. “There’s just one in here.”

“I’m not that hungry—remember those leftovers I brought home last night? I mixed in that green chili you like, threw them in the microwave.”

Her lies had a way of rushing on towards an overfull explanation. Jack met her with a weak smile in the mirror.

The car continued forward, light settling into chrome.

“You sure you don’t want anything?”

“I told you, I already ate.”

"Need a hand?"

"No, it's fine."

The crash of plates and flatware crescendoed, Sandra's scouring of some blackened substance she couldn't begin to name quickening in the scratch of steel wool against cast-iron.

She'd let the dishes pile on long enough: might as well get them over with.

Jack sat curled on the couch with a book, his head popping up every few seconds to check on the situation in the kitchen.

Let him rest. She stared straight at the suds browning up through her nail beds, at the window's overlook on the blue grass separating the drylands from the parking lot, at the reflection of all behind her. All that worry.

Outside, a young couple hovered over a car hood, rolling a cigarette between them back-forth, back-forth, that red glow circling an entire horizon before the stars would roll around, settle down alongside the night.

Now here she was, slaving away at a pan.

It could be worse, she reminded herself. She didn't cook as often as she should, and though the food stamps never stretched as far as they ought to, she knew of people who relied solely on peanut-butter sandwiches and chips, of people who skipped through drive-thrus so fast that their cup holders were lined with the toys most people threw out at the end of the Happy Meal.

At least they saved junk food for the rare occasion. Sided sit-down meals with a garden salad, often passed on soda.

Except on nights she worked doubles, coming home as Jack headed off for class and sleeping away the day in a pile of perfume, fries, and sequins.

Or when she couldn't make ends meet.

It was all starting to pile up again.

In the weeks after they took Jack away,

she'd had to enroll in a class on better parenting practices, something her lawyer assured her would look good for the court when they filed for custody. She remembered the teacher now—his whine, how his nose pinched up with his moustache at the end of every sentence.

"Now, mothers," he'd begun, "who can tell me where ice cream falls on the food pyramid?"

A silence. Three men in the corner crossed their arms. The instructor fiddled with his pointer stick.

"Well, we can rule out a vegetable because it isn't green"—SMACK!—"a grain because it doesn't come from wheat"—SMACK!—"and a fruit because its sugar isn't naturally occurring"—SMACK! "Now what does this leave us with?"

A woman in a Cheetah Girls hoodie raised her hand.

"Yes, Amy."

"Dairy—it comes from cows."

The teacher's nose twitched. He sucked in his cheeks.

"Not quite."

The pointer made its way to the top-most section on the pyramid, a section filled with caricatures of pudgy kids double-fisting lollipops.

"This, mothers, is where we find ice cream: the land of sweets, trans fats, and dullardry." He let the word hang over them, fill the air.

"Say little Jimmy won't stop crying on his way to his dad's house; are we going to give him an ice cream cone to cheer him up? Say little Jimmy got a D on a math test he really studied for; are we going to give him an ice cream cone and tell him to do better on the next one?"

"No! Ice cream is a pathway to malfeasance, to bottom-feeding, to illiteracy! You mothers have been given another chance to examine your ways and change. What are you going to do when Jimmy asks for an ice cream cone?"

At the time, Sandra cried. Those were her

crying days: in bus stops, in bathroom stalls, on break behind the diner, after filling out forms and standing in line for hours on end in her stilettos, her one good pair of shoes, once for a night out, then for looking well-kept, legible, legal. She'd graduated high school. She'd done good with her life. How could anyone talk to her like that?

Hunched over the kitchen sink, her scrubbing quickened pace. The solid bits were starting to chip away, that grit sliding down towards the drain. No matter her nail polish. Her skin.

"Shit!"

The grit sliced through skin and she pulled the cut to her mouth, sucked blood.

In a second Jack was standing over her with a towel, running her hand under the tap.

Outside the window, the young couple was turning in for the night, snuffing out their light. Stars had descended over the drier flats, a prairie dog whistling out from the distance.

But she knew the fridge was stocked—at least until the weekend. And she had a bank account in her own name, something those classes had never explained but that she had pursued anyway. And Jack was a healthy boy—a kind boy—a boy who didn't mind green beans.

They would never become those caricatures. Not on her watch.

*In the summers before we were women,
we snuck through the walls with the
farm puppies.*

*We found hips with the youth chased out, an
old kitchen still ripe with genesis and
dust.*

Sitting at the kitchen table over his English assignment (they were beginning their poetry unit, the scansion sheet just by his elbow), Jack couldn't help thinking about Mom.

What he knew of her childhood was little. It took on the shape of a farm, a lot of yelling.

He had a hard time imagining her as a girl. Sure, she was girlish—all those magazine quizzes, her laugh making her seem younger than his friends' moms—but never really a girl. He could picture her with braids, a pail for collecting eggs and a bible on her hip, but her trajectory always pointed towards motherhood— "guns and puppies and my gold colored shoes."

Now he troubled himself over the words, what Falkner meant by hips with the youth chased out and how they were found, not grown.

*In supermarket tanks the lobsters would
pile
their crowding bodies on top of each other and we
would wonder if they even knew that the
others were alive.*

But those were supermarkets: meat was still meat. If not from his growing up with gas stations instead of groceries, the year Mom dated Mark (fat old drunk) had taught him to savor every bite he could get.

So much for "Ellis County, Kansas"; his translations were of no use, each attempt getting further from the original. He set his sheet on the countertop, red pen ready for Mom's comments in the morning, and slumped off to bed.

Jack spent the night struggling against the sheets, against the box springs. Dreams swirled in and out of worry: he couldn't picture himself as a collective "we" from which to witness and contribute, leaving him unsettled. Winds picking up across the desert, scraped against the walls, the prairie dog calls once more turning towards a howl.

Later that week, Sandra found the flier hung up to the refrigerator door with its promise of discount hockey pads, skates, and club uniforms.

Everything a boy could ever want.

Except a stick.

She'd waited for him to pad out of his room—watched as he took giant, careful steps to avoid the edge of his oversized plaid pants—made sure to hand him a cup of coffee—before broaching the subject.

"I don't know kiddo," she said, sliding over the flier. His cheeks flexed, his tell when he was trying to keep calm.

"You know how tight things are lately. I don't think I can balance out a hockey stick this month, let alone registration fees, gas to get you to practice and games." Each word got quieter and quieter.

"But I've got it all figured out!" he said. "All you'd have to do is sign a paper and my fees are paid for—it's really just the stick."

She took another sip of her coffee.

"The school said they'd take care of most of it because of—well—because..." He was always embarrassed to say "our situation" because he liked it here. It was better than Denver. Better than some of the other motels, other towns, they'd had to pass through just to get here.

"...because of how it is. But they can't cover the stick: those you have to get custom-fit."

He waited, wrapped one of the pants' drawstrings around his finger.

"What do you think?"

Sandra sighed, stared out the window. It was the times after she'd quit when she most needed a cigarette.

"I can't make any promises." They drank their coffee in silence.

"I'll sign the form, though. See what we can do." And when she'd seen a smile start to poke out at the corner of his mouth, just enough, she continued with: "I never pictured you in the rich-kid sport. Soccer, maybe, but hockey?"

"What's wrong with hockey?"

"It's a fighting sport." She laughed. "All this time just to get you a dentist and you want to bust out your teeth?"

"I'll be careful." The grin had spread across his face; her boy was back.

"Plus they fit the stick to you, so it's not like the field-hockey girls all hunched over the turf."

"Or the skirts."

He started to laugh. "Or the skirts."

[...]

To read the rest of the piece, please use the QR code to access it online.

Editors' Note: This piece contains lines from the poem "Ellis County, Kansas" by Julia Falkner.

Experience

Diego Woodward



The following is an excerpt from a longer piece. For the full text, please visit <https://journals.colorado.edu/index.php/honorsjournal/article/view/1889>

You sit on the train tracks and watch as the black smoke figure ahead of you grows. Its shrill whistle screams out at you, begs you to reconsider, but you're motionless. A sense of terror grows from within your gut 'til it nearly overflows. That figure keeps nearing, its form gets clearer and clearer. The definition is pristine, you can practically see the conductor yanking on the brake hoping to spare your life, you feel nauseous. And then, well past the moment of no return, the steam train plows through you. You can hardly notice it knocking you back onto the ground before the fuzzy sensation of your flesh being torn to shreds under its wheels and hooks consumes your body. Without the pain, it can best be described as ticklish.

You rip off the headset and wipe your brow, chuckling nervously.

"That's too real! That felt like the real thing! Oh my goodness I thought I was gonna die!" You shout, and your friends all cackle. Your name is Colton, and you're spending a weekend at a friend's cabin, but instead of enjoying the wilderness, you've all decided to immerse yourselves in something a little more novel.

"My turn!" shouts another of your friends, and your vision fades to black.

You take off the glasses and shake your head. "That was terrible. Stupid Oscar-bait. Wow, amazing, technology has come so far. I'm an artist, I will not resort to cliches like that. My art is going

to change the world!" Your name is Axel, and you're going to be one of the greatest experience writers alive, one day. You feel yourself filled with inspiration.

Edwin flicked off the experience and rolled his eyes.

Wow, another best-experience winner right there. You're so right! It totally is like Inception! I never thought of that! Christ, you'd think living your entire life in someone else's experience would make these people write something interesting, he thought. I did get called out a little at the end there. I guess I should rule out writing about experiences themselves, unless it's actually gonna be interesting.

Edwin took a deep breath and closed his eyes, then opened them again—a routine reality check he performed whenever re-entering the real world, though this time it didn't feel very necessary. Still, it was a good habit to maintain, as he'd been taught since he was a child, like brushing your teeth. Telling the difference between realities is like being asleep or awake. If you aren't thinking about it, if you aren't pausing to ask "Where am I?," you'll forget where exactly you are. But if you take that moment, telling the difference is as easy as breathing.

Edwin cleared his throat and went back to business. He scrolled through his list of experiences to try until he found The Marvelous Life of Miles Martin, and scratched it off. What a waste of time,

he thought. Then, his eyes gazed over the rest of the intimidatingly long list as he tried to decide what kind of feeling he felt, what kind of story could match his mood. Still, much like life itself, an experience is difficult to qualify with words alone and impossible to predict, so Edwin didn't bother reading into himself too deeply. Julia, he settled on a story that caught his eye, Julia, I hear that one's good.

Down where the water meets the tips of the leaves, you find yourself here again. You turn to your right, and there she is, like all the times before. Julia. She smiles a light smile, and the weight of life is lifted repeatedly. You slowly shift your gaze back to the lake, and see spots of birds drift across the sunset sky and dip down to where the hum of insects warms your mind. You take a deep breath, and close your eyes. You open them again, and redirect your slurred gaze to Julia beside you.

"How do we know this is real?" You hear yourself ask as the autumn leaves behind her drift all together like a hundred paint brushes coloring an expressionist's canvas.

"We don't," she says.

You laugh, and look down at your feet. The cool air breezes past the tips of your ears—you just feel so light.

"But I know that I love you," Julia says.

You feel your heart soar and you laugh like a hot cup of tea on a frigid day.

Edwin flicked off the experience and jolted up off the couch, running his hands through his hair. He paced around the coffee table, shaking his head. He stopped at the fourth corner and took a deep breath. He closed his eyes, then opened them again. It's fine,

I know this is real. It doesn't matter. He sits back down. It's fine. He couldn't stop picturing her, Julia, the intensity of the feeling he felt towards her. He felt an electricity throughout his upper chest, a general anxiety. That was too much, way too real. He lay down on the couch. Normally it'd feel dissonant to attach so much emotion to someone they hadn't introduced yet, but for some reason it fit so perfectly. How did they do that? Was it something to do with the whole surreal feeling? God, I wish she was real. I wish that whole situation was real, it was just so... sweet. I deserve to be that happy. He sat up and shook his head one last time, then scrolled through his list again and settled on an experience without really considering it further. Veteran's Rebirth. Sci-fi. Cool.

You cry down from your space-copter as you feel your planet collide with this nameless world. Agony, agony sinks into your soul as you realize you'll never again see General Grawl, the only man you've ever loved, after this moment staring down at his glossy eyes in the rubble below. He just keeps getting further away from you and there's nothing you can do but watch.

When you can see him no longer, you look up to the stars and cry out "GRAWLLLLL!!!!" as you fire your mega blaster off into the cosmos.

Three days later, you find yourself walking up the steps towards Soldier Vernkot and Professor Kipple, standing on a stage before a roaring audience. You feel the weight of three long, bloody years on your shoulder. You feel the weight of years at the academy, years of choosing to do pushups and steroids instead of playing video games like all the other boys.

You feel the weight of the lives of Grawl, and Eckle, and the unforgettable Skiff. It's all been leading up to this. You step forward as Kipple brings the medal forward, and he places it over you so it sits upon your worthy, massive chest.

"Captain Charles T. Baker, you have saved not just our world, but many, thanks to your brave sacrifice." Vernkot says, and the audience cheers.

Pride floods your system. Finally, you can rest.

Edwin flicked off the experience. Three years, god damn. Wow. That was kinda corny but still actually fantastic. Shit, that last battle was so fun, they really pulled everything out for that one. I was on fire! Love when they really tap into the thrill of the kill. He chuckled to himself. It might be interesting to use that feeling for a morally questionable character, actually, he thought as he emptied out his tear valve and checked his watch. 10:16. I've still got the whole night left before school. Alright, tonight's a research night and then I start writing some tomorrow. I should really try pushing myself, that last one was three years long but it was totally awesome. Edwin went through his list to check off Veteran's Rebirth and immediately scrolled back to near the top of the list. Hills of Water. 65 years long. The last one was a long one too, and it was fantastic. I'm ready, I might as well. It's finally time. Edwin took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and opened them again. Shit,

I forgot to do it last time. It's alright. He sighed. Maybe I should check on my parents first, it isn't good to be lying still for so long.

He got up from the couch to walk down the hall to his parents' room. He could hear the sound of a movie being played inside. As he approached, he felt a warmth come over him—not a physical warmth, but an emotional one. There's a shadow in the corner, just around the hall closet, a shadow big enough to conceal someone. He stops and gasps a little, trying to fight back a grin. Julia. He stepped closer, and then another step, and the shadow revealed itself to be nothing but an empty wall. Nothing there. The warmth flew away along with that ambiguity, like leaves in the wind. Edwin took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and opened them again. He walked down the rest of the hallway. Two knocks, then he opened the door.

"Hey guys, just saying goodnight. How's the movie?" he asked.

His mother shifted up in her bed at the sight of him. His father was already asleep. "Oh, it's good. Kinda confusing, they were in all these different dreams and now there's these people that think they're still asleep. Also one of them is a detective? I think? I don't know, it's kind of hard to follow. But it's interesting."

"Sounds interesting. Alright, well goodnight."

"Goodnight. Love you!"

"Love you."

Edwin's father mumbled a

“Goodnight”, eyes still closed and still on the border of some shallow dream.

Edwin walked back to the couch and scrolled back through his experience service to find Hills of Water. Okay, here goes.

And so you lie there, in your soft, wiry mattress, looking up at the light and letting it blind you. You feel someone hold your hand; you can hardly spend the energy to look to see who it is. But the chance that it's Annie crosses your mind, so you find it within yourself to look. It's Joan.

“Joan... where's Annie?” You whisper in a voice you can hardly believe is yours. It's so hoarse, so frail, it's an embarrassment anyone can hear you like this.

“Annie's not coming, dad.”

“Oh.”

“I'm here for you, I'm not leaving.”

“I know.”

“I love you.”

Your eyelids feel heavy. You find yourself drifting away, back down that river, back over those hills, to the City of Lights, to Julia.

“No, I'm not ready to go,” you say.

You feel someone squeeze your hand and say “It's okay.”

In the boat beside you, those wrinkled eyes, that crooked smile, you see Elias.

“Elias.”

“Elias?” A voice from some distant place asks.

You look back forward and watch

those waves drift over themselves under that shimmering night sky, and you can't help but feel relieved.

“He's finally here with me.”

Edwin lurched off the couch, the experience flicking off on its own as he fell to the ground. He stays there, lying on the carpet, staring at its folds and threads. He sniffles. The tear valve was leaking, filled to the brim and begging to be emptied, but Edwin doesn't feel like doing anything at all. A tear rolls down his cheek. That was heartbreaking; I can't believe they did that. It makes sense, but Annie... That was brutal. I don't want to believe it. He sniffled. He wanted to take a deep breath, close his eyes, but he isn't ready for the real world. Not so soon after.

There's no rest, you're just in one world and then out in another, he thinks.

The soft, cotton candy cloud cushions your feet with every leap you take.

“To the castle!” You cry, and your teddy bear friends shout and giggle in agreement behind you.

[...]

To read the rest of the piece, please use the QR code to access it online.

Black Sea Glass on the Shores of Time

Jemma Kuster

Samuel can no longer remember how long they've been looking for the ocean.

In the early days, he had attempted to keep track by counting steps, methodically recording each slap of his leather soles against the snowmelt soggianness of the road. Every footfall had been a sound as much as a sensation, syncopated staccato beneath the rattle of kicked-up bits of gravel falling together in his boots.

Unfortunately, he had only known so many numbers, and his shoes had only been able to hold so much gravel before Annie had noticed and forced him to shake them out. So, after trying and failing to instead measure time by using the pebble calluses on his feet as tally marks, he had finally turned to the pocket watch.

It had already broken by that point in their journey; not long after he'd first swiped it off a stranger in the street, the face had snapped free from its pendant and tumbled down one of the thawing gulleys beside the road. For a single, stunned second, he'd watched it pirouette midair, its elegant dance knocked off-kilter as it bounced from rock to rock, spider leg cracks exploding into crystalline splinters destined to lose themselves on the ice.

The ache in his chest, the aborted, feeble attempt to lift his hand and catch nothing—it hadn't been a reaction born from sadness, not really—the chain had never even properly wrapped around his wrist, perhaps out of loyalty to its previous owner,

perhaps out of disgust for the grubby skin he'd sat it upon. But clambering down between jagged edges and trying to fit broken parts together before his fingers could freeze over, Samuel had wondered why he'd even stolen it in the first place. And that, if nothing else, had been a feeling adjacent to melancholy; not guilt or regret, but the bitter sort of disappointment that had come with growing up and realizing how easily beauty could shatter into memory.

Then, noticing the glacial wetness seeping into his boots, he had gathered the nearest of the scattered parts into one clenched fist, broken slivers of glass and all, and made the scramble up to the cobbled road without another word. As Annie's outstretched hand had pulled him out of his mind and back into the realm of movement and sound, he'd quietly resented the fact that time had refused to stop. Not for one of its most loyal preachers, its final, ticked breaths evaporating into sighs of vapor beneath the warming winter suns, and certainly not for the philosophical grieving of a miserable, eleven-year-old boy with boots too large for walking in the snow.

After a few miles spent enduring her silent, curious gaze, Samuel had told Annie that the watch had been his father's, just to see what it would feel like to say it. The device had fit well enough within her palm, her own hands more capable of protecting and pretending as if the things they held were precious, as if the ornamental gears along the rim

of the face, broken as they were and immobile as they had always been, could still somehow rotate in time with the stippling stars overhead. Her eyes had traced their celestial edges, then risen back to his expression, and for a moment, he had rather regretted saying anything at all.

“What a lovely watch,” she had replied. She hadn’t reprimanded him because she never did. The look was always enough. “How about we make it a new strap together?”

So the pocket watch had become in death what it never could in life, a relic on a patchy woolen leash loved not for its beauty, but for its ugliness. Samuel still likes to tug it out from the depths of his knapsack and stare at the haphazardly pinned cover like a wayfarer seeking the stars on his compass. He’ll smile to himself from behind his scarf, the cool metal soaking in the warmth of his skin, until he inevitably catches a glimpse of his reflection and spoils his good mood for the foreseeable future.

Of course, even if it did work, the watch would be no help in answering the question of the exact date. Or for how many days they’ve been walking, surviving on foraged goods and Annie’s dwindling purse. Yet Samuel finds himself comforted by the idea of time recording itself more subtly, more unmeasurably, in the disrepair of pocket watches, in the yellow creeping over the edges of old newspaper kindling, in the dust beneath sagging beams in abandoned homes along the road, in the rings of fallen trunks, the number of cranberries left on the vine, the flakes of frost like a thousand moons being shed and subsequently reborn from the sky each night.

Nevertheless, if he were to ask, Annie might know how long it’s been. She seems to keep track somehow. She’s always keeping track of things, always patting her skirt pockets to reassure herself that they haven’t been blown away in the wind,

nimble fingers finding little coins and spools and salt taffies that she’ll have in his palm the instant his feet start to lag when it’s his turn to walk beside the horse.

He wonders what she had lost to make her like that.

But he never asks either question.

In truth, Samuel doesn’t think it should be taking this long to find the ocean unless it doesn’t exist at all. Maybe it existed once, sure, but not anymore, not when all that’s left is melting snow, the distant, dry sand, and rumors of saltwater like a looming avalanche on the horizon, just waiting for the opportunity to crash over the earth and finally make it clean again. To ask the first question would be to bring that possibility into existence, and he could never do that to Annie.

As for the second, well, he could never ask that of Annie either, never risk shattering the fragile, but growing, trust between them. Because Samuel’s life, though he’s lost track of exact days, can still be split into two halves: the time before Annie and the time after Annie. And Annie, in all her confident tenderness, is the kind of woman that Samuel wishes could have been his birth mother.

She’s the kind of woman to speak in “delightful”s and “lovely”s, to punctuate her sentences with little “oh”s, and qualify her adjectives with “so very” as if her lips cannot bear to part such intimate words. She’s the kind of woman to pick crocuses from the frosted grass until her spindly fingers are red with cold, fighting her way through snow squalls in order to lay the blossoms at the feet of any ruined buildings they pass. She’s the kind of woman to wear long skirts and weave longer scarves, to let a kitten stumble with muddy paws all over her fresh lace stockings if doing so would support its quest to explore the wide world, to lean down and gently nudge Samuel’s chin from the folds of his

jacket when he tries to hide his face for too long. No one had ever touched Samuel's face before Annie.

Sometimes, in passing puddles of melting snow or the warped metal of the stirrups hanging off the horse's saddle, he'll spot his dreadful reflection, the wobbly outline of a creature that wears his face, and wonder what kind of person he's meant to be. What do other people see in the gaunt boy with sunken eyes who stalks in Annie's shadow? What do they want to see? What would they have seen back home, if she had never stopped to offer him her hand?

If he makes the mistake of lingering too long on the sight, the woman in question will come to his side and ruffle his hair, once-pretty nails chipped from foraging through brambles. "Oh my," she'll say, the hints of a smile forming on her chapping lips. She'll know, as she always does, what he must be thinking. "What a handsome young man we have here."

It's an effort that succeeds at embarrassing him every time, sending his neck back into the coat and scarf like a turtle as those forgiving hands tighten the cords of his mittens and help him onto Carrot's back. The horse will snort and Annie will pat his mane patiently, lovingly, before taking the reins to walk alongside them.

Samuel likes that about her, the fact that she walks. She doesn't glide or prance, her steps aren't particularly elegant or angelic, she just walks. She walks and her feet will eventually start to hurt in her shoes and she'll have to place something in between the material of the shoe and the skin or she'll get blisters on the backs of her ankles. She bleeds sometimes and has to wrap the wounds, but she never cries. She's an optimist, and being an optimist is painful, he thinks, in a way that being a pessimist isn't, because she always tries to be

hopeful, to see the good in people, and then gets crushed into a tighter and tighter ball each time they fail to meet her expectations. But despite it all, she keeps walking.

Samuel wants to walk with her forever.

Most journeys have endings, he has to remind himself, his field of vision wobbling up and down to the rhythm of Carrot's leisurely pace. It's just too easy to pretend that this one will be forever. That time might really stop, just this once.

"If you don't move forward," Annie likes to say, "you can't get anywhere." But the thought of arriving at a destination is as terrifying as the thought of a vast expanse of rising water crawling over the edge of the earth, clawing its way higher and higher with every passing year. If the ocean, in all its supposed endlessness, will be an end to her walking with him, to her caring for him, then he hopes that they never find it. He hopes that it isn't real.

On the best of days, the days of little wonders, he's able to forget his worries.

Spotting the tiny slices of paradise hidden among the ordinary is Annie's specialty; she'll point one finger into the woods with a delighted hum to show Samuel something he'd never have looked at twice on his own. In her eyes, even the pervasive hoarfrost must look like sugar sprinkled on a tray of pastries, the storm clouds in the sky like a particularly thin layer of lemon glaze melting into speckles across the fluff of a cake.

"Fairy gate," she'll say of a little birch arch, clearly formed by the wind and the weather. When he squints and frowns, she'll only smile even gentler. "Oh, Samuel. You're looking for something that isn't there."

This, of course, always serves to confuse

him further, at which point she'll clarify. "It doesn't have to be there to be real. Isn't it lovely to pretend sometimes?"

He doesn't, won't, ask if she's pretending about the ocean. If it's just a girlhood dream carried on the wind as little seeds swallowed down and replanted by the traveling buskers who fly from corner to corner. If she's looking for something impossible out of fear of whatever follows behind her.

Instead, he'll shrug, nod, and stare harder into their surroundings, searching endlessly for something that he can blurt out, something that will impress her, will reassure her that he does care, he's always cared, he's just never been good at this sort of thing. Strange, for a boy to be so unimaginative, especially when surrounded by so many sources of inspiration. That's what he sometimes imagines that she might think, and then hates himself for it. Funny that his imagination works perfectly fine when it comes to creating monsters.

"There," he'll try. "The rocks by the river."

She'll turn her undivided attention to the unremarkable stones and he'll swallow down his fear.

"They're, well, they're chairs. For the toads and frogs. And the turtles. Sometimes."

Her hands will clasp together and she'll look as if he has produced the sun itself from his bosom. "How wonderful! Oh, how wonderful! They must have quite the time together, don't you think?"

"I dunno," he'll reply, combing a hand through Carrot's mane more for his own sake than the animal's. "I guess."

"They must. I'm sure of it."

His lips will begin to part to reveal wobbly teeth and he'll have to duck behind the scarf once more to hide the smile, thinking about a ridiculous little tea party between amphibians with opposable thumbs as Annie starts to come up with ideas for what the squirrels might be chattering to each other

about. And so time passes, in approximations of moments and minutes, in hours and hands rubbed together to stay warm, and Samuel forgets about endings, about people coming and going.

"Is Annie short for something?" He asks one day as they stop outside one of the few towns that haven't yet been completely abandoned, immediately regretting it when she remains silent for several moments.

"I don't remember," she replies, one hand on her purse.

It's a strange answer. She must remember, he thinks, because how could she not? Unless she would rather pretend to have forgotten. Maybe her real name had been something she'd left behind along with her old life, something she'd gladly abandoned along the road.

"Does it seem like it should be short for something?" Annie continues. "Do I look like an Annabelle? Or an Annette? Maybe Annalise—"

"You look like an Annie," he interrupts. The smile that splits her face reassures him that it's the right answer.

When she leaves him with Carrot and wanders off to attempt a trade, he sits down in the wet grass and thinks about names. He spends so long thinking about names, about gaining them, about leaving them behind, that when Annie returns and tries to show him a map she'd bartered for, he can barely focus on the letters. He's never felt very good at reading, despite Annie's best efforts to teach him. It's too embarrassing when he can't do it, which means he often doesn't want to try at all.

"What is it?"

"The ocean," she replies, and any happiness he may have found in his burst of imagination disappears instantly.

In the face of her unwavering elation, her sunflower smile that has finally managed to completely rotate into the sunbeams, he can manage little more than a croaky, "it's real?"

He hadn't believed, he realizes, not in the slightest, and that alone feels to him as though he'd slapped Annie directly across the face. He'd thought about it, sure, frowned about it, sure, come up with a thousand scenarios in which the sea could be seen and a thousand in which it couldn't, sure, but he had never expected any of them to come true.

How could he not have believed in her?

"We're close." Her answer is possibly the cruelest thing she's ever said to him. A punishment, maybe, for the nonbeliever. "A day or so away."

A day or so. A day or so isn't long enough to say goodbye or thank you or please don't leave me behind. Part of him had really thought it would be easier, that if the world had people like Annie in it, he might be able to like it a little bit more, even without her. And maybe he does. But there are too many things he wants to say first, and the more he wants to say, the less comes out of his mouth.

He's been left behind too many times. He doesn't want to see it happen again.

"Say, Samuel," she says, sitting down beside him before he can dig his nails into his palms, before he can fumble for the pocket watch and cling to it, desperate for an anchor. "Do you know what the doldrums are?"

He shakes his head mechanically, picturing some kind of instrument like the ones he had used to admire on street corners. The buskers had never liked him doing that; children don't tend to carry a lot of money on them. Children with nobody left tend to carry even less.

"They say they're this, this place in the ocean," she begins, taking his hand. "A place where the wind doesn't blow. A sailor can get stuck there for a very long time."

What fate typically meets a fellow in such a circumstance goes unsaid, and Samuel doesn't particularly want to linger on the thought. Without wind, he thinks, alone on the water, a man would have nothing but time, endless time, and the fingers

on his hands. For half of a second, an unreasonable and childish half of a second, he feels jealous. Of the man, maybe. Of the Samuel from a day or two ago, maybe. Of the wind, that gets to blow wherever it wants without a care for the objects in its path, definitely.

"I think the wind is very important," she continues. "It's brought me to exactly where I need to be, after all."

Her eyes don't leave his face when she speaks.

Samuel dreams of a sailboat that night, though he doesn't really know what one looks like. It ends up turning into a little boy in the end anyway.

When he wakes up, much earlier than usual and soaked through with sweat that freezes his shirt to his back, Annie's purse is missing from her side. The draft of cold air that tickles his neck drifts in through the open patch of the tent, the fabric sliced clean with a pocketknife.

He stares. Stares some more at the peaceful rise and fall of Annie's chest, then at his own pack, his body having curled around it even in sleep, the kind of habit that he'd developed as a child when he'd spent every resting moment waiting for someone to wake him up, elbows sharpened into knives for fighting off grabby hands in the night.

For a moment, he can only feel relief that Annie isn't hurt. That Carrot, when he soundlessly shuffles outside of the tent to check, is standing upright, snoozing, unharmed.

But the map had been in that purse.

Standing there, alone, in the frigid darkness, Samuel thinks about going back inside, curling into a ball, and pretending he'd never woken up.

"Have you ever wanted to run away?"

Annie had asked the first time they'd met, tucking her cloak around his shoulders as he sat, shivering, against an abandoned storefront. Strange, he'd thought, both the question and the act of her

stopping to talk with him. He'd always been easy for everyone else to pass by. "Find something bigger than yourself? Something you can't explain, but you just know you need to find it, in order to keep going?"

He hadn't wanted either of those things. He had wanted a nice place to store his stolen pocket watch, maybe, and someone who would smile at him, definitely. But he hadn't cared about finding a purpose and had never really experienced the luxury of dreaming about his future.

To be honest, he still doesn't care about hope and possibility in the same way that Annie does. But if the idea of the ocean is to her what she has been to him, then he'll find the map, no matter what it takes. He's only ever wanted to see her happy.

Picturing the way her smile had looked when she'd opened the map, he becomes the wind.

His feet are moving and he's running, flying, whirling, his skin bruising from the cold even as he burns. He's out of the tent and in town begging, knocking on doors that are shut in his face, crawling into the kinds of hovels he would have hidden in had it been him, before chasing a boy of thirteen or fourteen into the woods with bare feet and a barer heart.

It hurts, a bit, feeling nails scratch into his skin. The last time he had fought someone had been in the days before Annie. Any tolerance he'd built up for it back then is gone, but he has no choice. No choice.

"Are you an idiot?" The boy roars, nose bleeding from where Samuel has tackled him to the ground. Both of them are covered in wet, frigid dirt, shivering even as they wrestle, teeth bared. He is Samuel, in a way, two or three years older but also two or three years into the past. "They sell these everywhere! It's not even worth anything!"

He is an idiot. He doesn't care. It has to

be that one. He thinks of a brilliant smile and the laughter of fairies and little animals chattering away and a great blue sea and he burns. "I need it," he says, desperate. "Please. Just the map. Please. You can keep the money. I won't tell anyone."

The boy glares up at him for several moments, his eyebrows low and blood still smeared across his upper lip. "Something's wrong with you," he spits finally, shoving himself out from underneath Samuel's trembling arms. "Whatever. You can have it."

Samuel lets him go, barely even hears the words, a great weight lifting from his shoulders upon seeing that the little names are still there, unharmed, on top of each part of the map. He can't read them, but they're still there, and he can almost imagine what they might say. With trembling fingers, he smooths out the creases that the pickpocket had left behind, tenderly, as a mother would to a child. As Annie would to him, her hands massaging out the wrinkles on his forehead when he had lain sick and panting the one autumn he had caught a fever.

He stands up, looks from the map to the sky and from the sky to the map, and then he's running again, hair sticking down to his forehead with something between sweat and icy condensation. He's running, and this time, he knows where he's going. He knows where he wants to end up.

Annie is already awake, her hands wringing together until she notices him and stands with a silent shout, eyes widening at whatever horrible state his face is in. He throws himself forward and feels strong arms circle his back.

It's a strange realization, the thought that she might need him, at least in this moment, in the same way he needs her. It's one that makes him shudder with snot, one that makes his knuckles clench, his eyes squeeze shut, and the bumps of his skin shiver with something akin to hopeful, almost disbelieving longing. His lips part, then close, and he

holds her tighter.

“I want to see the ocean,” he sobs. He can’t remember when he started crying. He can’t even remember the last time he’d cried, if he’d ever cried, but he’s crying. “I really want to see the ocean.”

Warm thumbs rub circles into his shoulder blades and he wails into her dress, staining the fabric with the salty trails of the sea.

“I’ll take you,” she whispers. Her quietness is strong. “Don’t you worry. I’ll take you wherever you want to go. Let’s go see the ocean.”

When the dawn floats up over the horizon, they’ve almost made it.

Frost clings to the tall grass that threatens to swallow the path, tickling Carrot’s legs as he trudges past. Samuel, bandaged fingers clinging to a sturdy waist, doesn’t think browns, grays, and whites have ever looked so lovely. Just yesterday, he might have thought them lonely.

“Does the water really go on forever?” He asks, peering over her shoulder at how much of the hill they have left to climb.

Annie laughs, the sound of a clock tower at noon. “I don’t think so, Sam. If it went on forever, there wouldn’t be any land left for us to live on.”

“Then what’s on the other side?”

“I don’t know,” she replies, teasing. “But I’m sure you can come up with something.”

“I—” he begins, before stopping himself. He had been about to say that he couldn’t. “I could. But I wanna know what you think.”

“I think it’s better not to know.”

Samuel takes a moment to consider this. “So you can pretend?”

“So the possibilities will stay endless forever. So I can hope. And dream. And know that as long as the wind blows, there’ll be somewhere new for it to take me.”

He rests his small head against the back of her shoulder and thinks, breathing in the salt and sweat of the sea as Carrot completes the final, plodding steps over the crest of the hill, leading the charge to the boundless edge of possibility.

There, as the waves crash against the rocky shore, powerful enough to gouge canyons, to kill, to smooth even the most worthless of human trash into prismatic glass, Samuel takes in his first glimpse of the ocean.