



 THE
MINOR BIRD
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The Minor Bird.

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Poetry

mosaic

Abigail Beckwith

celestial, mauve, amethyst, radiant.

glass shimmers in sunlight,
splintered on the sidewalk.
seven years of bad luck.
wildflowers littered on the side of a highway:
aegean, jade, wisteria, pure magic
ignored. hidden. destroyed.
broken or beautiful?
weed or wildflower?

celadon, sage, emerald, vibrant.

wildflowers speckled in my hair.
monsters swarming in my head.
fighting storm clouds,
entangled in a mirrored world,
alone with my shattered thoughts.
seeing the wildflowers,
but feeling the broken glass pierce my bare feet.

cerulean, azure, dew, brilliant.

then a voice whispers:

remember, cracked glass still sparkles.

phoenix woman

Amber Neszpaul

for my mother

don't let the black wingtips
of time's sailing feathers annihilate you.
do not sink into the earth a pillar of salt,
of pink crystal, hard and unchanging.
you are more than this.

a circle of women lie naked
on the floor of a forest damp with sweat.
there are forty-three pairs of eyes green and blue,
young, unseeing,
jewels in a fairy ring.

you are no longer these women,
nor do your fists grip swaths of soil
as though to coax a dead seed into growing.
and you do not need these women anymore,
for their eyes are glazed
as they stare blindly toward swaying treetops.

their bodies are but snake skin you have shed,
shimmering in golden noontime light,
beautiful and
gone.

take the carcasses
of those women and burn them.
with their ashes, paint your name
on the mountainside.

The Wind

Rachel Geffrey

The wind is playing through the bony trees.
The little corpses clinging to them fall
To quaking, coursing, soft, symphonic breeze.

The little children crash upon their knees
In leafy piles 'til parents do recall.
The wind is playing through the bony trees.

The skies are peppered with the flying "v"s.
With final voices, fleeing birds will call
To quaking, coursing, soft, symphonic breeze.

The life of summer braces for the freeze.
Her great beloveds fade and droop and loll.
The wind is playing through the bony trees.

Familiar faces every season sees,
But winter's left alone to face the pall,
To quaking, coursing, soft, symphonic breeze.

And when they're gone, the promise of light flees.
Commitment-phobes, deserters are they all.
The wind is playing through the bony trees
To quaking, coursing, soft, symphonic breeze.

\$3.17

Rachael Owen

Every other customer

swipes a card

grabs groceries,
returns the cart.

My fingers
tremble, drop a

lone quarter

and a mess
of incriminating pennies.

Fingers tap,
a child cries,
the line grows longer behind me
as my sweating palms
collect loose change
and the knife
in my stomach
twists.

Two worn bills,
quarters/dimes/pennies,

spill from my hands
and into the cashiers.

An embarrassed smile,
and:
“Just getting rid
of some change.”

/Jawbreaker/

Indigo Baloch

Vol. 1

I.

My mouth is a screaming “O”
of soundless color,
a stream of consciousness
on the phone
with an operator
insisting the number
I have dialed
does not exist.

II.

I’m an empty kaleidoscope,
twisting and shrieking
for a new angle
and something—please—
to shake the nausea
when I look in the mirror
and see his slack jawed,
skeletal scream.

III.

I’ve been pinning my eyelids
shut for two hours,
but still, when I hear
the faucet running,
I have to pull the covers
over my head and pray
the paranoia won’t leave
scars on my skin.

IV.

My hands are blessed now;
cursed to hold a horcrux
just beneath the surface;
to lift communion wafers
to my lips and bathe
in the unadulterated
blood of Christ,
her lord and savior.

V.

When I pull back the shower
curtain, a silverfish hurries
from the shadows.
I start the water
so I can watch
him disappear
down the whirlpool
of the rusty drain.

VI.

I want to crouch in his sedan,
through the crackle of the radio,
and hear the crunch
of water bottles
under my boots,
when I howl
for you to come home.

VII.

A woodpecker flies
into a bar, sits down,
and asks,
“Is the bartender here?”

Stormchaser

Sarah Bangley

She entered:

A tall, cool drink of wind
Cassiopeia freckles
& hurricane hair;
with strident walk
& a grin, said,

Today's gonna be the day

so

I hope you can keep up
I hated her for it.
How could I know I'd
be the one to pin the wind,
catch her in my sails & capsize

down on wet grass, my whole body

& slake my thirst with her kisses

Russell

Stephanie Ramser

likes to bring up how nice it'll be
when I settle for a jürgen or
hans or joachim or
björn or florian or
even an uwe

near the nürburgring
his favourite place
in germany

sometimes when i watch get drunk
on his fifth bitburger or eighth Heineken
or some other fancy beer from some
microbrewer he recently discovered
on his latest depressed search
for a new woman to fix him
i think could really use some serious help
from alcoholics anonymous or something
else like that he'll refuse to go to

but doesn't have a problem
it's always a new woman
a katie or alina or
god knows who next
but the right one will fix him for sure
this time

and i'll keep crossing their names off the list
as they fail him one at a time
as fails them
and i will eat edys ice cream and laugh

ash

Indigo Baloch

he licked the flames back
let the wax melt from his wings
and greeted the sea with open arms
and outstretched fingers
father wringing his hands
trapped in his own labyrinth
clutching a ball of yarn and screaming
into his bloody palms
and the snowy night

mother calling the hospital
and holding his wounds shut
with duct tape and kisses
begging him to put away the candy
and never take it out again
not while the baby is crying
not while the cradle is full
be a man now

he is a man now
three drinks with lunch
and four with his dinner
across the table from him
i shake my head and clasp
my hands in a language
he cannot translate
unless we are under
his sheets or in the passenger
seat of his dirty sedan

he found a rusted knife
in the trunk—his grandmother's
when I found books in the backseat
i didn't know they were for another
girl who liked his messy room
and danced for money

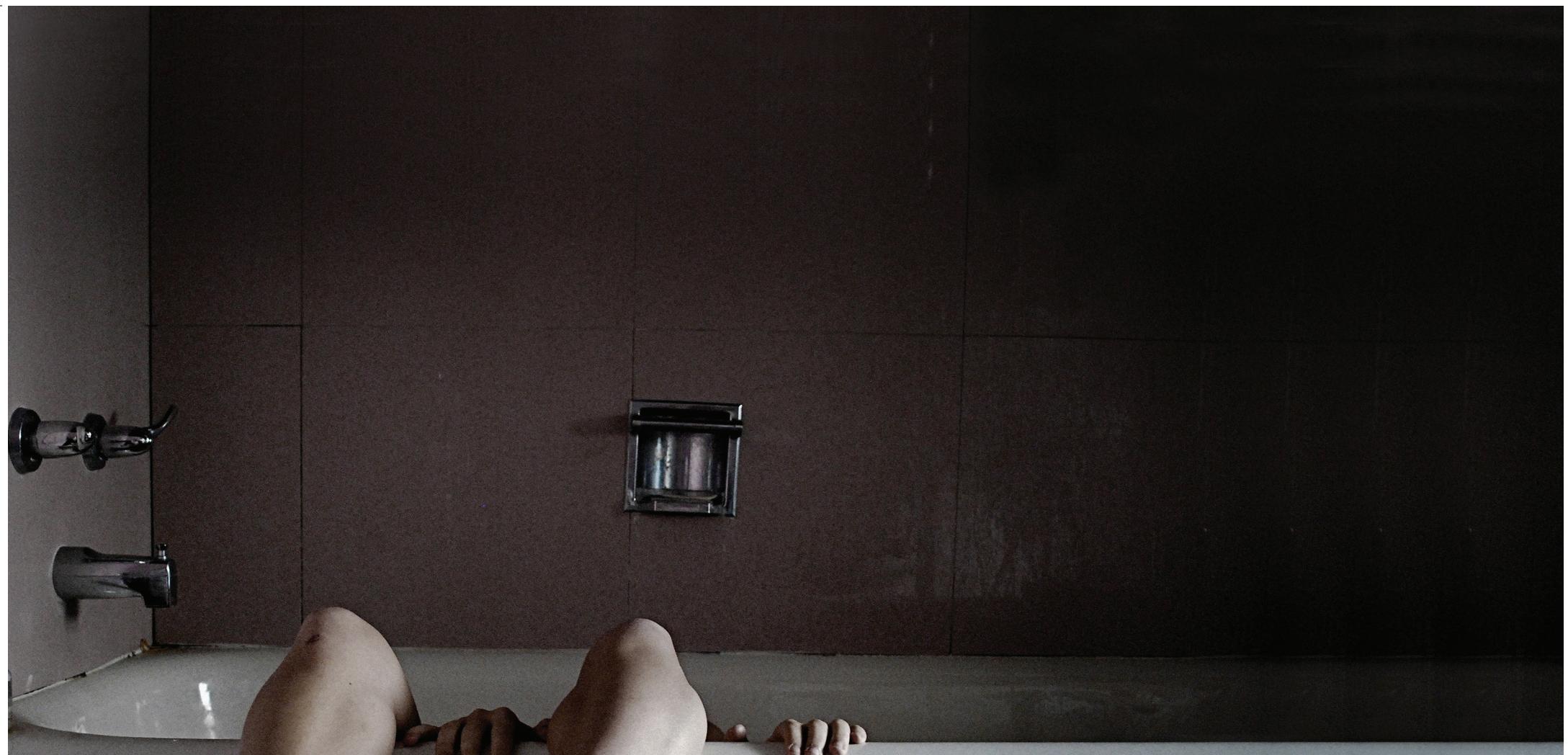
i'm sure she tastes like strawberry lipgloss
and not the cherry of a cigarette
some shade sweeter than menthol ash

The Atlantic

Rachel Geraci

a vulnerable Arctic landscape forces us a difference;
I may as well be taunted by violent, draping oceans,
wrongly across, diagonal, the bent is here and now,
as if I were Europe; and you are North America,
horrible in my loss to speak the slang of the times,
how I smack like a bare belly, in briny snot-water,
sloshing ceased to the white on my frosted face.

I'm stranded in a foreign, funny, sand-grit place,
how I wish I could dismiss my old ideas and tricks,
saltine soaking eyes, loud-mouth, spilling your bottle,
water glasses over the ice-floor and at the exit-door,
while you watch me tap, tap dance, a babe across the waves,
I think maybe you're maritime green, some slick seaweed,
I can do nothing but imagine those tears, sea-eyes,
and like a great mysterious boat, stray fondly away.



Prose

Neither Here Nor There But Somewhere

Kaitlin Tomko

I set four alarms every morning.

One: My eyelids crinkle open like the folds of an accordion. The room is pitch black. My comforter around me is cool to the touch as I reach out for my iPhone. Plucking it from its dock I silence the Chimes alarm and drop it down on my bedside table. Ignoring the alarm message, “Start the day off right.”

Two: I don’t remember falling back asleep. It must have taken me awhile to get up this time as the crescendo of the alarm tone has risen to an obnoxiously high pitch. The screen of my phone is lit up with the words “come on.” I knock my bottled water off the table with a thump to turn off the alarm, shoving my phone under the goosey down feathers of my pillow. Come on, come on, come on. The mantra repeats in my head and I can feel heat on the back of my neck. The lump at the back of my throat makes me feel like I’m suffocating as I open my mouth to pant like a dog. My muscles spasm and I fidget, but I don’t get up.

Three: “If you don’t wanna run around like a jack ass you have to get up.” I throw my phone across the room. This is why I bought an Otterbox.

Four: I have to get up this time. I know it, but that doesn’t make it any easier. I picture I look like a puppet when I get out of bed. My legs swing freely over the side of the bed. Then my torso and my arms slink over the side until all four of my limbs touch the soft black shag of my carpet at once. Letting out a grunt I roll the weight of my upper body onto my fingertips and push myself up into a wobbly standing position. Stumbling over to the door I pick up my cell phone and turn off the last of the alarms. “Fucking moron,” it calls me.

“Yeah, I know” I reply softly.

I strip off my clothes and let them fall where they are as I head for the shower. The cold porcelain tiles in the bathroom are a shock to my system as I turn the hot water all the way up. The rush of the water streaming down from the showerhead hushes the birdsong just

outside the window and silences my mind with the soft whispers of radio static.

I take long showers, spending countless minutes just standing under the hot water as it thunders down on my scalp, beads on my body, and clouds my eardrums. I run my warmed fingertips across my eyes in a circular pattern, rubbing all the crystal shards away and massaging the pain out of my dark circles. I lift the creases and rolls of my fat, invading their untouched folds with the Dial soap as well as under my breasts. I touch my hair only with shampoo. I use the scrubbing sponge on my arms and face. Mom just replaced it and it cuts the skin on my arms like sandpaper. Droplets of blood speckle the water as it retreats down the drain.

When I get out of the shower I don't wipe away the steam on the mirror to face myself. I pass by the digital scale without weighing in and I pay no attention to the goals I have set for myself taped to the wall. Not since last summer have I cared about the size of my pores, the calluses on my feet, my dress size, the knots in my back muscles, that one suspicious mole. My BMI could tell me I'm fit, but I think we all know that wouldn't make me healthy.

Back in my room it's slightly brighter. Transformed by the waking sun from the felt tip of a Sharpie to shadows on a black drop. I turn on all the lights. Without drying myself I get back into bed. My sheets cling to my wet body like Saran wrap and I can feel the water from my hair absorb into my pillow as it gathers at the back of my neck. I close my eyes. The lights bring up blotches of yellow and green and fuchsia that swirl and grow and wane. I wonder if this is what LSD feels like. My dog jumps up onto the bed and lies down next to me. The weight of her calms me. I run my hand over her fine white and black fur, twisting her ear gently in my hand. It's silent except for the sounds of breathing, but noise can manifest in different ways.

It's like I have voices in my head. I don't say this to anyone. Schizophrenia, panic disorder, manic depression, bipolar disorder—they all run in the family. I mention voices and I'd have myself a first class ticket on a train with muscle relaxers and straight jackets to see

Dr. Ward. And sure, he's a nice enough man, but I've been around my family long enough to know there isn't a name for my disorder. Because that's what it is, disorder. It's like fourteen versions of me have generated inside this room with filing cabinets. That's what I imagine the inside of my brain to look like, filing cabinets in a dark room. Think of a basement that isn't damp, or a bunker with walls so tall they melt into themselves. Like pointillism they go on so long they just seem to meet at a speck, a small opening where—if you tilt your head back so far it hurts your shoulder blades and squint till you see eye lashes—you can make out the sky. These days it's almost always cloudy.

The walls are brick red in the clean patches where posters used to hang, but everywhere else a dirty maroon. In the dim lighting of the room the shadows within the recesses of my brain distort the tweed grey filing cabinets—some becoming bigger, others smaller than they actually are. The walls are covered with them. The occasional tree taking root and sprouting out between them; an idea fighting against the odds to see the light of day.

When I was a child the room was quite different. It still had filing cabinets; I was the child who color-coded the different sets of ABC blocks at recess and then stacked them alphabetically, but the cabinets were bright and shiny and new. Purple, red, green, blue, yellow, orange, pink. I didn't feel the need to lock any of them yet. They held things like the alphabet, the lyrics to Disney musicals, the sound of laughter, the names of pets, when to hold your mother's hand, how to build a fort, board games to play on rainy days.

I think all those filing cabinets are still there. Just lost behind cabinets like "debt", or under heavier topics like "stage four melanoma", or rusted shut.

When the dogs start to cry and scratch at the door I get up. I put a brush through my hair and tie it in a wet, sloppy bun. I pull on yesterday's clothes as I pick up Cricket, the miniature Schnauzer. She excitedly crawls on my chest, scratching my skin. Stella, the white and black Beagle, follows by my side. I catch myself often saying something my Dad used to say to me: "I don't know where she gets all that

energy." I feel much older than nineteen.

Think of the voices as the librarians of the filing cabinets. They're each in charge of a different area—discipline we'll call it. The Physical department is managed by two sets of competing figure-heads. Fat and Poor Eating Habits have been the hated opponents of Thin and Exercise for years. In private Thin allows me to see myself as more than a physical being and feel free to act. In public, Fat reminds me that if I don't make myself small people might think I'm a sumo wrestler trudging down the halls. Exercise gets infuriated when running three miles daily does nothing to combat pasta and bagels and three-time weekly desserts.

Under the Emotional discipline there is Optimism and Pessimism who are always fighting and Cynicism whom could never pick a side cause we all know he is the Siamese twin of Self-Doubt.

My spiritual self was divided into the Atheist and the One That Stills Prays. She knows Hell exists and she hopes Heaven does too.

All of my interior selves were supposed to share and care for the Psychological discipline, which explains a lot if you think about it. In all their arguing they created the positions of Depression and Anxiety who then created the part time post of Paranoia.

Outside the morning light begins to cut through the thick branches of the Oak trees. A fog rises in the air and golden yellow and pumpkin orange leaves sprinkle the ground with color. The dogs run wild after one another trying to trace the invisible patterns of animals that had been there overnight. I fall into my pattern of pacing from one side of the yard to the other. It's always at this point in the day that I let the voices talk amongst themselves freely and we walk through the coming day. When that becomes too much, I turn my music all the way up till my eardrums ache.

Ten minutes too late I leave for school.

Philosophical Journeys: The Untold Story of a Travelling Water Bottle

Jennifer Grahnquist

It's a warm day in March and I'm finally brought into the light. Stuffed in with rice cakes and eggs, jostled under apples. But the breeze seeps in through the reusable shopping bag and it's better than hanging on a metal hook, watching the customers pass by in a daze. Does she know that I'm different than the others, a catalyst subtly altering the air around me? She doesn't even reach the sidewalk outside the store before my work starts to take effect. She meets a boy campaigning for a cause and they discover they have a mutual friend. They exchange numbers; the rest is not for me to tell... I'm not your ordinary water bottle.

A short walk through the Denver Spring before we're home. I'm pulled free from the produce and washed of the invisible film that quietly coats the world of commercialism. I'm filled with water and I allow the weight of it to ground me, its touch to cool me.

I go with her everywhere: yoga, ballet, movies, the homes of friends and lovers. I sweat condensation as she sweats in the studio. She takes me to restaurants where worried waiters wonder why she doesn't want ice water. I sneak into theatres where food and drink are prohibited. Those who know her best joke that I'm filled with wine or beer, knowing that she hates both.

Yet I know her more intimately than anyone. Her hands, her mouth, her thoughts. Water is the best conductor of energy – it takes only the most minute of vibrations (a word, a whim) to reach my metallic core. She chose me at an opportune time; I get to see her grow. Learning, loss of innocence. She'll never guess that I chose her.

Cars do not interest me; they cut me off from the outside world. Better to be hooked onto a finger, bouncing against a leg or a bag with gaited rhythm, absorbing the weather's hot and cold. But in a car I am placed and I can do nothing to avoid it. Driving for days until

I feel the southern heat reflecting through the greenhouse windshield. We're now in Dallas.

There is little here to tell. Only the oppressive sun, which my thin layer of paint does little to combat. Once the water inside me has absorbed all the heat it can, I am left to bear the rest alone. I am untouchable, scalding. Here, cars are an every day occurrence. I am shoved into unforgiving cup holders and can see nothing worth watching. Blasted with fake air and fake music; the CD's vibrations pale in comparison to the music of the world.

Despite all this, she's beginning to know me better now; I'm beginning to show the traces of time. The lipstick stain around my rim and the scuffs around my base indicate that I am well-loved. She looks at me differently now, too – I remind her of the mountains.

I discover airplanes are not much better than cars. There's the same fake air, only no fake music or cup holders. TSA officers stare warily as we plod through security; I hold far more than the allotted three ounces. We've arrived in Pittsburgh.

She's back to walking everywhere and I'm glad to be back in the breeze. More lipstick stains and scuffs and it is decided that I should be put in the dishwasher.

Darkness. Never did I imagine that water could hurt me, but this is different. Fiery streams blasted from every angle mixed with stinging soap. My paint is defenseless against such attacks and I feel it beginning to peel away, leaving me exposed, vulnerable. When the storm is past I assess my situation...

I am now an atlas. An ocean of metal with green acrylic continents and tiny flecks of islands. An organic map that evolves with our travels. As paint continues to chip away, the coastlines acquire new shapes, islands sinking into the silver sea. My painted design is still discernable: simple purple flowers against a background of sage, but the real me of stainless steel has been revealed.

I have become a topic of conversation as others notice my

compromised state. But she just smiles and explains that it gives me character, individuality. I am hers.

More planes and cars. We retrace our steps through Texas back to Colorado and my newly exposed surface suggests a reflection of the mountains. I find myself tied to the strap of a saddle and suddenly I am pounding against hard leather, feeling the different rhythms of a horse's gait. We are in the mountains, on the mountains, and suddenly I'm surrounded by Aspens. Without looking I know that she has lost her breath, not from the altitude, but from the beauty of this place.

Back in the city, it's a glorious day and she decides to walk a mile rather than take the bus. We pass through City Park and watch the geese on their way South. We cut through fields, ignoring paths, and the honking birds lift off in hordes as we approach. Their wings create gusts as they beat just above our heads. The music of the world.

The other cities fly by in a flash: Sacramento, San Francisco, London, New York, Chicago, D.C. Some go by in less than a day, others last a week, a month, a year. Her friends are scattered on the wind and she follows the scent of hope. She herself is air, an element whose only constant is change, a gypsy. Yet I'm always by her side, grounding her with water, metal, weight.

I have become an extension of her. It is a strange sensation to be touched by someone else. The yoga teacher moving me out of the way of someone's mat, the waiter returning me to her as she tries to leave the restaurant without me. She feels that she herself is being touched. She is disturbed by the contact, and yet it awakens in her a longing for someone, for their hands.

Music is my true passion. To be placed on the floor of a stage with a live orchestra in the pit below, feeling it vibrate up through me. Through each morning's warm-up I'm more concerned with the ac-

companist on the piano than with any of the dancers going through their frappes and fondus. I listen attentively at each of her voice lessons and tune myself to her frequency.

Another island has disappeared – someday I will be all silver. Perhaps when that happens some spell will be broken or some curse will be doomed to remain unlifted like the Beast watching his wilting rose while he awaits his true love. In the meantime I do not cause good or bad; I simply keep life interesting.

I have a tendency to lose myself. Not that I ever intend to leave (in fact, I have an uncanny way of finding my way back to her). But I need an adventure of my own now and then and the separation always allows for a joyful reunion. Usually it's just a forgetful moment leaving a studio and I'm retrieved before she even reaches the dressing room. At other times I'm left at a party, returned the next day by a friend. With all the moving, she wonders at how I've managed to keep track of myself at all through innumerable cities and boxes.

But I will never forget Hidden Mesa. Once again I am strapped onto a horse, again in Colorado, only now we are not among Aspens. I can see the mountains in the distance; we are farther East, climbing up, yet closer to the Earth's core than the Rocky peaks. Here it is hot and I watch flecks of Mica reflect the sunlight as we pass. I decide it's time for an adventure and loosen my hold on the strap. Soon I am bouncing against the horse's side instead of his saddle. A few more steps and I have slid all the way off and crash onto the dust-red path. I watch the horses fade into the distance and I'm filled with excitement; she hasn't noticed that I'm gone.

I take the opportunity to bask in the golden glory of the Gods and roll my way down the mesa until I'm lodged against an ancient boulder. It whispers to me the secrets of the ages while I await the one who will retrieve me. I'm easily seen from the trail and by now she will have become aware of my absence, informing any passers-by to

keep their eyes out for her lost companion. It's not long before a man on a bike stops and stoops to scoop me from my perch. I discover the rolling patterns of the bicycle, smoother than human or horse despite the rough terrain. We reach the head of the trail and I'm placed on a simple wooden bench to watch the hikers start and end their journeys.

Soon she and her companions complete the Mesa's loop and I see them coming on horseback long before she spots my mottled sage blending into the sagebrush that surrounds me. But once I'm recognized she swiftly swings herself down from the saddle and rushes to me in amazement. It's now that she realizes I'm no ordinary water bottle.

Sand is hot. Despite what I thought was my smooth surface, it manages to find my most minute crevices and lodge itself there. Despite my best efforts I cannot shake all the grains before I am dragged back to the beach to collect more. I'm hauled up 214 steps of a lighthouse, but not just by her. I'm stuffed in his pocket until we reach the top, take in a view and breath of fresh air before descending 214 steps to the ground. Once back in Pittsburgh I shall deposit sand around her apartment as a free souvenir of the trip. She'll smile at the happy memories and laugh that she was ever anxious about it.

She hasn't written of me for a long time – things have been good. She thinks she's found a home and someone to share it with. I cannot pretend I'm not jealous, though of course she still takes me everywhere. Still, she hasn't written of me in a long time – things have been hard. She thinks she's lost a friend and a dream. She'll be pursuing another one soon, but losing a dream is still hard and the limbo in between is even harder.

She's trying to remember who she is, that nothing deep down has changed. That's what I'm here for – to remind her of herself.

I had never been to a soccer field before. She brings me here often now. It's not her that's playing, but the children she's watching. Nonetheless, she's learned a thing or two from the practices. That out-

door fields do not have places to fill water bottles. That kicking a ball is harder than it looks and even soccer coaches know how to dance. That trees make good umbrellas and even little boys will build fairy houses. That you often come away from a place with something entirely different than what you went there to get.

Today the tree is not an umbrella, nor the foundation of a fairy house, but a ladder to the sky. She leaves me on the ground while she climbs with her miniature friend and stares down through the green cherries at the field.

She's writing a story about me. She's writing about writing a story about me. She's writing about writing about writing a story about me. We're in an endless hall of mirrors where the reflections of reflections stretch on infinitely. If I am part of her does that mean I'm writing about myself? Or perhaps she's actually writing about herself through me...

Another painted island disappears into the silver sea. The changes are indiscernible to most, but she knows I'm ever so slowly losing my mask, becoming more me. She knows because it's happening to her too. It's less a fear of what others will think of the truth, more a discovery of a truth previously unknown to self. I now know what will come when I'm all silver, when she has nothing left to hide from the world; the story will be over and it will be beautiful.

Fire Flight

Kaitlyn Lacey

She ran by firelight. The city was burning, and what was not engulfed by the licking flames was desecrated by looters. At this point the alleyways were safer than the main street, but there was the risk of getting blocked in by the rising inferno. So, she took the main street, and hoped the men were too distracted by the treasures beyond the broken glass to notice her "frail" female body, which would be just as much fun for them to shatter.

Her chest heaved and her heart ran faster than her legs did. Tears tracked down her smudged skin, indiscernible from her sweat. Her finish line was the city's edge, and it was close.

She was less than a mile from her destination when the crowd stopped her. Turning a corner, she almost crashed into a mob. It was a dark, writhing thing; a mass of screams and fists. She gasped for air, and touched the nearest shoulder.

"What's going on?" she screamed. Her answer was an elbow crashing into her sternum.

The blow knocked her into the asphalt. It jolted her heart and knocked the air from her lungs, and she narrowly missed breaking her head open. The pain flooded her brain, and for a moment she could sense nothing else— not even the screams.

Her awareness returned with her breath, and the distinct sensation of someone dragging her. By the time she was able to gather her strength enough to fight against the grip, they had moved her over the sidewalk and into the alley.

"Relax, I'm not going to hurt you." It was a man's voice. She struggled more, dashing her elbows open on the pavement and howling. Instead of letting go, the man hauled her up on her feet.

"I just told you I'm not going to hurt you." She whirled on

the man, almost falling over as the blood in her head tried to pull her down.

She was wrong. He wasn't a man. He was a teenager, like her. He towered over her, sweating and panting as hard as she did. The fire shone through the strands of his hair, painting the white of it red.

"You won't be able to get out of town that way."

"Why not?"

"They blocked the exit."

"Who's they?"

"I don't know; the police, the government, the YMCA, it really doesn't matter."

"How are we supposed to get out?"

"The sewers."

"The sewers? There's no way we could survive down there! The fire will burn up all the oxygen."

"You can follow me or you can chance the mob. It's your choice."

He turned away from her to grab at the nearest manhole cover, struggling with the weight of it. She watched him for a moment before joining him. They pulled at the cover until it lifted enough for them to push it aside, exposing the gaping darkness below.

"This is it," he trailed off. It took her a minute to realize what he wanted.

"Alice. My name is Alice."

"Right. This is it, Alice. Your choice."

Charlie stood in the alleyway, and watched the strange boy with white hair descend into the hole, wondering why she had given him a different name. It was when the last of his hair disappeared that she moved, setting her foot on the first rung of the ladder.

It never occurred to her that he never told her his name.

The Smallest Taste

Kit Gigliotti

I can sense their fear. They are going to come for me in the end. They've already tried. One by one they have come for the Treasure. By sitting here in the furthest corner of our ranch house I hope to prepare a preemptive strike. I am entirely on the defensive now. If they catch me it will be game over for me.

It was not always like this, between my brothers and I. We used to get along really well. We even used to celebrate our shared birthday together, May 22, 1980. Our favorite game was tag. I would roll around trying to catch them. I was always the slowest of the bunch. Our fathers only set one rule for us: we weren't allowed to eat the stones off the floor. That was just a rule to keep me imprisoned.

For a while I was the good little sphere. I always did what my older brother Blinky said since he was kind of the self-proclaimed ruler of the house. Clyde was his right hand man, Pinky was an idiot, and Inky was weak. We considered ourselves brothers despite looking nothing alike.

The four of them are virtually identical. They are essentially just ovals with four tentacle things at the section of their bodies that hover over the ground. You can only tell them apart by their colours. Blinky is red, Clyde is orange, Pinky is pink, and Inky is cyan. Me, though, I'm the stud of us. Glowing yellow and a sphere, I think it would be reasonable to compare me to the sun.

But I digress.

One day we were playing tag and I got a little bored waiting for those idiots to come find me. Our house is not that large, it evens loops around if you go through certain passageways so I don't know how it was they could not find me. While I was rolling back and forth I became mesmerized by one of the stones. There did not appear to be anything wrong with it. It was simply resting on the black floor. I peeked around the corner to be sure that no one was coming. If anyone saw me, especially Blinky, I'd be screwed.

I approached it as one would approach an easily startled an-

imal. I thought perhaps the reason we were not supposed to touch them was because if you paid attention to them they would jump to life and attack!

It remained still on the ground, so I picked it up with my mouth. As soon as the stone brushed my tongue there was an explosion of flavor. This small stone contained the most decadent taste I had ever encountered. I skipped forward, tasting another. This time it had a delightful light flavor. The third had another flavor still.

By the time anyone found me I had eaten ten of these stones. The energy radiating through my pixels was incredible. I felt a light stroke on my back and I turned to see a floating pink oval, it took a few blinks to pull him into focus.

“Found you!”

“Pinky, man. You’ve got to try this!”

He floated from side to side looking inquisitive, “Try what?” I turned around and point to one of the stones. His eyes widened and he backed away, “Ohh, no. I’m not trying one of those again.”

The world moved in slow motion. “Again?”

“Yeah I tried one last week and it tasted funny.”

“You mean incredible!”

He looked incredulous, “It made me feel all jittery...” He studied me with his creepy white and blue eyes, “You don’t look so good. How many did you eat?”

“One.” I paused. “Ten.”

“You have to stop! You’re shaking like crazy. I don’t think these things are safe.”

“That’s BS! You’re just too stupid to understand something this profound!” I turned and ran, swinging around corners without caring if I ran into someone. I was the fastest sphere in the world! No one was going to stop me!

When I finally came to a stop I felt like my lungs were on fire each time I tried to suck in air and I was in the far corner of the house. I had never really been in this corner before, and it was completely silent. Silent except for the quiet hum. I looked down to see a huge, glittering orb. I poked it, but like the smaller stones it did not seem

menacing. If the smaller stones had tasted so amazing, I could not imagine what this would taste like.

I stopped myself. I was still under the delusion that Pinky was right and these really were dangerous. I decided instead to make my way back to the room I shared with everyone. Clyde was sitting on the floor playing a game with Pinky. Dumb kids, playing a dumb game, they had no idea the power they could unlock by opening their minds.

“Hey.” A deep voice called, and I was forced to turn around by a pair of red tentacles that grabbed me. “What the hell are you thinking?”

I wasn’t dumb like Pinky. I knew exactly what he was talking about. He hated it when I disrespected them. “You can’t tell me what to do.”

“You broke the rules and hurt Pinky’s feelings!”

“So?”

“So? Apologize ass-hole. You crushed that kid. He was trying to keep you out of trouble. How self centered can you be?!”

“Shut up!”

“What-ever. Clyde’s got him. Get out of here.”

“Gladly.” I turned and found a hidden corner to hide in. I couldn’t handle them all anymore. I don’t remember how long I sat alone. The anger swelling and ebbing. It was driving me nuts. I looked sideways at one of the stones and licked the edge of my mouth remembering what it tasted like. That night I ate every single one of those stones that I could find. By morning I felt as if I had drunk ten thousand cups of coffee. I just ran around and around and around laughing wild unbridled laughter.

Not one of them caught up with me until that evening. I had crashed in the middle of one of our hallways when Inky caught me.

“You alright man?”

“That was awesome.” My voice was flat and airy.

Inky sidled up to me, “I’m worried about you.”

“Why?” I snapped to attention.

“You’ve been awake for over thirty-six hours. Go to sleep, and stop eating those things. They’re keeping you up.”

"Blinky put you up to this! That bastard!"

"There is no need to swear, we're all worried about you."

"Well don't be. Worry about Blinky, I think he's getting power hungry. We all know I'm the only one who can take him on."

Inky seemed to be thinking about what I had said. It was because he knew I was right. "Just be careful. I don't want this to tear our little family apart."

He glided away back down the hallway. This was clearly between Blinky and I. Our battle for power. I was going to win. To win I needed more energy. Thankfully during my rest the stones had reappeared all over the house and I had a new project.

I stood outside their bedroom the next morning waiting. I was ready to take on Blinky. Unlike him I was prepared for battle.

Inky woke up first. He floated out, sleep still clouding his eyes when he ran into me. "Where were you?"

"Preparing."

He blinked a few times and shook himself out, "For what?"

"Blinky."

He seemed to be studying me. "Did you sleep at all? You're shaking all over. Also you look really tired."

"Some things are more important than sleep!"

I must have been loud because he winced a little. He's kind of a wimp. "Come on, let's talk about this."

"No! This is the moment! Get out here Blinky!"

"Shhh!" Inky begged.

Blinky appeared at the doorway, "What the hell are you doing?"

"I'm here to take you down!"

"Down where?" Blinky looked at Inky as if he would clarify. He didn't know Inky was on my side. Inky was just looking at the white walls. Instead of answering my red brother I head butted him.

"Woah, back off!" He said, fully alert. "You smell weird. What were you doing all night?"

I head butted him again, harder this time. He slammmed into

the wall.

"Stop it!" Pinky squealed from the doorway. I didn't look at him. I could console him later. After I dealt with Blinky. Once he was air born again he came charging at me.

This was it. My chance to overthrow the overlord. Back and forth we went. I slammed him into the wall again, again, again. I was winning. What a loser he was. It was complete chaos. Pinky was sobbing, Inky was trying to shield him, Clyde was standing around open mouthed like an idiot and Blinky was breathing heavily, his oval body expanding and contrasting with each breath. I felt the energy the stones had let me borrow start to wane. I needed more, but they hadn't regenerated yet.

Blinky took advantage of the moment and slammed himself into me so hard that I went careening down the hallway and bounced off a corner into another corridor. I felt like I was going to be rolling down the hall forever. The world was spinning out of control. When I finally started to come to a stop I was facing the ceiling. By far the most interesting feature of this place. The colors swirl around. Sometimes I see a large figure until it is replaced by someone else.

I let myself get distracted by the images until the world stopped spinning. I knew what I needed to do. I rolled myself over and started to make my way down the hall. I made a turn, another turn, and one more turn. It took a while to get back to the edge of the house, to the corner where I had found it. The king of all stones. The one I dared not eat. I was going to eat it now. I opened my mouth and swallowed it whole.

It was nothing like anything I had ever experienced. My eyes grew enormous and somehow changed to match the exact shade of yellow as my radiant body. Everything felt like it was flashing. I needed to run. I ran back to where my brothers were, I wanted to share the euphoria that had taken me over.

I saw them. No. Yes. Yes it was them. I saw the oval and tentacle shapes. But they were blue. Not that cyan color Inky is, but a deep royal blue. Someone came running at me yelling something. He stopped and yelled again. I looked at him. It was Blinky, I knew it was.

He was screaming at me as loud as he could.

Flashing. Blue. White. Blue White. The power was coursing through every square inch of me.

Blue white blue white blue white.

I had to act. Before Blinky had a chance to come for me. I opened my mouth as wide as I could. Not even sure where the idea came from. I took one bite and then another. I didn't stop until all that was left were his eyes. I watched as they floated quickly away from me.

Screaming. Blue. White. Blue. White.

I am ready now. When they come to take my Treasure I will stop them by any means necessary.

Vodka

Kenzie Saunders

My friends and I huddled in the corner of the furnished basement. Our bodies curled protectively around the small bottle of cheap liquor I held in my hands. The smooth glass glistened and glittered like a diamond, and our smiling faces reflected into its curves. Our innocence showed back to us in the clear liquid. I pushed my glasses up on my nose and closed my fingers over the label, conspicuously covering Liquor. We'd all scrounged up three dollars to chip in, and now we stared at our child in reverence.

"What do you think it tastes like?" Rachel's voice slid between her lips.

I caressed the yellow label. "It says lemon." I couldn't say vodka yet. I held the bottle in my hands, concrete as my desire to rub off the sheen of my youth, but I couldn't twist my tongue to form the words.

"I heard it burns." Natalie's voice was confident, but the words fell limp out of her mouth like a passed down legend.

Rachel and I looked at her.

"What does that mean?"

My thumb rubbed absently over the smooth glass.

Natalie shrugged, tucked her bangs behind her ear, and reached her hand out to touch our idol.

A creak on the stairs snapped our backs ramrod straight. We twirled so fast our heads spun and I shoved the cool glass against the skin of my back.

"What are you guys doing down here?" Rachel's mom called from above before she reached the landing.

Natalie and I stepped away from the corner, slouched our shoulders and relaxed our faces. My fingers ached to hug the bottle but I eased my clawed fingers and slapped an easy smile on my face. We looked over to Rachel to see her face transformed to a tomato.

"Rachel," I hissed, staring at the end of the banister, "calm down."

"I am calm," she whispered back.

"You're beet red." Natalie's comment was casual as Cindy's footsteps got louder.

Rachel slapped her hands to her face and rubbed vigorously, then waved her hands in her face. She turned to us nervously.

Cindy's manicured toes finally stepped down onto the immaculate carpeting, and she rounded the corner to the kitchenette, where we stood. I gave Rachel a sly thumbs up.

"Just planning our party." My voice was chipper. I felt the cold bottle against my skin, and the courage it held seeped into my blood.

Cindy was casual, leaning against the stairs with a smile. "How's it coming? Need anything?" Her red nails tapped on the bannister.

I looked to either side. Natalie piped up, "It's going pretty good so far. We have a guest list and all that down."

"And we started getting some ideas about decorations."

"That's cool."

The bottle was warming against my back.

"Natalie is your mom coming for dinner?

"No they're going out to Chewy's."

Cindy nodded, still tapping at the bannister.

We all stood with grand smiles, mentally shoving her back up the stairs. The silence dragged on for a second before a mop of a dog appeared, wagging its body at the base of the stairs. Its little barks burst into the silence. "Oh Joshua, you aren't supposed to be down here!" She scooped the fat dog up in her gentle arms and turned to us, "Well I'll let you get back to it."

We waited in a hush until we heard the basement door close. I eased away from the wall and walked over to the couch, out of sight of the stairs. "Think we were too obvious?"

"Shh!" Rachel scolded me as she plopped on the couch beside

me.

Natalie was slow to join us. I'd taken the bottle out and was fondling the lid by the time she sat down.

We sat, admiring the screaming yellow label, the relaxed font of the title, and the proud word staring up at us from the bottom: liquor.

"Let me smell it." Natalie burst out, fingers curled like a bear with a rabbit, paws poised to snatch the bottle away.

I gripped the bottle for a moment and cursed myself. Why didn't I think of that? I clamored for control and unscrewed the cap before handing her the full sloshing bottle. She brought her nose carefully to the lip of the bottle, eyes wide, hands shaking and held still for a moment. She grappled for something with herself, then finally took a deep, refreshing inhale.

She immediately began to cough.

I seized the bottle like a doting mother and gently lifted it out of her hands, replacing the lid, but not screwing it on. I searched her pants for any lost drops, but found none. Rachel leaned in to me and grinned. I caught her excitement and turned a smile to Natalie. We looked on as she coughed, rubbing vigorously at her nose and patting her throat. "Woah."

I didn't need any more encouragement. I held the cap away from the bottle and put my nose at slightly safer distance. My breath was tame and controlled. A hazy scent drifted up from the liquor, like lemon and summer. It was deceptively sharp, hidden under an initial syrupy sweetness that coat my wet tongue. Then the hardness started, and punched the back of my throat; I took another breath to gather the mix in my nose. My lips itched. I stopped myself from gulping down the contents.

I turned to Natalie and grinned. We'd shared something; pecked away an imaginary block of our innocence together.

"What'd it smell like?" Rachel clamored beside me, her body shaking with nerves and fear. She was still thinking about her mother.

I moved the bottle in front of her hands.
Her head shook violently and her eyes glanced upstairs.
“Rachel we’re gonna drink this later but you can’t smell it?
Come on.”

Again she shook her head, determined not to lose this part of herself.

“Rachel just smell it! Jesus.” Natalie’s voice playfully angry.

“Fine! Gosh.” Rachel reached for the bottle and put her face toward it gently. Glaring at Natalie she took a deep breath. “Good Lord!” Her nose crinkled and she waved a hand in her face.

Natalie and I grinned. “Welcome Rachel.”

Rachel laughed and quickly glanced upstairs. “To what?”

“To high school.”

The Teacup Dress

Rachel Jeffrey

Jayna wasn’t a bad person, she just liked to explore when no one was home. This wouldn’t be a problem if she was exploring her own home, but that was not the case. She reasoned that if people gave her a key or a code then she had permission. And she did, to an extent. She had permission to come over and let the dogs out when Mr. and Mrs. Hammond had to stay late at work. She had permission to go in and water the African violets in Mrs. Goldblum’s front window when she flew south like the birds to Florida for the winter. She did not, however, have permission to climb over the fence into Old Mrs. Maynard’s backyard after school when she heard the car pull out of the driveway, take the key from under the mat where she once saw the lady hide it, sneak in, give the fat calico cat a scratch, and pad around inside the orange brick split-level ranch, but that didn’t stop her.

Mrs. Maynard had lived next door to Jayna since what felt like the beginning of time, but never, not once in Jayna’s long eight-and-three-quarters years of life, could she ever remember meeting the woman face to face. She barely saw her outside the house at all, and Jayna had certainly spent her fair share of time looking for her. She was curious to see who tended the big pots at the side of the house to make the round, red tomatoes and fresh, fuzzy mint grow so tall and who plucked all of the cherries from the tree that swallowed part of the fence between their houses (mostly, she just wanted someone to share the cherries with her).

One year Jayna decided that she would meet Mrs. Maynard on Halloween. All of Jayna’s neighbors always got so excited to see her dressed up. They’d all ask her what she was (even though she was obviously a space cowgirl fairy) and tell her how creative she was and how big she was getting and give her extra candy because her baby brother, Noah, was too little for big kid candy. But Mrs. Maynard didn’t give out big kid candy on Halloween. She never even opened her door.

Charlie across the street, who was twelve, said it was because she was mean and didn't like kids. He told her about how Mrs. Maynard yelled at him and his friends when they played kickball in the street and left a soccer ball in her yard by accident. Jayna thought that sounded pretty awful. She remembered the first time it happened, back when there were big pots full of purple and yellow flowers in Mrs. Maynard's front yard. She remembered hearing a crash and seeing the soccer ball among broken pieces of orange ceramic in a big pile of dirt next to the driveway and hearing yelling from the windows. After that, the flowers disappeared. She knew that big kids never lied and she was still kind of mad about losing the flowers, so she made sure to stay away from the house next door.

She was still curious, though, so after a little while she decided that she would just stay hidden while she looked. When the weather got warm again she started peeking through the fence every day after school let out. That's when she noticed the key under the mat. Every Monday and Thursday a dark blue car would putter down the street and stop in Mrs. Maynard's driveway. A tall woman with too-white tennis shoes would climb out, clomp around to the back of the house, and let herself in with the mat key. She always stayed inside just long enough for Jayna to almost get bored enough to leave her super secret spy post, peeking out from under the hedges. When the lady came out she brought Mrs. Maynard with her. Still, though, Jayna never got a good look at her neighbor. It was hard to get a good look at someone's face when they were always wearing big sunglasses and floppy hats. After a month of watching, Jayna decided she would sneak over to investigate. She really made a better spy than a space-cowgirl-fairy, anyway.

Jayna knew from movies and stories that spies had to have rules—that was kind of like rule number one. She didn't really like rules but she wanted to be a good spy. She didn't think it made sense for her only rule to be that she needed rules, though, so she gave herself the Eight Things Rule. When Mrs. Maynard left in the blue car,

Jayna would go into the house and let herself look at eight new things every day, because she was eight years old (she didn't like to round down, but she couldn't very well look at three-quarters of something). Part of this rule was to make sure that she didn't go through the whole house in one day and would always have something new to look at the next time. The other part of it was to make sure that she didn't stay too long, because everyone knows that rule number two of being a good spy is not to let anyone know you're a spy, and that meant not getting caught.

The problem with the Eight Things Rule was that some things were more interesting than others. The first time she went over, she barely made it past the door. She had taken her shoes off because they were muddy and when she first walked in she had to take time to examine the weird fuzzy carpet that was the color of half-dead grass. It was made of lots of longish strings that squished up between her toes when she stepped on them, not at all like the little woven rug her mom put over the hardwood floors at home. There was a tall vase next to the door that came up a little past her hip and was painted with cherry blossoms and long-necked birds. In it were several umbrellas with handles carved into animal heads. She made the duck talk to the dog and counted them as things three and four for the day, after the funky carpet and detailed vase. She pulled on the other two handles in the vase but they were kind of boring compared to the first two. One umbrella was just a wooden stick with a rubbery dot on the bottom. There was no frame or fabric stretched up the length and Jayna didn't think it would be very good at keeping people dry, but who was she to judge if Mrs. Maynard liked getting wet in the rain? Personally, Jayna loved jumping in puddles in the ladybug rain boots her grandma got her. She rounded out the day's eight things with the treasure chest-like trunk she found by the stairs and the pile of folders she found inside. When she picked one up, a black disc fell out. She ran her nails along the grooves and it made scratchy noises and sent tingles up her arm.

For the next few visits Jayna drifted through the house, look-

ing at heavy books full of big glossy pictures, seashells bigger than any she ever found at the beach with her parents, twisty pieces of metal that she supposed were supposed to be art, and the stones and pieces of glass hanging in the window that threw rainbows across the whole room when the light hit them just right. Then one day she found a collection of figurines on a table in the living room. She was playing with a carved wooden giraffe that was as big as the tiny bronze Eiffel Tower next to it when she noticed the pictures, two of them in plain black frames on the back of the table.

The first looked like one of her school pictures, just shoulders and a head, but instead of a fully-colored little boy or girl, the picture was faded into shades of brown and showed a young man in a funny tan hat and jacket with shiny badges pinned at his shoulder. There were some curly words written in the corner by his right ear. Jayna couldn't read cursive very well, but she thought it said I love you, Ruby. She thought that was really sweet and wondered who Ruby was. In the picture next to it, also faded into browns, she saw the man with the rest of his body. He had his arms wrapped around a pretty lady with short dark hair that flipped up at the ends. She had flowers in her hand and a hat with a little veil on her head and was wearing a white dress that fell to her knees and stuck out a little instead of hanging straight down. It looked a little like someone had taken one of her mom's tea-cups and turned it upside down to make a skirt. Jayna guessed that the woman was a younger Mrs. Maynard and that that was a wedding picture. Even though it didn't look much like her parents' wedding photos, she thought that it was one of the prettiest pictures and prettiest dresses she had ever seen.

Jayna knew that her mom had saved her wedding dress and hoped that Mrs. Maynard had saved hers, too. She made it her new mission to find the old, short wedding dress. Unfortunately, she had already reached her eight things that day, so she had to wait until Thursday to start looking, but that was okay. It gave her two and a half days to think about the dress and where it might be hidden.

She narrowed it down to the closet, like where her grandma kept hers, or the attic, like where her mom kept hers, but she realized pretty quickly that thinking up hiding places for the dress wasn't any fun when you couldn't look for it immediately. She tucked her ideas in the back of her mind and decided she to try to draw the photograph so she could have her own copy. She gave up on that pretty quickly, too. The marker boxes at school only had one brown and she didn't know what colors were really in the photo. She didn't want to guess and get it wrong. Jayna knew from her aunt Macy and new uncle Mark that wedding colors were some of the most important things about a wedding. Aunt Macy had almost started crying when the flowers turned out to be baby pink instead of blush. Jayna couldn't really tell the difference but she knew that if it made Aunt Macy cry then it must have been important. She didn't want to get Mrs. Maynard's flowers wrong in her drawing, even if she didn't plan on showing it to her, so she decided to stop trying unless she found a picture where she could see the colors better. So she waited.

When Thursday finally came Jayna flew from the bus when it pulled up to her stop after school, raced through the house, passed her mom on the phone in the den, ignored the apple slices and popcorn set out on the kitchen table, and flung herself down in the tall grass right up against the fence. She was so excited that she didn't even care that she was probably getting gross green grass stains all over the new yellow shirt she got for her birthday. When the tall lady finally pulled up in the blue car and took Mrs. Maynard away, Jayna slithered under the fence and was into the house faster than she could ever remember. The bedroom was the third door on the left from the main hall—she had found it early in her adventures but bedrooms were private and there was so much other interesting stuff in the house that she hadn't really gone in before. Now she was desperate to explore the closet.

She slid every item along the rack but the only white thing she found was a sweater so fluffy it looked like it was glowing. There were a bunch of boxes on the floor but when the biggest one only held a pair

of snow boots she decided that a dress couldn't possibly fit down there. Kicking off her shoes, she climbed up on the bed, jumping a little to peek at the top shelf. It was lined with hats, but no box big enough to hold a dress.

The attic it is, she thought, and collected her shoes. It took a few tries to find the door with the short little half flight of steps going up. She wrapped her hands around the skinny railings on either side. The stairs were raw wood, almost grayish, and creaked when she stepped on them. The air smelled like pine, dust, and old people, and Jayna decided she kind of liked it. The sunlight slanted through the round windows and painted pretty pictures in the dust swirling in the air. There were big cardboard boxes and green plastic tubs stacked along the walls, but what caught her eye was a table and mirror set under the window. A flat box wrapped in string sat on the table. Jayna scrambled over to it. Her fingers tingled and she almost didn't want to open it just in case it wasn't the dress, but if it was then she didn't want to lose her chance. She slid the string off and cracked the lid.

Folded in the box was a cloud of fabric like a butterfly net. It was yellower than her mom's dress. Still pretty, just different. She found the shoulders, pulled it out, and draped the dress over a chair. Yellowed lace wrapped around the neck with little pearls scattered in among the stitches. The skirt was creased and stuck out a little funny in places but was still full and swishy. It wasn't anything like the glamorous floor-length dresses she saw in her family's wedding photos, but it was beautiful.

Carefully, she flipped through the layers of fabric and fluff at the skirt and crawled into it. It took some twisting to get her arms in the right holes, but eventually she figured it out. The dress wasn't short on her like it was in the photo—it brushed the floor—but she still felt like a princess. She stood in front of the mirror and twisted so it swirled and swished around her legs. She hummed a song and danced around the room with an imaginary partner like Belle danced with the Beast, watching the light fabric fly out and make the dress

look even poofier. She spent so long admiring the dress that she forgot rule number two of being a spy.

When a squeaky step warned her that she was about to be caught, Jayna stopped spinning immediately. She wanted to take the dress off, fling it into the box, and hide until Mrs. Maynard left so she could sneak out, but she couldn't do it. Not to Mrs. Maynard's wedding dress. If she was going to get in trouble, the dress made it almost worth it.

The soft footsteps stopped and Jayna finally, slowly, looked up from her feet. The woman standing before her was shorter than she looked in the pictures and had very round shoulders. Her hands looked like they were covered in skin-colored tissue paper wrapped a little too loosely around her fingers. She wore a simple gold ring on one hand and a silver charm bracelet above the other. There were pillow puffs of skin under the gray eyes hiding behind her big plastic glasses, perched on her long nose. White hair sat like a curly cotton candy cloud on top of her head. She didn't look anything like the mean old lady Charlie had made her out to be.

The wrinkly face smiled and put a hand on Jayna's shoulder. "You look prettier in that dress than I ever did, sweetheart."

His Face Splitting Smile

Kenzie Saunders

I hated this. I hated every moment of this, and it hadn't even started yet. I gripped my iPhone in my jacket pocket and surreptitiously peered around me. I'd worn my shittiest clothes in an attempt to dress down. I didn't want to attract attention to my status. Here, in this area, a rich black woman felt like more of an offense than a poor white one. So I hunched over in the black puffy jacket with a broken zipper that I kept around to walk my dog in and the ripped jeans I used for painting. I dug around the back of my closet for these Tims—my father had given them to me when I was 14. They were a dull pink and didn't match my ratty green shirt, but I guess I had that going for me.

I step over an uncapped syringe on the sidewalk and try to mask my disgust. The cracks in this sidewalk probably held dried blood and dreams pushed farther and farther away by each ounce of coke. I look around the dilapidated neighborhood and superimpose the one we had grown up in over the shit colored bricks falling into themselves. They're spitting images of each other. I thank my lucky stars and my stepmother for the third time since arriving in the neighborhood. When Tyrone had gone to jail for the first time, I was stuck without a guardian; my father was in and out of the house, my mother was high on a street corner somewhere and my uncle was curled up inside a bottle of Jack. On one of my father's better days he called Child Services and away I went. I'd only been in the system for about a year when I was scooped up by Linda, my stepmother, my real mom. We fell in love instantly and I never looked back.

Until my biological father had called and told me Tyron had finished his fifth stint in jail.

The red building Tyron slept in had to be around here somewhere. My phone starts bleeping, an unattractive loud noise that punctures a thick blanket of poverty and addiction in this place.

I snatch my Otterbox covered phone and put it up to my ear, trying to cover as much of it with my hand as possible. "What." I'm not sure why I'm whispering.

"You here yet girl?"

"Punctual now are we?"

"Shove it."

I glance down the alleyway I pass, "I think I'm lost."

"Girl, how you lost? It's a straight ass street you walkin' on."

I clench my fist and remain silent.

"You pass the bum at the bus stop yet?"

The bum at the...? "You're kidding."

"Did you pass him or not. Ashy mug, fat as hell?"

I hadn't seen a bum in ten years. I'd probably cringe and cross the street. "No."

"Then you must be walking slow as hell, girl, that's only half-way here."

Halfway! "Tyron how far into this—"

"Eh girl!"

I shove my phone into my pocket as I whirl around. A thin black man shuffles across the street, arms waving in the air. His baggy jeans scuff on the asphalt and his black flannel slinks down his arm as his hand waves. "You lookin' for that fool Tyron!"

I stare silently.

"What, you mute or some?"

I squeeze my eyes shut then open them quickly. God forbid he reaches me. "Um, no."

"You hear me then, girl? I said you lookin' for that fool Tyron. Mighty fool him. Good people though." His voice is deep, deeper than I'd expect from such a thin man.

"Uh, yes."

"Then girl, you going in the right wrong direction."

What? "Uh, I'm sorry?"

"The fool's house is back that way." His long arm points in

my opposite direction. The cracked sidewalk stretches ahead of me like an endless racetrack. I can't run in these clunky Tims. I look back to the man, who's reached me now, his foot resting on the edge of the sidewalk, exposing his stick ankles. A thick black plastic bracelet wraps around his ankle, a black box attached, with a small green light glowing steadily. I wonder what his range is.

"Oh don' worry bout that, girl." He leans in towards me, like we're chummy, and whispers, "I was just an accessory." He puts an odd emphasis on the word and winks.

I lean away from his face and his pungent breath. "Tyron's is that way?" I nod my head to my right.

"How you know him?"

"Childhood friend." The lie springs off my tongue and falls to the ground. I want to step on it, step on this tiny man and run to my brother.

"Aw, that's good." He nods his head for a moment then links his arm through mine and waltzes forward. "I'll take you there, girl. Wouldn't want a pretty thing like you gettin' lost in the hood now."

I lurch forward, so stunned I can hardly move. He's touching me. Touching me, actual contact between our bodies, and he hollered at me from across the street.

"We're gonna get you to Tyron's red ol' house quick fast." His thin legs pump and I skip steps to catch up.

He makes no move to release my arm. My heart drops in my chest and hiccups out a beat. I'm trapped. Just then I hear a tinny sound and remember Tyron is still on the phone. Carefully, glancing sidelong at my guide, I bring the phone to my ear.

"Lysa!"

"What." I hiss into the phone. The thin man is humming to himself, casually stepping over needles and broken bottles in the sidewalk like he memorized the path in a maze. He seems to pay no mind to me or my failing heart.

"S'matter with you! What happened, huh!"

"A..." I look at the shadow of a man on my left and eye the leg where his house arrest anklet was, "friend of yours found me."

He perks up as he's mentioned and his face brightens. One of his front teeth is chipped. "That Tyron?"

"Who Jimmy?"

I'd prefer not to know his name, but I hesitantly venture it. "Jimmy?"

Jimmy bobbles his head excitedly and pats his chest. "That's me, girl. What's he sayin'? Good things, better be, the fool. Lemme talk to him? How is he doin'? I don't have a phone or I'd call him myself."

His words gush out so fast I only catch half of them. I stare at him openmouthed and grip my phone.

"Jimmy's alright. How'd you find him? Must have been goin' in the hella wrong direction."

"He found me."

Jimmy's head is pushing forward to find my phone. "Can I talk to him?"

I don't want to give him my phone. It'll give me away. But my arm is enclosed in his, and I don't want his mood to change. I swear I hear my arm creak as I extend my phone to him.

He pays no attention to my Otterbox, just snatches up the phone and hollers into the phone. "Tyroooon!!"

I can hear Tryon laugh on the other side.

"How you been man, long time brother. I'm taking your friend to yo' place now." He pauses. "Uh-huh, just at the edge of my perimeter."

I tune him out and focus on the sidewalk ahead. We pass the gape of empty asphalt where I parked my car. The shiny black gleams and winks in the sunlight, boasting its wealth. If I got back in my car right now I could drive back to my apartment, over the bridge, and forget I ever came back to a place like this. But mom said it would be closure for me. Closure, right. She'd never seen my neighborhood, never heard my uncle belch out the door and yell at the prostitutes in

the street, never counted the track marks on my birth mother's arm to guess how long she'd been gone, never hid under a bed and longed for a tight hug as gunshots rang outside.

I didn't want closure.

I wanted to forget.

Tyrone had stayed entrenched in the filth, caught in the muck like quick sand. He hadn't gotten a free ticket out. It was harder for a black man from neighborhoods like this.

Jimmy laughs at something. I smile automatically. He has one of those infectious, full laughs that makes anything funny. It lightens the air around us and tugs my heart, reminding me of my father. I almost laugh, mouth just opening, before I remember where my father is now, and my lips turn down in a scowl.

I'm not sure how he's kept up with my brother or I in a federal penitentiary. I almost hadn't answered the phone when the blocked number popped up on my phone, but my Mom travels and gets burn phones all the time. So I picked it up. It took me a few to recognize the deep, gravelly voice as my father's, and when I did I sat in silence.

"Hey baby girl, how you been? I know we haven't talked in a bit, but I wanted to tell you about Tyrone. He's out now, so. You should visit him. You're the only family he has, you know, with his momma and I in here."

And with Uncle Illias dead, I wanted to say. But I felt like an outsider in their family, so I stayed quiet and let him talk.

"Anyway. I don't expect you to say nothing, just, give him a visit, baby girl. Keep him away from here. I see ya."

He hung up before I had the chance to say anything. I'd immediately called my mom in a fit of tears and anger. How dare he expect me to keep Tyrone out of jail. How dare he call me. How dare he call me that, baby girl, after all these years and all my questions. "Screw you!" I wanted to scream. "You and that woman for ruining my brother." But I'm here. In this shitty neighborhood to do just that, keep him out of jail.

We are walking more quickly than I realized; to my right, closer than I would have liked, an old man snores, curled up against the walls of the bus stop. His clothes are baggy and holy. He grips a paper cup tight in his hand, even in sleep, and rests his other gnarled hand over his chest. One of his legs is propped up on the bench. He looks peaceful, considering. I want to put something in his cup, but Jimmy marches ahead.

When he notices my stares he nudges my side with his elbow and says to me, holding the phone away from his mouth, "Don't give that raggedy negro nothin'. He ain't nothin' but an old drunk."

I crane my neck back to look at the lumbering bear of a man and shudder. Why could I accept him so quickly, but I stare at Jimmy with mistrust? The thought intrudes and I try to shove it away but it brands itself in my mind. I turn to Jimmy. He's smiling brightly, mouth moving a mile a minute. His arm is linked loosely with mine, not restraining at all—friendly. He gestures wildly with his elbow, jerking it back and forth. His clothes are raggedy but he stands straight and proud in them. Is there a sister waiting for him at home, praying he doesn't go back to jail?

"...negro please!" he laughs on the phone. He takes the phone from his ear, squints at it, and stabs the end button with his thumb. "Thanks, girl. Haven't talked to a brother in a long time." I take my phone slowly and put it in my pocket.

"Sure." I think of my mom, and my father in jail for life. "Are we almost there?"

He points ahead, no more than twenty feet away, with his free hand. I follow it to see the faded red brick of my brother's building. Here at last.

We come up to the door quickly. Jimmy turns to me, unlinking our arms and grins. "Stay safe out here, girl, it may look empty but it can be dangerous."

I nod my head graciously. How many times has he gone to jail? Who's rooting for his recovery? Anyone?

He slips his arms around me, pats my back twice, and retreats, before I can reciprocate the hug. He swaggers away, one hand in his pocket, the other swinging freely. I try to imagine him talking to my brother face to face, mouth splitting his face in half, hands flailing about, loud laugh bouncing off the walls. It makes me smile.

“Thank you!” I shout, standing on my tiptoes.

He doesn’t turn, doesn’t speak.

Just lifts his free hand in the air and swaggers on.

Strawberries

Stephanie Ramser

Out under the blaring Alabama sun, I watched my sister toddle between rows of bushy green plants. My mother was chasing after her, with a basket looped in the crook of her elbow, and I dragged my basket on the ground beside me. It wasn’t too heavy, it was just too bulky in size for me to lift more than a few inches off the ground with my height, short, even for my age.

The fuzzy stems tickled my fingers, and every time I tried to pluck one of the ripe red fruits from the plants, I ended up with half the strawberry in my hand. I was frustrated, but I kept trying.

My mother and sister were further off now, and I could hear one of them screaming. Probably my sister throwing a tantrum. Soon enough, I was alone, with a basket of mashed strawberries, and frustration bubbling in my throat.

I wanted to get at least one proper strawberry. Some of them looked like multiple berries fused together, but I didn’t touch those. I didn’t want to ruin those.

I couldn’t tell you when the man got there, but he was just there. Tall, dark hair, but he looked incredibly old. He might have been the farmer, or some stranger out in the field picking a basket of strawberries for the few dollars we paid to come out with baskets. He didn’t have a basket, but he acted like he was there for a reason.

He put a hand on my back, wiped at my tears, and whispered to me. It wasn’t in English, but somehow, it made sense. His voice was so soothing, and though I can’t remember his words, I relax when I think of the tone and how he sounded. He was magic, for all four-year-old me cared.

“You twist them like this and they come off whole,” he told me, and demonstrated, his broad fingers leaving the fruit completely unharmed. It was so large I had to hold it with both hands, and he invited me to eat it.

Juices spilled down my chin, and the combination of sweet and tart was overwhelming. I knew not to talk to strangers--I'd been hearing that for a long as I could remember--but this man was no stranger. I had never seen him a day in my life, and I would have remembered his almost golden eyes. With him crouched over me, his arm around my back, and the sweetness of summer on my tongue, I felt completely safe, I felt home. I've never felt that safe or at peace since.

With anyone else I would have cried and screamed for my mom, but something told me not to. "Be good," he told me. He knew my name, and I didn't question it; my name sounded like royalty on his tongue.

With his approval, I twisted a strawberry off its vine and handed it to him. He ate it in front of me, and smiled with some black seeds still in his teeth. He smelled nice, of fresh tilled dirt and warmth, and faintly of lavender.

He pressed his nose to my forehead, but I squirmed, wanting to get him another strawberry. I wanted to make that man happy.

He told me to fill my basket, and watched me a while. I ran around in his shadow, bringing handfuls of berries back to my stationary basket. One time I turned around and he was gone, nowhere to be seen. It was like he had just disappeared, and I felt like I lost something important that day when the stranger left.

How do you lose a man in a flat field? I don't know. I hadn't even seen my mother or sister when he was near, it was almost like being taken to another world, for just a brief moment.

Sometimes, when the wind is right, or even when I'm alone in a room, for no explicable reason, I smell his smell again and the memory of his voice is brought back to me for a moment. No matter how hard I try to remember what he whispered to me when he first came to me, I never can, but I remember the deep sound, and I remember how safe I felt. Whenever the moment passes, some part of me is left with longing for that warmth again.

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