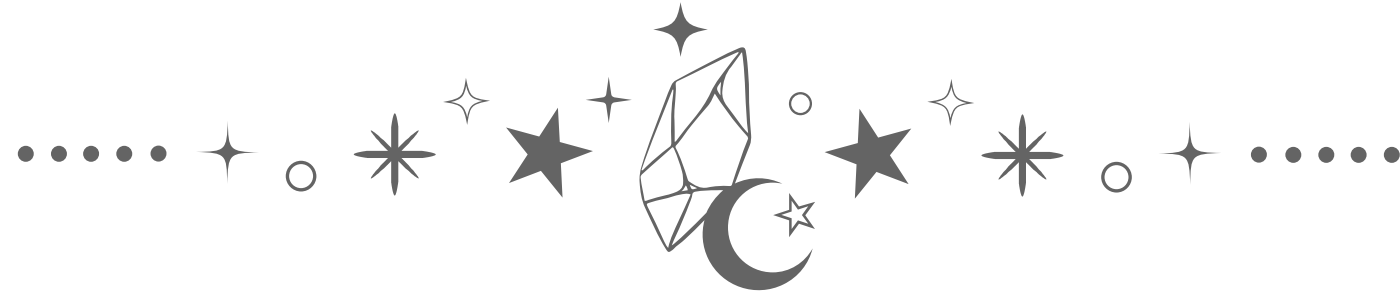




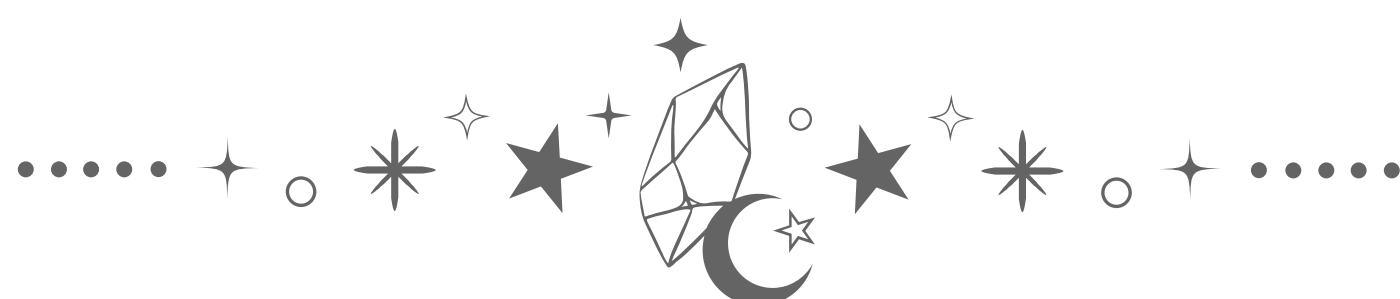
Haunting Humanity

ISSUE 1. VOLUME 2.

Still Here Magazine



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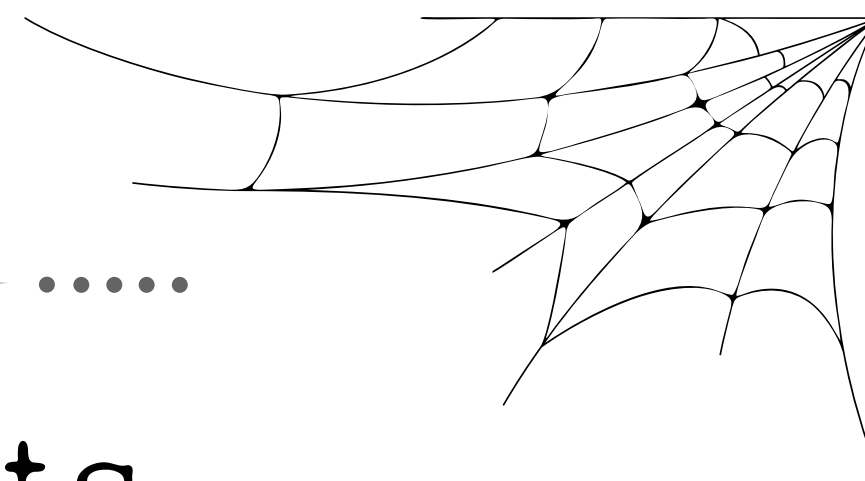
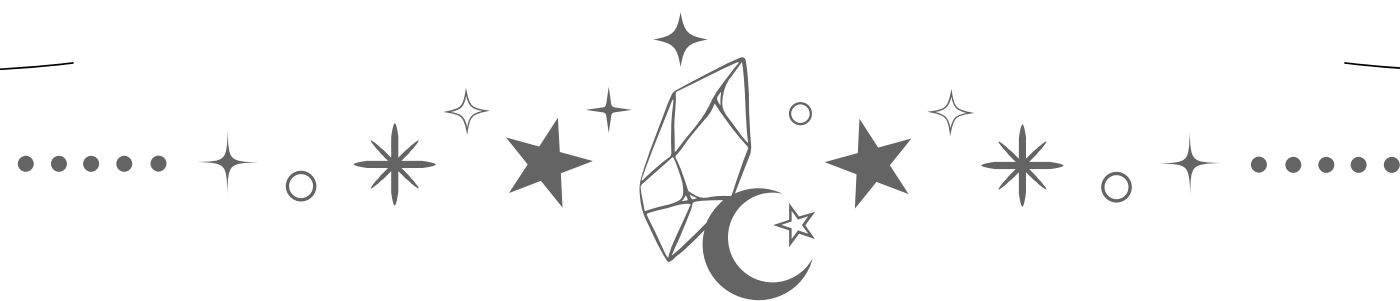
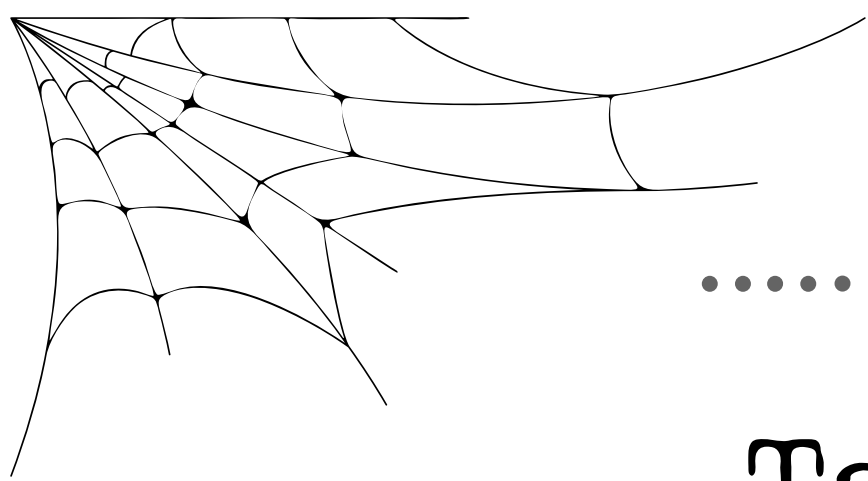


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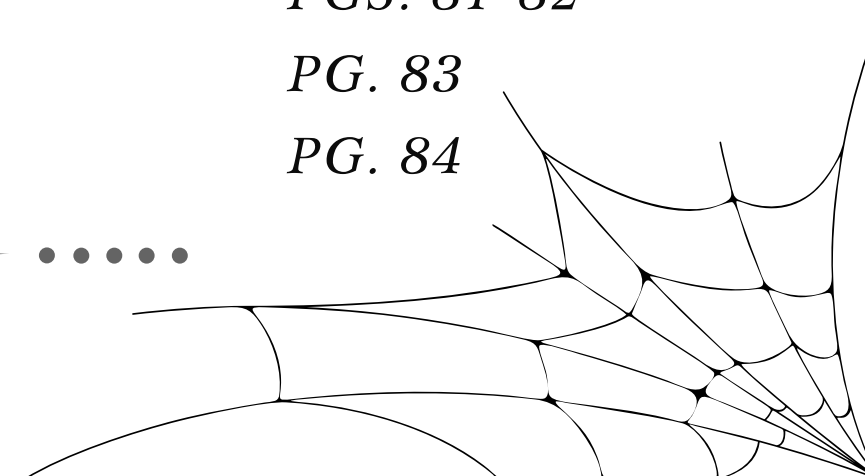
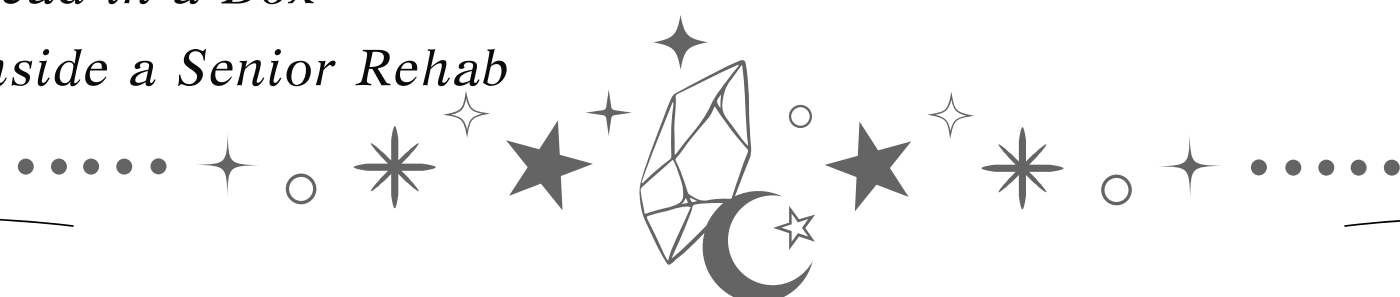




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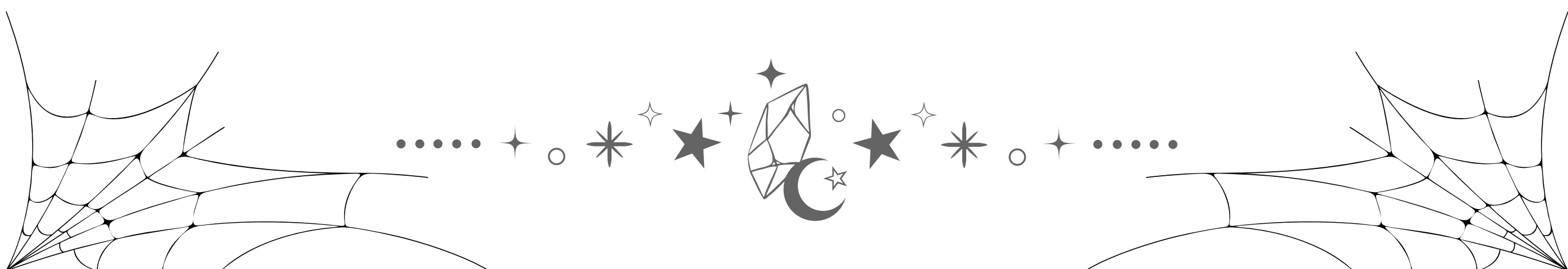
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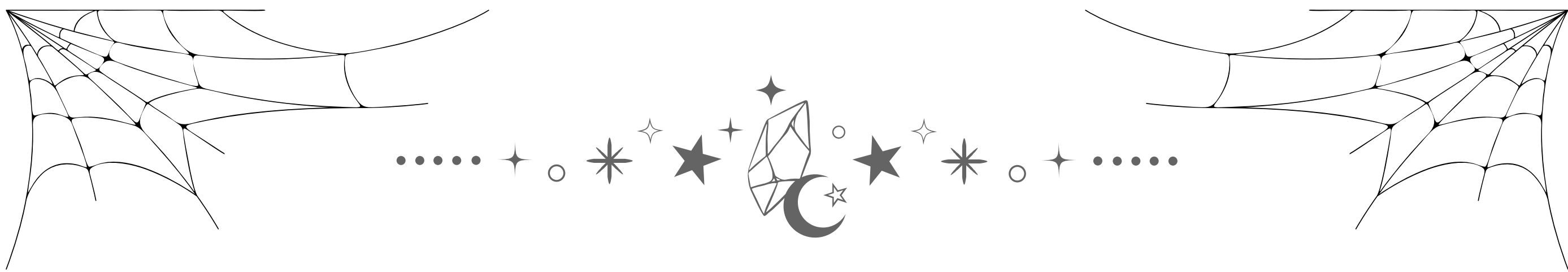
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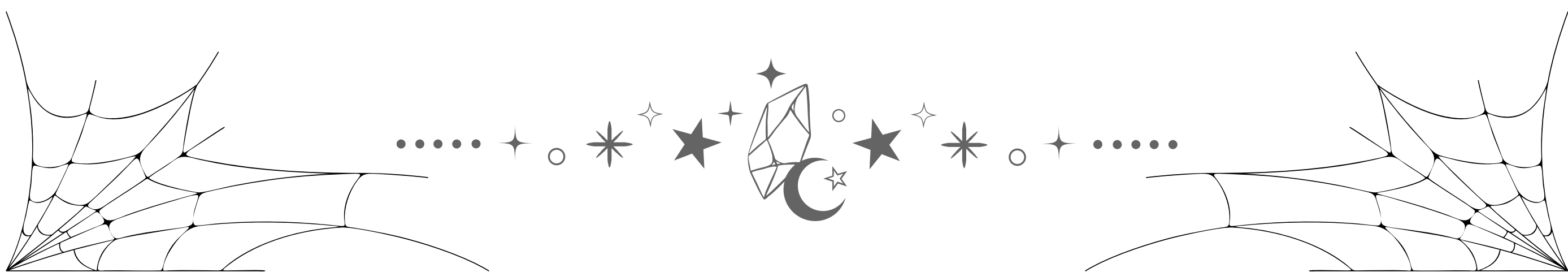




Letter from The Editor

Welcome to the first issue of Volume Two. It features 19 works of fiction, 16 poems, 2 personal essays and 7 pieces of art from 33 contributors. We're very excited for this issue, and hope you all enjoy it. While we love being super creative with the magazine, we've still got to keep in mind its printability! We're working through those obstacles to bring our full creative vision to life.

And speaking of life, I think it's about time you delve into "Haunting Humanity", where perhaps even life itself is eerie.





Butterfly Woman by Nadia Gerassimenko

A Cure for Lies by Ivan Ivanov

Catherine knew that Marcus was cheating. It was obvious to her. Not coming home right after work. All the new clothes, perfumes and watches. His car was always clean, as never before. She also felt oddly uncomfortable to be around him these days. Something just felt off. Those were all signs Catherine had noticed, but she didn't have anything concrete. All the times she had confronted him about it, he would reassure her that he was just doing longer hours at the office, for both their sakes, since Catherine still hadn't started working. This obviously didn't make sense to her, because he was spending the extra money he earns on all that crap he was buying. Self-care, he called it.

She currently had Marcus' phone in her hands, prowling through his Instagram messages. Most of them were work-related. There were a couple of chats with close friends that she was also acquainted with. Then there was the family group chat with his mom and two sisters.

"Baby, I forgot my towel on the bed again. Could you get it for me?" His voice made her drop the phone.

"Yeah, give me a second!" She picked it back up and got rid of all the evidence, before placing it exactly where it had laid before.

When she opened the bathroom door, Marcus was already out of the shower, waiting. He had been going to the gym for about half a year now, and it showed. His body was leaner, the muscles visibly separated. The veins on his arms looked like spiderwebs stretching under his skin. She couldn't help but take his training as another hint to his unfaithfulness.

"You gonna pass me the towel, or keep staring?" He smiled at her, visibly delighted.

"Oh— sorry, here."

"Is everything alright, Catherine?" His hand, still wet, touched her waist. The towel was not yet around his.

"Yeah, sure, all good. I'll check what we have for dinner." She pulled herself away from him and stomped off to the kitchen. He really thought he could seduce her like that! He wanted to have sex with her on the weekends, while fucking this other girl the rest of the time. Well, that wasn't gonna happen. She would prove that he was a liar.

While she was checking the nearly empty fridge, Marcus walked behind her. Thankfully, he had underwear on.

"Looks like we have to order in," he stated. "Sushi?" Catherine felt his gaze crawling on her back.

"Sure." He kept staring at her. "What is it?"

"You are acting weird. Are you hiding something from me?"

"No, are you?" She was sweating.

For a moment, silence filled the space between them.

"This is about the cheating again, ain't it?" Marcus sighed. "Catherine, I know you are going through a difficult time, since your parents disappeared. Actually, I cannot even imagine how frustrating it must be for you." He took a step, closing in on her. "But I've been doing my best to make you feel better this past year, so please, don't take it out on me, Cath. I—"

"I am not taking anything out on you. I just think you are lying, Marcus. You are definitely keeping something from me, I am not stupid." She felt heat rising up her throat, like smoke up a chimney. "My parents might be dead, Marcus! Fucking dead!" Her knees almost gave out, making her hold herself onto the kitchen counter with one hand. The other one gripped her face.

"Cath.." Marcus took another step towards her.

"Don't! Just order the food and leave me alone." She saw worry in his face, but it looked fabricated. His eyebrows pulled closer together, creating waves on his forehead. Narrowed eyes. A clenched jaw. A masterfully crafted sculpture, worthy of a place in a museum. But at the end, it was just that. A sculpture.

"Alright, whatever." Marcus exhaled, before picking up his phone to order takeout.

They didn't talk to each other for the rest of the evening. Marcus ate his tempura rolls on the couch in front of the TV, while Catherine sat at the kitchen table, on her phone. Like most evenings these days, she was scrolling through forums for women with cheating husbands.

A Cure for Lies by Ivan Ivanov

"I caught him in our bed with the whore!" read one of the comments.

"He had been sleeping with my sister. For over a year!" Most of them were just brokenhearted women, explaining how they caught their husbands red-handed. But then Catherine saw something.

"A Cure For Lies" There was a link under it. "At first I didn't believe it would work, but bought it anyway, as I was desperate. And trust me, when I tell you, that bastard spilled all the beans after he took it. Some of the details, I didn't even want to hear! If you are looking for a way to get him talking, buy this and thank me later."

Catherine, intrigued but doubtful, tapped on the link. Apparently she had to download a whole new browser to open it, which was already shady.

"Please, don't empty my bank account or something," she whispered to herself, but kept going.

Eventually, the website revealed itself. It was pretty clunky, but contained all the information she needed.

The Cure was a small plastic bottle of 10ml, filled with translucent liquid. It cost a hundred and twenty dollars. Somehow the high price made its promises more believable for Catherine. "Your partner is cheating, but won't admit it? Your best friend is lying to your face, but you cannot prove it? Your own mother is keeping secrets from you, but you cannot get her to talk? Give them *The Cure For Lies*, and watch their tongues unravel in front of your eyes! Listen to their sinful confessions! And the best part is, there are no side effects! They will be able to tell and do nothing more and nothing less, than that, which they truly desire."

Catherine admitted to herself that this is probably snake oil, and ordering it made her a complete idiot. Then she looked at Marcus. She imagined him in a bed, that was not theirs. She imagined a woman next to him, who was not her. They were both smiling, no, laughing. Probably at her. The clueless Catherine, who could never find out about their little affair. Like she never found out what happened to her parents. Her thumb slammed the order button. Shortly after, as she was headed to bed, she saw her husband walking to the basement door. These days, he wouldn't even go to bed with her. He would spend his nights working on his new project. A leather jacket. It had cost him a hefty amount to get all the material. Steer hide from Italy, he had told her. This newfound hobby was odd to her, because he had never before expressed any interest in making his own clothes, and a leather jacket was a big endeavor for an amateur tailor. Catherine also found the idea of working with raw animal skin disgusting, so it had been a while since she last went down to the basement. Marcus had promised to show her the end result and she had been satisfied with that.

It was the next morning, after Marcus had left for work, when the doorbell rang. The sharp tone pulled Catherine out of her sleep. The second ring forced her to stand up and make her way to the front door, stumbling into one of the standing lamps, which ornamented the corridor. When she finally opened the door, there stood two police officers with solemn expressions on their faces. The way they looked at her, before their eyes turned to the floor, revealed all she needed to know. Her heart dropped.

"Good morning, Ms. Albert. May we come in?" said the visibly older one, taking off his cap.

"Yes, please do."

They entered the house, not taking their shoes off. Catherine still led them to the living room, where they sat on the couch.

"Coffee, officers?"

"No, thank you. Please take a seat."

She sat on the armchair next to the sofa. The older one inhaled deeply, before he began talking.

"Ms. Albert, I am very sorry to inform you," A short pause. "We have found your parents' remains. My condolences."

Even though she had known from the start, what they were about to tell her, Catherine burst into uncontrollable tears. For a year she had been living with the hope of her parents suddenly appearing at her door, laughing. "Surprise!" they would shout, carrying different souvenirs from their travels. Those hopes were finally laid to rest.

A Cure for Lies by Ivan Ivanov

“Where did you find them? Can I see them?” she spat the questions out fast.

“They were found at the bottom of Lake Larry, fifty miles from here.” This time it was the younger one talking. His right leg was jumping nervously. A tick she knew well from Marcus. “Decomposition happens very fast in water, so there was no soft tissue to be found, only bones.”

Only bones. Her parents had been reduced to *only bones*.

“What took you so long to find them? It’s been a year!” she shot the words at the officers. “Do you at least know what happened to them? There is no way in hell my parents jumped down there willingly! Were they murdered?”

“We are sorry, Ms. Albert, but until their remains have been thoroughly inspected, we cannot make any assumption as to the cause of death.” the older officer said, standing up. “We will keep you updated on any new findings. You have our sincere condolences again.”

Soon after, the officers left her home. While closing the door behind them, she saw a package with her name on it, laying on the porch. The Cure For Lies had arrived sooner than she’d expected. She threw the box on the kitchen table and buried herself in bed, crying. She had gotten used to living a life, where she pretended her parents went away to seek their happiness without telling her. It was a ridiculous story, but she had started to believe it. Now that she knew the reality of it, grief crawled back from the shadows of her heart, stabbing it again and again and again...

What was Marcus doing now? Was he really at work? Or was he in bed with his mistress, while she was alone at home, sobbing? The thought made her furious. She stood up and made her way to the kitchen, dedicated to finding the truth, even if it was the last thing she’d do.

Marcus came home late, as usual.

“How was work?” Catherine called out from the living room, picking up two glasses. Old fashioned. Marcus' favorite drink.

“It was fine.” He looked at her, lifting a brow. “Good to know we’re talking again. What do you have there?”

“An apology.” She handed him the drink. “I know, I’ve been a lot to handle these days, sorry.”

“No, it’s fine, really. Is that old- fashioned? Thanks, baby.” He kissed her forehead before he took a seat on the armchair, where she had first heard the news about her parents. Drops of sweat were sliding down Catherine’s back as she was waiting for him to take a sip. She had put all ten milliliters in his drink, just as the instructions had said. A part of her still didn’t believe in this cure, and was even scared that it was poisonous. But still, she wanted to try. She needed to know.

Marcus took a sip.

“That’s amazing, Cath! Which whiskey did you use?” His eyes pointed at her. Everything felt the same for now.

“Um, let me see...” She picked a bottle of Woodford Reserve showing it to him. “This one.”

“Haven’t tried that combination before, have to put it on my list.” Head turning back to the TV, he took another sip of his drink.

Catherine waited until the glass was almost empty. Everything seemed normal. He was still alive, which was a plus. There was no kind of physical reaction, either. She took a deep breath. It was time to see if she’d gotten scammed or not.

“Marcus?”

“Mhm?”

“Are you hiding something from me?” Silence. Then his answer.

“Yes, I am.”

She thought she saw his head twitching ever so slightly, but he did not look at her. His eyes were glued to the screen.

“What are you hiding?”

A Cure for Lies by Ivan Ivanov

“Different things.”

That answer annoyed her. But she couldn't believe the Cure was working. Or was Marcus playing with her? Never mind, she had to go for it.

“Are you cheating on me, Marcus?” Silence again. And the head twitch, a bit more noticeable this time.

“Yes, I am.”

There she had her confession.

“Stop giving me one-liners and tell me everything, you bastard!” Tears were starting to burn her eyes.

“Everything?” His eyes rotated towards her, followed by the head. He had a calm expression on him. *Too calm.*

“Yes, everything! Who is she? How long has it been going on?”

“It started about a year ago. Multiple women. Sometimes men. Depending on what I needed, at the time.”

Catherine was about to vomit.

“What you needed? *What you needed*, Marcus, was to be by my side! The police were here today. My parents are dead! Their skeletons had been found on the bottom of a lake.” She needed to catch her breath. Marcus stood up, and made his way to the basement. “Where are you going? Come back here, asshole! I have more questions!” She followed.

Stopping at the basement door, he turned back to her.

“Wait here, Cath. It smells bad down there. All the leather, you know.”

“Wait for what? What are you doing?”

“It's your parents, baby. It will make you feel better, promise.” He closed the door behind him, leaving her confused. Her legs were shaking. What did he mean? The way he talked felt off, as if he was a stranger. A stranger, who had made his way into their home, taking the place of her husband. She felt the sudden urge to flee. To run far away, while he was down there, because she wouldn't have a second chance once he was back.

Her phone rang. She stared at the unknown number, before picking up.

“Catherine here, who is it?” She almost whispered the words.

“Hello, Ms. Albert.” It was one of the officers. “We need you to come to the station tomorrow. More bodies have been found in the lake. Some of them are still fresh. Looks like a psycho is on the loose.” She suddenly got this uncontrollable feeling of dread behind her breastbone. The basement door screeched open behind her.

“Okay, so my parents were killed?” She heard steps getting closer, but was too terrified to turn around.

“That might be the case, yes. Some of the corpses had parts of their skin peeled off. Others were completely stripped of it. It was a bad sight, Ms. Albert. We will be expecting you tomorrow. Have a good night.” The officer hung up. Catherine slowly lowered the phone from her ear, feeling a cold breath on her neck. She got goosebumps, like the thorns on a rose, there for protection.

“Want to turn around, baby? It's not done yet, but you can look at it.”

She glanced behind her, and saw Marcus wearing the leather jacket he had been working on. It looked off, and not just because it wasn't finished, or because he was still an amateur. There was something else. Catherine was too scared to ask. She didn't want to know.

“I have to go to the police station tomorrow morning. Something about my parents.”

“No, Cath. You won't go.”

“Why not?” She wanted to run, but it was too late now. Like a deer in front of a car, she stood there. Eyes wide open, watching, while death approaches.

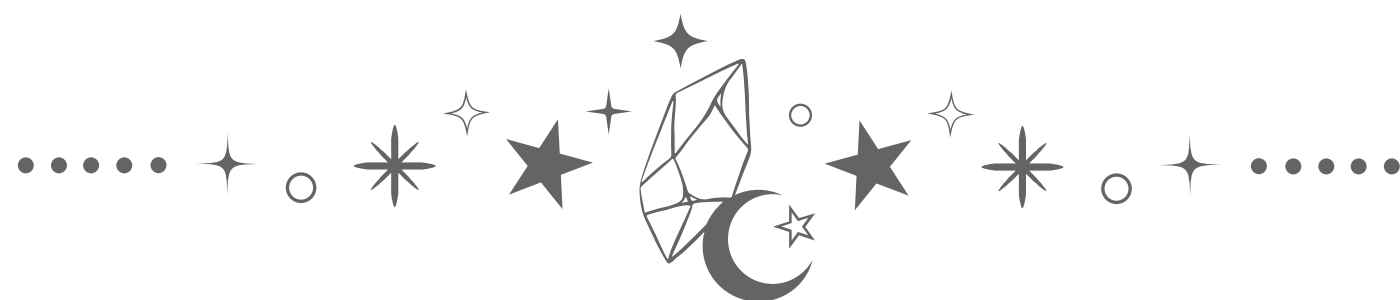
“You've waited long enough, baby. I can finally reunite you with them. You see?” He turned around, showing her the unfinished part of the jacket. “I have made space for you right between them. *Beautiful*, isn't it? Catherine stared at the empty spot, trying to come up with the words to ask what he was on about. But fear had stolen her speech. Her tongue twisted in unusable shapes. Her teeth clattered in front of it, making the sounds coming out of her alien to the human ear.

A Cure for Lies by Ivan Ivanov

Marcus left her there alone and strolled to the kitchen. At this point she wasn't thinking of escaping. All that was left for her was to wait out the inevitable. Underneath all the terror, there was a slight euphoric feeling peeking out from underneath the rubble, telling her she should be happy to meet her parents again. Marcus came back, holding one of her kitchen knives. He stood in front of her, smiling.

“Just a second, Cath.” His eyes had this shine in them, that she had fallen in love with the first time they met. This was *her* Marcus. It was her Marcus, who held the back of her neck, while he sliced her throat open. She sensed her consciousness flowing out of her, together with the blood. Marcus held her, as she was falling to the ground, not letting her body get bruised. Her vision began to fade.

Catherine's last thought, as he was carrying her limp body down the stairs, was how The Cure For Lies had turned out to be an absolute success.



The Burned Man by JS Aspley

Sophie was not a worrier.

But for the first time in their marriage, her husband was distant, distracted. Danny evaded her gentle inquiries, blaming his detachment on stress at work. He spun a story of colleagues not seeing eye to eye; him caught in the middle. But Sophie knew her husband. His mood was more than some office spat. He was permanently on edge; he fidgeted ceaselessly.

It all came to a head one night. She had crawled out of bed to take a trip to the loo. His side was empty. Rubbing her eyes, she had discovered him at the window in their front room. He was just standing there in the dark, shaking in terror, staring out into the street.

He had mumbled something about a bad dream. She brought him back to bed, not believing a word of it, but kept her confrontation till the next day.

"It's going to sound really stupid, Soph," he had said, rubbing his scalp. His speech was jagged with adrenalin, betraying genuine fear.

"I think someone has been following me, watching me."

Alarms bells went off. Sophie's husband was a sensible, middle-of-the-road kinda guy. He was not one for *derring-do*; not one for pranks. He was a middle management accountant for a company which printed whisky labels, not a gangster or even a serial philanderer. The notion someone was stalking him was incongruous.

"What do you mean?"

Danny rubbed his face with both hands. His eyes blazed with secret devastation.

"I can't explain it. I've just seen ... I've seen some things. It's making me doubt my own eyes, Soph."

Sophie had her arms around him now, and kissed his cheek.

"You're scaring me, baby. What is it? What's going on?" Her voice was trembling.

Danny gritted his teeth and pondered. She knew he was holding back, perhaps to protect her.

"Jesus Christ, Daniel, whatever is happening ... you've got to tell me and tell me now," she insisted.

Danny nodded like a little boy.

"I was heading down to the bus stop. I saw this man. He was standing in a doorway on the other side of the street just under the railway arches. I thought he was just some drunk, or a junkie. A taxi flashed past me and then the guy was at the edge of the pavement staring right at me. His face ... his face was terrible, Soph."

"What do you mean, Daniel, I'm not following?"

"Half of his face was like a mask. All horrible burns and scars across his brow and down one side.

The Burned Man by JS Aspley

His eyes were ... ablaze. It was like he knew me, like he hated me. Like he wanted to harm me in some way. I can't really explain it."

Sophie retreated to logic.

"Was he out of the soup kitchen, love? Just some poor down-and-out? Maybe the worse-the-wear for drugs? He couldn't have meant you any actual harm."

"But it was the way he was looking at me, Soph. Like he knew me. I felt like he wanted to kill me."

Sophie sat back and rubbed her husband's shoulders, gently kissing his cheek.

"This guy has really got under your skin," she said, kissing him again. "But whoever he is, he has nothing to do with you. He's just some random idiot on the street."

"But Soph ... I've seen him again. I've seen him a few times."

A coldness ran down her spine like the edge of a dagger's blade. Sophie withdrew her arms from him; as if her caress had been suddenly plunged into icy water.

"You think he's following you?"

"I don't know, love. But I'm scared. There's something familiar about him and it's freaking me out."

"We need to speak to the police, Danny. What does this guy want?"

Danny was agitated, and lashed out at her.

"How the hell do I know?"

He stood up, rubbing his hands over his scalp again. This was his nervous tic, one Sophie knew well. Danny turned, and saw how upset his wife was.

"Sorry, honey, I didn't mean to snap. I should have told you about this before now. I think I'm losing it."

"It's okay Danny ... it'll be okay." Sophie took his hand, encouraging him to sit.

"Take me through this so we can tell the police. Tell me the times you've seen this guy."

"The first time was under the railway arch. But a couple of days after that ... do you remember I had that retirement lunch for Amy?"

"At the Spanish Steakhouse," Sophie said, confirming. "You said you loved the padron peppers."

"Aye ... well when we were all heading back to the office, I saw him then. He was standing at a set of lights on George Street. He was wearing a camouflage hoodie. The hood was up, but he was there, plain as day. When saw me and pulled his hood down. We made eye contact and his face contorted. The burns on his face seemed to flare. He was really growling at me."

The Burned Man by JS Aspley

"Did he confront you?"

"No, nothing like that. But I know he was real, Soph. After we passed by Amy asked me about him. 'Did you see that guy with the burns,' she said. 'I wonder what happened to him'. She said something like that, I think. Big Alec saw him as well."

Sophie felt like she could be sick. Whoever this man was, following her husband, he was real. She felt threatened, and vulnerable.

"We need to call the police now," she said, trembling. "You should have told me about this guy sooner."

Danny saw that his wife was shaking.

"I didn't want to frighten you," he said, taking her hand. Sophie clocked a flash in his eyes. It was a look she knew well - he was holding back. There was something more to this.

"You've not told me the whole story," she said, withdrawing.

"Last night, when you found me at the window ..."

"What about it?"

He whined, rubbing his scalp. *That nervous tic again.*

"What about it Danny? What about last night?" she asked, agitated.

"He was there," he said, meekly.

"Outside our house? Outside *my* house, Daniel? Who is this guy? We need to get the police right now."

She reached for her mobile, but he stopped her.

"You need to hear it all, first. Then we'll call them, I promise."

She looked at her husband, mortified, unsafe. Sophie had never felt anything like this before. At least, not with Danny.

"I couldn't sleep all night, but when I did, I had an awful nightmare. I had to get up and clear my head. I was standing at the window stretching my back, and I saw him. He was across the road, standing right under that streetlight."

He was pointing at a place just yards from their front door.

"Jesus, Danny, what does he want?" Sophie stuttered, her eyes tearing with fear.

"He was wearing that same camouflage hoodie. He pulled the hood down so I could see his face. He looked at me and he knew me. I mean, he really *knew* me. That look was purposeful. He wanted me to see his whole face. He wanted me to see his scars."

The Burned Man by JS Aspley

"Danny, I'm really scared. Can we lock the doors?"

Sophie did not wait for his answer. She stood up and disappeared to check the front door was locked. It was. She unlocked it and locked it again. Just to be sure, she unlocked it and locked it one more time.

When she came back into the front room, she found her husband standing at the window, hands in pockets.

"Do you remember me telling you about the Tivoli bonfire? The old bingo hall?"

Sophie thought for a moment. Danny had shared little from his childhood with her; this was one of the few stories she knew. "Yes, of course I do," she said, confused.

Danny had pulled a wee boy out of a bonfire when he was a young lad himself. He palled around with two brothers who stayed next door. One of them had stumbled when leaning in to retrieve something from the fire. Danny had thrust his hand out to grab the boys t-shirt, but missed. The boy fell in the centre of the bonfire. Danny and the brother got him out, but the boy had been horribly burned.

"That was my nightmare," he said, absently.

"I mean ... that was the nightmare I had last night. About the bonfire at the back of the Tivoli bingo. Me and my two pals throwing things in the fire, seeing what would burn quickest. It was me and ... Chris and Gary McCletchie."

It had been an awful experience. Danny had nightmares about it, even now. She looked at her husband. His face was like an ill-fitting paper mask; his eyes like dark wells of arctic water. He looked away from her, facing out of the window.

"It's Chris McCletchie. That's the burned man. He's the wee boy who fell in the fire. I know it's him."

"Oh my God, Daniel, how can you be sure?"

There was a pause.

"Because I'm looking at him now."

Sophie's stomach dropped somewhere deep in her bowels. She peered across the street in abject fear.

There, the burned man stood.

He loomed like a gargoyle, and his scarlet face was full of hate.

He stepped towards the house. Though horribly scarred, he was clearly strong and fit.

"Call the police Danny! Call the police!" Sophie screamed.

She grabbed his arms, ducking behind him for safety. Danny fumbled with his phone. They both watched, rooted, as the burned man approached, each step bringing him closer to their home.

The Burned Man by JS Aspley

In moments, he was on their lawn.

Sophie screamed.

The burned man paused briefly to look at her through the window, and as he stood on their fake grass, he raised his arm to point at Danny. His crimson finger was an arrow of blame.

"You did this, Danny boy!" the burned man cried.

Sophie was crying, bubbling with fear. Daniel was shouting their address down his phone.

"I'm on to the police!" he blurted, raising his phone to show the burned man; as if it were a silver shield.

The burned man smiled; a malevolent grimace, and slowly lowered his arm. If he had heard Danny, he did not care.

"You did this to me, Danny!" the burned man raged. He drew his hand up to pull his hood down. Sophie recoiled at the man's scarring. He ripped the full hoodie off his naked torso and threw it down like a gauntlet, revealing further terrible burns.

He strode to front door and turned the handle.

Danny and Sophie heard the door latch click open. Danny looked at his wife in terror. "Didn't you just lock the door?" he fretted.

"I did, I did," she cried.

But the door opened.

"Oh Jesus," she stuttered, quickly thinking of her efforts. She had locked, unlocked, locked ... and then unlocked. *In her panic she had left the door unlocked.*

The burned man burst into the front room, confronting them. He slapped Sophie to the floor and grabbed Daniel by the throat.

"Look at what you did to me, Danny!" he growled.

"He saved you! Danny saved you! It wasn't his fault," Sophie cried, grabbing at his arm. The burned man snarled, slapping her down again with the back of his hand.

"Is that what you told your wee wife Danny boy? That you saved me? That you SAVED MY LIFE?"

Daniel was in the clutch of paroxysms of terror. The ghoul before him had been a little boy called Christopher McClethie, with whom he had played as a child. But the burned boy had become a burned man, and the man had become a demon, with the strength of vengeance in his red hands. He closed his eyes to the horror before him, and the horror of memory.

"Tell her the truth, Danny," the burned man urged, his voice like crackling coals on a grate.

The Burned Man by JS Aspley

Daniel tried to escape the fevered grip of the burned man. Sophie got to her feet and grabbed at his arms, her fingernails drawing blood from his scarred flesh. Neither could move him; he was a colossus.

"Tell her what really happened Danny!" he spat.

Danny moaned and opened his eyes. He saw past the wretched, angry face of the burned man to the confused face of his beaten wife. The look she gave him, acceding to his guilt, was a thousand times worse.

"I did it! It was me!" Danny screamed.

The burned man let go his grip around Danny's neck, and he fell to the floor. Sophie got free and scrambled on the carpet to her husband's side.

"Danny, what do you mean, what did you do?" she pleaded.

Danny looked at his beautiful wife and took her head in his arms.

"I'm so sorry," he splurged.

Towering above both of them, the burned man stood with clenched fists, a hate-filled golem.

"Tell her!" he sneered.

"We were just kids, playing, throwing things in the bonfire. It was an accident," Danny mewled.

But the burned man scoffed. "An accident? Bullshit, Danny boy. You tell her the truth now, or she's dead."

"Danny, what does he mean?" Sophie pleaded, her world asunder.

"I ... I grabbed wee Chris. I grabbed ... *him*," he said, pointing to their tormentor.

"We were at the bonfire. It was supposed to be a joke ... a joke! You know, like the ones we used to play on each other as kids."

His wife's face rippled with fear and confusion. He tried to explain.

"I shouted '*saved your life*' and grabbed him. You know, to give him a fright. Make him think I was pushing him into the fire. Only ... I stumbled when I grabbed him ..."

Then the burning man spoke. His voice smoldered with ashen fury.

"And you pushed me in, you bastard. I was just a boy with my whole life ahead of me. And you pushed me in a bonfire ... for a joke. Are you laughing now, Danny boy? Are you?"

"No... no! I'm so sorry ... Chris, please forgive me," Danny pleaded.

The burned man scoffed.

The Burned Man by JS Aspley

The burned man leaned down and struck him with the back of his red hand, as his scarred upper lip curled in enmity.

The sting of that strike shook Daniel. Images flashed before his eyes. Awful images, of that terrible day, of a little boy screaming. A little boy whose flesh dripped from his face.

As Danny's mind was an awful world away, the burned man grabbed Sophie and dragged her, screaming, to the front door. He tossed her onto the lawn like a bag of rags, and retrieved his hoodie. He re-entered the house, locking the door behind him with a single, assured twist.

Scrambling, Sophie got up from the grass to thrust herself at the window. Her husband lay below the burned man, cowering.

The burned man fished inside his hoodie, producing a small plastic bottle. He squeezed the contents over himself, and over her husband. The burned man paused, leering at her through the glass. Where his eyes had been, she now saw two dark pits of hell. He produced a lighter.

She ran to the door, fumbling at the lock, crying, screaming. She ran back to the window. The burned man held his gaze of her, and flicked the lighter into flame. Sophie screamed as he let it drop. Both men whooshed alight. Danny screamed, grabbing, kicking. The burned man batted his efforts away. Slowly, he sat on top of him and held him down, and they burned together.

Sophie howled, running to and fro for help. No neighbour came to their window. No neighbour came to their door. She was alone.

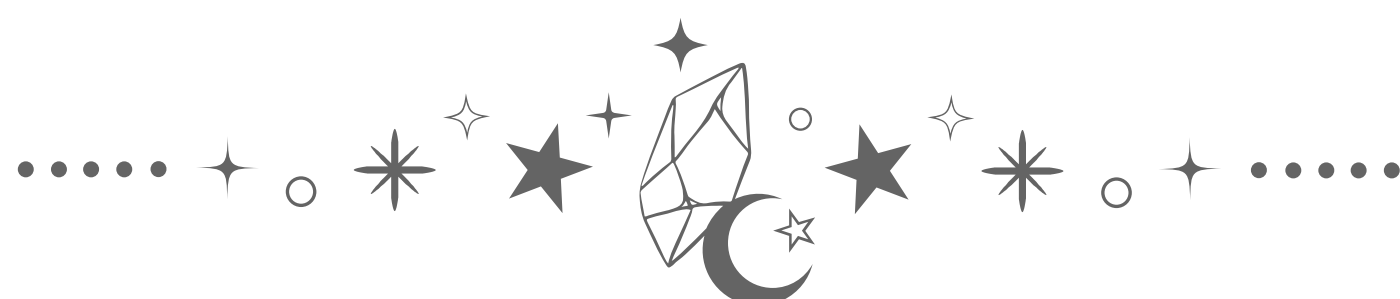
She ran back to the window, gibbering, her mind fractured with horror. The two men were ablaze. Danny was motionless, his blackened body lying crippled and prostrate. She could not see his face, for he had none.

The burned man was atop him, tearing at what was left of her husband; a writhing, living *portmanteau* of flame and flesh.

"We burn together, Danny boy," he croaked.

And then, the fire took him.

It took them all.



Children and Their Bones by Alex Blake

“If my boy came home with bones, I’d give him a clip on the ear, march him right back to the churchyard, and make him put them back. God. What is happening to our children?”

Mrs. Daniels is nodding in-between sips of tea, listening. I notice my hands are shaking as I look down at them. Frank and Tony are shouting from the garden. *I’m going to get you. I’m going to get you.* Playing.

I continue, “I heard that sweet little Martha’s mother found a femur under the bed. A femur, for goodness sake. She took it to the police and my boy Frank hasn’t seen the girl since. Good thing too. She shouldn’t be let out until she’s under control. The whole town has gone mad. I swear it.”

Mrs. Daniels puts her hand on mine, her nail polish smooth and her rings sparkly. “Have you heard anything from young Frank? What does he say?”

“He doesn’t talk about it. He says he doesn’t know anything.”

“You don’t believe him.”

“He’s a good boy. Tony too, I’m sure. But I think they must talk about it. At school. I’ve been in to see the headmaster three times already.”

“I’ve been twice myself.”

The front door opens and shuts in the hallway.

“What did we do to deserve this, Sarah?” I say, “I was never like this as a child, nor my brothers. We didn’t go loitering in graveyards. God knows what.”

Bernard enters, “Evening, ladies.”

“Oh Bernard,” Mrs. Daniels says, “Good to see you.”

He gives me a short kiss on the temple, and puts the kettle on. Two small faces arrive pressed at the kitchen window. Dark eyes with no detail in the frosted glass. Bernard waves once at the children.

“You’ve surely heard about all this bone business, Bernard?”

He looks up from the box of teabags, “No. To be honest, Lisa and I haven’t had much time together recently. Busy week at the office.”

Mrs Daniels is looking at me.

“Henry has been saying the same. He’s out tonight too, so it’ll just be me and Tony.” Mrs Daniels is looking at the faces in the window. They quickly snap away. *I’m going to get you. I’m going to kill you.*

I look to my husband, “Sarah and I are thinking of organising a parent’s group - to address all this unpleasantness.”

Bernard is sipping hot tea by the counter. He comes to sit down at the table. “Is that really necessary? You’re not making this one of *those things* are you? Where you get all worked up.”

I put my hand on his. “No. There’s been more. Emily, you know, George and Danielle’s daughter. The one with the ringlets. She’s brought it on their family too. She came home with more of them, freshly dug. She had dirt all under her fingernails. They said she was making no sense. Then it all started.”

Mrs. Daniels speaks next. “One of the families from Albert Street. They’ve heard voices. Knocking at all hours. All after they found ribs in their cupboards. Their little boy talks about beheadings and socialism.”

He’s sitting back in his chair now. “I just don’t think it’s good for a young boy to be kept shut in like this. Frank needs to be out there, playing. That’s how it *should* be. Tony too. I’m sure Henry would agree.”

Mrs. Daniels is shaking a little. She’s quiet for a moment, then says, “Henry actually - he’s heard some things himself.”

“Go on,” I say. I hear the boys come in through the back door. *Let me show you. In my room. In my room.* My eyes try to catch them as they dart past. *You’re dead. You’re dead.*

“Don’t run, boys,” I call after them.

“He was speaking to Father Joseph just yesterday,” Sarah says, “ They’ve put tape all around the area. The roots can’t be removed without excavating that whole part of the graveyard. They’re worried about disturbing those poor souls further.”

“Disturbing them further?” Bernard is chuckling, “It’s all getting excavated anyway. Those roots are pushing half the graveyard up. We need to just let it settle, and then clean up and re-open when it’s good and proper to do so.”

Children and Their Bones by Alex Blake

“Quiet, dear,” I say, gesturing at the ceiling. His face tightens.

“And the children?” Mrs. Daniels asks.

“We’ll tell them to stay away, obviously,” he replies, “But we can’t keep them inside all the time, now can we?”

I keep my voice hushed, “They’re talking. The children. I know they are. At school. Danielle said Emily went in a group. They went after school.”

Mrs. Daniels shivers, “I won’t have Tony doing it.”

“Danielle said Emily is different now. Not the same. She keeps her at home.”

She’s clutching her bracelet, “I’ve been walking him to and from school each day. I’m not having it in my house.”

Tony appears in the room. Now Frank is at my side. “What are you talking about?” he asks.

“Nothing, sweetheart,” I say.

He’s holding something behind his back. Tony is grinning.

Frank says, “Mummy, I’ve got something to show you.”

I look at where his hands are placed. The object is long. He’s gripping with both hands.

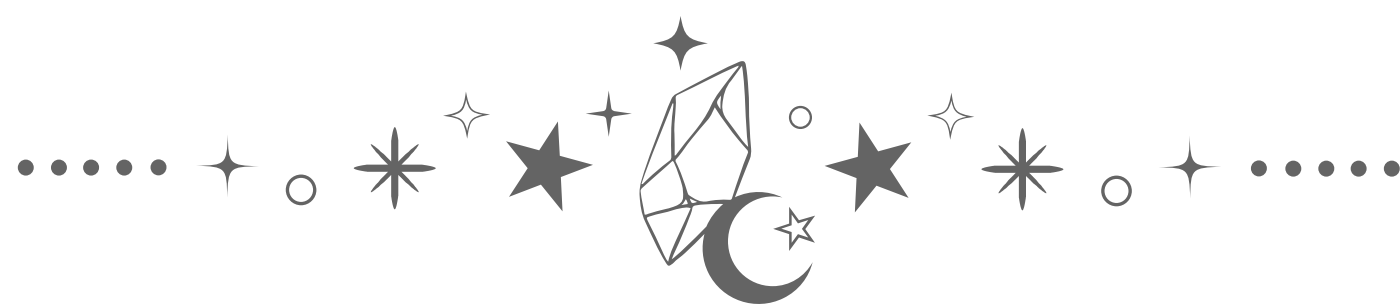
Bernard starts, “Darling-”

I grab at his little arms, my teeth grinding. He cries and drops the stick.

“Mummy,” he wails, as he stumbles back into Bernard’s chair. His wrists are all red where my nails dug in.

“It’s a stick that looks like a sword,” Tony says.

The stick is on the floor. It’s a stick that looks like a sword.



The Snakeskin by E.G. Skaar

“Not now, Petey,” his mother hissed, one hand covering the receiving end of the phone.

Without regarding the effects of her attempted pacification, she removed her hand and carried on with her conversation.

Petey stayed where he was. He wasn’t going to put up with her neglect, not this time. These matters were too pressing, too time-sensitive to be ignored. He waited for another pause in the conversation and then tried again.

He interjected, louder this time. “Mom!”

“Hold on a minute, Cheryl,” his mother said. She covered the receiver again and shot him a scornful look. “What is it, Petey? Can’t you see I’m on the phone?”

“I’m sorry, Mom.” He fidgeted with his fingertips. “I need help with my homework. And I’m hungry. When are we having dinner?”

“We’ll have dinner when we have dinner, Petey. Can’t you see I’m busy?”

“But it’s getting late. And I have to turn in these math questions tomorrow.”

She regarded him in the way that one regards a buzzing fly. “Figure them out yourself. You’re a smart boy.”

“Please, Mom. I need you. When are you going to be off the phone?”

“When I’m off,” she snapped, seeming more irritated by the second. “Why don’t you go outside for a bit. I’m sure you’ll lose track of time once you’re out there. You always do.”

“But Mom—”

“For the last time, Petey, I am on the phone! Run along now before I ground you from your wizard books.”

Reluctantly, Petey turned and left through the back door. From behind him, he heard his mother carrying on: “I’m so sorry, Cheryl. What were you saying?”

From the back yard, he made his way past the wood line and into a grove that opened up near their house.

On his way there, he discovered a snakeskin among the pine needles and fallen leaves. It was all dried up, a coiled mass of gray-green scales, and at first sight, he thought for a moment that it was a living snake. Relief came with the revelation, and instead he was left to marvel at it. He wondered how they could slink out of themselves so seamlessly. Did it hurt them, or did it offer some relief to be free of their old, tiring flesh? Were they ripped from themselves without a choice, or did they go willingly to grow and thrive without the boundaries of their former lives?

He left the snakeskin where it was.

Once he made it to his grove, he picked up his favorite stick-wand and began casting spells. There was a beetle skittering up the bark of an old elm; he turned it into a newt. There was a falling leaf floating down from the canopy overhead, and in midair, he turned it into a fluttering moth.

In that moment, he was no longer Petey. He was Henry Porter, the boy wizard from his books, whisked away from his evil family to be enrolled in a school for wizards, where each day was a new and magical adventure.

In his grove, he waved his stick-wand and whirled, reciting ancient magical spells in his most commanding voice. “Abracadabra! Alakazam!”

He shot magical beams from his wooden instrument and the trees became giants.

“*Abra...*”

The sticks at his feet became serpents, writhing and hissing along the forest floor.

“*... cadabra...*”

He swung his wand-wielding arm and twirled his body in a circle.

“*... Alaka—*”

He thudded against something solid standing among the trees, something that wasn’t there before. It wasn’t long before he realized that that *something* was, in actuality, *someone*.

The Snakeskin by E.G. Skaar

It was a man, hooded and robed, draped in cloth of midnight blue patterned with yellow stars. His face was mostly obscured by his hood, but Petey could see a haggard white beard dangling from its recesses and a toothless mouth within.

“You show great promise, boy,” the robed man said. “I believe you are destined for greatness.”

Petey backed away from him, refusing to take his eyes away even for a moment. “Who are you?”

The man’s voice was somehow both kindly and a booming death rattle that echoed through the trees. “You can’t tell?” He laughed. “Why, I’m a wizard. And so are you!”

“No,” Petey said, retreating into himself. “I’m not. I was only pretending... playing make- believe.”

“Ahh,” the man said, “but there was intent behind it. They won’t tell you this in the real world, but we all have magic within us. It exists in our will and our intent. The only thing holding it back is the flesh, our organic prisons, tethering us down to the tangible and the real. It is the mooring of our souls, those of which would otherwise sail into seas of boundless power and ethereal wonder. I can teach you this power: the unlocking of the imprisoned will. Come with me and I will teach you.”

Petey wasn’t sure how to answer this, so he fell back on the most instinctual response, one that had been drilled into his mind throughout all his youth.

“My mom says I’m not supposed to go off with strangers.”

“And what about her? Does she not treat you like a stranger? When was the last time she spoke to you in a meaningful way? When was the last time she bathed you in her maternal affection? She is a stranger by choice; I am one by circumstance. Either can be rectified, so allow me to put forth a first attempt. I am Elbonus, Wizard of the Wandering Bones. And you are?”

“Petey.”

Elbonus laughed. “Alas! We are no longer strangers. Now, will you come with me? I have much to teach you.”

Petey thought back on Henry Porter and his magical adventures. If one child can find respite from a life of torment and neglect, who’s to say he couldn’t?

“Are you going to take me to a wizard school?” Petey asked.

“In a fashion. For what is a school if not a vehicle for transcendence? If you come with me, I will help you transcend the bounds of your mortal flesh.”

“I’ll go,” Petey said. “But first, prove to me that you are a wizard. Show me a spell.”

Elbonus grinned a toothless grin, then reached into his star-patterned robe to produce a wand—a true wand, not like the stick imitation that Petey held.

The wizard raised his wand over his head and widened his stance. In a booming voice, he muttered an incantation...

“Abracadabra! Alakazam!”

... and the sky darkened. It was as if a great eclipse had washed over the world at once, unexpected and radiant in its design. Petey looked up through the canopy of leaves and observed as the clouds were torn asunder. And then, in a blinding flash, a red bolt of lightning tore through the firmament and struck the ground between them.

The thunder that ensued was a soul-quaking report, a sound that could only be compared to the dying of gods. When it was over, Elbonus lowered his wand and the sky cleared. The day brightened.

To say Petey was satisfied with the demonstration would be an understatement; he was enthralled by it. Without further discussion, he acquiesced and went off into the woods with the wizard.

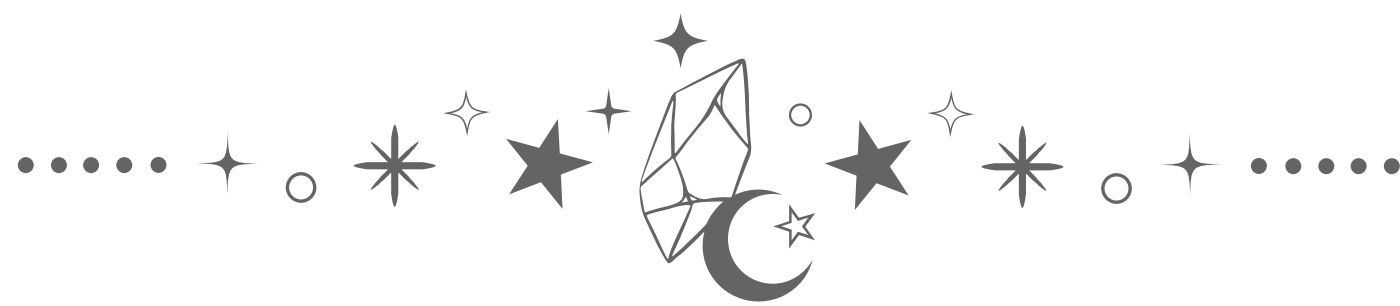
When Petey didn’t come home that night, his mother reported him missing to the police. There were search parties carried out by the community, but an official missing persons report wasn’t filed until two days later. During the investigation, many locals reported that on the day he went missing, an unexpected eclipse darkened the sky, and a singular red bolt of lightning tore through the clouds with no storm to herald it.

The Snakeskin by E.G. Skaar

On the third day, Petey's skin was found draped over the branch of an old elm tree. The discovery confounded the local authorities. There were no signs that it was flayed off: no incisions, no stitches, not even so much as a scratch. It was entirely unbroken, but devoid of the bones, blood and internal organs that could be expected beneath.

They never found the rest of him—those innards that were so impossibly separated from the skin that bound them—and they never would.

Petey's mother sank into a deep depression, a withering guilt that would haunt what was left of her days. She never picked up her phone again, no matter who was calling, and she even disconnected her landline after a time. But Petey was gone from her now, never again to suffer another bout of her cold neglect. He was in a place where no one could ever find him. Much like a snake after shedding its skin, he had become transcended, free from the bounds of his mortal flesh.



Turner's Mill by Will Pharis

Understand, we had to pitch a winter camp that night, but this time luck had provided us with a couple of boys who could lay a good fire. Still, everyone was dogged. The fight with the yanks that afternoon—the whole affair—had been the last punch. So, that evening when the boys got our fire going and we had turned up the collars of our greatcoats, pulled down our caps—had passed around a bottle or two that the sergeant himself provided—we were ready to trade stories.

Rusty, who had been with the 28th Virginia in Gettysburg, was describing his third day of that battle. “Seminary Ridge,” he says, “We watched blues up on Emmitsburg, along the high road.” He took a slug from one of the passing bottles. “And an hour later we’re running full hell at ‘em in the charge—making that scream, you know.” (Here, a few of the boys laughed and gave out the cheer.) “That’s it,” said Rusty. “And you could see they was scared, every one of ‘em. Folks watching in the crowd, too. Scared by that sound because it’s . . . well, it’s *crazy*. Like insane birds. Ain’t the guns, it’s the sound of something where it don’t belong.”

“Scared? Scared by a sound? That ain’t nothing,” said a man from behind us.

It was Jesse. He was sitting on a log a few yards beyond the fire, rag-cleaning his Springfield. Jesse always held himself back from the rest of us. He was a hard case, a crack mechanic but none too good at this soldiering. Jesse didn’t care.

“No,” continued Jesse, “That ain’t half the scare I got last summer. And it weren’t in no battle.”

“Well, Jesse, so you finally gonna talk?” That was from one of the men around the fire. “Hell, what’s in this stuff, Sarge?”

We could tell indeed that Jesse had reached that pleasant state of existence, the moment when the whiskey melts into where it’s needed, and the tongue gets loose. And since Jesse hardly ever spoke, this made the moment something of a novelty for us all.

Jesse motioned for the sergeant’s bottle. He took another pull, then wiped his mouth and mustache long enough to choose his words.

And then Jesse told us this story.

Battle of Turner’s Mill. Down in Dan River country, along the Roanoke, where I used to fish with my daddy. It weren’t no big time like your Gettysburg, and it sure weren’t cold like tonight. No, it was *hot*, and it was raining like hell and had been since daylight. Worse, I swear most of the boys ain’t eat since morning. Not me, of course. I always make sure to have something, and it ain’t for sharin’, my food. But with all that rain, everything stunk like wet wool and sweat, and the chiggers was chewing us for leather. Ain’t nobody making a campfire on a night like that. After a while, I says to myself: *Jesse, this ain’t what we come in for. Shooting guns is one thing, but drowning in the mud is another game, and I ain’t playing.*

I told my buddy that. My buddy, you know, he’s laughing. But I ain’t laughing, that’s the thing about it. So, as soon as they was mostly all asleep, I just got up and went.

(“No, you did not,” said one of the boys. “You *left*?”)

Lit out. Ain’t but just for the night, you know, cause we got to fight in the morning. I ain’t ever quittin’ on a fight, don’t worry. Here, take this bottle, I’m near emptying it.

(“Pass it this way,” said a man.)

Well, the only reason I went, see, was since I already knowed all them woods from ever since I was a boy. Me and my brother, we growed up hunting quail along the river. I knowed where the greenbriar grows close. I remember the best paths through the pawpaws leading down to the river. Not to mention where the muscadine gets so thick, it’ll catch your foot and break it. I had a cousin do that and shot his own damn boot.

Anyways, that’s when I recollected about the Turner house, down the road and through the heaviest of them trees, just short of the river. I figured that the house might be there still even after all this time; that is, unless flooding had taken it away back in that big storm of ‘40 when everything else got washed out. So, I set out toward the Turner place, remembering to make clear of a particular stand of canebrake close to the bottom of the valley that goes to the house.

Turner's Mill by Will Pharis

The rain kept pounding. Every step, I smelled pine needles and the wet leaves of sweetgum and sycamore. I kept pushing ahead through the thickets and trees and found the house without getting turned around but maybe once. But that house . . . oh, my Jesus. It was sad. Little brick house, hand-built, so they said. Built for Mrs. Turner while her husband was off somewheres, maybe with the 14th Virginia. Mrs. Turner was a short woman, my mother said; and Turners like her husband, was always tall, that's what I heard from an aunt.

And now their house was ruined. The windows—empty. Smashed in, and some of the walls, too. One porch pillar collapsed, which hung the whole porch roof at a wedge. The front door was totally gone and the doorframe was leaning crooked. As I pushed toward the house through the brushwood and thickets, the wet leaves and old-lumber rot got to mixing together in my head, and damned if it didn't smell like defeat. It sure did.

But I says to myself, *Boy, you're smelling skunk cabbage. And besides, a wet cat ain't picky.*

So, I come up onto the porch real slow, looking for the rotted boards. I had to crank my neck when I got to the doorframe to swing inside.

It took a spell before I was able to see around me in the darkness.

The plaster was dark with mould, fat and soft-looking. I moved a few more steps into the room. To my left was a fireplace with a bread oven falling in on itself. On the other side, a wall with a missing chunk and a hole for a window. At the far end of the room, a short stairway run up three steps and turned the corner. I looked up. The ceiling plaster was spider cracked; a floorboard was missing along one side, through which the rain spattered down and collected near the fireplace.

I dropped my kit.

Jesse, I says, *this is a goddamn palace.*

So, I spread my roll in the middle of the room where it was driest, and it's then when I come to reckon that I'd left my rations back at camp cause I'm a fool. All of them. I'd already eat something in the afternoon, but it weren't enough to keep me going.

So, I'm thinking, oh hell. Go back and eat and face the nation or stay here and be dry?

And while I'm sitting there on my blanket roll deciding my ways, the stairway suddenly—*flickers*—it weren't there, and then it was. Then gone and then back.

And I says to myself, *That's hunger talkin' there.*

Just then this rumble of thunder passed overhead, like to take the roof off. I felt the floorboards shake. And then another pass of thunder, this one followed by the clap-sizzle sound of a lightning strike. I weren't going back into that, I guarantee you, certainly not by the path I took to get there. And staying put seemed to be the right decision, because right then I found a handful of string jerky at the bottom of my kit. Feast enough for me.

By then, I could see good enough. The thunder passed. All was good again. I laid down on my blanket, but I ain't ever fall asleep on the first go. Still, I was happy to be there with my jerky and a roof keeping out the rain.

I was actually almost nodding off when I suddenly hear something come through the ceiling. I ain't sure what, but a sound. Moving. Then it stops.

Possum, I'm thinking. Hope it ain't a goddamn skunk.

And then I'm making out creaking, like someone getting up from a bedframe.

Now, honest to God, that stopped me.

And just about then, the rain begin tapering off fast, like it's getting shut off at a spigot. So fast it seemed ain't natural. And there I am, not moving; listening for another creak while I hear the rain ending.

And it's silent. Only dripping.

Jesus. Cause I'm now making out a new sound. And it's growing louder.

A man crying.

Crying and crying.

I sit up.

Turner's Mill by Will Pharis

Footsteps across the floor.

A-bump. A-bump. A bump.

(Here, one of the men around the fire tittered nervously. Every eye was on Jesse, and his eyes were wandering somewhere else.)

Tell you the truth, I was fixing to cry myself, and I ain't ashamed to say it. And I would a did, but just as suddenly everything stopped upstairs. The footsteps, the crying: silence.

Silence that continued for quite a spell, long enough that I could start thinking right.

Upstairs, I told myself for certain, was one or two varmints dragging something across the floor. Probably the carcass of another varmint. And the crying man? Well, that took a bit longer, but I come to remember that a blown-in roof makes that exact sound when the jib of the wind cuts right. My daddy woulda solved that right away.

And since I was feeling all ashamed, I knowed that now I *got* to go upstairs and confront them critters. Cause as a rule, I don't share my camp with animals.

So, I made my way real careful across the room to the foot of the steps, since you ain't never know when a floorboard is missing. That first stair tread sunk almost clear through under my boot. I held to the wall so's to steady myself. That bad step was good enough proof for me that ain't nobody been up them stairs in ages.

On the second step, I begin to smell something. Sweat. Cotton. Wet. But strong, if you understand; old stink like forever. While I'm trying to figure on this smell, the walls on the landing begin to flicker. First all there, then gone; gone and there again, like the way heat sheens across water. Somewhere about then, I do believe I stopped breathing. I braced against the wall.

And I found myself taking that last step onto the landing. I turned to look through the darkness.

What was I scared of? Scared that it was true?

It was all true.

There was a man. On a bed at the far end of the room. Tall. And stretched across him, a short little woman, her face turned away. The man had wrapped her in his grey officer's coat. His cap lay on the floor.

She's dead, that woman. She's dead.

As I stood there on the landing, the soldier struggled to get to his feet while cradling the woman in his arms. Her face was cushioned into his coat, but the soldier's own face said everything. Like a man ain't slept for a year. I seen now that his grey coat was stained with dark patches. Holding the woman, the soldier swayed for a moment. Then he walked toward me, as if to pass off his heavy bundle.

A-bump. A-bump. A bump.

Crying and crying.

Near on top of me there at the landing.

And as the soldier takes one more step, the woman's head gets jarred loose: her face lolls round toward me. Putrefied. Smiling. Hilarious. Empty.

Which is right when my arm begins vibrating under my shirt.

Oh, Jesus God.

I hear screaming.

The soldier and the smiling woman flicker. There they are before me. And gone. And back again. But gone.

That screaming is *my own*.

My arm keeps shaking, it keeps shaking.

Jesse said, "They found me next morning at the bottom of the stairs. I couldn't talk for two days."

"You coulda died," said one of the men around the fire.

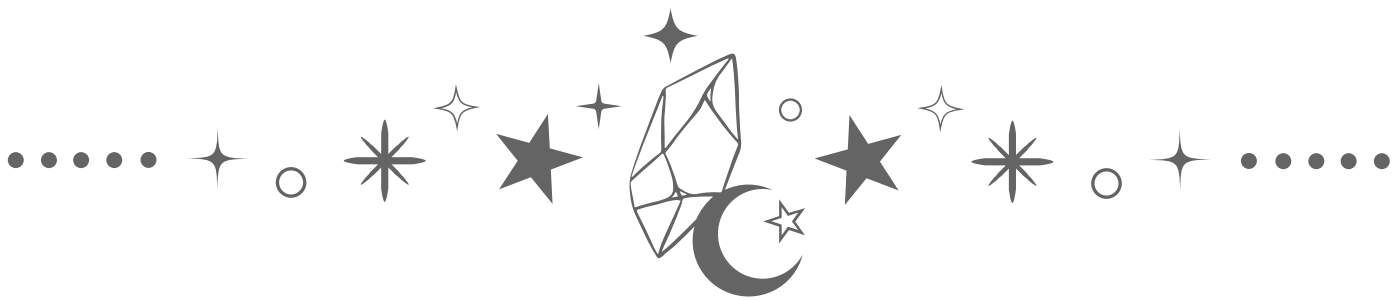
"Low sugar," said Jesse. He squinted his eyes as if to reprimand himself. "I got stupid."

Our campfire stories ended soon after that. But Jesse's story stayed with us.

Turner’s Mill by Will Pharis

But Jesse’s story stayed with us. We faced the yanks one last time the next day, but without spirit. When we struck camp that afternoon, I watched Jesse put his glucose monitor into his kit alongside a prescription bottle.

RECOLLECTED BY: Sergeant Peter Elliot, 24th Virginia
July 11, 2025
Brotherhood of American Civil War Reenactors



Deadman's Hole by Ashley Mangtani

The sign on the fence tells you what the alcove was for. Bodies came out of the Thames here in numbers, so the Victorians tiled the walls white, put a drain in the floor, and the men hosed the place down between arrivals.

Under the tiles the steps go down in an L, curve round, and enter the water. Overhead, the underside of the bridge is blue girders, pigeon mess, and a hundred and thirty years of paint.

In the day, visitors come along from the Tower, stop at the mesh, read the sign, photograph the white tiles, the green steps and the black water, and then go up to the road and over to the far side, where the Queen's Walk has the gelato cart and the man doing the giant bubbles and HMS Belfast lying grey in the tide with her guns trained on a service station on the M1.

For three nights I stood at that fence with my fingers through the mesh and a coat over my arm.

Twenty-two years on the river, and I can stand at Wapping and tell you which step they will come up on.

The flood sets hard past the north pier and turns in on itself below the bridge. Whatever is loose in that reach comes into the turn and stops there.

The turn has given me scaffold boards, fenders, and four people. Lightermen worked the turn before the bridge stood, the men who built the bridge put a mortuary into the stonework, and the tide has kept to it since.

The Authority pays me to keep the channel clear, and the moorings sound. Bodies belong to the Marine Policing Unit, half a mile east along the Wapping shore. Four times I have held the boat off and let them come down and bring one up, and then gone back to my own list.

The bag in my hand. The phone in the other. The gate at the dock steps, which stands open in the day for the boats.

The water hardly broke. Not a splash.

A closing.

The first night gave me a navy sleeve turning in the eddy. I had the pole off the brackets, and the hook under it before the weed came up in place of an arm. The second night gave me a fender off a Dutch barge, blue, child-sized, turning over and over and going nowhere.

They had the launches out from first light and the divers in the reach by nine, and on Wednesday, a woman at the station door, with her hands behind her back, explained that the search would run in daylight hours.

She used the word resources. She used the word realistic. She did not once say the north pier, which is the only place where the river gives anything back.

The third night, the turn held something pale and low in the water.

The shoulders sat wide. Hair lifted pale off the head of it and sank dark again against the lamps. Too big. Both the other nights had started here, at exactly this. My fingers let go of the wire and hooked into it again.

Then it came round once more. The shoulders were not shoulders. They were the swell of a hood full of river, and the pale was a sole, bare, and I had held that foot still in a shop in September while a girl slid the gauge up against the toes.

The mesh reaches shoulder height, and its top is smooth. I went over with the coat in my teeth.

The steps under the tiles are worn round at the edges. The last four are green, and there is nothing to hold. The pole lives on brackets in the alcove wall, six feet of ash and a hook of iron the width of my hand.

Somebody keeps it there. Somebody has always kept it there.

The water under the bridge at night runs black and quick and carries the lamps away in long yellow ropes, like a road after rain.

Deadman's Hole by Ashley Mangtani

I set the hook against the shoulder of the coat and brought him in against the set of the tide, hand over hand, the way I have brought in a hundred things that were not him.

Nothing to it in the water. Everything to it at the step.

The river had been at him. I put my palm over his face and turned it away from the lamps and held it there while the machinery started up in the tower for a lift.

The bells went, and the road opened for a boat that had somewhere to be.

I brought him up onto the third step and knelt in the green, and the wet came through my trousers and up my shins, and the tiles took the light and gave it back.

"I had both hands full," I said, to nobody, again.

I shook the coat out. Navy, the fur round the hood gone stiff from all the washes. One arm in and then the other, the sleeves down over the wrists, and I did the buttons from the bottom because that is the order they go in.

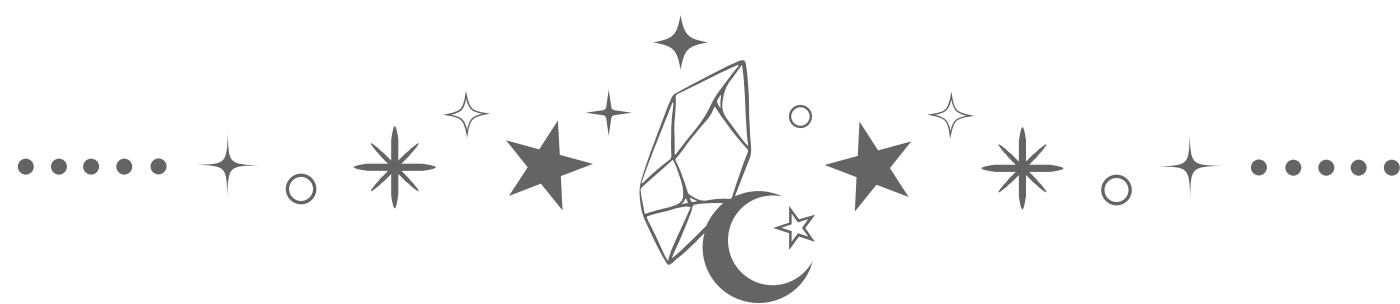
"Arms in," I said, the way I say it at the door on a school morning.

The coat fit. I had bought it a size up in October so it would see him through the winter, and here was the winter, and it fit him the way I meant it to.

Relief went through me and out of me, and I sat back on the wet step with my hands loose in my lap.

Six years and four months. I put his hood up, the way I do when it turns cold, and then there was nothing else that wanted doing.

Then the blue went across the white tiles, and somebody above the fence called down to me. Across the water the Queen's Walk was all light, slow couples, a dog off the lead.



The Untimely Love Story of Antonin Maravelli

by Sameer Saklani

It was a place of pure white, bright light, one man, and one telephone.

Antonin Maravelli had been a Time Operator for ten years. He had not held any other job in his lifetime. His office was capacious, the ceilings were high, the fluorescent lights shined, and the walls were painted an incorruptible, immortal white.

Each day Antonin sat at his oak desk with erect posture and arms folded. Before him were four items: a pencil, a blank sheet of paper, a black telephone, and an unmounted wall clock. The job was simple: if any person needed the current time in the Eastern Standard Time Zone of the United States, they were free to call. Antonin worked every day from 12 a.m. to 12 p.m. After 12 p.m., he was relieved by a second employee. He had never seen the second employee and was unsure when they arrived. Antonin worked every day of the year besides September 1st, on which he was given time off to visit the grave of his sister. On this day he was unsure of what became of the time from 12 a.m. to 12 p.m.

It was the modern age. The time service was antiquated and could be seamlessly eradicated without any impact on the world. Antonin was unsure why the service still existed, whether any profit was turned, and who paid his salary. But without too much thought, he arrived each day and worked earnestly.

Within a month, Antonin would receive no more than one or two calls. And even these were attributed to misdials, drunks, and those struck with melancholia. Sometimes weeks and months would pass without a call and Antonin would begin to question the validity of the entire operation. He wondered whether he was caught up in some complex scheme, a hallucinatory vision, or a government funded psychological experiment.

There were two doors in the office: one ordinary door from which Antonin entered and a second door straight in his line of sight. This door led to the office of Antonin's boss, Mr. Goodogg. The white of this door transcended the vivacity of all the other white in the room. Antonin had never seen Mr. Goodogg. The only interaction Antonin had with Mr. Goodogg was at the end of each shift when Antonin would knock on the door and inform Mr. Goodogg he was leaving for the day. Mr. Goodogg would never acknowledge Antonin's farewell. Antonin wondered whether Mr. Goodogg could possibly lie behind that door every hour of every day.

One day, Antonin sat at his desk while the night dragged on. Antonin had black hair neatly combed to the side and an unmottled face. He looked down at the blank sheet of paper and pencil which sat atop the desk. There was always an urge to pick up the pencil and mark the paper somehow. He had never used the pencil and paper. Their purpose had never been explained.

The telephone rang. Antonin sprung out of his woolgathering state and answered the call.

"United States East Coast Time Services Office, this is your Time Operator," greeted Antonin.

"Hello, who is this?" said a young woman's voice. A drunken night maybe or a misdial intended for her friend or lover, perhaps.

"I'm not allowed to disclose that information," said Antonin. "Now if you're inebriated, I suggest you go to bed. Remember to rehydrate to avoid a hangover. If this is a misdial, I suggest you check the phone number closely. '5s' tend to look like '6s', and the same with '3s' and '8s.'"

"I'm sorry, but I'm calling to ask what time it is," said the woman.

"The time? Yes, yes, of course," responded Antonin. For a moment he nearly forgot how to perform his job. He looked down at the wall clock on his desk. The time was 3:33 a.m.

"It is 3:33 a.m. here in the Eastern Standard Time Zone of the United States," informed Antonin.

"3:33?" considered the woman. "Interesting, okay, thank you."

"Yes, and," blurted Antonin. He was not sure why.

"Yes?" replied the woman.

"Well..." Antonin searched for words. "My name is Antonin Maravelli."

"My name is Pamela Mornmiss," said Pamela Mornmiss.

"I see..." said Antonin.

The Untimely Love Story of Antonion Maravelli

by Sameer Saklani

“Goodnight,” said Pamela.

“Okay, goodnight, yes_” Antonin spoke as he heard the receiver click. He wanted to say more to the woman. He wanted to know if she would call again. But these thoughts seemed inappropriate. He sat unthinking until his shift ended.

*

The next day, Antonin sat at his desk holding the pencil with the eraser pushing against the blank paper. He moved the eraser about the paper slowly, making ambiguous shapes and lines.

As he scribbled blankly, the telephone rang. Antonin answered before the second ring could sound.

“United States East Coast Time Services Office, this is your Time Operator,” he recited quickly.

“Hello, what time is it?” asked a woman’s voice.

Antonin surveyed the clock and answered, “It is 3:33 a.m. here on the East Coast of the United States.”

“3:33? Okay, thank you, Antonin,” said the woman.

“You’re welcome. Is this Pamela?” asked Antonin, mustering the courage.

“I’m surprised you remembered me, Antonin.”

“I suppose there was something memorable about you.”

“Well, thank you for the time.”

“Can I ask you something, Pamela?” said Antonin. He had no question in mind as he spoke those words.

“Sure,” said Pamela.

Improvising, Antonin asked, “Is everything all right?”

Pamela laughed.

“Of course, why do you ask?”

“You haven’t been drinking?”

“No.”

“You’re not depressed?”

“No.”

“You aren’t...mocking me?”

“Not at all!”

“Well...” said Antonin, baffled.

“Once again, thank you for the time.”

“Of course, I hope to hear from you tomorrow,” said Antonin as he heard the receiver click.

He regret everything he said.

*

Antonin sat fidgeting at his desk. He strummed his fingers across the wood, sneaking intermittent glances at the clock. At 3:33 a.m. the phone rang promptly.

“Pamela?” answered Antonin.

“Antonin!”

“How are you tonight?”

“Great!”

“Well, that’s nice. I think Autumn is near. On my way to work, there’s a cluster of oak trees, and...”

“Antonin?” interrupted Pamela.

“Yes?”

“What time is it?”

“Of course, it’s 3:33 a.m. as usual.”

“What do you mean?”

“Pamela, may I ask you something? Why do you call? In this day and age...Couldn’t your husband-...

The Untimely Love Story of Antonion Maravelli

by Sameer Saklani

-...or partner assist you?”

“I call because I would like to know the time,” responded Pamela.

“But your husband or partner...?”

“I haven’t got one.”

Antonin felt wrong to have interrogated Pamela. The two continued talking that night: about their jobs, their childhood, their interests, their favorite books. By the time the conversation ended, the clock read 6:15 a.m. As he neared the end of his shift, he returned to a more solemn state. At 12 p.m. he rose and walked to the door of Mr. Goodogg. He knocked thrice.

“Mr. Goodogg, it’s 12p.m., I must be going. And a reminder, tomorrow is September 1st, I won’t be in. Good morning and goodnight.”

*

It was a night of thanatopsis. Antonin lay in bed distraught with thought. The moon, the crickets, the cool, the things generally somniferous were disconcerting on this night. Antonin felt uneasy, overheated, his heart accelerated. For twelve years he had visited the grave of his deceased younger sister. He was never conscious of the experience, of himself, of the gravesite, of her frozen state in time. He felt no sadness, he did not weep. He felt no consolation, it was no catharsis. Her death was a fixed truth and no liturgy would change it. Pamela would call and expect Antonin to tell her the time. It would be 3:33 a.m. when Pamela would call. Lying in bed, Antonin imagined her figure and face. He moved about in bed. A lonely soul needing a voice on the other end. He could not fail Pamela. Pamela Mornmiss. Her concerns of time required relief. Antonin slept.

*

On September 1st, Antonin sat at his desk with his hair mussed and face unshaven. He scribbled feverishly on the blank page, pencil lead on paper, leaving marks on the virginal white. The markings were incomprehensible, a depiction of the boiling teakettle within man. Antonin looked at the clock: 3:43 a.m. He looked away and continued drawing. The pencil dug deep into the page, nearly snapping the pointed lead tip. Finally, the phone rang.

“Pamela?” Antonin quickly answered.

But there was no reply. Antonin heard the receiver click.

“Pamela?” he repeated into the dial tone.

Suddenly a voice permeated through the room.

-*Antonin, listen to me*, it said.

It was a powerful, amplified voice which resonated through space. It was a human voice but simultaneously a foreign sound to Antonin. It seemed to be a product of countless voices layered atop each other.

“Mr. Goodogg?” said Antonin, as he searched around the room.

-*I said listen, Antonin, don’t speak. I know what you’ve been doing. I know about your affair. I know of your denigrated work performance. Relations with those we service are strictly forbidden. If you don’t proceed with professionalism, I will redirect her calls to a different Time Operator. Or I may relieve you from your position. Is this understood?*

“Yes,” uttered Antonin.

-*Also, I need your paper under my door before you leave.*

With the final command, the voice was gone. Antonin spent the remainder of his shift sitting in shame, like a criminal captured and displayed before the public. At 12 p.m., he walked to Mr. Goodogg’s door and knocked thrice.

“Mr. Goodogg, it’s 12 p.m. I must be going. Here is the paper you asked for.”

Antonin slid the deranged graffiti below the door.

The Untimely Love Story of Antonion Maravelli

by Sameer Saklani

The following day, there was no pencil or paper at Antonin's desk. He slouched in his chair, pale and sick. The telephone rang.

"United States East Coast Time Services Office, this is your Time Operator."

"Antonin!" cried Pamela Mornmiss.

"What do you want?" said Antonin coldly.

"What do you mean?" answered Pamela, perplexed. "I want to know what time it is. I want to talk to you."

"It's 3:33 a.m. What time do you think it is? It's 3:33 a.m. It's always 3:33 a.m."

"Why are you speaking to me like this?"

"My sister died, Pamela."

"What do you mean? When? Yesterday?"

"Every day. She dies every day. Everything is a perpetuation of yesterday. There is only one day, it repeats itself forward. Every day she dies and why didn't you call?"

"Antonin, I'm sorry...I didn't know I was supposed to."

"You were supposed to. You didn't."

"Well, okay. Now I know."

"You'll call tomorrow?"

"Now I know."

The two hung up their telephones.

*

It was 3:32 a.m. and Antonin's gaze was fixed on the telephone. He waited for the telephone to cry and shatter the still silence. The clock now read 3:33 a.m. Antonin placed his hand on the receiver. His love was contained within that device and he desired it to be set free. Then, with great nonchalance, the clock moved to the next minute. 3:34 a.m. Antonin removed his hand off the telephone. The lifeless blank stare returned to his face. Several questions arose but they were quickly answered. Antonin saw the pure white door before him and he knew.

At 12 p.m., Antonin rose, walked to Mr. Goodogg's door and knocked thrice.

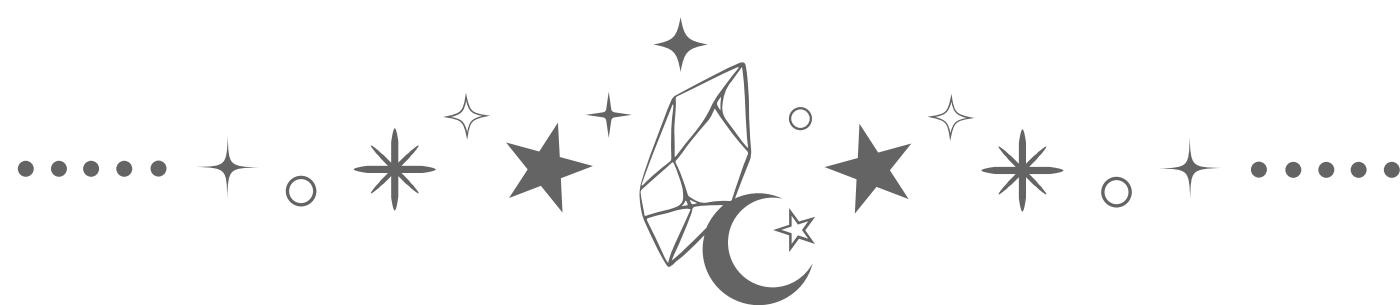
"Mr. Goodogg, it's 12 p.m. I must be going," said Antonin.

As usual, no reply. Antonin began to walk towards the exit when suddenly, he stopped. He stood, head down, thinking, deciding. Antonin turned back towards Mr. Goodogg's door. He spoke carefully and calmly:

"Mr. Goodogg, one of these days, when I decide the time is appropriate, I will become the death of you. I will be the death of you each day and every day that follows."

He was unsure whether whatever lay behind the door had heard him, but he was sure that he had meant it.

Antonin Maravelli turned and exited the Offices of Time Services.



Communications from Days

Stranding by Nadia Gerassimenko

The lyric excerpts are from “BB’s Theme” by Ludvig Forssell, featuring Jenny Plant

“See the sunset
The day is ending
Let that yawn out
There’s no pretending”

The sun never sets here to rise again. The sky is always overcast. There is no concept of time here, except time falls and ages and kills everything in sight until it all grows back to die another time. What we wouldn’t give for a beam of light at daybreak, an orange glow at sundown, and time to tell us it’s safe to sleep again. All we have are these four crumbling walls and the few porters risking their lives bringing supplies to save ours. We’re just biding time until time bids us adieu. When can we yawn again? Can we ever? Or will we be lost to timefall, voidouts, eventual extinction?

“Feel the wind rise
A dawn we’re bound to
Watch that star die
Eons without you”

A dying star created life, another dying star took it away. And then a supernova exploded and brought back life and with it death. You may have seen beached things by the shore. You may have felt ghosts—if you could—with umbilicals stranded in-between. You may have witnessed your loved ones disappearing, lost forever on some beach. Or is it us, the lost ones? It’s hard to tell these days what’s life, what’s alive, what’s living, what’s dying, what’s dead, what’s death, what’s stranding. The wind is picking up; it won’t be long until the next explosion.

“We part too soon
But in our lies
There’s a truth to find”

Everyone’s a villain when // if they lie. But, near a mirror to them and what reflects is abysmal loneliness, and maybe longing for a world whole // a world before or, at least, for this pain to finally cease. Porter, you must follow every strand of lie to weave a truth complete. And you will see there are no villains here, just flawed protagonists on a mission to restore humanity // to make the ending gentler. And die trying. Porter, you already have the key—go!

“The end is new
A tomorrow we must reach forth
To be heard”

Since the day you were born you were already so special, a breath of new air. You were always meant to be a porter handling cargo with care // a strand webbing a network // a bridge building a way out. But being alone for so long, losing everyone to touch you lost touch with yourself and the rare connections you’re afraid to make and keep. Let them in and let yourself out. You were always meant to be our tomorrow, Porter, don’t you see, you are the key—now, go!

Communications from Days

Stranding by Nadia Gerassimenko

“We’re stranded on the beach
In our dream”

Feel the lull of the gentle wind, the waves curling and breaking in tandem and tender. While the world is falling apart, in my dream, it’s fine here on our beach, with you and I, just like it’s always been. Come now, lie down here with me and feel yourself cradled, little one, our palms stranding perfectly together. Doesn’t this feel like home? Yes. Home. Come back home. Come back! Wake up!

“I’ll stay with you
In your mind”

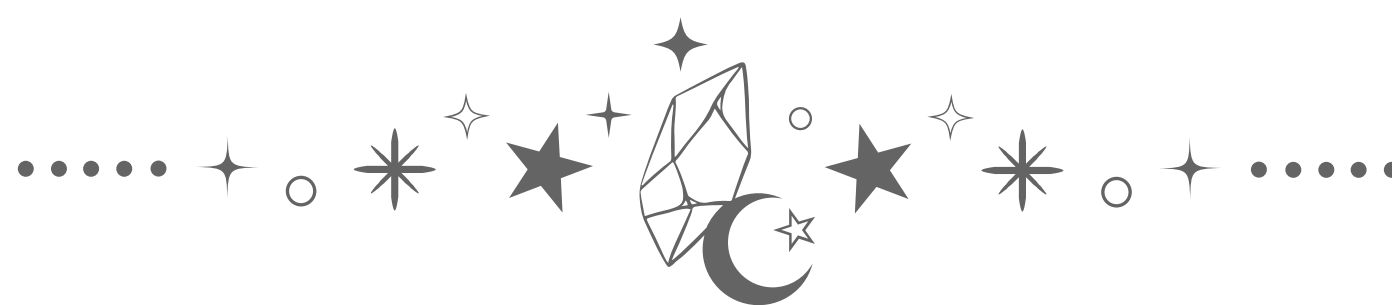
I did not mean to strand you for so long, entrench in you tar visions not yours. Now you know what is real and what is not, what is salvageable and what is inevitable. What is inevitable. If I am here or there or in Arcadia or if I am at all, I am where it matters—in your mind and heart—I’ll always be, I’ll always shepherd. Take this truth, bring it home. You’ll know what to do tomorrow, come what may.

“See the sunset”

What is inevitable is inevitable. What is hopeless // helpless has no hope // no help. Does it mean we stop trying to deliver, connect, rebuild, expand? There is still hope for today. Perchance an inkling for tomorrow. And as timefall falters, the clouds collapse, we await the orange sun.

“The day is ending”

Seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months pass. We’re still here, still handling fragile cargo with care, still tethering deep strands with each other, still bridging voids and cities. Remaking a world whole, a world for tomorrow. The day is again ending, but this is still not yet the end. Porter out.



The Baker's Twine by Col Bak

The old woman gazes at the small pond from a wooden bench not far from the bakery door. It's wobbly, but works nonetheless. The sun's golden rays graze her face and the cool wind kisses her cheek. The sweet smell of blooming willow trees fills her nose as she observes soft ripples on the water splashing against a family of ducks.

"Are you looking at the ducks?"

The old woman turns to the little blonde girl, who is staring up at her.

"Yes, dear", she replies. "Aren't they wonderful? She asks. The girl smiles.

"They remind me of us."

A younger woman comes outside from the bakery. She's pale, a side effect of spending her days inside. Her long blonde hair is tied tightly; she has a sharp look on her face and a flour-covered apron with a frayed tie in the back. She stands straight, shouting for the little girl.

"Daughter, leave her alone," the younger woman huffs. "You ought to be inside helping me bake the bread, not out here."

The little girl's smile dims.

"I'm sorry, baker. I'll come inside now." She turns back to the old woman. "Farewell!"

The old woman smiles down at her.

"Farewell, dear."

The baker slams the door behind them, rattling the rusted hinges. The old woman turns back to the ducks, but halts at the faint murmurs still audible through the wood. She moves closer to the door, hoping to overhear some snippets of conversation. The smell of fresh dough floats gently from under the door frame. She hears her daughter's voice.

"How was your time with the young ones?" she asks the little girl.

"Fine," the girl replies.

"Is your search for a husband fruitful?" the baker questions, cheerfully. The girl sighs.

"Yes, baker... But I don't understand why I need one. I'm happy, just you, me and... her. Neither of you have husbands, and we're all happy."

The baker returns the girl's sigh.

"Daughter, that's untrue. I loved my husband, your lifegiver. He is one half of you. Without him, our family is missing a piece. If he were here now, I know you would love him too. And her husband." A hint of shame colours her tone. "He was..." she pauses.

The old woman's chest sinks, and she returns to her bench. Trying to put the baker's words out of her head. She frowns, thinking of the baker's young daughter. She's such a kind girl, and so bright. She could do much more than marry and take up the mantle of the baker. The girl is too young to understand that. Every time this conversation is had, it becomes harder to hear. The old woman wishes she could get away. Find a place where she felt... better. But the old and workless were forbidden to leave their homes. The old woman remains on her bench, looking down at her feet and swinging her leg aimlessly.

Later, the baker's daughter peeks her head out the door. The sun is setting, bringing waves of pink clouds to dress the darkening blue skies. The little girl hurries to the old woman's bench.

"Hi, dear," the old woman smiles at the girl. "Are you supposed to be out here?"

"Don't worry about the baker," replies the girl. "We finished the bread, so she went to the market."

The young girl's voice wavers, and the old woman notices her twiddling her thumbs.

"What's wrong?" the old woman asks.

"I'm worried about the baker," the girl says, pressing her lips together. "There's a problem with the bakery. Remember what happened to the weaver? We've got no twine to tie the bread. The baker says the quality will go down without the twine. She says our reputation will sour."

The old woman remembers the weaver fondly. She was a close friend of hers for many years. They drifted apart when the old woman inherited the bakery earlier than planned. She was quickly wed and burdened with her new responsibilities. The weaver wasn't so lucky.

The Baker's Twine by Col Bak

As she aged, it was clear that she and her husband could never give life. Foolishly, they stayed together till old age took one, and then the other just last season - leaving no weaver. It was only a matter of time before a problem arose.

The old woman feigns a smile at the young girl.

"Try not to worry, dear, a solution will be found".

"Why didn't the village ask someone else to be the weaver?" the girl questions. "There are many people in the village, someone could've learned to make twine." The girl pulls a bit of string from her pocket; it's frayed and not long enough to tie anything. Its dirty brown tint looked as if she had dragged it through a puddle. "I tried to make some, but I don't think I did it very well."

"It's lovely," the old woman smiles warmly, cleverly hiding her aversion. "You're right, they could have taught a new weaver. Unfortunately, the village is too traditional, or too stubborn to reassign any of their young ones. They fear what people would think of an eldest not inheriting their lifegiver's professions. And refusing to marry off the youngest is just as shameful."

The young girl looks up at her.

"Really? Couldn't a couple give life to a third?"

"It's unlikely," the old woman replies, looking towards the ground. "Mention of change is forbidden; those here are..." The old woman pauses, looking back to the sky, as if searching for answers in the intermixing colours. "Scared. I know not how to change that. Hold out hope, young one, it's all we have for now."

That night, the old woman lay awake in her bed. The stale scent of her room and the chill coming through the small, open window aren't much comfort. She often struggled to fall asleep, something that had plagued her since her earliest days. She never spoke of this, her lifegivers would've suffered much shame having an unsound daughter. So she lay there in silence, her darkest thoughts surfacing. It's these evenings when she remembers her husband. A failure that cost her a second young one and her daughter a second livegiver. Her husband was strange, willful. Perhaps that's why she chose him. No one in the village ever questioned their way of life; until him. Marriage, young ones, retirement and death. The old woman has known her fate since birth, despite the small deviation in her life with her lifegivers' early death, which set up this dreadful chain of events. The two had been married young. It started well; they were in love. And when they gave life to their daughter, that love increased. Until the day her husband's lifegivers passed the title of blacksmith off to his elder brother. It had been the anniversary of the old woman's daughter's first year of life. The old woman's husband grew worried. He tried to raise his objections to her, but she didn't listen. She didn't understand what he feared. He had begged her for help, trying to convince her to run away with him and his lifegivers.

"My love, please. We must go, we must free them from this place. My brother is a foul man, I fear for what he may do to them."

The old woman brushed him off.

"Foul? My love, everything is fine. I've never known your brother to have ill intent. Your lifegivers will be well cared for in their retirement. They are no longer your concern; you know the eldest was to be responsible for them. Your duty is to our daughter and me."

"My love, you don't understand. I may be the youngest, but I refuse to believe my duty is to relinquish care of my livegivers to my brother simply for our marriage."

After that, the old woman forbade him to speak of his lifegivers again, saying she wouldn't allow him to spoil their marriage. Then his lifegivers' bodies turned up in the river. It was a ghastly sight, seeing them floating with their backs to the sky in the filthy water. Cold winter air created small waves, crashing against the shore. The old woman's husband's face was frozen in horror. And when she reached out to comfort him, he jolted back from her touch. His elder brother claimed their deaths were self-inflicted, but her husband rebutted they had bruising and blood on their heads. The village was uninterested; the deaths of the workless were of no importance. Simply the inevitable being expedited. The old woman's husband left that night, blaming the old woman for his lifegivers fate.

The Baker's Twine by Col Bak

"I know you're still worried, but I have some good news for you." The old woman says.

The young girl perks up, "You do?"

"Yes, dear, I want to show the baker first, but I found the solution to our problems. Everything is going to change."

"What do you mean?" questions the young girl.

"It will no longer be the way people believe they are supposed to be. I know how to change things."

The two hear familiar footsteps by the door.

"It's time," the old woman smiles at the child. "The baker has returned."

"Hi, baker!" welcomes the young girl.

"Hello, daughter," the baker says, not bothering to feign a smile at the old woman.

"She's got something to tell you, baker!" the young girl says.

"Oh, really?" remarks the baker.

The old woman is almost swayed by the sarcasm in her tone, but it doesn't deter her.

"Darling, I've heard about your problem."

"Problem?" the baker questions, giving her daughter a disapproving look.

"Oh, darling, don't blame the girl," says the old woman. "She was concerned for you, rightfully so. But she needn't worry now." The old woman reaches into her pocket and pulls out the makeshift twine.

"Do you remember when I told you of how I snuck to the weaver's house when I was young? I used to sit for hours and watch them weave. I remember how they made twine. I know this piece isn't perfect, but with more practice, they will get much better. Isn't this wonderful? The three of us could work together."

The baker stood there, ugly expression on her face.

"How could you think this would help? We can't tie the bread with bits of waste." The baker remarks, exacerbated. "What would the villagers say? Was your illness and your husband not shameful enough?"

"Daughter," the old woman sniffles. "I only wanted to make you happy."

"Happy?" the baker berates. "I don't know where you get these ideas. No other workless person behaves as you do,"

The old woman gasps for breath, choking on tears. The smell of burning dough from the neglected bread fills the room.

"I-" the old woman whispers. "I can do more, I can be of use to you. I know my health makes it harder, but it doesn't make me-"

"Worthless?" the baker spits. "What else would you call a workless old woman who does nothing but burden and shame her family?"

"Baker, please stop," her daughter yells. The young girl was red-faced from sobbing; she hadn't been noticed over the fight. "She's just trying to help us! Because she loves us."

The baker glares at the girl, then back at the old woman, fists balled. The old woman lurches back in fear. The baker's expression waivers for a moment, then hardens once more. She addresses the old woman once more, gritting her teeth.

"You are lucky your livegivers died young," the baker says with a scowl. "For you will never know my shame. Get out of my sight. Now!"

The old woman steps backwards, shaking as she guides herself through the door to her room. The baker's fist releases as she turns to her daughter, whose sobs had only gotten louder. Outside the door, the old woman hears the baker exclaim.

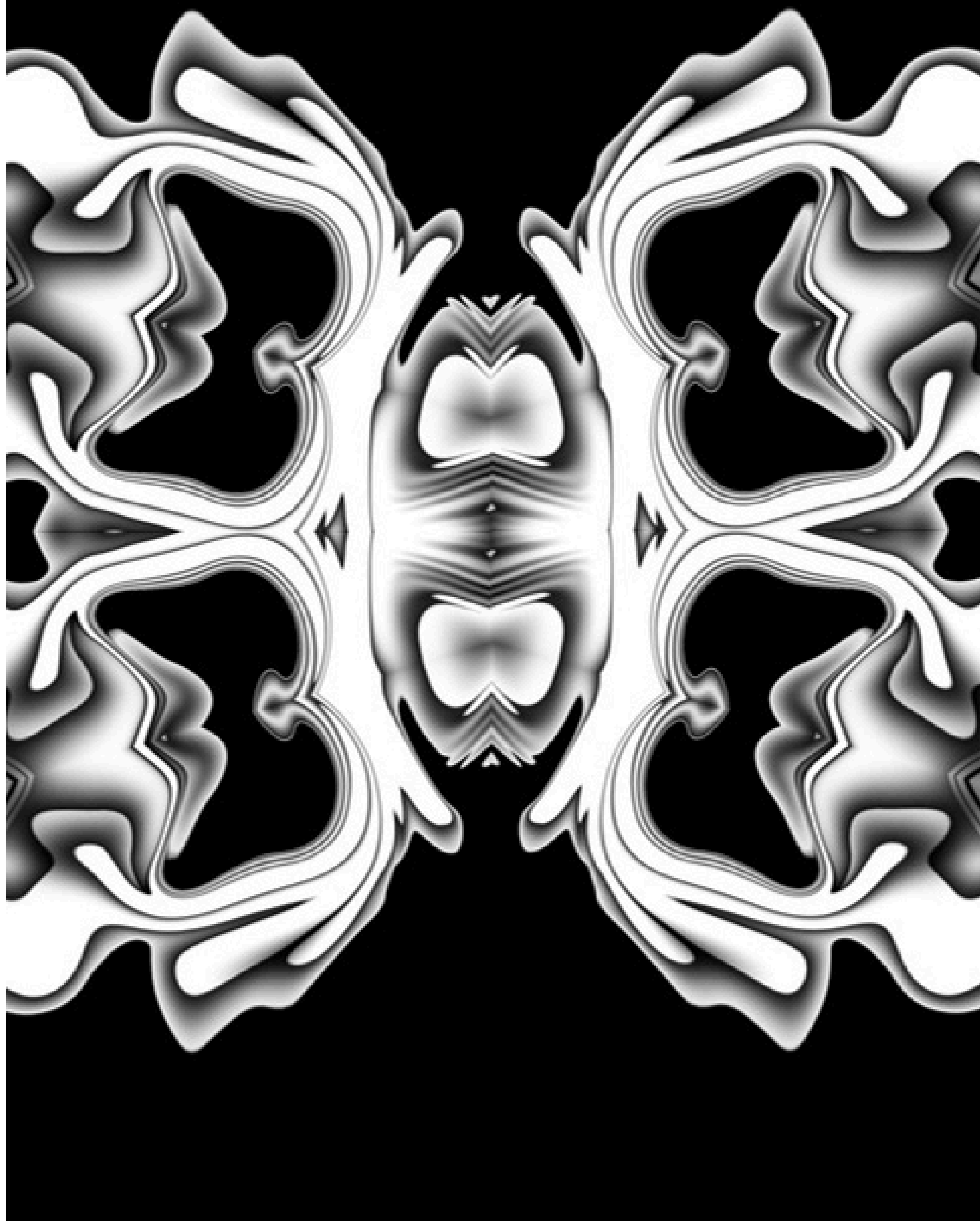
"Daughter, if I ever become a woman like her, have mercy and do away with me".

The next morning, the old woman gazes at the pond from the small window in her room. She hadn't moved since returning the night before, after her daughter went to sleep. Today, there are no ducks. The old woman sits still, expression blank. In her right hand, she holds the small, grey piece of twine.

*Outrage Surrounded by Indignities by Edward
Supranowicz*



*Not All Lips are Sweet and Tender by
Edward Supranowicz*



The Bottom of the Bottle by Nicholas Kellogg

I was drunk when my daughter was born.

Her name is Deborah.

I was out with a couple of buddies, a few six-packs down, three packs of Kools. You know, the good kind of smoke that seems to be laying little fiberglass eggs in your lungs with each inhale. About seven shots deep between light and brown liquor.

That's when I got the call that my wife was going into labor.

We harpooned out of the parking lot in a drunk motor pool of assholerly. One truck driven by my best buddy in the world, Lucious. We howled at the moon like a pack of horny wolves.

My daughter doesn't have my last name; we never made it to the hospital. I wasn't there. I was drunk in a ditch. A deer darted across the front of our vehicle and Lucious couldn't help but turn hard. The two men that were standing in the bed of our truck, Frank and Robert, were thrown from the bed.

If you're ever driving up 95 North near exit 88 you can see where both of their bodies went splat and then slid against the uncompromising pavement. You can see it, trust me, the streaks are still there. Those two men, I met them when they were only boys. And now, they've been reduced to nothing more than a viscous goop. I'm sorry, Frank, and I'm sorry, Robert. They told us while we were still in school that we'd have to leave our friends behind eventually. I just never thought it'd be dead and saturated the highway I now try to stay clear from on most days.

My driving partner, Lucious, smashed his face against the windshield and had his arm pinned under the open window he'd been smoking out of as we skidded into that ditch. He lost that arm—it was the worst of his physical injuries, but I don't think it held a candle to the mental ones he's probably juggling daily. I suppose it'd be hard to fend for yourself in prison—to hold off the guards and inmates with only one arm. Lucious got 15-30 on two counts of involuntary manslaughter and driving under the influence. I can't say I blame the county for their decision on the matter. I only feel guilty that the only punishment I got from the crash was a few bumps and bruises, a gimpy leg, and of course, the loss of my three closest friends.

But were they really your friends? Do friends allow you to risk your life? Were any of you actually friends if you needed to have a drink in your hand to have a conversation?

Once, before I got Lauri pregnant, I told her that I was going over to Lucious' house. She asked me what we were intending to do. For the life of me, I couldn't give her an answer. The truth was, I didn't have one. I only had the idea of a friend. Their ghosts haunt me sometimes when I get up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat with goose bitten skin and a sense of dread that's only akin to an impending blizzard. I don't want to hear them when they speak—whispers of a past that I'm trying to leave behind but failing miserably.

I survived and my daughter was born, happy ending, right?

Wrong.

After the accident, Lauri didn't believe I'm fit to be a father. Lauri has told me that it's now time to give up the sauce. A proposition that many wives and men have bestowed upon their lovers at the crossroads of their relationships.

Just give up the sauce.

Do it, Jake, it's not that hard. Do it.

Has anyone uttered a more innocuous sentence? Just give up the goddamn fucking sauce. Why don't you? Why don't you give it up, Lauri? I saw you get drunk as a skunk when you had a miscarriage. And even drunker when you learned that your sister was pregnant. Who are you to deny me one of life's greatest pleasures? Who are you to tell me to let go of the thing that's helped me too many times to count?

It helped me when the love of my life broke my heart early, freshman year in college. It held my hand, stroking it and whispering to me with its luscious breath, promising that everything was going to be all right. Wrapping me in its amniotic fluid and allowing it to drip over my troubles and dissuade my pugnacious attitude—that other voice that told me to go and burn down her father's home and piss on the ashes.

But it didn't help.

The Bottom of the Bottle by Nicholas Kellogg

It never did.

You just thought it did.

It helped me when my mother died. When she died on those streets shoving God-the-fuck-knows into her arms and doing anything other than being a mom to me. It came to me, wistfully wending down that bar top. It took my hand and held it once more. Placing its smoky and saccharine lips to my own and breathing life into my cracked foundation. It told me things were going to be alright—that I was interesting, that I could find happiness without my mother. And all that I needed to do was kiss the lips waiting for me at the bottom of a bottle.

You got drunk that night. Really fucking wasted. And then you went out on the street and asked that woman if she'd sleep with you. She said she would because she felt bad and you cried because you couldn't get it up. And when you cried, she laughed and you took that pain and inflicted it on her. You beat her within an inch of her life and then left her in the alleyway with those strange men. Was that healthy? Did that make you feel better? And what do you think those strangers did to that poor girl? What do you think they did, Jakey? She used to call you by that name when you were both sober. Do you remember when your mother called you Jakey?

There's a bottle of bourbon sitting on the table in front of me now. A pack of smokes abandoned by a picture of the daughter I've not held yet. I haven't had a drink in a few days and that's only a few days longer than I've gone since I started at twelve. My heart is set to staccato and every other breath I take stings my lungs as though I'm swallowing recently sharpened swords.

She wants me, she wants revenge, she wants to want and I can't help but want to want to want her wanting back.

The want will turn into need, and that truculent temptress of a salaciously slandering slutty slut slutting siren will beg to taste my lips as I long to taste hers. Then, without listening to the lecherous leering of her voice, I hear something or someone begin to move at the bottom of the bottle. She's beckoning me closer with that vulpine tone, the kind of acerbic voice that could cut into stone with its tempting words. When I attempt to resist that siren, her fingers cling to the sides of the bottle and she begins to ascend. The arm rises from the bottom of the bottle, and her pallid, almost porcelain-stained fingers finger the hole that she wants me to place to my lips. She wants me to put those fingers in my mouth and suck like some slaving city dweller at a strip joint. She wants me to enjoy her flesh even though she isn't the skin and bone that I've committed myself to. Her voice gets stronger the more I resist her charm; she rises further from the bottom of the bottle. My bones are rattling from within my emaciated frame as if their integrity has already been compromised the same as my brain. I can't stop shaking spasmodically. I try to call for someone to help, but they don't exist. I've already ostracized myself from everyone that ever gave a shit about me.

That bottle, I swear that hole on the top is getting bigger as her hand squeezes itself out and fingers the air I breathe. My siren, she won't take no for an answer. She's been with me long enough to understand that I'll always say yes. Her shoulder is fully visible now, it's gorgeous, almost as perfect as the first time Lauri and I made love. She slid her little sundress down and exposed the bottom of her neck, the curve of her shoulder, the top of her breast, and then she winked at me. It was a dance I never wanted to stop learning and recreating. I wanted to be with her forever, the same as I do now. But I can't be with her, I want to, but I can't. And it's all because of this tempting slut at the bottom of the bottle. That slut whose shoulder looks eerily similar to the woman I love. A woman, who is currently reading a bedtime story to my daughter while Daddy is boarded up in a scummy motel waiting for the pain of his siren to be over. But I bought another bottle. That fucking tempting cunt of a whore is sitting on the table and begging to be fucked the same as Lauri eventually had done after I stuck my tongue deep inside her.

Next comes the top of her head. She slid up the bottle like a snake, her voice clear and more pronounced. And I saw the face of a beautiful woman that wanted to be with me more than any girl I've ever met. Her eyes fixed on me the same way a mother looks at her recently born child.

The Bottom of the Bottle by Nicholas Kellogg

The woman's hand and arm are completely out of the bottle now, flashing her claws and beckoning me closer for a good stroke. Those claws, sinking below the subcutaneous bits of my flesh and getting down into the pulp of my being. Because even though that woman at the bottom of the bottle is beautiful, she is also relentless. She needs to be heard the same way that I hear her.

I heard her when my dog was hit by a car.

When my best friend fucked that girl I had a crush on since the first grade. And even when they got married and pumped out those little babies I wished were my own.

I heard her when I was cheated on by that crazy bitch I met in Rhode Island who was too pretty for me anyway and liked to drip hot wax on my chest and cut it off with her dirty razor.

I heard her when my father told me that I wasn't as smart as my older brother, and he didn't have enough money to send me to college because college was for people with brains better than my own.

When I tripped in the woods and fell on a piece of glass. Perhaps that same glass was at the bottom of the bottle with the woman I'd only just met. And she was calling for me then, telling me that she would nullify the pain.

Her breasts came next; she couldn't wear clothes if she tried. And every time that woman at the bottom of the bottle exposes herself to me, I can't do anything to stop the blood flowing to my cock. I feel warm, anxious, flattered, and my shaking calms because I know within minutes she'll slip me inside of her wet, tight hole, and my eyes will roll into the back of my head and Jesus Christ, Buddah, Allah, God, Zeus, and whatever the fuck that Hindu one is called will shove their tongues and thumbs up my ass and it'll all be worth it. I'll come hard and then wait! There's more! There's more of that goodness to drink. That nectar. That ambrosia. That God's come Juice that I must slurp to feel like the person I've been for the past fifteen years. That's all the bottom of the bottle is really doing to me now. It's allowing me to be myself. You see, that other version of me hasn't made an appearance since grade school. Since before I even had a license. Before I knew how hard this world was going to try and fuck me. A predator lurking around every bend. A city that tried to swallow me whole with very little remorse. Not in the same way as the woman at the bottom of the bottle, no, not in that way. The rape kind of way. The kind of way where I didn't even want a cigarette afterward. I only wanted a shower to wash away the shame. And then I wanted to take another gulp and pull from that woman at the bottom of the bottle.

Next comes her vulva, it's perfection. Concealing all those bits and pieces that I long to wrap around my member and never let me go. I want it more than the mouth that's finally breathing in the air around me, lurching out from the bottle and making me sit back on the couch as she tells me she's going to make it all better.

My family, what family? Who actually gives a flying fuck about a family when you have a woman trying to drink your children with a succulent mouth from the bottom of the bottle? Who needs a family when I can have that body of perfection reach for my mortal flesh and make me feel so so so so good. The kind of good that seldom turns to great before I wake up the next morning covered in sweat and regret. She's licking the side of my face like that dog I had when I was a child. The one that got himself ran over. *Do you remember that dog? Do you even remember that fucking dog? Do you remember the boy that pet him? Do you remember that kid?*

I know you were starting to.

You were.

But then, you went out of your way—off the path to buy yourself that woman at the bottom of the bottle.

Those smokes.

A few uppers you keep in the glove box to enhance the experience like Viagra. You wouldn't want to disappoint that woman at the bottom of the bottle, would you? Go on. Go on, do it, fuck your family. Get into that bottle with her— get into that warm floaty place where the world works the way you want it to.

Before I know it, that woman that started as a few fingers is standing next to the bottle. She's perfection. There isn't a misaligned blemish within her porcelain façade. Those fangs that she hides behind her salacious smile are quite alright because I know what she has to offer.

The Bottom of the Bottle by Nicholas Kellogg

I love what she has to offer. I love it. I just want to feel normal again.

She'll give it to you good, and if you let her, God only knows she will want to give it to you again. But don't worry, right? You'll pick up the pieces tomorrow when she's gone. You'll try again tomorrow.

Yes.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow is always better than today.

Another day.

Another opportunity.

You've already done so much today just trying to resist her charm.

Tomorrow is always better than today.

I'll do it tomorrow.

Eventually, it's not even your voice that's telling you you'll stop tomorrow, it's hers. And that succubus wants you to think it's no big deal.

Tomorrow.

But that succubus doesn't know that lust isn't the only thing on your mind anymore. And that bottle doesn't know that there's something else driving you. A dream that's so powerful it'll eviscerate anyone who dares to obstruct your dream.

Your Dream.

A simple Dream.

A miraculous Dream.

And it's right there, and all you have to do is reach out and hold her in your arms.

So, I pushed away that naked woman who came to me from the bottom of the bottle. She didn't like it. But I'm sure she thought for a moment that everything was going to be alright when I reached for the bottle. While she was caressing my neck, she probably thought that I was heading to the kitchen to grab a glass as I've done every other time. Get a glass. Fill up. Shoot it back. Restart the timer. I'll just get started tomorrow... it's better anyway. Tomorrow. She's smiling, she knows that's what I'm about to do. It's what I do every other night, you know? But as I reached for that glass, I thought about that photo sitting on the counter where I'd only just shook in anguish while having a feverish yet truthful conversation with myself. I think about that photo. Lauri gave it to me, right after Deborah was born. And as I unscrewed the cap of my liberation, a slight tingle of disobedience rose from within my chest, and I began to dump the amber liquid down the drain.

She screamed.

She cried for me to stop.

Digging those mangled claws into the skin of my neck and back and biting at my ears.

But it doesn't matter, because even she knows that she can't hurt me the same way I've been hurting myself. Only I know how to hurt myself.

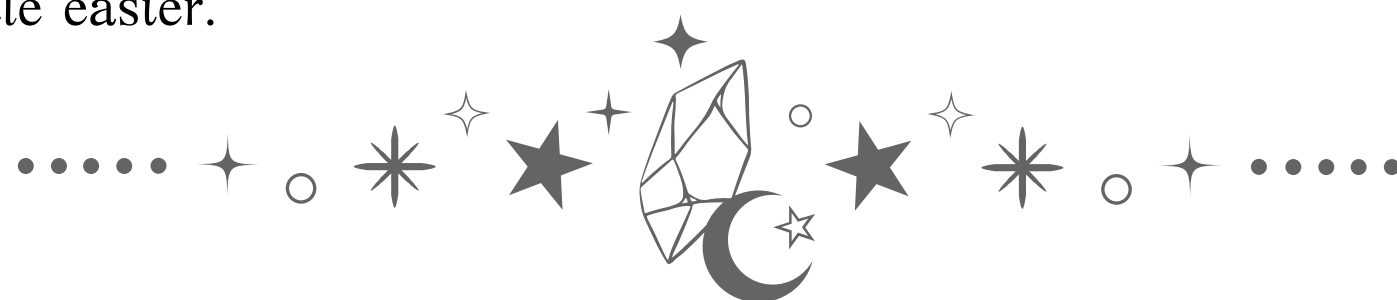
Before I know it, I'm looking at clear glass at the bottom of the bottle. But the liquid isn't sitting at the bottom of my stomach. It's somewhere else. I'm smiling. I'm shaking, and I can feel those holes that she's left behind screaming for something to nullify the pain.

But I did it.

I tossed that bottle into the trash and closed my eyes, clutching that photo of my daughter against my heart.

I know she'll be back tomorrow night.

I don't think she'll ever stop trying to get back to me. But maybe, just maybe, if I keep pouring her down the drain it will get a little easier.



Fiadh's Lament by Heather Labay

Fiadh nursed her third glass of cider, piss-water that it was. The wee dram of alcohol it offered might eventually soften her sharp edges if she drank enough, but what she really wanted was a shot of whiskey, her promise to Declan be damned. The hateful part of her brain cajoled and mocked and whispered in its snide little voice that whiskey was what she needed on a night like this—her mam being eaten alive by cancer, her da eight months buried, and Declan trying to fill their father's too-big shoes, tripping over himself despite every effort.

But whiskey would just make her angry, and her anger had nowhere to go. She'd only break things. How many friendships had she lost to a liquor-soaked row, her abuses and obscenities hurled like knives at those closest to her? Her da had been the only one who'd withstood her cruelties, letting her ire shove up against him until she was spent. He was supposed to be forever. Fathers weren't meant to die.

And now her mam. Less than a month, the doctors said. Fiadh clenched her pint, wanting to throw it, to witness the satisfying shatter of glass. She could almost hear it, almost settle into the shards of it, until the sound became her mam's death-rattle breathing. Fiadh sipped her drink, trying to wash it down, but the phantom clamor only got louder until the half-filled bar splintered with the sound of applause, and Fiadh looked up to see several people take the stage.

A fiddle, a bodhran, a tin whistle, a guitar—it was to be a night of traditional pub songs, then. Fiadh breathed relief. A room full of rowdy Irish drunks singing 'Finnegan's Wake' or 'Whiskey in the Jar' was sure to blot out her own miserable thoughts for a while. The thumping of the drum and the stomping of feet, the cheers and loudly mis-sung verses beautifully off key. Fiadh even joined in singing half-remembered lyrics of 'Molly Malone,' finding a moment of laughter as she sang of cockles and muscles, alive, alive-o!

"Alive," she wailed, her voice cracking like ice, the pain of that word stabbing deep into her chest. Alive, a lie, alive, a lie-o. Soon it would be only her and Declan, the brother who looked down his nose at her, as though she were a clod of dirt smeared upon his pretty boot. Fiadh had ruined Declan's life, to hear him tell it. All by being born. Ten years old, and already he'd hated the sight of her, small and swaddled, stealing mam's attention and da's heart. Her whole life, Declan had always been a gobshite, but ever since their da died, he'd become a nasty piece of work. Cruel, though mam defended him; she always did. *He's sad, Fi, and he's knackered from all the hurtin'. Just give him some time, love.* As though Declan was the only one to walk through grief.

Fiadh buried her grief at the bottom of a bottle, but she was trying to step lighter on that road, even though the cider in her hand didn't fill the hole in her chest quite the same. She threw back the last mouthful, banging the glass against the table in time with the end of Molly Malone. She gave a last shout, her head sizzling with the pain of being alive, alive-o, and bounced on her toes, waiting for the next reel to start.

Then, in the breath between songs, a woman stepped on stage. She walked to the microphone without introduction, ethereal in the stage lights, long dark hair loose around her shoulders, barefoot even in the chill of November. She began singing the opening verse of 'She Moved Through the Fair,' her voice high and sweet, filling the space around her and threading out into the crowd.

A song of death and loss. Fiadh felt tears pushing up from some deep well within her and stood to leave, but the woman's voice swelled and whispered, lilted and rolled, haunting Fiadh, bewitching her, and beneath the words, she heard something else, something more.

A low, guttural thrumming. Another voice singing, wailing, grieving. The words were Gaelic, a language she barely knew, but even so, Fiadh understood them: *Alas, what will I do? You are gone from me, and I am left alone. Alone, alone, and gone.* The hidden voice keened, its pain washed over her, piercing the hollowed-out place in her chest, and she looked back at the woman on stage. Her eyes were locked on Fiadh, her hand reaching out, face wet with tears. She moaned and beat her breast, wailing her lament over and over again, yet the crowd didn't notice. They didn't see the banshee. She sang for Fiadh alone.

Fiadh pushed back from the table and forced her way through the pub until she stood outside.

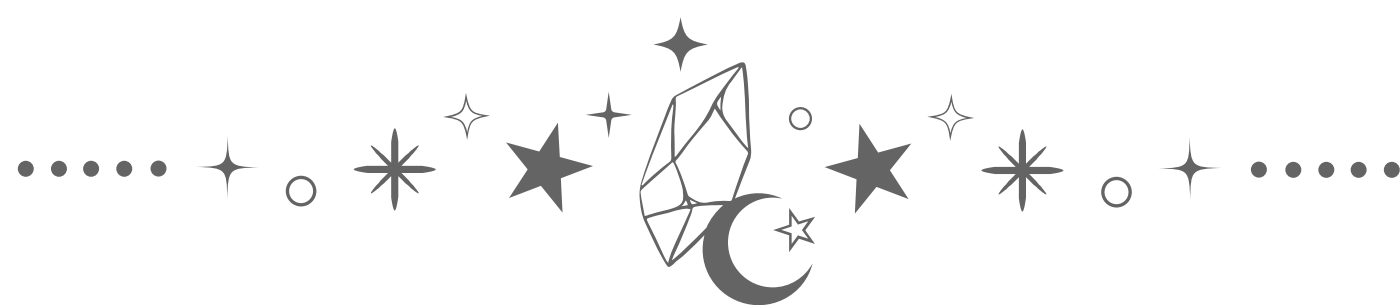
Fiadh's Lament by Heather Labay

Hands on her knees, she leaned over as though she might vomit and gulped in shards of bitter air. Fumbling with her phone, she called Declan and begged for a ride to the hospital. No, she wasn't drunk, well, she was, but not like he thought. No, she couldn't explain; she couldn't make sense. He just needed to come. Come now, please, Declan.

Tears she had never allowed herself to cry now ran freely down her face, her breath hitching, chest constricted. She waited in the cold for Declan to arrive, wondering if he might just leave her here this time, sitting on the curb, face smeared and snotty like the child he always said she was. She hated needing him, hated more the feeling of wanting a brother just once, and always being disappointed.

From her perch by the car park, she could still hear the banshee's cry seeping out of the pub and into the night around her, a warning of impending death.

Don't die yet, mam, she prayed. Wait for me. I'm coming. Please, wait for me.



The Shape of Absence by Alexander Grant

Detective Sloan taps on the sun-bleached black door. “Mr. Reilly? Are you home?” Nothing. “Some people in town are concerned about you. Said they haven’t seen you around in a while.” She waits thirty seconds, hearing only the humming cicadas in the trees. “Mr. Reilly, I’m going to come in now to check on you.”

A few hard blows with her shoulder and the door bursts open. The cabin is dark and quiet, the measured ticking of a grandfather clock reverberating off the old wooden floors. “Mr. Reilly?”

Detective Sloan sweeps her flashlight in long arcs. Shadows curl up the floral-papered walls. There’s no sign of life, a thick layer of dust encasing every surface. In the living room, a warped, rotting rocking chair sways in front of the closed window.

“Are you feeling beef tonight or chicken?” Mr. O’Mally lifted a package of each.

Mr. Reilly paused. “Let’s do chicken. I’ll turn on the grill for us when we return.”

Mr. O’Mally smiled, returning the beef to the refrigerated store shelf and placing the chicken breasts in the metal cart. “Sounds perfect.” He pecked Mr. Reilly on the cheek. Both blushed.

They heard a throat clear, turning to see Mrs. Connors, the church organist staring at them from the frozen dessert aisle. Her forced smile couldn’t fully hide the disgust in her eyes.

Reaching out a hand, Detective Sloan halts the chair’s motion. She lets go and the chair resumes rocking. She scans the ceiling above her and the wall behind the chair. There’s no vent or fan. Sloan taps the front window. A cracked line of white paint seals it shut.. Nothing is moving the chair.

Steadying the chair once again, she runs her hand along the back. The wood is bumpy, malformed. The closer Sloan looks, the more the rockers, legs, and arms seem human in shape and size.

“You saw the way she looked at us!” Mr. O’Mally paced the patio while Mr. Reilly flipped a piece of chicken. “It was like our presence was a personal affront to her.”

“I know, dear, I know. It’s nothing we did, it’s just...the way it is around here.”

“I’m tired of it. I’m tired of feeling their eyes everywhere we go. I’m tired of my parents having to work up the nerve to ask how you are, like they need a deep breath to get through each sentence. I’m fifty fucking years old. It’s not fair!”

Mr. Reilly flipped another chicken breast before setting the tongs down and enveloping Mr. O’Mally in a half-retained hug. “Just a few more years. We just have to earn enough to get out of here.”

“I don’t know if I can do this anymore.”

“Yes, you can.”

“No, I don’t know if I can do *us* anymore. At least, not like this.”

“What?”

“My parents...” Mr. O’Mally said, “they offered to put me back in their will. I’d just have to marry Miranda. It won’t be real, you know I’ll always want you, but—”

“I can’t believe you’d actually even fucking consider that!” Mr. Reilly had forgotten about the chicken. It began to smoke on the grill. “Putting aside the levels of low your parents stooped to, why would you even think about agreeing with them?”

“Because I’m tired.” Mr. O’Mally groaned. “I could exist in public without everyone’s eyes on me. I could afford to take a day off work, to not sit down and stare at the piles and piles of bills on the table every goddamn night!”

“What about your freedom, what about building a life together?”

“What life? Always being judged, hated, exiled by every person in Raynard?”

“I can’t lose you,” Mr. Reilly pleaded. “I’m not strong enough to go on without you.”

Detective Sloan cracks open the door to the station office. She slides into a seat opposite Mr. Leonard, Raynard’s mailman for as long as anyone can remember. He was the one to call a welfare check on Mr. Reilly. He was the one to notice something was amiss.

The Shape of Absence by Alexander Grant

“What made you call us?” Sloan asks.

“I saw how large the mail pile got. It wasn't normal. They was always good about gettin' their mail. Well, before Mr. O'Mally left an' all.”

“What about Mr. Reilly? When was the last time you saw him?”

Mr. Leonard pauses. He looks skittish, dodgy, like Sloan won't believe his story. “Maybe a week or two ago. Thought he was on vacation, maybe, but he'd 'ave paused his mail.”

“And before that?” Sloan presses him.

“Always in that rockin' chair o'his by the window. I'd wave, but he'd never wave back. Just sit there, rockin' and rockin'. Almost like he was glued to the chair if you asked me.”

“Please don't leave me,” Mr. Reilly begged, running out onto the porch after Mr. O'Mally and his overflowing suitcases. He stood there until the sun set an hour later, waiting, hoping, believing that Mr. O'Mally might return to him.

Grocery shopping with Mr. O'Mally was hard enough, but going alone was somehow worse. Some stares were pitying, some grimly satisfied, all curious and sharp and destructive. The lingering sense of paranoia crawled up Mr. Reilly's spine like a centipede, feet stabbing holes in his back so his broken heart could ooze out like bloody pus.

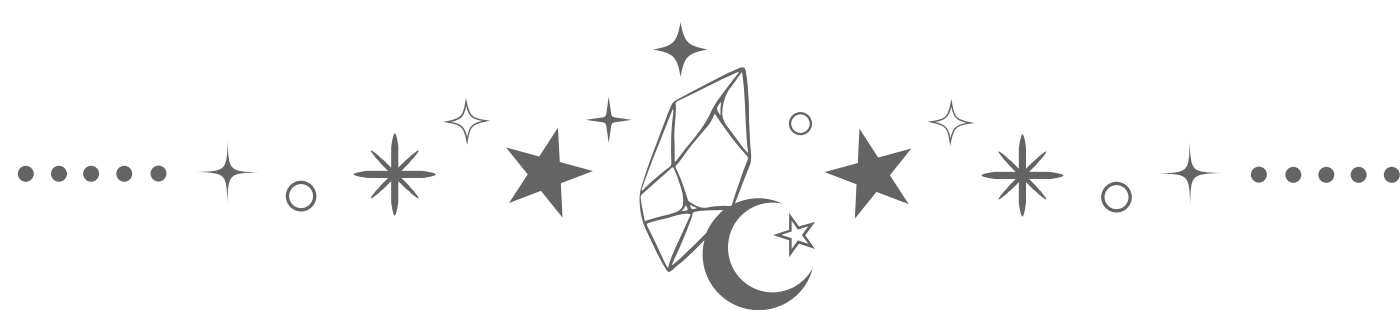
He still turned to ask Mr. O'Mally's opinion on an item, and each unexpected silence brought a fresh lurch of pain. A reminder that his love couldn't topple the bastion of ingrained cultural dogma. Watching his groceries scanned one by one was excruciating. He tried to avoid eye contact with the girl working the register. An image flashed in his mind. The girl bringing up her encounter with the sad fag to her friends at school, just like the gossiping after he had been caught kissing Jay Mercer in high school that got him sent to therapy to cleanse his sin.

When he returned home, Mr. Reilly poured himself a glass of water and sat in the rocking chair by the window. It brought him some small comfort to watch the squirrels chase each other around the trees as the wind blew brown leaves in a lazy spiral.

He almost didn't answer when his parents called, but waiting would only begin the avalanche of the stones he knew they'd cast.

“I think it was God's plan to save your soul,” they said. Mr. Reilly pulled the phone away from his ear, grateful his parents couldn't see the tears sliding down his cheeks.

As the weeks passed, Mr. Reilly found himself sitting in his rocking chair more and more. It was a safe place, a refuge. He still waited for Mr. O'Mally to change his mind, to come back to him so they could escape and chase their dreams together, somewhere where they could be whoever they wanted, invisible and in love. Mr. Reilly had faith in his love, and he knew Mr. O'Mally would be back any day. He just needed to sit and wait, rocking back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.



Disassembly by Travis Koll

I'd expected something more dramatic, not just an empty hospital bed. Rented, of course. Not just a tableful of half-filled pill bottles standing in ranks like soldiers waiting for a battle already lost. Not just a gradual silent stillness. A gasp. A groan. A last prayer in anger or despair or both. Hell, I'd have settled for a clammy hand squeezing back at mine.

While we knew somebody would be by in the next few days to dismantle and collect the bed, my wife and I decided it was best to take it apart ourselves. Nothing like fumbling and arguing your way through a project to distract the mind.

"Can't find the right wrench."

"Don't do it like that. You're gonna break it."

"Maybe we should just wait for the guy to get here."

"Just unscrew it. No, the other one. That one! Yes, I'm sure."

For something so heavy, so complex, the bed came apart with relative ease. Springs, siderails, screws, bolts, washers, a mattress and footboard all scattered across the floor. The tangled sheets and blankets, bleach cleaned but forever corrupted, ended up in the trash. So did photos, shoes, and paperwork with rusted-on clips. Out, too, went her little television, her kitty calendar, the neon-bright butterfly puzzle she'd framed and hung on the wall. All were gone after a debate about who'd want any of it. If we really wanted any of it. We don't, right?

As I tried to clean up, Lisa sat cross-legged on the floor and cradled a bed girder across her lap. "You call them?"

She meant the funeral home. I nodded. "Said it'd take about two weeks before we get the ashes back."

"Sure we shouldn't have paid for a memorial? Something?"

"She didn't want one. And neither did you. Remember?"

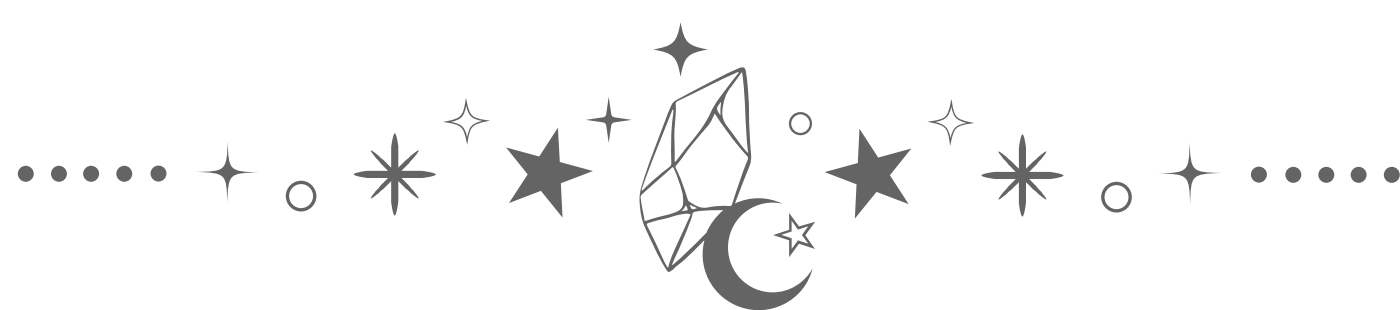
Lisa placed the girder beside her, red lines from its weight bright across her legs.

"Anything else to go through?"

I shook my head.

They came the next morning and hauled away the bed parts, side-eyeing us for doing such a shitty job disassembling everything. The backroom's been vacant ever since. A blackhole.

One day, we may turn it into an office or a guestroom. Tear out the carpet. Paint the walls. Maybe.



The Drove Road by Steve Cashel

Douglas sat on a bench outside the brick-and-timber shed that'd housed the waiting room of the long-gone train station. Now, half of the shed served as a café for walkers and cyclists using the newly-installed path that followed the old railway line. The other half became a convenience store for the inhabitants of the newly-built golfing village whose houses and course occupied this part of the valley.

Today, it was closed.

He opened the photo album on his lap and studied the pictures attached to the first cardstock pages. The blues and greens were starting to fade. Still visible were the over-enthusiastic flourishes of the time, like whitened faces and vampiric red eyes. These were group photos, showing six people. The group's number had actually been seven because one person had to use the camera. As the group's photographer, Douglas was rarely in any of their pictures. Fay was in every picture, however. Looking mysterious, aloof and—despite the big hair and the era's other stylistic follies—elegant.

Then he came to a new page where there was only one photo: a headshot of Fay. Unlike the others, it showed her in black and white, and yet she still looked mysterious, aloof, elegant. The photo was at the top of a newspaper cutting from a time before colour became the norm in newspapers. The page contained other newspaper cuttings, picture-less ones.

More photos came after that page, but the group numbered five now—six if you counted the person behind the camera who was still, mostly, Douglas.

Also, while the drove road had featured in only a few of the photos before the cuttings, it was in all of them afterwards.

He faced the tarmacked railway path and, beyond that, a terrain that was flat, save for a few gentle undulations, and green, save for the brown pocks of the bunkers. Nobody walked across it or stood and took shots or beetled about in golf buggies. At one end of the course, rows of trees partly hid the bulky, detached houses around the village's first cul-de-sac, the deciduous trees dappled with orange and gold. He could just see a figure in one of the houses' windows, perhaps looking out at him suspiciously.

He closed the album, put it in his knapsack, and rose from the bench. Even standing up, his muscles ached and his lungs wheezed slightly. What'd happened to Fay was a tragedy. Yet, part of him was glad she hadn't lived to see a part of the world she loved so much turned into a golfing facility for rich folk.

Behind the shed and away from the railway path he followed a path up one of the slopes forming the southern side of the valley. The slope was wooded, though the path climbed the middle of a grassy strip several yards across with trees growing beyond the strip's edges. The gravel track cut through the swash of grass like an incision made by a scalpel.

By the time the path reached a timber gate in the middle of a drystone dyke, Douglas was aching, sweating, and gasping. From there, the track became a vaguer strand of dirt and pebbles. The trees ended at the dyke and the slope above was bare.

He turned back whilst propping himself against the gate. The hillside and its mantle of trees hid the golfing village and most of the valley below, but he could view the hills to the north. The drove road wound in and out of sight on their sides and summits before descending into the valley. When it climbed out of the valley again, it was as the track he was on now.

He removed a flyer from his knapsack and unfolded it gently—it was old and coming apart at the creases. The flyer advertised an Edinburgh Fringe production of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. Above the play's title were the words: *The Seven Drovers present...* Fay had suggested that as their new theatre group's name during one of the weekends she invited them to her home part of Scotland and took them hiking in these hills. Her reasoning was that they were drovers too. With their art, they led the herd. Nobody pointed out to her that drovers didn't actually lead. Since they drove their cattle from behind, technically, they followed.

He recalled some dialogue from *Endgame*. Hamm, the master, asking Clov, the servant: "Why do you stay with me?"

Clov's retort: "Why do you keep me?"

The Drove Road by Steve Cashel

He took out the album again and turned to its later pages when the photos were all of the drove road. Years were written on the page-tops: 1993, 1994, 1995. Many photos showed them clustered around the truncated stone cone of the trig point on Shield Law. Douglas was in many of the pictures now. He'd finally got around to buying a camera with a self-timer.

The seven of them together...

His hand froze while turning a page. *Seven?* No, *six*. Fay was dead. Her death was why they gathered here once a year and trekked up the drove road. He checked the previous page and counted six people in the photos. His eyesight wasn't so great nowadays. Plus, he was ill.

He put away the album and unlatched the gate.

From Bleck Hill, he could see the surrounding landscape in full. Rows of hills receded in all directions, some summits bare and blunt, others with hoods of dark green Sitka-spruce forestry. Above them, the sky had a pale, chilly blueness. The only cloud was a thin band running along its southern fringes like a smudged pencil-line.

For a long time, Douglas couldn't process any of this. He dropped onto his backside next to the cairn of stones assembled on Bleck Hill's highest point and waited for the pain in his muscles, chest, and head to subside and for his breathing to slow.

He produced the album and a sheet of paper from the knapsack. The sheet was covered in neat, cursive handwriting. He was shocked to realise how long it'd been since he'd last read a handwritten letter.

He recalled reading this letter the first time and misunderstanding the information in Kirsty's opening lines: *"I'm letting you know that I've made a big decision. You're aware I'd retrained as a computer programmer? Yes, you are. I remember telling you and you laughed at me, because you were with me the very time I attempted to operate a computer and I couldn't work out what the mouse was for. Well, you should see me now. I've done well for myself, financially and reputationally, thanks to my work thwarting Y2K. And not only do I have a lucrative new job lined up, but that job's in Perth. I'm moving there next month..."* Initially, he'd assumed she meant Perth, Scotland.

He didn't twig until Kirsty wrote later, *"Of course, being in Australia, I can't attend any more of our reunions on the drove road. That's the one thing in Scotland I'll miss—seeing you, Jimmy, Cathy, Mike and Sam again and being reminded of my misspent, but idealistic and gloriously fun youth. When the five of you walk the road in future, I'll make sure to raise a glass to you and to the memory of Fay. Beautiful, imperious Fay..."*

He'd been astounded. Kirsty, ditching everything for... computer programming? Now, on Bleck Hill, he said aloud, "You were the most talented of us all"

A harsh sound, like an indignant splutter, came from nearby. Douglas twisted around and discovered the source of the sound to be a ewe, laden with a thick, matted fleece, that'd approached unnoticed. Its black face scowled at him from between two downturned horns.

Mentally, he corrected himself: The most talented of us after Fay was gone.

Then he inspected the album's last page of photos. These were taken at the reunion following Kirsty's departure for Australia. When he put it back in the knapsack, he felt relieved he wouldn't need to look at it again. His eyesight still played tricks on him and he kept thinking, momentarily, that in those final photos six people were present, not five.

The next part was easier, though still exhausting for Douglas. From Bleck Hill to Cranston Craig, then to Tuchet Law and Glen Rig, the drove road didn't plunge into and climb out of any more valleys. It oscillated between the peaks, going a little way down, a little way up. Now it was an avenue of grass, earth and stones. On either side were banks of brown-green heather, sometimes hemmed by lines of rubble from tumbled drystane dykes.

On Cranston Craig, having recuperated somewhat, he took out his phone and laptop. Using the phone, he accessed his Hotmail account. It surprised him that Internet coverage existed in a wilderness like this.

The Drove Road by Steve Cashel

The reason was possibly a mast that rose like a tall, silver stalk from a distant summit. How Fay would have hated seeing that.

He'd created the account two decades ago. Since then, it told him, he'd sent 1,517 emails, which seemed a lot. Probably, though, the figure was low compared to the output of the 21st century's more sociable digital citizens. He hunted among his earliest sent emails for the ones he'd written to Jimmy.

Near the end of their correspondence, one asked, *"Jimmy, are you all right? You haven't replied to several messages now. Please drop me a line when you can."*

Another said, *"I'm worried about you. Please reply."*

The final one: *"If we upset you somehow, we're very sorry. But please get in touch."*

Jimmy's account must have been working because no emails had bounced back. He'd received them, maybe read them, and not replied. As simple as that. And so he was lost to them.

I should try Googling him, Douglas thought. Though being called James Wilson, he'd be hard to locate. They used to say that when Jimmy had the big breakthrough with his writing—which would surely happen soon—he'd have to replace his commonplace name with a more exotic pseudonym.

Douglas was using a digital camera by the time Jimmy went AWOL. Its photos had passed from hard drive to hard drive of successive laptops. He opened a folder on his current laptop and flicked through the photos from their first post-Jimmy reunion. He paused at one where the four of them huddled on Shield Law in various-coloured windcheaters, hoods up—it'd rained during that year's ascent. With the trackpad and cursor, he zoomed in on the photo and shifted it around until he could study part of it close-up. Between and behind the heads of Cathy and Sam, he thought he saw a curved line in the shape of another hood where the rain appeared to stop, though it had nothing to impact against. He zoomed in further...

No, the rain was falling the whole way down. Nothing there.

He spent longer on each summit and found it harder to get up again.

On Tuchet Law, he fumbled the laptop out of his knapsack. Despite his pain and tiredness, it occurred to him how weird, how voyeuristic he'd been in emailing Cathy's voicemail to himself from his old phone. Like the photos, he'd then stored the audio file on his laptops. He played the message when he'd stopped rasping for breath and could hear it properly.

"Well, I'll be there. Of course I'll be there. You know how much I adored Fay. I owe it to her to make it.

"But Mike won't be. You won't see fucking Mike again.

"You know we'd tried to keep an oar in with our acting by joining that local amateur drama group? Well, nine or ten months ago, they mounted a production of Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound*—like The Seven Drovers did. And Mike blagged his way into directing it, based on our experience with the play decades ago. He got a bit too close to the actress playing Felicity Cunningham... A bit too close? Christ, why am I being so delicate? He started shagging her because she was 20 years his junior and it helped mitigate his mid-life crisis. Now they're a couple. Moved to Alexandria outside Glasgow, near Loch Lomond. Not quite like Kirsty taking off for Australia, though Mike probably thinks it is. Imagines he's going to the other end of the earth, jettisoning his old life, beginning afresh"

A sigh. "But don't worry. As I said, I'll be there again this year. Frumpy, reliable old Cath. Always there..."

Douglas opened another folder and, this time, checked if there were three of them on Shield Law, or four.

On Glen Rig, he slumped against the cairn as limp and unmoving as a discarded ragdoll. A wind began blowing and knocked tufts of sheep-wool over his splayed legs. Finally, he sat up, found his phone and looked for the chat with Cathy's last messages.

"I'm done with this," said one. *"Absolutely done. Don't try to dissuade me, Douglas. Won't work."*

Another: *"Last year, for instance. I drank two hipflasks of brandy going up there. Can't even remember how you and Sam got me back down. That's scary."*

Another: *"Dunno if it's me missing Mike, bastard though he was, and our expeditions reminding me of him."*

Another: *"Or maybe it's Fay. Still breaking my heart, from the grave, after all these years."*

The Drove Road by Steve Cashel

Finally: “*But that’s me finished. Sorry Douglas, but I’m blocking you now. Bye.*”

By then, the photos of Shield Law had been taken with and stored on his phone. He squinted at the selfies, trying to discern if, in the years after Cathy stopped attending, there were two people present, or three.

Suddenly, he realised he no longer cared.

When he finally wrestled himself onto his feet, he pocketed the phone and left the knapsack with the album, laptop and everything else by the base of the cairn. It was too heavy to carry. He’d collect it on his way back.

“And stop fucking filming me, weirdo!”

Though his hand shook, Douglas managed to hold the phone in front of him and watch the footage on its screen. Shield Law looked different a year ago when mist enveloped the landscape. It formed a grey curtain behind Sam.

Sam bawled at him. “Can’t you see how sad and pathetic and fucked-up this is? Year after year after year, dragging our decrepit selves up here, for what? To cling to a faraway memory of when we had dreams, ideals, principles? When we imagined a timeline for ourselves not like the dreary crap one we ended up living in...”

A voice tried to protest—Douglas’s, behind the phone.

“Look at us, Douglas! Me, a teacher, spending his remaining productive years forcing moaning numpty teenagers through their Higher English. Haven’t taught drama since 2010. And you? What have you to show for yourself? A shopworker—”

“Shop *manager*.”

“Still a serf—in a fucking shoe-shop!” Sam turned and strode into the mist. Just before it swallowed him, he turned back. “Though... It was never really because of that, was it? You insisted on keeping in touch with us, long after we’d stopped having anything in common, and driving us up here. You were the *last* drover—because of her. Your morbid Edgar Allan Poe-type passion for a woman dead for 35 years, a woman who hardly paid you any attention when she was alive. You pretended it was a big, noble friends-forever reunion but that was just to conceal the truth. You’ve spent your adult life obsessing over a corpse!”

Then Sam was gone. Dazed by the outburst, Douglas had for another minute kept pointing the phone into the mist and filming. While he watched that last, silent minute of footage now, he realised he saw another figure. It stood amid the mist, dark and hazy, little of it discernible. But its slim, feminine form meant it wasn’t Sam lurking at the edge of the summit, wondering if he should return and apologise.

The clip ended and Douglas lowered his hand and phone. Yet the figure remained in sight, standing across the summit from him. There was no mist today, but somehow the figure remained dark and obscure.

All this time, Douglas’s other hand had clutched the top of the trig point. His arm wobbled, he lost his grasp on the stone column, his legs buckled and dumped him on the ground. Already he was slathered in black muck and dirt. On his way up to Shield Law, he’d blundered into a peat hag and nearly *not* crawled out of it.

He was in such pain and so depleted of breath that he couldn’t look up. But still, he sensed she’d approached and was standing over him. “I always felt your presence here,” he croaked. “But only now... without the others... I *perceive* you.”

“You’re sick,” she said. “What’s wrong with you?”

“A disease, a new disease... Since Sam and I were last here... it’s been an eventful year.” A minute passed before he could speak again. “I broke lockdown rules driving here... and getting up the drove road was an ordeal... I made it, though... I always make it for you.”

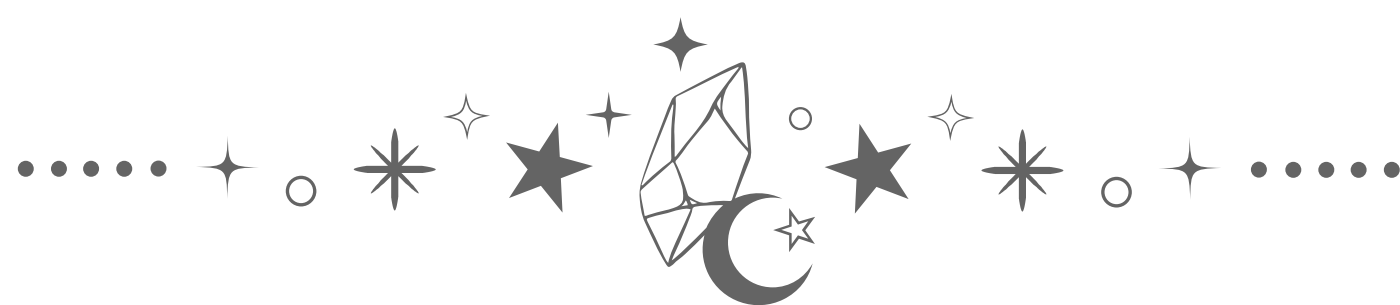
Her voice was ruminative, perhaps pitying. “Yes. You always make it. But why? Why do you stay with me?”

The Drove Road by Steve Cashel

While the pain in his chest was intense, his limbs felt wholly numb. He imagined soon, between them, the pain and numbness would consume him entirely and he'd cease to exist. "Why do you keep me?" he retorted. Then he laughed—his laughter hideously parched and rasping—remembering Beckett's *Endgame*.

She recited the play's next line: "There's no one else."

Not missing a beat, he answered, "There's *nowhere* else." And he knew, for him, there *was* nowhere else.



Here to Help by Leslie Rourke

Content warning: sexual assault, substance use

He watches from the bus stop as the good mothers pull up to the Pilates studio at 10:30 a.m. A small blonde woman hops out of her white SUV, her smooth, high ponytail bouncing. She is wearing a pink leotard. Perfect little body. He catches her eye and winks. She turns away quickly and clicks her key fob twice, the morning sun flashing on her diamond ring.

He takes the bus downtown to the noon AA meeting. There are cookies and coffee. He hasn't eaten yet today. He volunteers to read the opening and then shares his experience, strength, and hope with the group. There is laughter and applause. One woman dabs her eyes with a tissue.

He looks around the room. Lots of young ones here today. Fragile, eyes red, broken. Fresh from rehab or a sober living facility, dropped off by concerned family members or sent by the courts. He watches them in the way he imagines a kind father would. He tries to make his eyes seem gentle. He believes they are.

His eyes settle on a young woman with stringy blonde hair standing alone near the coffee table. He starts toward her.

An older woman reaches her first and gently takes her by the arm. "Come on, honey. Let's get you some women's phone numbers." She leads her toward a group of women across the room.

Then he sees the young man, and he smiles. The young man smiles back. He is thin, bowed. He prefers a woman with a juicy ass, but this one will do.

He approaches the young man after the meeting.

"How long you got, son?" he asks, and he means it.

"Twenty-four hours, sir." The young man clutches his Big Book to his chest.

He taps the book. "You'll find the answers to life's questions in here. Do you have a sponsor yet?"

"No, sir," says the young man.

"Hey, I'll tell you what. There's a pie shop down the street. Why don't we get a bite to eat? I can help you read the first chapter. Call me a temporary sponsor if you want, or better yet, call me Hank."

"I'd like that, sir," the young man says quietly.

Hank notices the young man's clothes are nice. Someone just bought him those.

"Where you staying?"

"My parents put me in the motel down the street and told me I couldn't come home until I had thirty days."

"Perfect," Hank assures him. "I am here to help."

The coffee shop is next door to the motel. The boy says his name is Ryan. Hank orders a club sandwich. Ryan asks for just coffee, fills it with ten tiny containers of creamer, and lets it sit.

Hank is starving. He eats the club sandwich and signals to the waitress. "Hey, honey, why don't you bring a couple of pieces of that apple pie for me and my buddy Ryan?" He tries a wink. She rolls her eyes. A minute later, she returns with the pie and slams the check on the table.

Ryan takes one sip of coffee and picks at his pie.

Hank reaches for his wallet. "Oh damn, Ryan, I left my wallet at home! I always buy my guys lunch the first time we meet."

Ryan mumbles, "That's okay. My mom gave me a card for my expenses. She said not to tell my dad."

"How old are you, Ryan?"

"I'm twenty."

"Was this your first meeting?"

"Yes, sir. I've been to rehab a few times since I was fifteen."

"Oh, I remember my first meeting. It was like the world finally opened up."

Ryan asks, "How did you get to your first meeting?"

"I woke up naked in a bush by the side of the freeway one day and said, I can't do this anymore."

"Ryan, do you know the definition of insanity? It's doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results."

Ryan smiles, then lets out a small laugh.

Here to Help by Leslie Rourke

Content warning: sexual assault, substance use

“You think that's funny? I have got stories for days. What got you here?”

“Fentanyl, mostly. A lot of stuff, but lately just fentanyl. My sister found me in my room, and that's when my parents kicked me out.”

“Hey, buddy, have you started the Big Book yet? I can help you. We can take turns reading. We should find somewhere quiet.”

Ryan points to the motel. “We can go to my room and read. There’s a table and chairs.”

“You feel comfortable with that?”

Ryan shrugs.

“Okay, buddy, let's go. This is the first day of the rest of your life.”

In the room, Ryan's phone rings.

“It's my mom. I have to take it.”

“Hey, Mom. Yes, I went to a meeting. I met a man who said he's going to be my sponsor.” Ryan smiles.

“Thanks, Mom. That means a lot. One day at a time.”

Hank gives him a thumbs-up.

“Love you, Mom. I'll talk to you tomorrow.”

Hank looks around the room. A brand-new duffel bag with RYAN printed on it sits near the bed. A case of water is next to the motel refrigerator. An empty Nike shoe box and a Foot Locker shopping bag are on the dresser.

Hank sits down at the table and opens the Big Book. “Okay, here’s how it works. You read the first page, then we take turns. Take a break whenever you need one.”

Ryan makes it through the first paragraph before tears fill his eyes. Hank scoots his chair closer.

“Come here, buddy. Tell Hank what's wrong. There's no secrets with your sponsor.”

The sobs get louder. Ryan’s body shakes with grief. Hank wraps both arms around him and guides him to the bed, rocking him. Ryan continues crying, but his body relaxes.

Hank rocks him until sobs turn to hiccups. “There, there buddy. You’re just reaching rock bottom. We’ve all been there.” He rubs Ryan’s back. His fingers catch on a belt loop. Hank slips Ryan’s pants down to his knees. Damn, that boy is thin. What he wouldn't do for a woman with some meat on her right now. Hank pushes himself into Ryan.

Ryan freezes.

Hank finishes and gets up. “I’m going to hit the head and then we can continue reading, okay?”

Hank heads to the bathroom. There’s a shower, brand-new soap, and some kind of fancy-smelling shampoo he’s never seen before. He smells an armpit. Sour sweat. Why not? He runs the shower, lathers himself in lavender or peach or whatever the hell it is.

Damn, I smell like a chick.

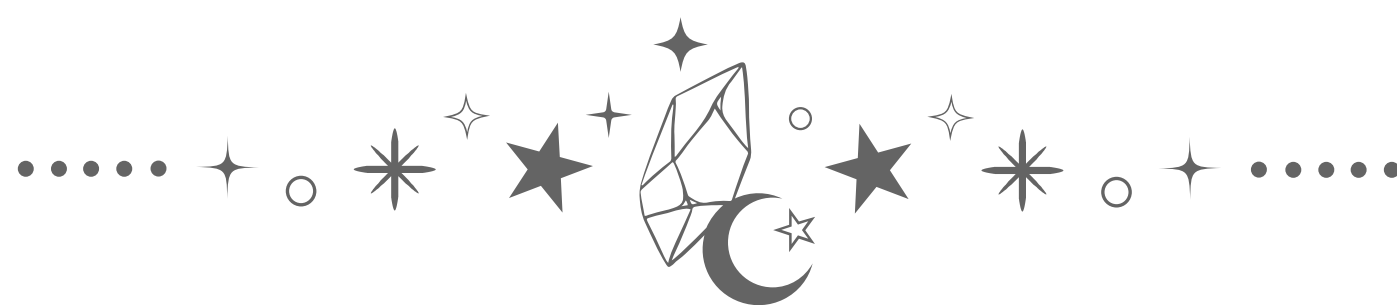
As he's drying off, he notices the bottle. Xanax. He shakes it. Nearly full.

Hank puts his pants back on and slips the bottle in his pocket.

When he comes back, Ryan is still on the bed in a fetal position, his pants still around his knees.

“Hey, buddy,” Hank says. “I’ll see you tomorrow at noon? You don't have to do this alone.”

Hank whistles as he walks down the street to the number 14 bus stop. St. Luke’s Fellowship is having a potluck tonight. The girls there know how to put on a good spread.



Thirty-Eight Degrees by Patrick Carella

By nightfall, the last of the mourners had drifted home.

She was the matron of the family, now.

Staying in the old house made more sense than driving home. In the morning there'd be movers to call, an estate sale to arrange, photographs to sort through. She lay awake in her old bedroom. The brass bed still sat beneath the casement window.

Two-thirty in the morning. The P.F. Chang's hadn't quite done the job. Her stomach complained with a Bronx accent.

She headed down the narrow staircase, making sure not to knock any of the framed photos from their hooks.

She knew the refrigerator was empty.

Still, she looked.

It was an old avocado-green GE, the kind Alice might have opened while getting dinner ready for the Brady's. Her parents had never seen a reason to replace it. Why should they? It worked perfectly, and if anything, it kept food colder than the stainless-steel one in her apartment.

She pulled the heavy handle and braced for the brilliant light that used to hurt her eyes when she'd come home late, usually with the munchies.

Darkness.

Yet, she was able to make out an image.

There, on the middle shelf, sat a white porcelain bowl covered with wax paper held in place by a rubber band.

It hadn't been there before.

She lifted off the rubber band and peeled back the wax paper.

White pasta fagioli.

Not the tomato version. The white one. White wine. Chicken broth.

She put it in the "mike," her mother's word for the microwave.

When it dinged, she lifted the bowl with a dish towel and sat at the old kitchen table.

The first spoonful was rich and brothy. Comfort.

She rolled it across her tongue, searching the familiar flavors. Then she found it.

Guanciale.

Not pancetta. Not bacon.

Guanciale.

And fresh beans. She could always tell fresh beans by their distinctive bite that defied cooking.

No one else made it that way.

Her mother's recipe.

She took another spoonful. The ditalini peeked out from the beans. She found herself wishing for freshly grated Locatelli. It always reminded her of snow falling onto a bumpy landscape.

"SPLINK!"

The noise came from the refrigerator. It wasn't the sound one would expect to hear when the compressor turns off. This was different—like something hard hitting something metallic.

She opened the door slowly.

On the middle shelf sat a small plate.

Freshly grated Locatelli.

Fine as snow.

She went back to bed.

She slept like a baby.

Morning came and she made coffee in the old Farberware percolator.

The half and half was waiting for her in a pint-sized Pathmark container.

Pathmark supermarkets had closed its doors twenty years earlier.

She spent the morning piling and organizing clothes: suits, dresses, robes, shirts, nightgowns, ties.

Thirty-Eight Degrees by Patrick Carella

Some would go to relatives, most would go to Goodwill.

It was around noon when she realized she hadn't eaten yet.

"I have a hankering for those stuffed green peppers," she said to no one in particular. She couldn't remember the last time she'd used the word hankering.

She opened the refrigerator.

A Pyrex dish held two green bell peppers stuffed with chopped meat and rice, resting in a shallow pool of tomato juice. Her mother used tomato juice instead of sauce.

She warmed them in the microwave. Soon the kitchen filled with the familiar, heady aroma.

She sorted cookbooks over a plate of pizzelles, waiting at a steady thirty-eight degrees, powdered sugar freshly sprinkled.

Housewares were sorted and packed. A Corning dish filled with escarole and beans waited on the top shelf.

The next afternoon her daughter stopped by with two empty boxes and a roll of packing tape.

"You should have called me."

"I've got it."

"You've got too much."

Together, they boxed up lamps, framed pictures, knick-knacks and three generations of serving bowls that hadn't seen a holiday table in years. Every few minutes her daughter held something up.

"Keep?"

"Donate?"

"Trash?"

By dinner, they were both dusty and tired.

"What do you have to eat?"

Her daughter crossed to the refrigerator before she could answer.

She froze.

The refrigerator.

Her daughter opened the refrigerator door and stared inside.

"Mom, there's nothing in here."

"What?"

"Nothing. Not even milk." She laughed. "What have you been eating?"

She walked over slowly.

The shelves were bare.

No soup.

No cheese.

No stuffed peppers.

Nothing.

"I guess I haven't been very hungry," she said.

"You need to take care of yourself."

"I will."

Her daughter ordered sandwiches. They ate at the kitchen table, talked about funeral flowers, and argued over whether the old dining room set should stay in the family. By nine o'clock, the boxes were stacked neatly by the front door.

"Call me if you need anything."

"I will."

She waited until her daughter's car disappeared around the corner.

Then she walked back into the kitchen.

She stood in front of the refrigerator for a long moment before pulling the heavy handle.

An earthenware crock sat on the top shelf.

Chicken soup. She heated it up and said grace.

Thirty-Eight Degrees by Patrick Carella

The next day, she found a plastic container on the middle shelf. By then, a morning of sorting closets had left her famished. She peeled back the lid.

Calamari sauce.

The unmistakable aroma rushed up to meet her.

It was Christmas Eve again. Any Christmas Eve. An endless parade of seafood for hungry relatives. She could still hear the clatter of dishes, the arguments over cards in the dining room, the adults laughing loudly.

She hated seafood.

She hated calamari sauce most of all.

"Very funny, Mom."

She stared at the hutch.

She'd been putting it off long enough.

Cigar boxes. Albums. Stacks bound with rubber bands. All filled with photos.

It was time to dive in.

They reappeared all at once—from Kodachromes and sepia prints, photo booth cameos and portrait studios: people, places, and times, like ghosts coming and going at the command of her fingers.

The showdown with blue crab in Wildwood that would not release its pincers from her foot.

Looking at the giant wrought-iron initial on the family home in Gravina where she was born.

Harry jumping with the 101st Airborne.

Bobby, Petey, and the rest of the cousins throwing sandwiches at each other at her wedding.

Most of them were gone.

The Christmas pictures outnumbered everything else. Living rooms in the Bronx and Yonkers. Fresh trees gave way to artificial ones, then back to fresh again, each serving as the backdrop for another year.

There was Dad carving the turkey.

Mom arranging antipasto.

Her brother sneaking struffoli before dinner.

Her sons with their giant plastic toys in mock battle.

She laughed out loud.

The photo of Christmas in the Bronx—its edges worn, black paper from an old photo book still glued on.

Everyone was there, both sides, all gathered around the dining room table and its extensions. Her father in the center, proudly holding a baby. Her.

By the time she realized she was hungry, the afternoon sun had shifted across the living room floor.

She opened the refrigerator.

For a moment she simply stared.

Trays of antipasto crowded the shelves. Genoa salami. Soppressata. Roasted peppers. Olives. Caponata. A pan of lasagna. Stuffed artichokes.

On the bottom shelf sat a whole roasted turkey.

She laughed.

"You're making up for Christmas Eve."

She spent the afternoon grazing.

A slice of lasagna.

A stuffed mushroom.

A wedge of provolone.

By evening the turkey had disappeared.

In its place sat Italian pastries, rainbow cookies, hard candies, fruit, and a jug of red wine marinating with peaches.

She poured herself a small glass.

"To both of you. Miss you."

The next morning she opened the refrigerator.

Thirty-Eight Degrees by Patrick Carella

On the middle shelf sat a square of halvah wrapped in wax paper.

"Dad."

She smiled.

Still full from the feast, she settled for a cold, peeled hard-boiled egg.

The movers finally thumped out with the last piece of furniture. She put the boxes of photos in the car.

The house was empty.

"I could really go for a cold apple."

She opened the avocado door.

Empty. The motor hummed quietly.

She smiled.

She closed the door.

Then opened it once more.

Just shelves.

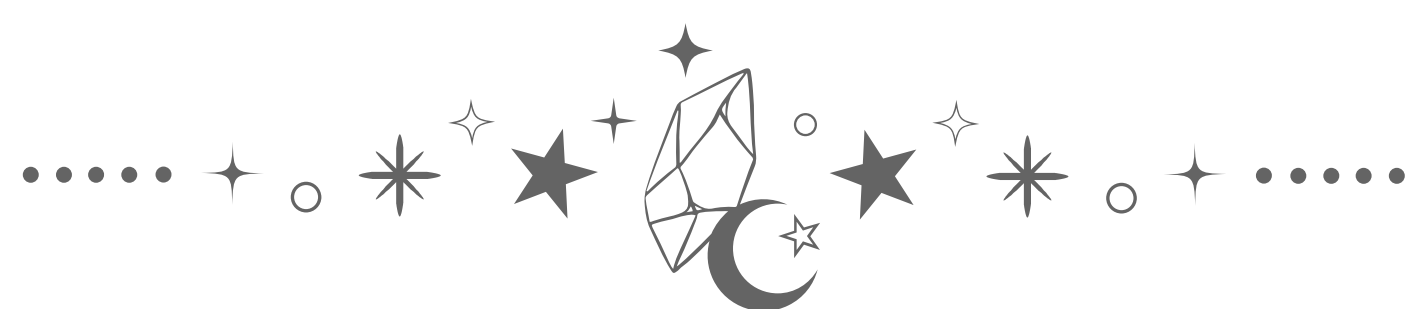
She walked to the front door and pulled it open.

One last look.

Through the narrow seam where its insulation wore thin, she caught a faint flicker.

Then a beam of light.

Enough to hurt her eyes.



Twenty Five Club by Ella Barron Carton

A very bad thing happened to my friend. He died. That was the bad thing; he died there whenever I was admitted here, and if that was three days ago, like I think it was, then right now he's being lowered into his grave. I'm missing it.

It's my fault he's being put there. It is also my fault that he is being buried and not cremated—he was always talking about being cremated, no chance of being buried alive. It's my fault they're playing whatever music they're playing. He had plotted out his funeral plans to me, and only me, in great detail, like he foresaw—and looked forward to—his flamboyant end. But he's dead so I suppose the funeral is for his mom and sisters and grandparents and the like. They need to remember him and he no longer has a say.

He never had much of a say anyway—Eoin, that was his name—and he never had much of a say in anything. He kinda went along with things cause he always thought he was the lesser in the group. We were both artists, typical I know, and we did the whole art college thing. That's how we met. Shared a room for the first year. I swear, he was one of the best I'd ever seen. Painting I mean—he was a better painter than any I'd ever met, you know—better than me or the rest we knew—but he assumed he was shit because his shit was weird.

Mad thing was, he didn't even get a fine art degree. He did first year, got scared, and changed course. Chose architecture so he could still sketch.

Forever down on himself, down on his art, he didn't pursue it, really, for ages. Straight after his degree he popped himself into a fucking multinational corporation on the outskirts of town—a Starbucks—and there he remained. Well, now his remains will remain in the graveyard back out behind it.

He never even let himself be made supervisor.

I don't know where I should start.

Starting at the start wouldn't be enough. The start of the night was not the start of the falling apart, and no finger could be put on when that was. There are so many details from his life which will explain the one night, you know.

Details like how Eoin was a real fan of yokes. He was also whatever the opposite of a fan is of LSD. He kinda always enjoyed ket, as I suppose people usually do. I have yet to meet someone who has willingly tried it—unwillingly now that's a whole other story, that's being tranquilised—and didn't at least kinda enjoy it.

Anyway, we started on all that sorta thing in first year of college. We'd both been kinda dumb in secondary school, but not as dumb as we could have been. We both drank since we were about fourteen, which is kinda normal, you know? And we both smoked since fifteen when both of us finally knew people to buy us fags and had strange cousins pass us a joint every now and again when it seemed least likely we'd be caught. I mean, I always thought I'd end up some low-life stoner who painted his feelings and killed himself tragically in his forties after 20 odd years of no success. Eoin had bigger dreams.

He always knew he'd end up on all sorts of other stuff, convinced he'd be the most boring man added to the twenty-seven club. Most young people talk like that though, you know? Most young people can't think far ahead or see themselves slowing down.

So, it was Halloween. Three days ago. I think, anyway. And we were sad. As gloomy as a pair of young, failing artists could be. So typical, fucking hell. It's so fucking typical, it's embarrassing. But anyway, we were sad, and we were both off work. Well, I am on the dole anyway, but I gave myself the day off painting to be sad and off work with Eoin.

We didn't have very much to begin with. We smoked joints and talked about the success of some former classmates, Eoin complaining about work. He did that a lot. Three years there though, which is exhausting for a job you can't stand.

That, and he was sad about Angela. She had been messing around with his head, to be fair. She used to get really sweet on MDMA, would sit on him, basically, and stroke his hair, hold his hand, and kiss it or hold it to her lips for long periods of time. He had thought she was pure magic, or some shit, and she'd say things to him like, "oh I love you so, so much. You are the best person in the world. Oh, I think we should get married when we're older and saner. We can't be together now though—we're not healthy."

Twenty Five Club by Ella Barron Carton

They'd go hill walking and she'd pose for his paintings. Half the time, she'd show him off like a prize pony and kiss him in front of all of their friends. The other half, she'd go on for hours about how she doesn't think monogamy is real and commitment is a con. She's going out with Steven Connolly now. You don't know who he is of course, but he's a prick.

So, to avoid all the downers, what with this down-turning conversation, Eoin phoned a lad he went to primary school with and bought nine yokes. There were only two of us, I reminded him, but he insisted that this lad's stuff was only half the usual strength anyway. I wasn't so sure. I mean, a yoke is a yoke is a yoke is a yoke, you know. But there you go. So, we walked down the main street and out across to the council estate where everything felt a little bit dodgier.

The whole street was alive, what with the wind blowing soggy leaves all over the place and candles mocking us from the inside of pumpkins. It was still daylight, no kids about yet. We arrived at your man's gaff which was covered in this fake police-tape saying, "enter if you dare," that you can get in the two-euro shop. He welcomed us inside and it became obvious very quickly that this lad has a family. Like, kids. Fuck, he was our age, and he already had a pair of four-year olds running around in witch costumes. That kinda took me aback. But anyway, we went into his bedroom and he rooted around inside his bedside locker and gave us the yokes—pink love-hearts that looked like those sweets—and we gave him fifty quid. He said trick or treat, which is probably what he expected us to say.

One each, dry swallowed.

A touch of dusk had entered the sky, so we sped off as quick as we could. Inside, Eoin crushed up another to snort while I went into my room to find a drawing I did. I always loved showing off to Eoin, you see. Eoin was good to show off to. You show him a bit of shit on a page and he tears up. Feeling slightly giddy now, my memory of what I'd done was getting skewed.

So, I was flicking through pages and what falls out, but almost a full blotter of acid. Couldn't believe my luck, thought I'd lost that weeks ago. I ripped maybe two tabs off and started chewing away as I walked back into the main room with it. I forgot to show Eoin the drawing. Now he'll never see it, I guess.

The second Eoin caught sight of me he started shaking his head. You don't have to have any like, I told him. He didn't have to have any, but I did.

Shite was talked and I started to get thirsty, my jaw going ninety. I had nothing but Tesco lager in the fridge to drink. I couldn't have the water cause the fluoride is worse for you than any drug I've ever taken, you know. So we drank some of the lager, talked more shite, and then took another pill.

I was seeing some stuff now. Sound was getting uncertain too, and I kept thinking there was someone at the door. We turned off the lights and sat in the stretched dusk for fear of trick-or-treaters, despite being on the first floor above a shop. Nothing at that moment could be more terrifying than those kids, you know. Those kids who only want treats and all we have to give is a little lager or ecstasy shaped like a sweet that could stop their hearts. Our eyes so wide and our jaws going so fast that we would scare them senseless and their parents would call the guards.

Seeing as we had no gum, we thought it would be good to chew on some paper. The floor was covered in newspaper but all of it was manky. We could peel the paint off but that wouldn't have been enough. More acid was the answer. Of course. Everything began to get a little bit sideways.

Felt like I couldn't breathe, even when I was. Was talking shite at the speed of light and laughing at myself when I didn't say anything. Walls kept moving away from us and the light in the room changed colour. The aura of the couch vibrated throughout, turning everything red and I felt like I was in a seventy's porno. Out of some intense fear that we were going to be filmed bumming one another if I kept sitting there, I got up and paced the room, away from Eoin. He sat there staring at the sheets of newspaper, scared face on him.

I'll never know what he was seeing, I was too afraid to talk to him in case he tried to have sex with me. Unbelievable, really. An insane fear to have of your best friend. "Fragile heterosexuality" is what he would have said to me; he never had an issue with that. One of the few things he didn't have an issue with, if I'm honest. People were forever thinking he was gay, flamboyant as he was.

Twenty Five Club by Ella Barron Carton

Anyway, I will never know what he was seeing, because I was too scared to ask, but he was really beginning to freak.

Eventually, I lay down and looked at the plain white ceiling as it bubbled and breathed. Red and green pumped through my veins and out of my eyes and upwards. Next thing I knew, Eoin's head unfurled into my square of vision. His nose was bleeding and a drop landed on my face. It sent ripples out over my skin. He told me we need to get benzos right now or he's never going to see again. That scared me cause it made no sense, you know.

So, we got up, put our shoes on, and landed in the street. There were still kids everywhere, all dressed up, you know. When we were in first year of college we won Best Couples costume for being the dayman and nightman from that episode of *It's Always Sunny In Philadelphia*. In second year, we won again as Lilo and Stitch. I wore a hula skirt and coconut bra and tried my best to look like a little Hawaiian girl—something you'd never get away with these days. Third year, we didn't win even though we were the best representations of Beyoncé and Jay-Z I'd ever seen. We did win in final year, again, with Troy and Gabriella from High School Musical. He followed me around singing love songs.

We haven't really *done* Halloween since. It was October 31st of final year that Eoin realised acid didn't suit him. We dropped three tabs each and went to a costume party. I was fine, I guess, you know. I enjoyed it, it was enjoyable. I loved seeing how the already screwed up looking faces were further screwed up by the acid, people with fake cuts looked like they were gushing blood. The more I describe it, the more I understand how it would be freaky.

I lost him at that party. Didn't even realise until some girl we half knew grabbed me by the shoulder and dragged me through seven layers of hell to land at Eoin's feet. He was curled up under the sink in this girl's en suite bathroom with real cuts all over his body. He never really remembered what had happened, only that he thought there was a wolf in the building. But you know, there were probably like, twenty wolves and werewolf type things under that roof.

Anyway, there we were, walking through the streets, and I realised I wasn't feeling too good. Panic took over me for a moment before I realised that a diet of chocolate coins, paper, and Tesco lager don't make a nutritious and delicious meal. Calming down and enjoying the fresh air, I managed to ignore the increasing fear eating its way across Eoin's face. He had taken some painkillers earlier on, thinking Codeine was a benzodiazepine when it wasn't. Of course, paracetamol and ecstasy don't mix, and to be frank, Tesco lager didn't mix well with anything. So now, in our muddled state of mind, we're trying to remember what the hell actually is a benzo other than Xanax. We knew someone who was selling some, like, a week ago, but we couldn't remember if he had much left. We walked to his house, anyway.

Rob Mulcahy, that was the name of your man. We were in his living room asking about the Xanax and listening to him lie and say he was fresh out. Listening to him lie and say that ketamine is a benzodiazepine. Listening to him lie and say that fifty a gram is a good price, until finally, our minds faltered and we both believed these incredible truths.

Of course, ket is a benzo, how could we have been so *stupid*? Ket does to horses what Xanax does to people, that makes total sense. We will take as much as you have, Rob Mulcahy, you reliable bastard you, and we'll take it now, please. We need to wake the fuck up from this nightmare as soon as possible, please.

Eoin took some first. He took a couple of keys, I don't know how many, and then he started to cry. His nose was all crusty with blood still and he picked off all the little bits of hardened blood and ate them as they were now dusted in what he thought was a cure. I took a bump then and got a sinking feeling in my stomach. Something definitely wasn't right. Eoin's nose was bleeding again.

We left Rob Mulcahy's house. Got as far as the river when Eoin's crying crippled him. I was freaked out because his eyes were bleeding as far as I could tell. He wanted to take more, to make it all go away faster, so we dipped down into that place by the bridge from my teen years. This was where you can take as many drugs as you want, smoke as many spliffs, drink as many cans, and no one would see.

Eoin was releasing equal part wails and hiccups into the air and I couldn't concentrate on anything, you know.

Twenty Five Club by Ella Barron Carton

My hand in my pocket and holding the bag, I then forgot what I was doing and dropped my arm again. Over and over I got close to completing the task before forgetting what I was doing and having to start over.

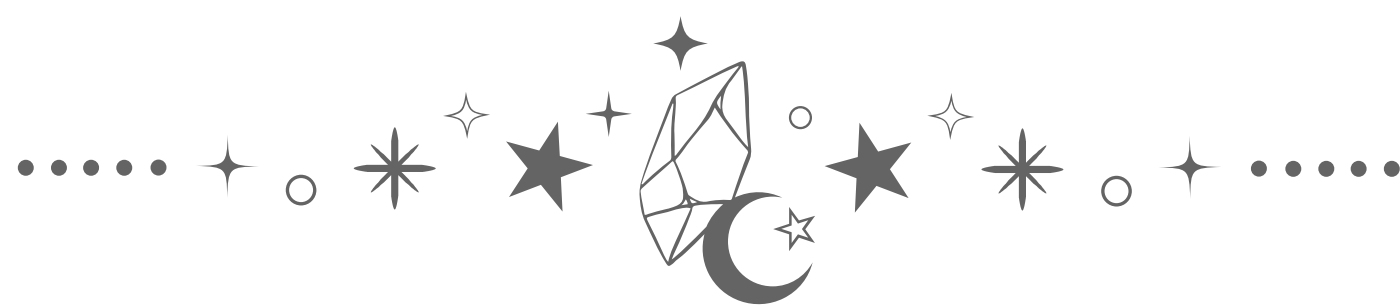
From across the river I saw this giant fish come towards us. Stumbling backwards, landed on my back right before it launched at me. Closing my eyes, I felt the thump of its entire weight. I screamed and fought my eyelids only to see Eoin's body on top of mine. I know now he was k-holing.

He was completely paralysed, but his nose was still bleeding, his eyes were still crying, silent except for coughs. I pushed him off me and saw that he was melting. Jesus Christ, he was *melting*. His face was *melting* off. His eyes were melting, his nose was melting, and most of all, his chin and mouth were melting. Oh no, I thought, oh *no*.

It made sense to me that seeing that fish launch at us was sobriety coming toward me like an evil creature, you know, and now what was happening was totally real and that my best friend was melting right in front of me. I started grabbing his melted flesh and scooping it back onto what was left of his face. He might not be pretty anymore, but I needed to keep him together. I needed to keep him from becoming liquid and seeping into the river like sewage.

I know now—at least I think I do—that he wasn't actually melting. Yes, he was dying, but all that stuff that was leaking from his face and down into the soil was tears, blood, and vomit. And in piling that cocktail of shit back on to his face, I was helping him choke. I was helping him die.

Screams eventually alerted people. I didn't even know I was screaming. Some people must have thought it was a shitty Halloween prank, you know. I am still kinda hoping it is.



The Past is Empty by Jack Peterson

I stepped inside with little hesitation. The door shut behind me and I was sealed inside. I expected much more from such an invention, but it looked like nothing more than an elevator. The window on the door was a neat addition though; I could see the dread spread across the faces on the outside. Such an emotion couldn't be caught inhabiting my face though. I knew what I was getting into and I didn't care. Apathy was an old friend of mine, we'd gotten to know each other well over the last few years. However, excitement snuck its way into my body as I heard the machine charge up.

When they asked if I had a particular date and location I wanted to go back to, I gave my answer instantly. You see, I never drank. Never smoked. Never huffed. Never puffed. Never pricked my skin. No, my drug was nostalgia. I missed being a kid, when holidays still felt special. I missed high school and playing football with my buddies. I think simplicity is what I missed the most. After graduation, it felt like everything got complicated. While everyone else was able to adapt, I stayed the same. I was left alone to pick up the pieces that time had left behind. When I hit my 20s, I realized the only thing that gave me comfort was thinking about the past. Despite the fact that the good ol' days were gone, the emotions tied to them were very much alive; right there in my head, ready for me to retreat back to whenever I needed them. Of course, over time, this became an unhealthy habit. I spent so much time in the past that the ease I received from these memories began to fade. I guess I had built up a tolerance. This trip was my chance to rekindle the last bit of fire that resided within me.

The machine shook violently; I could no longer see through the window. I lost my footing and fell awkwardly to the ground. I felt a queasiness in my stomach, like the feeling you get when an elevator drops a little too suddenly, or when riding a steep rollercoaster. I had no sense of direction, but for some reason felt like I was moving downward. I could feel the rust coming off my body. Adrenaline shot through me, flooding my system with endorphins. This was real. Ironically, for the first time in a while, I thought about the future. *Maybe this will be good for me*, I pondered. *Perhaps, I will finally be able to move on*. Which was a weird thought because it didn't seem like it belonged to me. The shaking screeched to a halt. I gathered to my feet, fought some nausea, and for the first time in what felt like forever, I smiled with genuine joy. I was peering into a memory, how picturesque it was. My old home stood just as it did all those years ago. From the outside, it looked like any other house on the block, but to me, it was everything. This wasn't the version I had seen when I moved out; it was how it was meant to be. Two cars in the driveway instead of one. Christmas decorations lost to time were now back in their rightful spots. Snowflakes fell innocently, accumulating on the unplowed street.

I wanted to rip apart the door keeping me from paradise. As I prepared to unseal the airlock, I saw the front door open out of the corner of my eye. There he was, my mom's little boy, happy as can be. He was bundled up in a puffy jacket, a scarf that was way too big, and a New York Giants beanie. It had to be at least negative ten out there, but that adventurous little guy would've worn lead boots if it meant he could play in the glistening canvas that was laid out before him. *I wish snow still felt that special*. I could feel the bitterness from outside leech into the machine, but my body was intoxicatingly warm. I couldn't avert my gaze as I watched him run around. He looked awkward and clumsy moving through the thick layer of snow that was basically up to his torso. He fell backward into the blanket and out of view. When he emerged, he did something that broke my trance. He looked in my direction.

I quickly ducked down behind the window. I had almost completely forgotten about the nature of this trip. There was a very strict set of rules I was to follow. I'd be lying if I said I didn't plan on bending those rules a bit, but I didn't anticipate being dropped in the open like that. *My younger self saw the machine, 100%. I don't think he saw me though. Thank goodness*. I kept my body close to the wall, so much so that my back painfully rubbed against the metal as I slid upward to my feet. I slowly bent over, trying to reach a point where I could peek through the window without being seen. From what I could tell, he was gone. *What if he went to tell Mom what he saw? I gotta get out of here. Quick*. So, I broke the first rule and scurried out of the machine, stumbling into the winter storm. I had planned to cover it in snow – not the best idea but at least it wouldn't be out in the open. However, when I glanced back, all that stood in its place...was a divot.

The Past is Empty by Jack Peterson

Surely it hasn't been ten minutes. Has it? No, there's no way. Panic began to sink in, I could now feel the bite of the tundra that surrounded me. I clawed at the dent in the snow thinking I'd find some remnant of the machine. Nothing. For a moment I just laid there, trying to console myself. *It'll be alright. They'll probably send it back when they realize I'm not inside.* I noticed that while lost in thought that I had begun making a snow angel. I continued to wave my arms through the powder, falling back into complacency – it was very soothing. I almost missed the front door opening once more, luckily I had sunk down into my imprint. It was muffled, but I heard the voice of my mom. It sounded different than I remembered it – of course it had been quite a while.

“What, baby? There's nothing out here?”

“Momma, I swear! It was right there!”

Is that really what I used to sound like?

“Baby, you probably just saw a car or something. Though, “I don't know who's crazy enough to try and drive in this.” She mumbled.

“But, Mom! It wasn't a car!”

“Cut it out baby. I think the cold's getting to ya, you should just come inside. Dad'll be downstairs soon and we can open some presents.”

“Make me!”

It was muffled but I could hear my mom groan and whine as she chased the rambunctious little speedster across our yard. *We used to be so close.* Hearing her voice helped ease the bite of the snow against my skin. Even in frustration it was youthful and vibrant, not at all how I remembered it. Eventually, I could hear my mothers woes getting more and more distant. I knew the layout of my home well – so I devised that while the door was open, I would quickly run upstairs and into my room. I worried about what I might see when I emerged from the snow. *What if I misheard? They could still be within eyeshot. I **can't** let them see me, but...I've gotta get up and go. What choice do I have?* I rose from the snow with force – I didn't try to be subtle about it, afterall it was an all or nothing move. I charged forward, narrowing my vision until all I could see was the front door. Snow resisted every step of the way, but little-me's footprints had kindly paved a path for me. I slid into the doorway, nearly bear-crawled up the steps, and burst through my bedroom door like I had just got home from a long day of school.

I let out five big labored breaths as I shut the door behind me. I took it all in. My Xbox was still on – The store was open on the screen, I was prepared for a giftcard in my stocking, no doubt. A fathead of my favorite football player sprawled across the wall – back when he was still my favorite. My bed was messy and unmade, which brought a dim feeling of shame to the surface. I doubt little-me even knew what that word meant. On my desk was a piece of paper that said “Christmas List”. At the top in big bold letters, “Pair of Jordans”. Weirdly enough, I couldn't quite remember if I ended up getting the shoes. Next to the list was my Xbox controller. Video games had lost their magic for me in the present. Often I would turn the console on and quickly shut it off without playing anything. However, I felt that magical urge resurface, it took everything within me not to pick up and play. In that moment of contemplation, I was startled by two faint voices. I dropped my guard when I realized who they belonged to.

“Do you think he's coming back?” My old friend asked.

“I think he went to open presents,” My other friend replied.

“Really? This late?”

“Yeah, his family always opens presents late”

“Should we start a game?”

I reached for the headset, it was an unconscious action. I really missed my friends – I didn't care how many decades there were between us at that moment. I broke another rule.

“Yeah, let's ju–

“No! Don't start without me!” I screamed without thinking.

I don't know what kind of response I expected. I did, however, expect a response.

“Hello?” I asked innocently, like a kid would.

The Past is Empty by Jack Peterson

I realized just how stupid I was being, not just in that moment, but in general. *Why did I do that?* I didn't know whether they were silent out of fear, or if it was something much worse. When I looked around the room now, I could feel my presence tainting it. I tossed the headset back onto the desk and sat in my old chair. My heart began to pound to the point that it ached, but I had become a master at subduing it.

It's times like these that I remember the past. When my mom would suffocate me with hugs and kisses and remind me that Christmas was right around the corner. There was a time when that was enough to make me forget what I was worried about. I was back in a memory where things were supposed to be simple again. *My family's probably opening presents about now. I think I know a spot where I can watch without them seeing me. That'll make me feel better.* That thought seemed to ease my hysteria – marginally at least.

I moved slowly out of my room, extremely cognizant of my volume. I stopped at the top of the stairs. I glanced at my dad's door, which was now open. I tiptoed down the steps, staring at the framed photos of me on the wall. Each snapshot contained a different era of my life. Each one different from the last. As I reached the bottom of the stairs, the sounds of laughter, screaming, and careless paper-ripping filled the air. I peeked around the corner and watched it all unfold in real time. All my feelings evaporated into the spirit of the room. The golden rays of the Christmas tree, the lights dancing in their majestic patterns, they illuminated the scene perfectly. His happiness made my siblings happy, which made my parents happy – I missed that infectious familial love that I thought would last forever. Things were nice. I felt good. I thought I had been fixed. Yet, my heart began to pound again.

I want to join them...but I can't. I tried to reconcile with myself. *This is plenty. Just enjoy the moment.* Even in the happiest time of my life I couldn't be present. *Enjoy it. This is enough.* Just then, I heard the subtle sound of metal landing gently on a blanket of snow. I glimpsed through my front window, the machine was back. My heart pounded faster. *They won't send it back a third time. If I don't leave soon, I'll be stuck here...* Despite what my delusional mind was telling me, I had to go home. I felt stupid for ever thinking this trip would be good for me. All I did was stir up things I had long bottled up. I was better off in my head. I always was.

Just as I was about to sneak out the front door, I heard little-me begin to cry. I hung back, I didn't remember ever crying on Christmas.

"That was everything!?" I whimpered

"Yeah, sorry, kid. I guess Santa forgot. Maybe next year!" My dad said.

I remembered. I did get those shoes. My family just hid them from me until the last second. They wanted it to feel extra special. *I bet that giving me that present made my parents feel so good.* My eye twitched. Sweat dripped down my face. I was angry for some reason. *I don't wanna go back.* I was ready to break the rules one last time. I didn't care about making noise anymore. I waltzed upstairs to my dad's room. I marched into the closet. The present was precisely where I thought it was. I was hardly in control of myself at this point as I tuned out the cries of my own voice.

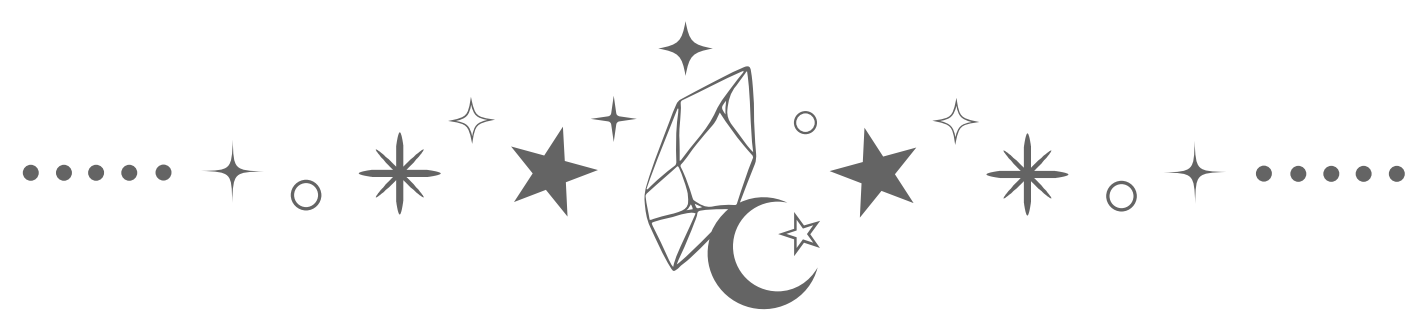
"Dad, I think I heard someone upstairs!" I was always very observant.

My entire family gasped as they heard my footsteps descending. I stepped foot into the living room. For a split second, I was able to see all their faces, and they were able to see mine – my expression blank and listless. In a flash, the past was empty. Their clothes covered the ground. The couch still had imprints where my parents sat. My brother's present, an RC car, crashed right into my leg. Christmas music was playing. It seemed ambient before but now it was piercing. There was a fire going, it was on the brink of going out. I was cold so I put on my older brother's Christmas pajamas – my own wouldn't fit of course – and took a sip of my dad's coffee. It was the mug I had made for him at school. The shape of it was uneven and hard to drink from, but my dad used it all the time. I sat in the center of the empty room and stared at the box in my shaky hands. I opened it slowly and methodically, like I was trying to make it last as long as possible. When I finally got to the box and removed the shoes, I noticed they were obviously fake. Not authentic at all. He didn't notice. He wore those shoes everyday, proudly. Maybe it was innocence I missed.

The Past is Empty by Jack Peterson

I looked out the window, the machine was gone again. I stared at my hands — still shaking. A couple tears fell from my eyes, and then a couple more; finally, the levee gave way to a flood. It was the first time I cried in ages. It was ugly, childlike, and lasted an embarrassingly long time. When it eventually tapered off, and I shut off the Christmas music, I was forced to confront my new reality.

I was trapped in a hollow echo of something great, something that only truly existed in the moment — impossible to recapture. I did some introspection as I strolled around the empty house. I realized something that deep down I think I already knew. When I passed the dining room table, I reminisced about dinners with my family. When I imagined the people that should be occupying the 5 vacant seats, I realized that I wasn't one of them. It was a person that no longer existed. Someone I yearned to be again. What I realized was the only person keeping that from reality, was me. I could always be that little boy again — I could be adventurous, live with passion, and conquer everything thrown at me, all with a smile on my face, just as I used to. Story of my life. Always figuring things out when it was too late. Always stuck in the past, avoidant of the present, and terrified of the future. *I hope they come back for me...*



Paper Bridges by Raymond Brunell

In a building where the HOA had ordained that no doormat could lie before a door, lest it impede the fire hoses, a small crack had appeared in the wall between apartments 6A and 6B. The residents, who had long since given up trying to recall each other's names, merely nodded in the hallways, never breaking stride. But the crack, which ran like a vein straight through the wall near the baseboard, became their private channel.

Your music is shaking my furniture. Some of us work nights.

The handwriting was blocky and impatient, scrawled on a torn corner of a takeout menu. The reply slid back the next morning:

Sorry. Didn't know the walls were made of tissue paper.

As winter dragged on, the notes kept coming. They started with negotiations and minor hostilities.

Can you not fry onions at 2 a.m.? The smell seeps through.

I'll stop frying onions when you stop singing in the shower at dawn.

Sometimes, a single word: *Seriously?* Or a hastily scrawled *Sorry*.

They never signed their names. Anonymity was part of the appeal—each could be sharper, blunter, less filtered than they might have been face-to-face. The crack became their private channel.

The HOA board, meanwhile, continued to issue its directives. No music after 9 p.m. No "unauthorized decorations" (meaning, apparently, the cactus on the third-floor windowsill). The board scuttled through the halls, collecting rumors and leaving notices.

Should we start a black market in doormats?

I'm making protest banners out of old socks.

The rules kept coming. The mood in the building tightened. Residents whispered in the halls, then stopped whispering. Doors slammed more often. Someone got fined for leaving a grocery bag outside for ten minutes.

Did you see Mrs. Carlson crying in the lobby? \$50 fine for her doormat.

This is getting ridiculous. What's next, citations for breathing too loudly?

Their frustration spilled onto paper. Notes grew longer, angrier. They began sharing stories—overheard conversations, witnessed confrontations. The woman in 3C received a write-up for her houseplants. The family in 2A faced eviction over "excessive noise" (their six-year-old jumping).

I saw the board president measuring hallway decorations with a ruler.

Someone should tell them we're tenants, not prisoners.

The crack became their outlet, then their planning space. Ideas began to flow between apartments—small at first, then bolder.

What if people knew they weren't alone in this?

What if we showed them how ridiculous these rules sound when written out?

They started copying HOA notices, adding their own commentary in the margins. *Really? A fine for a grocery bag?* Scrawled next to a violation. *Since when is a doormat a fire hazard?* beside another.

We could post these around the building. Let people see we're not the only ones who think this is insane.

Anonymous, of course. Keep it between neighbors.

Then one Monday, a new note appeared—not from a neighbor, but from the HOA, printed and taped directly over the crack:

Any unauthorized communication or modifications to the building structure will result in fines, as per Section 3, Subsection 7 of the Building Code. Appeal window: 30 days.

That night, a note slipped through, wry and a little sad:

Wonder how they'd feel if they knew the crack was the best thing about this place.

The next morning, instead of a warning, a different sort of note appeared on official letterhead:

I'm supposed to tell you to stop. But I get it. This building used to feel like home. —J, HOA Board

That was the last time the HOA showed any softness. The rest of the board's notices got stricter; J's signature never reappeared.

Their plan evolved slowly over weeks.

Paper Bridges by Raymond Brunell

They'd leave copies of their annotated HOA notices in the laundry room, tucked behind detergent boxes. They slipped them under doors late at night. Soon, other residents began adding their own comments, their own stories.

Same thing happened to us last month.

Why is the board so afraid of doormats?

Anyone else think the 'quiet hours' are getting ridiculous?

The building began to stir. Conversations started happening in hallways—tentative at first, then more open. People shared phone numbers and offered to help with groceries. Someone organized a petition. A formal one, this time.

Finally, on the first Saturday of June, the building woke to a quiet revolution. Copies of collected messages appeared on bulletin boards.

We shout, not manifestos, but simple statements from neighbors.

We want to feel at home here.

Doormats aren't dangerous.

Community shouldn't require permits.

Someone played music in the courtyard—not loudly, but enough to fill the morning air. A few more plants joined the third-floor cactus in the windows. People lingered in the hallways, actually talking.

The HOA called an emergency meeting. Residents came—more than had attended in years. They didn't demand a revolution; they merely asked questions. Why the sudden rule changes? Could they have input? What was the goal—safety or control?

J spoke up, tentative but clear. They needed to listen more, regulate less. Other board members shifted in their seats, aware that the room was full of neighbors they would encounter in elevators tomorrow.

Behind their respective doors, 6A and 6B observed the gradual transformation of the building. They didn't meet, didn't celebrate together. Instead, they exchanged notes through the crack:

Think it's working?

Slowly. Mrs. Carlson smiled at me in the lobby today.

The board's backing down on some of the newer rules.

Still feels fragile though.

Good things usually do.

One morning, they found the landlord filling the crack with fresh plaster.

Guess this is it.

Thanks for making this place feel less lonely.

Maybe we'll pass each other in the hall someday. I'll be the one trying not to smile.

Mrs. Carlson watered her houseplants, now lined up on the third-floor windowsill. The cactus garden had grown—spilled onto the sill in the next apartment.

Downstairs, the HOA board met on schedule, their minutes posted in the lobby. Some rules had been relaxed; others remained. The family in 2A no longer faced eviction.

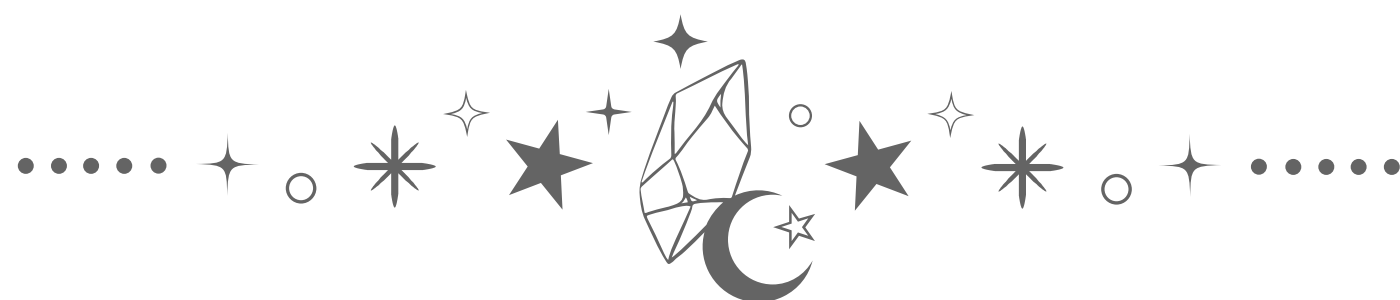
A notice taped to a doorframe announced a community potluck. J's signature was at the bottom, a small rebellion.

In the laundry room, a piece of paper was tucked behind a detergent box. *Doormats are still a hazard, apparently.* It was unsigned, a small reminder.

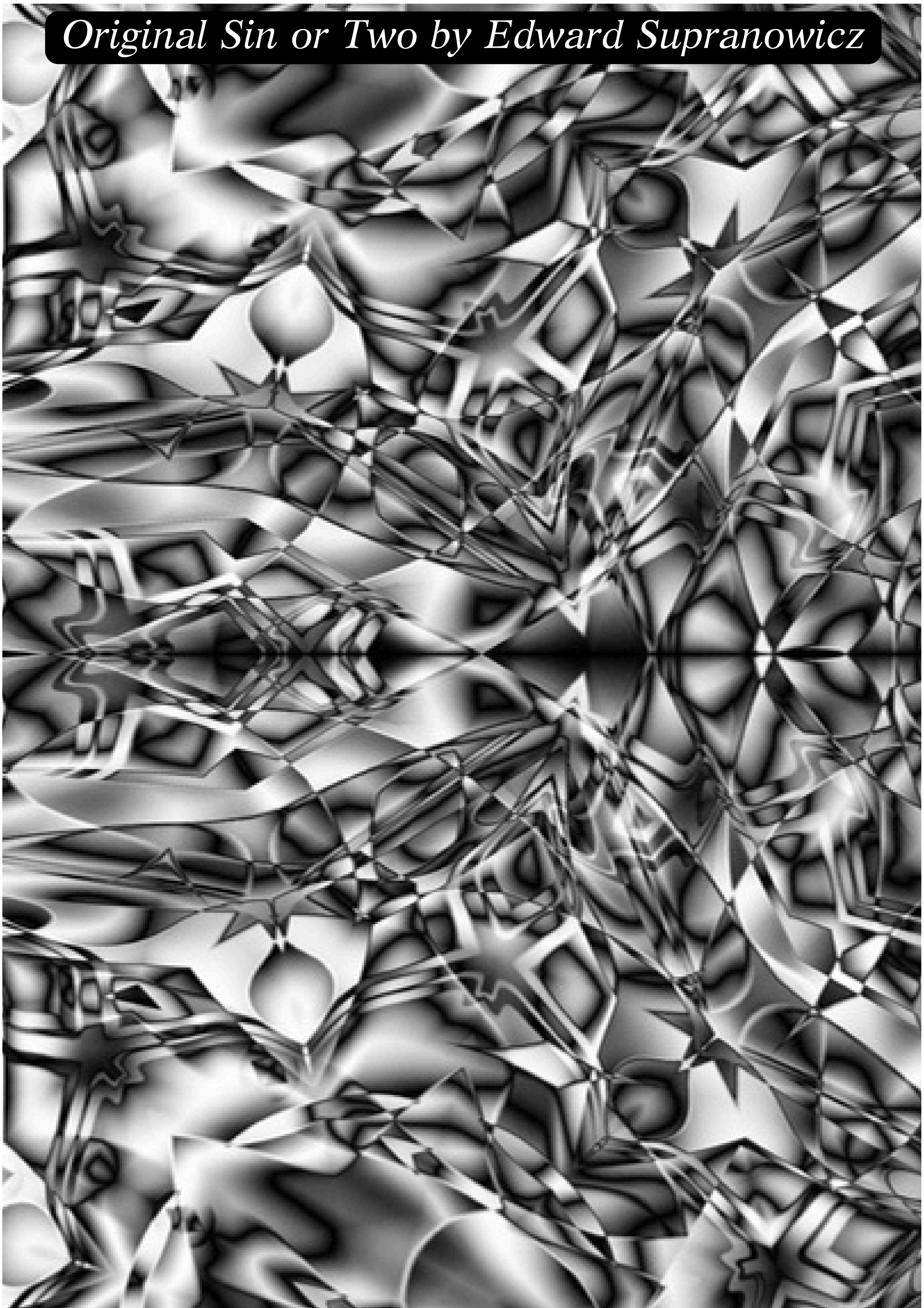
A child's laughter echoed down the hallway. The woman from 3C checked on Mrs. Carlson, who was smiling.

The building was not a community, not quite; but it was no longer a collection of isolated units.

A resident passed the filled crack, now just a smooth patch of plaster. They almost smiled.



Original Sin or Two by Edward Supranowicz



Frankenstein High School Photo by Edward Supranowicz



In Name and Numbers by Thao Vu

** language trigger: profanity*

It all started with the wrong name, a mistake that artistic mothers made, imprinting her unborn with an ekphrastic inspiration and therefore signified a permanent reverse temporal gaze into the past. The look of a child paid to help out at a rest stop. A child not quite tall enough for the gas pump and big enough for the hat but nevertheless matured enough to peer into the van and meet the eyes of another child sitting next to her dog. To gaze after a car driving away. The pessimistic lover would even say that a child born to correct the past shall have no place in the future. Yet Mother was determined to name 𐄂 after an ancient poem. A Japanese poem, no less – an unknown, foreign past whose impact and collision time remained distant and difficult to pronounce for both mother and child until it was recited – a mother's wish half fulfilled at conception.

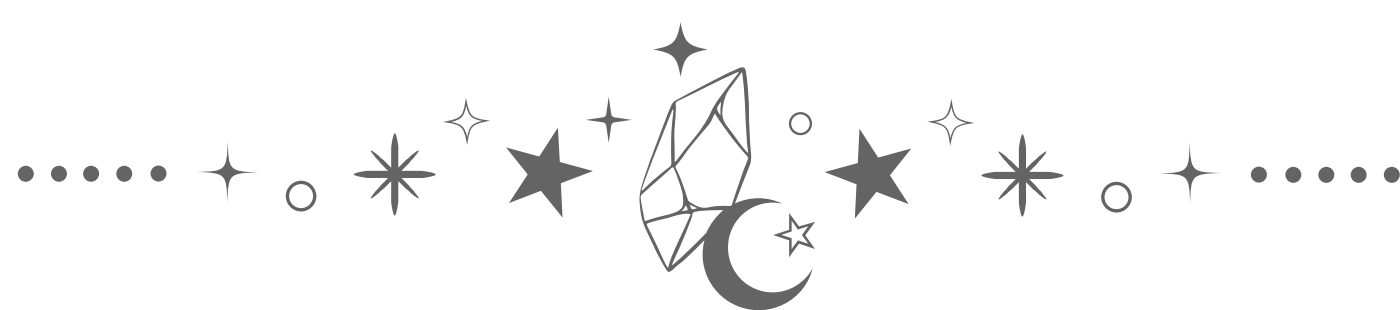
𐄂 set a mission to rename herself when it became apparent that she was too late to fix anything else of tangible values. Like a sexagenarian door-to-door salesman who never left a stone unturned, she tried. Hard, heavy, and selfish was the effort. She dog paddled against the current, bobbing her head with crashing waves, it would be easier to drown, but then she would drown not as herself but as 𐄂. The vile 𐄂 drifted towards water lilies after days of floating face-down, covered in tiny bitemarks, because trout also had teeth. Unoriginal and un-Ophelia but what did it matter.

Mother complained against this senseless blaming. It gave her nightmares, to think that she was a terrible namer. Mother thought everything went downhill after the wrong numbers. Numbers separated by a colon were the wrong time. Numbers appreciated by zeroes were misplaced worth. Numbers apologized to her with examples, how the algorithms messed up and dug a shithole. Numbers wasted time and space with their obnoxious presence just because they could – part of the privilege of being a number. Be kind to numbers, forgive the stupid little glitch, 𐄂, or go to hell.

It's her fault, don't blame the name.

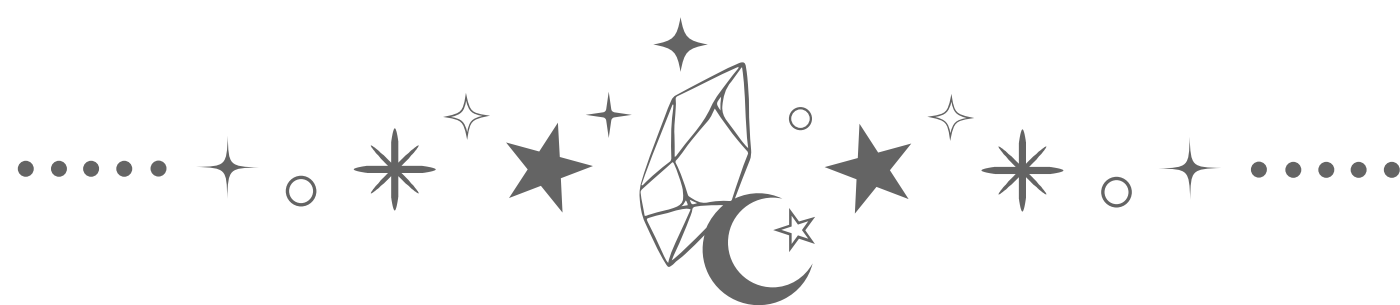
It's her fault, don't blame the numbers.

Mother woke up in a cold sweat. The sheets felt damp and her pjs were twisted. She reflected on the strange dream and texted 𐄂: "I'm sorry, sometimes my face betrayed what I felt inside. My attitude did not convey what I truly wanted to say. More so the opposite. Baby, all this time, I honestly don't give a shit. Why should you?"



Opulence and joy by Anthy Strom

—
You have to say I love you
3-4 times before you hang up,
Remember to watch the way your
Grandmother cuts the brown spots off apples
With swift elegance before
Her hands start to tremble,
Make peace with the living-dead
And the dead-alive: wrestle with their weary
Ghosts every spring, put them to rest
With the beets-peas-carrots,
Learn how to read music, forget
How to feel lonely, forget the pustulant and
Choking shame, forget the dead-end years
Laugh at the same jokes, tell your friends
Another story: repeat, feel how small the bones
Of your hands are, hold your niece,
Hold a cup of hot cider
Sit in front of a firepit beside 1000 years of ancestors
And watch flying embers turn to stardust



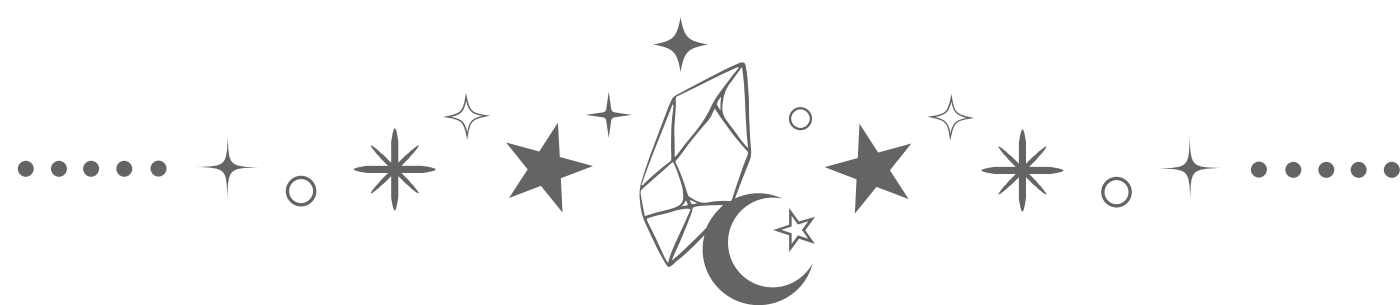
Devotion to joy by Anthy Strom

—
The paint is still wet in heaven
The good day has just dawned

So,
Let it all out in therapy
Vomit it out in the gutter
Let it flow
Like a litany, like a flood
Like a dog that comes back
Just to bite
Like a narrative
Recounted in the dark
Prayed away in a high murmur
Let the voice of god
Fade like the howl of winter wind
Close up shop
Turn on the light
Breathe.
Breathe again.
Let go.

Hold on.
Going home, to the primordial pool

—
green light ringing waves on
the face of wet tile, shocked murals
chipping away, revealing older portents
black, blue, holy white
sedimentary memory of
hot summers, melting into the hands of time
like ice cream, sweet and smearing
dripping onto swollen concrete
heavy with chlorine, cracked under
such brilliant blue



Paradox Princess by Rachel Rodman

The first curse—a prick from a spinning wheel—
mandates that she sleep for one hundred years.

The second—a pea beneath her mattress—
ensures that she never can.

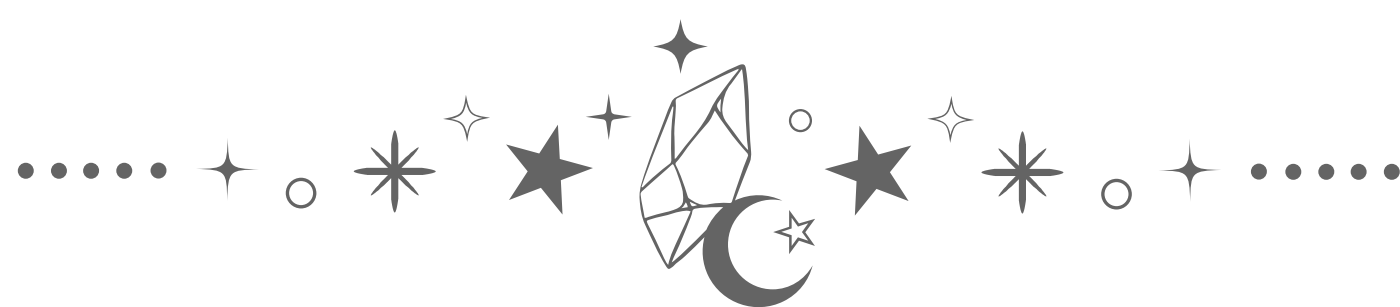
For decades,
before the spell
(and the paradox)
are broken,
she remains in an impossible state:
what is simultaneously

a period
of enforced wakefulness

and a profound,
dreamless slumber

until,
at the allotted moment,
a (physicist) prince
pries the thorns away,
and the room
(and the box)
are opened.

And she is dead.



When I Lost You by Robert Loren Moe

My mind faded
As if a window

Was being closed
Then shattered.

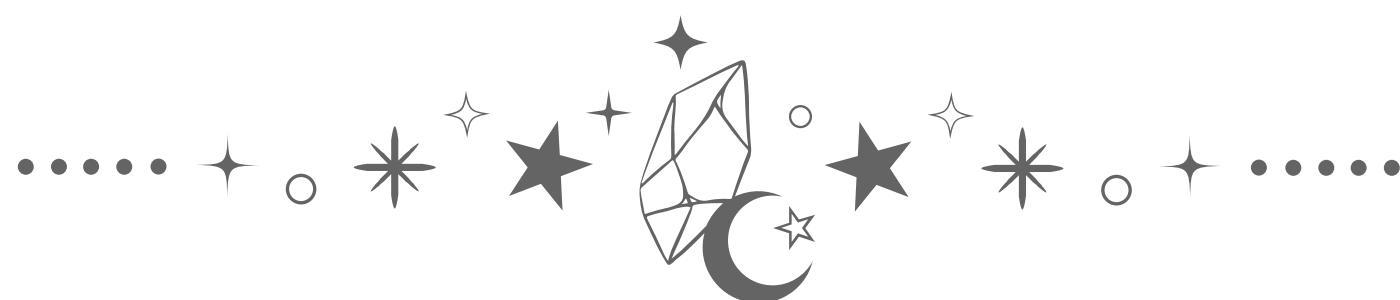
I breathe and realize.
What I am losing.

Slipping from my grasp,
A handful of water

Onto porous ground,
Soaking in as I watch.

My hands, I realize
Wet with blood, not water.

The cut of the glass
Remains welcome.



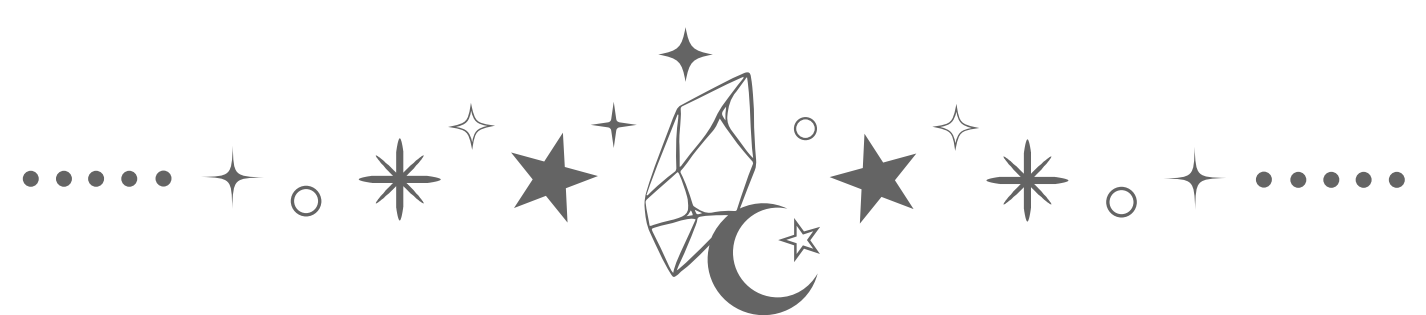
Nothing More Terrifying by Philip Athans

than the deepest part
of the ocean,
lair of monsters,
cold and dark.

than the farthest reaches
of the cosmos,
bathed in radiation,
cold and dark.

than the abandoned edges
of the city,
home to dispossessed,
cold and dark.

than what's held inside
of my mind,
imagining nothing but
cold and dark.



This Story is Laid Bare by Jacqueline Hodder

I dreamed a nightmare horror-scape
Of a pram upturned and empty

While upon the clean new plate of snow
My baby lay — sweet and tasty

A creature came to cleanse its palette
Sniffing at the seasoned scene

While I, Drunk on ravenous eyes
Lifted up a Salted plea-se

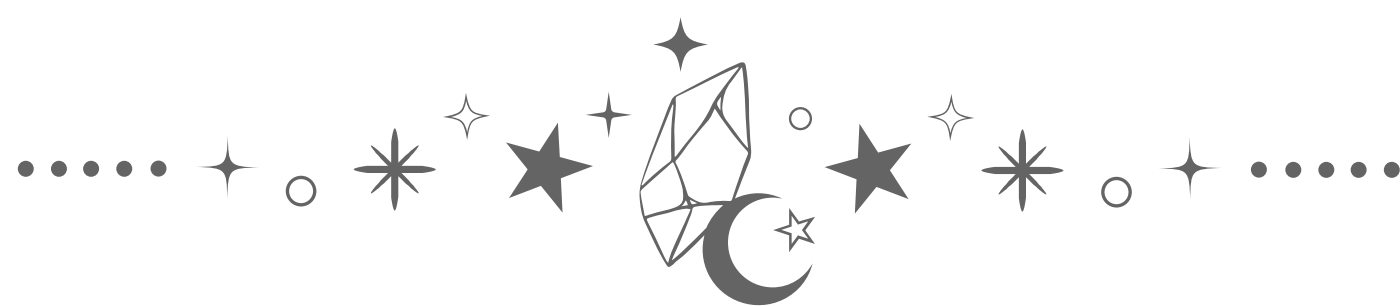
Hungry, preyed the baby prayed
Wait — But the creature — Satiated

Raised its bloodied head and slowly
Suckled a juice-filled finger

I dreamed a nightmare horror-scape
That came of fear-pocked news

This story is laid bare —
The baby is not there

— Taken for the terror of a creature's Gross
Intent — and its appetite for the innocent



It's Dark Outside by Pebbleton

It's dark outside.

The window does not yield to prying eyes.

It's dark outside.

No vast, secluded plane dwells in that empty shield of glass.

It's dark outside.

The light within yet renders the darkness darker.

It's dark outside.

And the window's frame remains a hollow, vacant portrait.

It's dark outside.

You know it and it knows you.

It's dark outside.

You feel it and it feels you.

It's dark outside.

You taste it and it tastes you.

It's dark outside.

Lay hands upon the glass and start to tear.

It's dark outside.

Prise down the pane –

It's dark outside.

Your brittle nails will crack and shatter,

It's dark outside.

For the glass has turned a shutter,

It's dark outside.

And the world beyond is gone.

It's dark outside.

Now dig your fractured claws into the sill!

It's dark outside.

Scrape your broken fangs against the pane!

It's dark outside.

And where your frightened eyes yet yearn to probe –

It's dark outside.

The night stares back an equal.

IT'S DARK OUTSIDE.

A deafness roams the distant night, as if to beckon!

IT'S DARK OUTSIDE.

Watch there, blindly, while your gaze is yours no longer!

IT'S DARK OUTSIDE.

The emptiness won't answer to your silence!

IT'S DARK OUTSIDE.

The window is a mirror!

IT'S DARK OUTSIDE.

And the mirror is a wall!

IT'S DARK OUTSIDE.

The window –

IT'S DARK OUTSIDE.

Is a mirror!

IT'S DARK OUTSIDE.

And the mirror –

IT'S DARK OUTSIDE.

Is a wall.

IT'S DARK OUTSIDE.

The Tower by Pebbleton

Amalgam of columns, arcades und buttresses,
Erected of limestone and marble alike,
Whose cornices merge into arching terraces,
Impaling the sky like a fiery pike.

An undulant altar of sculpted devotion,
The Tower is wreathed toward unfathomed crests,
Whose glorious shape, set in restless corrosion,
Repudiates respite and execrates rest.

Its spine, growing steadily upward, is fading,
Because a foundation the Tower has not.
Its apex ascends where its base is abrading,
Gorged on by the jaws of eternity's rot.

Enshrined in the clouds, the perpetual spire,
Suspended by nothing but faith and debris,
Yet soars in its fall, climbing higher and higher,
The burgeoning crown of a long-timbered tree.

The children gazed up at the great ancient spiral,
Beheld the unthinkable pillar of old,
Whereon their Creator should lay out their trial,
Where they should be guised to whatever He told.

"What order demands", spoke a child to the Idol,
"To view this construction, we're standing before?"
The Master remained and, by patience unbridled,
Spoke calmly: "Keep watching but one moment more."

Again, they looked up and their vision had shifted,
The arches and turrets no more to be seen,
And as the old veils of ignorance lifted,
They saw what the great Tower truly had been:

Its columns were writhing, each plinth a cadaver,
The balconies flesh and the walls made of skin,
Whilst tendons and muscles spanned each cantilever,
And sinew and bone bore the structure within.

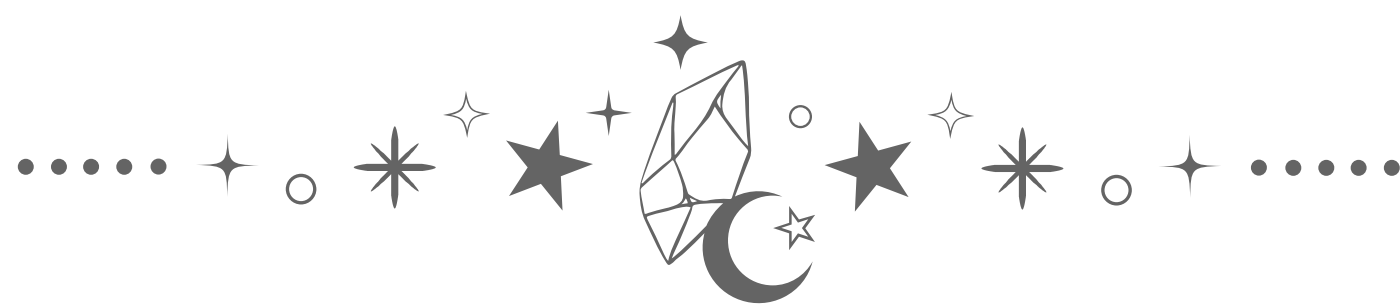
The top of the Tower was fashioned from infants,
Atop the begetters they'd sworn to condemn,
The crones and old men holding up their descendants,
And ashes and graves formed the monument's stem.

With each generation its own distinct storey,
The edifice wrought from its own rotting base,
Renewed in putrescence's infinite glory,
Won't cede in its growth till the end of all days.

The Tower by Pebbleton

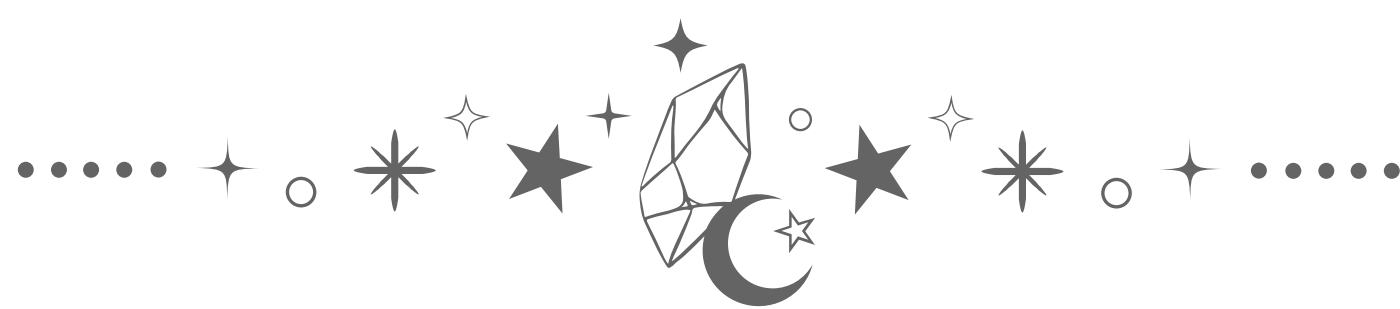
“Oh Master, with what purpose would this be succoured?”
The child asked its God, who spoke “My little lamb,
Of reasons I have but a plentiful record,
Yet *purpose* is certainly not among them.

My beautiful children, your time, it is near,
For it is but you who lend meaning to power.
Ascend to the scaffolds and be without fear,
Your future awaits you – as part of the Tower.”



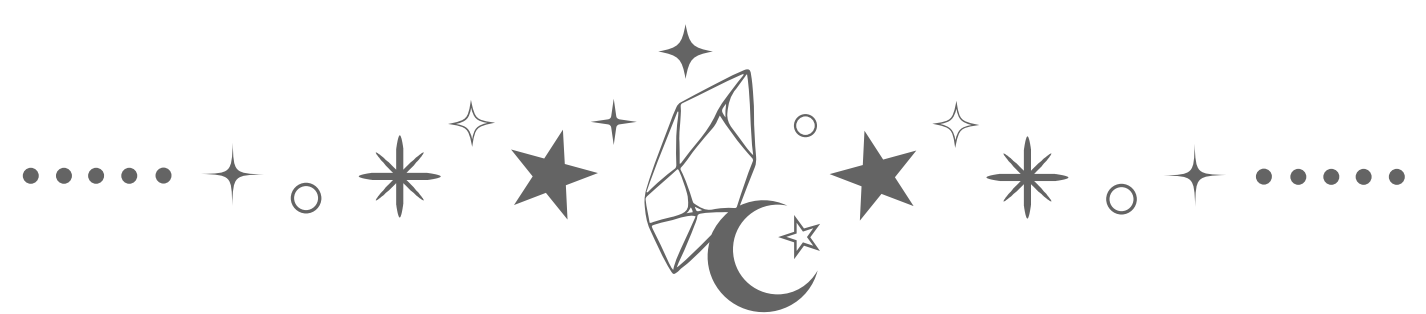
Head in a Box by Shawna Woods

I haven't left the house in
three years.
And I've let the internet
replace all my thoughts;
subsequently, swapping my voice
for everyone else's.
Now my uncle is dead
and I don't know where to keep him.



Inside a Senior Rehab by Shawna Woods

An Indian woman shared her food with me
from a sack attached to her belly;
the creamy yellow substance spoke to me
not literally but empathetically,
as I drank from her gastrointestinal tote.

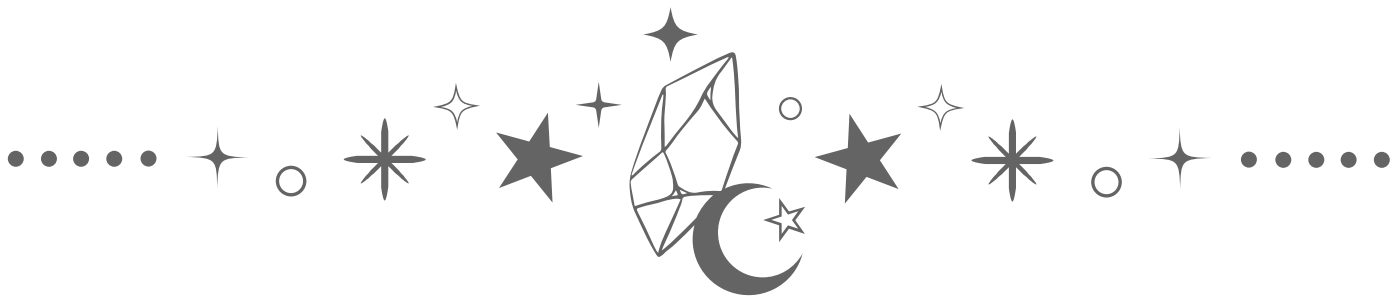


Emotion as a Bad Stepdad by MJ Weerts

My summer class said goodbye
with snacks and small awards,
awkward one arm hugs and an
extra email of thanks.

—

So why am I alone on a couch
at home an hour after, afraid
to watch or read or even think
about this aerial spirit?



Tree Rooted in Pink Moon by Lorelee Clark

The second spring of blossom
for the apple tree I planted four years ago
but no fruit yet; a tease, a promise

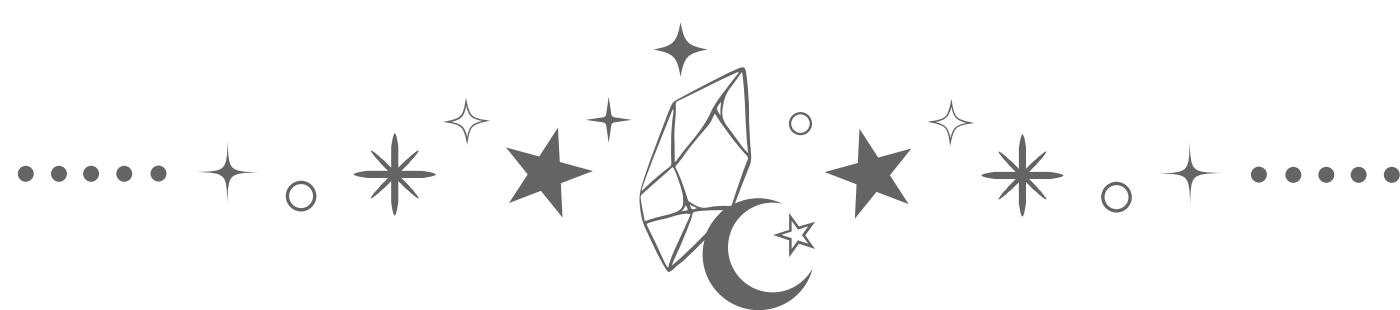
like the damselflies, thin as hairs
swarm up from beneath the planks
of the bridge, underfoot, clustering,
the breeze of my legs swirl them
hard into the railings.

Sluggish carpenter bees
buzz loudly throughout the neighborhood
look for a good spot to bore a nest

the plentiful, pinhead, green balls
will mature to purple mulberries,
long as my pinkie finger, soon.

It has been almost a month
since she died, yet the Virginia Spring Beauties
shroud the wooded, leaf-littered floor,
Bluets root in the tamped dirt
beside the tarmac trail.

This hard-knotted tree
seeded by grief,
embedded in my lungs and legs,
as I step out the front door,
hear the catbirds and wrens call a warning;
tertiary and primary feathers sound a reprimand,
interrupted as they gather fodder for nests.
As they accept this season of bloom.



Eternal Struggle by Lorelee Clark

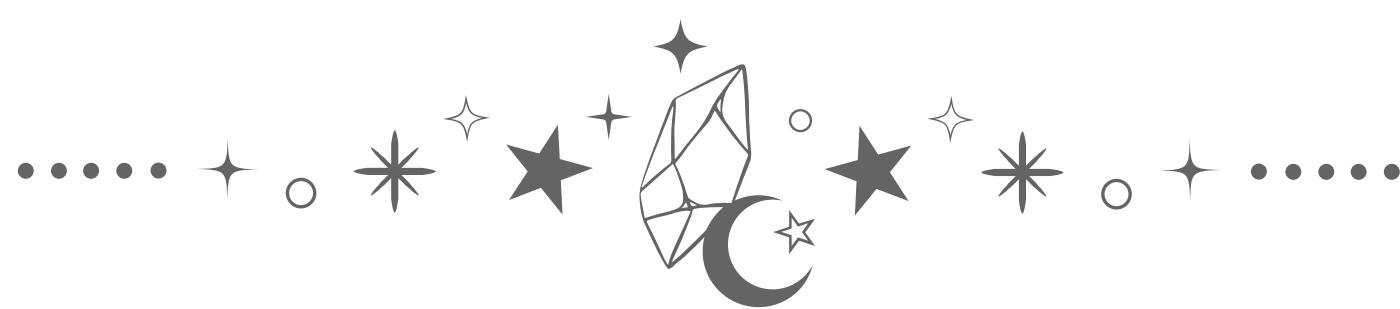
As earth spins faster, closer to the sun,
our shadows come into power,
higher, taller than before.

Darkness makes her yearly inhale of light
and in this absence,
illumination must come from within.

We reside again in a cleft—nothing is as it was:
chasm, absence, gap;
we avoid the goat that is Krampus,
kill the buck that could bring death to the doorstep,
punisher of the cold that in its death
feeds our light.

We light the candles in the evergreen,
in the stolid night lasting longer and longer
this ritual of warmth
bringing belief into being:

an exhale is on its way.



Scuffed and Bruised by Lorelee Clark

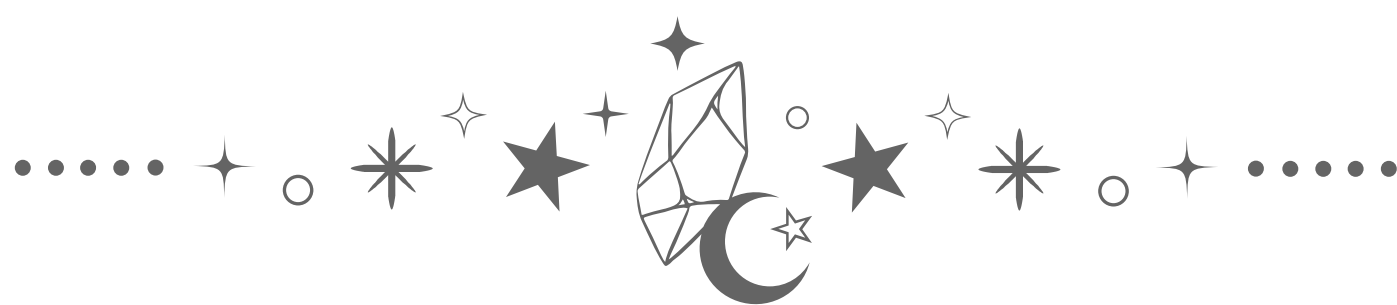
Summers when we visited you,
we went to the breakwater:
concrete at my back, waves persistent,
rhythmic.

I was slight, buoyed up by the wall, slammed about in the waves,
I emerged scuffed and bruised

not unlike this past month when I heard
you had died. Gravity thickened;
no buoyancy but my father's arms
securing me to his torso,
stillness as the grief squeezed the air from my lungs; it didn't matter
if I ever inhaled again.

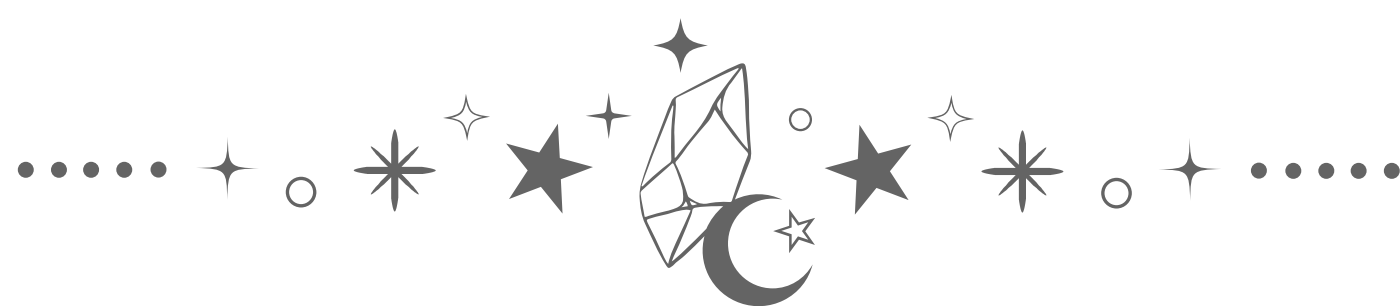
I recall your fingernails, long and white
like your sister's;
your face, round and soft
like your mother's;
your laugh, yours alone;
your heart, mine for brief moments.

I carry you inside my body like blood
giving sustenance to every fiber of fascia
holding my organs, moving my limbs,
my fingers as I write this devotion,
as I pour coffee each morning,
touch my child's hair. As I lay back
softly in my bed
at the end of each day.

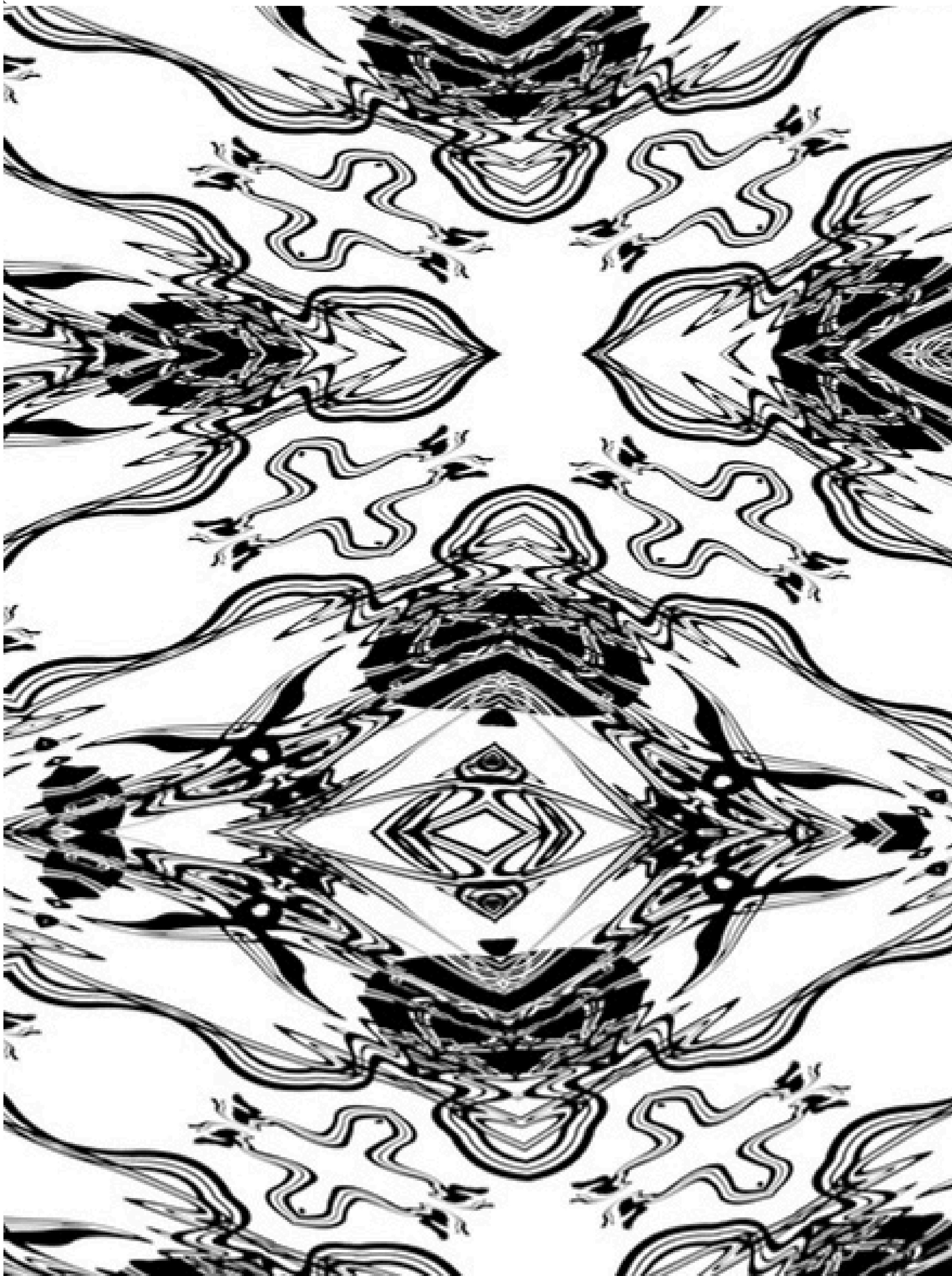


Neologisms by Sriyukta Misra

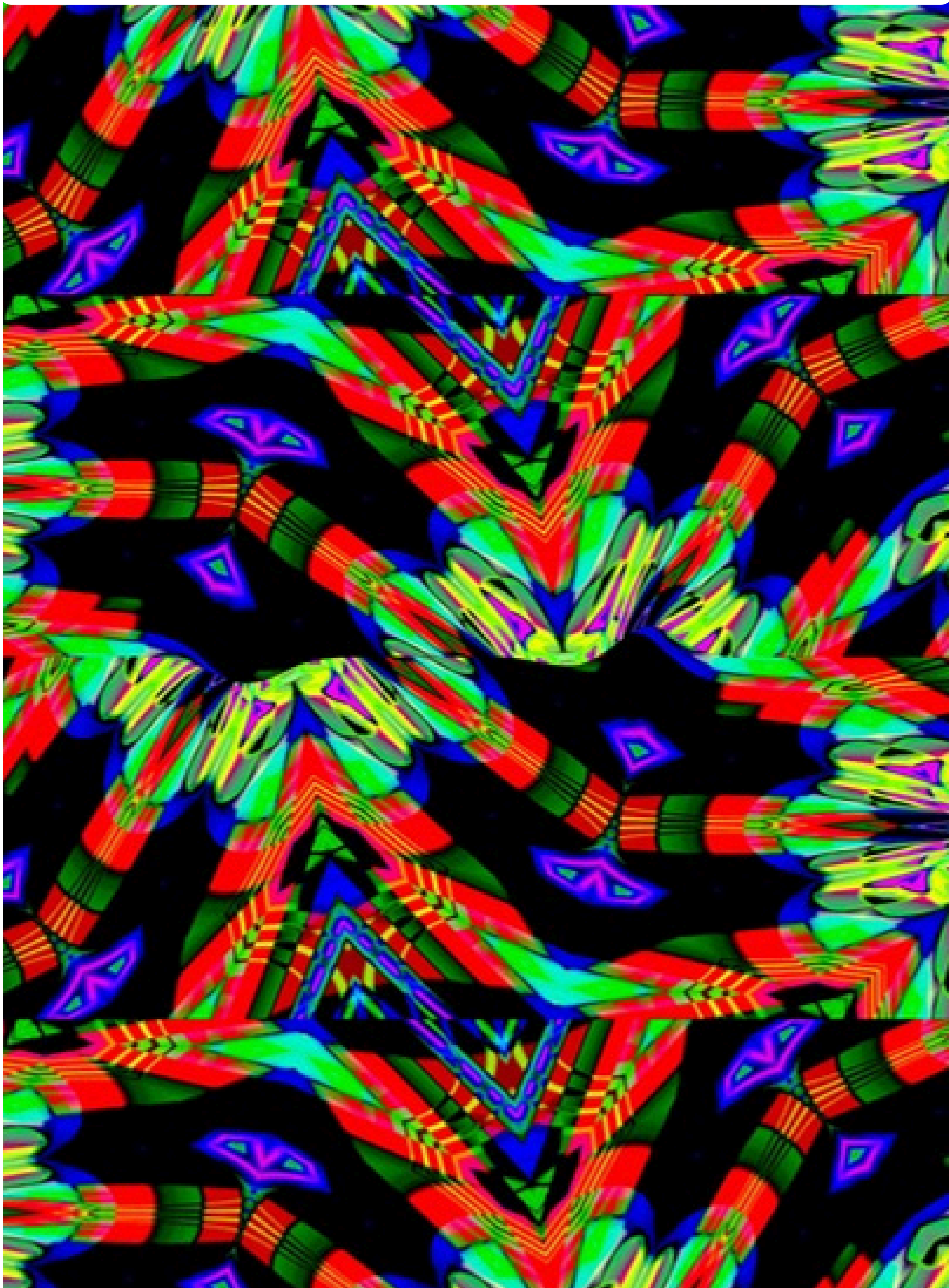
Faces from childhood find a home in dreams
There must be a name for it
Dream is too soft, nightmare too grand
It's mundane
Wretched
Their faces still round with baby fat
They drag me back, and I am
Made small
Distance, paid with time, erased
Walls loom, giants roam the halls
I am closer to the floor than I remember being
Summer prickling my skin
I sit sticky, melting
The fan swaying, cradling heat
I have left these rooms
But they won't
Let me leave



Falling Crosses by Edward Supranowicz



The Day Moves Along by Edward Supranowicz



Void by Avery Dall-Hilton

Last night I dreamed that I died. The details are hazy, but I remember the terror of leaving my husband alone—even though my conscious self prefers he be alone rather than find someone else. In the dream, although a separation existed, we were still able to communicate. Not like a science-fiction novel or a smoke-filled séance, we somehow went on loving and existing together in a kind of harmonious haunting.

I believe we continue to exist after death, perhaps only because I can't grasp the concept of the void. I can't imagine being without my five senses. Even when I sleep, whether a short nap or through the night, I always have plenty of vivid dreams to entertain me. It seems that no matter what state it's in, my brain can't stand the idea of stillness. Of nothing.

I like to think my existence after death would be similar. Restless. Something. I don't know that I'd be a person with an identity as structured as I have now, but I think my ghost, or essence or soul or whatever, would retain a level of disquiet and curiosity.

Or is that what it means to be incorporeal? To lose your sense of thought, being, place, and time that are so integral to a body. Every day, each moment is filled with more sensations than I can track: The sound of sirens disappearing toward the hospital, the keyboard clacking away, two or more clocks ticking out of sync, cars hitting the pothole just outside, the shadows bending from the shifting sun, notifications on both phone and computer screens drawing away my fickle attention, the clutter on the coffee table, the smell of the neighbors cooking downstairs, the warm black cherry tea on my tongue, the edge of my laptop digging into my wrist, my back and neck stiffening, the temperature a few degrees too cold, anxiety about deadlines, a weight on bones and mind I can't unfeel.

When I first had these thoughts and sat to write them down, I was on a hillside. I could not ignore the droning insects, the brittle grass, or the smell of horse dung. It's unignorable; The abundance of the world resists the very idea of the void. Though, our planet, filled with the only life we've encountered in our 2.5 million years of consciousness, glides through a vast, ignorant, unknowable abyss. Our overstimulated planet, nestled in its exact opposite: nothingness.

There is evidence, almost as ancient as written language, of humans seeking enlightenment from the stars. Early Egyptians saw chaos in the cosmos and sought to understand Maat, the cosmic order. Mayans looked to the skies to create complicated calculations of time. Zoroastrians saw the battle between good and evil play out in the movements of celestial bodies. Somehow, we've always guessed that there must be answers in the ineffable connect-the-dots of galaxies. The idea that it is possible to count, compartmentalize, and track the expanse gave us tiny terranean specks a sense of control. But with every concept we coin, deep space photo we take, planet we discover, black hole we peer into, we realize there is still more we do not understand.

Last year, I worked as an educator at a complex of science museums. I spent months teaching students about topics I barely had a grasp of. I learned on the job as I taught about states of matter, forces, life cycles, and wave and particle theory. I toted around a heavy glass vacuum chamber and a host of odd materials to test the effects of pressure. Shaving cream, marshmallows, balloons, and a glass of water accompanied me on my trips to middle schools for presentations. After a lengthy discussion on waves and particles, I'd plug in the vacuum and watch 20 or so 8th graders snap out of their stupors. They'd shout out guesses for what might happen to whatever day's victim ended up in the chamber. The dramatic change in pressure always gave an impressive show, warping, shrinking, engorging, and distorting the objects with a vengeance.

I told my students what we'd all heard plenty of times: space is a vacuum, just like the chamber we were experimenting with. I didn't understand it then, but with further research I learned that a true or "perfect" vacuum—a space that contains no measurable matter—does not exist naturally and has never been created artificially. Even outer space, while free of air particles, is not "absolute space" (a concept Newton devised, and Einstein later disproved). Though perfect vacuums may exist in small pockets and infinitely small moments, quantum theory suggests that there are always "virtual particles" transitioning in and out of existence.

Void by Avery Dall-Hilton

Virtual particles cannot be directly measured, but their existence and simultaneous inexistence, make the concept of absolute space and perfect vacuums unattainable. In other words, there is no such thing as “pure nothing”.

So, if you’re still following, my inability to conceptualize the void is scientifically accurate as well as instinctive. Unlike the colloquial saying suggests, there is no “filling a void” because the presence of matter means it is no longer a void by definition.

Void:

Derived from the same root as vacuum.

Desolate; barren; vacant; unfilled; empty; null.

Emptiness; hollowness; nothingness; absence.

My mind twists into a single if not a double helix just trying to wrap itself around the idea. There is just no way to create nothing out of something.

Unless, of course, you think death is creating nothing out of something. A true void. Somehow, a heart and a brain support an inexplicable mind. When the body fails, the thing that was a person is gone, replaced with nothing.

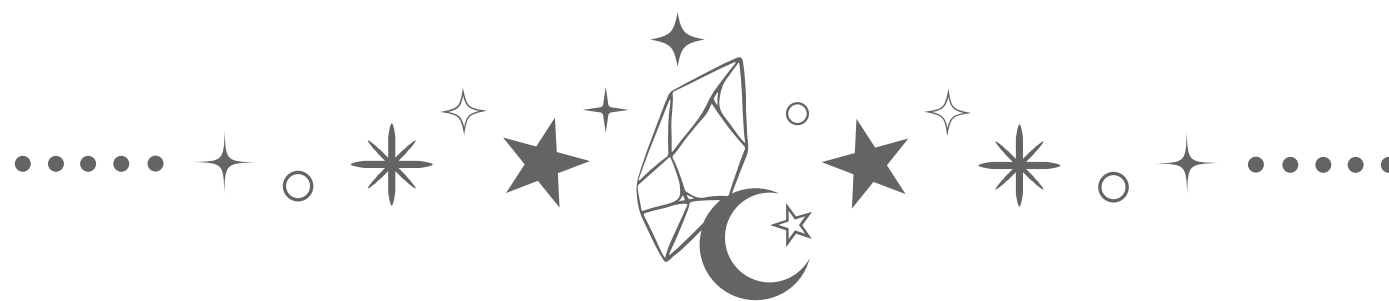
But is that even a true void? Ghosts, literal or not, exist because life leaves behind an imprint. When we go from something into nothing, we carve out a space but can’t ever truly vacate it while someone is still around to remember us.

Six years ago, I watched Keanu Reeves give an interview with Stephen Colbert. Colbert, almost as an afterthought, posed the question, “What do you think happens when we die, Keanu Reeves?”

Reeves was still for a brief moment, and then breathed out a long sigh before saying, “I know that the ones who love us will miss us.”

In that moment, I recognized the words and the eyes of a man who had suffered heartbreak. After the loss of a daughter, a partner, and a best friend, he had stared into the void. And that is the paradox, isn’t it? We can be in the presence of the void regardless of its own scientific definition. We feel the gap, the lack, the loss when someone we love crosses space into the unknown oblivion. The stretch and ache and hollowness that is both nothing and yet something. Our existence, like virtual particles, is both gone but indisputably present.

I still do not comprehend the void. Like my dream, what I imagine of the nothing that succeeds life is still something. Even if science proves every skeptic of an afterlife correct, there is still something. Because as long as there is someone left to feel the loss of love, that loss is not void.



The Mark Left by Vera Podell

The cocktail didn't taste weird at all.

I was at the bar. Then I was in my hotel room. Something happened in between. Nothing bad happened in between.

He might have slipped me something, I would think afterwards. I would become sure of that later but then I would have nothing to prove it.

It's good that nothing happened to me. I'm sure something was supposed to.

It was a little past midnight and somehow it was still hot outside. The hotel bar was closed already. I didn't know how many cocktails I had but the conversation with some people I barely knew was going so smoothly that one nearly tasteless drink followed another until my words got all smashed together and my thoughts were slamming into each other. I barely noticed some men staring at me from behind the closed bar. At the time, I was playing with a straw in my empty glass, thinking to myself how I wanted some more toxins in my system as well as how I should not have any more. But the hangover was already going to be awful, so, why would I care?

That's when another drink miraculously appeared in front of me.

Rule 1. Always keep your eye on the drink.

Rule 2. Don't accept drinks from strangers.

Rule 3. Rules don't mean shit when you are drunk already.

I started sipping.

'What were you thinking?' my friend would ask me after I got back home from that blurry holiday when I told her the story. 'I mean. It's obviously bad, but *why?*' She would pause for a second and then ask 'But nothing happened to you right? Not *really?*'

One of those staring men behind the bar gave that cocktail to me. It was the same drink as I had been sipping before but in another glass, and as far as I can remember, it didn't taste weird at all.

It really tasted like nothing.

I left the bar.

I went to my room.

The ladder upwards was blurry. Why didn't the elevator work? The body that didn't feel like mine was stepping up, up and up again. The body was holding the railing tight. The body opened the door of the hotel room. The body saw a woman there. It was the body's mother. The body laid down on the bed, attempting to fall asleep. It couldn't keep its eyes closed but when those glassy eyes opened, the surroundings looked alien, or the body felt alien to itself as it was trying not to fall down while it was still sprawled on the bed.

Everything around swayed and circled and the ceiling was too high and then so low that it was right in front of my face, covering it, I was almost choking on it but I couldn't move my head and then suddenly I was sat up and everything became even blurrier and there was not a single thought that I could utter and I said something but those sounds I produced didn't sound like words they sounded like nothing, nothing at all, and then I stood up and I didn't fall, I don't know how, I don't know why, and something itched in my throat and I felt like was about to die there I started to whimper because that's not how I wanted to die I wasn't even twenty yet I wasn't even anything and didn't want to die at all I sat down on the floor and my mouth was sore and bitter and the tiles became more and then less and then there are none at all and I was still about to collapse as my heart sank down to my legs and then back to my throat

I threw up.

I was vomiting for a while.

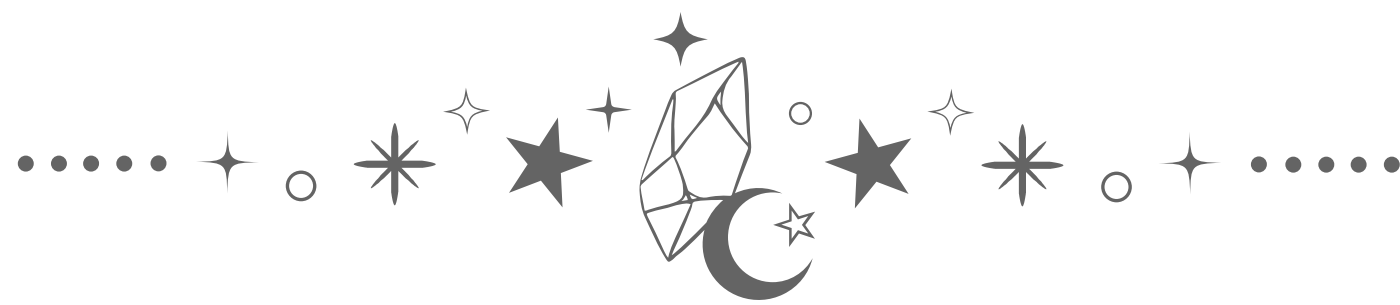
My mother was exhausted. She knew something was very wrong, that it wasn't just a bad hangover, especially as I sobbed, hard, and liquid poured out from my eyes and my mouth but she could not do anything but watch as I became an erratic mess. 'Should I call the hospital?' she asked. But we were in another country and she spoke no English. For a moment I felt like saying "yes" but in the end I didn't. It had gotten a little better by that time.

The Mark Left by Vera Podell

It was nearly morning. I nearly fell asleep on the bathroom floor.

Maybe I should have been thankful that those men didn't follow me but there were no coherent thoughts in my head.

'I never noticed those stretch marks on you,' my mother said. We were sitting by the pool in our swimming suits. I had lost around five pounds in two days that followed after that night. I looked down on my legs and did not notice them at first but then I saw white lines on my inner thighs that certainly had not been there before. They were deep and long and there were at least six of them. Almost instinctively, I tried to wipe those lines away but of course they didn't go anywhere, they did not disappear into my skin, making it clear again, the same way my liver didn't undo the damage and my head didn't stop hurting. They'd never go away, I would find out later, those marks of something that never happened at all.



Haunting Humanity by Alauna Lester



Thanks to the Contributors!

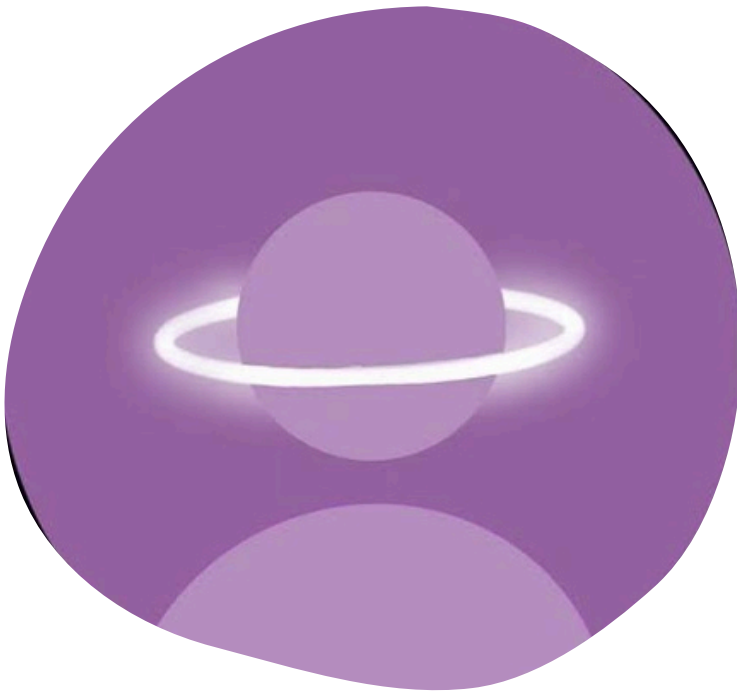
Ivan Ivanov



A Cure for Lies

Ivan Ivanov is a Bulgarian-born author, based in Germany. He loves to experiment with different genres when it comes to writing. His day job as a physical therapist allows him to meet many new people on a daily basis, who often become an inspiration for his stories.

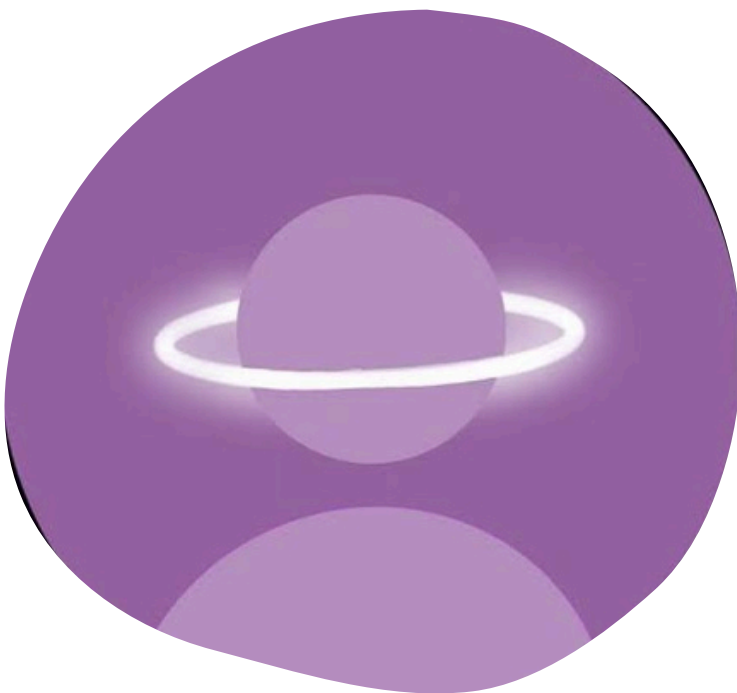
JS Apsley



The Burned Man

JS Apsley is the pen name of an author from Glasgow, Scotland. He won the Ringwood Short Story Prize 2024 and has gone on to place over 50 short stories in journals around the world. His debut novel, "Storm Girl", has been picked up by Hoodstone Press, a new independent publisher. Check out www.jsapsley.com for more details.

Alex Blake



Children and Their Bones

Alex Blake (He/Him) is a writer and artist based in Sheffield, UK. His short fiction has appeared in or is forthcoming in *Chthonic Lit*, *Dishsoap Quarterly*, *GossamerWight*, *Pfielstorch*, *Table Salt Press*, *Ugly People*, and *Wintersweet*.

E.G. Skaar



The Snakeskin

E.G. Skaar is a writer of dark fiction and poetry. He has published works in *Allegory* and *Suburban Witchcraft Magazine*, and currently lives in Columbus, Ohio with his wife, daughter and three cats. instagram and threads: @eg_skaar

Thanks to the Contributors!

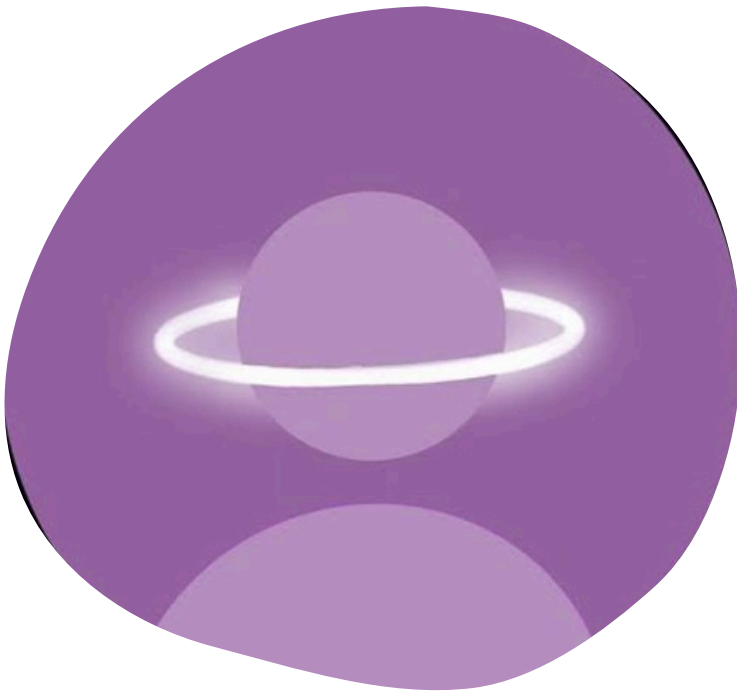
Will Pharis



Turner's Mill

Will Pharis is a retired theatre teacher and director. He taught theatre, Shakespeare performance, creative writing, and arts history at a magnet arts school outside of Denver. His poetry has been published in Blue Daisies Journal. He and his husband divide their time between Wyoming and Puerto Vallarta.

Ashley Mangtani



Deadman's Hole

Ashley Mangtani is a slipstream writer whose work explores ecological and social collapse, and the roles people inhabit in moments of crisis. His work appears or is forthcoming in Smokelong Quarterly, Strange Horizons, Litro, Washington Square Review, Boudin, BULL, Expat Press, Thin Skin, HAWKEYE, Mobius, Neon Dystopia, Apocalypse Confidential, and others. Read more at ashleymangtani.com

Sameer Saklani



***The Untimely Love Story of
Antonin Maravelli***

Sameer Saklani is a Brooklyn-born writer, factotum, and creature of matter, now residing near the equator with his loved ones. He explores the humananimal condition alongside the qualities of language. His recent work appears in Eunoia Review, Rivener Lit, The Bokeh Review, Inkhorn Review, Sam Hill! Review, Mobius, and elsewhere. hello&goodluck to all.

Nadia Gerassimenko



***Communications from Days Stranding,
Butterfly Woman***

Nadia Gerassimenko is a freelance editor and writer. She has poetry, fiction, and essays published in various magazines such as Luna Luna Magazine, Tinderbox Poetry Journal, The Mighty, Glass: A Journal of Poetry, Yes Poetry, Quail Bell Magazine, RESURRECTION Mag, The Hellebore, among others. In her free time she screams her lungs out to survival horror games.
www.ngediting.com

Thanks to the Contributors!

Col Bak



The Baker's Twine

Col Bak, (they/them), is a little controversial. Unusual and outspoken, their writing covers topics from ableism to sinus infections. They began as a horror prose writer, and later discovered a love of comedy- including Improv. They now write in many different genres, including dark comedy and dystopian. Col creates in several forms, you'll find them writing prose, poetry and playwriting, doing Improv, acting, and whatever else they decided to try this week. Driven to live life to the fullest, there's no one like Col. They can be found on Instagram as @colbakcreative.

Edward Supranowicz



Not All Lips Are Sweet and Tender, Outrage Surrounded by Indignities, Original Sin or Two, Frankenstein High School Photo, Falling Crosses, The Day Moves Along

Edward Michael Supranowicz is the grandson of Irish and Lithuanian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in *Fish Food, Streetlight, Another Chicago Magazine, Door Is A Jar, The Phoenix*, and *The Harvard Advocate*. Edward is also a published poet who has had over 700 poems published and been nominated for the Pushcart Prize multiple times.

The Bottom of the Bottle

Nicholas Kellogg weaves chilling tales from his home in Connecticut, where he lives with his partner and balances fatherhood, with two toddlers under five and a full-time job. Early morning prior to work, he creates nightmares while many are still having them. Drawing inspiration from the eerie realities of everyday life while exploring the darkness beneath the ordinary.

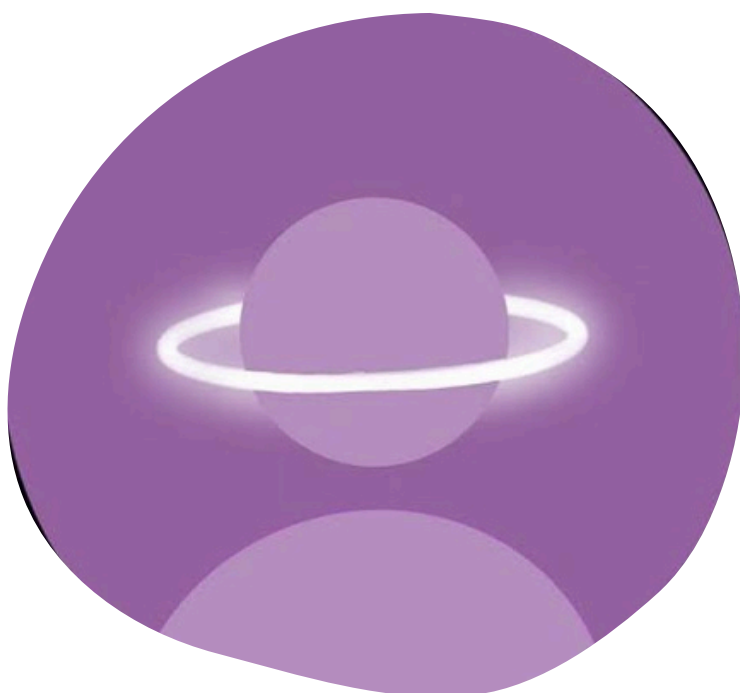
He has recently signed a traditional publishing contract for his debut novel **Green**, with Wicked Tales, an Imprint of DAOwen Publications.

[Nicholas Starr Kellogg - Author Website](#)

Nicholas Kellogg



Heather Labay



Fiadh's Lament

Heather Labay is an author, editor, and book coach. Her short story, "Cuss Words," appeared in the inaugural volume of *The New Southern Fugitives* and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Her work can also be found in *Borderline Tales Magazine, Adelaide Literary Magazine*, and *Mobius Blvd*. She lives in Rochester Hills, Michigan.

Thanks to the Contributors!

Alexander Grant



The Shape of Absence

Alexander Grant is determined to write the queer fantasy romances he longed to read as a child. He seeks to bring greater representation to the sci-fi and fantasy genres with his diverse stories, perfectly suited to a cozy break from the scary world outside. His journalism has previously appeared in the *Anderson University Magazine* and his fiction in the *Twin Bird Review*. He currently lives in Georgia with his boyfriend and his cat and enjoys basking in the sun like the finest of reptiles while dreaming up his next tale. Feel free to message him at alexandergrantwriter@gmail.com.

Travis Koll



Disassembly

Travis Koll is an English professor and the author of books like *Better Writing: Beyond Periods and Commas* and *the Sultan*. Besides writing, he enjoys martial arts, cooking, and spending time with his wife and son.

Steve Cashel



The Drove Road

Steve Cashel spent much of his youth on a sheep farm in the Borders region of Scotland, although he has lived and worked in many other places since then. His fiction has appeared in the magazines *Groundswell* and *Gutter*, the webzine *Close 2 the Bone*, the anthology *White Witch's Hat & Other Yuletide Ghost Stories* and previously in *Still Here Magazine*.

Leslie Rourke

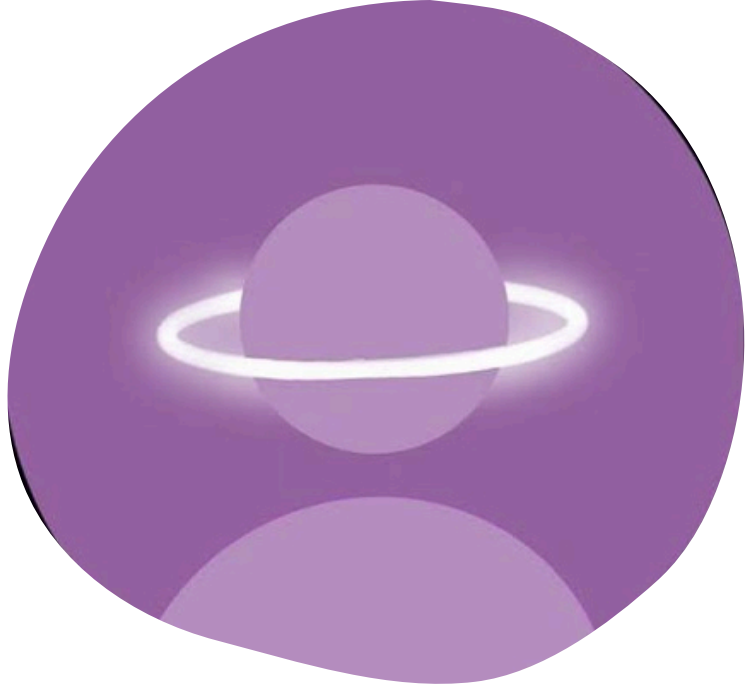


Here to Help

Leslie Rourke is a California writer whose fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Esthetic Apostle*, *AESKO*, *The Pinch Journal Online*, and the *Beyond Words* international anthology. She is a recipient of the James Phelan Award for Fiction from San José State University.

Thanks to the Contributors!

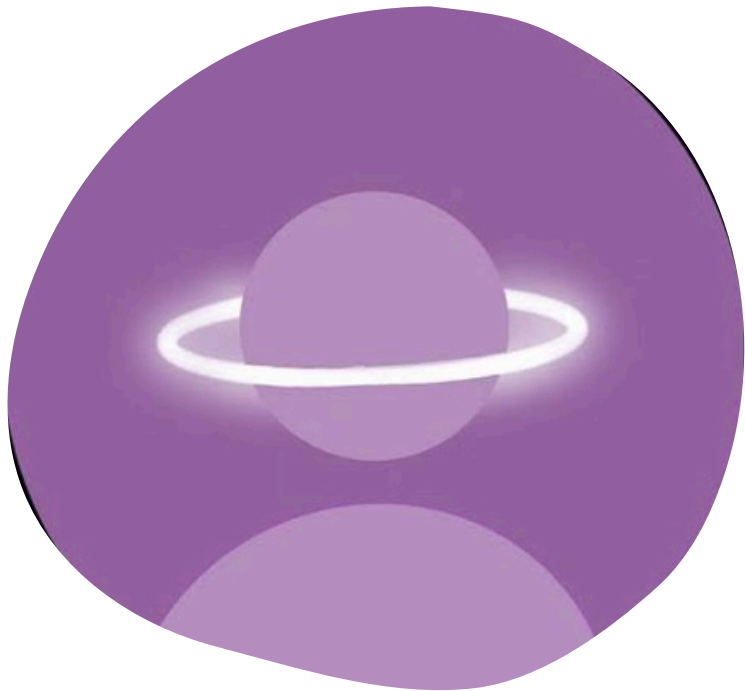
Patrick Carrella



Thirty Eight Degrees

Patrick Carrella is a New York writer whose fiction and nonfiction have appeared in BULL, Hobart, JMWW, Eunoia Review, and elsewhere. He is currently pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Texas at El Paso.

Ella Barron Carton



Twenty Five Club

Ella (she/her) is an Irish writer with a degree in Creative Writing. Her work has appeared in Poetry Ireland Review, Abridged, Stony Thursday Book, Atrium, "The Garden" Anthology by Sans Press, and Southword. She is currently working towards her first collection of short stories.

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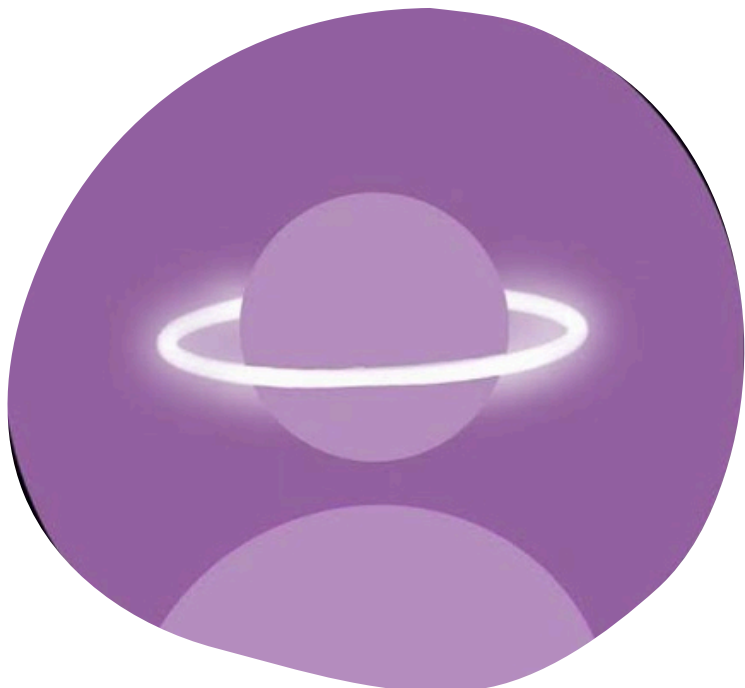
Jack Peterson



The Past is Empty

Jack Peterson is a 20 year-old writer from Barnegat, New Jersey. This is their first publication. They are currently studying Psychology at the University of Iowa, and love diving deep into character's inner states in their writing. In their free-time you can catch them enjoying a Mets game at Citi Field, watching a movie, or exploring nature. His Instagram handle is: jpete050

Raymond Brunell



Paper Bridges

Raymond Brunell writes literary horror, speculative fiction, and dark magical realism from Michigan's Upper Peninsula. His short fiction has appeared in more than sixty venues, including *Necessary Fiction*, *Across the Margin*, *River and South Review*, *34 Orchard*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, and *The Penmen Review*. His story "The Tide's Fragments" was nominated for *Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy 2026*. A first reader at *Flash Fiction Magazine* and a member of the Horror Writers Association, he is completing his MFA in Creative Writing at Southern New Hampshire University, where his thesis novel explores bureaucratic dread and institutional harm on the Gogebic Iron Range.

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- Bluesky: @raymondbrunell.bsky.social
- Instagram: @raymond_brunell_author
- Threads: @raymond_brunell_author

Thanks to the Contributors!

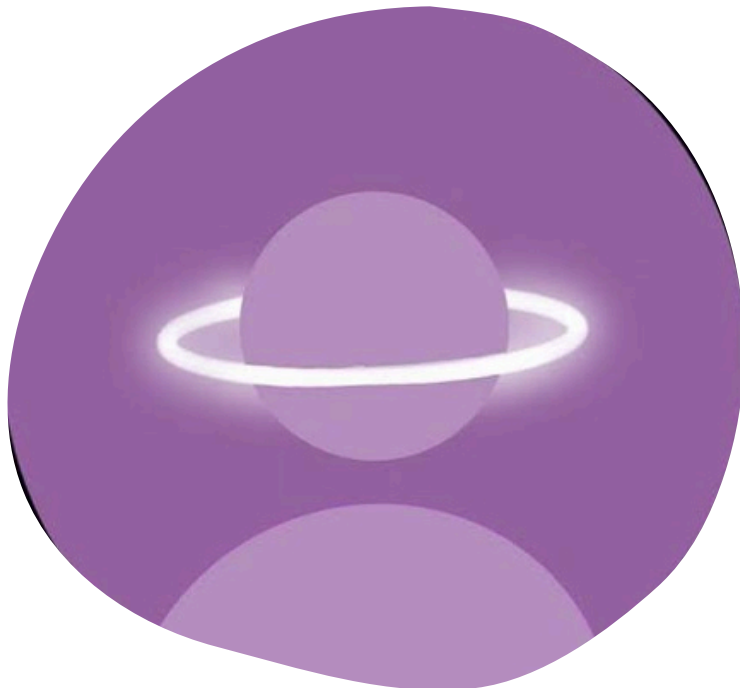
Thao Vu



In Name and Numbers

Thao Vu is writing her debut novel at Virginia Tech (Blacksburg, VA). Her recent and forthcoming work can be found at *Bending Genres*, *Blood+Honey*, *BULL*, *Cosmic Daffodil*, *the engine(idling)*, *The Dread*, *FlashFlood*, *Fork Apple Press*, *MockingHeart Review*, *Tap into Poetry*, *THIMBLE*, *Villain Era*, *Zin Daily* and at www.vuqythao.com.

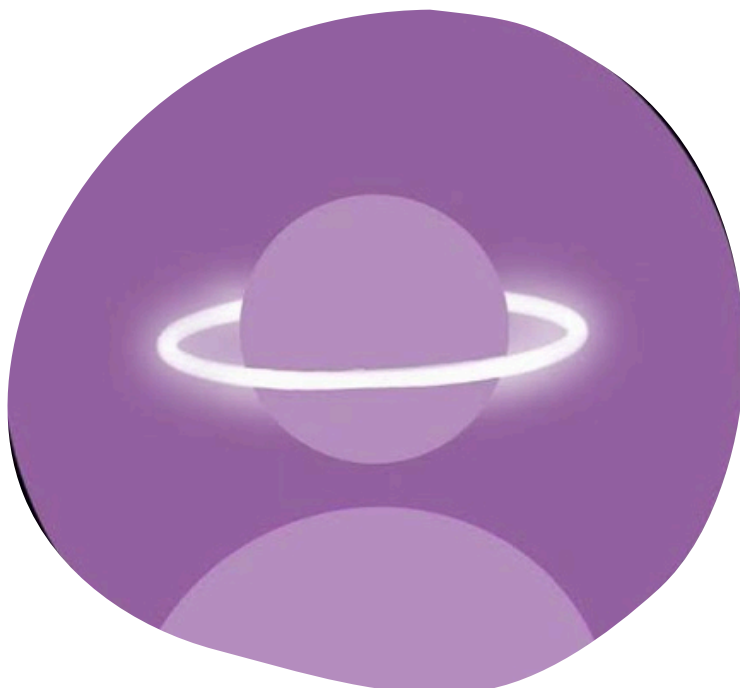
Anthy Strom



Opulence and joy , Devotion to joy

Anthy Strom is a poet based in High River A.B. Their work has recently appeared in *Salt + Silk Journal* and *Lacuna Vox*. When not writing, hiking or cat-wrangling, they can be found desperately battling the mint that has currently taken over their garden.

Rachel Rodman



Paradox Princess

Rachel Rodman (www.rachelrodman.com) is the author of three collections: *Mutants + Hybrids*, *Art is Fleeting*, and *Exotic Meats + Inedible Objects*. Her fiction and experimental poetry have appeared in *Penumbra*, *The Alexander Review*, *State of Matter*, and many other publications. Her art celebrates evolutionary relationships.

Robert Loren Moe

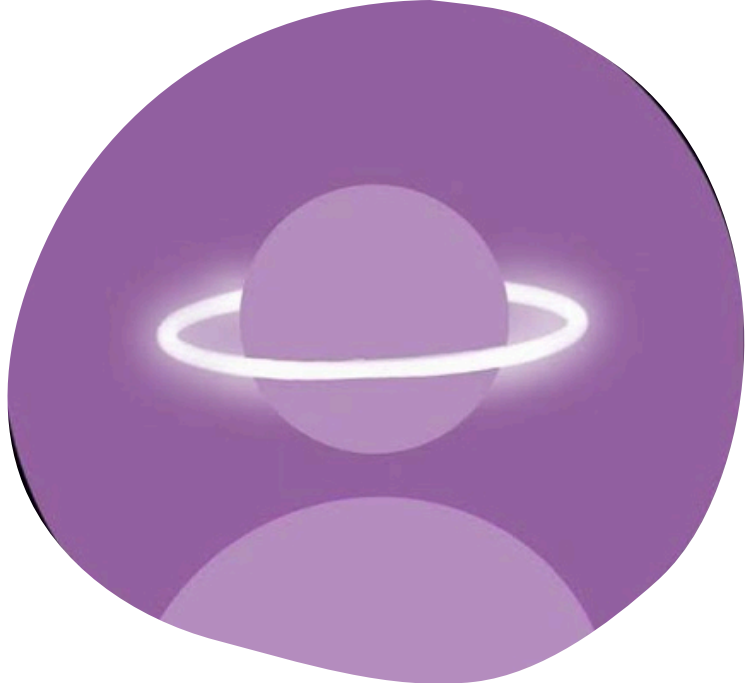


When I Lost You

Robert Loren Moe is a senior citizen originally from Ohio now living near the Appalachian Mountains in South Carolina with his wife and blue heeler. He is a life-long amateur writer camouflaged by day as a robotics engineer. Writing maintains his humanity and sanity in a complicated world. Publishing credits include *Animated Blue*, *Carmina Magazine*, *Blue Crystal Magazine*, *Impspired Magazine*, *Withering Words*, *Academy of the Heart and Mind*, *Poetry Superhighway*, *Tap into Poetry*, *All Your Stories*, *The Big Question* and others.

Thanks to the Contributors!

Philip Athans



Nothing More Terrifying

Editor and author Philip Athans has been a driving force behind varied media including *Alternative fiction & poetry* magazine and *Wizards of the Coast*. He lives and works in the Pacific Northwest.

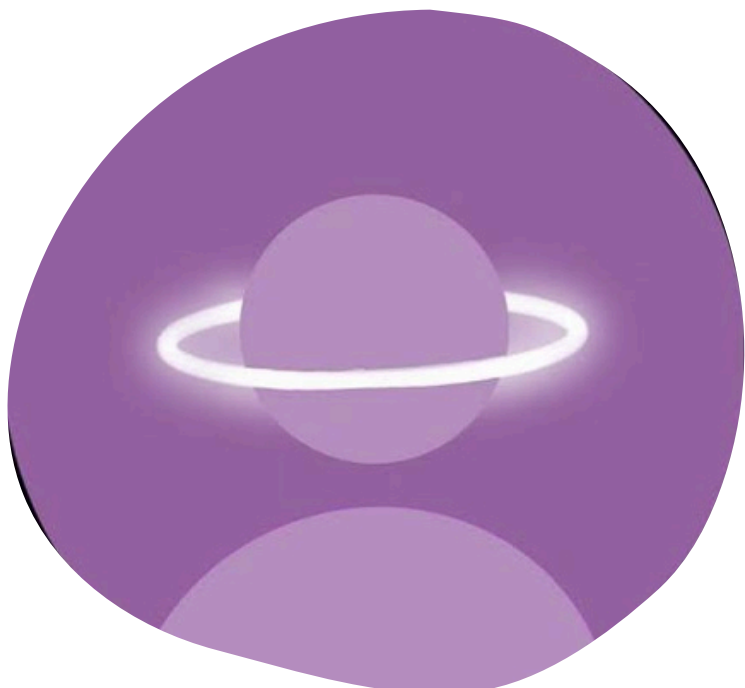
Jacqueline Hodder



This Story is Laid Bare

Jacqueline Hodder is an award winning writer from Melbourne, Australia. Her writing has featured in literary magazines in both Australia and the US and in anthologies as varied as *Stringybark Stories* and the *Newcastle Short Story prize*. In 2026 Jacqueline was involved in the Melbourne and Leeuwarden City of Literature's Bar-tailed Godwit poetry project in which four poets from each city met in a virtual writer's room to create a chain link poem celebrating the extraordinary migration journey of this little bird. Most days, Jacqueline can be found daydreaming and birdwatching at her local wetlands reserve. Follow Jacqueline at: www.instagram.com/jacquelinehodder_writer

Pebbleton



It's Dark Outside, The Tower

Pebbleton is an emerging young poet from Germany with a knack for a rather antiquated writing style and a very toxic, very one-sided relationship with Magritte's pipe. He dreams of one day having a cat. His works can be found, among others, in *The Morgue* and *Notch Magazine*.

Shawna Woods

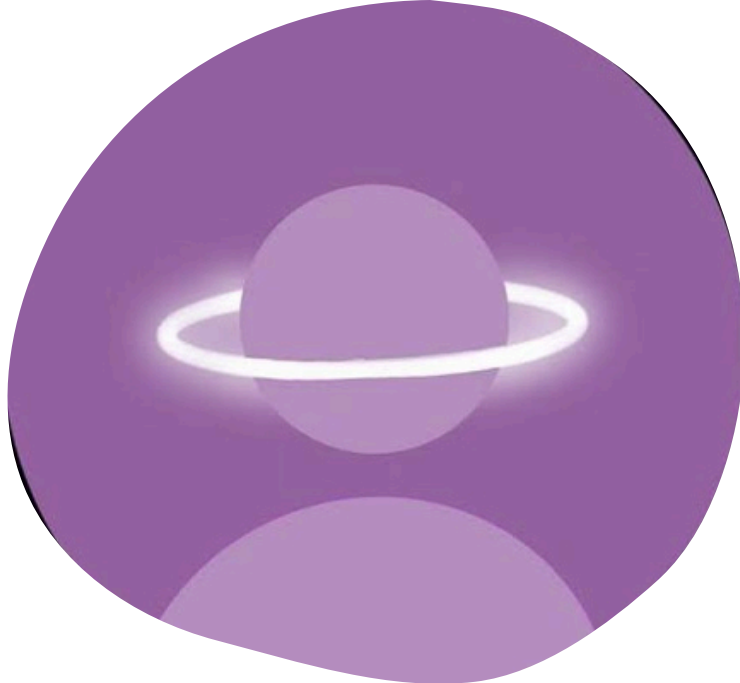


Head in a Box, Inside a Senior Rehab

Shawna Woods is a Black woman who writes whatever she can; currently hibernating in Long Beach California. She has stories featured in *Eulogy Press* and *Lilac Magazine*. Her Substack is: @shawnamothra

Thanks to the Contributors!

MJ Weerts



Emotion as a Bad Stepdad

MJ Weerts (he/him) teaches comp and film at LSU. He loves Thao and Kai so much. @lsuenglish instagram (that's his school he doesn't have a personal)

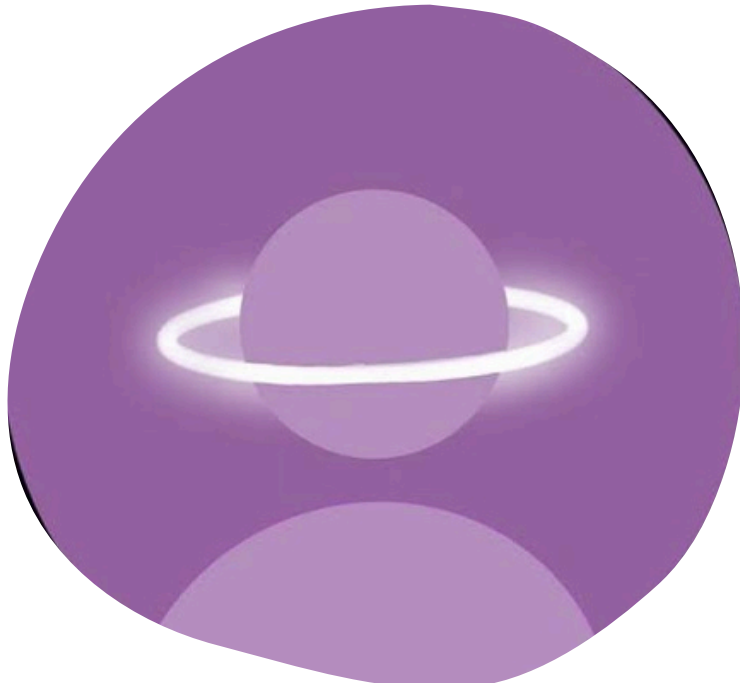
Loralee Clark



Tree Rooted in Pink Moon, Eternal Struggle, Scuffed and Bruised

Loralee Clark's fourth book, *Neolithic Imaginings: Mythical Explorations of the Unknown* (Kelsay Press, 2026), was released in April. Her interests include myth, the natural world and environmental science. She resides in Virginia; her website is sites.google.com/view/loraleeclark. Her Substack, which focuses on the process of creativity, is nosuchthingasfailure.substack.com.

Sriyukta Misra



Neologisms

Sriyukta is an India-based writer whose work explores identity, the inheritance of grief, and the search for selfhood through minimalist verse. Their writing appears or is forthcoming in various publications, including Parcham, Homeplace Magazine, Cosmic Daffodil Journal and Aporia Literary Journal, where their triptych, "Flesh over Flesh," was selected as an Editor's Pick.

Avery Dall-Hilton



Void

Avery holds an MFA from Brigham Young University studying creative nonfiction under Pat Madden and Joey Franklin. She served as Assistant Editor in Chief at *Inscape Journal* from 2024-2026. She received awards from the Vera Hinkley Mayhew Contest in playwriting in both the 10-minute and full-length categories. She writes theatre, music, and ballet reviews for Utah's theatre blog: *Front Row Reviewers*. An avid performer, musician, and theatre practitioner, Avery fills every spare moment writing, reading, and stargazing.

Thanks to the Contributors!

Vera Podell



The Mark Left

Vera Podell is a Russian-born writer and photo artist. She writes in three languages, which are English, Russian and German. Vera's art primarily focuses on the topics of memory and power in their different forms. Her writing has been published in multiple literary journals, including "The Yesterday Review", "ACIDC Journal", "Ouch! Collective", "InterrobangLit" and others. You can see more of Vera's work on her Instagram [@verapodell](#).

Final Note

Thank you so much for reading the first issue of Volume 2. We all at Still Here Magazine appreciate your time and support. Please make sure to give these contributors a follow if you enjoyed their work, and I hope you all have a spooky Halloween!

A dark, atmospheric night scene. In the background, there are silhouettes of trees and a few distant lights, possibly from a city or a festival. The overall mood is mysterious and somewhat ominous. The text is overlaid in the center of the image.

“Hell is empty, and all the devils
are here.”– William Shakespeare,
The Tempest