

Periphery

Art and Literary Journal

Edition 55

Periphery

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submission process

Submission to *Periphery* is free and open to undergraduate students in the Midwest, including those in the states of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. *Periphery* accepts stories, photographs, poems, music, essays, paintings, videos, interviews, new media work, sculptures, graphic narratives, spoken word, comics, and genres that have yet to be created or recognized. All submissions are sent through a blind review process by the Editor-In-Chief, Art Director, and Editorial Staff only. *Periphery* reserves the right to edit any and all submissions, but does not claim the rights to any published work.

letter from the editor

Art presents an opportunity to challenge or subvert the conditions of the natural human experience. It allows us to not only assess the unknown, but to rewrite the known. Art, in its most exciting states, not only flips the script on the world around us, but also does so for art itself.

Periphery 55 proves distinct from its predecessors in that none of its art is labeled or categorized. We lifted prior generic constraints to provide a medium for new art forms, as well as variety art forms that may now share space in our publication like never before. We hope this change allows for a dynamic and fulfilling artistic experience for our readers.

I am elated for the continued growth and adaptation *Periphery* will experience in the hands of our forthcoming Editor-in-chief, Graham Johnson, and faculty advisor, Carol Spaulding-Kruse.

We thank the artists in this publication for their willingness to engage with us in new ways and to share art that continually challenges.

Thanks, too, are in order for the artistry that takes place behind the scenes at *Periphery*. I feel immense gratitude for the help and guidance provided by the publication's faculty advisor and my mentor, Megan Brown. Likewise, *Periphery 55* would cease to exist and present the same vision were it not for our inimitable Art Director, Hannah Trochinski, or our diligent and intuitive staff editors, Ryan Hultman, Graham Johnson, Sarah Mondello, and Hallie O'Neill. Finally, we deeply appreciate the contributions made Justin Atterberg and the

staff at Christian Printers; as well as Jeff Inman, Jake Bullington, and the Board of Student Communications.

Love always,

Jake Leiberton

Editor-in-Chief, Edition No. 55

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Fifty Percent Backwash

The party is pulsing on the other side of the apartment door and I'm kicking it slowly and methodically, leaving a new dirt mark with each hit to the flat white.

I'm staring at the ground. The carpet is green, embedded with gold flowers — outdated. There are three and a half beers sloshing through my body, meant to ease me through the night but instead pulling me down toward the green. I'm glad the apartment is old. It looks good with my denim jacket.

I lean against the door, shoulder slouching on the frame, and hope that it will never open. I'll be able to leave, stroll up to Brandon and Gretta tomorrow and shrug. Dude, no one answered the door, I'd say. I practically broke it down. I thought about going through the window but it's a three-story drop, man. Some parties are meant to walk away from. I would pretend to give a shit about missing one party and they'd pretend they'd noticed my absence.

The door swings open violently and there's Brandon, the smile plastered on his face spreading when he recognizes me through the cloud in his eyes. I pause, my boot held midair, ready for my next kick. I let a smile creep up my face, breathe, and let my body fall into the party. A hug and a fist on the back from Brandon as I pass him, and then all the others. My friends, the people that have filled the apartments and coffee

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shops and cars that I have passed through for years, all look like one breathing and drinking and laughing creature. Greta kisses my cheek and rolls her eyes at a group of guys a few feet away, whose conversation rears up for a moment and blots out whatever she says to me. She shrugs and disappears. Somebody pushes my shoulder and someone else rubs my head and tells me they like my long hair, grown in the last few months, just past my jawline, maybe too long. My fingers itch for a pair of scissors.

Someone yells "DANIEL" from across the room. I wave in the direction of the voice and then veer away from it.

The beer, or maybe just the party, reaches into my head and begins to press down.

The room is warm and sticky and the windows are gaping open but bodies are pressing close to each other, the apartment too small, suffocatingly warm. I feel sweat accumulate on my wispy mustache and pull my hair into a pony tail, leaving a chunk free to stick to my forehead. I make a few laps around the living room and dining room and I think I keep repeating the same conversation about the heat to everyone but I can't think of anything interesting to say. I find myself in the kitchen, the only breathing room in the apartment that still overlooks the party. There's a small fan set up inside the empty freezer, pushing a steady stream of cool air into the apartment.

"Brandon's either an idiot or goddamn genius," I hear someone say.

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I look over to find Andrew sitting on the counter. He's nodding toward the fan with his forehead, his eyebrow raised.

I laugh and step deeper into the kitchen. I lean against the counter and stretch my legs out in front of me so that anyone trying to enter the kitchen would have to step over me, or ask me to move, or push me.

"Probably the former," I say. He's not looking at me, though, and I follow his gaze into the larger apartment, where they are locked on his ex-girlfriend, who is sitting very close to and talking with a guy I don't think I've seen before on the couch.

Andrew was my roommate freshman year. He cried on the first night in the dorms and I went out to get him pizza because I didn't know what else to do and felt uncomfortable with his emotion, that it was so visible to me.

But I sat with him on the dirty carpet and ate the pizza with him and told him that I was afraid for my mom and my sister, for leaving them alone with each other. Now I can't get that night off of me. Sometimes I want to walk away from him.

"Hey," I say. I stare at him but he's not looking at me. I turn around, look at the counter, and pick up a used shot glass. There's a peeling image of the Eiffel Tower printed on the glass and my fingers tap, tap, tap it against another stray glass, making the drops of liquid left in it shake and sway and then I pour it into the Eiffel Tower, which I know is Brandon's glass because he goes to Paris or Spain or something with his family every year, maybe a few times a year.

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I look behind me. "Andrew," I say, almost begging. He sort of nods but starts picking at the label on his beer can, still not looking at me. I roll my eyes and sigh and let a smirk crawl up my cheek. I pick up a random red solo cup from the counter, pour the dregs of alcohol from it into the shot glass, and then the rest. Bits of alcohol from the near-empty glasses and cups sprawled across the counter until the Eiffel Tower is nearly spilling with yellowish liquid and I turn, dangle it in front of Andrew's nose. "Hey dude," I say, my voice rougher now. "I dare you to drink this. Fifty percent random liquor, fifty percent backwash. I promise it will thoroughly distract you."

He meets my eyes, finally. Smiles, smells the liquid, and shakes his head with exaggerated disgust.

"Gross, Daniel. And I don't need a distraction."

I shrug. "I'll give you twenty bucks."

"Go find a freshman to haze."

I look back at his ex. She's sitting close to the guy and her hair is out of the harsh ponytail she usually wears. It looks longer. She brushes it over her shoulder and the guy watches her throat.

When I look back at Andrew, I'm a little warm — frustrated, maybe, or pushed by the beer and whatever is buzzing inside my head. "You've been here for almost four years and you're still fucking obsessed with the same girl," I say, matter-of-fact. "I'm bored."

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I turn back to the party and my eyes sweep the room, grabbing at my friends, and I'm tired of them but I don't want to be. My eyes catch on Gretta. She was dating a guy when she lived next door to Andrew and I in our first year and if you bring it up now she'll roll her eyes and mimic throwing up with dedicated theatricality. She came out to me before anyone else, in the grass in the courtyard outside her apartment sophomore year. It was March and when we stood up to go inside, our jeans were muddy. Some of the faces floating around me look back at me and they are open and admiring and I want to keep them looking at me and I want to tell them to leave me alone.

I cross the room and step onto the coffee table. I hold the Eiffel Tower between my forefinger and thumb, drops spilling from my wrist and sliding inside the sleeve of my jacket.

"Hey," I yell. "Listen up!" I swing my arms and wave the glass in front of the crowd. Someone turns the music down and Brandon is laughing and Gretta is frowning. I look away from her. "Listen, listen, I have a proposition. A challenge, if you will." I pause and laugh like I'm laughing to myself. "A test of courage!"

I push the strand of hair I'd left out of my pony tail behind my ear.

"I have here an accumulation of the kitchen counter's wasted, abandoned alcohol, mixed — delightfully, I'm sure — with all of your vomit-laced spit."

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The little crowd around me is midway through a laugh. The guy next to Andrew's ex staring at the glass in my fingers, his hand hovering above her knee.

"My now-estranged friend Andrew," I motion toward the kitchen, where Andrew is barely visible, but I don't look at him. "Has refused the offer, but I'm opening it up to the room. Who wants it?"

Voices rear up all at once but it's Gretta that joins me on the table. She is sharp and angry and I wonder if she's always looked at me like this. I think she must be more tired with the people around us than I am and I realize I am one of those people, maybe the worst of them.

She plucks the glass from my hand and for a moment I think she's going to drink it but she holds it just out of my reach, taking the crowd with her. "Turn the music back up," she says.

Then she turns to me. "You're an idiot."

Warmth fills my body and I'm angry, but not like Gretta is angry. I feel like a little kid that got scolded, his toys taken away. She hands the glass back with a look of disgust and wipes her fingers on her jeans and hops off the table and I pour the liquid from the Eiffel Tower glass down my throat.

The alcohol cuts at my tongue and the different mixers press on my gag reflex. The crowd really, actually oohs and my

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eyebrows jump up my forehead. I throw the shot glass into the crowd and a guy I know but can't name catches it, holds it up in the air in his fist like a wedding bouquet and I jump off the table and back into the crowd. As I descend, I catch Gretta's gaze and I look away.

I want to throw up but Brandon is in front of me now, his white t-shirt spotted with drops of water or alcohol or sweat.

"Daniel, what the hell," he says, all admiration, and I shrug. "I thought Gretta was gonna punch you, dude."

I put my hands in my pockets of my jacket. He grips my shoulder in a friendly way and I think the smile that sweeps my face is genuine but I also feel like there is something rattling inside me when his hand shakes me. I can feel Andrew's eyes on me from across the room and I wish he'd look away, or just laugh at the stunt. I want to lie down on the ground and let all of these idiots stomp on me until I don't have the energy to ask them to leave me alone.

The music is still low and people are talking around me. A few people push at my back or shoulders and say things to me but I can't make them out. I ask Brandon about his girlfriend and his internship and nod while he's talking. I think I'm supposed to be familiar with what he's saying already and I try to nod at the right places. I try to remember when Brandon and I became friends but I think we just always had mutual friends and then I feel my phone buzz in my pocket and I stop talking. I hold my phone as it continues to vibrate, willing it to stop. It does, eventually, and then starts again.

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The buzzing feels like it's carving a hole inside me, or just shaking what's already hollow.

I hit Brandon's shoulder lightly midway through his sentence. I smile lazily and point to the bathroom. "Rain check?" I ask. "Gotta piss." Brandon nods, his eyes already on the crowd for a new person to talk to, pulling beer from the bottle in his hand. Voices reach for me and they pull at me and I throw easy-going smiles at them as I pass but I don't look. The voices in the room press on me and I think I'm suffocating. In the bathroom, I shut the door tightly, take out my phone, and answer.

"Hey Mom, what's up?" I try to speak quietly in case a line is forming at the door.

"Daniel? I can't hear you."

"I'm here," I say, louder, flinching.

"Daniel, do you know where your sister is?"

I roll my eyes, and then close them. "No, Mom, I don't."

"She went out last night and she hasn't been home."

I wait for her to keep going but she seems to be waiting for me. Sweat is accumulating on my face under the screen of my phone. "Okay," I say, placating. "Is that unusual?"

She makes a sound in the back of her throat that I know is there more than actually hear. "Seriously, Daniel? Can

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you be serious?"

"I'm being serious but — "

"I can't deal with this right now. You just — you don't understand. She's been all over the place and she's probably dead, Daniel."

"Mom, she's not dead, Jesus Christ. I'm sorry, I can't help. I'm sorry. I don't know."

I hang up and I think she's starting to say something but it's cut off. I stand there for a moment longer, looking at the octagons in the bathroom tile and take a moment to worry about my little sister. She was fifteen and small when I left for college. The last time I saw her, I had picked her up from where she had passed out on a stranger's porch. I drove her home and spent the next two days at my mom's, trying to make her pay attention, to watch my sister so I didn't have to. I gave up when my mom knocked the toaster off the counter during a forced conversation, and left my sister there alone to come back to the parties and the buzzing. I cross the room and flush the toilet and turn the faucet on for a few seconds — just in case.

I loosen up the muscles in my face and check it in the mirror, and I get stuck. My eyes are caught on the long blonde hair brushing at my neck. I remember looking in the mirror months ago, thinking that people would be interested in the change, thinking that I would enjoy not looking like myself.

My phone is buzzing again and my fingers find the knob

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to a drawer beneath the sink. I pull it open, search, and shove it closed, move onto the next. In the third drawer, as if placed there on purpose, a pair of scissors, old and a little stained. I hold them in my hand for a moment, feeling the weight, and then I begin.

I close the blades against my hair again and again. I don't look at my reflection.

I cut until it's gone and then I stare at the sink, filled with dark blond. I'm breathing heavily, heaving warm air. I leave the scissors on the counter and throw open the door.

I beeline for the front door, desperate to escape to the hallway, to shut the door and slam closed whatever is swinging open inside my head and letting out a buzz. A red-nailed hand snatches a fistful of my denim sleeve and pulls me into the dim kitchen. Gretta is standing there, matching my height but somehow towering over me. Andrew is just behind her, the beer still as full as it had been when I'd arrived, his feet still swinging against the white cupboards.

Gretta looks angry at first and then she just looks afraid. She reaches for my hair like she's going to touch it but then she pulls her hand back.

Andrew begins to say something that sounds like my name but she cuts him off. She sounds sad when she speaks.

"Aren't you fucking tired?"

The Muscian

The young mother
was so happy
when her son stretched
a set of long
thin fingers

"You can play
the piano," she
said, "you will
be a musician."

She didn't tell
him he would
live in dingy
hotels and sleep
with prostitutes

She didn't tell
him, "you will
die poor."

instead, she blew dust off
an old record from the flea
market and let him set the needle.
She taught him how to wind cassette
tapes and pay attention to the wild
music spilling out of mini vans
that rolled down the street with
open windows spitting out
bare arms like cigars in
the summertime. "We
are all a needle," she
told him, "searching
for the music at our
fingertips, looking
for a vein in which
we can be understood.
Listen." He listened. He
watched the record steadily
revolve and sway and pop.
He hummed to the notes like
he'd hum with the neon lights
that drizzled over him late at night
above foggy barstools and Martini
cocktails as he strummed his guitar
not realizing all his life he would
be doing what she told him that
day long ago in the barter market:
listening. The boy's long thin
fingers twitched.

Used Time Machine for Sale

Over nineteen million hours on it. Sand from Normandy still on the seats. Transmission good, steering good, right front headlight punched out by Bucephalus' hoof. Ash from Pompeii melted onto the body. Bullet hole spider-webbed in the back window from the shot heard round the world. Used to keep dinner warm, save the cat from being run over, visit Joel before he died in prison, and family vacations to the Chicago Columbian Exposition. Radio works from 1921 on. Gear shift stuck in reverse. Price is negotiable. Please do not contact me with any unsolicited services.

The One Who Holds the Moon

She wakes up in the middle of the night and zips open the tent door, stumbling outside to pee. She picks her way across the rocky outcrop they're camped on and squats behind a shrub. When she stands, her eyes rise groggily to the sky and then open wide as she sucks in a breath. The canopy of twinkling stars has emerged, at last.

When she is in the second grade, her classmate's father dies in a car crash. Someone tells her the last words the little girl said to her father were, "I love you." Her own father is taking her to the funeral today, but she doesn't want to go. She cries at the top of the stairs as her father tells her to come get in the car. Inside the church, she stares at her classmate's little blonde head as it shakes from weeping.

She ducks her head back into the tent and shakes her snoring father awake. He follows her out of the tent and they lie back on the cold smooth rock, gazing up. The sky above the Porcupine Mountains is awake for the first time on their adventure, shedding the dense gray clouds to reveal stars. Stars so thick they form a film across the black. The Milky Way. Made of real milk froth. She's never seen so many stars.

They gaze silently. She takes deep breaths to hold the night in and wills her memory to store it away perfectly, capturing every detail. Pristine. Create a memory to return to when he is gone, where she can feel him. Though she's

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convinced it's possible it won't ever happen. If it did, she would die. Two deaths in one body. Who is to say the day will come? The universe is infinite, after all. And yet.

Her favorite bedtime song is 'My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean.' But she thinks her dad is saying "body."

"My body lies over the ocean, my body lies over the sea. My body lies over the ocean, oh bring back my body to me, to me. Bring back, bring back, bring back my body to me, to me."

When he sings this, she closes her eyes and imagines her small body floating over the ocean to be united with her father on a sandy shore. As his voice fades, she fights through the drowsiness and opens her heavy eyes, relieved to see her father is still there by her bed. Her protector, confidant, love of her life.

They stare at the millions of lights stuck in ink and she is amazed to think that some may not even exist anymore, but here she and her father are, gazing at the light they emitted thousands of years ago. Visible nothingness. She breathes out, forcing her fingers to loosen their grip, and lets the moment just be. Someday, she knows, she'll rage against the closing of his final day. But this moment, it is meant for the now. Her body sinks into the earth and she is home, next to him, the center of gravity. Fathers are night skies that hold daughters as they orbit, those shining moons.

Her father puts her to bed and sings her songs before she sleeps. Each time he finishes singing and stands to leave, he tells her goodnight and that he loves her. She says she loves him back, and

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then she says it again, and again, and again. If she accidentally says something else before he leaves her room, she panics and shouts.

DAD!

What?

I love you.

Midwinter's Nightmare

Just half a yellow harvest moon hangs low,
its ocher gleam so bright in bleakest skies.
I shiver in the harshness of its glow;
the darkness froths: a death without a guise.
Rescinded love and broken trust both show
I'm just a place to sharpen all your knives.
Now that I'm cut the blood won't cease to flow—
beyond the drop the shadows surge and rise.
They sing sweetly the song I want to know
and promise me a life with no more lies.
Too long I stand and stare at what's below;
with every breath the love I bore you dies.
I do not leap into the calling void,
but you have left what we once had destroyed.

Water

I was seven years old when I saw my first flash flood. I felt squeamish as a cockroach swam by, frantically floating on top of the water. The bug reached out its needle-pointed arms attempting to latch onto my skin until I slapped it away. I walked barefoot, blindly poking my feet under deep water. That tricky river violently pushed me, nearly knocking me down while I searched for my brother. Jagged rocks ripped open my plump toes, spilling blood out into the river. I thrust my small legs through the swamp up to my hips, to the playground where my brother sat cradled on a swing. His wet knees were bent in toward his chest, cradling his head.

Recently, I read that if the water pouring over Houston were confined to the shape of a perfect cube, each of the six walls would stand about 2.4 miles tall. In ninth grade I swam back and forth in the large rectangular pool in my gym. My tie-dye shirt soaked up the pool. I felt heavy in the water and the full cloth of my shirt dragged me back and my feet kicked through a line of red dye. I reached my arms out towards the wall and small bubbles popped between my fingers. When I reached the ledge I held on and rested my chin on the floor. Quick bursts of breath vibrated across puddles of water foaming on the floor. Water dripped across the checkered tiles and each droplet made the puddles grow wider and deeper.

I've heard to stay clear of the great red squirming pancakes floating by in Houston's water. If you look a little closer

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you'll see tiny ants holding each other's tiny legs; mandible clutching mandible, antennae curled around antennae. If you look even closer you'll see thousands of ants protecting their Queen as she floats somewhere in the middle. I've heard that the thousands of seemingly insignificant sparks easily ignite even when they are surrounded by water. When I was eight my younger brother played in their sand; he unknowingly trampled their home. I watched as hot red ants poured over his skin like steam out of the shower. When he was completely submerged, he screamed, as I backed away barely letting out a whisper.

Someone said that on average most people don't drink enough water. Yesterday, I drank six glasses of water, four cups of strong coffee, and one full glass of a dry red wine. I twirled the wine in my glass; my eyes grew as the liquid teased, climbing the walls. I twirled in one swift motion, round and round just before it crept over spilling on my lap.

At the farm for misbehaving gators in Houston, 350 problem gators could swim over the fence to spy beneath our wrinkled toes. The city of Houston is a massive cauldron frothy and diseased, green with chemical waste swirling towards the center. A jellyfish stung my mother when she was eighteen. She said that suddenly, she was completely aware of her leg as a bolt of pain shot up and down. She told me this story when I was young and I checked under the bubbles in my bath water for fish that resembled jelly.

I heard someone say, Harvey is angry; he has come with a vengeance wrecking homes with his wind. It's recorded that his winds moved at 130-mph. Imagine those fast winds

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sweeping hundreds of people by your rooftop. The water by your eardrums muffles the heavy pressure of the storm invading the canal. A distant voice calls out and you see someone swimming tirelessly. You're frightened and you climb your roof to escape the rising water. You're standing on your roof looking up in the sky for a ride. You gaze at the clouds above. They seem like a soft clean bed, but I can assure you, if you sat on the puff, you would fall.

What you should have in case of a flood: medical supplies, food, a candle, a poncho, a pillow, blankets, duct tape, a decent bottle of wine, a clock, a good book, one more book, clothes, toiletries, more food, battery-operated lanterns, matches, scissors, pet food, sunscreen, a backpack, battery-operated radios, a boat, flashlights, a chocolate bar, your morals, heavy duty gloves, garbage bags, a large knife, a raincoat, Band-Aids, tampons, strength, a lot of batteries, a can opener, liquor, pictures of your loved ones, your wallet, a floatation device, a phone, and

water.

Crisscross Applesauce

I talk too much, that's what my sister, Cali, says. I think she's wrong because I think she talks too little. I would never tell her so because she's my best friend, my sister, and she has sensitive feelings. Our favorite game to play together is to sit face-to-face and make up cool new handshakes, but sometimes we like to play with our Barbies together. Our dolls are twins, just like us, except we have blonde hair and our dolls have dark brown hair. I named mine Samantha, and my sister named hers Susie. Samantha and Susie are 17-years-old, and they both have a crush on the same boy named Ken. Ken is so handsome; he has tan skin and really light hair, but what they like the most about him is how nice he is to talk to. I'm going to ask for him for Christmas because I saw him on TV, but for now, my sister and I have to pretend he's talking because we don't have him yet. Sometimes, we have to talk really loud because Mom and Dad are yelling downstairs.

It's quiet right now. Maybe today is a good day. We all smiled at my school around Ms. Kelly, my principal, and Mrs. Roth, my teacher. Mom and Dad shook their hands, and I went out on the playground to swing because I wasn't supposed to interrupt the adults. Mom waved to me from the window, but she didn't stay long enough to see my cool trick off the swing. I thought maybe it would make her smile.

Now, Cali and I are sitting face-to-face like normal; we have matching pigtail braids and the same pink dress on. We

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are sitting crisscross applesauce with our knees touching on my bedroom floor, Samantha and Susie on our laps. I pick up Samantha and make her say, "Did you see Ken today?"

"No," Cali makes Susie reply. Cali uses her own voice and stares down at the floor, not even picking up Susie to play with her. I always like when she makes Susie dance and sing in a high voice like Elmo, but she doesn't do that today.

"We need to talk about this," I hear Mom say from below us.

"There's nothing to talk about. She's fine," Dad says back. Quiet voices.

I plop my Barbie on the floor and grab Cali's hands. "Hey," I say and wait until she looks at me. "Let's play, come on. We can still have fun."

She nods and picks up Susie. "Okay."

I nudge for her to answer the question: did Susie see Ken today?

"I saw him. He looked nice," Cali makes Susie say.

From below, I hear Mom say, "You heard what her teacher said." She's using her low voice that she only uses when she's sad. I know it's her sad voice because it's the same voice she uses when she tucks me in goodnight before I hear her crying in her room. "Something is definitely wrong. And I

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think we both know it has to do with us."

"It has nothing to do with us," Dad growls back. I love Dad, but his voice is scary sometimes. I think he might be the reason Mom cries all the time, but I don't know why because when all of us are together, we have a lot of fun. Mom makes us pancakes and eggs, and Dad cuts up some bananas and makes a smiley face on my pancake. Even Mom laughs sometimes, especially the time when Dad put a strawberry on my pancake to make it look like it was sticking its tongue out at me. I don't get why she cries when we have so much fun together like that.

"Her teacher said she's withdrawn and has trouble making friends," Mom says. "She's seven-years-old; she should be playing house on the playground with the other little girls, not sitting on the swings alone. You really think that has nothing to do with us?"

"She's just shy," Dad says with his long sigh he always uses when he talks to Mom. "She'll grow out of it." Loud voices.

Cali begins to cry. She always cries, but I pat her on the back until it's OK. Sometimes I want to cry, too, but that wouldn't help Cali feel any better. "It's OK," I tell her now. "Let's keep playing. Maybe they can be on a beach together waiting for Ken to show up, and then they will all go get ice cream cones together."

Cali nods, wiping her nose, letting a final whimper go. She grabs my hand. "I think Susie will get a double scoop."

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I smile and squeeze her hand. "Samantha might even get a triple scoop. Mom let me get a triple scoop one time, but I only had like five bites and then I was too full. Mom said it was OK though because we were on vacation."

Cali is silent. I hear shuffling down below us; Mom is probably rearranging all of the pillows on the couches again. I always know when she has a fight with Dad because the cushions are in a different order. One time I asked her why the blue pillows were on the gray couch where the green ones used to be. "It was time for a change," she had said. She hadn't really looked at me when she said it. Dad walked in then, and I waited for him to notice. Instead, he picked up the pillow on his favorite cushion and threw it to the floor so he could sit down and watch the TV. Mom didn't look at him either.

"It's past the point of being shy! She's always up in her room, haven't you noticed? Probably because she's too scared to be around us down here. Sometimes I'm even scared to be around us," Mom says, after the shuffling stops.

Dad sighs again. "What are we supposed to do? We can't make friends for her! She seems fine when she's here. She plays with her doll." Yelling voices.

"Maybe we could stop creating such a toxic environment for her to live in! We're always yelling and screaming at each other; I know she hears us," Mom says.

Dad lowers his voice. I don't think they realize I can hear them no matter how quiet they talk. "She's a kid. She

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probably doesn't understand half of the things we say."

"She understands what yelling is, and it isn't a good thing," Mom says back in her same low tone.

"Maybe we could talk to her," Dad says. "Tell her she needs to make some more friends at school. Tell her we love her." Quiet voices.

I smile at Cali. They're all done yelling for now; that means I might get pancakes and eggs for supper tonight.

"Maybe instead of the beach, they can be at home with their parents, and they all sit at the table and eat together and talk about everything they want," I tell Cali.

Cali nods. "Can they get ice cream afterwards?"

"Yes. And they will be so hungry that they can still get a triple scoop after dinner. Their parents will let them since they are 17. And then they can all watch a movie together under their blankets and have popcorn."

Cali laughs. "They're going to be sick if they keep eating."

I hear heavy steps on the stairs, probably Dad coming up. I stare at Cali, squeeze her hand. "They won't get sick," I whisper. "They will be having too much fun."

Dad taps on my door twice, then opens it up. He stares

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at me, looking to my hand with Samantha in it. "Who are you talking to up here?" he asks.

I scoot away from the mirror and uncross my legs. Dad doesn't know that I play with Cali in the mirror. I want to tell him how fun she is to play handshakes with and that she has a Barbie just like mine, but I tried to tell him once already. He just looked at me with this sad look on his face, the same face he makes when he is disappointed after his team doesn't win on the TV. So now I tell him, "No one. I was just playing with my Barbie."

He's looking at me the same way now, looking at the smudge on the mirror where my hand had been, the fog from my breath where I had drawn a smiley face. "Your mom and I are going to make us some pancakes. Come down and help us." He reaches his hand out for mine, so I walk to him and grab it, letting Samantha drop onto my bed.

In the kitchen, Mom faces the stove, whipping up the ingredients silently like she always does. Dad gets a banana and slices it into little pieces, and I notice he grabs a strawberry from the fridge. I hope he makes Mom laugh today. I sit in my chair and stare at Mom's back until I smell the pancakes are ready, and she finally turns to give me a small smile. She sets a big round one on my plate, and Dad stands over me with his banana slices and strawberry. I help Dad make a big smiley face on mine while Mom loads a stack onto plates for her and Dad. Once we're all sitting, I exclaim, "I want a Ken doll for Christmas. My Barbie, Samantha, has a big crush on him, but it's hard to pretend when he's not actually there."

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They both smile at me. "Sounds good, kiddo," my dad says.

They chew in silence for a moment, but I don't want to eat mine yet because I don't want to destroy the smiley face with its strawberry tongue poking out at me.

"Can we go get ice cream after this?" I ask.

They look at each other, then back down at their plates.

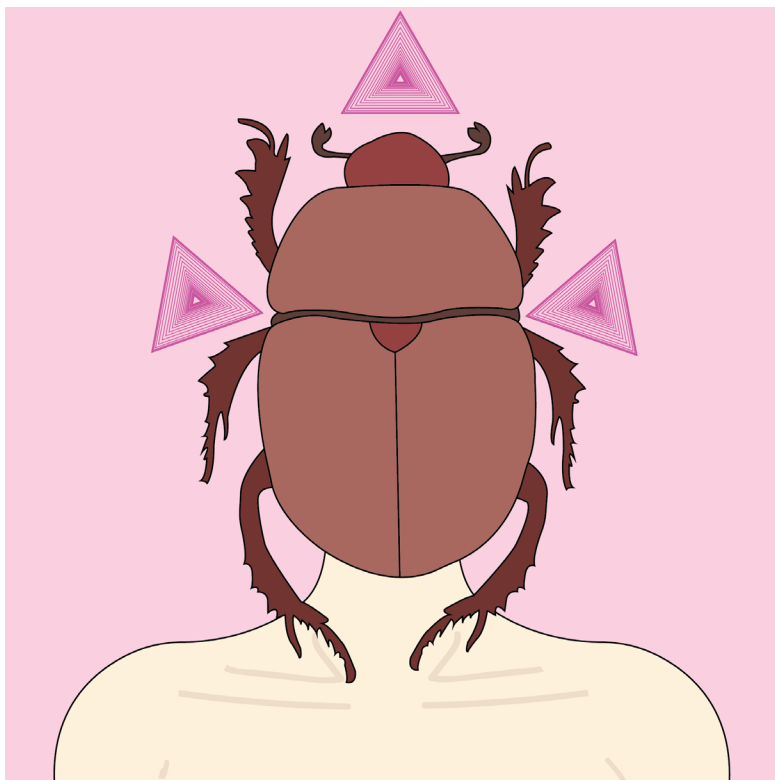
My dad clears his throat. "Not tonight, kiddo." It's silent again. I stare down at my happy pancake. I take my fork and drag each banana slice down on my pancake, pushing my strawberry to the side of my plate. A giant frowny face stares back at me now, no sign of its playful tongue. Now I take a bite.

No voices.





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Do you Remember Falling off your Scooter When you were Eight?

But it is evidence I live

it is evidence I breathe

the rising, the falling, the tumbling down a hill
the gasping, the moaning

it is evidence my lung has not collapsed

I ran miles yesterday, more than the day before
but at the same speed

it is evidence I am moving

forward rather than backward
I would be willing to shuffle sideways
making room for your charging
I am proud you became an equestrian

it is evidence we are moving on

it is evidence my knees have been oiled

I have stopped creaking when I bend
when I straddle, when I ride

it is evidence axioms are true

this is as hard as riding a bike

but it is evidence I remember how to get up

Diamonds and Rust

The ring sparkles under the cheap fluorescent light in the shack size gas station. My thumb reaches behind the ring to fidget it back and forth, causing the light to dance in the middle of the diamond. Such a pretty thing, quite the waste.

"Excuse me," a man says from behind me, impatient. I mumble a sorry and back out of the way, taking my focus back to the snacks in front of me. Cheetos, Funions, or Doritos? I go with Gardettos and pair that with a cheap bottle of vodka. I drive home in silence, the same scenery blending in front of me.

I pull into the gated driveway and Wes, our security guard, lets me in with a nod. Wes doesn't say much and that's why I like him. My house is lit up as always, even on the inside. If I drove by as an unknowing person, I would think this house instills fun and love. I grimace at that idea as I park. The house is quiet, contradicting the lights that are always on. I walk to the living room, my own personal ad from a home magazine. The oversized white 'L' shaped couch with the glass coffee table on top of a long, hairy white rug that stretches to the fireplace. I can count on two hands the amount of times I've sat on that couch. I purposefully walk to it, set my things on the glass table, and plop down. It makes a very unsatisfying leather sound. I frown. I lean back with the bottle of vodka and drink long and hard. The alcohol sizzles deep in my chest, burning away the perfection of the room in front of me. I look

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at the sad attempt at the Christmas tree, the only real dark thing in the house. I admire it.

"Rose!" I shout, still fixated on the tree.

"Yes, Mrs. Lisk?" Rose rushes in.

I point with the bottle, "The tree. It's sad. Don't you think?" Rose hesitates as I look to her. She is such a sweet woman, her wrinkles a map to her past smiles. She smiles now, but it doesn't meet her eyes. I wonder then if she hates us. Does any maid actually enjoy being a maid?

"I would agree that it is a little scarce." She pauses. "You did say you wanted to decorate it yourself." I take another swig as I reminisce pulling out old boxes of ornaments drunkenly one night. I stand up promptly, my face stiff.

"Decorate the tree and then you can leave; take the night off." I shuffle by her and open my bag of Gardettos, lifting it to get an unreasonable amount. I climb our ridiculously long stairs and walk to the bedroom. Flipping on the light, I'm greeted with more silence. It levels me as I head for the bathroom. Pale everything stares back at me. I smile, but it feels so unfamiliar that it fades quickly. I try and find some feeling from within myself but nothing comes. I wonder if the tiny people in my brain deserted me too. Gave up on helping me think. The thought amuses me as I start a warm bath. The water fills gloriously, steam laying on the water. I reach for my favorite candle and light it. The scent hits me immediately, my stomach clenching. The last time I lit this candle was two weeks

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ago. Well, I didn't light it. He did. Before I can let myself change my mind, I reach for my phone and find him in my contacts. "Come over. In bath," I type. I press send and set my phone down. I take off my ring and set it on the ledge beside the tub. I climb in, the water burning my skin. I welcome the feeling, my forehead relaxing as my skin stings, the lavender scent healing.

My eyes flutter open, my toes feeling the cool of the air outside the water. I'm not sure how much time has passed. I pull myself up and that's when I notice him.

"Jesus Christ, Frank," I gasp. As my heart rate comes back down to normal, I wipe my eyes and look at him. My stomach clenches once again as his eyes wrap around me like silk. "I didn't think you'd come."

"Why wouldn't I?" he retorts, walking closer to me. He stares, his eyes looking at every inch of me beneath the water. I let him. I take notice of my heart rate rising again and force myself to breathe.

"I'm sorry. About our fight... I've been busy," I trail, knowing he won't buy it.

"Or your husband was back in town." He turns away from me, fondling the jewelry I never wear that hangs from the door. "Where is he this time? Ohio? New York? I'm really not sure what job he attends to more, fucking other women or actually defending someone for a case." His words don't bother me as I gaze at the water in front of me.

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A year ago, after only being married to my successful defense attorney of a husband for a few months, I came home from work after being sick with the flu to a bright, obnoxious Porsche in my driveway. It was funny, I had thought he had bought me a new car. As I climbed the stairs, the sounds coming from behind our bedroom door was enough for me to sit on the top step and study the hideous painting on our wall and listen. Voices got closer to the door behind me and I stood up. The door opened and only a woman came out. She closed the door with a smile on her face, which disappeared as soon as she saw me standing in front of her. Her eyes darted to the door behind her, unsure of what to do. "Stop. Just go," I whispered. She didn't move. Tall legs, plump breasts and a soft, darling face to match... she was beautiful. I wished to feel anger at that moment, but I didn't. Raising my eyebrows at her, I stepped aside and put my back to the wall. She took a few hesitant steps then quickly walked by me, her perfume engulfing around me. She abruptly stopped after only a few steps and stared at her hands. She quickly turned and outreached her hand so far that her arm might detach from her body. In her hand was a ring. Bewildered, I looked down at my own hand and remembered I had accidentally left my ring there that morning. She had been wearing my ring. The ring this pathetic excuse of a man gave his vows with. I grabbed the ring as she muttered something, disappearing before a coherent thought could form in my head. I put the ring on ground and walked to my car to drive anywhere.

'He made me wear it' echoes around me as I'm brought back to the present. Frank is sitting next to the tub now, studying my face. I meet his kind eyes, wondering what he is thinking.

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He reaches for my face and cradles it in his hand. "You deserve a different path, Aly," he whispers, his voice surrounding me as the water turns suddenly cold.

* * * *

My body twitches in a dream, waking me up. I turn over, reaching my hand to find Frank, but I only feel a cold other half of the bed. I hoist my body up and see his clothes still lying on the floor and his phone by his pants. Maybe he was thirsty. I press the button on my phone: 2:33 A.M. I stretch my arms up and my legs out and trudge down the stairs. Turning right for the kitchen I stop, hearing the slightest sound to my left in Sam's office. I tiptoe in the room and something catches my attention. I walk closer, my eyes narrowing. There is the slightest swaying in the pendulum that sits on Sam's desk. It emits the most miniscule sound, a creak as it goes back and forth. I slowly reach my finger out to stop it.

"Are you hungry too?" I jump at the sound of Frank's voice as he stands in the doorway. I compose myself, glancing back at the pendulum, its movements sojourned. "Aly?"

"No. I was looking for you," I say, walking towards him. I place my hands on his chest. His face is hard and he looks almost nervous. Frank is so hard to read. I have been with him for the past four months of my life and recently, I ponder if I might actually love him. As soon as the thought crosses my mind, I push it away, deeming it to the deepest part.

"I got hungry, I hope you don't mind," he holds up an

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apple and takes a bite. "Are you coming back to bed?" He asks over a mouthful.

"Yeah, go on ahead, I'm gonna get something to drink," I say with a smile. He turns for the stairs and I watch as he disappears into the dark of the bedroom. As I sip on a glass of water, my mind puzzles over the coldness I felt on his vacant side of the bed.

* * * *

An insistent knock on the door jostles me awake. I click my phone: 11:42 A.M. The knocking continues.

"What is it?" I say as I rub my eyes.

"Mrs. Lisk, I am sorry to bother you. I have something urgent I need to discuss with you." Rose's face is serious, her eyes wide and she creeps inside the bedroom. I perk up at the sound of that and motion her to come closer. She hesitates and I can tell she is unsure on how to say what she needs to say. "...I had forgotten my purse last night after I left and came back for it..." Shit. She saw Frank. "Mrs. Lisk, I - "

"Rose. I know. I know what you're going to say, but you need to understand what has been done to me, and is actually still going on..." I ramble but Rose steps forward.

"Mrs. Lisk, I know that man. I remember," she comes even closer. I feel heat course through my body; I don't think Rose has ever been in such small proximity of me. I don't

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understand. "I saw him. He came here. He was belligerent; Sam had to threaten to call the police to get him to leave." Sweat accumulates on my palms, my tiny people in my brain running around frantically.

"Sam knew him? I would've recognized him the second I met him," I question myself even as I say it. Since that night of Sam's unfaithfulness, I was never really present in the parties and events with all of Sam's friends. I wasn't really present for anything.

"He said something before he left. He said Sam will pay for what he did to him and his wife... something like that and then the door shut," Her last words are barely audible. Rose wrings her hands together tight, keeping her eyes down.

"I know Frank, I trust him," I whisper. I nod my head repeatedly, confused on whether I'm trying to convince her or the both of us. Her head snaps up and fear is in her eyes.

"Frank? Mrs. Lisk, my apologies, but who are you talking about? I'm talking about a man named Vinnie."

Rose runs through the story of that night once again before leaving. I try to gather my thoughts. I walk blindly to the bathroom and stare at myself in the mirror. Vinnie? Who is Vinnie? How does he know Sam? What did Sam do to him? Sam gets a lot of attention, good and bad because of his job. This wasn't the first time someone has showed up at our house. I shake my head in confusion. As I do, a small flash occurs beside me. I look towards the tub, realizing the flash came from the

ring. My mind stirs, the tiny people in my brain running around, trying to make sense of the chaos. I stare at my hands spread on the bathroom counter, breathing deeply. Sam keeps old cases in his file cabinet! I rush downstairs and into Sam's office. Just last night I was in here, the pendulum swinging slowly and Frank, or Vinnie, right behind me. Adrenaline comes over me and I'm pulling open drawers, looking through Sam's files; for something, anything. I skim rapidly, looking for key words. That's when I see it. DeVito. It sounds familiar, like something on the edge of my memory. I pull it out and before I can even glance at it, the front door opens. I hold the file behind me as my husband walks in. He shuts the door and turns toward me. He glares at me.

"Please get out of my office," he mumbles and doesn't give me a second glance as he heads into the house. I resist the urge to up and ask about Vinnie. That would be beyond suspicious considering we can't even talk about the damn weather. I rush upstairs and lock myself in our bathroom. I open the file and the headline, "DeVito Acquitted for Hit-and-Run, Lisk moves up" is plastered across the top of the paper. I read further and discover three vital things: Sam freed this DeVito guy that was on trial for the hit-and-run, the woman was found dead at the scene, and in her picture, his white smile glowing, was Frank, or really, Vinnie. I had never seen him smile like that before. My chest begins to ache as a lump forms in my throat. They look so in love. My finger traces over his smile. My feelings begin to change as I realize what is actually happening here. My head aches as the tears come and then it hits me all at once. Swallows me, taking my breath

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away. The life I've been living, the loneliness, the inability to change, and the uninhabited void that is my heart... this is not my path. Vinnie flashes in my head. I need to talk to him first.

* * * *

Vinnie sits opposite of me at the local coffee shop, the smell of coffee beans making my head fuzzy. He walked in easy but his face fell as the sight of mine. "What's wrong, Aly?" he reaches for my hands and I pull them away, tucking them in my legs. My ring stabs into my other hand which causes a simultaneous pain in my chest. I wipe my hands on my pant legs and reach for the file. I set it on the table and flip it open. Vinnie's face looks placated and a certain sadness clouds his once bright, blue eyes. He speaks slow and soft. I listen, giving him the benefit of the doubt. He takes me through his wife's death, and the case that allowed DeVito to walk free, when he was the one who hit his wife and left her to die. How does he know for sure? He continues taking me through the last 2 years and the pain he went through knowing there was no justice served for his wife's death. His eyes lock with mine as he comes to the time he met me only four months ago. His eyes begin to sparkle and I look down at my ring as he speaks. "I wish I could say a silver lining in this. I really do, Aly. But –" he pauses, his face distraught. It is then that I can see the ache he has been feeling and especially what he feels now as he sits in front of me. "There isn't," he continues. "I can't feel any love anymore. My wife was the one person who had my heart. Saying 'I'm sorry' doesn't cover how hurt I am inside that I resorted to this. To do this to you. I had to find the proof, I had to. So, to do that, I had to get in the house, get to his things,

and – " My head quickly snaps up at that, cutting him off.

"Wait, wait... proof? How do you know for sure that he really wasn't innocent?" I probe. Hurt flashes across his face but he takes a deep breath.

"I saw a DVD. I had followed him in the courthouse, preparing to confront him. I overheard him talking to DeVito in one of the rooms and listened. He was saying how he would keep it safe, that no one would ever question or find it. I looked in closer and he had a DVD in a blue sleeve. It could only been one thing." I stared blankly at the coffee in front of me, the steam curling in the air. "Aly, he illegally doctored evidence, tampered with evidence to get the man who murdered my wife off FREE," his last words are so sharp that my skin prickles. He explained the footage on the DVD was of DeVito going to a gas station a year prior to the accident. Sam had copied that footage, changed the date to the night of the accident to give DeVito an alibi. The edited copy was played in the courtroom so the real evidence that proves they lied is still in Sam's possession. If he hasn't done something to destroy it. Sam isn't the type to get rid of proof of his wins, though. I listened to Vinnie more and even though he had stopped talking, my eyes remained in the same spot. I looked down at my ring, overcome with confusion and angst. "Aly?" Vinnie said softly. I held my finger up, my eyes still focused on the ring.

"I have an idea."

* * * *

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"Sam! Sam, thank God you're back," I cry, reaching for him as soon as he walks in the door. Immediately he is alarmed and looks at me bewildered. "Someone came in the house, they had a gun and made me stay in the kitchen. They went through the whole house, pointed the gun at me, asking if I knew!" I am in sobs now.

"Calm down," he says smoothly. "Calm down. Did they say anything about what they were looking for?" My façade hinders for a split second as I realize this asshole doesn't even care if I'm okay. It's not surprising, really.

"I don't know, he said a CD? No, DVD, I don't know..." I cry. "A blue sleeve! What is it, I don't understand!" Sam's eyes flicker and I can tell he knows exactly what I'm talking about.

"Stay here." He turns on his heel and runs to his office. We pass the clutter from things I had previously knocked over myself just 20 minutes ago. I follow Sam, making sure to not make a sound. He goes straight behind his desk, bending down to the floor. I peer over his shoulder and watch him lift up a carpet piece. And there it is – the DVD. He grabs it and turns it over in his hands. Alarms ring in my head but I shove his chair into him hard, his side taking the blow. He lets out an 'umph' and his hands let go of the DVD. I reach for it as he turns around, his face confused beyond anything. I swipe the DVD before he can turn and grab me. "What the fuck, Aly?" He spits. Before I can turn, he grabs the pendulum on his desk and chucks it from his knees. I take the blow to my stomach, the solid metal connecting with one of my ribs. I lose my breath falling to the ground, but I calm myself and turn away

from him, my hand grabbing a different DVD, a blank one that replicates the one I had just taken. I tuck the actual DVD in my waistline and turn over as I hear him getting up from behind the desk. I hold my ribs with the blank DVD in my hand.

"What exactly were you trying to do?" He mocks as he reaches to me, ripping the DVD out of my hands. "You're just beyond stupid." He goes to his desk and sits in the chair. I struggle to get up but I force myself towards him and point to the papers I had previously placed on his desk before he arrived.

"Those," I gasp, my breath still ragged. "Sign them. For once and for all." I knew the altercation would give him reason. He glances at the divorce papers I have been giving him for the past 6 months. His breath evens out as he looks at me with disgust. He sniffs, wiping his nose with his hand.

"Is that what this was. Huh. Okay." A long moment occurs between us like a small flame but it ends, eventually dying out. He grabs a pen and signs them quickly, shoving them at me. I reach for them and he grabs my wrist, forcing my eyes to meet his. I know what he is waiting for; for me to break down like I always have. I hold his gaze steady and pull the slightest bit back. He lets me go, his fingers brushing against the ring. I glance at him but his eyes are low. He didn't notice. I turn and walk to the door. I glance at the living room; its perfection. These nice things never gave me an abundant life. It leaves you unfulfilled. And I've been feeling that for far too long.

* * * *

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I sit in my car outside the gas station, the sun creating a tingly feeling throughout me. I grab the yellow envelope and the piece of paper sitting beside me in the passenger seat. I scrawl on the paper then reach in my glovebox to pull out the DVD in a blue sleeve; the DVD that contains the footage that will get Frank justice for his wife. I wince at the memory of that night, the pain of the pendulum but the quickness of my hands as I switched out the DVD's. I smile at the thought of Sam smirking that he was able to keep the DVD from me. Too bad his DVD is actually blank. I stick the note on the blue sleeve and look at it: "You deserve a different path. -A". I slide the contents in the envelope and seal it. I see a familiar flash from the sun as I do and I lift my left hand in front of me. I slide the ring off and stare at it, a smile forming on my lips. I laugh, the feeling coming straight from my chest. \$18,000 on a ring and he forgot to include it within the pre-nup. I put it back on my finger and smile at it. It twinkles back at me in response as I put the car in drive.



inconsistencies: number three

the distance expanded and contracted like lake ice.
first: only a few hours kept us clean and untangled,
the man before you—skin brown like yours.

this, i thought, is no good, but good enough, until i chased
him home to paraguay. it'd taken me eighteen hours
and three planes to chase him down. i had watched

the caribbean, pocked with the silhouettes of whales,
vanish into rainforest. moving in for the summer—
winter in the southern hemisphere—was transactional,

forced him to relocate his childhood toys, to make space
for my clothes. the man before you did this begrudgingly,
unaccustomed to sacrifice. his eyes turned over, inside out.

and now: your toys watch me from over your shoulder,
through the screen. you had assembled each one
by hand, and then put them on display, perched atop

the shelves that line your room. you're working on one now
as we speak, painting shadows into its plastic nooks, your lips
parted in focus, chancing me to stitch them together

with my own. but that would take a plane. money. a carry on.
so you and i try measuring the distance in months. it's a trick
i made for the nights of him before you—converting miles

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into days for saving money, asking for permission,
praising the potential the future holds while knowing
that none of it will come to pass, but it's fun to play with it,

roll the idea between fingers and mouths—a sinewy dream
we pretend is satisfying even with our mouths on other men.
for three months i shared the winter with the man before
you—

balmier than any back home. when the summer passed,
he promised to follow me soon despite his plane to europe.
only four months. i had talked him down from nine.

his sister, too. but when he got there it doubled. tripled.
left me aching until i couldn't see him under the ice
anymore. my feet too light to break me through.

my mom says: he's gone and so's his mind. men are everywhere.
a friend says: that boy did the same to me and my hopes.
i've said goodbye. pruned the orchard of rot by hand,

and there you grow, an endearing shade of peach. so i eat
around the pit. suck juice from your flesh—sweet
as the early days of the man before you. but a little more
punch.

more tangy than bitter. a slight aftertaste of his final hours
with me, so i keep biting, savoring your skin against my lips.
this, of course, is fantasy, but i swear

Periphery



Boiling Point

As Heather Anderson sat alone in the Des Moines International Airport, absentmindedly scrolling through old pictures, she thought about a story she had heard as a kid. It said that if you put a frog in boiling water, it would jump out immediately; if you placed it in warm water, however, and slowly raised the temperature up to a boil, it would remain in the water until it died. It had always felt like a warning, but for what she had never known. Now, as she waited in the terminal, looking back on the past few days, she wondered how she hadn't understood it before, how it had taken buying a ticket to New Zealand to open her eyes and notice the water boiling around her.

It started two nights ago.

She had been lying in bed as the hours passed, unable to drift off to sleep. She wasn't surprised -- she always found it harder to fall asleep after her sessions with Dr. Lewis, always found the bed a little too big and the room a little too empty. Tonight, though, she couldn't get their conversation out of her head, couldn't stop thinking about what Dr. Lewis had asked her as they finished talking. Heather had mentioned how everyone around town still stared at her, a full two years later, and how she couldn't stand the way that their gaze made her feel.

"And how is that?" Dr. Lewis had asked.

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Heather thought for a moment. "Like there really is something wrong with me. I try and tell myself that I'm just being irrational, but when people constantly stare at me, it feels like they can see through me. It's just...I don't know, sometimes I wish I could get up and forget about this town."

"You know," Dr. Lewis said, "there's nothing that says that you can't. If you want to leave, you have the power to make that decision. You have to take a look at what's keeping you here, and figure out if it's something you can let go of."

Heather had thought about the question as she walked out of her therapist's office and hadn't stopped since. She knew what was keeping her here – Harold, and the house, and Joey. How could she possibly let go of that, of them? Could she? And more importantly, should she? She agonized over the possibility of it. She couldn't deny that her feelings of restlessness had been increasing, that she had been finding it harder and harder to go into town each day and to return to her house each night. She had always stopped herself from fantasizing about getting out, convinced that the very thought would confirm what she feared most. Yet now, as she laid alone in their master bedroom, she allowed herself to wonder what it would be like to leave, to hop on a plane and never look back. Before she knew it she had her computer in her hands and a destination: the farthest place she could go.

She bought two tickets before she could even wonder whether she really wanted just one.

Knowing that any attempt at sleeping would be

fruitless, she began packing, collecting everything she thought she might need until the sun started shining through her window. Grabbing the two printed tickets, she made her way down the hall to where she knew she'd find her husband, to the place he now spent his nights instead of in their bedroom with her. She rarely visited this room. It had belonged to Joey, once upon a time, and as she stood in the doorway, she noticed how nothing had changed from the way they decorated it two years ago. Cartoon rocket ships still decorated the walls, a rocking chair sat in the corner, and stuffed animals littered the room. The air-mattress laying in the middle of the floor, on which her husband laid, served as the bedroom's only addition. The sound of his alarm filled the room, and she forced herself to enter as he woke and shut it off.

"Heather?" he asked, and for a minute she couldn't speak. She almost didn't want to break the silence, didn't want to think about everything else that might break with it. He was looking at her. He was confused, but at least he was looking at her.

She forced the words to come out. "I bought two plane tickets."

Harold slowly sat up in bed and stared at her in confusion. "You...you did what?"

"I bought us two plane tickets. For New Zealand. For Sunday. 2:30 PM."

Harold shook his head and stood up. "Yeah, yeah I

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got that part – why did you buy plane tickets? And why New Zealand?”

“It’s not about New Zealand, Harold. It’s about getting out of this house, this town.”

Disbelief flooded his face. “You would want to leave Indianola? It’s our home, it’s his home.”

“Harold,” she sighed, “this isn’t a home anymore.”

“What, and you think a vacation is going to change that? Change us?”

She took a deep breath. “It’s not a vacation. I don’t want to come back. The tickets – they’re one-way.”

The betrayal that flashed across his face took the air out of her lungs like a punch to the stomach, and the speech she had practiced before walking into the room disintegrated before she could open her mouth. For the first time in years, she wished he wouldn’t look at her. “You’d just abandon him like that?” he finally asked.

“You can’t abandon someone who’s already gone, Harold.”

He went silent. She looked down at the tickets sitting in her hand. How could two pieces of paper hold so much power?

“You should come with me,” she said, looking up from

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the tickets, "Look, I know we've had our issues, but what if this is our chance to move on? To get our life back?"

She held the ticket out to him. He grabbed it without speaking a word. The silence between them grew until she heard Harold, in barely a whisper, ask, "Why now?"

"I just - I can't take it anymore. It's been two years and everyone still sees me as the dead kid's mom. And then I come back here, and everything is a constant reminder of what we lost." The longer Harold went without speaking, the faster Heather spoke, feeling a desperate need to fill the quiet between them, to explain herself again and again. "And every time I wake up and forget for a moment that he's gone, every moment I see you and realize I'm not feeling his loss the same way you still are, I hate myself. Like, 'how dare I be happy when he's gone?', you know?"

She found she couldn't stop talking, even when her mind screamed at her to stop. "And I'm terrified, Harold. I'm so scared that I'm going to forget about him, or that even wanting this makes me a horrible mother, but I can't sit here and let the rest of our lives be like this. How will we ever be able to move on if we stay here?"

Harold kept his eyes cast down at the ticket in his hands. Slowly, silently, he walked past her and out of the room, leaving her with just the creaking sound of the old mobile hanging above the crib as it spun, and spun, and spun.

* * * *

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As she sat in the terminal, she thought back to that story with the frog. She wondered now, whether this house was her boiling water, and what staying in it would mean for her. He hadn't spoken a word to her since he walked out on their conversation the previous morning, plane ticket in hand. The following day had flown by, and at 1:45 she found herself sitting in the terminal with no memory of making the hour-long drive to the airport. She thought she would feel better by now, but every passing second only made her more anxious.

She stared down at her phone. She had been scrolling through old pictures before finding one of the three of them. She remembered that day – it had been before the diagnosis. She tried to move onto the next one but found she couldn't look away. She could hear Dr. Lewis' voice in her head telling her to stop, that fixating on these pictures was "futile". She wished she was here. Dr. Lewis would know what to do. Hesitantly, she dialed her number. She had called her yesterday and told her everything about her impulsive purchase and her conversation with Harold. It rung once, twice, three times before she picked up.

"I don't think I can do this." Heather said the instant Dr. Lewis answered the phone.

"And why is that?" she answered, calm as ever, as if she had anticipated her call.

"What if I'm doing the wrong thing? What if I get on this plane and ruin everything? Oh my God, is this going to ruin everything?"

"What are you afraid of ruining?"

"I don't know! I just – I feel like I can't breathe, and I don't know where Harold is or if he's coming and if I even want him to come, and it's as if everything we've talked about and worked through is just gone. I can't stop thinking that I'm a horrible mother for leaving, that I'm a monster for wanting to get away from the house that my son lived in. I mean, who do I think I am? What if I leave and then forget all about him?"

"You won't forget Joey just because you leave."

"But what if I want to?" she asked in a quiet voice, suddenly timid. "You know, I think sometimes that it would have been better if he was never born, because then I wouldn't know what it felt like to lose him. And I'm terrified that I'll never be happy unless I leave him behind, but how can I possibly do that?"

"Heather, listen to me." Dr. Lewis' spoke with a sternness she hadn't heard from her before, and the shock in hearing her gentle therapist speak in a way other than the calm tone she had grown used to stopped her in her tracks. "There is nothing, nothing, wrong with you for wanting to distance yourself from the house. I know that me telling you that isn't going to magically make these feelings disappear, and neither is getting on that plane. But it's a start. You're allowed to be happy; you just have to give yourself that chance."

Heather nodded before she remembered Dr. Lewis couldn't see her. "Yeah, ok, I—I will," She said quickly.

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"Are you going to be ok?"

"Yeah," Heather responded, breathing deeply in an attempt to calm herself down. "Yeah, I will. Thank you. For everything."

"You don't have to thank me. Just -- call me when you land, ok?"

"Yeah, I will. I promise." She said. As she ended the call, she noticed that people had begun boarding. As she went to stand in line, she made one more call.

"Harold," she said, after he answered right before the call went to voice mail.

"Heather. I thought you'd be on the plane already."

"I'm boarding right now."

She was met with silence on the other line. Then, "I'm sorry, Heather. I tried, but every time I thought about leaving, or took out a suitcase, I thought about Joey, and I couldn't do it."

"It's ok. I think -- I think it's probably for the best, anyway."

"This isn't how I wanted things to go with us."

Heather sighed. "Me neither, Harold. But you can't

stand to leave, and I can't stand to stay."

She had reached the front of the line at this point, and as she handed the woman standing by the gate her ticket, she thought about her and Harold. She thought about when they met, two 19 year olds who had wild dreams about a blissfully unknown future. She thought about when they got married, just after graduation, and how the realization of her pregnancy soon after put a stop to their idea about what their life would be like. She thought about the moment they realized Joey was sick, the day they celebrated his first birthday and knew he'd never make it to a second.

"Harold," she said, stopping right before she crossed the barrier onto the plane, "I hope you can find a way to be happy again."

She heard his sharp intake of breath on the other line. "You too. I hope this gives you what you're looking for."

With that, she ended the call. Slipping her phone into her pocket, she thought back to that story, the one with the frog. She understood now, that it's not as simple as it seems, that it takes more than just realizing the water around you is boiling to jump out. You have to make the choice not to perish, to do something about the pain. She still wasn't sure she deserved getting out, that she should be able to try and enjoy life again after everything she had gone through. But maybe it wasn't about what she deserved. Life wasn't fair – she knew that more than anybody. And if life could give her what she didn't deserve, maybe she could do the same for herself.

Badly Behaved Cephalopods Lead to Amazing Occurrences

Be an octopus research scientist you said. It would be fun, you said. No no, they can't steal things. Absolutely not. They don't memorize night guard patterns and steal fish from other exhibits. They don't open their tanks, slip their grubby tentacles out, reach into your candy drawer, and steal your Almond Joy. Not them. Dumb fish, yes they are.

Hahaha, kill me now I think, shoes squeaking on the ugly yellow linoleum as I follow the puddles left behind in his mad dash for freedom. The little bastard's escaped again. Lenny, we call him. He's not much to look at, just an *Octopus vulgaris*, literally the "common octopus". They're everywhere, and I think they're stupid.

Well, not stupid stupid. He's actually one hell of a little scientist, testing new ways to gaslight everyone on staff into thinking he's secretly working for the Soviets. But his behavior is ridiculous, no matter how inspired, and I resent him for it.

I narrow my eyes at the flowerpot in the corner. I've seen *Finding Dory*. But no, it's just a worn-out and cracked clay pot, with sad little rainbows painted on the side. Flowers in varying stages of death peek out of it, the pot too crowded for Lenny to shove himself into easily. I sigh as I approach the tropical fish exhibit, bright light shining from around the corner. He loves the tropical fish exhibit, and I honestly can't blame him. It fills the entire cavernous room, styled to look like

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an “rainforest” (although the plastic tiger in the corner is a bit of overkill if you ask me) The tank itself must be nearly fifteen feet high and thirty feet wide, a gigantic clear wall displaying an underwater world filled to the brim with colorful fish, swaying green seaweed, brightly colored algae-covered rocks, and an enormous number and variety of anemone species. I’m almost certain that’s where he’s gone, since he loves prying open and eating clams that live near the bottom of that massive tank.

Beautiful swirling schools of fish dart from fake rock to fake rock, eyeing me with suspicion. Knowing full well that Lenny can change colors and assume varying shapes to hide anywhere, I scan the bottom of the tank carefully for any oddities. I’d once caught him waving his tentacles like the seaweed he’d hidden with, but I don’t see him trying that now.

Out of the corner of my eye I catch movement, something much larger than the fat puffer fish currently scowling at me. I turn my head to the left, hoping it’s not some gigantic shark that I have to worry about eating Lenny.

Oh thank God, it’s just Bill the fish man. He was slowly flippering his way with his little oxygen tank and orange swim trunks towards a sizable group of striped snowflake eels hiding within the coral, each eagerly flapping their mouths like hungry baby birds. His hair is nearly the color of his fluorescent trunks, which honestly makes that outfit a terrible choice for him.

I’m pretty sure his name isn’t actually “Bill the orange fish man” or even “Bill” at all, but I’ve never actually talked to him. I do think it’s a bit odd that he’s dressed like a tourist

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instead of a person being paid, but it's after hours, so he's probably not too concerned. I suppose he hasn't seen me yet, given the distortion the glass produces. I shrug, and continue searching the sand at the bottom of the tank. He'll be useful for getting Lenny out, unless Lenny's in a mood. In that case, we'll just have to wait until he returns on his own, unless someone's willing to get chomped on by his beak, covered in nasty ink, or choked out by his tentacles.

There! I grin, finally spotting the little miscreant posing as a rock. It pays to count the rocks — you never know when Lenny will pretend to be one. I point at him accusingly, and I know full well he sees me. His little eyes narrow, and he angrily ejects water from his funnels. Even when they're camouflaged to look like horizontal lines on an oddly shaped rock, I know his pissy eyes when I see them. Well, so much for a cooperative Lenny.

"You little shit, I hope a shark somehow gets in there and eats you!" I swear at him. I know he's a cephalopod without the ability to even perceive sound the way humans do, but that doesn't stop me from calling his irritating fishy ass lots of names. I stick my tongue out at him, and the ends of his tentacles twitch in irritation. He regains his usual pumpkin color from the slate gray color he'd used to pose as a rock. If he were capable of verbal expression of thought, he'd probably be saying something along the lines of "look what I can do, silly human. Can you change colors? I think not, useless bony creature. Hahaha, I laugh at your stiff land-locked species. Ha!"

However, Lenny assuming his normal pumpkin color

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alerts Orange Bill, who seems very startled to see a rock become a mid-size octopus. His eyes, magnified by his goggles to sloth-like cockeyed perfection, blink several times. He glances at me, and then points at the octopus curiously, as if to say "is he supposed to be in here?" I shake my head no and point back the way I had come. Seemingly convinced to procure the escaped octopus, he begins swimming towards Lenny's hiding spot by the rocks, just to the left of a large *Leptopsammia*, a bright yellow pom-pom of a coral.

Oh no, bad idea don't do it danger zone he'll eat you
jesus christ Lenny's one mean little bastard when he wants to be- No matter how horrified my hand waving and how panicked my facial expressions, Orange Bill doesn't seem to notice. Reaching Lenny, he attempts to get a good grip on his bulbous angry orange head. I cover my eyes in absolute horror. I know Lenny isn't big enough to kill anyone, but this will not end well!

Peeking through my fingers, I immediately regret calling attention to Lenny in the first place. Poor Orange Bill has been absolutely lost in a cloud of deep black ink, which will no doubt stain the hell out of everything he's wearing, and perhaps even his skin. I suppose it could have been worse — he could've gotten chomped on by Lenny's horrifying beak of a mouth, or even strangled by his eight suction-cup laden appendages.

I quickly run over to the side door entitled "Staff Only" and open it with my key. Taking the steps two at a time, I reach the top of the tank in sixty-seconds flat. I skid to the side of

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the tank near the exit ladder, and stick my head almost into the water to see if I can find Orange Bill, but all I see is a slowly drifting cloud of very dark ink-laden water. I'm honestly worried he might get stuck on or cut up by some of the sharper coral species, not being able to see. This incident was a bit my fault, and I feel sorry about what happened to poor Orange Bill. My face so close to the water, I fail to notice the inevitable until it literally smacks me in the face.

"BWAHARGL!" I shout, grabbing my now bleeding nose and falling SPLAT into the water like a fat penguin. Cold salty water surrounds me, still darkened by Lenny's ink fiasco. I begin flailing in the inky water, completely lost as to which way is up. Hands grab me, and direct my head to the correct orientation. I gasp when I reached the surface, thrilled to have air again. I wipe my stinging eyes with my hands, and grasp the ladder that was so frustratingly close to me the entire time.

I suppose I should have figured that Orange Bill would swim straight upwards in an attempt to evade the ink, and it would have been silly for him to expect some idiot octopus scientist to be dangling their head inches above the water. After pulling myself onto the small deck area, I examine my nose in greater detail. I suppose it's not bleeding that much, so at least I've got that going for me.

Hearing an "UMPH" noise, I see that Orange Bill has hoisted himself up after me. He pulls off his miniaturized scuba gear and sits it next to him. He isn't really orange anymore — both his fluorescent trunks and ginger hair look far darker than usual. Goodness knows my formally white shirt is probably a

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purple shade at this point. Wiping his face and eyes with his hands in a similar way to how I had earlier, he shakes his hair out like a dog.

Damn... I suppose the glass had distorted him more than I expected. He doesn't actually look like a ginger sloth with massive googly crossed eyes. He has a strong jaw, normal sized eyes, adorable little dimples at the corners of his mouth, and a cute little perfectly shaped nose.

Thinking of how I must look in comparison... Ugh. Drowned rat with a mildly bleeding nose probably wasn't the best look for me.

"Hey, uh, so are you, uh, ok?" I ask, not exactly accustomed to speaking to strangers. Octopus ink isn't poisonous or anything, but it isn't pleasant to get on you. He blinks at me several times.

"Yeah, not... bad. Why is he so angry?" he asks, seemingly puzzled by Lenny's behavior.

"Yeah, he's a bit of an asshole. He escapes, and then treats anyone who tries to return him like they're a shark that murdered his whole family." I reply, rolling my eyes. Not-so-Orange Bill snickers, and attempts to get some of his ink-stained hair out of his eyes. I giggle a bit myself while trying to wring out my white T-shirt.

"So what's your, uh, actual name?" I ask, a bit ashamed to have been referring to him by a made-up nickname.

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"Actual name?" he repeats, tilting his head to the side like a confused dolphin. I blush.

"I don't know your real name so I, uh, have been referring to you in my head as like 'Bill' or something..." I trail off, embarrassed. At least I left off the "Orange" part. He laughs, and messes with his hair even more.

"I'm Travis," he says, smiling a beautiful smile with perfect teeth. Wow, his dentist must've charged a fortune...

"Jim," I say, smiling as much as I can with my head-damaged nose and bright red cheeks. He smiles even wider.

"Well then Jim, would you like to help me feed the fish tomorrow at eight? We could try for round two with the angry pumpkin," he says, winking at me. I turn an even brighter shade of red, if that's even possible at this point. Was my nose still bleeding? Am I hallucinating?

I can hear him now. Lenny the asshole cephalopod... "Silly inflexible human, fear is for the lesser species. Seize the clam, eat it, and live a bit. But I still hate you.

I laugh out loud, and grin at Travis, fear and awkwardness gone for once.

"Sounds great to me."

Fin
(Or tentacles)



Periphery



How Observant

Of course he was there, it was a Sunday afternoon. Cecelia gazed at him across the lawn. His trumpet glinted in unison with the water. His hat perched precisely atop his head like one of the sailboats on the sound. Every week Cecelia brought her sister to Grand Island under the excuse of watching the boats and enjoying the fresh air. Molly used to play with the other children, but lately she only wanted to lay in the grass and thread flower crowns.

The waves lapped the shore and couples meandered between the picnickers. Cecelia and Molly found endless delight in making up stories about the people they saw.

"See the man on the tug boat?" Cecelia asked. "He's secretly terrified of water and despises his job."

Molly giggled then joined in. "See the woman wrapping her arms around that man's neck? She's only holding on so tight because she suspects her husband is having an affair with the maid."

The girls laughed so loud a mother walking by shot them a disapproving glance. The game was fun no matter who was at the park, but Cecelia's favorite subject was the man with the trumpet. She imagined he was the stern but loyal type. Perhaps he was the kind of man who never took maybe as an answer. The trumpet was his way of expressing himself as

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he marched through the park. His melodies were strong and so were his shoulders, she assumed. Of course, he also had a well-trained dog, an apartment near the center of town, impeccable manners, and a steady job as a banker. And a girl could probably drown in his blue eyes...

"Cecelia, you're doing it again," Molly snapped.

"What?" said Cecelia, knowing exactly what.

"You should either talk to Trumpet Man or stop staring at him. Either would be better than obviously gawking at him across the park."

Cecelia was embarrassed at being caught. Every Sunday she watched the man with the trumpet and added to her list of his characteristics. His voice must be deep and rumbling. His name must be something proper, like Harold or Oliver or Walter. It didn't matter that she stared, because he never brought his attention away from his instrument.

"Oh please," Cecelia scoffed, "he doesn't even notice I'm here."

"Do you want him to notice?" Molly couldn't imagine being absorbed in thought about someone she had never met. Cecelia sighed. "Well it would be lovely to know if my imagination was right about him."

"Then let's find out." Molly hopped up and strolled over to the man with the trumpet. Cecelia gasped as her sister

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tapped him on the shoulder, interrupting his tune, and turned crimson when she pointed at her. The man smiled timidly and nodded, and Molly led him back to where Cecelia sat, her eyes and mouth shaped in matching, surprised O's.

This was what she had been anticipating every Sunday. Maybe he would notice her admiring the water, be pulled from his song by her beauty, and invite her to walk with him. They would get to know each other, fall head over heels in love, and have seven beautiful children. As he walked toward her, Cecelia regained her confidence. Here came a man who she had seen every week for the entirety of the summer. It seemed as if they were acquainted already.

"Well hello, my name is Bert," he said, tucking his trumpet under an arm and shaking Cecelia's hand. Cecelia was immediately jarred by his high, squeaky voice. He looked to be a few years older than herself, but sounded younger than her sister. Molly noticed too, and suppressed a snicker.

"Pleasure to meet you, I'm Cecelia."

Bert said nothing. He glanced at the ground, fiddled with the valves on his trumpet, and rubbed the tow of his boot into the dirt. Cecelia caught a glimpse of his deep brown eyes, which were more like the wood of a sailboat than the blue capable of capsizing it.

She broke the pause with a stumbling question. "So, Bert, ah, what do you do? For a living I mean?"

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He cleared his throat. "Well, I currently sweep floors at the bank. It doesn't pay much, but it's enough for Misty and me to get by on," he said, scratching his head and staring at the parasol Cecelia had left on the ground when she rose to greet him. Cecelia's heart sank. Misty must be his wife, she presumed. All her thoughts of being whisked away by a handsome, loving man flitted away.

To be polite, she inquired with a tight smile, "Have you and Misty been together long?"

Bert erupted in obnoxious laughter. "Oh, you misunderstand, Misty is my tabby cat!"

Cecelia should have been relieved that the man she had been pining for all summer was indeed available. But as she looked at the stranger in front of her, she realized she was entirely wrong about him. From his job to his pet to his voice, she had been mistaken about the trumpet man.

There seemed to be no escape from this uncomfortable conversation where Cecelia was proven wrong time and time again. She worried the two of them would rot standing there in the shade avoiding eye contact. Suddenly, the bells on the church down the street rung one o'clock.

"Oh my, look at the time, I have to gather my sister and leave," Cecelia exclaimed.

"Alright, bye," Bert said with a little wave. He turned on his heel and walked away. It took him only a few strides to

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remember his trumpet and resume the song which had been interrupted.

"Nice to meet you too," Cecelia muttered under her breath. She found Molly under a tree weaving flower crowns as usual.

"Was he everything you dreamed he'd be and more?" the younger sister sang mockingly.

Cecelia let out a short laugh. "Absolutely not. Let's head home."

"Can we at least play our game one more time? Please? What do you think those two sailors are like over there by the shore?"

Cecelia thought for a moment, smiled, and said, "I haven't the faintest idea."

Starting Now

I have learned to swallow my panic.
I do things for the sake of doing them.
I am not afraid to be alone but I hold my hand
over the wound and wince
when I touch you.

I try you on like a new pair of jeans.
We are in the dressing room together
and you let me undress myself
I face you in the mirror;
neither of us blink.
The glass shatters.
My knuckles blush.

Our bodies touch every surface,
your shape inhales to mountains,
mine collapses to caverns.
We are allowed to sculpt
every part of the body
except the face.

I wish I was facing the window.
Look backwards,
try it with me now.
You are perfect.
This angle is even better.
I can tell you think I'm beautiful.

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Later, as the sunset
echoes between our mouths,
I buy a knife
and count your ribs.

I am distracted.
Distance has made my body
comfortable with absence.
I write letters to my mind while we wait.
I change the address
when you're not looking.
All my letters come back to me.

There is a Man on a Tall Bench Reading a Book

The bench, it seems, is made entirely of books

Maybe two or three stories of stories, and perched on top is this man

I gaze up at the man and ask what he's doing

"Just waiting," he says

I ask what for

"My wife," he responds

I ask if I can wait with him, he smiles and drops down a book
"That one is my favorite" he says

The book, with its faded, damp stained hardcover with deep golden engravings, catches my eye

Its pages, painted with years of age and antiquity, are frail like dandelions in the breeze

As I read through its torn and twisted pages, I fall deeper and deeper into its words

I am mesmerized by its handwritten lettering

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Entranced by its hypnotic text

Studying each line, singing every word in my heart

There is something about this book

Time passes and I check my timepiece

The books topple behind me as I get up to leave

"Don't leave," says the man, "not without reading this."

He tosses down another book

I want to leave, but he is so lonely up there, waiting for his wife,

I can afford to stay for one more

So I take the book

Pretty soon, I take another book

And another book

Another book

Another book

The pile of books beneath me grows, and grows

I look down

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From where I sit on this newly erected throne of literature, the
grass below seems miles away

I look up

I see the clouds, once so far, but now within reach

I look out

Sitting on his own bench of books, directly parallel to mine, sat
the man

I yell and ask how long it's been

"Ten years," he responds, almost giddily

I look down and ask how I might be able to get down

"It's too far to jump," he says, "but it's okay, my wife will be here
soon."

As we sit atop our towers, waiting for the man's wife, I get to
thinking who will come for me

The man has his wife, but who do I have?

I have no one

Maybe my wife will come for me

We sit there waiting-reading and waiting

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Eventually, as the years tick on, the man dies, and his body
plummets to the ground

Shortly after, his tower, his monument of isolation, crumbles,
completely decimating the earth below

His body is crushed by his own books

I sit there, waiting

I read some more

More time passes and the thought of jumping off the behemoth
gets more and more reasonable

Then, from below, I hear the voice of a young man

I look down and there he is, standing at the foot of my throne
is this young man

He asks what I'm doing all the way up there

"Just waiting," I said

The boy asked for what

"My wife."

Periphery

At the Gym

Bodies move like escalators, ellipticals
glide like synchronized swimmers. 28:32.
Up down, up down, left right, left right.
How does the guy in the blue
sweatshirt withstand this sauna? Watch
as he circles around us to the tock-tick
of a counter-clockwise Tuesday. Listen
to the circadian rhythm
of bodies in consonance, bodies in cadence.

Hear the treadmill wheel
like a guinea pig pining to be fed
by sweat and Gatorade: the salad bar
of missed opportunity. Thighs burn
like the roof of the mouth that couldn't wait.
Does the girl in pink know that
leaning on the machine is giving power
to the machine? Increase incline. Resist
thighs like overcooked noodles.

Weights chatter like bowling pins.
It's the start of spring
intramurals. Watch from our balcony
as the red and blue is volleyed.
17:31. Hear the spritz of antiseptic
applied to the machine's wounds
with a soiled cloth. Cubbies full:

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squeaky shoes, warm pants, keys. Hear
the bowling pins chatter.

What if animals went to the gym?
Wonder this as six screens
display the same news, the same
surgeon, the same team. Does anyone
else get creeped out
by the dude standing, staring
behind the desk? Resolve problems like adults.
Imagine an elephant elevated on an
elliptical.

Read the sign: Monday, clockwise.
Talk in circles, observe
the showcase below. A mix of
wannabes and will-never-bes
swarm the court. Loop them.
Bodies in constant motion, brains
with their own form
of recreation. Think of words to say.
Pretend. See the girl in cut-off.
Read the sign.

Objects Fail to Appear

Warning: Objects in mirror
are closer than they appear
only works if the driver sees
the object in the mirror. It matters
whether or not the mirror saw
the object before it reflected
a larger problem. Then the image
becomes crystal clear that the beagle
puppy did not win the battle
with a tire of a farm truck. I was
not there. I was four-years-old
and left grandpa and grandma's house
that afternoon with mom. Dad was
still hunting or helping with a late
harvest. I think of this years later
at an Amish farm. I did not mind
bringing the broilers to be butchered,
their heads chopped, feathers plucked.
The butcher bunnies were almost
unbearable to let go of. I tried not to
listen. Too late. I heard their shrill shriek
and my ears grew long, black, and floppy.
My arms became short white legs with a
broad white chest. I went on a mission, letting out
my beagle battle cry, wanting those bunnies
for myself. I could already smell the blood
of the first cut when I startled the young

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Amish boy. He dropped his knife with the blood-stained handle, the blade reflecting the last sign of death as it plummeted to the concrete floor of the early 1900s-built barn. I used my pointed, paint-brush of a tail to apply a thin coat of paint to cover the scarlet red. This is what I wish I could have done, saved you. Instead, I listened to the shrieks just like I listened and did not say a word years after the beagle's death when the accidental truth was revealed. It was the innocent, aging woman's fault. Regardless, I still felt the sting of that blood-stained knife trying to break through, dig itself under my skin. It was grandma driving that 1989 Dodge Ram with its farm plates and pipes on its sides like smoke stacks, releasing the beagle's final breath into a cloud of exhaust.

Periphery

Natercia

my father used to tuck me into bed every night with a prayer.
i hated it when he fixed the sheets all the way under, trapped
beneath the mattress.

it felt like i couldn't get out

and i would kick until i was free.

i was baptized in a church in paran , kicking and screaming,
ringing off the walls. i grew up to be an atheist.
god never talked to me,

i spent years feeling like a defective joan of arc,
praying into bibles like

"are you there, god? it's me, daniela,"

only to get the answering machine.

i don't know how to believe in anything.

my father always says you have to believe in something.

i know he doesn't mean this as the condemnation it feels like.

my grandmother was catholic woman with twisting brown
hands, who loved orchids and maracuj 

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and wound rosaries around her wrists.

she always spoke of god like they were on a first name basis.
only a handful of conversations have ever stretched

between us, i mean,

how many things can bridge 4,744 miles?

how many things can still feel the same from that far away?

i get the call that she's dying while i'm on an airplane, heading
west instead of south.

i'm always coming home in the wrong direction.

i read once that in victorian times,

people believed that if you wrote while on an airplane

the words would hang, suspended.

i wonder if my grief hangs over the continental US, pressing as
the atmosphere.

my father catches a flight home twelve hours after i land. you
can always leave home,

but you can't always go back to it

and i wonder if he gets homesick like i did as a child, an ache

Periphery

so bad it steals the air from your lungs.

i don't ask him that

like i don't ask him if he misses his father

or if he still remembers being seven years old

as a military regime took over his country

or if he remembers being twenty-seven and a child of the revolution, running through the streets in the echo of tanks.

instead, i picture him in airport security,

his passport pressed in his coat pocket

right over his heart as if it could stop a bullet.

i wonder if the excess x-rays pick up on that, if they can see the way it tangles with the gold chain around his neck

and his stuttering heart.

he comes home two weeks later

with a box full of pictures,

full of letters, full of poems in handwriting i can never read.
spreading them out across the living room floor,

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i wonder at how eight decades can fit so neatly into boxes.

he says, *querida, let's pray*

and for once i bite my tongue.

we bow our heads. it's just like every bedtime story i remember.
*pai nosso que estás nos céus, santificado seja o vosso nome. venha
a nós o vosso reino.*

seja feita a vossa vontade, assim na terra como no céu.

someone told me once that god is not coming home, god is
leaving it.

my father's voice shakes

like 4,744 miles trying to rearrange themselves.

he prays with his mouth closed. he prays with his eyes open.

you are all invited to my joint funeral with
benjamin becker

to gain admission to our joint funeral,
you will have to tell at least one story about one of us.

it doesn't have to be good story.
once the day before college decision day,
when he still had not decided where
the hell he was going to go, ben was sitting
in the passenger seat of my 1996 gold nissan altima
and talking about anything else
but the future looming above us with fanged teeth.
and ben went, "well, what do you want to be
when you grow up?"
and i didn't know how to tell him
that i've never exactly pictured grown up,
that i've never pictured my wedding
or graduation or future family,
only my funeral, and that future always ends up
blank in my mind.

i don't know how to tell him that.
ben's aggressively neurotypical and he thinks of death
as something that happens to other people.
he's never gotten into bed with it and rolled out stained.
he's afraid of death in all the ways
you're supposed to be.

so instead, i say, "should kanye west

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be the musical guest at our funeral?"
and ben goes "dude!!!! totally!!!"
because we've never talked about scary things
like they're anything but stories.
ben wants a musical guest to do a tribute medley to our lives
and his own music career, which he swears will be illustrious
and also a real thing that actually happens.

he is vaguely certain that he could find success
as a christian rapper because he thinks
it's a very niche field compared to being a regular rapper.
his rap name will be yung messiah
and when i said, "ben, isn't it a bit presumptuous
to call yourself the messiah?"
he just said, "you know, that's what my mom said."

we began the planning of our joint funeral
while ben was working at the amos family funeral home,
which we have all always agreed is
the natural progression in his career given that
he was last employed at the lakeview retirement home.
we've been friends for nearly five years now
and i don't remember how i met ben exactly,
he wasn't there and then he just was,
asking me about whether he should patent
an invention called the slitten
(which are literally just sleeve-length mittens)
or whether we should have a shuffleboard table at our funeral
and laughing at my jokes even when they don't deserve it.

ben says he wants a shuffleboard table

Periphery

because once on election night at a watch party, ben and i
accidentally bested two semi-intoxicated twentysomethings
in shuffleboard although we didn't have any idea
how to actually play shuffleboard.

there will also be an in-service screening of
the it's always sunny in a philadelphia episode
"the nightman cometh" that encourages audience participation.
these are things that are probably not connected,
but also what do i know?

i am very small and the universe is very big
and i know about two things. maybe three.
no more than five.

and as this spectacle draws to a close,
a chosen few will be given gold tickets.
these tickets give you privilege and honor of
being allowed into the scavenger hunt
for me and ben's entire combined fortunes!!!
which could be a lot if i write the book i say i'm going to write
or become who i say i'm going to be
and if ben really becomes a rapper called yung messiah
or ever actually patents the slitten
it could be approximately \$72.65
or it could be that all our money was spent
trying to get kanye west to come to our funeral
even though it's likely that by the time ben and i die,
kanye will be a provocative pop culture entity
contained only in a mason jar.

either way, death is still death just like life is still life
and we are still woefully

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and terribly unequipped to handle either
and everything we were looking for is still
in the ground.

Periphery





Periphery

Living

A profession of love on the lips of a teen
The last chord played on a piano
Echoing, but no longer there
Grasping at a memory for an echo, a semblance of what was
What is no longer

A dandelion in the August sun
Plucked from its home for another
Torn apart by a single breath
Another's wish indulged,
One life blown to bits,
just to pay for the other's

Traces of peppermint
That linger in the air,
and on the tips of your lips,
every breath reminiscent.

An untended garden
Forgotten and overcrowded
Looking for its path to be clear once again
Waiting for one to dismantle its extremities
and return its sanity

A lonesome seaman amidst a storm
Scanning all horizons for a sign, for light
for hope

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A heads up penny on a scorching asphalt lot
The smell of rain and earth
when you can almost taste the humidity, but the sky is clear
the wind whips around you, filling you with
memories, laughter, adventure, purpose,
life

Blame

You know your parents' choices aren't your fault, but it still hits you hard when your mom decides your father is incompetent and kicks him out of the house because he's depressed and full of apathy and it hits you even harder when you witness your dad get in your moms face as if he's going to hit her and, even though you know if anyone hits anyone it will be your mom hitting your dad, you still fear that the strike will come out of nowhere and you'll have no one left to

blame but yourself

because you saw it coming and you could've stepped in and made them both shut up and go their separate ways but you didn't because you didn't want anyone to leave and you just wanted to be one big happy family even though your mom is an alcoholic and your dad is known for drugs and you can only sleep at night after cutting open your own thigh and your sister spends all of her time designing the perfect family home even though she

blames your parents

for everything that has gone wrong and sometimes she blames you because you don't speak up for her enough but she knows you're still a kid too so the anger comes and goes in waves and you spend a lot of your free time dreading when the next wave will hit because it always drags you under and you drown in

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your own blood and then your grandmother moves in to take care of you because she loves you but you know most of all it's because she

blames herself

for failing at something with your mother, because your mother needs help and your grandmother thinks she could have done it, but in the end you know it's a lost cause because your mother inherited her father's stubbornness which you know only because you have it too and until your mother wants to get out of this cycle of self-destruction everything will be in ruins and there is nothing your grandmother can do about it except

blame God

which she does and you do too and eventually your sister gives in and the three of you live in a heathen rage while your mother quotes scripture at you, trying to exorcise your demons while you try to live with hers and you want to give up, but then your father invites you to his place for the weekend and you go play videogames and eat french fries for thirty-six hours straight and return home rejuvenated only to find that your mother

blames you

and has spent the entire weekend destroying the house in a black-hearted attempt to bring you home and your sister has tried to clean up after the rage, but can only do so much

Periphery

before it returns, so you take away the broom and send your sister away, giving your mother a bottle of whiskey you've been saving for a day like this and wait for her to pass out before setting to work cleaning the house, throwing your tears out with the dirty water and promising yourself that you'll figure this out before it kills everyone.







