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Alchemist Review

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Table of Contents

Feeling Gravity's Pull	1
Toxic Masculinity Journey	2
Deep in the Grave	3
OPIA or ZELDA GRAY A Life in Eight Parts	4
Untitled	23
Weight of Water	24
Bspectacled Spectacle	25
Untitled	27
Prologue	28
Abe Photo	52
Drills & Screws	54
Existentialism and the L.I.E.	56
Years from Now	57
Broken Pieces	58
The Attic	70
Cassie	71
Primordial	72
In Men We Trust	73
Grandfather's Once Heavenly Acres	74
For Karen	75
Untitled	81
Cracked Teeth	82
Personal Hell	84
Interruptions	93
A Catscapade	94
Streetlight	99
The Age of Fire	100
An Old Acquaintance	101
The Telling of a Bus Ride	102
Excerpt From "The Great and Terrible Atlas Devúa."	103



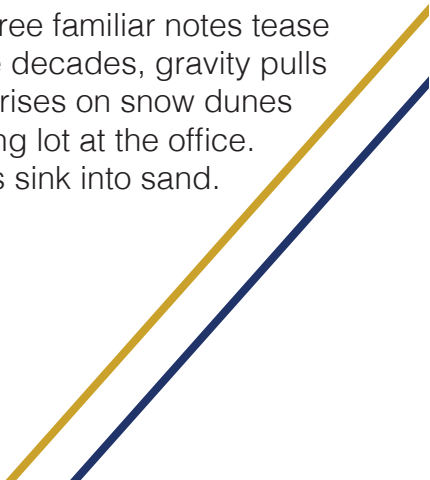
Feeling Gravity's Pull

Glenn Cassidy

Cassette plays and replays
on my Walkman, like the ocean
reaches for the beach and falls back,
lunges again. Like freshman physics
ebbs away as I lie in Florida sunshine,
like the scarf that will freeze with my breath,
bundle me again after Christmas.

Three dissonant plucks on guitar
strand in the air
like a breaker scatters foamy from under me,
the tingle when gravity pulls,
ear hanging on for tonic,
plunges into broken shells
of clams and whelks and mussels,
heavy afternoon, terrycloth imprints
on my cheek, gravity.

Three familiar notes tease
across the decades, gravity pulls
from the radio, sun rises on snow dunes
in the parking lot at the office.
My toes sink into sand.



Toxic Masculinity Journey

Stanley Sharkey

I used to love poetry
A long time ago, before I was a *MAN*
But my father would say, between beers,
“Poetry is GAY.”

This was just the start
From there I embarked
On my Toxic Masculinity Journey
To make a man out of me

“Don’t cry.”
“Boys can’t wear pink.”
“You throw like a girl.”
“Go outside and play.”

Then one day
I was bullied
Reading and being quiet
I was
asking for ridicule

“Man up!”
“Fight back!”
“Don’t be sad.”
“Get mad!”

The rage builds
Emotions conflicted
Is something wrong with me
Can I not be a man and emotional

A product of our culture
A disease on our species
When will we let “boys be boys”
Instead of forcing them to become monsters

Deep In The Grave

Thomas Brooks

A day is an every time adventure...
Every being lives in to take a part of...
It happens many or so times in what is a lifelong
experience...
What If?...
Those things that you perceive...
Didn't come to be anymore?...
Isn't that the question that hold no answers we loom
around for?...
The thing is....
We do this...
ALL. THE. TIME.

We search corridors that can't be lighten....
We take roads that just lead in a dead end...
We go through "doors" that hlds no key...
So, If things weren't the they were engraved in at the
beginning of the scripture of father time itself....
What would be there to Perceive?....

OPIA or, ZELDA GRAY

A Life in Eight Parts

By Vika Mujumdar

Part I

Nodus Tollens

“So, when do you get back?”

“Day after tomorrow.”

“I’ll be on a flight to D.C. by then.”

“I know.”

“Zelda...”

“I can’t get back till the day after tomorrow.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

“But you are. You always are.”

“I’m always asking you to what?”

“Don’t be dense.”

“I’m not being dense.”

“You want different things.”

“I do not. Why do we keep having this conversation every time?”

“I don’t know.”

“Can you please actually talk to me for once?”

“I am.”

“Can you please be less monosyllabic?”

“I’m not being monosyllabic.”

“Zelda…”

“Nathan, this isn’t working out.”

“I know.”

“And?”

“I don’t know. Why are you laughing?”

“This is odd. Our one-year anniversary and we decide to talk about the fact this isn’t working out.”

“It is odd.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing anymore.”

“Yates and Gray has been amazing this past year, so that’s at least one thing going well.”

“I don’t know.”

“You have, Zelda. You’ve been amazing.”

“You know that I love you, right?”

“I know.”

“I’m sorry. You really do deserve better.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I’m telling you that if you want better I’m willing to sign divorce papers.”

“I love you.”

“Is that enough?”

“I would like it to be.”

“Maybe nothing is going to be enough.”

“Adelaide would be.”

“Nathan-“

“I’m sorry, that was out of line.”

“I said I would sign divorce papers if that’s what you want.”

"Zelda, are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes."

"You need to stop, Zelda. You can't spiral completely out of control."

"Nathan—"

"I don't want a divorce, but you need to stop."

"Okay."

"I love you, Zelda."

"I know."

"Will you be home on Sunday?"

"Yes. I need to go now, I'll see you on Sunday night. I love you, good night."

"Good night, Zelda."

Part II

Fitzcarraldo

"I'm exhausted."

"This might be a surprise to you, Zelda, but that will tend to happen when you consistently stay up all night."

"Shut up. I just want peace and quiet and sleep."

“And you think being a lawyer is the best way to achieve peace and quiet and sleep?”

“Probably not.”

“Probably?”

“Have you and Nathan never had a conversation about his work and have you considered whether that’s what you want the rest of your life to be?”

“We have.”

“Is this something you really want to do?”

“Why are you asking me that? That’s such an odd question. I’m in law school, for god’s sakes.”

“Well, I don’t know. You talk about everything you want to do and how much you want to change the world, but are you sure this is the way to do that?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

“I don’t know.”

“...”

“You know, when I was just starting college, I had this whole plan- law school, get a job at a law firm, quit after making junior partner, start my own firm, couple of years later quit, run for political office.”

“I can see that.”

“...”

“That’d be something you’d be great at.”

“Making plans?”

“Political office.”

“I don’t know.”

“I could see you doing that. Being a politician. A visionary of some sort.”

“A visionary?”

“Yes.”

“I’m too messed up for that.”

“Well, you could be run for office someday.”

“And do what?”

“Change the system. Change the world.”

“And do what by trying to change the world? People are resistant to change. And besides, how would I change the world?”

“Make it better. Make it something other than the dark and twisty place it is right now.”

“You know I can’t deal with bright and shiny. I’m just naturally a dark and twisty person.”

"Is that really relevant?"

"I suppose not."

"We should do that. Start our own law firm."

"Someday."

Part III

Dead reckoning

"I trust finding the place wasn't difficult?"

"Everyone knows Yates & Gray. You've made quite a name for yourself in less than a year."

"Drink?"

"Thank you."

"How are you?"

"Good. You?"

"Good."

"This place is quite deserted."

"Most people leave by 10:30."

"I went to her grave this afternoon"

"I was there in the morning."

"I assume you left the balloons and the lilies?"

"Yes."

"I thought I'd miss her less. I miss her more than ever."

"I miss her too. It's easier now though."

"The pictures are lovely."

"Thank you. I miss her every day. Every second of every day."

"Zelda-"

"And I keep skipping therapy to sit at home and cry about her. Today is the only day all year I've adhered to an appointment I've made."

"I didn't know you were in therapy."

"Why would you? My husband doesn't know. Adelaide knew, and now she's gone."

"You're not the only one."

"..."

"You're not the only one hurting about her death."

"I'm sorry."

"She didn't deserve it."

"I have a picture of the two of you that she had."

"Thank you."

"She looks so happy."

"She was beautiful."

"She was the best person I've ever known."

"I also read your book."

"..."

"It's a beautiful collection."

"Thank you."

"I have one question though."

"Ask away."

"Has your husband read it?"

"Yes. He chooses to be oblivious to the fact that I loved her. Can't fault him for that. Anyone would do the same."

"Is that your phone?"

“Yes. I should be going.”

“You can call if you need anything.” (*I’m not actually offering.*)

“Thank you.” (*I won’t be calling. I know you’re not actually offering, but thank you all the same.*)

“ ... ”

“Good night, Manuel.”

“Good night Zelda.”

Part IV

Keyframe

“I just got back from this amazing poetry open mic. Where I decided to summon enough courage to read something I wrote last week.”

“That sounds cool. What was the piece called?”

“Seafarer. It’s something I wrote a couple of weeks ago.”

“That’s nice.”

“And then went to Nathan’s.”

"So, you're still with him?"

"Yes."

"Zelda-"

"No, you don't get to do that. You don't get to disappointingly say Zelda and look at me like that and judge the people in my life."

"..."

"You don't get to constantly do that to me and expect me to not have certain people in my life just because you disapprove. I have never done that to you."

"I'm sorry."

"..."

"When are you going back to college?"

"Saturday morning."

"That early?"

"I have things to work on."

"Is Nathan going to be there?"

"Yes, he's coming to visit. We ran into his ex-wife once; did I tell you?"



“No.”

“We did. It was an unusual set of circumstances. Anyways, when are you going back?”

“Monday.”

“Okay. How’s everything?”

“I think I’ll be able to graduate a semester into senior year. Which is great.”

“Yeah. How are your parents?”

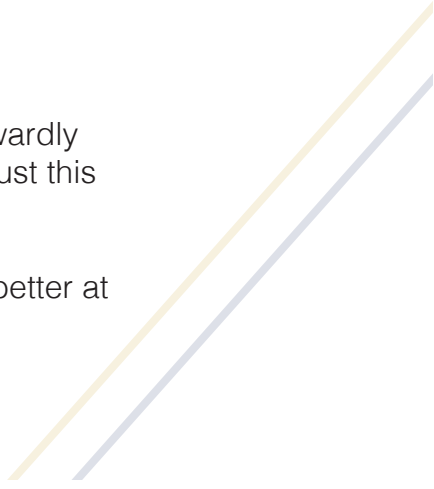
“Good.”

“Adelaide...”

“Yeah?”

“When did we turn into this? Awkwardly stilted conversation, tension and just this air of melancholy?”

“I don’t know. I’m sorry we’re not better at this.”



"I wish we were."

"I wish I hadn't had that argument with Nathan."

"Argument is an understatement, but I wish you hadn't either."

Part V

Gnossienne

"You certainly took your time getting back to me."

"Yes."

"It took you a week to answer?"

"Yes, Zelda."

"Well, what is it?"

"Yes, I do want to marry you."

"I was worried that you wouldn't."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Well, Adelaide for one. You know, yesterday, I realized-

"Yeah?"

“Never mind. It’s not important.”

“Alright.”

“You don’t deserve this. You deserve better than this. Me complaining constantly about Adelaide.”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“Yes, but is. I, I- never mind. Forget it. That’s stupid.”

“Zelda...”

Part VI **Exulansis**

“Zelda?”

“I feel like I haven’t spoken to you in forever.”

“Are you alright?”

“Adelaide is dead.”

“Adelaide Bennett?”

“Yes. She’s dead.”

“...”

"Manuel called me. She's dead."

"I'm sorry."

"She's dead."

"I'm sorry, Zelda."

"I can't believe she's dead. She shouldn't be dead. She's so young. Or was. I suppose. Since she's dead."

"I know."

"I loved her, you know. I really loved her."

"I know, darling."

"No, you don't understand. I was in love with her."

“Where are you? You need to calm down, Zelda.”

“I’m at work.”

“Is Oliver with you?”

“Yes.”

“Can you put him on?”

Part VII

Adomania

“We need better office space.”

“I know, but we also just don’t have to money for that, Oliver.”

“That needs to be done as soon as we start having better incoming funding. Clients aren’t going to want to come here.”

“Yes, but we just can’t. Not right now.”

“Alright.”

“I thought this would be more glamorous when we decided to do this.”

“It is fun though. Starting out on our own. Knowing that someday we’re going to be like Hoffman, Knight and Irvine or someone else like that.”

“I suppose there is some strange sort of glamour in that. Knowing we’re the new Hoffman and Knight.”

“I’m assuming you’re Hoffman in this equation.”

“Literally yes, figuratively, no. You’re eerily like Nathan sometimes.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You think like him.”

“I want to take that as a compliment.”

"You should."

"This is going to be a great year- we can do this, right?
Run a firm with almost no income as of now?"

"Let's try to be optimistic about this, Oliver."

Part VIII **Avenoir**

"Are you sure about this?" *(Do you really want to be tied down for the rest of your life?)*

"Perfectly." *(To you, yes.)*

"You sure you're ready to be married to me?" *(Do you, really?)*

"For the hundredth time Nathan, yes." *(Every time.)*

"Even though marriage is a social construct that you don't believe in?" *(I hope someday you do.)*

"Yes." *(I love you and me compromising some of my beliefs for you should be enough.)*

“This is pretty permanent, you know.”
(I hope you don’t leave.)

“I know.” *(I don’t think I’d ever want to leave you, and I hope you don’t leave either.)*

“Your parents will be hurt.” *(Your parents already hate me.)*

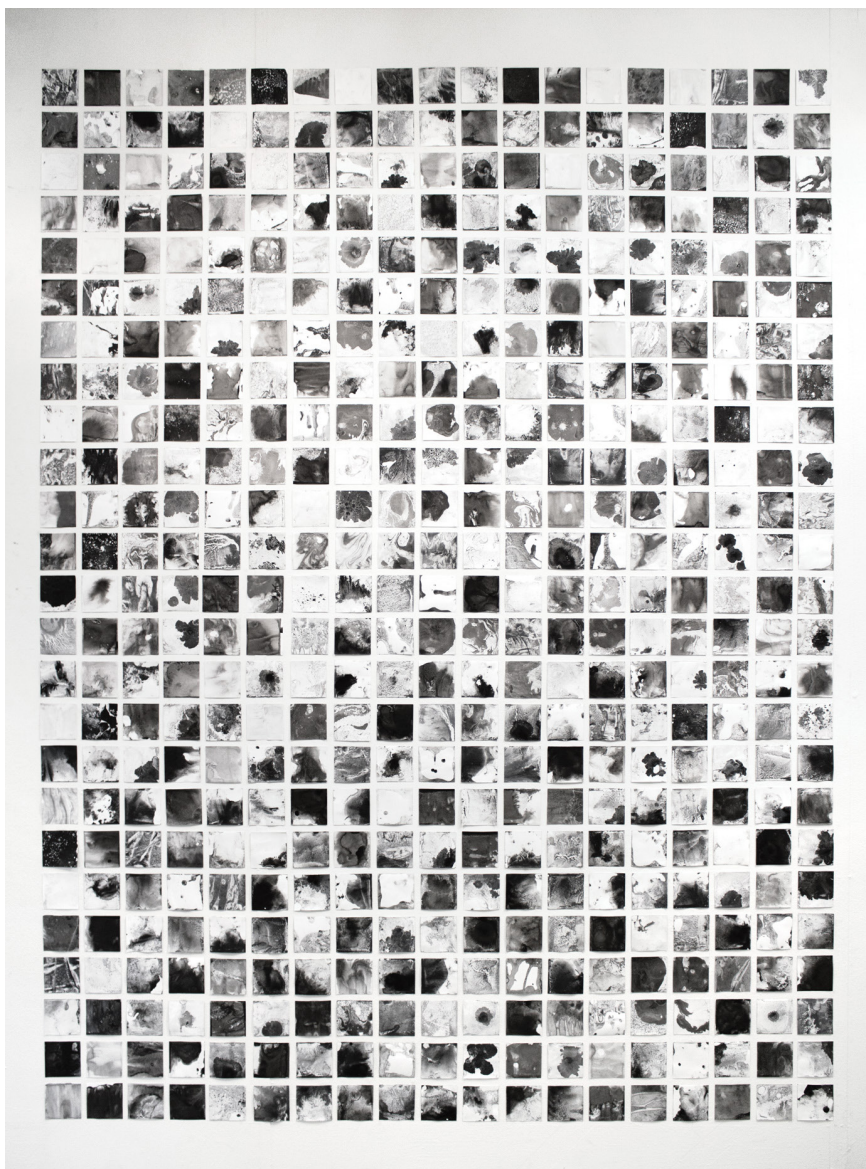
“Does that really matter?” *(I love you.)*

“I love you, Zelda.” *(I love you, Zelda.)*

Untitled

Abbi McKinnie

23



The Weight Of Water

Glenn Cassidy

Seven days I carry water
in milk jugs from work each day,
the car doing most of the lifting.
The week's water bill goes to charity,
builds a community well in Mali,
where villagers balance blue jerry cans
on their heads and walk a mile
to a polluted river.

A damp rag slaps my face and armpits
to greet the day. A mugful brushes my teeth,
dips the angled bristles with ergonomic grip.
Takeout pizza saves me when I can't
summon two quarts to boil angel hair
pasta for dinner.

A giant asterisk lets me flush the commode.
Another cheat lets me rinse dishes
for a week in the same puddle swirling grease
and coffee grounds in the basin,
the dishwasher to finish them
after the exercise has ended.

A few drops to the droopy tongues
of petunias and herbs on the porch,
just a taste to keep them standing
until my faucet spills with life.

Bespectacled Spectacle

Maura Freeman

You were pink cheeks and foggy glasses over bright
blue eyes on February mornings.
You were green pipe cleaner rings on your littlest finger,
an off-trend trendsetter.
You were sweaters with pom poms and velvety skirts
and rainbow knee socks in gym class.

Laps like a peacock, you were a spectacle.
Bespectacled and befreckled, you were a sight to see in
your monocle in math class,
A force to be reckoned with outside the theater in the
mall where my friends and I loitered.

But you never went in and I noticed.
You stood out but never once raised your hand.
Not even if you knew the answer (and I knew you
always did).

We gawked at you, gossiped behind you, marveled at
you from safe distances, respected you even.
But we never asked why.
Deep down, I don't think we wanted to know
that blue and green feathers hid black and blue
arms.
Knit Christmas tree sleeves covered grief
and the kind of cut that pierces right
through to your very core.

Home was gray T-shirts and sweaty gym shorts stinking with the smell of Jack and Mary Jane.

So gym was the zoo and the smell of old popcorn was a breath of fresh air.

At graduation, your speech was four minutes of silence, followed by a thunderstorm of applause.

You left without hugs though, and went home to small siblings not parties.

With a toddler in my cart, I picked the sweetest cereal I could reach and saw you with steel rolled oats in your basket down the aisle.
No more stripes and sequins, now you sport blacks and slacks.

It's still you, I know.
But you're different, downtrodden.
No more the bespectacled spectacle.
Your contact lenses display dull eyes and I wonder what changed our wonder from way back when.

When did you slick back your hair?
When did it go gray?
When did wrinkles appear in the middle of our foreheads?

Where we have laugh lines you wear crows' feet.
And your silence speaks volumes, the boring encyclopedias no one reads
and still no one sees.

Untitled

Drew Van Weelden



Prologue

Diana Vazquez

“...and the winner of the 2036 presidential election, winning both the popular vote *and* the electoral vote, Realist John Baron!” The Mexican-American commentator reports, live from Democracy Plaza in Washington D.C.

“No...” I breathe out in a faint and fragile whisper. *No. No. No. No. NO!* I cry in my mind as I start to feel the weight of the commentator’s announcement in my brain, and in my heart. My brain seems to take the announcement better than my heart, as I can feel my heart slowly start to sink below the carpet flooring, past the wooden floorboards, and onto the surface of the Earth, where it shatters into a million shards of broken glass.

No. Not him. I can feel tears starting to form in my eyes, temporarily blurring my vision. *Why? Why him?* I can feel those tears starting to slide down my cheeks. *Please. Please* tell me that the commentator is lying. *Please* tell me that it isn’t true...*please* tell me that this isn’t a living nightmare. *A living nightmare...a nightmare...*

Please. Please tell me that this is just that. A nightmare. And that I will wake up in the comfort of my bed, with both of my parents sitting on either edge of my bed. My father asking me why I was crying and screaming in my sleep, while my mother would tell me over and over that it was all just a bad dream as she comforted me.

My parents. I turn my head ever so slightly to look at

my beloved parents, who are sitting in the middle of the sofa, surrounded by my siblings and I. My face falls, and my already broken, shattered heart breaks even more for *them* when I see the devastating look that is plastered onto both of their faces. Both of their faces have become a sickly pale, appearing as if all of the blood in their bodies has been drained, appearing as if they've seen a ghost, or even as if they are staring into the eyes of Death himself...and one by one, small tears slowly start to roll down my mother's face. And upon hearing her soft sniffles, my father turns his head in our direction, to look at her. And I can physically see his heart break, shatter even, at the sight of his wife in tears.

He slowly lifts his hand up to her face, causing her to turn her head to look at him. More tears slowly start to slide down her cheeks, only this time, my father wipes the tears from her right cheek with his left thumb. He gives her a little smile, before kissing her forehead. He then undoes their intertwined hands to wrap his arms around her, and pulls her closer to him. She, in turn, leans into him, and buries her now teary-eyed face into the crook of his neck.

What will happen to us? Citlalli, my younger sister of four years, asks me with her eyes when she turns her head to look at me. But she already knows the answer to that question...

Employees of the United States of America's federal immigration enforcement agency will discover their legal statuses by looking through our birth certificates and other records on file, and will vow to hunt my parents down until they are found. And when they do find them, they will arrest them for their illegal trespass. They will then take them to the nearest police station, where they

will process them and have all of their information -including their fingerprints and different samples of their DNA-entered into the national criminal database. And depending on the time of day, my parents will either spend the night in a holding cell in that same police station, or be transferred to the nearest deportation center, which is located on the outskirts of Chicago, Illinois. They will then be held in that same deportation center for a month or so before they are handcuffed to a seat in one of the federal immigration enforcement agency's airplanes, and be deported back to Mexico.

That is what will happen to my beloved parents. But what will happen to the four of us? To my siblings and I? That I do not know...I don't know what they will do to us when they find us...

All four of us were born here, in Chicago. And we've lived here, in the city, for the entirety of our very short lives. But that alone won't stop the U.S. Government from deporting my entire family. Even if all four of us *are* natural-born U.S. citizens...but we *are* the four children of not one, but two undocumented Mexican immigrants...and I've heard millions of stories of underage natural-born U.S. citizens being deported alongside their undocumented parents.

If our citizenship were to be revoked by the U.S. Government, we too would be arrested, processed, and deported alongside our parents. *But* if by some miracle, the U.S. Government decides against revoking our citizenship, we will be taken into the custody of the state of Illinois, into the custody of the Department of Children & Family Services, where we will be registered to be fostered and/or adopted, only to be placed into foster care...into separate foster homes...because our nation-

al foster care system is broken. It's *been* broken...it's *always* been broken...

"This isn't fair..." Tletl, my elder brother of two years, mutters under his breath. "This isn't fair." He repeats, his voice rising with anger and hatred as he runs his hands through his reddish-brown hair. "This isn't fair!" He screams, before storming out of the house, making it a point to slam the front door as hard and as loud as he can behind him on his way out.

Although the sound of the front door being slammed shut *did* startle me, I'm not at all surprised by his reaction to the announcement. Tletl has *always* had a fiery temper. After all, his name does translate to fire in Nahuatl, the language of the ancient Aztec people.

My parents were born and raised in Mexico, in the heart, and in the capital city of the Aztec Empire, now the site of modern-day Mexico City. My parents share a hometown, but are from two very different sides of the city. My father is from the richer side of the city, while my mother is from the poorer side of town.

They met on their first day of school at la universidad de la ciudad de México, the University of Mexico City. Both of my parents received their Bachelor's degree after their four intense years at the University of Mexico City. My father majored in Physics as a pre-med student, while my mother double majored in Business and Economics. My father dreamed of being a Medical Physicist, while my mother dreamed of starting her own business. In fashion. She wanted to start her own clothing line... my parents were two very different people with two very different dreams, and somehow, managed to find each other. They were brought together by "a force greater

than love” and stayed together, even when life itself gave each of them every reason to leave the other...

Though it wasn't easy, they dated almost all throughout their four years at the University of Mexico City. My father proposed to my mother on their three year anniversary, and they were happily married the next summer, shortly after graduation.

My mother was merely four months pregnant with Tletl when her and my father got married. But despite her ever-growing belly, she was the most beautiful bride anyone had ever seen, according to everyone who attended their traditional Catholic wedding. Including my father's parents, who didn't approve of my mother until her and my father were officially husband and wife.

Though my father's parents didn't particularly approve of my mother, or the very thought of my father *marrying* her, they attended their wedding, and even gifted them a two-week trip to Cancun. They were supposed to leave for their romantic honeymoon -with Tletl-the day after their wedding, after brunch with both of their parents, but instead, they set off on a journey that changed their lives *forever*.

The day after their wedding, they began their journey across the border that separates the United States of America from Mexico. Both of my parents had received really good offers for jobs related to their majors in Chicago, Illinois. My father was offered a job as a Physicist's assistant, while my mother was offered a job as a Chief Executive Officer's assistant.

They had also received multiple offers for similar jobs in Mexico City, and even received multiple scholarships

to continue their education, but my mother was already pregnant with Tletl, and didn't want to raise Tletl in Mexico City. *It's too dangerous.* She would tell my father.

Crime rates were at an all-time high in Mexico City, even in the rich neighborhood where my father and his younger sister, my paternal aunt Marina were born and raised. Vandalism, theft, drug possession, assault, battery, rape, abduction, murder, and so many other crimes were becoming more and more common in all parts of Mexico City, rich or poor.

Both of my parents felt as if they had no other choice but to accept the job offers in Chicago and to illegally immigrate to the United States of America...and they did. But when they had finally arrived to the third largest city in the United States of America, after weeks of walking through the desert, and after weeks of hitch-hiking their way to Chicago, the address that they had been given had led them to an abandoned warehouse...

They had been tricked, deceived by the ones who had informed them of the job offers they had soon realized were fake...those individuals worked with coyotes, or human smugglers to get more people to want to go to the United States of America, and therefore, obtain more money from people desperate to have a chance at a better life...

My parents were beyond devastated when they had come to the conclusion that they'd been deceived. They had turned down the offers they had received back home in Mexico City for the offers in Chicago...they didn't know what to do...it was already too late to go back home, even if they really wanted to. My mother was already six months pregnant with Tletl. They couldn't go

back home. Not after everything they had given up. Not after everything they had done, and gone through to get to Chicago. They couldn't go back home. They couldn't go back to the country where both of their families had been born and raised for generations upon generations...they just couldn't go back home to their roots.

Our roots trace back to Aztlán, the ancient ancestral homeland of the ancient Aztec people. As infants and toddlers, my parents and their siblings were all taught to embrace their cultural heritage, and have taught all of us to embrace it as well.

We find ways to embrace our cultural heritage every day. We don't practice Aztec customs and traditions -as they are a little barbaric-but we do practice Latin, Spanish, and Mexican customs and traditions. We may not practice Aztec customs and traditions, but all of our names are of Aztec origin. Except my mother's name. Her name is of Latin origin.

My mother's name is Soli, shortened from the Latin word for sun: Solis. My father's name is Atl, Nahuatl for water. My elder brother, Tletl, his name is Nahuatl for fire. My younger brother, Tlatl, his name is shortened from the Nahuatl word for Earth: Tlatlicpactli. My younger sister, Citlalli, her name is shortened from the Nahuatl word for star: Citlalin. Me, Meztli, my name is Nahuatl for moon.

My parents, like their ancestors, are intensely religious and deeply spiritual. Although they may not worship all of the Gods that their ancestors had many, many, *many* generations ago, they do strongly believe in equilibrium between all elements and forces of nature, all throughout the Earth. They also strongly believe that all of our names *almost* balance each other's out in perfect harmony. *Almost*.

My mother, Citlalli, and I balance each other's names out in perfect harmony as the celestial trio: the sun, the moon, and the stars. In that exact same order. My father, Tietl, and Tlatl *almost* balance each other's names out in perfect harmony as *three* of the four elements of the Earth: water, fire, and Earth. They are still missing one more element: air.

My parents desperately wanted a fifth child -another boy- not only to create a sense of equilibrium between the four elements of the Earth, but to become the one to make our family feel whole. *Ehecatl*. His name was going to be Ehecatl, Nahuatl for air.

My mother was merely three months pregnant with Ehecatl when she lost him...she suffered a miscarriage that stole our Ehecatl away from us. We were all heartbroken when we found out that she had lost him, but none of our sorrows could ever compare to those of my sweet mother. That miscarriage broke her, shattered her heart into a million shards of broken glass...

The morning after she had lost him, she refused to leave her bed. My siblings and I tried to roll her out of bed, but our father told us to leave her alone. *Leave her be, niñitos. Let her grieve the loss of our Ehecatl.* He told us as tears started to form in his own eyes. *Let her rest... let her sleep.* But one day in her bed quickly became one week, then one week become two weeks, then two weeks became one month, and then one month became three months.

My mother laid in her bed for a period of three months -sleeping all day, and crying all night as she grieved the loss of her unborn child, of our Ehecatl. She laid in her bed the exact same number of days that she was preg-

nant with him. Ninety days. My mother laid in her bed for ninety days before she finally found the strength to take a step outside of her bedroom.

That morning was the same morning that she had found the strength to take a step *outside of the house*. The second she set foot outside, she was surrounded by the cool autumn breeze, and the crisp fresh air...and was illuminated by the sunlight, as if the sun itself had missed her.

She didn't come back inside until late afternoon. And when she walked through our front door, she had a little sapling in her hands. She told us that she wanted to plant the little sapling -in memory, and in honor-of her deceased unborn son, of my deceased unborn brother, of our little Ehecatl...we planted that little sapling within the hour.

We planted it in the center of our backyard, surrounded by white rose buds, a traditional symbol of innocence. After the little sapling was planted and watered, we stood in a circle, surrounding the little sapling that would one day become a tree. We held hands, and prayed for the spirit of Ehecatl, hoping that he was safe in heaven, with our ancestors, who would take care of him, until our parents could take care of him in heaven...

My mother read a poem she had written for him. I still remember it...

*My dearest Ehecatl,
who is named after the Aztec God of wind and air,
you have left the life you could have had here on Earth,
you have left me, and your family in despair.*

*I never had the chance to say goodbye,
as I never even had the chance to say hello.*

*I never had the chance to bring you into this world,
I never had the chance to see you grow.*

*I never had the chance to be your mother,
the opportunity had been stolen from me.
I may be broken, but I still have hope
that your spirit will live on through this tree.*

*I promise to water your tree every single day,
and this is true.
As I promise to take care of the tree,
as if it were you.*

*You may have left,
but do not fret as you will never be unloved.
You will never be forgotten,
you will be forever loved.*

It is without a doubt, the most beautiful poem I have ever heard, or read. My mother has a way with words, unlike anyone I've ever met. She has the power to make a grown man cry. My father *did* cry upon hearing her poem, but then again, he was mourning the loss of his deceased unborn son. Tears were already sliding down his cheeks, but he couldn't stop sobbing by the end of my mother's beautiful poem. Though, to be fair, we were all emotional wrecks by the end of her poem. And she smiled, because she knew that Ehecatl would never be forgotten, that he will be forever loved. By all of us.

That night, my father and I, along with the rest of my siblings, cooked for her. We made her favorite authentic Mexican meal, and her favorite authentic Mexican dessert; we made molé con pollo, refried beans, and fried rice with carrots and peas for dinner, and flan for dessert.

It started raining as we ate dinner. My mother smiled as she heard the soft pitter-patter of the rain. There was no thunder, there was no lightning. Only rain. Only the soft pitter-patter of the rain.

She said it was God's way of answering our prayers for sweet little Ehecatl. She said that God was going to take care of him, and his spirit, and that He was going to take care of our little sapling as well, that He was going to make sure that our little sapling was never thirsty.

Not one morning nor afternoon goes by that I don't catch my mother watering the little sapling that has grown into a young tree. Not one night goes by that I don't catch her sitting by the young tree while she reads under the moonlight. She reads a chapter of her book by the young tree every night before the nationwide curfew often o'clock.

She says that she likes the silence of the night, and the feeling of the crisp fresh air the night always seems to possess, but I think that she liked to read to Ehecatl's young tree, silently hoping that his spirit is present, sitting in her lap, like a young child. He would've been ten years old now, following Citlalli as the youngest.

I've already lost one brother, and I can't bear to let myself lose another. I would never forgive myself, even if I didn't have anything to do with it...I would never be able to live with myself.

"¡Tletl!" I scream. I want to stand up from my seat on the sofa and run after him, and I think my mother knows my intentions, because before my body has the chance to even stand up, I feel her soft hand on my knee.

“Let him be, Meztli. Let him calm down.” She says with a small smile in her soothing, motherly voice. “You need to let him process what has just happened, and you need to let him have his own reaction without him worrying about what you’ll think of him...”

Every single person in this country will have a very different reaction than their neighbor. Some people will be happy, some people will be sad. Some people will clap and cheer, some people will scream and cry. Some people will celebrate with alcohol, some people will try to drink themselves to death. Some people will be frozen in shock, some people will want to take action, do something about this...let Tletl do whatever he needs to do.” My mother says, and all I can do is nod my head.

“Okay.” I manage to croak out, trying to fight the tears that threaten to escape my eyes.

“Don’t cry, Lili.” My mother begs with a sweet smile, as she wipes away the tears that have managed to escape my eyes. I smile at the use of my childhood nickname: Lili. Tletl was the one who gave it to me. At eighteen months, he was juggling English, Spanish, and Nahuatl. He had a firm grasp on both English and Spanish, but had a hard time pronouncing most Nahuatl words. Poor little Tletl could barely pronounce his own name, much less his baby sister’s name. Everytime he tried to say my name, he would end up saying Lili. After he learned how to properly pronounce my name, he would continue to call me Lili. It became his official nickname for me.

Brrring, brrring

We all turn our attention to my mother’s little kitchen timer with the ironically and annoyingly loud noise. I had

forgotten that my mother made flan, and that it should be done baking by now.

My chocoholic little sister had asked our mother to bake a triple chocolate cheesecake instead of flan. And it pained our mother to tell her that she couldn't because she doesn't have enough chocolate to make it.

Since 2020, chocolate has become a delicacy. The cocoa bean is endangered due to climate change around the world. And as a result of the drastic decline in the production of chocolate, chocolate is now given to families in rations. Each family is given a mere five ounces of chocolate per year, given to them on the twenty-eighth day of October, National Chocolate Day.

We are planning to surprise Citlalli with a triple chocolate cheesecake on her fifteenth birthday, the most important birthday in a young Latina woman's life. Unfortunately, Citlalli won't turn fifteen for another three years, but my mother believes that she will have more than enough chocolate for her special day.

Our mother has been saving our chocolate rations since she found out about Citlalli's love for the endangered delicacy. She is by far, the most chocoholic person I know. It's comical, and sweet, watching her indulge herself in a chocolate dessert. But as comical as it is, watching her, it breaks my heart because I don't think that she knows that the cocoa bean will be extinct long before she dies of old age.

"Meztli," My mother whispers, distracting me from my innermost thoughts, causing me to snap out of my thoughts, and into reality.

“¿Sí? Yes?” I ask, lifting my head from my lap to look at her.

“I’m brewing tea. Would you like a cup?” She asks with a small smile, and I can feel the corners of my lips form into a smile, something I never thought I would be able to do again.

“Yes, please.” I say with a soft smile, and her small smile grows wider. “Gracias Mami. *Thank you Mom.*”

“You’re welcome, Lili.” She says with a small smirk, causing my smile to grow wider as well. “Tlatl, Lalli, would you two like a cup of tea as well?” She asks my younger siblings, and they nod with a little smile.

“Yes, please. Gracias Mami. *Thank you Mom.*”

“I’m going to brew a cup for Tletl too. It’s a little chilly outside, and I know he would love a cup of tea to help warm him up when he *does* come back inside.” She says with a smile, remaining optimistic. “Would you like a cup of coffee, m’amor?” She asks my father with a smile. M’amor is Spanish for “my love”.

“Si, m’amor. Gracias.” He says with a soft smile as he turns his head to look at my mother. They exchange a loving look, before my mother walks over to him and kisses his cheek, letting him know, in her own little way, that everything is going to be alright. As long as we have each other.

I stare at the front door, anxiously awaiting Tletl’s return. It’s been hours, and Tletl has yet to come home. It’s three o’clock in the morning, long after the nationwide curfew of ten o’clock. *Where did he go?* I can’t help but

wonder. *Where is he?* He should've come home *hours* ago. *Why hasn't he come home? Has something happened to him? Is he alright?* I try to answer my own questions, but it's hopeless, pointless, useless. Tears start to form in my eyes, not long before they start to slide down my cheeks with each and every unanswered question.

"Meztli," An unmistakably familiar voice whispers softly, making his presence known. I can feel even more tears start to slide down my cheeks at the sound of *his* voice.

My vision may be blurred from my seemingly ever-lasting tears, but I *know* that voice. I'd recognize that voice *anytime, anywhere*. How could I not? I've grown up with that voice. I've grown up with *him*. I've grown up listening to him talk. I've grown up talking *to* him. It'd be a crime not to remember that voice, nor not be able to recognize it.

"Meztli," He repeats, in a soft whisper. I snap out of my innermost thoughts, and into reality. I lift my head from my lap to see him standing right in front of me. My seemingly weak and fragile body manages to gain enough strength to take control of my mind, and my conscious as it stands itself up from my previous seat on the sofa.

He wraps his arms around me without hesitation, pulling me into a gentle, soft, warm hug. His embrace is always so endearing, so sweet, so full of love. There's never been a time where I don't feel safe and secure, or protected in his arms.

It's times like these where I'm desperate for his embrace. I stand on the tips of my toes as I wrap my arms around his neck, tightly, but not too tight. He doesn't hesitate to tighten his arms around me, almost as if he's afraid I'll shatter into a million shards of broken glass, right before his eyes.

“Meztli,” He whispers into my ear, his voice sounding weak, and broken. He buries his face in my long black hair before he nuzzles his head into the crook of my neck.

“*Martirio*,” I whisper in between sobs, through tears. I bury my face into his chest as I let the tears slide down my cheeks, and onto his chest.

“I’m so sorry, Meztli.” He whispers as he hugs me tighter, but not too tight.

“No, I’m sorry...I’m so sorry, *Martirio*.” I whisper into his chest, shaking my head. As soon as the words escape my lips, he slowly starts to pull away from me, far enough to see my face, but not far enough to release me from his embrace.

“Why are you sorry?” He asks, his eyebrows arching in confusion.

“Because I ruined your shirt...” I say with a soft smile. A smirk is his immediate response.

“Don’t apologize. You have *nothing* to apologize *for*... and besides, I never really liked this shirt anyway.” He says with a sweet smile. Now it was *my* turn to smirk in response. He smiles before the expression on his face softens. “Don’t cry, Lili.” He whispers as he brings his hands up to my face. He gently wipes my tears away with his thumbs, before softly smiling down at me.

“Please don’t cry.” He whispers, before placing a soft and gentle kiss on my forehead, a sweet and friendly gesture between two people who have not only grown up together, but grown to love each other, in a non-romantic way.

Martirio and I have known each other since *before* we were born. We've known each other since we were fetuses in the wombs of our mothers. We *officially* met the day I was born; he was a mere two days old then. His mother, Itzel, claims that Martirio "smiled the instant he laid eyes on me" and that we would grow up to be high school sweethearts or even soulmates. My father was always quick to tell her that we would grow up to be best friends and nothing more. Sixteen years later, we're best friends, and nothing more. Though, in all honesty, I would like to be something more...

As thoughts of Martirio start to run through my mind, my eyes quickly find Itzel, who is comforting my mother, while Martirio's father, Eztli, is comforting my father. My eyes then direct their attention to Itzel's ever-growing belly. She's merely two months pregnant. With twins.

For a second, I fear for her. I fear for her life, and for the lives of her unborn children. That is, until I remember that she has nothing to fear...she and Eztli are natural-born U.S. citizens...and were both born before 2000, the turn of the century. For a moment, I envy them...despise them even.

"Meztli," Martirio whispers, distracting me from my innermost thoughts, causing me to snap out of my thoughts, and into reality. "Please don't cry." He whispers as he gently wipes all of my tears away with his thumbs. I didn't even realize I was crying again. "He'll come home." He whispers with a soft smile.

"Martirio?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm afraid."

"That he won't come home?" He asks, and I nod in response. "He will."

"But what if he doesn't?"

"He will."

He reassures me with a soft smile.

"Martirio?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm still afraid."

"Of what?" He asks, and I shift my gaze towards the ground. "Meztli," He whispers, causing me to shift my gaze back to him. "What are you so afraid of?"

"*Him.*" I whisper, my gaze now focused on the screen of the television. John Baron is standing behind a podium, giving a celebratory speech. "I'm still afraid, Martirio...I'm afraid of the U.S. Government...I'm afraid that they will take away the ones who brought me into this world...that they will take away the one who came before me...and that they will take the ones who came after me...I'm afraid of the day my family will shatter into a million shards of broken glass." I whisper, tears sliding down my cheeks once again. The expression on his face softens, before he gently wipes my tears away with his thumbs again.

"Meztli," He whispers, tears sliding down his own cheeks. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry...I'm sorry I can't protect you from the ones you fear the most, but I promise you that I will do anything, and everything I can to not only

protect you, but your family as well...I will regret the day you fear the most, as it will be the day I have broken my promise, and have failed not only you, but your family as well...Imourn that day that you fear the most, as it will be the day you will no longer be a part of my everyday life..." He whispers as tears slide down his cheeks.

More tears start to slide down my cheeks upon hearing *that*. But instead of attempting to wipe each other's tears away, Martirio wraps his arms around me, pulling me into a comforting hug. I stand on the tips of my toes as I wrap my arms around his neck. He buries his face in my hair, while I bury my face into his chest.

"We are so sick and tired," A masculine voice screams, starting Martirio and I. We unwrap our arms from around each other's bodies, and turn our bodies in the direction of the sound: the television.

A Mexican-American male is standing in front of the camera, with a crowd of hundreds, maybe even *thousands* of Hispanics and Latinos. "We are so sick and so tired of being treated like second and third class citizens! We are so sick and tired of being mistreated! We are so sick and tired of being ignored! We are so sick and tired of feeling worthless! We are sick and tired of being sick and tired!" The man screams, before stopping to clear his throat. "We may be sick, we may be tired, we may be weak, we may be weary, but we are strong enough to fight for what is right! And this, this isn't right! So we must fight!" The man screams, before raising his right hand to reveal a gun.

"Tonight, we will rebel against the United States of America! Tonight, we will start a rebellion! Tonight, we will start a war!" He screams, before pointing the gun to

the night sky, and pulling the trigger, firing the gun. At the sound of the gunshot, all of the Hispanics and Latinos who were once standing quietly behind him, start screaming and running around like maniacs.

"I can't believe those crazy maniacs are *finally* rebelling against the United States of America and its government..." My dad mutters under his breath with a little smirk.

"What are you talking about? What's going on?" I ask him.

"Don't you see, Meztli? This is the start of the rebellion!"

"Rebellion? What rebellion?"

"*The* rebellion, Meztli. The same rebellion that will end with equality for all."

"Equality doesn't exist...equality will *never* exist. No matter how hard you fight for it."

"Oh, but it will exist. Once this rebellion is over."

"And how will we obtain it? By rioting?"

"How else?"

"What ever happened to peace?"

"Peace." He mutters under his breath with a scoff. "We tried fighting peacefully in the past. It didn't get us anywhere...but violence, violence will capture their attention..."

"Violence is *never* the answer."

“It is tonight.”

“What is wrong with you?”

“Excuse me?”

“As children you and Mami were taught that violence is *never* the answer. And you’ve taught all four of us to believe the same, but here you are, saying that violence is the answer? What is wrong with you?”

“What do you want me to do, Meztli? The rebellion has already begun...there’s no going back...there’s no stopping them. Not until we get what we’ve been fighting for for so long.”

I’m torn. I’m torn between being a good citizen of the United States of America, and being a rebel in this rebellion, standing hand in hand with my brothers and sisters in this war. I know that true equality does not exist, but I do want to fight for more equality, as much equality as we can get. I want to fight in this rebellion. I want to fight for the same reasons they are, but unlike them, I don’t believe that violence is the answer. I want to fight peacefully. It may not lead to the result we are expecting, but it will take us far, without a doubt. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Cesar Estrada Chavez proved that.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi fought for the civil rights of the Indians. He fought with peace. And because of him, Indians gained their civil rights. And because of the way he fought, with peace instead of violence, he has inspired dozens, maybe even hundreds or thousands of peaceful movements for civil rights across the world. He inspired Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to fight for the

civil rights of the African-Americans. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. fought with nothing but peace. And because of him, African-Americans gained *their* civil rights. He even inspired Cesar Estrada Chavez to fight for the civil rights of the Latinos. Like Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Estrada Chavez fought with peace. And because of him, Latinos gained *their* civil rights as well.

It's all a chain reaction. It's a chain reaction that starts with a single person, a single rebel...a single rebel who is willing to fight with peace instead of violence. Peace brings change. Violence only brings hate.

"But what about Gandhi? Or Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.? Or Cesar Chavez?"

I retort. "Stop it, Meztli!" He screams, startling everyone in the room. "*Please*. Just stop." He whispers. I don't dare utter a single word nor make a single sound. Within seconds, I can feel Martirio wrap his arm around my shoulder.

"Come on, Meztli." He whispers, and guides me to the farthest sofa from my father. "Sit down." He commands in a soft whisper, and I obey his command and take a seat on the sofa. He takes a seat next to me, and grabs my hands. He doesn't intertwine our fingers. He only holds my hands in his.

I turn my head towards the screen of the television and watch the riots unfold. It's worse than I thought...it's absolute mayhem, chaos.

In the largest city of the United States of America -New York City- most of the rebels chose to riot in New York

City's most visited tourist attraction, Times Square. Though, there were a few hundred rebels who chose to riot in front of the Baron Tower in downtown New York City, or in front of John Baron's penthouse apartment building, which is also located in downtown New York City.

In the second largest city of the United States of America -Los Angeles, California-most of the rebels chose to riot in downtown Los Angeles, while others chose to riot in front of the Baron Tower, which is also located in downtown Los Angeles.

In the third largest city of the United States of America, which is also the most segregated city in the country -Chicago, Illinois-most of the rebels chose to riot in downtown Chicago, while others chose to riot in front of the Baron Tower, which is also located in downtown Chicago...the riots are worse in Chicago than they are in New York City...

Everywhere, rebels are running around like maniacs. Screaming like maniacs too. They're vandalizing city property; defacing city property, covering the walls with graffiti, throwing bricks at store windows, anything they can do to get the media's attention.

The rebels have even gone as far as to set abandoned cars and buildings on fire...not to mention the hundreds, maybe even thousands of police officers who are trying to control -and diffuse-the situation. They weren't using lethal force, until one rebel decided it was a good idea to shoot a police officer, which, in turn, caused all of the other police officers to start using lethal violence to control and diffuse the situation, and potentially put the riots to an end.

If only the riots were fought with love and peace, instead of hate and violence. If only the riots hadn't started so late. All of those rebels are almost two years too late. They aren't going to change anything for us now. If anything, they are only going to make things worse.

I can't help myself but to look for Tletl in the midst of all of this chaos. *Where is he? Is he involved in these riots? No...he can't be...could he?* I can't help but think that's the reason why he hasn't come home: he's involved in these riots. I furiously scan all of the faces that appear on the screen of the television, looking for my elder brother.

Brrring, brrring

That is, until the home telephone rings. *Tletl*. I don't hesitate, and run to the telephone. I pick the telephone up from the home telephone basestation, and immediately put the telephone to my ear.

"Hello, this is a phone call from the Chicago Police Department Precinct Number 75. This is a phone call from A0594209. If you would like to accept this phone call, please press one now. If-" I press one, and put the telephone to my ear again. "Thank you. You will be connected with A0594209 immediately."

Beeeeeeep

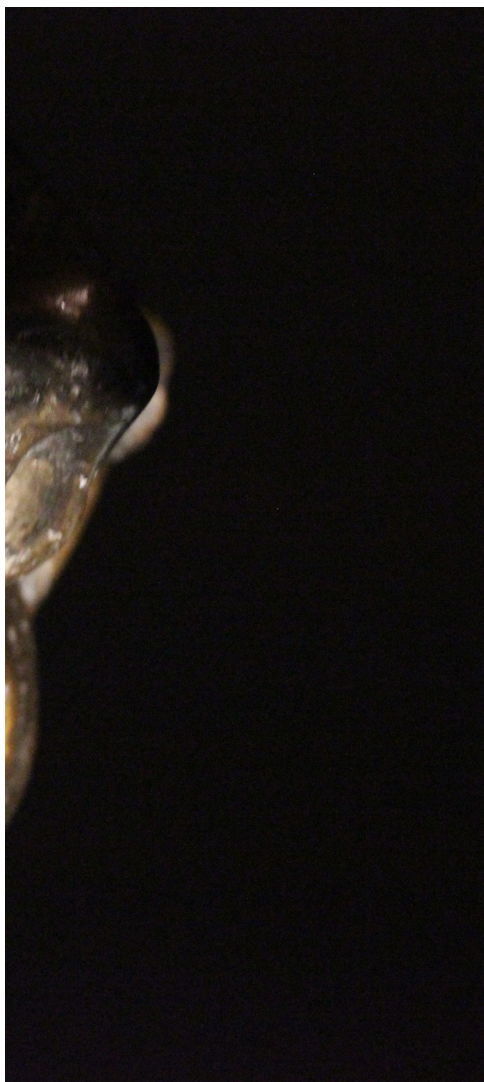
Then silence. Then I hear someone clear their throat on the other end of the line.

"¿Mami? ¿Papi?" It's Tletl.

Abe

Drew Van Weelden





Drills and Screws

Maura Freeman

“my friends look like school shooters,” you said
and i thought back to the drills in the hallways in
elementary school.

you laughed and i grimaced and a man with a
duffel bag entered a school a few hours later.


i remember fear of the color blue—“CODE
BLUE”

when blue bellows over the intercom
during drills.

what you meant was you laughed and i gasped and a
aloof and lanky and alone boy with a rifle pulled the
and lonely and awkward. fire alarm.
he was they are cowardly and
spiteful and filled with an evil
and enraged.

but you laughed and i cried and a kid
took aim in a ~~shooting range~~ hallway.

no number of drills could prepare us
as we cowered in corners
arms thrown over our heads like
tortoiseshells, tables pushed against
doors that opened the wrong way.



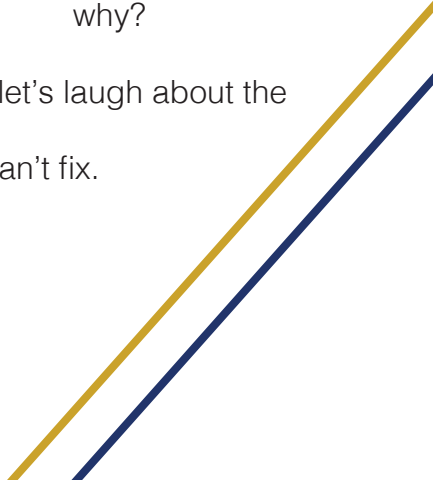
as you laughed and i shook and families read horrific
messages on their phones and mascara ran down
cheeks and blood pooled in classrooms and teachers
consoled students and parents looked desperately
for their sons and daughters and one set of
parents learned that they raised a monster.

drills don't protect from the loose screws
rolling ominously in the toolbox in the bed
of the truck.

drills don't prepare us for the anger-
dread-denial-pain of loss and
losing loved ones.

yet you laughed
and i stared as it all
demanded to be felt and i
wondered where next?
when next?
who next?
why?

but you're right. let's laugh about the
loose screws...
the ones even drills can't fix.



Existentialism And The L.I.E.

Glenn Cassidy

The swallowtail's head,
smashed against the windshield,
stares me in the eye.

Its dead wings,
the color of summer sky,
move with the breeze.

The cars on the expressway
do not move.

Years From Now

Kaya Schreiber

If I could save this moment
to look at it, years from now
a different world behind the glass
what would I see, those year from now?
When in a different place
and in a different time,
I look back in a different light
at what's been left behind.

Broken Pieces

Maura Freeman

I was sat at the dinner table, a plate of eggs remained untouched before me. I hated eggs. You were gently swiping a soapy dishrag over your favorite ceramic plate. It was blue and flowery, and I said I hated it because flowers were for girls. But I really liked it, Mom. It was blue like your eyes and the lines were curly like your hair. But boys aren't supposed to see those things. You were staring out the window into the woods behind our house and you were talking about some boy you met in college.

He was handsome and strong. He played football and wore a uniform that was always muddy even though you washed all the time. He looked good in a uniform. You said he looked even better in his Dress Blues once he enlisted. He didn't have a real job, but Grandma liked him because he had worked on his father's farm, and "real men knew the power of real, hard, dirty work".

You stopped scrubbing and looked at the still soapy plate (that had been clean for a while now) and said solemnly, "Benji, there is no such thing as a *real* man. Even real men can be bad men. So you just be a real *Benji*, and that'll be enough for me and any other girl out there." Girls still had cooties, so it was a moot point back then.

He was older than you by just a little bit.
When he graduated, he got a job in
construction and saved up to buy a

fancy ring. He said he couldn't afford a dress or pay for a ceremony though, so you got married in a courthouse in front of a judge, which isn't what you wanted. You wanted a ceremony in that little white church down the lane from Grandma's farm. He wanted to have you before he got sent off to some desert. The wedding was too fast for Pastor Herb to arrange anyway.

I started on my now cold toast. You had moved onto polishing a little pink tea cup. There was a tiny chip in the handle from when I had accidentally dropped my cup of chocolate milk years before. I had cried and cried (probably more because I had spilt my milk... However, I also knew how much you loved your dishes. So I felt a little bit worse for breaking one of your treasures). You hugged me and told me it was okay. "Accidents happen," you said, "You didn't mean to hurt it or my feelings, Benji. It's okay." Together we used craft glue to put the teacup back together. You lathered up the dish rag again before telling me about my birthday.

Aunt Robbie says the happiest day of your life was when the plastic test showed those little blue lines. There was a baby in your belly and it was me. But I wish it could've been a little bit different. He was still overseas, so you shared the news with him in a letter. When he got back, it was already too late to get rid of me. Since it was me, I guess I'm pretty grateful for those little blue lines. I'm also pretty glad he was deployed when you found out you were pregnant ...because I think your happiest day was Chuck's worst day. And if it weren't for that letter, I don't think I'd be here today. But maybe you wouldn't be here either.

You hated that I called him “Chuck.” When I was fifteen, you yelled at me over lasagna in front of Aunt Robbie.

“You don’t have to like him, Benji. But the least you could do is respect him,” I glared at my fork. “What’s he done to earn my respect, mom? He’s not even here!” “I dunno! But he is your biological father. And if you won’t refer to him by title, at least acknowledge his real name. It’s Charles, Benji.”

I wasn’t quite alive yet, but I’d bet my savings account that the day he got your letter was the same day he started drinking.

And he could drink. I remember once he challenged me to a chugging contest after school. I had apple juice and he had liquor. I threw up halfway through my glass while he poured another. I didn’t know it was whiskey, so I used to brag to my friends that he held the world record for fastest apple juice drinking. Frankly, it’s still kind of impressive—disgusting, but impressive, because it’d take at least three of those full glasses to knock him on his ass.

You hated that I used such foul language to describe Chuck. At fifteen though, I think you should have been happy I *only* used those words in reference to Chuck. At that age, my friends were all cursing like sailors in any setting, talking about anything. It’s almost funny now, because I learned most of those words from Chuck in the first place. They were his first favorite weapon when he fought with you.

He always waited to pick fights until after you put me in bed. But the walls

were thin. And the dinosaurs you painted on my walls weren't enough to defeat (or quiet) the demons behind them. I laid awake every Wednesday after his Poker nights and waited for a glass dish to shatter by the sink. That was your cue to start sobbing. It was my cue to pray for an angel or something to come between you and the drunken monster. I imagined that the angel would wrap its wings around your shaking shoulders and protect you from the verbal blows. Eventually, Chuck would either tire himself out or walk back to his buddy's garage down the street.

I don't think you ever knew—probably because I never told you—about *why* I fought those kids at school. They were bullies, Mom. Keith and Steve and Val, all of them. Their whole group would gang up on “Jelly Belly” Watkins. She couldn't protect herself. So eventually, I started picking fights with them first, before they could get to her. They reminded me of Chuck. She reminded me of you. My angel didn't intervene there either, so I took it upon myself to be my classmate's angel. Keith and Steve and Val were the first ones to teach me I could stand up against Chuck.

At that point, I don't think Chuck had ever touched you yet. If he did, you hid it marvelously. I never saw a bruise or heard you whimper. His knuckles weren't cracked or bloodied. And our first aid cabinet was still well-stocked in those days.

I remember the first time I heard the unforgettable sound of a grown-man's fist meeting his beautiful, innocent wife's unmarred skin—your skin. Like a crunch and a cry and an act of sheer cowardice all combined into one, it still haunts me. That sound now manifests itself in my nightmares.

That sound decorated you in black and blue like eye shadow. And you wore the bruises proudly, like somehow you had a choice.

I was ten when he hit you hard enough that you slumped into the sofa. For hours, you didn't move. Your chest still rose and fell. And from my hiding spot around the corner, I willed my angel to keep breathing life into your seemingly lifeless form.

You were broken. And he was drunk. And I was scared.

I don't think he ever saw me crouched between the wall and your precious china cabinet. He didn't see me when he started pacing. He didn't see me when his buddy—coincidentally Keith's dad—came over to check on you. Chuck was so far gone that he didn't see your chest moving like I did. Neither man saw me when Keith Sr. started whisper-yelling at Chuck.

"You took it to far, man," Keith Sr. hissed, "You need help."

"Shit, man, shit," Chuck had his now bloody knuckles pressed into his eyes, as if he were willing the scene he created to vanish.

"You could have killed her. Next time, you might."

Chuck just kept repeating unrelated expletives. I heard words that night that I will not repeat even to this day.

“C'mon man, let's get you sobered up. She'll be fine,” Keith Sr. grabbed my father by the shoulders and led him toward the door.

“And if she presses charges, I know a good lawyer.” Keith Sr. laughed. Chuck moaned. I wondered for a moment, if my classmate dealt with this kind of violence at home too.

Her chest continued to show signs of life. And as long as that continued, I didn't dare move until the sun came up.

I counted to a thousand and four before I rose from my crouched position. I rummaged through the first aid cabinet and noticed for the first time, that it was nearly empty. As I dug, I began to recall the bandages and the creams you would apply to your arms and chest and neck in the morning while I scarfed down my scrambled eggs before school. I remembered the bloody tissues in the waste basket by the desk. I remembered Keith's mom coming over with frozen peas and holding them to your forehead when you couldn't raise your arms high enough to do it yourself. But as my elementary school self discovered and unwrapped a blue bandage, I remembered how strong I thought you were.

I remembered that you hadn't ever let me see you cry. You never let Chuck touch me. Frankly, you never really let him speak to me either. You were the kindest, bravest lady I had ever known, and I regret that I never got to tell you that.

You woke up when I pressed the Band-Aid over your heart, it was my last ditch effort to hold you together. Because I couldn't bear to see you in pieces like this anymore. Your chest swelled bigger than it had in hours and you came alive with a

sobbing start. You held me until the school bus pulled up in front of our house. And you held me after the bus pulled away. When I looked up at you, you told me I wasn't going to school that day.

You held my hand while you packed our meager belongings into grocery sacks. You held me close all throughout our hours-long train ride to your big sister's house. You only let me go when Aunt Robbie caught you in a big bear hug and whispered, "Andrea, you look like trash," when she thought I couldn't hear.

I could hear. But I didn't think you looked like trash. In fact, it was the first time I saw pink added into the coloring on your normally bruised and gaunt cheeks. Your blue eyes had regained the spark I once knew. I imagine they were the color of the little blue lines on your pregnancy test. They were the color of happy. For the first time in a long time, your eyes could foresee a night not ruined by fists or booze or curse words.

Life got better after we got to Aunt Roberta's house. You got a job. You were a lunch lady at my school, and I'm pretty sure you hated it. But I loved it. I got to see you every day. You were the normal mom-colors all the time: pinks and peaches instead of blues and blacks. The only blue you carried with was the blue Band-Aid you hid under my milk carton on my lunch tray. I kept it hid-den from my classmates, because somehow, it felt like our little secret.

I still treasure that collection to this day.

From Aunt Robbie's house, I grew up. I graduated high school.

I had girlfriends. And you questioned them all as if they had committed a murder.

"Now don't you dare break my baby's heart, you hear me?" You knew the strain a relationship could put on a person. I think we both knew you were just trying to protect me from enduring the pain Chuck put you through. In the meantime, those poor girls never stood a chance.

You scared Jenny away in a matter of minutes over lunch when I snuck away to use the bathroom. I returned to a hysterical Aunt Robbie on her side of the booth and you clutching a fork. "She called you manly," your sister guffawed, "she, she said you were a real man". Roberta was clutching her sides from laughing so hard. You, on the other hand, were staring daggers at the front door of the diner—through which, I imagine, Jenny had just fled.

Georgia and Ruth-Anne were similar stories. Both made comments about my appearances or my strength. Liz noticed I had been working out and hypothesized (in a joking manner) that I could "take on the other girls" if they got jealous. We had only been dating about a week, but you felt comfortable enough to launch into a story of abuse and a lecture about how hitting girls was never acceptable. Though I truly did not say anything wrong, I earned an earful too. You exploded on me in the car on the way home, warning me that you would forbid me from hitting the gym if I was just going to use my new muscles to hit innocent little girls.

It hurt me that you thought I could even be capable of committing even a fraction of Chuck's violence. It hurt me more to remember the scars you still carried with you.

It was my sophomore year of college when you started collecting dishes again.

Aunt Robbie installed a locking system on the new china cabinet in your new apartment to keep unwanted people out. You were the only one that had a key, and you wore it around your neck like a lifeline. Wednesdays came and went. None of the plates or cups or bowls were ever broken again.

That summer, I drove past a construction firm with my last name on the sign. I saw a familiar face on the company's billboard a street over. It took a whole semester for me to gain the courage to enter the business. When I did, I just stood at the counter until he came out.

Chuck had changed. Where there was once unkempt stubble, his face was clean shaven. Instead of a grease and mud stained gray t-shirt and basketball shorts, Chuck sported a pressed work shirt tucked into carefully creased khaki slacks.

Despite his appearance, he looked petrified. I don't think my father ever expected to see me again. His jaw hung low and an unspoken question hung in the air between us: *Why?*

My eyes asked *Why her? Why me? Why Us?*

His dumbstruck (and just plain dumb) face quipped back with an ever clever *Why are you even here?*

He had to have recognized me. We were practically carbon copies of one another as adults. The only difference in my face was my eyes. They were your kind and loving and strong eyes. They were eyes that made it very clear to Chuck that I was not here to mess around, to be manipulated. I didn't even want an apology. I certainly didn't intend to forgive him.

The moment passed. I laid a brown paper package on the counter between us, turned on my heel and left. The bell above the glass door tinkled softly when it slam-med shut behind me.

Inside the package, I had written every mean word I ever remembered him calling you on broken pieces of a pretty ceramic plate. I included a bottle of craft glue. It was up to him to put his life back together, because the moment I discovered his storefront, I decided I was done dealing with him as my demon. I had bigger issues to worry about—like school, girls, my mother, a job...

My issues would only get bigger and scarier when you got sick.

Bloody tissues returned to the waste bins around your apartment when you started coughing up blood. Our first aid cabinet grew exponentially, as new bottles were added at every appointment. Your body began to bruise again, but instead of knuckles and boots, this time needles and scalpels

inflicted the pain. Your face lost all signs of life and your cheekbones hollowed out once more. It was scary to know that this Mommy was just as familiar to me as the lively and colorful Mom I had grown accustomed to over the past decade.

Bloody tissues returned to the waste bins around your apartment when you started coughing up blood. Our first aid cabinet grew exponentially, as new bottles were added at every appointment. Your body began to bruise again, but instead of knuckles and boots, this time needles and scalpels inflicted the pain. Your face lost all signs of life and your cheekbones hollowed out once more. It was scary to know that this Mommy was just as familiar to me as the lively and colorful Mom I had grown accustomed to over the past decade.

But even in the darkest days, your eyes never again lost their spark. They had already overcome the worst. Cancer had nothing on the pain of your marriage. And this time, you were far from alone.

I only left your side when Roberta came to relieve me. Every time I returned to the house or your apartment, I brought back a dish (a nurse slipped me the key after one of your surgeries). Aunt Robbie and I decorated your room with your treasures. We did everything we could to make you comfortable.

And it was my turn to cry when I held you close one last time. The monitor over my shoulder beeped out one long beep and I knew it was over. Your chest wasn't ever going to rise again. So nobody could ever hurt you again.

But as long as you're my new angel, I want you to know that I'm okay.

I loved you in pieces then. And I love you to pieces now.

"It's cold, Benji. Are you ready?"

"Almost," I called out, signing my name in bright blue ink at the bottom of the letter. I bent down to lay the letter on top of the new pile of dishes at my feet, and resting my hand on the stone, I said, "Mom, I want you to meet Nellie. Nellie 'Jelly Belly' Watkins. You would have loved her. She is strong and beautiful, just like you. Just like you, she fought her share of bullies too."

Tears streamed silently down my fiancée's face.

"And like I promised you years ago in our kitchen, we're going to get married in that church of yours."

"I wish she were still here. I would've loved to have met her. She sounds incredible," Nellie whispered, her head on my shoulder. She reached up and swiped a tear from the corner of my eye.

"Me too. I miss her so much. I love her so much, it breaks my heart every day." I looked up, "But Mom, it's okay, I found one that puts me back together every time."

We stood quietly for a few minutes as the sky began to darken and the November air grew impossibly colder. Nellie began to shiver in my arms.

"Yeah, let's go." I kissed her forehead and we walked to the car hand in hand.

The Attic

By Kaya Schreiber

I am the attic in the old house,
watching silently from a distance
as people come and go.
Some stay long, some for less time.
Many ignore me or stay away.
It's true I have some dust and shadows
but I also have secrets, treasures, and memories.
Sometimes it's lonely here
when the rest of the house is loud and busy.
But it's worth the simple relationships.
I am a recluse, a loyal friend.
I'm there for the little girl,
helping her to host a tea party for her dolls.
I listen to the young boy who recites poetry with bright eyes.
I cry with the old woman who looks through old scrapbooks
filled with the pictures of her grown children.
I silently admire the old man's art as he works. And in the
quiet moments when I'm thinking to myself,
I realize that even though some days are hard,
I'm better off right here.
I might see far less faces
but I know I'll see more heart

Cassie

Cheyenne Gain

71



Primordial

by Drew Kodrich

Primordial looks like that
anachronistic echo rushing up
into the racketous cacophony
of a thousand, thousand faces
whispering into the night,
looking inward at one another
through shallow slits of white,
panopticon vision. Omni-vision,
Omni-present. Waiting to police one another:
nation state under capital rule of punishment.
In the cracks and crevices of a forgotten working class,
of a pathed street breaking apart at its foundation,
of idled cars filled with thugs in straight laced boots
pining over old rhetoric waiting to commit violence:
for blood, for heritage. Their ears aflame with
the fervor of a fist clutching and striking downward,
bloodied knuckles and scraped up boots
giving way back to its origin:
the guttural retching, dry-heaved words of venom.
A single word: primordial.

In Men We Trust

Glenn Cassidy

*"A government of laws
and not of men." – John Adams*

Every day,
I trust that strangers approaching
on the sidewalk will walk past and not attack,
trust that drivers will stop at the red light
as I pass through on green.
I trust that the waitress has not spit on my pizza,
that the bridge's steel girders aren't rusted
and flaking away like dandruff.
I trust that the man reaching into his pocket
is not reaching for a gun, that nearby strangers
who might carry concealed guns have the same trust.
I trust that my lover is not cheating,
that my employer trusts me to continue in my job.
Friends trust that gluten-free noodles
are what they claim to be, trust that I remembered
not to add flour to the gravy.
I trust my neighbor to be careful with the ash
from her cigarette as she smokes on the deck.
I trust that flaws in the jet's thin metal skin
are within tolerance, that the gaps between atoms
hold against stresses at forty thousand feet,
will not rip open and hurl me to the ground.
And it seems, Mr. Adams, I have no recourse
but to trust the human flaws of senators, governors
and presidents, that they lie within tolerance
of gaps in the law.

Grandfather's Once Heavenly Acres

Cheyenne Gain

When I was only a young fawn you
bought the hundred acre wood. As
I grew the life upon this hundred acre
wood did too. There were sycamore
trees the size of me that now are taller
and wider than the streams that run
through this hundred acre wood.
Ponds that bubble from the fish hiding
beneath the puke green moss with
them are remains of that old cabin you
built on the hundred acre wood. Only
the galvanized poles from the
deteriorating dock can be seen above
the pond. The winding trails leading
you through the hundred acre wood
are now over grown. Vines, limbs, and
toppled trees sit rotting on them. Now,
that you are gone and decaying
beneath the ground I have to revive
the hundred acre wood.

For Karen

Brittany Wiser

The house is quiet. Only the sounds of Oscar, the stupid fish, the occasional noise from the oak housed clock on the mantle my wife bought many years ago, and the splash of coffee hitting my cup remind me that time is still moving and life is still going. I take a sip of my coffee, the hot and bitter liquid burning my mouth as I force myself to ignore the pain. *Tick.....Tick....Tick....* I listen to the clock for a moment; it's the most noise it's ever made in such a sort amount of time. It doesn't tick like it used to, not since my wife became ill. As her health declined, so did the ticking of the clock. I sigh, returning my thoughts to the coffee. I don't know what my wife did to it, but I can't make it taste as good as she did. I walk from the kitchen over to my blue recliner in the living room, the clacking of my shoes softening when I leave the kitchen linoleum and enter the living room carpet. I sit in my chair and open the drawer of the wooden end table next to it, pulling out a pack of Marlboro cigarettes and putting one in my mouth as I glance at the clock. *Tick.....* It once again falls silent, as though it only made the noise to acknowledge my presence.

“William Leonard Thomas, I know you're not about to light a cigarette in this house!” I can still hear my wife scold me. I turn toward the kitchen, full of false hope that she's standing there with her brown curls

shining in the sunlight spilling in from the large kitchen window, one tanned hand on her hip, and the other hand holding her red bathrobe closed to hide her favorite nightshirt that says 'World's Best Grandma' and sweatpants. She's not. The house is empty, except for me and Oscar, the stupid fish my wife loved so damn much even though he ate the other fish in the tank.

"No, Karen, I ain't about to smoke in the house." I sigh to the ghost my memory created. I take the cigarette out of my mouth and place it in the old clay ashtray my youngest daughter made me when she was in elementary school. That was over twenty years ago now. "Karen, when are the girls due?" I called to my wife like I did every morning. She was always so excited to talk about our upcoming grandchildren. She used to go on about how one of my girls would have a daughter. Karen desperately wanted one of the kids to have a girl. Her son from a previous marriage had three sons, my middle daughter from my first marriage had four sons, and my eldest and youngest daughters from the same marriage were both pregnant with their first child.

"One of them will have a girl, Bill. I just know it!" Karen's brown eyes used to light up when talking about it, even when the pain medication for the cancer made her almost detached from this world. She was determined to see our grandchildren, she had taken on cancer once before and was prepared to do it again.

But it had come back with a vengeance, becoming terminal. I walk back into the kitchen, trying to forget about the last months with Karen, how much pain she was in, how embarrassed she was at her appearance. For a moment,

I saw her sitting at the kitchen table by the window, the sunlight shining through her tired eyes and highlighting the dark circles under them and her now pale skin. Her once curly hair was gone and a delicate purple scarf covered the top of her head. She was so small and frail, I felt like touching her would cause her to shatter into thousands of pieces.

“You’re just as beautiful as the day I met you.” I could hear myself telling her.

“You’re so full of it that I’m going to call you Bull instead of Bill.” She would smile. A sigh would follow as the smile faded. “You’ll have so much more leisure time when I’m gone. I hate you having to take care of me all day.” She would say as she turned her attention to the window where she could see the neighborhood children playing outside. *Tick.....* The clock takes me away from the memories.

I turn myself away from the empty table. It’s hard to remember just how long the ghosts had been haunting me. Had they come when she died, or were they recent?

“She’s gone, Bill.” I sigh to myself as I set the cup of coffee on the white countertop and take a glass bottle of gin out of the cabinet above the sink. I open the cabinet to the left and take a tall, crystal glass out of it, filling it about a quarter of the way with gin. As I place the bottle back in the cabinet, I open the freezer next to me; the cold air feels good on my face. I pause and calculate how long Karen has been gone. After a moment, I take out five ice cubes, one for every month she’s been gone, and place them in the glass. Karen used to scold me for using

the good crystal glasses when we didn't have company, but alcohol doesn't taste the same in plastic cups or coffee mugs. I smile to myself; she was so determined to make sure I wouldn't break the crystal that she switched the cabinet with the coffee mugs and the cabinet with the crystal, breaking three mugs, all of them hers, in the process. I grab the bottle of citrus soda next to the stove and slowly open it, watching it fizz slightly. I pour it over the ice and gin, filling the empty space in the cup. Forgetting about the soda, I take the cup and walk back to my recliner in the living room, seeing Karen's favorite blue armchair across the room by Oscar. She used to read books out loud to Oscar for some reason. She claimed it made him happy, I always thought it was because she liked to hear herself talk.

"And so, they theorize that the monster-" Karen would always stop mid-sentence in Oscar's favorite book to look at me as I gazed at her over the top of the newspaper from my own chair. She could somehow sense that I was staring at her. "What is it, Bill?" She would ask flatly as she shifted in her chair to look at me before I could retreat behind my newspaper. *Tick... Tick... Tick...* The clock seemed to emphasize the sudden silence in the room, like it was pushing me to answer her.

"Karen, darling, you're reading a book to a fish." I would always reply, trying to hide my smile as I watched the large, gray blob of a fish swim around in his tank, oblivious to the world, and the glass walls he constantly swam into.

"I know that, Bill." She would retort. Look at him, it makes him so happy!" A smile would

form on her lips, her eyes twinkling. *Thud....* She would cringe as Oscar let us know that he once again discovered the end of his tank. I would roll my eyes at her. Karen was a sweetheart, but she gave the damn fish too much credit.

Thud... The noise brings me out of my memories. Stupid fish. I sit in my chair and sip my drink. It is too early to drink, but it doesn't matter. Time continues to move for everyone except me. Time even continues for the stupid fish and all he does is ram his head into the glass all day. I hate the damn fish, but I can't bring myself to get rid of him. A knock on the front door brings me out of my bitter thoughts and hatred towards the fish. I set down my drink and slowly get out of my chair, running my hands through my uncombed hair as I walk into the kitchen to the door. I hadn't heard anyone pull up the driveway. I pull open the heavy brown door and see my son-in-law, my youngest daughter, and a car seat covered in a white blanket sitting at their feet. My daughter smiles warmly at me as I pick up the car seat and invite them in. The two follow me into the house where I set the seat on the kitchen table where Karen would always sit. I gently lift the white cloth off of the seat and look into the tiny brown eyes staring at me. The sunlight from the window catches the baby's eyes just like they did Karen's. If she had waited only three more months, she would have met her granddaughter, her only granddaughter. But she's gone now and she took the illusion of time with her.

"Say hello to Grandpa, Sophia Jane." My daughter says to the infant. I look at her blankly for a moment before I return my attention back to the child. Jane was also Karen's middle name. "I think Karen would have like it."

She says softly as she gently touches my arm. The room falls quiet, even Oscar restrains himself from banging into his tank. *Tick.....*

Tick.....Tick.....Tick..... I notice the steady tick coming from the living room. I look at the clock, the clock that hadn't ticked well since Karen was sick. It ticks slowly, but steadily and strongly and continues to do so. "Dad," My daughter interrupts the trance the clock has put me into. I turn my attention to her. "Do you like her name?" She asks me nervously.

"I think it's perfect," I reply, glancing back at the clock. "I think Karen would think so, too." I can't help but smile slightly at the clock.

Untitled

Drew Van Weelden

81



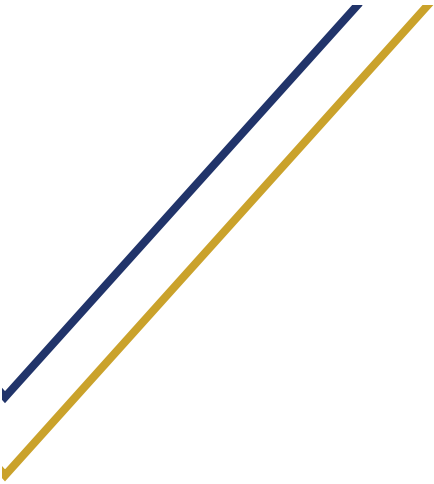
Cracked Teeth

Daymon Kilman

Shattered enamel
leaves brittle clefts
of bone with which
to chew my words
and yours.

Forever straining against
layers of mortar
and brick,
the bloody gums and
flaking stones
of mouths

worn dry
and hollow,
desperately reach
for the anchor
of the maxilla spine.



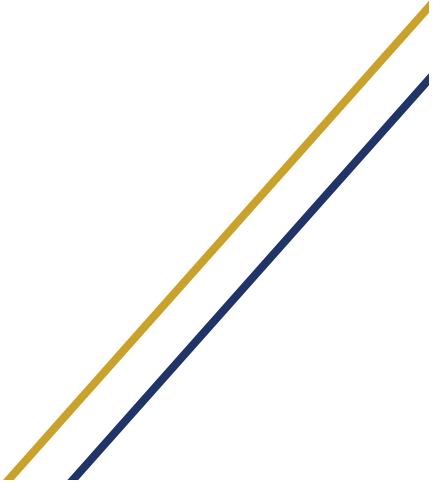
Words destroy themselves,
on the page,
on a tongue
denticulated
by the brutalities
of concrete and steel,

and in our minds without boies--
in our bodies without minds.

We have too little
and too much.
Certainty with
abundant servitude.

I spit dust behind my words
as I rescue flakes of bone
before they hit the drain.

These fragments don't rot,
so I keep them safe
and hope for new growth.



Personal Hell

Allen J. Dixon

Using Dante Alighieri's "Divine Comedy" as inspiration, "Personal Hell" takes the reader on a journey through ever-deeper realms of suffering. Each level is a view into the Hell which awaits those who indulge the sinful inclinations of man. Some historical figures and real-life events frame particular passages, giving relevant context to this age-old concept.

First Floor- Limbo

Restless whilst eternally asleep.
Writhing in waters dark and deep.
Far removed from what had been.
Trapped within a world of sin.

I walk nowhere, seeking release.
To purge my soul and bring it peace.
Suffocated by lamentations.
And overwhelming consternations.

Now tis too late for absolution.
Thusly resolved to persecution.
Unholy men dismiss the river.
That promises our heart's deliver.
To one who comprehends the truth.
Forgiving us our transgressed youth.

But to Him, I denied my faith.
And forever walk, an aimless wraith.
Amidst the many, connected to none.
I shall remain a forgotten son.

Second Floor- Lust

Unsatiated visceral yearning.
Never-ending lustful burning.
Have led me to this dreadful place.
So to my deeds, I must now face.
Concerned solely with tactile pleasure.
Sensations beyond mortal measure.

Eyes devour the sensual flesh.
Closing space when bodies mesh.
Tightly bound in a sinful swoon.
The Devil strives to make commune.
With those consumed in the pursuit.
Of Adam and Eve's tainted fruit.

Carnal cravings to quell the mind.
In hopes to peril and plight be blind.
But who are we to turn one's eye.
From suffering here or God on high.

And now am bound to wander lost.
Into a sea that shant be crossed.
The water's edge alas is gone.
No horizon, no break of dawn.
Just boundless black inquietude.
For many sins of flesh accrued.

Third Floor- Gluttony

Could not appease my aching need.
A constant quest to gorge and feed.
Partaking in perpetual feast.
Whilst praying to subdue the beast.

Satisfaction at no time would last.
So filled the cups and tables vast.
Let them eat cake, I have my share.
By emptying the cupboards bare.

I lied about through day and night.
Enthralled with such gastric delight.
Tempting morsels, savory and sweet.
Little pleasure in things I could not eat.

Ever-expanding, burgeoning breadth.
Had led me to my sudden death.
The plane I walk a desolate land.
Bliss replaced with sun-scorched sand.
And now no wine, nor daily bread.
Just mere regret and tears I've shed.

Fourth Floor- Greed

Upon our birth, we were designed
To gain net worth, remain refined.
With things of breed like charming wit.
Gold rings and greed and business grit.

Never losing sight of what we crave.

For we were meant to serve ourselves.
To earn a cent and line the shelves.
Recurring themes, profit and cost.
In building dreams, others are lost.

Always love of spite, of sin and slave.

We made the deal so long ago.
To rob and steal, to reap and sow.
In opulence, we strive to prove.
No consequence, heavens will move.

Earning day and night until the grave.

Acquiring wealth, was once our aim.
In fading health, weighed down with blame.

For what was done in power's name.
Now setting Sun and mark of shame.

Two blackened hearts far too dark to save.

Our withered flesh is stripped from bone.
As demons thresh with sword and stone.
Each grisly mass a grim tribute.
To caste and class and greed's pursuit.

Frightful fiends abound in foul conclave.

Fifth Floor- Anger

The red within my soul runs true
The dead without the way pass through.

And haunt the sleepless dreams I can't escape.

They pray that I might finally meet.
The day of death I once did cheat.

While wandering with broken back and nape.

Their plot at once has come to pass.
Not shot or drowned, but broken glass.

As the speeding steel is torn away.

The length on which I travel long.
No strength to quell the cost of wrong.

Now behind the wheel I'm forced to stay.

To right the deed for which I drive.
Bring light to death, in hopes to thrive.

Among the few that Heaven's love contains.

So blessed are they, the pure and chaste.
Confessed their sins, to God made haste.

But my anger eternally restrains.

Sixth Floor- Heresy

Commissioned with a flock of sheep.
Had promised God, but kept asleep.

My charges holding me beyond reproach.

With golden tongue, they worship lies.
Pointing their hands up to the skies.

Upon their souls I stealthily encroach.

Collection plates are thusly filled.
Until belief in Heaven's killed.

As the Lord knows not of what I do.

I gather them to tables round.
For praising faith they too have found.

But the words of God I misconstrue.

The day had come for righteous calls.
Torn from my throne, the prophet falls.

A fiery pyre consuming me in flame.

In death I walk, no end of night.
Fire and smoke, my only light.

A fitting end for deeds done in His name.

Seventh Floor- Violence

Was taught to hate from early age.
A father's legacy.
For as of late, my wrath and rage.
Has taken over me.

I walk the trail, my torch in tow.
To cleanse this land of mine.
I cannot fail, by night flame's glow.
We build our baneful shrine.

With hoods in place, the cross affixed.
And quickly set ablaze.
The dogs give chase, to River Styx.
Now death has come to gaze.

The rope is tied, a sickly knot.
Onto the bough was flung.
His family cried, bemoaned their lot.
Bore witness as he hung.

But I have learned revenge is served.
To men intent to kill.
For those concerned, it is deserved.
Despite our bitter will.

They tracked me down before the dawn.
And shed me of my clothes.
Outside of town, my body drawn.
Succumbed to deadly blows.

The dark ones here in Satan's liege.
 Delighting in our pains.
 The wraiths of fear, they seek and siege.
 With shackles and with chains.

The innocent the oak tree held.
 Are now my cross to bear.
 Though Heaven sent they feel compelled.
 To whisper and to stare.

The pain and strife that sealed my fate.
 Forever to remind.
 My useless life, my father's hate.
 My soul God left behind.

Eighth Floor- Fraud

They say creating life is to be blessed.
 But my wicked truth must be confessed.
 My children brought me anything but mirth.
 Just an albatross from day of birth.
 Five useless runts to bathe, to clothe and feed.
 Mere good-for-nothing brats of endless need.
 No father to relieve me of my load.
 He had gone for smokes and hit the road.

The brightly colored box beneath the sink.
 Its contents to concoct a hellish drink.
 The signatures applied on dotted line.
 Each to represent these kids of mine.
 One by one laid out in dark repose.
 This chapter of my life I plan to close.

Suspicious grew till I could lie no more.
 Feigning innocence became a chore.
 Twelve men had found me guilty of the crime.

A lead-lined box to spend my little time.....
 The hangman's noose pulled tight around my neck.
 A price to pay for my insurance check.

The demons keep me locked within a cell.
 Forced to consume a flaming brew of Hell.
 To suffer as my children did in death.
 Eternal burning erupts with every breath.

Ninth Floor- Treachery

My page of history.
 Is written in the blood.
 Of those who followed me.
 Through famine and through flood.

Had fought to earn my place.
 Demanded my respect.
 To rule the human race.
 Is to con and misdirect.

A lesson from The Prince.
 For what it takes to lead.
 Denying consequence.
 No odds I would concede.

All men should toe the line.
 Aware of what would pass.
 A death in River Rhine.
 Or a chamber full of gas.

The day my foes arrived.
 By boat, by foot, by plane.
 To save those that survived.
 And free the land I reign.

But as the men drew near.
My pride would not allow.
A hint of doubt or fear.
To death I would not bow.

One bullet to the head.
It seemed the surest way.
Put depravity to bed.
I took no time to pray.

The Devil came to call.
To keep me company.
He praised me for my gall.
Almost as bad as He.

He took me by the hand.
We two of single mind.
Not knowing what he planned.
A nightmare I would find.

Into a bog I went.
Such suffocating smoke.
Something malevolent.
On which I cough and choke.

The Devil merely grins.
In evil so sublime.
While I suffer for my sins.
Until the end of time.

Interruptions

By Kayla thomas

A breeze cuts through the stifling air-

Ring. Ring.

“Good morning, Thank you for calling.
This is Kayla, how may I direct your call?”

“Uh Hi Kayla, I’m calling about...”

Don’t fucking say my name

I don’t know you, we are not at the level boy

It’s difficult writing

a poem when,

writing by a phone.

How will I ever be the next Frost,

or Marvell,

or hell, even Seuss,

with this damn phone?

Can’t even-

Poetry may not be my thing,

but my goodness

Can I answer the phone-

Warmer than the pavement in summer

And that’s what I get

paid-

For!

A Catscapade

Kayla Thomas

“Humans. The most disgusting litter of inbred organisms that walk this rolling yarn ball. I’ve never seen an ape before, but surely it must be the better of the two. Humans are a joke made by evolution. Survival of the fittest? More like survival of the most destructive. The worst things about these two-legged hairless trolls are the following:

1. They think they control everything
2. They put suffocating material on their fur-less bodies to keep warm-even during the hot times.
3. They get under falling prisms of water every day. Every. Day.
4. Their disgusting portrayal of my language is humiliating to hear.
5. They added another one.

As far as humans go, I always thought I was pretty lucky. Originally, it was just me and my human, a woman. She isn’t a very big one and she was gone a lot, but she always kept my food and water full and my gray sandbox clean. She’s also very good at scratching me just right. Don’t tell anyone this, or I’ll have to

scratch your eyes out, but she even rubs my belly just the way I like it. It wasn't love, but it was comfortable. Sometimes I slept in her bed. She used to sleep on ranging hills of pillows. It was always warm and snuggly and cozy.

Everything was going great, until she brought that man into my life. Next thing I know, my sleeping space was at the bottom of the bed, like a dog! No amount of purring or clawing got him to leave. And trust me, I tried nice and mean. Once, I peed on his bottoms, I got urine everywhere and he's still around.

He started being at my house all the time. Eventually he started to smell like the girl. Sometimes he puts those brown pellets in my shallow blue bowl and so I started to think he was pretty okay.

But then the most unthinkable thing happened.

I smelled that vile... vile... thing! As soon as that man walked through the door I heard it make its scared little meows as it scratched beneath that cardboard lid. It wanted me to feel sorry for it, but all I could do is feel sorry for myself. I felt the disease of hatred swell in my belly, up through my esophagus, leaving its bitter taste on my tongue. I despised this creature. It was going to share my food. My bed. My climbing. My *belly rubs*.

Worse than all of that (as bad as it always was), it was going to share my humans. Sure, they were coarse and vulgar, but they were mine. But from this moment on, they would be *ours*.

At least that man had the common sense to lock that monster in a room, so I couldn't get it. I would have scratched it's face off. Both my people took turns going in there, making those awful high-pitched tones at it and all I got was the wrong side of the white door.

After two days, they let it out. It turned out to be a girl and they named her Chevy. That just sounded fantastic with my name, like twins, all this despite the fact I am ages older than her. Her fur, white with large black spots to go with her yellow eyes. She truly was a little monster. We smelled each other and naturally she was completely smitten with me. Ha-ha a smitten kitten, I am so clever.

She was a terror of a cat and small. A deadly combination. Her favorite thing to do is hide and attack. Especially under the bed. Whenever our people get up, she slinks under, waiting for the perfect moment. Pat, Pat, on their naked paws. I must admit, hearing *him* squeal makes me happy. It makes my girl laugh and that's not so bad. Chevy is really good at it. What? Even I can acknowledge when someone is good at something.

The problem was, she was better at everything. I thought we would just split the people up fair and square, like respectable roommates. But no, she took them both. They wanted to play with her and scratch her ears. She purred like the way those big things outside sound like when our people leave. Horrible things. They put me in one to go see that man in the white coat. I hate that contraption. Anyway, how could I even compete with that stupid ball of furs' "cuteness." I found myself wanting more and more attention as she took my world away from me. Chevy, how I despised that name.

The real trouble started about two weeks ago. Both of

those humans were home. They were staring at something on a screen with moving pictures. It was a rare occasion since I was sitting between both the humans' laps and they were petting me. Once, I found this humiliating, but now it was really quite enjoyable. I am not sure what about it had changed, they probably were just getting the right spots. The best part was that Chevy was in another room. All in all, the evening started off like the middle days, with both the humans paying me attention and no Chevy to distract them.

All of a sudden, from the back room (you know the one with the desk?) came a noise that was so odd. It made both my people jump up, knocking me to the floor. Even their blanket landed on top of me and my girl human kicked me in my stomach. The utter humiliation! After recovering myself, I walked into the chaos. Chevy was running around; the girl and the boy were yelling while he wrapped something in a towel. As he walked by, it clearly smelled like one of you. My girl was crying, and my boy was trying to make her feel better. Telling her it was just nature and what not. I hated their panicking, so I tried to help too.

Now, I have never caught a mouse before because I knew this is what would happen. Both my people love all the critters, although, I can't say why. Being comfortable with my life, I never wanted to chance it. You know how humans take everything so personally? Plus, all that blood and guts has a smell that just taps the energy right out of me. Surely, that vile creature was on the way out.

But as we both know, that is not what happened. She was rewarded! With treats and so many "thank-you's." It was just so sickening and confusing. I coughed up a hairball and might again just thinking about it. People

hate mice in their houses more than I hate waking up from a dreamless nap. They started putting out traps and keeping all of the doors in front of the food closed. It's still total lock-down in the house, I cannot even sneak into *my* food.

That's how you came to be trapped here on this black sticky thing. It's all Chevy's fault. Now, if you could just stop making those hideous squeaks. I would greatly appreciate it. Also, how about dying a little faster? I plan on pulling you off and pretending that I caught you. Maybe they will get more traps and I'll do this again. I'm worn out from talking. I'm just going to take a little nap. Don't worry- I won't leave you here to die alone."

Streetlight

Drew Van Weelden

99



The Age of Fire

Daymon Kiliman

Foreign aid from Louisville arrives:
a palette of AOL disks
and “Golden Age Hollywood” DVDs.

In the letter enclosed, they only ask, in return,
how many children are learning in our schools,
in this, the Age of Fire?

Will our soldiers be much longer?

Whose war is being fought in which country and for what resources?

In this, the Age of Fire, we cannot spare much more,
but please accept these Ramen spice packs
and vegetable peelers.

We, your brothers and sisters, stand with you
as steadfast as ever,
in this,
the Age of Fire.

An Old Acquaintance

James Kanter

I hear footsteps behind me
And pause to look around,
But I see no one about me
Nothing that made the sound,

I continue on my journey
But once again stop dead,
Slowly I look behind me
With a mounting sense of dread.

There he stands so smugly
And I am left aghast,
This terrible apparition
The shadow of my past.

He points his finger at me
Judging me for my sin,
I can only stand there
Crawling in my skin

But slowly I step towards him
And open my arms wide,
I am finished running,
There's nowhere left to hide

As much as I don't like it
And wish that I were free,
I don't exist without him
For he's what makes me me.

The Telling of a Bus Ride

Kayla Thomas

Inspired by riots involving a school bus

The bus was going down the road
and it was really bumpy and jumpy
But that's fun, we like to fly into the air
it's a contest to see who can go the highest
of course it's the funnest part of school
and my best friend always sits next to me
But then, but then
Are you listening to me?
Then we heard a loud noise
then another
so many
pang, bump, thwamps
all drouned us and filled up our ears
the bus driver told us to get under our seats
but I looked out the window anyways
Men are mad
but why at us?
We didn't do anything
well I took a pencil from mom once...
the other kids were scared
but not me
I'm brave, like you
and now I'm home
Let's play.

Excerpt from *“The Great and Terrible Atlas Devúa.”*

Zoey Pritchett

It took me twice as long as it usually would to reach the station, and by the time I clicked the elevator button for the fifth floor, a large majority of the officers on the day shift had long since clocked out, leaving only the on-call officers on the third floor, and the clerical staff on the second.

As the elevator door clattered open I was struck by just how quiet it was. The main investigation hub, typically swarming with officers pouring over their cases, was abandoned. I passed the janitor sweeping a meeting room and nearly opened Penndelton’s office door when, from inside, there was a sudden outburst.

“You mean he never showed? He was so eager yesterday-did he-agh! The bastard probably searched the clinics on his own!” There was a voice, deep and growling: Penndelton, followed by a clattering as he pushed his chair away from his desk, hitting the filing cabinet set too close behind him.

“Get out-I have to make a call.” I stuttered backwards, hiding in the nearest open office as one of Burnham’s little henchmen skittered out of his office like a rat, making short work of walking to the elevator. Once he was out of sight I returned my ear to the door, waiting impatiently to hear what he had to say.

I sat there a moment longer before I began to fear I’d been spotted, Burnham finally standing and walking to the receiver hanging on the left wall in his office.

There was yet another beat as he fingered the dial, delicately selecting each number.“...

Yes, hello? Atl-ah-and who might this be?" He spoke smoothly, pausing for a moment as the person on the other end of the line spoke.

"Roommate? Well, that's lovely. Do you know where he may have gone off to...?"

Another pause, he didn't-he wouldn't have, would he?

"About an hour ago? Huh, alright. No, don't worry, I'm just a friend of his, yes, no, it's quite alright. It was a pleasure, Chapter, was it?" His voice was a honeyed mask, smothering the anger bubbling within him. Penndelton paused for another second before slamming the phone hotly down on the receiver, causing some internal bell to clang in protest. He growled in frustration, stomping from the office in a clatter of pounding footsteps. In an instant I threw myself back into the empty office, banging into a cupboard as I tried in vain to conceal myself. What can I say-stealth isn't my strong suit.

Penndelton, trying to regain his composure, calmly shut and locked his office door, letting out a large exhalation of breath as he walked down the hall and out of sight.

That was close. Once I was sure he was gone I revealed myself, kneeling down and beginning to fiddle with the lock. I hadn't thought to bring a lock pick, and frankly I had never taken the time to learn how touse one properly.

Righting myself, I fiddled with the handle for another moment before the sound of footsteps in the direction of the elevator caught my attention.

"Working late?" The janitor, a friendly looking older canid, approached, broom in hand.I stared at her for a moment, hand caught guilty on the brass knob. Glancing between my hand and the janitor, I forced myself to speak.

"Oh, yes-you see-Inspector Burnham told me to collect some files for him for a case that he left here, but I-" I paused, taking a shaky breath. "I think I lost his key. If he has to wait any longer, he'll be furious. I can't lose this job, it's hard enough as it is." I tugged at the edges of my coat, feigning my best look of utter hopelessness.

"Oh don't fret! I can let you in, no worries." The janitor pulled a large keyring from her belt, thumbing through them until she found the one she was looking for.

"Thank you so much Miss-?"

"Roberta. It's no trouble, frankly I find Mister Burnham a bit scary myself, and I'm a' hundred years older than him!" She laughed. "And you are?"

"Oh uh, D-demure, Demure Devereux. I work downstairs, mostly secretarial stuff, hence... y'know, this." I turned away from her, praying I hadn't just screwed myself over.

"Oh, alright. Well, just close the door when you go, and I'll lock it up for you." She patted my shoulder. "It was nice meeting you, Mr. Devereux."

Once I was inside the office, I quietly closed the door, carefully scanning the room for any sign of something useful: Documentation of the woman, records he had been withholding from me, anything to prove he was hiding something.

Unfortunately for me he had always been a neat freak, the only thing on his desk being a small rectangular frame, inside of which was a photo of a feline girl I'd never seen before, a blank pad of paper, several pens and a stained glass lamp in desperate need of dusting.

Sitting back in his desk chair, I let out a long frustrated sigh,

glaring daggers at the ceiling. I scanned the underside of his desk for a hidden doomsday button or secret panel but no such luck, it was just wood. All his drawers and file cabinets were locked with keys I doubted Roberta had, and the rest of the room was entirely spotless. Pushing the chair back, I hit the cabinet directly behind me, which rattled in protest.

Spinning around, I fiddled with the drawer handle, finally finagling it into opening with a clatter. I stood still for a moment, holding the handle in one hand as I listened to my surroundings. I was unsure of what I thought I would hear, though I paused regardless.

Pulling the drawer out, I was devastated to see it was almost entirely empty, save for three manilla folders. I scooped the folders up, laying them out on his desk.

In the first was a single profile on a man named Theodore Pearl. There was no photo, but a brief scan of the page told me he was a feline species called a Trap Tiger, and had immigrated from Mandali in 1857-eight years ago.

In the second folder was a note handwritten in Halvori. I put the note aside and continued to shuffle through the folder's contents, though it seemed to be filled with nothing but handwritten notes.

Finally I opened the last folder to find a profile for...
America Devereux.

The profile was mostly unimportant, however there were several handwritten notes in the margins of the profile.

"Delusional, but cooperative, likely as a means to an end. She was broken when we first met, though I am exceptional at these sorts of puzzles."

The notes went on, though it sickened me to even imagine the inner workings of his mind. Setting the profile aside, I picked up the next item—a newspaper clipping of the obituary section with one in particular highlighted. Without even reading it I knew what it said, but to be sure...

“America Devereux dies in the crosshairs of a gunfight on the corner Bruchpunkt and Fortieth. After being shot in the chest she was rushed to the Chorona Hospital. She succumbed to her injuries at 24:47 on the eighteenth of Kaltest. An up-and-coming journalist, Ms. Devereux was—”

I forced myself to stop reading, pressing a hand to my chest and drawing deep breaths of air in and out of my lungs with an effort that I hadn't felt since the day I first read the obituary for myself.

Without looking at the rest of the papers I closed the file, gathering all three of them up in my arms. I hastily copied the contents of each, stuffing them into my pocket as I returned the originals to their drawer. It was crucial to keep Penndelton from learning that anyone had so much as even entered the office.

Walking coolly towards the elevator, I decided, as an afterthought, that the stairs might be better if I wanted to avoid being seen any more staff members than I already had.

Several flights later I snuck through the deserted halls of the station's main floor, ducking out the back door and into the alley where the majority of officers went to smoke during the day.

Despite the deep red beams of sun piercing the alleyway it was frigid and dark, leaking piles of trash surrounding an overfull dumpster alongside the neighboring building filling the air with a hair-curling smell of decay. Nearly tripping

over a stray bottle on the ground, I struggled to silence my clumsiness, ducking behind a waste bin in an attempt to keep from falling flat on my face into one of the pools of questionable liquid seeping through the cobblestone to the alley. Cursing quietly, I began to weave my way through the streets, all of which were quickly sinking into darkness as night approached.

Crossing Wheeler street, left on Black, right on Pascal, crossing Brookens, Lindsay and Nikola... Finally as I ducked down an alley and onto Lotus drive did I make it back to the back door of my home. I slipped inside, shutting the door softly, listening for a sign of Burnham's arrival.

"What did you do?" Ms. Adler nearly gave me a heart attack, standing in the doorway of her rooms with a blue tinted bottle cradled in her arms.

"Pardon?" I asked, pressing the edges of my coat flat, hand running over the roughly patched lapel.

"That inspector you used to mill around with is upstairs, had Mr. Abel looking like a ghost."

"He 'milled around' with America. Probably here to try and steal credit for something else I did," I grumbled. "anyhow, how long has he been here?"

"Only a moment, brought along a bit to sip on, like some sort of bougie prince." She paused, turning the bottle over in her hands. "Not that I mind, anyway."

"Ah well... I'd better not leave the two of them alone any longer." I stretched my antsy limbs, Adler letting out a small scoff as she returned to her apartment.

Taking the stairs two at a time, though steadying myself as

soon as I was out of eyeshot, I approached the door with a delicacy I rarely expressed. Ear pressed to the frame, I tried in desperation to expose whatever scandal he intended with Chapter, however their conversation seemed rather...mundane. *How unfortunately dull.* ~~~~

"I'm terribly sorry, but if you would like you're welcome to wait here. I'm sure he won't be out too much later, we still have a few errands to run."

"He never was very orderly. If it's no trouble to you I brought along a bit to drink, consider it a housewarming gift."

There was a pause, followed by a pop like wine being uncorked. If they were drinking my alcohol I swear-

"I'm afraid I don't have the place fully stocked yet so I don't have much to offer, but I appreciate it mister..?" Chapter's voice dripped with naivety and charm, sounding far more comfortable than he had with me that morning.

"Burnham, though please, call me Penn." There was another shuffle of fabric, Chapter was clearly still dissatisfied with the state of our parlor. "You are certainly a man after my own heart." The shuffling stopped.

"I'm not sure what you mean." Chapter's voice raised an octave, suddenly on edge.

"We seem to have quite similar taste. I have a way of surmising these sorts of things."

The room fell silent.

"...Do you mind if I close that window? It's just, the draft-" Penndelton let his words trail off. "I don't mean to impose, but it's a tad chilly."

"Oh, no, no trouble at all! Atlas'... secretary... likes to come in that way, is all. Honestly I think we would be better off with a door-no sit, I'll get it, I insist. I haven't been able to properly entertain in years." Chapter's footfalls were soft and light, the telltale sound of socked feet pausing directly in front of the window.

This is as good a time as any to make my grand entrance.

Stepping through the door, I was immediately put off by Penndelton's posture. Arm leaning firmly against the counter, one leg hitched on the base of one of our barstools, the other planted on the ground, the position screamed 'power and control.' I snatched several files I had neglected to put away off of the counter, hastily shoving the copies of his files into one and tucking it into the corner of my desk.

Returning to the pair, I snatched a bottle of Charbonét Black Talon Liquor, a favorite of the inspector's, from the counter, examining it.

"How can you drink this?" I said, grimacing. Chapter downed a large gulp of it, looking much more pained than any man should while drinking.

"I'm sorry you don't have any taste, my friend. I was just telling, uh..."

"Chapter." I provided.

"Yes, I was telling Chapter how you will certainly benefit from a bit of that. He seems quite the intellectual, not unlike myself." He ran a hand through his hair as he took a sip of his drink. Chapter had poured it into a brandy glass, but any fool knows black liquors like Charbonét were to be served in a tall glass, even if it was repulsive.

"I'm assuming the two of you work together, is that why you came about the hospital-"

"OH yes-" Penndelton cut Chapter off as soon as he began to speak, pitching his body forward. "Atlas, it's dreadful, the victim we brought in yesterday seemed to have been poisoned. She, unfortunately, passed away this morning." He waved his glass in an expression of sympathy. "I was able to interview her myself late last night. I would have allowed you, if not for the Alliance regulations-you see it was out of my hands." His words were spoken with the concept of genuineness, though the slight upturning of his lips and serpentine gleam in his eyes told a different story.

"Yes, how unfortunate." I conceded, opening the cabinet beside Chapter and finding my favorite Peravian wine, still uncorked from the night before.

Taking a long swig, I ignored the stale taste. I should have remembered to re-cork it.

"Is that all?"

"Don't worry, I won't keep you. I just wanted you to know that until we find the culprit my officers will be spread thin, to say the least." Penndelton said, finishing his glass. "Not that that should affect your work, though. I just thought you would like to know." He set the glass down without a sound. "As for the victim, her body is in the morgue at the central ward, should you take an interest in examining it."

With that the inspector stood, gathering up his coat and giving Chapter an odd lingering look.

"If Mr. Devúa gives you any trouble, Mr. Abel, be sure to contact me. Good evening, Atlas." He parted with an odd wave of his hand, shutting the door and disappearing into the night. ~~~~

Colophon

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