

Welcome to the Summer 2025 edition of the Avalon Literary Review. We are pleased to present this latest collection of poems, short stories and essays both from old friends and new. We send a special thank you out to Sylvie Greenway. We are proud to be the first of what we anticipate will be many publications.

Over the years we have strived to select both light-hearted and more somber pieces for each issue of our magazine. Regular subscribers to the *Avalon Literary Review* may sense a darkening of our tone in this issue. For us it seems like a natural reflection of the appalling direction in which our country is moving. I think former Vice President Harris put it succinctly in a recent interview when she remarked that the anti-humanitarian choices the Trump administration is making is as predicted, however, the shocking government-wide capitulation to these heinous policies was not.

I am embarrassed to say that I didn't have much respect for pre-WWII German citizens. I couldn't understand how they had allowed fascism to overrun their country. Now, as I watch the same thing happening to the US I am much more contrite. I was raised to respect the right of others to have a different point of view from me. I was raised to accept that people make different choices in their lives and have every right to do so. I was raised to savor discourse, not silence it. I think it's that respect for other's autonomy that is partly responsible for the horrific position in which we now find ourselves. Respect only works if it goes both ways. To paraphrase Shulman, nice people make great fascists. If we're too frightened to make waves and choose to look the other way, then we'll get the country we deserve.

We hope that we at *ALR*, and other people who respect differences, will learn to set aside our tendency to be cooperative. We must embrace a more rebellious nature so that we may return this country not to just what it could be, but what it should be.

Valerie Rubino Editor July 2025

Table of Contents

The Difficulties of Dream Reading
by Ruth Berman
Factory Girl
by Liliane Pang
Fur Coat
by Michael C. Smith
Rick's Time
by Diane Webster10
An Overlapping Space
by Dorit d'Scarlett11
I Wasn't Always Like This
by Carly Rae Oakley-Doran13
Colors
by Stephanie Teasley16
Baby Bird
by Ken Wuetcher18
The Cage
by Jacqueline Marino21
The Grass is So Green
by Sarah Daly25
The Blue at the End of the VHS
by Jenny Severyn27
Wretch
by Gabriella M. Belfiglio31
The Sick Room
by C.W. Bigelow32
Dinner's Ready
by John Grey36
Not Mad
by Elizabeth Collis
Taps on the Ceiling
by James Nelli40
Grandma
by Matthew Snyderman43
El Jaleo
by Melissa Moschitto47
Battle Royale
by Elise Chadwick51
Fig Season
by Sylvie Greenway52
How to Make a Hash(tag) of Things
by Adele Evershed53
,
Biographies

The Difficulties of Dream Reading Ruth Berman

Used to be in dreams sometimes I tried to read a book, But you can't do it.

The words transform themselves to action And become the dream.

Sometimes, stubbornly, I kept on Trying to read words That blurred before me.

And finally, thinking to see better, I opened my eyes –
And was awake.

Factory Girl Liliane Pang

"Mom. Dad. I have something to say."

My mother looked up from her freshly delivered *Montreal Gazette*. My father kept his eyes on the golf tournament on the TV. I inhaled dramatically.

"I'm going to spend next summer in Europe."

The synchronized raising of their eyebrows led me to argue that the greatest writers of all time had done the same thing when they were my age (more or less). My father waited until the tiny man on the television swung his golf club. The white ball arced silently through the air before rolling towards and then away from its circular target. He cursed under his breath and switched off the TV.

"With what money?"

Rising at 6 am became my routine, four days a week. I washed my face, got dressed, cobbled together a lunch and sprinted for the 121 bus. The granola factory was in an ugly industrial park beside some train tracks. You had to pass over the similarly ugly Decarie Expressway, an abandoned-looking animal shelter and many blocks of identical new townhouses to get there. It wasn't the most inspiring scenery but it gave me the chance to nod off into that first stage of sleep for a good twenty minutes. The assembly line required little of me; my mind was free to meander as I scooped cereal, nuts, chocolate chips and dried fruit into little paper bags. As for the pay, it was predictably shitty. That wasn't the worst part, though.

At first, I was somewhat charmed by the floor manager's wide smile and a demeanor that could only be described as bouncy. Marie-Hélène possessed a unique way of tearing you down while never wavering in her perkiness. According to her, the task of managing meant asking you to do something and then hovering over your shoulder, close enough that you could hear her breathing.

Within minutes, she would stop you to demonstrate what she considered to be her superior technique of tying ribbons around bags, for example, that wasn't all that different from what you were already doing. I quickly developed a vivid fantasy of burying her alive under five tons of granola.

I didn't hate everything about the job. The smell of toasting cereal could be quite comforting and I managed to sneak mouthfuls of dried fruit and chocolate chips while Marie-Hélène berated some other poor soul. The floor team consisted mostly of somewhat senior -age women, mostly immigrants from the likes of Guyana, Poland, the Philippines, Romania and Chile. I can still hear their conspiratorial whispers and giggles when I think back to that time. Sometimes while we ate our lunch in the "lounge" (that was actually a storage space) the ladies would pass around cookies or crackers that a relative had brought back from their home countries.

One day, it occurred to me that Marie-Hélène might have the ability to read minds because, after a few months of me praying for her professional downfall, she came up with a new way to torture me. It was very early in the morning when I emerged from the locker room in my stained lab coat and itchy hair net, dreading the start of a shift where I would have to spend the next eight hours on my feet. Marie-Hélène was standing in front of me with that severe bun that pulled up the outer corners of her eyes, brandishing her clipboard and the attached pen like a whip. (What did she even write on that thing?)

"Good morning, Liliii! How are you todayyy?" She didn't wait for an answer.

"I need you to do something really important for us! Right after the granola has been toasted. It would be *such* a great help to us, okayyy?"

She walked quickly and beckoned me towards the giant industrial oven. "I'm only asking because you're the smallest person here."

She was only an inch taller than me and bony enough that she resembled a grasshopper.

I looked towards the oven, hot enough for me to feel its warmth from a few feet away. She pointed to a nearby hose then pressed a scraper and box of steel wool into my hands. Her mouth broke into a cloying smile while she unnecessarily cleaned her glasses with the corner of her pristine lab coat.

"İt's best to scrape while it's still warm. Before the granola hardens. You'll thank me later. Okay, now go, go, go!"

My grades at school plummeted. Still, I was able to build up a little mound of savings. Eventually, this mound became a hill before growing into a proper mountain as my one year work anniversary appeared on the horizon. Living with my parents provided huge savings. I also cut corners wherever I could, getting up early to make my lunch and dinner for the day (usually, a pair of cucumber sandwiches that would turn soggy by 12pm). Sometimes, I would bring slices of raw tomato drizzled with olive oil and salt, convincing myself I was eating an authentic Mediterranean appetizer I had seen on some travel show.

In the break room, while munching away at my "Spanish" lunch, I would slowly flip through my favorite coffee table book, featuring an evocative photograph of every single country in the world, luxuriating in the romantic notions I had about each destination while trying to tune out the hum of the commercial refrigerators behind me. Occasionally, my elderly female colleagues ambled over and we daydreamed out loud about places that felt the most mysterious to us, like Kiribati and São Tomé and Príncipe. Lena joked about how she and her husband had visited the closest big city to their hometown for their honeymoon and how that had felt like such a big deal to the two of them. Rita confessed that leaving for Montreal at the age of thirty-five was the first time she had crossed her country's borders.

I connected with those ladies much more easily than my peers in the Art History undergrad program. My weekday stints at the factory ended around 4pm and then I had to rush off to catch the bus and metro that took me to Concordia's downtown campus in time for my evening classes. I would usually show up a few minutes late, quietly sliding into a vacant seat as those around me sniffed the air, trying to locate the source of the smell of burnt granola mingled with stale sweat. I should have felt more self-conscious but I was too exhausted to care. I possessed neither the time nor the energy to join any school clubs, and everyone was so effortlessly cool and artsy that I would've stood out even if I had tried to participate in campus society.

Marie-Hélène continued to interrupt my daydreams of wandering around museums and sipping on glasses of wine in bistros with wall-to-wall mirrors. She always demanded more. More speed. More attention to detail. For me to give more of a shit about that stupid little job. Couldn't she understand that doing the bare minimum made sense because my nineteen year old brain just wanted to get through the day? I savored getting one step closer to my goal of quitting in the most dramatic possible way. Ideally, that was leaving her ugly-sobbing in the wake of my departure.

Eventually, that day did come, even sooner than I'd hoped. I was doing a routine check of my savings account over the phone during my lunch break and was told I had reached the magic four figure sum I had been working towards for over a year. I punched the air in victory. Back on the factory floor, Marie-Hélène was reprimanding the new girl, a McGill student from Australia with a passion for swing dance. When I interrupted her to give my two weeks' notice, Marie-Hélène simply blinked three times in a row.

"Okayyy.

I felt the eyes of the others. The ladies were trying to see what was going on while maintaining the smooth flow of the assembly line. The expected blow up didn't come even though I had mentally prepared myself for it. Marie-Hélène simply informed me that I would receive my last paycheck in the mail. That was it. Everyone turned around and went back to work. A big batch of new orders had recently come in, after all.

Marie-Hélène gave my sleeve a tiny tug and pulled me towards the nearest corner.

"I heard you're going on your first backpacking trip this summer. Incredible. So exciting! You know, I spent a summer in Asia with my boyfriend ten years ago. It changed our lives.

We learned so much about ourselves during that time. You'll see, you will come back as a completely different person."

And then she did the unthinkable. She hugged me.

I knew that another broke college student would quickly take my place. As the newest hire, she would likely be told to climb into the still-steamy, claustrophobic oven that would make her clothes stink of burnt granola. Perhaps she would be a young immigrant, quiet and hesitant, but only because her grasp of English was limited. Maybe she wouldn't mind the lingering smell after her shift ended because she would be grateful for the opportunity to help her parents out with the rent.

The next day, I made my way to the student travel office on campus and placed my shiny new credit card on the counter. The budget flights were purchased and my shiny credit card was handed back to me along with a stack of shiny insurance and tour group brochures. My father, impressed that I had managed to follow through on one of my many pursuits, let alone saved enough for a four-month trip, tossed a couple of hundred dollars into the pot as a parting gift.

I was finally ready for my life to really begin.

Fur Coat Michael C. Smith

A man arranges a long fur coat just so on the chair between us, the arms on the armrests, the lining exposed like a turned-out purse. So strong

the perfume rising from the fur, I want to buy it a drink. I ask if the coat is real, a question I wouldn't, for many reasons, ask a woman. "Darn right, the man says. "176 black minks."

I look, I parse, but can't tell where one starts and another ends. We talk women in that general way men have when they'd just as soon say nothing: they're always late, always fussing, always outputting. He tells me he's telling me and I tell him I'm telling him and that's fine. He keeps turning

and looking for the woman to arrive, but she doesn't show up.
He wonders aloud where she is, speculates that she got carried
away shopping. Or maybe just got carried away period. "You know,
Louise," he says. I do and don't. He laughs. I laugh. But it doesn't help.
We look at our watches, shake our wrists, but that doesn't help much either.

Finally, he says, "I knew it, "and gathers the coat and leaves, though the perfume remains, bad company for any man and his drink. I carry it with me into the street and sit with it in a cab, wishing it wouldn't cling. It comes home with me to a better nose than mine and so the slamming of doors, the calling of names. I try to shower it off the odor, the drink, the night of dead minks. But again, I float down the hall. Again, I reach for the bed with both hands.

Rick's Time Diane Webster

It never crosses my mind not to go over when the ambulance lights strobe red and blue next door. Rick lies on the floor. EMTs hover over him. The CPR machine suctions up and down. Loudest sound in the room. Rick's son stands beside his mother as she sits on a kitchen chair. Praying, wishing, making deals with God, pushing the dread away like the CPR machine that continues its up and down job on Rick's chest. The EMTs are calm, efficient, do their jobs. The first time Rick is shocked, the scene lurches into reality, not a TV show. I sit down. But I still see. I still hear. I never see Rick's face or head, but it is Rick's body. It is Rick. Drugs push into his veins. He has a heartbeat. A thready heartbeat. No heartbeat. He is shocked multiple times. The head EMT steps outside. On his radio asking and saying they had done all they could, and Rick was dead. Did he have permission to stop? Hope flat lines. The EMT kneels in front of the wife and tells her. They pack up their equipment and the CPR machine is silenced. The wife brings out a blanket and spreads it over Rick. The wife tells me to leave now. It isn't my time with Rick anymore.

Everyone goes to Rick's service. He is cremated so maybe it will be better. Kind of. The chairs behind the wife, the son, the daughter, the grandchildren fill with familiar people. A swallowtail butterfly flies across my thoughts. "Okay. This is going to be okay." A bouquet of flowers sits on the ground beside a cigar box and one of the guitars Rick had made. What's with the cigar box? It holds Rick's cremains. Better than a casket. But the pile of dirt piled beside the cigar box doesn't look like enough dirt. Did they dig a couple of shovelfuls and call it good? It isn't enough dirt. Not even big enough to bury a dead cat. The hole is camouflaged by a hunk of fake funeral grass. Hopefully the pastor won't fall in or trip over it as he speaks and paces across that strip of grass. That dirt annoys me. It conjures images of flinging clods over the hillside. Look out below!

The son speaks. He has written his thoughts of his dad on a bar napkin. Rick would be proud. Then the son flicks open the cigar box and slips the napkins on top of Rick's cremains. Not as traumatic as an open casket, but the last of Rick shows inside.

You think you know someone until people start to reminisce and tell stories. Things you never heard, never saw, never imprinted themselves on individual memories. I wonder if I even knew Rick. I look around to see if I've come to the wrong funeral. If suddenly I should slink away pretending the trauma is too much as I cover my face with a wrinkled tissue and hunch my distraught body away from the embarrassment. But no. I'm where I belong. A vertigo service for a man maybe I never knew. Except for being a witness to his death. A witness to Rick's body lying on the floor. A witness trying to replace that death with a living substitution. An image of Rick standing upright, alive.

An Overlapping Space Dorit d'Scarlett

In the vast ocean of someone else's grief, I am as useless as flotsam.

This what I'm thinking, feeling it like wood in my veins, as the kettle clicks off, and I pour water over the teabag. Steam rises, curling, carrying the sharp scent of ginger. I carry the mug to the couch where she sits, legs pulled to her chest, her eyes fixed on the floor as if the pattern of the rug holds answers.

I offer her the tea.

She doesn't move at first, glancing at the mug as though surprised to find me there. Her hands reach for it, trembling, and I think she'll pull back. But she takes it, her fingers brushing mine, the brief touch like a lifeline.

I sit beside her, close but not too close. The edges of our dresses overlap. The television hums in the background, a half-muted news anchor narrating a world still turning while hers has stopped. The weight of her grief fills the room, heavy and sour, and I don't know what to say. There's nothing to say, not really. He's gone, and words won't bring him back.

Beyond trite platitudes, does anyone ever know what to say in these circumstances?

She sips the tea, her gaze distant. The cup is too big in her hands, her grip too fragile. Unsure if my presence helps or hurts, I wonder if I should leave. But then she glances at me, her lips twitching in something that's not quite a smile but isn't nothing, and I stay.

"Do you remember," I begin, unsure where I'm going but needing to fill the silence, "when we were kids, and he used to play that awful harmonica? How he'd follow us around the house, making up songs about how much he hated broccoli?"

She blinks, her brow furrowing. My throat tightens. I've overstepped. But then she lets out a shaky laugh, the sound catching like a spark. "God, yes. And he was terrible. Like, genuinely terrible."

"The worst." I grin, the memory pulling me back to a time when things were simpler, when our biggest worry was whether Mum would notice we'd eaten all the chocolate biscuits

Her laugh fades, and she stares into the tea, the brief levity slipping away. "I'd give anything to hear him play it again."

I nod, my throat tight. "I know."

We sit there, whatever is between us less like a chasm and more a thread tying us together. She takes another sip of tea, then sets the mug down on the coffee table with deliberate care, as though the act of placing it just so holds some significance.

"I need to get some air." She springs up. "Will you come?"

I follow her out onto the balcony, the cool night air brushing my face. The city stretches below us, a patchwork of light and shadow. She leans on the railing, her arms wrapped around herself, and I step up beside her, leaving a cushion of space between us.

Neither of us speaks. The stars are faint, drowned by the city's glow, but the moon hangs low and full, its light pooling on the rooftops. A breeze stirs her hair, and she doesn't brush it away.

doesn't brush it away.

"It feels...wrong." Her voice is small. "To laugh. To drink tea. To stand here and breathe when he can't."

"It's not wrong." My voice is barely audible over the distant hum of traffic. "It's just living. And he'd want you to. You know he would."

I cringe, even if it is the truth. Probably.

Her shoulders ease, just a little, the lines of her face softening in the moonlight. She reaches into her pocket and pulls out something small, turning it over in her hands.

"I found this in his room." She holds it out to me. It's a harmonica, battered and worn, the paint on its edges chipped. "I don't know why I took it. I just..."

I take it from her, the metal cool against my palm. Strange to hold something that once belonged to him, as though it still carries his laughter, his voice. Without thinking, I lift it to my lips and blow. The note is low and uneven, trembling with inexperience, but it rings out clear in the night.

She stares at me, her mouth opening in surprise, and then she laughs, a real laugh this time, bright and unexpected. I grin and try another note, then another, each one more ridiculous than the last. The sound is awful, just like his had been, and I play until she's doubled over, tears streaming down her face—not grief this time, but something lighter. When I stop, we stand there in the quiet, the harmonica warm in my hand. She wipes

her eyes, her breathing unsteady, and looks at me. "You're terrible at that."

I smile. "I know."

She reaches for the harmonica, her fingers brushing mine, and takes it gently. "Maybe that's the point."

For the first time since it happened, she looks steady, like the weight of her grief has shifted just enough for her to carry it. And I think, I might be flotsam in the ocean of her grief, but for a brief moment, she clung to me, and I kept her afloat.

I Wasn't Always Like This Carly-Rae Oakley-Doran

I'm about to find out if I have cancer. I do this every year. Get my blood taken. I do it because doctors advised it after what happened, and I'm a rule follower. Except. Cancer doesn't follow the rules. It doesn't wait until the stroke of midnight to shatter your innocence. No fairy godmother rules apply.

A nurse wearing jet-black glasses calls my name. I follow her into a tiny, sanitized room and sit in the designated blood drawing chair. I roll up my sleeve as she gathers together the needle and vials. Do you know five thousand five hundred people get diagnosed with cancer in the U.S. every day? That's roughly four people every minute.

After I get three vials drawn, I wonder—is this the minute I become a statistic? I get to my car and call Mom. Tell her my physical went great as I drive to her house. Aunt Ava chimes in, and we ignore the silent alarm of terror that will ring between us until my phone pings with the results. It's the same one you hear when you realize cancer is the villain. I didn't always think this, though. I wasn't always like this.

When I was seventeen, Aunt Ava was diagnosed with cancer. My family had just returned from Disney World, the happiest place on Earth (yeah, right). I knew something was wrong with Aunt Ava when we got to Magic Kingdom. She couldn't make the walk up to Cinderella's rose-colored castle. She sat on a bench and told the rest of us to go ahead. Blamed it on the heat. I believed her—or wanted to. I smiled as my parents took my sisters and me to the Haunted Mansion, It's a Small World, and Mad Tea Party. We met back up with Aunt Ava, and I pretended it was normal she didn't come with us. Pretended not to see the hollowness behind her eyes.

I did that a lot. Pretending.

I glance outside at a shiny black garden bench Mom got at Target. Sometimes, when we go there, I'll scan the store looking for places for Aunt Ava to sit. You'd be surprised how comfortable a mannequin display is or how fast you can gather random dresses to try on, only to use the fitting room as a resting place. I try not to do it anymore. Scan the stores. But it's like reading the Brothers Grimm version of "Cinderella" for the first time. You can never unread that the stepsister cuts off her heel to shove her foot into the slipper. Just like you can't regain the part of your body, cancer decides to sever. I didn't always think this, though. I wasn't always like this.

Seven days before Christmas, Aunt Ava was in the middle of decorating her vintage Barbie tree with glittering magenta garland when she got the call. It wasn't the flu. It was cancer. She didn't cry. She didn't panic. In the same tone she'd announced what was for dinner, she said she was meeting the breast cancer surgeon the next day. It was okay. She was Aunt Ava. Strong. Fierce. Relentless. Cancer wasn't going to beat her. She'd be fine by the time I went to college.

More than fine (yeah, right). I swear cancer heard my thoughts and chuckled, determined to prove me wrong.

The phone ringing echoes through the house. I almost drop my black coffee onto the weathered wooden floorboards. A spinning wheel turns in my head as the spindle flickers over different names of cancer—breast, blood, ovarian. If the doctor is calling already, I have cancer. It's okay. Roughly eighteen million people survive cancer each year. I can be one of them.

It isn't until I hear Aunt Ava's voice telling my grandmother that my physical went well so far that I exhale, and reality comes back into focus. But the words 'so far' bury themselves in my gut because Aunt Ava and I both know (thank you, cancer) it only takes a millisecond for life to change forever. To transform your ballgown into rags. Leave you standing in the guts of a pumpkin carriage. I didn't always think this, though. I wasn't always like this.

Two days after Aunt Ava got a double mastectomy, I sat with her in a hospital room. It looked exactly as I expected. Bouquets of salmon-colored roses and gaudy heart-shaped fuchsia balloons. What I didn't expect was to be met with a silent stranger. Tubes and drains protruded out of her chest and arms, stained with blood. She wasn't the same Aunt Ava I grew up with.

Cancer, with its cold, black heart, greeted me. I stood petrified of it. Of Aunt Ava. Terrified if I stole a breath, I'd do more damage to her. The only thing Aunt Ava mumbled in the twelve hours I was there was, "I'm cancer-free," as if the declaration obliterated cancer's malevolence.

I click my phone for the hundredth time, illuminating my ashen forest background before clicking it off. I trace the spider vein crack over its midnight screen. Do you know one in eight women get diagnosed with breast cancer in the U.S.? Or that breast cancer is the most common cancer? I didn't. I didn't know (a warning no one tells you) that when someone you know has cancer, it spreads to you. Not literally. It's the fear—worry—angst—the sickening can't breathe moments that remind you cancer can steal someone's life overnight. If I check the candle is blown out ten times, will that fear extinguish? Or tug the front door fifty times to make sure it's really locked, will that worry of getting cancer end? It doesn't matter how many deals you negotiate. Cancer tricks you. Forces you to work harder than you ever have just to be rewarded with nothing except a bed of ashes. I didn't always think this, though. I wasn't always like this.

It was a month after Aunt Ava's surgery. I'd just helped Mom put my younger siblings to bed when I found Aunt Ava sitting on the couch. Both arms draped over two hot pink heart-shaped pillows that were supposed to give her arms extra support. Aunt Ava smiled and started to talk about her high school graduation. I didn't tell her mine was yesterday, and I didn't go. I didn't see the point. Not when Aunt Ava needed me. To help her wash her face. To tie her shoes. To make her laugh. She'd tell me she was fine. Recovering faster than normal. I could do what I needed. But she didn't know I saw it.

Her Cinderella disquise.

The magic wore off when she went to pick up my baby brother, but her arms wouldn't let her. Or when she went to make dinner but couldn't hold the pot. I wanted to tell her it was okay to fall apart. Scream. Cry. She didn't need a ballgown or glass slippers in front of me. But the harder I tried to tell her that. The faster she ran. Could she run forever?

I click open my app. No results yet. I glance at Mom and Aunt Ava sitting at the kitchen table. Mom slides my younger sister a peanut butter sandwich with the crusts cut off on her favorite blush divider plate. Aunt Ava points at me and says that I used to be just as picky at that age, reminding me I'd only eat a salad made of croutons and bacon bits. We laugh the same way we used to. Pretend our language isn't different. Changed. Shadowed. But as our eyes meet. I still see it. Her disguise. My younger siblings will never see it because they were too young to remember Aunt Ava before cancer, but I do. Cancer shattered her. Removed her carefreeness. My carefreeness. It's funny how the scalpel never touched me, but it removed part of me, too. Left me dismembered like the cruel stepsister, unable to piece myself back together again. I didn't always think this, though. I wasn't always like this.

It'd be almost a decade until cancer invaded Aunt Ava again. Ovarian this time. "I'm not scared," Aunt Ava said behind her pink-framed reading glasses after scheduling her hysterectomy. "I can do this again." What she didn't know was I couldn't. Aunt Ava got home after her eight-hour surgery wearing the brand-new teal tracksuit I bought her. No one knew I checked on her hourly when she got discharged. Stood there watching the rise and fall of her chest to make sure she was still breathing. Still alive. Aunt Ava looked so pale, so frail. Cancer sucked another life out of her, and I saw for the second time not Aunt Ava's face but cancer. This time, though, I didn't turn away. I stared at it. Faced it. Forgave it

Summer 2025 ALR Page 14

A notification pings on my phone. My bloodwork is back. Holding my breath, I tap open the results. Normal. It's all in the green. Mom kisses my forehead, and Aunt Ava tightly hugs me as the silent alarm fades. Another year cancer-free. But as Aunt Ava pulls back, the smile doesn't reach her eyes, and I know she sees them. The tombstones that cancer's haunting void put in my eyes. No matter how hard I've tried to conceal it from her. Aunt Ava always finds my graveyard and stands there, offering me her silent apology for changing my life. For poisoning it with cancer. But apologies are for when you wrong someone, and she didn't wrong me. Cancer did. For that, I hate cancer. Detest it. But I can't forget the gift it gave me. To laugh louder. Harder. To jump ahead in life with eyes wide open because life is too precious to live with your eyes closed. It introduced me to life's Prince Charming, who you only meet when you see a survivor wearing Cinderella's disguise.

I didn't always think this, though. I wasn't always like this.

Colors Stephanie Teasley

Ruby has an aura. Not a red one, like her name might suggest, but yellow. A bright yellow that pulsates around her body. Except the colors around her stomach and head are blue...cornflower blue. I remember that color name from my Crayola box.

"I feel euphoric." I'm not sure if those words came from me or Ruby. I see the words

still hanging in the air...like purple beads.

"Euphoric?" Ruby's words come out green—green jolly ranchers.
"Uuuuuuforrrricccccc..." Slower this time to watch the words flow out of my mouth. They're purple word butterflies.

"I feel..." Ruby's words crash down like green leaves. How come she has different

colors? "I feel unfinished...like a zombie."

"Unfinished?" The purple butterfly letters flitter away from my mouth. I watch them

fly around Ruby's head.

"I've made a life-changing decision," Ruby says. I see the green "decision" come from her mouth and fly around her stomach. It flies up and twirls around her head.

"Deeeecissssjunhhhhh..." still purple.

"Jesus! These shrooms are no fucking joke!" Ruby says. I realize that she's sitting in the sink on the counter. Turns out we're in a bathroom, and I'm in the tub.

"I want some more."

"Maybe we should wait a few minutes." Decision is twirling faster around Ruby's head. Her stomach is starting to glow a brighter blue. So is her head. Ruby's aura seems angry...or agitated. Am I like that?

'Ruby...What color am I?"

"Black."

"I know that. Am I any other color?" It's annoying me. What is the deal with the colors, her stomach, and her head?

"You're still Black to me...or russet?"

Silence.

"Ruby...are you pregnant?"

"I can't believe that's what it means."

"What?"

"Your colors. You're all vellow except your stomach and head. They're blue, intertwined."

"Maybe blue means it's a boy."

"If that's true, then we got our money's worth of these shrooms."

"I'm gonna have an abortion."

"Why?"

"I'm eighteen."

Ruby changes. A light bluish tint is still around her middle, but the rest of her body is glowing yellow. Not pulsating, not beating, but just shining. I'm enthralled. And happy because I remembered a big word.

"You're staring"

"You're turning colors again to yellow."

"No more blue?"

"Nope."

The door opens. I can hear the sounds of the party as Aaron walks in. He's shining blue.

"We gotta talk." He says to Ruby.

Ruby turns to me. "We really should have left the party when I found out he was here.

"Ruby," Aaron pleads again. "Please."

"No.

"We need to talk."

"I'm messed up, Aaron."

"You can't tell me shit like and disappear."

"I can, and I did. And found some magic on the way."

"Ruby," Aaron's head starts to glow blue. "I gotta do something."

Ruby turns and looks at herself in the mirror. "You've known for a week. I'm not having it."

"Rubes," I say. "Are you sure?"

"Having Aaron's kid scares me." She looks at Aaron. Blue against yellow....like our school's football games. The blue Hornets....fight on.

"Can't we talk?" Aaron again.

"We just did. I'm done with you and with being pregnant."

"So that's it? I don't get a say?"

"We're not together, so no. My life longer accepts you." Now Ruby is completely yellow...golden, shining yellow.

"Ruby," the purple butterflies come out again. "You really mean that."

"I do.

"I know you do. Your color says it."

Aaron looks at me. "What?"

"Ruby was a bluish yellow..." I begin.

"Hey, genius, blue and yellow make green." Ruby's smart-ass jolly ranchers hit me in the face.

"Whatever, she was green, but now she's yellow. The blue was Aaron. That's what color he is."

"Ah," Ruby says. "Aaron is no longer my problem."

Aaron deepens to cobalt. "Ruby. Please." His words are blue rain to the floor.

Ruby says, "I'm completely done with you. My aura even knows it."

Aaron doesn't move. He's just standing there and being blue.

"Go!" she yells. "Leave!"

I don't remember seeing him leave. It's just Ruby and me again.

She slinks down to the floor and lies on top of the faded bathroom rug, staring at the

ceiling. I slump back into the tub.

"I've never stood up to him like that," Ruby says. "That was my best dumping ever." She sighs emerald breezes to the ceiling. "I can't have a kid. I like to do drugs. That's not going to change anytime soon." I hear her voice and see the emerald mist of words circle around the room. I look up, too. There's a rainbow spectrum of colors and auras left by people who came through the bathroom.

"Sometimes, though, not a lot because I haven't known very long, but I wonder what

it would be like. More like Aaron, or more like me? Would it get more of my aura?"

I thought about that. Would it have been a gorgeous malachite forest? Or seafoam? Or would it have been more turquoise?

"A mix," I say.

"That's all we are," Ruby says. "Our parents' colors. They're the base, and we are the mix. And then they sprinkle in some solvents to keep it interesting."

"Not all of us are mixes," I say. "What if both parents are red? Or white? What hap-

pens to us?"

Ruby's laugh comes out in green waves, washing away my purple sand of questions.

"If two people were red, they wouldn't be the same shade. One could be scarlet, and

the other could be rose. They'd make a deeper red. No one is completely pure."

The mushrooms still seduce our perceptions and kidnap our minds. We sit and stare at the ceiling, radiating colors. Maybe we leave a part of ourselves wherever we go. Maybe we pick up someone else's best and worst auras through life

"Rubes...I'll go with you to the clinic."

"I don't want you to.

"I don't care. I'm your friend."

Ruby glows bright, but this time, it's a lavender hue...how sweet.

"Okay," She says. "Let's go see more colors."

Baby Bird Ken Wuetcher

One of my sisters
Found a baby bird
Abandoned in our backyard
She brought it into the house
Made a little cage
For it out of a cardboard box
Put wood chips at the bottom
Made a little swing for it
Attached a small water bottle
To the side with a small
Tube for the bird to drink
It had a cozy feel to it

She and my older brother
Went on some kind of trip
For a week and they asked
Me to take care of this
Young little creature
I was surprised
Actually shocked
They would ask me
Usually they were very mean
To me even cruel and acted like I
Couldn't do anything right
But I guess there was
No one else

It was great for awhile
Just me and the little bird
She was so cute
Tiny and unfledged
With wrinkly skin
Itty-bitty beak
Crystal blue eyes
Small orangey-red talons
But when she was hungry
And started chirping
She was loud

I spent a lot of
Time with her
Mostly just watching
It was fascinating
To see her move
Her head around
As if she was soaking
Up the new world
Around her
Then leaned over and
Drank some water
From the tube

The best part however Was feeding her They told me to Give her raw hamburger Little tiny balls or scraps Three times a day I got pretty good at it She ate more and more Each day Gobbling it up heartily The food did its trick She grew some each day It was so fast that I Almost saw her growing Before me Feathers came too Pure sparkling white Soft and fluffy

This feeding routine Became habitual I didn't even think About it A day before my Siblings were to return I was feeding her As usual when all Of sudden I accidently Nudged her Just a little tap Down she fell Like a rock It was only a few inches She didn't move Her little breast didn't rise Stillness and silence Filled the air My heart caught In my throat I touched her Nothing I just couldn't believe it Just a short drop And it killed her I cried and cried I had become so Attached to my little friend We had bonded I felt really close to her Probably closer than Any of my school or Neighborhood friends

I knew my brother and
Sister would yell and scream
At me like they always did
But I didn't mind
I only cared about
The baby bird
I desperately wanted
To turn the clock back
And be more careful
And gentle with her
But obviously I couldn't

My sister and brother
Returned late
The next night
After I had gone to bed
The next morning the cage
Was gone and there
Was no trace
Of the baby bird
Ever being there
My siblings didn't yell at me
They didn't say anything
Nobody ever said anything

The Cage Jacqueline Marino

On a Friday morning in May, before the screaming started, a family of four sprawled across seven seats at Gate 12 in the B Terminal. The mother sat sideways in the middle seat, a tattoo of something with paws stepping onto her left thigh from underneath the hem of her shorts. Her large sunglasses kept her unruly mane of blond-highlighted curls out of her eyes, revealing brown roots above her ears. Her two children bopped from seat to seat to floor in matching tie-dyed, church camp t-shirts, wearing electronic devices around their waists. Her husband sat in the last seat near the aisle, playing a game on his phone

The mother's eyes were closed. She seemed oblivious to the distinctive terminal din of human movement punctuated by human voices. Roller-bags whooshed by as feet pounded toward gates 15 to 24. Announcements were made overhead, occasionally drowning out the television above her. She rested one hand in her lap while the other formed a kickstand between her temple and the armrest. Her children kept asking her to get candy at the snack kiosk, trying out different approaches every few seconds. They whined. They begged. They pushed themselves against her. She ignored their pleas, hoping her husband would take them.

"OK," she said, finally giving in. "But you'll get what I say you can get."

"Yay!"

Her husband did not look up from his phone as they passed.

An older mother, a pharmacist whose kids were grown enough to not go on vacation with her anymore, sat near a bald man with a large Chick-Fil-A bag, across from the family. She was heading to Boston to meet a friend for the weekend. She and this friend had only seen each other a handful of times over the past twenty years. At the end of a long phone call in March where the Boston friend had asked the pharmacist mother about an elective medical procedure for one of her chronic, but not life-threatening conditions, she asked, "Why don't you come visit me in Boston sometime?"

The pharmacist mother answered yes with a conviction that surprised them both. Now, as she awaited the flight to Boston, her thoughts ping-ponged between regret that she had not canceled and hope this could be a really fun weekend. She worried her family would be just fine without her feeding them and picking up their dirty clothes.

She tried to remember a woman who would be totally excited about this trip, a woman like she used to be.

In college, the friend she was seeing once edited a zine with her. They stayed up all night reading bad poetry submissions and even modeled for said zine on train tracks wearing little besides cookware and live animals. Surely, this weekend would remind them of what free, happy souls they used to, and, she hoped sheepishly, could be again.

The pharmacist mother saw her laptop was at 14% and wondered why she chose a seat without an electrical outlet. She allowed her mind to drift. Why had she changed her major from art history to the sciences? Someone had told her she was good at science, and her parents would not support her beyond four years at the university. She had gotten a job as a pharmacy tech her junior year, and the job didn't seem that bad. She was cute back then, with her always moist-with-lip gloss smile and long, shiny auburn hair that looked good with almost no product or heat styling. People lit up when she smiled at them while handing over their pills. She also got free snacks, which seemed like quite a perk at the time. Her friend stayed in art history, and they drifted into different crowds their senior year.

She knew exactly when they veered onto different social tracks. It was at a party at the end of the spring semester. Both of them had had a few wine coolers. The friend's boyfriend, a shaggy-haired Grunge-Emo hipster asked her where she worked.

"Family Pharmacy on Myrtle," she said. "I'm a tech there."

"What kind of drugs can you get us?" he asked, suddenly slinking toward her.

Everyone laughed, but he kept glancing over at her with his smoky eyes.

As she waited alone in a hallway near the bathroom later that night, he came up behind her so softly she nearly jumped. He was taller than she thought and broader in the chest, like he might actually lift weights, and he smelled lightly of campfire smores. Then he bent down so his mouth was next to her ear.

"Want to have some fun?"

She was shocked, worried, and turned on all at the same time.

She let him kiss her. Her tongue searched frantically for chocolate, graham crackers and marshmallows, but tasted only her own lip gloss. His hands roamed down her back to her butt and up her shirt before the bathroom door opened, ending their little party.

He pecked her on the cheek and then moved down the hallway, not looking back at her then or ever again.

She didn't say anything to her friend about what happened, and she went out of her way to not see that friend for a few weeks. The next time they spoke, the friend had broken up with the boyfriend for not being attentive enough (no way!!). Maybe in Boston she would finally tell the friend what happened at the party with Grunge-Emo Boy. If they had had enough wine. If the moment was right.

The pharmacist mother had always been a little jealous of her Boston friend. She always had a boyfriend and was not under any pressure to change her major. Even though they graduated the same year, their university was so large their colleges held graduation on different days. They didn't see one another again until they went to the same wedding five years after that. The friend now runs an arts nonprofit that somehow doesn't run out of money even though it's in a city full of arts nonprofits. Such luck.

Over the past few years, whenever this friend called, the conversation skewed toward health. What supplements were good for knees? What type of collagen does she recommend? Did she know anything about the new migraine medication insurances don't want to pay for? What is the best thing to do for hot flashes? The pharmacist mother suspected the friend didn't really want to spend a whole weekend with her, but she had probably exhausted the patience of her geographically closer friends and figured extending the invitation was the least she could do after keeping her on the phone for so long and not asking her a single question about the pharmacist mom's own health. Even if the Boston friend didn't really want her to come, she would make it worth her while. She had looked up some research on the elective medical procedure, and she was well prepared to discuss it.

Gate 12 was getting louder. Two other flights nearby were doing final boarding calls. What seemed like an entire girls' soccer team bounded past, their muscled legs rippling under lululemon leggings. The pharmacist mother thought the younger mother looked tired as she dragged herself toward the kiosk, while her daughter zoomed ahead without any regard for the personal space of the people walking in the other direction. Her son held tightly to her hand, not walking quickly enough at all.

The pharmacist mother didn't think she herself was tired, but she wasn't sure anymore. The sheer volume of things weighing on her every day could fool her into thinking she could manage something she should not. She found it easier to just to act like nothing was wrong. Sure, she could make her 16-year-old's favorite chocolate-banana bread when she got home from work when she'd really rather go for a walk and listen to a podcast. "Can you make chocolate banana bread?" had been the one thing her daughter said to her yesterday, and so she listened to the podcast while baking the damn bread.

The podcast was "Rising," by the psychologist Regina Shatterly, who is also a triathlete, menopause-fighting warrior, and pie bake-off winner from Season 10 of "Pie Life." The episode she listened to yesterday compared modern motherhood to the plight of wild animals in zoos. Many animals born into captivity have suppressed natural instincts. What they learn instead is how to depend on humans who pretend the carefully constructed habitats provide a convincing enough like-the-wild vibe to trick the animals into acting

like they would in, say, Zambia. If released into the actual wild, however, they would find they'd lost their ability to survive there. To the casual zoo visitor, the animals' behaviors look natural. But scientists knew when animals in captivity displayed abnormal behaviors, like pacing or licking themselves, they were in psychological distress. The technical term for this state is zoochosis.

Regina Shatterly observed that motherhood can be a chosen captivity, temporary, though it doesn't always feel that way. The whole podcast episode was focused on thoughts and behaviors that could be mom-zoochosis.

"Do you want to lick the frosting off of an entire cake? How about screaming? Tell me you ladies do screaming. I scream. AHHHHHHHH. . . .!"

Chills ran up the pharmacist mother's back and down her arms.

"AHHHHHHHH!!!!! And it feels so good when I'm alone. I just put my headphones and scream and scream until I cry. And it's all right. It's good. I've let the beast out."

The pharmacist mother wanted to clap, even though this was a podcast.

"How do I know when I want to scream till I cry?" Regina Shatterly continued. "Usually there's a trigger. Can't always put my finger on it. But the other day, I wanted to kick over a basket full of folded laundry. If you are having weird urges like that, it's not you. There's nothing wrong with you. You are rebelling against a false and unfair narrative you've been told your whole life. Women are not supposed to be the ones upsetting things. But this is anti-biological, it's unhealthy. I'm not saying be a destroyer, but don't be the one who always has to act how society says the grown-up must act."

Chronic headaches, sudden tics and dizziness. Dry mouth, shaking and sweaty palms. Hiccups, back pain and nausea. Regina Shatterly blames the dominant narrative for them all.

"The state of feeling like you couldn't possibly sit down for even a moment," she said. "It's not your hormones. We all take supplements and hormone replacement therapy now, so it's not menopause. It's how society keeps its beasts."

The pharmacist mother loved Shatterly's fierceness. After every episode, she felt like she might reclaim the abandon she once felt. The rush to accept the invitation to Boston was an example of her success.

But things had been bothering her this week. Her body was betraying her in more ways all the time. Things she used to do effortlessly now required thoughtful consideration. Should she bring a backpack as her carry-on, or should she spring for something with wheels? She needed so many drugs to make it through any excursion: the medications for her head, her nerves, her nerve pain, her hot flashes, her sleeping.

Wait, did she remember her nerve pain medicine?

She was pondering this when her laptop died.

Then she started watching the younger mother and her family again.

"I hate this candy," the little girl said.

"Sour gummy bears," the mother replied. "It's what you said you wanted."

"That's what Devin wanted."

"Well, what did you want?"

"I forget what they have," the little girl replied. "Can we go back?"

The younger mother ripped the bag out of her daughter's hand like it was on fire. The little girl recoiled and threw herself to the ground, sitting crisscross applesauce. She wasn't moving from that spot unless it was to go back to the snack kiosk. That's what she was saying on a loop, in fact, when the younger mother started screaming.

"No! No! No! I SAID NO00000000000!"

She fast-walked over to the overflowing trash bin and pushed the bag as far into the circular hole as she could. A grande Starbucks cup fell to the ground, along with a crumpled, coffee-stained napkin. The younger mother did not pick them up.

The little girl started wailing.

The husband took out his earbuds, walked over to the little girl, and pulled her to her feet without addressing what had just happened or looking at his wife.

"Want to get some more candy, Little Lady?" he asked. "Devin, you come too. Hold my hand."

The kids started walking back to the kiosk with their father, calmly and dutifully, one on each side of him.

Just then, the two mothers looked at each other. The pharmacist mother smiled sympathetically. She felt strangely giddy and wise. How grateful she was to not be in her 30s again, staring down the bottomless pit of her children's neediness and her husband's cluelessness.

The pharmacist mother wondered if she should say something to the younger mother, maybe "It gets better." Or "Being a mom is tough!" At the very least, she could recommend Regina Shatterly's podcast. She could download the zoochosis episode before the flight. That would be just what she needed to help her feel seen and understood. Regina Shatterly would help her feel downright justified about throwing away her daughter's candy.

But the younger mother's face went blank as their eyes locked. The pharmacist mother wondered if the younger mother was having a petite mal seizure. Her muscles tensed, in case she had to spring into action and dial 911.

Then the younger mother readjusted her sunglasses on her head, pushing back some wisps of two-toned hair that had escaped the frames. She rummaged through her bag and pulled out a prescription bottle. She struggled for a moment to remove the childproof cap.

The pharmacist mother exhaled and happily remembered her iPad still had plenty of juice. The podcast-recommending urge had been replaced by one to check her email.

As she waited for her tablet to boot up, the man with the Chick-Fil-A bag noticed her watching him watching the younger mother quickly swallowing her pill and then quietly bracing herself as her kids came bounding back toward her, fresh bags of candy in their hands.

He tipped the bag toward the pharmacist mother, offering her a waffle fry.

The Grass Is So Green Sarah Daly

They were driving down a deserted, dusty highway. Both passengers ignored the brilliant blueness of the sky, the clear, hot sunlight, the sloping hills, and the blinding greenness of the vegetation. Summer did not last long so they saw no point in getting used to it. Bare hills, leafless trees, and mud were their norm. Even the cleanliness of snow didn't last.

A woman with blond, bobbed hair and a shabby dress sat in the passenger's seat. Her feet were propped against the dashboard and her seat was reclined back; she was chewing gum loudly and fiddling with her nails. A man dressed in jeans, a black shirt, and a low-slung cap drove. They were several hours away from their respective homes. On the surface, they appeared to be a man and a woman ready to enjoy a brief vacation in the country. Their duffle bags were piled in the backseat, and a picnic basket rested on the floor.

But the woman was very bored. She had read several magazines and had chatted aimlessly and irrelevantly about their contents for hours. Gradually, the woman's voice was becoming high-pitched and whiny. "Nuthin' but corn and trees! If I see another tree, I'll scream! I don't know what these people do out here. I'd go out of my mind, that's what I'd do if I lived out here." With that statement, she turned and stared stonily out the passenger's window. Rolling waves of green filled her vision for miles and miles. She looked forward, and her eyes spotted an approaching billboard. The billboard's garish letters spelled out an advertisement for "Peter's Petrol & Pastrami".

"Look, a gas station's coming up," she screeched. "I gotta go, pull off." The car slowed at the next exit and turned into the gas station. An attendant in soiled coveralls leaned against the pump, as if waiting for them. The woman ran inside, while the attendant silently filled the tank. The man remained inside the car, hunched over the wheel.

After using the restroom, the woman paid for their gas and then purchased some gum and potato chips. She looked at a map over the counter. They were near Oorandates; they had over two hours to their destination. "Don't you get bored sitting here?" she asked the boy. The boy, who had an acne-scarred face, ignored her as he rang up the purchases. She went back outside. The sunlight glinted off their 1962 station wagon; it had been borrowed from a friend, especially for this journey. The man only owned a motorcycle, and she didn't know how to drive well. "Country hicks," she told the man when they pulled out and drove away.

The woman's restlessness only seemed to increase after the pitstop. "When I get this thing out, we'll have fifty dollars left. We can actually go someplace, like a motel or something. Wouldn't that be romantic, just the two of us? You know, I never told you this before, but I really do like you. Maybe, maybe even love you. I can keep working and maybe we could get a place together. You'd like that, wouldn't you? And I'd hang curtains, and plant begonias, and cook roast beef on Sundays. We'd save up for a television, and you could start that business you always talk about. Hell, maybe we could even own a home someday. A small little place, with a plot of land. A dog, too, yes, a dog. Then we can really have kids, you know, once we settle in. This is just temporary, you know. No one would blame us, right? Well, I'm just being silly. They say it's better not to think about it. It's all in the head, psycho-something. Most medical problems are, my Uncle says. If we just will ourselves to push through it and not think too much, then we could just about cure anything. Right? Just like a sore tooth, but a sore tooth can be really something, can't it? Well, say something," she waited for a response, and when none came, she barked, "fine."

She opened a bag of potato chips and began chewing noisily. She hoped the crumbs would irritate him and continued to talk loudly. "You know, Maybelle, down at the restaurant says there are real prospects for me. I'm quick on my feet, she says. More important, I can handle the men that come in and out. The men find me real-good lookin'. That's real advantageous for a waitress they say. I can put them in their place, sass them a little, and leave them wantin' more. They can be rough for sure, but I'm smart enough not to get mixed up with 'em. I knew, when I first saw you that one day that you were a real gentleman. Of course, I want a man, not someone who'll just spit on you and say 'see ya' when he

leaves. You're different, you always cared about me since I first met you over at Sally's. That's why you're doing this for me. I couldn't ask anyone else to do this. Not even Maybelle, and she's my closest friend."

She tossed the potato chip bag out the window; it whooshed past them, they were moving so quickly. She grabbed a bottle of nail polish from her purse. She knew he hated the smell.

"It's so empty out here. No people. So lonely and sad. I'd hate it. I'd rather be able to go to the dance hall, or the movies, or the soda shop any time I felt like it. You'd never see nobody out here, you'd never have a good time. It would take a lot of thinking for a person to get anywhere out here."

The acetate in the nail polish was pungent, yet it comforted her. She let each vermillion-coated nail dry thoroughly. At least she'd look pretty, stuck in the middle of nowhere. She sighed; she was already losing her looks. She was gaining weight like crazy and her hair was dull and thinning. Every morning her skin was puffed and blemished. Her features were becoming grotesque, distorted, and the man was not at all pleased by this. She had to apply lipstick and blush and concealer and powder to make herself attractive again. Every day she had to do this, and for a longer time each day. How would she manage tomorrow morning? They said that you had to stay there for twenty-four hours. Suddenly, she was worried.

"It'll only be two hundred dollars, right? You know the guy, so it's not like he's going to jack up the price at the last minute. You know, maybe I'd better hold on to the money. I mean, this is a safe thing, no big deal. But I'll have to stay overnight, and what are you going to do in the meantime?"

She fiddled with her nails and rubbed her palms against the vinyl seat. They were driving alongside a grassy field. She looked at the man, who did not seem to have heard her question.

"Jesus, would you just say something? Don't give me that look! I'm starting to worry here. I hope they give me penicillin. You know what, it's nothing. Nancy had one, they say, and she's fine. But can't you just support me? Support us? You've been acting so strange all day, honey, you know I love you just the way you are." She reached over and rubbed his shoulder. "I'm not meaning that we get married tomorrow or anything, I'll wait as long as you want, it's only just, you know, it looks strange to folks. My Uncle won't give me money for much longer, his store's failing so bad. There ain't a god-damn thing in Edensville, no business, no tourists. Even the truck drivers go on the big highway now, so there's less business at the restaurant. Edensville is going nowhere." His shoulders were tense and unyielding, so she pulled her hand back. "You know, I was only trying to make you jealous, mentioning that stuff before. You know I don't look at any of those guys. Hell, they don't even notice me most of the time. It's so slow at the restaurant, really, we barely get any customers." She paused, waiting for a response which never came. "Honey, why are you gripping the wheel so hard? Could you slow down? We're pretty close as it is, and I want to talk some more, maybe there's something else we can do about this situation."

The car only continued to increase in speed. The sides of the car rattled, and the dust had increased significantly. She rolled up her window. The countryside looked like a blur and she couldn't keep track of any of the landmarks. Suddenly, the car crushed a rabbit which had jumped into the road and she screamed. "Hey, I'm getting scared here. You're going way too fast! Just pull off now! You gotta listen to me!" She reached over and began shaking his shoulders, hitting him, clawing at him.

He finally complied, driving down into the field whose grass was rather high. She was still screaming, "That's how you like your women, huh? Easy to have, huh? You're nothin' to me, taking me to some low-down dump, hoping I die on that bed! Hoping I fuckin' bleed to death. That they'll scar my insides; I'll be fixed so I'll never have a baby. I won't go! I won't, you bastard, you marry me, or I'll leave you, you no good, rotten..."

He reached over and slammed her head against the window. Her body was still; blood trickled slowly down her face. It was very quiet. He exited the car and started across the field. By his reckoning, there were railroad tracks nearby. It would be best if no one saw him for a while.

The Blue at the End of the VHS Jenny Severyn

Addalynn doesn't like Gammy's basement anymore. She used to like it, the house's strange, secret, muggy underworld, a heart chamber of indecipherable joists and wires and pipes. But last time she visited, Addy tripped on the loose runner as she hurtled up the stairs and smacked her chin open.

She cried. Gammy checked inside her mouth for damage, then cleaned her cut with alcohol wipes and smoothed on a thick Band-Aid. Gammy told her that Gampy-God-Rest-Him (formerly just Gampy) had intended to re-staple that runner but never got around to it, same as a dozen other household projects he left uncompleted. Gampy-God-Rest-Him frittered his retirement. Gammy fondly lamented.

After the fall, Gammy let Addy curl up on the couch to watch an old home-recorded VHS tape of *Care Bears* littered with fuzzy digital artifacts. Gammy kissed her forehead and said, "You'll be all right." Addy held a frozen bag of mixed veggies to her jaw until the condensation bloomed into a sizeable wet spot on her collar.

The pain didn't last long, but the unexpectedness of the accident rattled her. This visit, Addalynn won't play in the basement.

She doesn't need to, anyway, as there are plenty of other activities to occupy her. Gammy splits a Kool-Aid packet in a flurry of pinkish powder and cherry candy fragrance and pours it into the plastic pitcher on the table. Then she offers Addalynn the wooden spoon: a token of trust. Addy clambers onto a kitchen chair, kneels on the ditsy floral cushion so she can stir. She grips the pitcher's handle.

"I've got a chore to do now," Gammy says. "When you're done mixing, you can go watch TV. Okay?"

On her nightstand, Gammy has a telephone—peach-colored, same as the bedroom's lacy valance—with a coiled cord. Once, Addalynn, with the dull, constant ringtone in her ear, walked down the hall as she held the handset and watched the cord's tight ringlets unwind and stretch and flatten. She made it to the kitchen threshold before she heard the base clatter off the bedside table. Gammy scolded her lightly in her Gammy way, bereft of animosity. Then Gammy stayed in the bedroom to hold the base down while Addy took careful step by careful step with the handset all the way to the kitchen's screen door. The end of the line.

Now Gammy's in her bedroom on the telephone, door shut to muffle the sound, but Addy can still hear her say, "Stef, it's been three days. When are you coming back?"

Addy deposits the wooden spoon in the sink. Gammy doesn't like it when Addy tries to pour drinks herself because she might spill them. So, Addy goes to the den, straight to the white cardboard Office Max box filled with VHS tapes from Gammy's basement: treasure reeled in from the depths. The tapes were Mom's from when Mom was little. Most of them are in paperboard sleeves and labeled with Gammy's unsteady, square penmanship. They hold programs recorded from television: miscellaneous desaturated Rainbow Brite and Pound Puppies reruns sandwiched by kinetic Pizza Hut ads and cozy Teddy Ruxpin promotions. The few store-bought tapes have bulky plastic packaging with decadent illustrations. Addy chooses one of these today, a perennial favorite: Disney's The Little Mermaid.

Gammy's voice seeps indistinct into the den. Addy decides she wants to color while she watches her movie. She puts the tape on the coffee table and creeps down the hall towards her bedroom (her mother's bedroom, once). Lingers by Gammy's closed door.

"You can't keep doing this," Gammy is saying. "Didn't I raise you better than this? To take responsibility?"

Addy pads to her bedroom. At some point this morning, Gammy neatened the twin bed's frilly-skirted, diamond-stitched comforter, and replaced the decorative pillows.

Although she knows the polyester is itchy and coarse to the touch, Addy admires the luxurious look of the bedspread.

She grabs her pencil box and Barbie coloring book, then begins her quiet journey down the hall. Gammy isn't speaking. Across the hall, the basement doorway waits like a poised Venus flytrap.

Addy darts back to the den. The VHS's cover opens with a satisfying crunchy crinkling, and Addy catches a whiff of the chemical plastic. She pops the tape into the clunky TV's built-in VCR. She loves the ritual of it. She loves the technology's heft. The clicks and the whirring spools. Mom and she have technology at home that's gaunt and slick, exciting in its own way, with its own sounds and weight and ritual, but Gammy's home and things and experiences from another era are special.

Gammy looks tired when, some minutes later, she delivers a glass of cherry Kool-Aid and ice. The vessel is an old jelly jar painted with Jerry the cartoon mouse.

"The Little Mermaid again, huh?" Gammy says. "That was your mom's favorite, too."

This statement is part of the ritual. Addy is pleased. She sits cross-legged on the cream rug with her jelly jar. Gammy reclines into the sofa cushions, slowly rolls a throw pillow's tassels in her fingers over and over.

"Is Mom coming soon?" Addy asks.

Gammy watches Ariel the mermaid and Flounder the fish scour a shipwreck for human treasure. "She said she will."

"When?"

"I don't know. I was thinking of making a stir-fry for dinner. Do you want rice or egg noodles?"

"Noodles."

Ariel is still half-ichthyic when Gammy says she should put in some laundry. Gammy totes the plastic laundry basket piled with Addy and Gammy's jeans and blouses down the basement stairs. Addy spreads her Barbie coloring book on the carpet, opens her pencil case to the gratifying woody aroma of colored pencils. She graduated to pencils from crayons just this summer. She still marvels at their straight, sharp beauty.

Barbie would look better with blue hair today. Addy works. Gammy filters into the kitchen and busies herself with dishes. The sea witch locks Ariel's voice in a nautilus necklace.

Gammy resituates herself on the sofa. Toys with her collar. Addy starts to write, careful, careful, atop the page in a rainbow of colors: *To Gammy*.

The washer chimes. Gammy sits a minute, watching the television absently, before she rises. Addy begins to write *From Addalynn* at the page's bottom. It's a painstaking task, but worth it. The longer version of her name holds more love. There's a yelp. A peal of hollow thuds. Addy looks up. Ariel and Prince Eric circulate a lagoon in a rowboat as the crab croons, "Kiss the girl."

Addy listens. A groan. She finishes writing her message. Listens. The dryer doesn't thump on.

"Gammy?" she calls.

Addalynn tears her page from the coloring book and abandons her fanned pencils on the floor. She starts, unthinking, towards the hall, then shudders to a stop. The basement doorway gapes, pumping out brassy light.

"Gammy?"

She waits for an answer that doesn't come. Spring-loaded apprehension whets her to dullness. Her picture is crumpling in her hands, so she drops it to the floor to save it.

Addy dallies. She picks her way back to the den. She gathers her colored pencils, drops them back in their case where they belong. Like Gammy would want. Hopes that the world will follow her lead and correct itself.

It doesn't.

No alternative presents itself. Addy knows what she has to do.

She plumbs her guts for bravery. Thinks of Gammy tucking a throw blanket around her and kissing her cheek. For Gammy, For Gammy, she must go.

Each step feels like each conscientiously scripted letter of her name.

Addy peers into the basement's maw. Gammy's feet are bare; her slippers skew across the concrete.

"Gammy?" she murmurs, weak. "What are you doing? It's not funny."

In the kitchen, the refrigerator's motor kicks up, a grating dread in the vibrations.

Gammy calls her name, once.

Twice.

The third iteration, frothy and irregular, draws Addy down the stairs. She pretends she's Ariel trawling the sunken ship.

Gammy lies motionless, crooked and crescent-shaped.

"Why are you on the floor?" Addy asks, though she isn't sure Gammy can hear her underwater.

"I need you to call an ambulance, honey," Gammy says. "Can you call an ambulance?"

"What's an ambulance?" Addy knows what an ambulance is. They talked about ambulances, firetrucks, and police cars at school. They talked about 9-1-1. Ariel doesn't know these things, though. Ariel, who combs her hair with a fork, doesn't know how to be human.

"Get the phone and dial 9-1-1," Gammy says.

"I can't," Addy says.

"Please, honey," Gammy says.

Addy waits to see if Gammy is playing a game, but Gammy stays where she is. Addy scales the steps on her hands and knees, careful, careful. She punches Mommy's numbers into the peach phone.

"What now, Mom?" Stef grumbles. In the background, people laugh like kookaburras, jarring and mad. "I told you I'd come soon, didn't I?"

"Gammy fell," Addy says.

"What? Is that Addalynn? Did Gammy tell you to call? Tell her I'll be there soon."

"Gammy fell."

"What?"

"I think she bust her chin open, but I—" Addy hesitates. Can't admit her cowardice. Wishes she could give Gammy the frozen veggie mix and a Band-Aid, but she's never had to do that before, doesn't know how. Her feelings burn like the coils on the stove.

Shuffling on the other end of the line, and Mommy says, "Gammy fell?"

"Can you come now?"

"What do you mean, she fell? Is she hurt? Is this a joke, Addalynn?"

"Can you come now, please?"

Mom doesn't come until the third playthrough of *The Little Mermaid*. She blows through the front door while the crazed French chef, wielding a cleaver, chases Sebastian the crab. A scary part. Addy doesn't like that part. Vibrant eyes and fish heads. But she watches.

Mom screams, and Mom charges, and Mom yells, "What did you do?" What did you do?" Mom wails into her cell phone until an ambulance arrives, splashing red across the den, a jagged, cleaving shade.

At the end of all of Mom's VHS tapes, a blue screen appears. Addy doesn't know how long the blue lasts because usually when it flickers on, she presses "stop" and rewinds the tape. This time, as they reel Gammy from the basement depths, Addy watches the blue. Mom cries. Her nose drips on the floor.

Later, Addy will sit by Gammy in the hospital. The old woman, gauzed and patched, mottled by violet swatches, will pat Addy's hand and tell her she did good to call Mommy.

Gammy's voice will tremble. Mom will exhale, then stroke Addy's hair. On Mom's orders, Addy will resist hugging Gammy, who looks crumpled, like a hatchling fallen from its nest. Addy will color a new version of Barbie, and the nurse will pin it to the whiteboard with a magnet so Gammy can see it all the time. Can see Addy's prismatic love fireworking outside the lines. A dazzling mess of color that avows, "I love you, I love you, I love you."

Now, a paramedic steps onto Addy's dropped coloring page, superimposing a boot print on her meticulous rainbow letters, and Addalynn anchors into blue; she sinks into blue; she sinks.

Wretch Gabriella M. Belfiglio

I find Jesus on the corner of 5th and 9th, across from the 24hr check-cashing window, nestled like an orphan

left near the curb, ready for pick up. Arms, eager or reluctant. Jesus—wrapped in newspaper—

hiding in a bright yellow plastic vending box, Spanish circulars spilling out.

I can't leave him. So, I carry Jesus, first to my friend's house.

I am helping her move. Packing boxes: salad tongs, soup bowls, and chili powder

shaped together like a tetris puzzle. I leave Jesus in the hallway so he won't get in the way.

Next, Jesus tucked under my armpit, I pick up my son from summer camp. The three of us

ride the B63 home. The last thing we need in our crowded house is Jesus. He's resting on a rising pile

of books to read, which I also found on Brooklyn streets. Flashing his flaming heart

with a full beard that would make hipsters jealous. And those eyes. Stoic brown eyes, beseeching me.

I can't resist him.

The Sick Room C.W. Bigelow

My mother called it the sick room and it was equipped with two twin beds, three full walls of windows. The only full wall was against the house and was painted white. It had one lounge chair that sat at the end of the far bed. Through the windows the view was of the front yard and Scarborough Street and the rest of our neighbors' houses. This room was off my parent's bedroom.

"Your fever is 102." Mother shook the thermometer to return it to its normal reading.

I'd come home flushed and dizzy from school. Runny nose and coughing I came inside immediately, which was a symptom. I never went inside after school until I was called for dinner.

"Mrs. Holland told me Priscilla has measles, and I suspect you do too."

Not really knowing what this disease was all about, though I had heard about Priscilla, but because she was what I considered a girly-girl I hadn't taken it too seriously, because I couldn't get the same sickness that she had. Mother's reaction worried me a bit more and I was suddenly overtaken with a combination of fear and sadness.

"It's to the sick room for you. We don't want to get anyone else sick."

I climbed the front stairs sullenly, fighting an overwhelming attack of fatigue. By the time I reached the second floor, I was out of breath. Grasping the banister, I gazed down the hall into my room where I had recently struggled with a nightmare in which a hulking, furry monster stood in the exact location I was, staring down the hall at me in my bed. It was almost enough to make me close my door, but I hadn't yet. Closing the door might keep monsters inside the room.

I continued into their bedroom, past the rose-colored silk comforter that we often slid off when my brother and I attacked them on Sunday mornings. Recalling the icy slick surface made by their nighttime open windows gave me a chill.

Entering the sick room, which shined in a bright halo of sun, the total opposite of my general feeling, my heart began racing as I recalled my first visit to the room.

"We may have to operate." It was Dr. Phillips, who was tugging on my swollen big right toe.

My teeth clenched tightly to fight the extra pain he caused. I shamefully swiped an unwanted tear from my cheek.

"It's definitely ingrown."

"Any other options?" my mother asked.

He continued curiously tugging which caused me to throw my head back in agony.

"Epsom Salts. Soak it for two days and I'll come back to see how it is. If it hasn't improved, we will have to cut." He smirked.

Cut was so much more severe than operate and I began shaking my head profusely.

The next two days were spent soaking my inflamed toe, which had become that way because I had ripped the toenail too close to the quick, daring to remove it from the water only when we switched to warmer water and a new dose of Epsom Salts.

My fever had inched higher, and I quickly stumbled to the far bed, the one I hadn't laid in for two days of soaking. Mother had directed me to the far bed because she told me she was going to read to me from a book she was currently enjoying.

She quickly followed me with a pair of pajamas and a thermometer.

"Put these on and I'll take your temperature again."

Embarrassed, I didn't want to undress in front of her, I countered with, "How about taking the temperature first. Then you will leave so I can change."

She nodded with an understanding snicker and stuck the white thermometer in my mouth. "Under your tongue." She held her arm cocked and watched the second hand of her wristwatch tick away for the needed three minutes. This was before the automatic

devices that beep upon reaching the time limit. It was also obviously before the measles vaccine was available.

"103," she sighed.

Our understanding was that a temperature of 105 landed you in the hospital and higher than that would likely kill you if it lasted too long.

"Starve a fever," she muttered under her breath as she stuck the thermometer back into its case, as though she was reminding herself of the wives' tales' book of medicine. "Get under the covers. I'll be back after I feed the family."

She was the toughest woman I knew. As far back as I recalled, I had always been proud to have her as a mother. A proficient athlete, she oozed confidence, and as I slipped under the covers, I felt safe in her care.

Shivering under the blanket, my fever-induced dreams flashed in a wide spectrum of colors as though the color wheel had exploded the primary colors into psychedelic montages, until it all turned to a smothering black.

I was awakened by my own thrashing and sat straight up in the dark sick room before I spotted the streetlight across the street which shot yellow waves at me like lasers, and suddenly Ronnie Redhead was gently piercing a long needle into the thorax of a grasshopper, then sticking it into the properly tagged location of the cigar box, just as he had showed my brother and me how to do it after hunting for insects at the vacant lot on the corner while sitting for us. We'd collected a plethora, and he seemed to know the names of each one. We sat back and watched as the grasshopper squirmed and instead of dying began buzzing his wings and took off like a rocket into the laser beam of yellow emanating from the streetlamp.

"I thought I'd let you sleep to see if your fever is down." Mother was waving the thermometer in front of me as I opened my eyes. I'd fallen back into a dreamless, fever induced sleep and it was now morning.

As I opened my mouth and lifted my tongue, she stuck it in and asked, "Lift your shirt."

Unable to respond verbally I frowned.

"We have to see if you have a rash."

I grunted as I lifted it while she focused in on my chest. "Not yet."

I frowned again and cocked my head in question.

"They say the rash appears 3 to 5 days after you get it."

She checked her watch and pulled the thermometer out. "103. How are you feeling. Did you sleep okay?"

"Weird dreams. Not too great."

"I'll get you some ginger ale."

"Tommy go to school?"

"An hour ago. You must drink a lot of liquids, okay?"

I shrugged. I was a little thirsty. "But no food?"

"Nope. Starve the fever."

"And drown it..."

"Correct. I'll be back up and I'll read you the book I'm reading. I think you'll like it."

Wrapped tightly in my blanket, I waited for her to return. The morning sun flooded the room so intensely it made me wince. Her footsteps climbed the stairs, her flats slapping the wood.

"Where's dad?" I asked as she stepped into the room.

"Work." She headed to the chair at the end of my bed, paperback in hand.

"How come he hasn't come to see me?"

"Doesn't want to get sick."

"But you come in here."

She nodded as she gave me a blank look. Finally, she shrugged, "He can't get sick and stay home from work."

My fogged brain struggled with the awareness that Mother was around both my father and brother. They could catch my germs from her, so her argument didn't hold water.

I said nothing more because my head hurt and remaining quiet was easier, as she settled into the chair and opened the book to the middle. "Four were left in the boat, huddled to the sides to avoid the glaring sun, and trying to keep from stepping on the dried pork covering the bottom of the deck. Salty and stepped on, even slept on as the boat floated aimlessly on the endless, open sea. Hunger pangs ravished their stomachs as they struggled to ration the pork."

"It had been twenty-seven days since the mast had broken off in a torrential storm that had swiped four crew members overboard, leaving the survivors listless with no way to guide the vessel. Bony and starving, they stared hopefully at the horizon, dreaming of the sight of land or another ship to rescue them. Captain Sears spent his days tending to the remaining crew, making sure he fed them because they were too weak to feed themselves."

I drifted off to the lulling cadence of her words, the melody of her gravelly voice. In my sleep I screamed at my father for having sailed me into a storm, leaving us rudderless, awash in the swell of the waves. I blamed him for the salty pork, now flattened on the wooden deck, hard to chew past the splinters in it. And my thirst was overwhelming, making my tongue so thick it was difficult to swallow.

When I woke, it was dusk, and the sick room was shrouded with mysterious gray shadows. I slid back under my covers to hide. My dizziness forced me to emerge from the safety and darkness of the covering and I struggled to sit upright, which alerted me that I had to pee. In fact, I had to pee so badly, it took all my fever drained strength to hold it in as I wrestled out of the blankets and wandered dizzily past the first bed, bouncing off the far windows before slipping through the door, past their bed and into their bathroom where I barely lifted the toilet seat before releasing a gushing stream that seemed to last for minutes. As it finally stopped, I fell weakly against the wall and slumped to the floor.

"Are you okay?" she called from the bedroom. "You fell!" she cried guiltily as she burst in.

"No. Just kinda passed out and slipped to the floor."

"Do you need help up?"

I shook my head as I shakily climbed back to my feet, using the wall as support on the way.

"I'll get you some soup."

I staggered through their bedroom, past their bed, which was obviously unmade, with her side the only one turned down. It seemed forever until I made it to the sick room bed and flopped down, totally drained of strength, and amazed at my weakness. Thoughts of Priscilla across the street struggling with this ailment gave me new respect for her.

I opened my eyes to darkness again. My stomach growled and I couldn't recall her bringing me soup.

"I'm not going to be back for a couple of days, at least." It was my father's voice.

I wondered if it was dark, before dawn, or dark in the evening. Why would he be saying he was leaving in the evening?

"Think about it. It will be a good break." I waited for her to respond.

"What's a couple of days going to do for me?" There was no emotion in her voice. Just stating a fact.

"I think you'll see you like it." The back door shut. It wasn't a slam, but it was loud enough for me to hear it up in the sick room. In just a few moments, I heard his car starting. I lifted off my pillow, fighting dizziness, and watched the car back into the street, and followed its red rear lights as they disappeared into the night.

I collapsed back into my pillow and fell back into a deep sleep where I dreamed about the boat in Mother's book. I kneeled on the bottom, gnawing on a piece of pork,

when suddenly I was grabbed by the collar, elevated, and flung against the side. "What the heck..." I yelled, dropping the piece of pork during the flight.

My father hovered over me; teeth gritted. "That pork is mine! I need my strength," he

growled. "I'm going on a long journey."

Muffled sobs woke me from the dream. As much as I wanted to call out for her, I didn't think it was any of my business. Feverish and swirling, I closed my eyes amidst the sobs and didn't wake till dawn when I heard her getting dressed.

After my brother slammed the door to go to school she appeared in the sick room with a bowl of soup. As I sat up and propped the pillow so I could lean against it, I asked,

"Did you bring me soup yesterday?"

Her eyes were puffed and red and she didn't look directly at me. "I got caught up in some other issues. When I brought it up, you were sound asleep, and I thought you'd be better off asleep than being fed. Sleep is the most important healer."

She sat in the chair and opened the book. As I sipped the chicken noodle soup, she

opened the book. "We have the last page. I saved it 'til you could stay awake."

"Thanks."

"After moving the crew to the shady side of the vessel to shelter them out from the blistering sun, Captain Sears sunk to the sole, panting loudly, wondering how he was going to gather his strength, when a ship's horn blast broke the silence. Invigorated by the sound he pulled himself to his feet and began waving to the gargantuan vessel. He waved until the vessel responded with three echoing blasts, and he stopped his waving, arms aching and slunk back to the sole, where he laid out on the pork, smiling to himself because he knew he wouldn't have to taste it again."

"The end," she sighed and closed the book slowly and gazed out the window. Her

eyes and face were still red and puffed up.

"Who was your favorite character in the book?" I asked as I reached over and placed the empty bowl on the table next to me. The soup had given me strength.

"Captain Sears," she responded quickly.

"Why?'

Still staring vacantly out the window, she said, "He never gave up on his crew. That's what a captain is supposed to do...take care of his crew until the bitter end."

She stood and grabbed the bowl. Just before she exited, I said, "Fathers and captains."

She turned and looked directly at me. Her expression was one of sadness mixed with anger and it told me she knew I'd heard their conversation. Nodding slowly, she sighed, "And husbands..."

Dinner's Ready John Grey

She calls, loud, strident. Her voice reaches out to the pond like a strong but wrinkled hand, drags both boy and pole from that deep trance of fishing. The others are already there. Sarah, Molly, Jane, Timmy. Each has the child rubbed off their faces, sits politely at the dinner table. I stand at the door. fishing rod hanging, waiting to be cleaned, to be neutered.

Not Mad Elizabeth Collis

The psychiatrist who comes to do my father's Alzheimer's assessment, an expensively dressed man in his forties, is late and in a hurry. Still, he takes time to settle himself facing me and my father in the living room, crossing his legs and tenting his hands before beginning his checklist.

First, we go through the charade of getting my father's permission for me to be present at an interview which is going to confirm his mental incapacity, and therefore his inability to give or withhold said permission. It's a Kafkaesque scenario which would amuse my father if he could appreciate it.

On top of that, the doctor's heavy accent defeats my father's hearing aids, and I have to repeat all the questions for him. It sounds as though I am asking, not the physician. Squirming as I speak; I hope my father doesn't think I am aligned with the psychiatrist against him. My father says to the doctor, "Yes, I want her here," and leans forward in his chair, gripping the arm rests so that his knuckles turn white.

Next, the doctor states his credentials, which are impressive. While I am thinking this is excessive, but no doubt the normal process in these meetings, my father tenses. Hope seems to gather in his clear eyes as thoughts—long dammed up—flow like tributaries into a single river. First at a trickle, then in stronger streams. I imagine him thinking,

This expert can rescue me from the prison of my dotage. Here is someone who will understand that I am being held against my will, condemned without cause to the dungeon of mental infirmity.

The psychiatrist moves on to the reasons for the assessment. Although my parents have done well, living in their own home and semi-independently into their nineties, my father's cognitive health has crumbled in the last few years. A major fall, uncontrolled diabetes, dehydration, wandering, a refusal to take his medication, paranoia where he insisted police officers had been stationed in the house to spy on him, incontinence, leaving the stove burner on, waking up the caregiver by banging saucepans around at 3am. I shift in my chair. Why does the doctor have to list all this? It's cruel. I look at my father to see if he has grasped the clear evidence of disease.

A couple of feet away from me, my father's tight jaw and pursed lips display his disease. He frowns, as if from the effort of furrowing thoughts into sentences with a rusty plow. The phrase 'muscle memory' pops into my head. I imagine his brain juddering into action in bright fire-red sparks, bridging the blackened dead areas. His mouth works, the blink of a green modem light rebooting but not yet reconnected to the Wi-Fi. I expect him to stutter when he speaks.

But when the psychiatrist asks (I assume out of protocol only) if he has any concerns, my father replies with a firm "Yes," and is ready with two very concrete things which he considers impingements on his autonomy. He wants to enjoy a drink of wine, and he doesn't want the kitchen locked at night so he can't access it. Astonishingly, he delivers these complaints as he always used to when making a point; prefaced by a commanding "Now," and underlined with his right forefinger slapped in the centre of his left palm.

Now I am caught in the middle, snapped between joy at witnessing a snippet of my father's former sharp intellect, and regret for engineering the circumstances which produced this cognitive revival. This is going to cause him anguish. Both requests have to be turned down. The caregivers will refuse to look after my parents if he's allowed to drink or access the kitchen at night because it's dangerous.

So I testify against my father. I explain the background to the alcohol and kitchen restrictions. The psychiatrist takes notes, emits "I see, yes, quite, uh huh," and then tents his hands again to uphold the prohibitions, like a judge pronouncing sentence. My father slumps in his chair. A croak of protest leaks from the back of his throat.

A snag in my gut tells me I am a betrayer, a trickster, an inadequate daughter. Why did my sisters and I get his medication under control, restore his sight and hearing, badger medical staff for follow-ups, cajole caregivers, on and on, re-linking the synapses in his brain? So he could make us happy by regaining some speech and mobility and then understand—when informed today by the highly qualified head of the Community Mental Health Team—that his mind was failing?

My father used to be so clear-headed. He never obfuscated or manipulated, always beat a logical path to what he knew was right. That he should be condemned to helpless-

ness, without even these slight comforts and reprieves.

"It's not fair!" I used to say as a child.
"Life's not fair." My father would reply.

Having dismissed my father's requests, the psychiatrist moves on to the real purpose of the visit, the cognitive test. He asks questions; what day of the week is it, month, season? Who is the Prime Minister? What county are we in? On and on the questions come, maybe fifteen, twenty of them, though by question one it's obvious there will be zero responses.

My father always had the answers. A prodigious memory, deep curiosity, encyclopedic interests—all these combined into someone you'd want on your Quiz Night team. Now he's given up saying even "I don't know". He opens and closes his mouth, a pleading light pooling in his eyes. I shift in my chair. The doctor holds up a hand to me—he thinks I'm going to answer for my father. If only I could. Dense clay clogs my voice box.

While the specialist writes notes after the last question, everyday sounds seep into the room. The caregiver bustles, the TV commentator exclaims, and in the garden, a robin

calls. I think like me, it wants this to be over. I imagine the bird is chiding,

That's it that's it that's it, hurry along. Wha' yer staring at then? Hup, hup, hup, hurry along, nothin' to see here and yer getting on my nerves. Hurry along, hurry along.

The psychiatrist replaces the top on his pen and squares his papers before once more tenting his fingers and looking up. He stills, as if preparing his tongue for launch,

"Michael, Mr. Collis. I believe you have mild Alzheimer's disease." He pauses, remembers the next line in the script. "This can be a difficult diagnosis for you and your family to hear."

I think, mild? To look at my father is unbearable, so I continue observing this professional's church-like hands, raised in front of him to offer comfort, or sanctuary, or to form a barrier.

My father has levered himself upright and his jaw juts out. A forefinger wags toward the psychiatrist, "No."

"I don't have—that—" he struggles for the right phrase. A sharp burr twists up his throat, "thing." The last word is spat.

The tented hands open in surprise.

"Mr. Collis, I assure you we make these diagnoses very carefully." The psychiatrist describes the procedure, his certainty.

"No." My father interrupts him, slapping both hands down on his knees. "I am not—" He searches the room for the term he wants but finds only his three daughters smiling at him from our wedding photos. "Mad. I am not mad."

In the silence which follows this pronouncement, a dreadful and dreaded heaviness settles on my shoulders. I have snatched my father's last hope from him, and I cannot lift my traitorous head.

In their senior years, my parents were dementia deniers. My father hoped to follow his father, who died without pain or fuss of simple old age at ninety-five, his brain still healthy. My sisters and I went along with pretending there was nothing wrong with our father's mind as much as we could. This diagnosis comes so late it's useless. Still, I insisted on the assessment, and regret, as powerful as quicksand, engulfs me.

I must have emitted a croak of my own, because the psychiatrist looks at me, startled, then gathers his papers and stuffs them in his briefcase. He's getting the hell out of here

"Yes, well, nevertheless, that is my diagnosis." He says. "Look, you need time to process this." He levers himself out of the chair. "I'll leave you with your family to absorb the news. If you have questions or concerns," he glances at me and then his watch, "please do get in touch."

The psychiatrist must pass his patient to reach the front door. My father gathers the words in his mouth as if he's about to hawk. "I AM NOT MAD." He hurls at the fleeing doctor's back.

A tart apple bittersweetness collects under my tongue. It's over. My father's last stand; done. He pushes himself back in his chair with stiff, brittle arms and sits there, staring straight ahead. His heaving chest releases adrenalin in sour breaths, while the chivying call of the robin chases the psychiatrist down the garden path to his car. I never witness my father emerge from dementia again.

Taps on the Ceiling James Nelli

Tap, tap-tap.

The tapping was gentle but persistent, a soft rhythm that drifted from the upstairs corner bedroom down the second-floor hallway and invaded Robert Volpe's overworked senses. He recognized the sound immediately. It was a simple familiar code. His father's brass tipped wooden cane tapped against the hardwood floor in his bedroom. Each tap a quiet insistence, a reminder that he was still there, even if his mind often wasn't, waiting for attention. Robert sighed, set aside the half-read newspaper that he hadn't really been reading, and braced himself before heading to his father's room.

His father's house, a two-story red brick building in a rural area outside of Omaha was once filled with voices and laughter, but now it seemed to hold its breath. The house served as a silent witness to the loving but strained connection that remained between Robert and his father. The relationship between a 67-year-old son and his 92-year-old father who drifted in and out of reality without warning almost every day was wearing thin. The father's dementia had been evident for years, but over the last four months it had become increasingly more frequent, pronounced, and difficult to deal with.

Robert climbed the stairs to the second floor and walked slowly down the narrow hallway, its floors creaked underfoot, worn thin by years of footsteps. At the bedroom doorway, he paused and watched his father carefully. His father was propped up in bed clutching the cane that rested beside him. His father's knuckles were knobby and thin, trembling slightly as he held onto the cane. His cloudy eyes searched the room and looked lost until they landed on Robert.

"Bobby," the old man murmured, his voice labored and fragile. "You...you heard me?"

"I heard you, Dad," Robert replied, his voice was gentle and reassuring. He took a few steps into the room and sat beside his father on the bed. "What do you need, Dad?"

The old man's gaze drifted for a moment, flickering somewhere between memory and confusion, and his brow furrowed as he struggled to remember why he'd called. "Are we...?" His voice wavered. "We're in the Omaha house, aren't we?

Robert nodded. "Yes. Dad. We're home."

A small smile spread across his father's mouth, and he nodded slowly, as if settling into the comfort of what he found familiar. "Good. That's good."

They sat in silence for a few moments. Robert felt the familiar ache in his chest that came each time he realized his father had drifted further into himself. He remembered the man his father used to be—sharp, self-assured, and always moving with purpose. Now, his father looked like a small, fragile figure, barely there.

"Did you need something?" Robert asked again, as he placed a hand on his father's shoulder.

The old man's eyes brightened, just for a moment. "I...there was something I wanted to say." His gaze drifted to the window, as if he were looking out at something far away, something only he could see. "But it's gone now."

"That's okay," Robert whispered, as he gave his father's hand a reassuring squeeze. "I'm here."

His father nodded, and his grip on the cane relaxed. Robert watched him, wondering if he would ever truly get used to watching his father leave reality and disappear into distant, unknown places. Every time Robert heard the tapping, it was like a tether, tying him to the man who was fading away before his eyes. And every time he answered, he found himself grieving the father he had known, even though his father was sitting right there in front of him.

"Bobby!" his father said with an unusual sudden sharpness in his voice. "Did you finish repairing the lock on the front door? Your mother is going to complain if it's still broken."

The familiar pang of sorrow hit Robert, and he forced a smile. "The front door is fine, Dad. I took care of it months ago."

His father's face softened. "Good. She always liked that lock to work well."

There was a heavy silence. Robert knew better than to remind him that his mother had been gone for nearly eight years. It was a kindness to let him believe, if only for a few moments, that she was just in another room or out tending the garden.

The old man's eyes turned cloudy again, his forehead wrinkled in confusion as he looked at Robert. "You've grown up a lot. But I still remember you, you know, as a little boy. Always running around playing baseball." He chuckled, but the sound was thin and brittle

Robert nodded, smiling at the memory. "You taught me how to play. I remember that.

You spent hours playing catch and throwing me batting practice."

À faint smile washed over his father's weathered face, and his gaze grew distant as he drifted into some memory from a time long past. Then, with a sudden shake, he looked back at Robert. "But where's your mother? Is she coming soon?"

The question tightened the muscles in Robert's chest, but he forced himself to stay

calm. "Maybe, Dad. You know she's always here, in a way."

The old man nodded, seemingly content, and turned to look at the wall across from his bed, his hand still holding onto his cane. The uncomfortable silence between them lingered, thick and full of unspoken words.

Robert felt his throat tighten, an ache that he had grown so accustomed to, it felt like part of him. "I wish..." Robert started, then stopped, unsure if his father would understand.

But his father's gaze softened, and he murmured, "What is it, Bobby?"

Robert searched for words. "I just wish...I wish you could remember things more often. I wish you didn't have to struggle to find yourself like this."

The old man's face tightened slightly, and for a brief moment, his eyes were clear, filled with a sorrow that mirrored Robert's own concerns. "I wish I could remember, too. I don't mean to...to forget".

Robert nodded, turning away slightly and fighting back the tears that had welled up in

his eyes. "I know, Dad, It's okay,"

They sat in silence, and Robert thought back to when their roles were reversed, when his father had been the one taking care of him, guiding him, making him feel safe. Now, he was the one trying to offer that same security, that same reassurance, even though it felt painfully inadequate. His father's grip on the cane tightened again, and Robert could feel the tension in the old man's knuckles.

"Bobby," his father said quietly. "You'll stay, won't you?"

Robert's hand tightened around his father's hand. "Of course, Dad. I'm right here. I'm

not going anywhere."

The old man's shoulders relaxed, and he leaned back against the pillow, his breathing growing soft and steady. Robert stayed beside him and watched the gentle rise and fall of his father's chest, feeling a mix of love, sorrow, and helplessness. After a while, Robert left the room, his footsteps echoing softly down the hall. But just as he reached the kitchen, he heard it again—a single, hollow *tap* on the floor. He paused, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. It was as if each tap had become more than just a sound. It was a message, a lifeline, a way for his father to say, *I'm still here. I still need you.* And each time Robert answered, he gave a little more of himself with every return trip down the hallway.

For days, the taps continued, each one a quiet summons, calling Robert back to his father's side. He knew, somehow, that it wouldn't last much longer. These sounds were the final echoes of his father's presence. And then, one night, the tapping changed. Instead of the usual rhythm, there was a single, gentle tap, then silence. Robert's heart was pounding, and he hurried down the hall to his father's room, his mind racing with a mix of hope and dread.

He found his father lying still, his eyes closed, his face serene. The ever-present cane lay at his side, its handle resting gently against his thigh. Robert knelt beside him, reach-

ing out to take his father's hand. It was warm but motionless, his breathing soft and shallow.

"Dad?" Robert whispered.

The old man's eyes fluttered open, and he looked at Robert with a clarity that took Robert by surprise. For a moment, he was his father again, the man Robert had known all his life, strong and steady. "Bobby," he murmured, his voice barely a breath. "You've been... good to me. So patient. Thank you."

Robert's throat tightened, and he fought to keep his voice steady. "You don't have to thank me, Dad. I'm just...doing what you always did for me."

The old man's gaze softened, and a faint smile crossed his lips. "I always knew you'd be...the one I could depend on."

A tear slipped down Robert's cheek, and he squeezed his father's hand. "I learned from the best."

The old man's eyes closed again, and his breathing grew slower, each breath shallower than the last. Robert sat there, his hand still wrapped around his father's hand, letting the silence settle over them. He didn't know how long he sat there, waiting, but he knew when the end had come. There was a stillness in the room, a silence so deep it felt like the house and his father had drawn their final breath together. Robert looked down at the cane resting on the bed and realized it signified every tap that had led him here. It was over now. The tapping had stopped and so had his father's struggle. He leaned down, pressed a gentle kiss to his father's forehead, and whispered, "Rest now, Dad. You're home"

The house was silent now. Robert sat alone in his father's room after the funeral, the cane lying on the bed where his father had left it. He could still hear the faint rhythm of the taps echoing in his mind, as if the sound had seeped into the walls, lingering like the ghost of a memory. For months, each knock had tethered his father to him, a steady pulse of need and life. Now, only silence filled the air. Robert reached down and lovingly rubbed his fingers across the cool, worn wood of the cane. He instantly felt an unexpected calm settle over him. As he rose to leave the room, he imagined his father at ease, no longer lost or restless. The tapping, once a haunting reminder of his father's fading presence, had become something else entirely. It had become a memory, a legacy, a way to carry his father with him long after the last echoes of taps had faded into silence. For the first time in a long time, Robert felt a quiet peace envelop him, and in that moment, he knew he was finally ready to let qo.

Grandma Matt Snyderman

I'm no doctor. Medicine is a mystery to me, but one look at those nails and even I could have told you Grandma was going to die. This grand dame, who swept rather than walked into rooms, commanding glances of admiration from people half her age, who only a select few ever saw with a hair out of place, would never allow the world to see her hands in that state unless something were terribly wrong. She noticed me glance at them as I entered her hospital room and slipped them under the covers, a touch of color showing through her pallor.

Gathered there, amid a tangle of tubes and leads, was Grandma's inner circle: her sister Helen, my aunt Stella and her husband Sy (who always knew best, especially when he didn't), and their daughter, Cousin Shawna. Grandma's trusted secretary of 20 years was there too, from the A-list charity they had run so ably since the early 70s. And, of course, at the foot of the bed was Mom, whose strained relationship with her mother had not kept her away.

Knowing I was Grandma's favorite and had just flown into New York from across the country, Great Aunt Helen invited me to take the bedside seat to comfort her stricken sister. Surprisingly, it wasn't Grandma who needed the comforting.

"Oh, Mikey," said Shawna, "it's breast cancer..."

"They don't know how bad it is " interrupted Uncle Sy, his may-it-please-the-court voice filling the room. "We're waiting for the tests to come back. It's taking long enough."

I leaned down and gave Grandma a kiss. "Thank you for coming, love. You must be exhausted," she said, rubbing her index finger over my two-day's growth of beard, clucking with indulgent disapproval.

In the middle of the group account of how Grandma had landed in Mount Sinai, the door opened and in strode a doctor. All conversation stopped while he scrutinized an iPad that might as well have been the Ten Commandments.

"Good morning, Mrs. Myer. I hope you had a restful night."

"Yes, thank you, Dr. Bhugatto."

"Most of your test results are in. We can discuss them privately, if you prefer."

Grandma drew herself up and took a deep breath, clutching at the pearls that weren't there. "That's very considerate, darling, but go ahead."

He nodded. "We're looking at stage four breast cancer. Tumors like these can often be treated successfully if caught early. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case here..."

Helen and Mom started to cry. So did Grandma's secretary, whose name eluded me. Sy loosened his bowtie and stared out the window. I squeezed Grandma's hand so hard it must have hurt. She listened as if she were at a dentist appointment, not receiving a likely death sentence.

"There is still one test outstanding. It could tell us how your condition might respond to a new kind of chemo. I won't lie to you," he said, "it's a longshot and the protocol can be difficult. Let's talk again when we know more. I wish the news were better." Then he nodded again and took his leave. Uncle Sy followed him outside, perhaps to negotiate a more favorable diagnosis.

Our little group met in the cafeteria while Grandma dozed. I had lasagna with the Italian steamed out of it.

"Stage four. Jesus," said Mom.

"You'd think she'd get mammograms like clockwork," huffed Uncle Sy, shaking his head. "She's practically the face of women's health, for Christ's sake."

"Practically? There's legislation named after her! And you should talk, Sy. When did you last give yourself a testicular exam? Or do you have a paralegal do it for you?" Great Aunt Helen had never much liked her niece's husband.

Even cups of tapioca, a family favorite, couldn't stem the exchange of recriminations. Aunt Stella interrupted Helen in the middle of thanking Mom for making the trip North with "Oh, please! Her mother's hanging by a thread and she takes three days to get here? What; too busy shrinking heads down in Asheville —"

"North Carolina isn't exactly down the block, Stella. Plus I have to work. Unlike

some," Mom fired back.

"Come on, Mar," said Sy.

"Try Marion!"

"OK, OK...Marion," he grumbled. "Look, your sister's been the primary caregiver round the clock for almost a week. And we all know what a pain your mother can be -" Simultaneous glares from the red-faced sisters shut him down, at which point we all decided to take a break from each other and decompress.

Mom and I had coffee at a nearby café to process the morning's events and just hold hands.

That afternoon lasted a week as the family waited for the doctor. We paced or doodled or otherwise fretted in silence, save Shawna, who maintained a running commentary about the muted Fox news crawl. Grandma read a guilty pleasure potboiler and asked me the occasional question about whether I was seeing anybody special and who was teaching my art classes while I was in New York, having long since dropped any misgivings about her forsaking an MBA for an MFA, something Mom and Dad had been unable to do. And somehow she managed to savor the Egg McMuffin I'd smuggled past the nurses' station.

An almost smiling Dr. Bhugatto joined us at 3:45. "Good afternoon," he said, paging through Grandma's chart. "There are some encouraging results, here. Your cancer, while advanced, is a type that has responded to this treatment I mentioned."

Any lingering resentment from that morning's acrimony dissipated amid the cheers and hugs. Dr. Bhugatto cleared Grandma to return home the next afternoon as long as we had a visiting nurse there during the day and a friend or relative on hand at night until full-time professional care could be arranged. "So I'll schedule your chemo and get Social Services in here to help with the home care. We'll see where we stand after a few treatments."

Everybody had questions about this potential gift from the Gods (except Grandma) which the doctor fielded patiently before bidding us adieu and continuing his rounds. Within seconds of his leaving the room everybody (except Grandma) leapt into action: her secretary began rescheduling board meetings that had been cancelled while simultaneously crafting a press release despite Sy's clearly unwelcome nitpicking; Mom and Mimi whipped out their phones in search of hairstylists and manicurists who made house calls in anticipation of the inevitable procession of well-wishers; Great Aunt Helen volunteered to contact a friend at 60 Minutes about doing a piece on her sister's comeback (a comeback she'd yet to begin). They only paused when a nurse entered the room without knocking. "If you don't mind, there are other patients trying to rest." That's when I caught the oddest expression flashing across Grandma's face before she papered it over with a smile: fear

As the designated nighttime caretaker – "You're the only one she listens to" – Helen handed me Grandma's keys and I headed for her apartment to catch a few winks and gather some beauty supplies. It was a 15-minute cab ride at most, but Grandma would insist on looking her best, even for such a short outing.

The doorman, in his smart cap and green jacket, was expecting me. He asked about Grandma and waved me in. I drifted off within seconds of landing on that ever-comfy sofa. After waking, I fixed myself some whitefish salad and Carr's water crackers – no-body had better snacks – and perused the familiar surroundings.

Grandma may have been pushing 76, but she was no one's old lady. The Zigzag Moderne-style lamps and curiosities ranging from pop art tchotchkes to Greek figurines graced every tabletop. Drawings and collages I'd made as a kid still held their places of honor in frames worthy of an art gallery. And there were stacks of travel books, growing like stalagmites beside the overstuffed chair where she did her reading. Clusters of family photos and snapshots from a career devoted to raising funds to fight breast, ovarian, and cervical cancer graced the walls. "Let somebody else worry about the world's prostates," she liked to joke. One image captured her decked out as a flapper, grinning with other glittering flappers at some wild high-society soiree. In another, she sat radiantly between me and my first boyfriend, the same week I'd come out to her, enjoying a lavish Valentine's Day brunch she "simply wouldn't hear" of us picking up. Below that hung an autographed photo of Grandma with President Reagan ("A nice man, but not my favorite president") as he congratulated her on her organization's 40th anniversary. Yet none of them, including the black and white studio shot of her looking like a young Greta Garbo, an image that had always captivated me, obscured the memory of that fleeting expression I had seen back at the hospital.

I finally ventured inside the bathroom to assemble Grandma's cosmetics care package. Older women's bathrooms brought to mind chem labs, with bottles and beakers and vials and various personal grooming contraptions. This bathroom was no exception. To my dismay, I didn't find any nail polish. Standing there, I recalled countless evening chats, me drinking decaf and watching Grandma, the public's elegant icon, sitting there in a slip and bra, face slathered in cold cream, waving a smoking cigarette as if conducting an orchestra. She'd grind it out and reach into the bedside table for her...nail polish.

It was there, sure enough, under a completed New York Times crossword, filled out in ink with no cross outs, a bottle of scarlet Tom Ford Nail Lacquer jammed alongside antacids and an assortment of prescription painkillers for her cranky back. And beneath them, a batch of mostly unopened government issue envelopes. A quick inspection revealed that the IRS wanted an audience with Grandma. Morbid curiosity had me reaching for a letter opener. For 2017, she owed \$65,000 in delinquent taxes and penalties. For 2018, \$85,000. For 2019, \$90,000. All told, the tab exceeded \$600,000. People lost businesses because of this sort of thing. Some did time. Given that she'd "never been a saver," there was no way Grandma could pay this off. He didn't wear a hooded cloak and carry a scythe, but the taxman lurked in the shadows and must have seemed almost as scary as her cancer.

Climbing into bed, stiff drink in hand, I spent the night listening to the air conditioner rattle.

Grandma was discharged home 36 hours later. Rose, a kind but no-nonsense Philippina RN, accompanied us to the apartment. Seemingly telepathic, she drew me aside: "Don't worry. Your grandmother can use the bathroom on her own, for now, and dress herself and shower. Just remind her to use the shower chair. Keep her company, make sure she takes her meds, stays hydrated, and rests. I'll be here days, but you can call me if there are any problems."

Then began a steady flow of adoring colleagues and collaborators – from the heads of non-profits and research institutes to the Senior Senator from Texas (whom she called Buddy) and his latest big-haired wife – all bearing flower arrangements suitable for a Mafia funeral. We both welcomed the chance to drink tea and exchange family gossip when the admiring throng finally retreated. Any attempt to bring up her financial predicament was deflected by suggestions that I visit the Met or MoMA or the Whitney, or offers to foot the bill for a tuxedo rental so I could use her opera tickets ("Darling! What on earth am I going to do with them?"). I desperately wanted to bring Mom in on my demoralizing discovery, but with Grandma needing to marshal every emotional reserve for a grueling course of treatment, the inevitable "what the hell were you thinking" exchange magnified by a lifetime of resentments was best avoided.

So there we sat, her in bed and me sharing a loveseat with a pile of unread New Yorkers and catalogs, playing gin. Every once in a while over the years I'd given her a game, but she typically made short work of me. That night was different. Instead of arranging and re-arranging her cards before striking, I caught Grandma glancing wistfully at mementos that chronicled the life she'd led with such success and panache, allowing me to pile up the points until she surrendered with a sigh that had nothing to do with the game.

I'd been enjoying a stretch of sound sleep when the urge to pee had me tiptoeing past Grandma's bedroom on the way to the bathroom. Light seeped out from under her door. Thinking she had nodded off while reading, I decided to turn it out.

As the door creaked open, Grandma started and clumsily attempted to hide several objects on her bedside table, knocking them to the floor instead. "Let me get that for you," I offered.

"Don't! Please!" she almost yelled, tears dampening her face. Lying on the floor were those bottles of prescription pain pills, their contents scattered beyond Grandma's reach. There were a lot of them. "Oh, Grandma," I said, retrieving the pills and thinking that for the last few days she had probably been wondering who among those adoring visitors might still come to see her once the inevitable day of legal reckoning had arrived. Had she pictured herself, as I had, in the harsh glare of camera flashes wading through jostling reporters toward a police cruiser against the backdrop of tabloid headlines? She must have seen her medical gift from the Gods as one of their cruel hoaxes.

I knelt beside the bed and we shared a wordless moment. Then I replaced the pills on the night table next to a glass of water. After brushing her hair so she would look her best, I kissed my grandmother goodbye on the forehead and left the bedroom to the sound of the door clicking closed behind me.

El Jaleo Melissa Moschitto

It is Easter Sunday, the first day of bullfighting season. Despite the lushly illustrated posters of dancers lining the walls of nearby restaurants, flamenco has been largely forgotten. Flamenco: the heart, soul, and personification of Andalucia. Flamenco (the kind packaged in glossy brochures): rejected by Spaniards and embraced by tourists.

Mari Carmen peers out from behind the curtain to watch Charo organize the pile of cheap red plastic souvenir fans, as instructed. Charo is her cousin's daughter and even though Mari Carmen just caught her smoking joints with friends yesterday (instead of hanging up flyers), she cannot afford to fire the twenty-something, who is currently in charge of box office, promotions and ushering. She'll have to keep a close watch—just one more thing to add to her list.

She exhales with effort, forcing herself to focus on a flicker of hope: an audience. Mari Carmen is the rare performer who also runs her own theatre, an asset that has turned into a burden. As her fellow company members ready themselves in the already-too-small dressing room, she is hiding the evidence of her own makeshift bed. (She'd had to let go of her tiny apartment in El Nervion months ago, choosing to pay the theater's rent instead.) It's been nearly two years since the pandemic descended, paralyzing the city with mandatory shut downs. Finally, buckling under impatience, the city has relented and theaters have officially reopened.

This is the first big test.

A giant laser-cut sign glows above the raised stage, spelling out "El Nuevo Teatro del Flamenco" in crimson script. It's been hung dead center so that every photo taken will have the venue's name in it. This is Charo's inspired contribution, an offering to the gods of the algorithm.

Ignoring this garish display, Mari Carmen stands before a framed print of the oil painting *El Jaleo* by John Singer Sargent, the first piece of art she ever hung in the lobby. Most passersby are oblivious to the masterpiece, which captures the distinctly Andalusian prototype for flamenco.

Rendered in muted tones of gray and black, it is always overlooked. But not by Mari Carmen. As if lit by real candlelight, the shadows of dancers and musicians flicker against the wall of an old *tablao* as they forever perform. The flash of the dancer's white silk skirt, the contortion of her arms, the bared-neck lament of the singer—this scene is always so arresting. It stops Mari Carmen at every pass. *El Jaleo*: the ruckus. Look at those two women in the corner, draped in flame-colored Manila shawls. They raise their arms in reverie, seeming to shout, *¡Ole, trá, trá!*

This is what Mari Carmen desires: unwavering devotion, fiery spontaneity.

But tonight she must wait until 8:30pm sharp, as advertised. The pandemic, with its fear of proximity and diminished attention spans, has condensed performances into neat start and end times. How rote! True artists operate outside of time, stamping out song in the dust wherever they can, moved by the moment—that is romance. The reality is that Mari Carmen has mortgaged herself to this stage.

In the early days of the forced closures, Mari Carmen arrived faithfully to the empty theater each day with an antiseptic fervor—to sweep, mop, rid the space of vermin, stockpile hand sanitizer, to be ready at a moment's notice to open again. They were living in weeklong increments, going outside only for food, forced to flash IDs to prove they belonged in the neighborhood, hopeful this would all be over soon. She made schedules, then canceled schedules, experimented with online classes, redesigned the website, tried to run payroll, wrote like a beggar to various government agencies, did it all with a fury burning inside of her.

The other theater owners had plunged into a foul mood. One of them, it was rumored,

had fled the city and relocated to the Canary Islands. Who had *that* kind of money? Everyone's income had evaporated. Mari Carmen and her artists took turns sending each other money for groceries, trading it back and forth electronically. Tomatoes, rice, and eggs were a balm when physical touch wasn't allowed.

The performers were forced to sit quietly in their apartments—no dancing at home or the neighbors would yell and bang on the ceilings! Waists grew soft. Knees ached. Flexors stiffened. The pads of feet grew tender. Everyone had aged so much and so quickly. Four grueling decades of rehearsals and performances ground to a startling halt. Mari Carmen lay in bed at night, staring at the ceiling, listening to the sticky film of fascia creeping over her idle middle-aged muscles, shrouding her in a translucent haze.

It was the closure of the theaters that stung the most: the blunt confirmation that passion, art, and craft was truly non-essential. *La cultura* was supposed to have been the thing that drove their country, but it turned out to be dispensable. The shoulder-to-shoulderness, the warmth of bodies, the heady feeling of pheromones and sweat—all that had been stripped away by the virus. This sacrifice was necessary, they were told, for the greater good. But they all knew there were parties going on behind closed doors.

When the *tablaos* finally opened back up, the dancers, singers, guitarists, and drummers valiantly risked their own safety to perform together again. No one from the neighborhood came clamoring back. They sat in their dead theaters, wondering if they were infected or not. Empty seats, empty songs. The only place that was full, besides the hospitals, were the bars.

Flamenco is a repository for suffering, transmuting pain into pleasure; heartache, misery, regret and longing are its raw materials. Flamenco exists in the suspension of time, inflamed by *el dolor*. It is solar plexus and sweat, flowers tangled up in hair and teeth, the smash of tambourines and castanets. Deep guttural voices in song-like keening, born of Gypsies with the Jews and Muslims adding their own lamenting influence. The dark and cramped *tablaos* where women have power, incandescent with body heat. The insistent beat of the *palmas*, summoning a primal heartbeat in a clap, compelling the dancer beyond exhaustion. An escalation of heels and hands, a chin jutting up defiantly. Bodies sharing vibration, rising together and unleashing a shout, lusty and pure, from everyone watching.

Picture a girl, maybe five years old, underneath the table, peering out from the table-cloth. She's wearing a cousin's hand-me-downs: black jazz shoes and a polka dot skirt ending just above her still-pudgy knees, topped off with a crisp white jacket. It is after dinner, outside on the patio, and all the adults are pleasantly drunk enough to have forgotten about bedtime. This is little Mari Carmen and she is smart enough not to be noticed. The adults are sing-speaking, souls in their throats and tears in their eyes—from laughter, from old wounds, from unrequited love, from marriage. An uncle drums on an empty chair and the vibrations hit her like a sonic revolution. A space appears in the center and she's there, pounding her heel. She's never taken a lesson but she's watchful and intuitive, and the dance already lives in her body. Her arms arc into the air and her audience goes wild. She cocks her hip and squints her eyes, her lips curling over her teeth in concentration. It's a grimace that feels so unpremeditated, so full of fire and determination that it makes the adults whoop and holler. The little girl spins, pigtails whipping out from centrifugal force, a fringe of dark bangs over her eyes. They love her because she's precocious and beguiling, but not yet competition for love or money or public adoration.

When Mari Carmen dances now, it's a duet with this ghost of herself.

A guitar is being tuned backstage, but this theater, which she has held onto for so long, feels unbearably lonely. Suddenly, a grating "Hola! Buenas!" rings out from the front. Charo has sprung into action! Her voice reverberates to the back, alerting the performers that yes, there is indeed an audience arriving. Mari Carmen spies through the curtain again to see Charo passing out the red fans to a group of Japanese teenagers who are

accumulating in the entryway, exchange students here to study this fabled dance form. The girls look about in awe at the vines of faux green leaves with reddish pink blooms tacked up on the walls. The German and Italian tourists arrive. Then an American family, seats scraping the floor as they rearrange their row of folding chairs for more space, their six year old climbing over them and spilling his bottle of water. There is a gentle clearing of throats and a rustling of paper programs, a restless unfolding and re-folding of cheap souvenir fans. It is time to begin. Mari Carmen gives the signal to Charo, and the stage lights come up, creating too much bounce on the sterile white walls. There is a hush in the house.

The trio of musicians are hustled out onto the stage. First comes *El Tocaor*, the guitarist, who sits upstage center, dressed in black with his signature flair of a silver vest and a matching tie, a look that hasn't evolved in decades. *El Cantaor*, the singer, sits to his right, his button down shirt puckering open to reveal his naval, evidence of the pandemic and its sedentary confinement. His voice, though, still slices to the heart. *El Cajonero*, the drummer, is new, his predecessor having taken the "great pause" as a sign to retire. The replacement is young and glossy, freshly showered and ambitious, sure that this is only a temporary layover until the next best thing.

Despite their musical bravado, the trio is smart enough to know that they are not the main attraction. Everyone is there for *La Bailaora*, who sits in her dressing room, eyes closed and swaying slightly, preparing for her entrance. The drum makes the announcement. With one mournful note from the singer, the guitarist immediately intuits the melody, long fingernails catching strings with gymnastic flair. An enormous blood-red and black fan bursts open. Mari Carmen looks out from behind with feral eyes. She delivers what the foreigners want: heel stomping, vicious stares, dark lips and dramatic costumes. Hewing close to tradition, she is skilled and charismatic. Predictably, all the cameras come out for her as she spins her tasseled shawl out over the edge of the stage. If she keeps her eyelids low enough, lashes fringing her view, she might be able to find the ghost.

"La luz! Por favor! Paga la luz!" El Cantante barks at an Italian tourist who is filming with phone flashlight blazing. The singer fumes at the uncouth behavior, ignoring Charo who is in the back, gesturing wildly at him to stop—this could be their viral moment! Mari Carmen grits her teeth through her smile and never stops dancing.

Each of them has to pay their own price for the privilege of performing. Some bitterly tolerate tourists while Mari Carmen graciously accepts their enthusiastic applause and poses for photos after every twice-nightly show. She knows what they're selling. But is it counterfeit?

Closing up that night, Mari Carmen dismisses Charo early and bids goodnight to each musician with a dry kiss on each cheek. She wants to be alone to calculate the evening's sales. With the theatre finally empty and locked, she seats herself in front of the dressing room mirror, the outline of bulbs glaring at her as she tabulates the future.

In the hallway, the oil painted dancer gleams white.

The next day is Easter Monday and the city is quiet and sluggish as if hungover. Charo and the new drummer certainly are, having gone out together to celebrate their first "real" show with a good number of *cervezas* and *ron y Coca Colas*. The street crews, in their bright yellow uniforms, are hosing down the cobblestone streets. The tourists who attended last night's show are ordering cafe cortados in la plaza while reviewing their lists of attractions still to be consumed.

Mari Carmen prowls the Old City. For the first time, she's unable to be in the theater, uncertain if she can stay there, unconvinced it even wants her to return. Winding her way through the crooked streets of *El Barrio Santa Cruz*, down *Calle San Clemente* with its cool white walls and saffron-colored shutters, she is brought to a halt by this sound, coming from an open garage door: palms meeting in a clap, a firm heel pounding cement.

She takes a step closer, pressing herself against the exterior wall to stay hidden. The garage is cave-like and cool, cluttered with mechanical relics, a chipped enamel bowl

discarded in the doorway, an old radio sitting on the ground. Her gaze rises to two women, about her age. There is a looseness between them, an easy comfort unknown to Mari Carmen. One of them beats out a rhythm with reddened palms. The other dances in sneakers and jeans; stomping into the oil-stained cement. Not possessing a skirt, she simply tugs at the hem of her shirt. The steps expertly crescendo and the women begin to urge each other on, peppering the air with yelps of *¡Vale!* and *¡Ole, trá, trá!* It is an electrifying racket. A wrist is thrust into the air and the singer begins to ululate, pinning Mari Carmen breathless against the wall.

The pair vibrates together, luminous, for an audience they don't know they have. Their jaleo ends with laughter and panting breath, and then, the clink of a few coins falling into the enamel bowl.

The two women turn their heads, but no one is there.

Battle Royale

I've been doing battle with the hardest of soft woods since I brought the table home. My first piece of grown-up furniture. Not a hand-me-down or almost treasure sidewalk salvaged on bulk trash day. Twin slabs of poisonous yew, lathed and sanded to an elegant gloss, hardware ready to accommodate extension leaves heavy as tombstones.

Inert, it is a thing of beauty. French Provincial silhouette. Fine grain of heartwood cut from the core of an ancient tree. Slim dark inlaid border. Pedestal legs graceful as a pod of octopus arms.

But call it to action for an impromptu dinner party, an intimate tete a tete or full-on bacchanalia. Demand from it more than a stationary cameo role. That's when the skirmish begins.

Armed with rails and leaves and pads excavated from the hall closet, I lug them to the dining room. Ignore the trail of stuffing leaking from the pads, courtesy of baby mice that teethed on them last fall.

The table awaits with its game face on.
Do I detect a faint smile when I struggle
to unlatch clasps and separate the top pieces?
Phantom brakes lock the pedestal wheels;
my effort to roll the slabs apart stymied.
Still, I gain the upper hand.

When the guard rails refuse to slide in their grooves, I wedge then gently coax before muscling them into their tracks.

I hoist the leaves on the rails. Balance then nudge them into to alignment. Fleeting triumph. I lock the clasps only to discover the subterfuge. The leaves never fully bonded. The uneven surface will wobble wine glasses and serving platters. It risks collapse under the weight of heavy elbows.

Tonight, we dine in the kitchen.

Fig Season Sylvie Greenway

The child crouches in the courtyard, rattan basket hooked over an arm, peering across the paving stones. Le pauses where she stands with the broom. The figs fall endlessly at this time of year. When they hit the ground, they're already halfway puce with rot but still too green to eat raw. Le's family harvested the good ones last week. Her cousin scrambled up into the tree's smooth trunks and stripped clusters of figs, shouting for Le to bring the basket. If Le was lucky, the figs fell into the basket and didn't bounce off the weave, bruising against skin or paving stones.

The child shifts her knees, slides one hand forward, almost hesitant. But when she

strikes, there's a croak-nothing shy about a toad squeezed in a small fist.

Le sliced the figs thin. Le's mother chased a spider out of a jar, piled in figs with two cloves of garlic and a chili, and submerged the pile in vinegar and sugar. They were ready two days later. Le's older brother tried to feed one to his baby, despite Le's mother swatting him across the head. Rice! She said. Rice from the bow!! Not figs! What a waste of raising you are.

Le leans against the broom. The bristles scrape rigidly against stone. The child's basket must be full of scrambling toads, croaking against the ragged Tom and Jerry shirt dampening them. The child stares down the toad in her hand. Its legs paddle in the air.

The baby has wandering feet, too. Whenever the baby is sitting down, the feet and hands stir, stir like rice plants in a breeze. Even when the little face crumpled at the vinegar burn of the fig, the hands and feet tugged *faster*, this way and that, but circled no closer to the sensitive tongue.

So the baby cried, and Le's mother yanked her brother's ear before pulling the baby to her, feeling into the mouth for the offending fig. The fig missed the edge of the table. Le swept it up later. The baby was taken off to sleep. Le swept up the rice the baby had dropped, too. That evening, she swept up after her older brother, longan peels curling off the tea table.

"Le σi , what are you doing? What's wrong?"

Le shifts back from the broom, blinking. The child is gone. Her mother is in the kitchen doorway, spreading mugwort leaves in the basket. She picks a snail out and flings it in the direction of Le's broom. It clacks against the garden wall.

"I'm sweeping," Le says. "Almost done."

"Come in and help me. We should feed the baby before your brother comes home. Figs! Honestly. Skies know the baby will colic." Her mother throws another snail towards the broom. It sticks on Le's pant leg, and her mother's lips twitch.

There's a clatter of the basket on the kitchen counter, the rain-sound of rice hitting the bottom of the pot. Her mother's voice, wavering trills about a hometown in the mountains

Le bends. She observes the snail for a moment, marking a tremulous path down her pants. Le peels it off and drops it in the pile of figs. It clings to one. Maybe the snail will like the figs better than the baby.

When Le stows the broom, a toad darts from the nook where she puts the broom. Le reaches for it, but she's lost her childhood grace with these things. The toad squirms into the pile of figs before her fingers close. Its tongue darts out before it vanishes.

Something stirs up Le's throat, moving, moving around. Seeking—skies know what. The snail is gone. Le joins her mother in the kitchen.

How to Make a Hash(tag) of Things Adele Evershed

Scrolling late at night, I stumble over a post about prosecco hills. There's a photosoft slopes, bubbly clouds, a pink hazeall with the tantalizing tag, #HikeProseccoRoad, a newly created trail in Italy's Veneto region. For a split second, I consider it-Wouldn't it be wonderful to walk an undisturbed world. stopping for a glass of happy fizz, with buttery bruschetta on the side, as if it were the old days? Days when-I didn't know where Gaza was on a map, or that sunflowers symbolize resilience to the people in Ukraine. Days when-I didn't worry that the name on my birth certificate didn't match my voter ID, or that my daughter's rights were fraying faster than Betsy's famous flag. Days whenmy Facebook feed was full of cats or kids doing cutesy things, and when I posted photos of vineyards and rosy sunsets instead of resistance hashtags. Oh-wouldn't that be wonderful?

Biographies:

Gabriella M. Belfiglio's work has appeared most recently in *Paterson Literary Review*. She is a winner of the W.B. Yeats Poetry Contest. She has had writing published in the award-winning anthology *Poetic Voices Without Borders, The Potomac Review, Folio, The Monterey Poetry Review, The Centrifugal Eye*, and *Lambda Literary Review*, among other places. She is a queer artist and teacher and mother in New York City.

Ruth Berman's work has appeared in many general and literary magazines. Her novel *Bradamant's Quest* was published by FTL Publications (Minnesota). She has self-published a chapbook, *Beyond the Moones Sphere*, of some of her poems.

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Elise Chadwick taught English at Horace Greeley High School in Chappaqua, NY for 30 years. She lives in NYC. Her poems have been recently published in *The Ocotillo Review, Healing Muse, Naugatuck River Review* and *The English Journal*. You can read more of her poetry at elisechadwick.com. Her chapbook *Poems on the Precipice* (Kelsay Press) is forthcoming.

Elizabeth Collis's work has been published in *Emerge Literary Journal, Fictive Dream, Pithead Chapel, Intrepidus Ink, Ellipsis Zine, The Good Life Review, Tangled Locks Journal,* and elsewhere. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee and won the Bill Percy Short Creative Non-Fiction Prize and the Intrepid Award. Originally from the UK, Elizabeth writes from her home in Nova Scotia, Canada. www.elizabethcollis.com

Sarah Daly is a scientist by day and writer by night. Her fiction, poetry, and drama have appeared in fifty-three literary journals including The *Inflectionist Review* (nominated for Best Spiritual Literature Awards, Orison Books) *New Feathers, Moss Puppy Magazine*, and *Shot Glass Journal*. Read more of her work at https://sarahdalywrites.wordpress.com/

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Sylvie Greenway is a Midwest-based writer and aspiring librarian. This is her first publication.

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Jacqueline Marino's articles and essays usually take shape after laborious research and time-consuming stunts, like kayaking the Mahoning River and traversing the country to learn mountain biking. For *The Cage*, she got to write what she already knows. Check out more of her work at www.jacquelinemarino.com.

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Melissa Moschitto (she/her) is a fiction writer and award-winning playwright lifting up feminist narratives to catalyze conversation and change. Her fiction has been published in *Bright Flash Literary Review* and will appear in an upcoming issue of *Macrame Literary Journal*. The mother of two dramatic children, she lives with her family in New York City on the ancestral land of the Lenape and is currently pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing at Cedar Crest College.

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Carly-Rae Oakley-Doran is a well-known literary advocate, having founded the popular book blog *HeyitsCarlyRae*. She is also a teaching assistant at Harvard University Extension School and is working on writing essays, short stories, and novels. Currently, Carly-Rae is a graduate student pursuing her master's in creative writing and literature at Harvard University Extension School. Find out more at www.heyitscarlyrae.com

Liliane Pang is a non-fiction writer and indie filmmaker born and raised in Montreal, Canada. She is also holding onto the naïve hope of someday befriending the local crows.

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Michael C. Smith's work has appeared in several publications, including *Iowa Review, Seneca Review, Northwest Review, Pembroke Review, Water-Stone Review, The Helix, Phoebe,* and *Blue Unicorn (forthcoming),* among others. He is a graduate of the MFA program from the University of Arizona and lives in Pomona, CA.

Matthew Snyderman lives in Northern California with his wife. He enjoys swimming, watching old movies on the big screen, and participating in the occasional Moth StorySLAM. His work has appeared in The Berlin Literary Review, Bristol Noir, Bare Back, Fabula Argentea, Killer Nashville, Literally Stories, The Loch Raven Review, The Lowestoft Chronicle, The Opiate, Punk Noir, The Under Review, Twelve Winters, Twin Bill. and The Yard.

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Diane Webster writes mainly poetry but sometimes crosses over into other genres. New English Review published one of her nonfiction pieces. Her poetry has appeared in Studio One, North Dakota Quarterly, New English Review, Winamop and other literary magazines. She was a featured writer in Macrame Literary Journal and WestWard Quarterly. Her website is: www.dianewebster.com

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