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Dreamers

Creative Writing

Motherhood in the Plague Year

Nonfiction by Allison Bothley

Of Imagination All Compact

Fiction by Eunice-Grace Domingo

Winners
2025 Flash Contest

PenParentis
2026 Fellowship Winners

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IMAGE CREDITS:

- COVER, PG. 3, Sergey Dobrydnev
- PG. 4, Wantarniwan
- PG. 5, Алла Пашкова
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“ And I realised that maybe tonight, maybe this night, he'd get it out, whatever it was, whatever it looked like.

-Jack Barrie, Page 18



EDITOR'S LETTER

Coming to this issue, I feel a noticeable shift from where I was when I wrote my last letter. Something that had been weighing heavily has finally resolved. Life feels more predictable again, in a good way. There is space again to return to things that I had set aside while I managed what needed managing.

That sense of return and reorientation runs quietly through this issue. Much of the work here circles around family and belonging, often through moments of love, memory, and loss. The 2026 Pen Parentis Fellowship winners remind us how deeply writing and caregiving intertwine, while the 2025 Flash Contest winners capture brief, resonant moments that carry lasting emotional weight.

Our two feature nonfiction pieces—*Motherhood in the Plague Year* by Allison Bothley and *Of Imagination All Compact* by Eunice-Grace Domingo—approach family from different angles, but both ask what it means to love through uncertainty and change.

Issue 22 feels like a gathering place. Not because everything is settled, but because there's room again to notice, to reflect, and to move forward with a little more confidence.

Thank you, as always, for reading and for being part of Dreamers.

Kat McNichol
Editor-In-Chief

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Kat McNichol

BOOK REVIEW EDITOR
Carole Mertz

REVIEWERS
Colleen McNichol
Phil McNichol
Cedar Newell

HOW TO REACH US
info@dreamerswriting.com
www.dreamerswriting.com
585 Bruce St. Hepworth, ON, CA



Cold Comfort

Fiction Story by Ellen Stearns

Mom died on Tuesday. On Friday she returned. I slept until eleven that day (it had been increasingly hard to get out of bed). When I finally shuffled into the kitchen, I saw her. She looked like an ice statue, the kind I had seen carved by a man with a chainsaw at the Winter Festival when I was nine. He had transformed giant blocks of ice into sparkling swans. But this ice statue was my mother, and she was sitting at my worn dinette set three days after her death.

"Mom?" I croaked.

She turned her face toward me. The deep lines on either side of her nose, her wispy hair, her drooping earlobes: all of it was rendered in colorless crystalline detail. She smiled but did not speak. A drop of water gathered at the end of her nose and dripped onto the linoleum. She was melting.

I shoved open the window above the kitchen sink. A gust of January wind burst into the room. I ran to the sliding glass door and threw it open as well. A small pile of snow that had

drifted against the door tumbled into the kitchen. I left a footprint in the powder as I rushed to the thermostat, setting it as low as it would go.

I put on three sweaters, two pairs of pants, gloves, snow boots, and my warmest coat. I wrapped myself in a quilt. It wasn't enough. The cold seeped through the layers bit by bit. Mom stopped melting as I began to freeze.

I said all the things I wish I'd said. She remained silent, but sometimes she'd smile or nod. I lost feeling in my fingers and toes.

My sister came to check on me and found us still at the table. I shivered. My lips were blue. "She can't stay," my sister said, gentle and absolute. Together, we led Mom outside, across the parking lot, to the edge of the silent, snowy woods. We watched her walk into the forest. One last glint of her—bright—and then gone.



Image by Sergey Dobrydnev

About Pen Parentis

Pen Parentis is a 501C3 literary nonprofit that helps writers stay on creative track after starting a family. Subscribers enjoy Accountability Meetups, Salons and other perks.

The Pen Parentis Writing Fellowship for New Parents annually honors a talented writer who is the parent of at least one child under 10 years old. Find out more at: www.penparentis.org/fellowship.

Prologue: Milagros' Story

Fiction Story by Fabiola Mejia

Milagros had never climbed a tree in her life, her father wouldn't allow it. Just as he had forbidden her from going with her cousin to the concert tonight. She swallowed the lump in her throat and kicked off her sandals to make the climb easier. How she loved her father and yet, how much she wanted to scream at him today. She had saved her own money for the event, but no matter how much she pleaded, she had to watch her cousin, Lorena, skip to the bus stop alone. Most of the girls in her small town were going, uncaring of what the older women would say about them in the morning gossip. Milagros held onto a branch tightly as the first sounds of the music from the city in the distance reached her ears.

As she peered over the tops of the trees, the familiar little houses of her neighborhood seemed even smaller. The trees seemed like a vast blanket of green that opened up to the city where the other girls who had managed to escape the scoldings of their mothers and the heat of their kitchens

were probably shaking with excitement. The sun was setting, and the city took on a bewitching aura of bright lights that changed as the faint sound of drums and bass became more prominent. Milagros could feel the bass notes in her chest, and she closed her eyes to stop the tears from coming. But as the moon shone brightly above her, she finally allowed herself to weep.

Holding onto the branches, Milagros wept, not knowing that in just a year's time, she would fall in love with a man with a golden voice who would bring her more tears than happiness, and that she would no longer have her father's protection. She could not know in that moment that she would one day have a daughter who would inherit her loneliness and her father's angelic singing voice. She wept as her own father's voice called to her, in anger and terror, asking Milagros to come down from the tree.

Image by Wantarniwan



Propagation

Fiction Story by Anne Ramallo

I wake to her fingers on my cheek, heavy and sweet-smelling. My body protests with a sharp yawn as I take her in through the sleep haze. Leg cramp? Nightmare? Do I need to change the sheets?

"Mommy..."

It's 3:27 and, in the alarm clock's greenish glow, I catch the glint of something metallic in her hand. Scissors?

"Baby?"

She must have sensed my sudden inhale, the fierce alertness entering my eyes, because she reassures me in her pillowy nighttime whisper, "They're magic scissors. The kind that don't show your bones." She picks up my hand with a tenderness I can't resist and calmly snips through my pinky finger.

I brace myself for waves of pain, but instead feel only pressure—a pulling at the seams of my inner fabric that transports me to my dark, formaldehyde-drenched biology classroom years ago. A slideshow about mitosis, knit threads unraveling.

Her dimpled fingers still hold my hand. I pull it away to inspect the damage. It's a clean cut, not even bleeding save for one red, jewel-like outcry.

"See?" she whispers. "No bones."

"Where—?" I can't finish the thought. It's all too surreal.

On the comforter, my severed finger lies uncomplaining, long and waxy like an echeveria leaf.

Sometimes I walk through our neighborhood cutting tiny pieces of succulents from the edges of yards—sedum, moonglow, jade. In pots, I watch them sprout roots, grow leaves. Could this cutting grow another self? Would it be more unbelievable than watching my daughter grow from kidney bean to eggplant to jackfruit, and now this walking, talking, scissor-wielding creature, wholly separate?

She yawns, her wide, solemn eyes scrunching to crescent moons.

I stand and slide the scissors from her hand. Her legs curl around my hips when I scoop her up, and her breath is warm on my neck. Before I carry her back to bed, I glance again at my pinky and wonder if I should be more worried. But it's nestled cozy in the rumpled comforter and all I can think is, at least part of me is sleeping through the night.



2025 FLASH Contest

Congratulations to the Winners!

1ST PLACE WINNER

First Snow

Nonfiction by Martha E. Shenton

Albert, our black lab, is scratching his large head, but the Yorkie, Biff, has not begun to stir. I stretch my hand along the sheets to touch George's shoulder; his absence startles me. It has been six months. But for a moment, I had forgotten that he's gone.

The sunlight, lower in the sky, comes through the closed shades. We are deep into November now and the light dwindles daily, with the sun nearing the horizon by three o'clock. The short days remind me of the long winters in New Hampshire, walking home from school in the dark.

I open the French doors from the bedroom to let the dogs out. There is a quiet in the air, a familiar anticipation. The trees sparse with leaves, colors faded. Waiting. Not for rain or wind, but something more quiet—gentler. And then it appears, right there, before me. Standing on the threshold, leaning over and looking up, snow lands on my face. Albert bolts to greet it, his tail wagging, nose to the ground; Biff stays beside me, motionless on the door's threshold.

The snowflakes fall. First lightly, dreamlike, but soon increase in number and size. A white coat begins to cover the glass table, my gauge for accumulation, dusting the ground, the table, the steps, as I stand shivering against the cold—waiting—I don't know for how long, Albert's black coat turning white.

I remind myself again that it is only November—the first snow so early and yet so welcome—New England winter arriving with a quiet reserve.

A tangle of twigs and leaves by the large sugar maple, a stray pot, two dog toys—a red ball and a large brown rubber bone—soon they too will no longer be visible, though this time of year the snow may not hold.

I want to call George to come quickly. I recall the morning he woke our daughter Jessica, just a toddler then, carrying her to the backyard to see her first snowflake. She squealed with delight as he lifted her above his head, his arms outstretched to the sky, so that our little girl could feel the snow fall on her face, catching the flakes on her tongue as she reached out to grasp what melted and was gone.

George and I stood here often in this doorway overlooking the yard, watching not only the first snow, but the arrival of the crocus in April, and the lush green leaves and irises of summer; the colors of fall that begin to fade as the long winter calls.

But today I stand alone. My hands hurting—visibly red—my nose runny. I try as I might to stop time—to clarify this moment—he is gone but ever present. There is a stillness, an empty space I cannot fill, like the gap between movements on a clock that no longer ticks. A space where something ends but nothing new has begun. I take in with one more breath this scene of falling snow and call out to Albert. He runs past Biff and me into the warm room and I close the door.

Letter to my Ex-husband's Lawyer

Nonfiction by Trina Chapman

Dear Mr. Lawyer,

At our Case Conference yesterday, you represented my ex-husband, but for a fleeting moment, I heard you advocate for me while attempting to acknowledge an injustice that caused you discomfort. Your small act of rebellion provided a tiny flicker of hope but didn't last long.

At an impasse regarding his financial obligation to our youngest child, your client paid you thousands of dollars to avoid helping *me* house and feed our son. He might've paid you more than he owed me.

With you by his side, your client's words were legitimized. Alone, my voice was little more than a whisper. It held no power. Truth gave me no discernable volume. Neither you nor the judge nor anyone in attendance yesterday knew about the years of therapy it took for me to be there, advocating for myself and my children. How much effort I exerted to thrust through the inertia of conditioning that I don't matter, just to be present. It felt like a chorus of voices was seeking to cancel out my words so they might wither into a thin wisp and float out beyond the reach of the judicial system. Perhaps it's easier to silence people than affect change.

Without a lawyer, the cards were stacked against me, but I showed up anyway. And when it became evident we were engaged in a game of "he said, she said," I suppressed my exasperation, surrendered my position and abandoned the money. Mr. Lawyer, my action wasn't one of submission; it was an act of emancipation.

You see, my options for moving forward were to remain immersed in legal and financial gridlock with the possibility that truth, integrity, and justice *might* eventually prevail or to disengage altogether and flourish *now*, beyond the shadows that have been cast upon me. In walking away, I was standing up. I chose freedom over subservience.

Mr. Lawyer, I am a cycle breaker, responsible for ensuring my children don't become trapped in the rhythm of partner

violence that has reverberated through my family tree. Lacking the courage to advocate for myself in my relationships, I've found the strength to do so for my children. After every emotional injury, I've repeatedly collected the fragmented pieces of my family and welded them back together until ultimately forging an indestructible armour to protect us.

I'll weep an abundance of tears on this first day of my liberation because, although things have changed since my mom's generation, it's really not all that different now. Mothers continue to cry themselves to sleep while they remain imprisoned one way or another. Still, I've never let the darkness steal the light and joy of motherhood from me. My children have taught me not only that I deserve love but how to receive it. My home is filled with pictures from vacations, board game nights, and Thanksgiving dinners; they represent the currency I prioritized in court yesterday. They are reminders of my armour.

Mr. Lawyer, I've been determined enough to protect my family alone, without a system to advocate for us, an affluent family to back me or a lawyer I could afford. I grieve for the legal apparatus to which you have committed your life. Conceived to ensure no harm, it can be twisted into a tool that aids wealthy manipulators in maintaining control and punishment. Justice was not delivered to me yesterday. There is no fairness in unequal legal representation. But in my hopelessness, I heard your brief endeavour to advocate for me. I saw your humanity. And I saw you see me, however temporary it was.

My chance at justice has passed, but soon, Mr. Lawyer, another client will cross your threshold. You'll read his ex-wife's Case Conference Brief and see me and my children there. Perhaps you'll recognize our story in the pages of her sorrow and desperation, and maybe you'll be reminded why you chose Family Law as a vocation and why you continue to choose it daily. In that moment, Mr. Lawyer, you'll have the opportunity to make an authentic difference for another mother, and I hope—like me—you choose freedom over subservience, too.

Motherhood in the Plague Year

Nonfiction by Allison Bothley

Sometime between the murder of George Floyd and the confirmation of Amy Coney Barrett, I started to think about killing myself.

It was May of 2020, and I was home—like all of us were home—ruminating on the words “unprecedented times,” and obsessing about when things would go back to normal so I could start to enjoy my mat leave. Just two months earlier, I had welcomed my second child, another sweet boy. And now the long days and nights of that fourth trimester were starting to get old. It didn't help that my life was also punctuated by the intense needs of my three-year-old, whose daycare was closed indefinitely.

I'd given birth in March, right at the start of the pandemic, when the needle on the wheel of fear was vellicating like the RPMs on our old stick shift. My husband had a new job and was putting a lot of energy into making the right impression—this included going in every day once the office re-opened. I was a career gal—I encouraged it. But back home with the kids, I struggled to make captivity stimulating so our brains wouldn't melt. I did all the things recommended by influencers: I made sensory bins, painting stations, planned craft and tummy time activities. We built baking soda and vinegar volcanoes and watched the frothy pistachio apocalypse rain down on Batman and My Little Pony. We read every story in our library 3000 times—even the books I hid because they were annoying.

When I think of those early days, I can still smell the cookies we baked and decorated with blue and purple icing, can still recite *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* backwards and forwards, can still see my son during one of our impromptu Blippi dance parties holding up his chubby arms and asking me to spin him around and around the living room, saying, “*Again mummy. Again.*” I was trying hard to keep things afloat. But each time Justin Trudeau and his bedhead stepped to the podium to extend lockdown, a little bit of my enthusiasm would escape the metaphorical inner tube that was holding us up.

As time wore on, I began to lie awake all night worrying, watching the headlights of passing cars on the ceiling and troubleshooting how I would stop panicking the next time I had to simultaneously wipe my toddler's bum and nurse the baby. Or how not to snap at my eldest for crying—and secretly wishing he would grow up faster and need me less. It was all starting to feel like too much, but in the sage words of some internet troll who seemed to be everywhere: “*Why*

have kids if you didn't wanna raise 'em?” Why, indeed.

One night, after a bad day, I went for a drive as soon as my husband got home, turning up the music as loud as it would go. It was the antithesis of *Baby Shark*—Alice in Chains. We weren't supposed to leave the county, but I needed to go somewhere else. But even breakdowns are limited when you're a parent, and my husband was blowing up my phone: the baby was hungry.

I remember stopping on the dark side road, my ragged breath, and the enormous moon hanging just out of reach like some novelty stage prop. I remember cursing with every word in my arsenal and screaming until I was hoarse. If I could just get a minute, I could control the slip. I could get my bearings. As I pulled a U-turn and pressed my foot hard to the gas, I briefly debated crashing into a tree on the right side of the road. And by debated, I mean aimed. This is how it started.

There are always challenges in new motherhood. It can be exhausting, repetitive, and thankless. But for me, the hormones, loneliness, and suffocation, coupled with the existential dread of that time, were swirling into what can only be described as a clusterfuck—for me—and mothers everywhere, it would turn out. Depression and anxiety increased by 25% in 2020, and the postpartum depression rate tripled. One in five was closer to three in five that year. Anyway, after years of repressing, performing, hustling, and tightly gripping my identity as a productive human full of chutzpah, I ran out of resilience. Something in me had started to fracture and ooze. That ooze came in the form of postpartum anxiety, intrusive thoughts, and rage.

Intrusive thoughts are abhorrent, frightening, unspeakable thoughts. Thoughts that came to mind like academic discourse. Thoughts like: *Should I turn the element on high and press my hand to it? What if I pick up this knife and cut off my finger? What will happen if I drop the baby down the stairs or out the window?* I knew I wouldn't act on them—my therapist later told me to wave at them as they passed by—but they made me feel afraid, crazy, ashamed, and monstrous.

But the worst was the rage. Rage that would bubble up when I was touched out, overstimulated, and overwhelmed. This rage would shatter dishes and put a phone-shaped dent in our wall. It would start with a fluttering heart and gasping for air and overtake me like possession. And once I opened the door to it, it was impossible to put it back in.

It came running out like a football team at the start of a big game.

I would rage for all the frustration and unknowing of the pandemic.

I would rage for everyone who had told me to be grateful and satisfied.

I would rage for my infant whom no one knew.

I would rage for my three-year-old who begged for his father.

I would rage for all my shame and failure and selfishness.

I would rage for the expectation that to be a mother was to be a martyr, to stoically sit in my suffering, and I would rage for my inability to uphold those norms.

I would rage for the good-girl conditioning and value framework that kept me innately aware of my currency and disposability.

I would rage for the immense loneliness that I had never reckoned with.

I would rage for my parents, whom I needed and whom I hadn't touched in months, and I would rage for my inability to tell them that I needed them.

In those moments, everyone screamed, so I screamed too. Everyone cried, so I cried too. And then it would lift, and I would be myself again, and we would sink into a puddle on the floor and I would apologize over and over, and we would stare, dazed, at the TV and try to forget until their father came home. And we were always relieved to see him.

Some nights, I would crawl into bed with my toddler and put my nose into his terra-cotta hair, self-flagellating because it had been too long since his last bath and for making that joke once about him turning into a raisin when his feet got pruney. Because of that, he had to bathe with socks on and resisted even then.

All my guilt would be there too, under the Paw Patrol comforter. His cup was never full. He wanted too much of me and I was empty. But he took anyway and I hated him for it. And that would trigger my new favourite mantra: I am a bad person. I am unnatural. It would be better for him if I wasn't here.

"I'm thinking of killing myself," I said to someone on the phone during the worst of it. It was hard to say but came out like a shrug, like so many of the things that I find hard to say. Like I'm talking about rearranging the living room furniture.

"Who isn't?" she said and laughed. *"I hear there's going to be another lockdown."*

And that was the thing about the zeitgeist of the time: angst, world-weariness, and languishing so dense. A global

experience of grief, frustration, and terror—it was impossible to actively listen. Everyone was suffering or hiding or fighting. I felt like I had no right to my feelings. So, I put on the smile that generations of high-functioning women have deployed in times like these. I wore a mask under a mask—and if you passed me on the street, you would never know that I was mentally calculating how many bags of breastmilk I needed to have in the freezer before I left.

But eventually, my son began to show the strain, and I had to admit that I had a lot of tools, but I didn't have the tools for this, and the tectonic plates of my life started to shift back into place. Daycare re-opened and I got into a treatment program through a university health network. Twice a week, we would stare at each other's faces over Zoom—faces that intersected cultures, ages, and experiences—and tell our stories. We would cry for ourselves, our babies, and each other, and we'd say, *"Me too. Me too. Me too."* And sometimes—we would laugh.

In time, my invisible enemy—the ooze—retreated. And on the advice of my therapist, I implemented frequent dates with my toddler to repair our relationship and strengthen our bond. Together, we scouted local bakeries for the best-tasting cupcake, hunted trolls under wood bridges in the park, and delighted in hours of hide-and-seek on the loamy trails of forests near our home. It's here where my son showed me that children have a vast capacity for forgiveness, and we have so much to learn from them.

In the fall, I started hiking again. It's a passion that has long made me feel part of something bigger—it's my church. I strap the baby to my chest and walk for hours as he sleeps against me. One day, I sit on a rock to nurse and think about how nice it would be to invite other moms—if I knew other moms. On a whim, I start a hiking group on Facebook, telling myself that if no one comes, I'll just be doing the same thing anyway.

But they do come. It starts with four and it grows and grows. Even women who don't like hiking come. There are still limited programs, but there's me, and I always plan a coffee stop. We walk—socially distanced—and tell our stories. Every one is different, but the thread of disappointment and sadness is always there. They talk and I say, *"Me too,"* and we share the nod of knowing. The pandemic had upended our lives, divided people, taken jobs, and brought uncertainty and death. It had muted our most joyful time. Now we were trying to get some of that joy back.

And we did.

...

– "COVID-19 pandemic triggers 25% increase in prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide." *World Health Organization*, 2 March 2022.

– Bailey, Laura, and Beata Mostafavi. "A third of new moms had postpartum depression during early COVID." *Michigan Medicine*, 23 March 2022.



Of Imagination All Compact

Fiction by Eunice-Grace Domingo

Thatcher was, by all accounts and sufferings of everyone who knew him, a genius. On the day he was to write the greatest novel in all eternity (or, at least, the greatest novel the ones in this particular eternity would ascribe such an inherently impossible penultimate lie to), he killed himself. He was twenty-two.

I use the term "genius" very liberally, for he was certainly brilliant, transcendent, and unweighted by the confines of empty common sense, but he was also a specialist, and therefore an idiot to everything outside of what he knew. In a way, he was like all of us—in that we are all fleshy bubbles so quick to reveal how easy it is to pop ourselves—but nobody really liked him. He was a prick.

(I say "nobody really liked him," but that isn't exactly true. People like a drink before they realize it's poison. Fish like a cave before they see its teeth.)

I met him in an Introduction to Shakespeare class. We were both second-years, hungover on literature and writing, but that was where our shadows stopped intersecting. For a misanthropist, he had a hilariously canny habit of attracting everyone's attention. Partly because he was gorgeous; another because he was an ass. One half from the paradisiacal heavens, the other an insufferable hindrance.

He hadn't shown up the first week of classes. I did, of course. Not because I am in any way angelic or an addict to education. It was just the thing to do. Thatcher never got that.

He did, however, *get* Shakespeare. Our professor only forgave him for the tardiness, the ritualistic absences, the aggravating way he never raised his hand, because he knew everything. He was Hamlet, Coriolanus, every witch in *Macbeth*. Iago in the courtyard. Cassius in the battlefield. When he spoke to the professors, you saw them crumble to nothing, configuring ideas in their heads the way children do with cheap puzzles. Thatcher would talk, and the teachers would listen, like apprentices to their prophet or humbled audiences suddenly understanding they were witnessing a masterpiece. He was their equal, their usurper—that brief image Goliath had of young David bearing the slingshot sceptre before the stone shattered his skull.

How could I resist?

I had my first impression of him during those baseless discussions the professors would have us do, where nobody was extraordinary and conjured no new ideas. Thatcher hated them with the ferocity of the insulted. We would be told to gather into groups, convalesce, and change the world—as if we were all promisingly compressed molecules of carbon, due to shit out a diamond with enough academic choking. We looked at each other nervously, feeling like the nine Athenians outside the labyrinth, eventually coming together, chewing the discussion question between our gums. I'd sometimes end up

in a group with Thatcher, but he barely contributed. He'd lie back with a blank look and stare at anything but our faces. I am surrounded by exceedingly dull people, his body seemed to say. Sometimes the bastard would even sleep.

By the end, though, always last minute and always unprompted, he'd jolt up and come alive, the wiring in his brain short-circuiting and spilling all over the floor. One always had the sense he had had enough, as if even being near our incompetence sucked the erudition from his soul. He spoke to us—finally, frantically, acknowledging our existence. His words always seemed like synonyms, as if he wanted to say something better, more fitting to the point, more eloquent and true, but his vocabulary was limited, making language impossible. He was never irrational enough to say that what we had said was wrong, but he made sure we knew we had definitely missed our mark. Lost our chance. Never quite arrived where we were told to go. He forced us to be corrected, and we sighed in relief: children chastised but done with the reckoning, moving on with a hand to hold that'd lead them to the light.

There were times, though, when Thatcher would lose his temper. (*Why is everyone stupid, why don't you see what I see, oh good God, why can no one solve the riddles? It's obvious. It's right there, see the connections? The parallel lines that link it in symphony?*) We were two days into studying *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Our professor held the play in her tenured hands, reciting that speech by Theseus, the ignorant king: ". . . The lunatic, the lover, and the poet / Are of imagination all compact . . ." She finished it swiftly, putting the book down before looking at us, expectant.

"What is he saying?" she asked.

Always the silence, the malefactor confusion that hung above us like icicles. We were often like this: too stupid to answer, too cowardly to try—smart enough to know we'd be wrong no matter what. Sometimes Thatcher would save us and voice an opinion. This time, he butchered the silence.

"You vapid fucks," he muttered, loud enough for everyone to turn to him in horror.

Our professor raised her eyebrows, her face teetering between distaste and amusement, which was par for the course when dealing with—

"Thatcher?"

"You're all vapid fucks."

"Thatcher!"

He was up almost instantly, frustrated beyond comprehension. Stomping to the back of the lecture hall, kicking open the door, and leaving the rest of us dumbfounded and red-eyed.

I don't know what compelled me to follow him. There were forty minutes of class left, and all my books and other belongings lay in a baggy heap underneath my chair. I stood and tripped over them, abandoning everything and not knowing why.

Thatcher didn't get far. I found him with his head buried in his hands, sitting just outside in the hallway. His breathing was a little irregular, and he was muttering something into his palms. Dazedly, I came and sat beside him. In the minute it took for him to realize I was there, I took the opportunity to look at him more closely. Analyze him, like those passages we wrote essays on. What were his metaphors? The telling signs that foreshadowed his end?

"I know you." Raising his head. Meeting my eyes.

"You do?"

"Why'd you follow me?"

"I don't know."

"Prof tell you to get me?"

"No."

"Yeah, she wouldn't." A small smile. No longer fettered. Shuffling off the anger. "She was thinking the same thing."

"The same thing?"

"What I said."

"That we were all vapid fucks?"

He stared at me. Through me. The way he looked at a passage before he dissected it with explication. "I know you," he repeated.

"You've said that."

"Do you want to get out of here?"

My things were back in the classroom. "To where?"

He groaned and gently bumped his head against the wall we were leaning on. "Anywhere. Out of here."

"I barely know you."

"We can fix that."

We never did. I'd learn things about him in the four years to come, but he never let me in. Uselessly, I clung to every sliver of information, history, or snippet of personal background he fed me. The intricacies of the scholarship he was given after graduating; how, if he maintained a good average and didn't miss most of his classes, didn't get into any trouble, didn't piss off most of the staff, then he'd get a decent ride through college. And, with that, of course, I found out about the lack of any funding from both his biological makers. About his father's inability to keep anything alive, especially a career, the pet dog, the houseplants Thatcher set on fire. (*Why did you set them on fire?* I'd asked him, his head on my lap but hidden by shadow. *They were already dead,* he'd said, getting up, grabbing his jacket, slamming the door.) I found out about the older neighbourhood kids who made any hands on him feel like lethal gas after they were satisfied with his crying. He told me

about winter road trips to his grandparents' house in the middle of nowhere, growing mad with the loneliness; staring at the vermillion, poppy, blood-red Christmas ornaments and wanting to bite into them like Adam did. He told me about the body count of therapists, counsellors, social workers, psychiatrists, nurses with big eyes that asked you, *On a scale of one to ten, how bad is it today?* He told me about the green pills that gave him ragged dreams. About the screaming in his head. About the drippingly hilarious irony of him hating nothing more than the thought of loving himself. All of this had poured out of him, like those frenzied tangents he'd say near the end of class discussions, spilling on the floor like spoiled milk that had upset his stomach and just needed to be vomited out. But with Thatcher, it had always felt as if every step closer was a lie I told myself repeatedly, like a false promise. Or a bad joke. I was unscrambling the portrait, splotching the paint. Never actually seeing him for what he was.

I did learn other things, though. For one, he had a mouth on him. He never shut up. And two, his tongue was just as much of an asshole as he was. Especially when it was in me. Touching me. Dragging along places that left me swearing under my breath.

Thatcher was a prick like that.

On that day he walked out of *Midsummer* and invited me for "anywhere," looked at me with such honesty, we'd taken my car and driven around the campus, then the city, then beyond the white-fenced walls. We debated Hemingway, him always winning, me getting tired. He traded me thoughts on Plath, Perkins-Gilman, Mayakovsky, Woolf, laying them down like lovers beneath my feet in exchange for the patchwork company. We bought cheap ice cream cones at the café near the English building. We went to the river and he threw an essay he got back that day into the black water (I caught a glimpse of the paper before it drowned in the abyss: 94%. *Excellent work* in red ink). The sun above eventually turned into the moon looking down on us: me on top of him as he wrapped his arms around my waist, kissing his lips and not knowing what the hell I was getting into. I'd spent just a few hours with him, and already I was possessed.

It went on for the rest of university. Him and I. Thatcher and me. We had the same major, but I was the student. He was the books, the library, the obscenity of an unfinished novel. He didn't just soar through the essays, the manuscripts, the deadlines we all slaved over—he was phenomenal, a beacon, always ahead and never slowing down. I didn't mind lagging behind. Or, at least, I told myself I didn't. There wasn't much room to complain. It was always about Thatcher. Thatcher not coming to class for two weeks and disappearing until he chose to come back. Thatcher needing to go to the hospital more often and not letting me visit him. Thatcher shivering outside my apartment from whatever he'd taken earlier. Thatcher kissing my neck and plucking the moans out of my skin. Thatcher buying a typewriter and loving it more than me.

And when we graduated, he looked down at that diploma certificate as if a part of him was itching to ask, *Can we drive to the river, just like we always do? Please, can we do it? Anywhere, to be rid of it. There are so many things only the water can smother. I earned this like you did, but it tastes so different.*

I took him to the bar where everyone was celebrating, toasting to the freedoms and potentials of tomorrow. He'd drunk himself to slurry distortion and I dragged him back to my apartment to fall apart safely. He fell asleep fast, and I crawled in next to him after I stripped off the graduation suit

and wiped some of the drool off his face. I would wake up a few hours later and find him sitting up on the mattress, fingering through the shelf underneath my bedside table.

"Shit, Thatcher. What're you doing? Come back to bed."

He did, but not before he grabbed the universal tome of *Shakespeare's Complete Works* that everyone seems to own. He must've had a headache, or some of the fuzziness from the alcohol swimming inside him, but he didn't look tired. I looked up at him quietly, my head on the pillow, knowing he'd talk eventually.

"Remember when you followed me?"

"To the bathroom while you threw up? Yeah, that was about three hours ago."

"No. From class. From *Midsummer*."

"Mm."

"Our prof was talking about Theseus. Nobody got it."

"You got it."

"Yeah. It was obvious."

"Not all of us are geniuses."

"Why not?"

Sigh. Me turning over to face the wall.

"Why'd you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Go with me."

"Dunno. Can we sleep now?"

"I feel as if nothing I do is enough."

Groaning. "You're drunk, Thatcher." I looked at the clock. "It's 6 AM."

"I have this idea."

I flopped back on the bed. "For a poem?" I said quietly. He liked poetry. Wrote a lot of it.

"No. A novel."

I yawned, closing my eyes again. "That's new."

His voice was disembodied now. A ghost in the dust. I vaguely heard him flipping some pages, no doubt rereading that passage that made him angry so long ago. Theseus' philosophy. The duke of Athens' ruminations. "I have notes written down. Somewhere. Written down."

"I'm sure you do."

"Been planning it for forever, it feels."

"Mmm."

"I think you'd like it."

"Mhmm."

"You don't believe me?"

"I do, Thatcher. I will. Like it, I mean." I was dozing off, but I knew he wanted to keep talking. "It's about time you had a big project," I said slowly. An afterthought.

"What's that supposed to mean?" He sounded hurt, but I was so tired that I barely registered it. If I did, I doubt I would've cared. It had been four years. He was special, but you take that for granted after a while. Drop a pearl into the ocean and all the rocks will stop needing it to feel beautiful. Just give them time.

"Nothing, Thatcher." I mumbled mindlessly. "You just don't commit to anything."

(You're all vapid fucks.)

Suddenly, he'd thrown the large book over the bed and scrambled onto my body, straddling my hips and pulling my face to his. I was shocked, the exhaustion quickly evaporating with each whine he moaned into my mouth. Still confused but so used to the motions, I adjusted his legs to wrap around my torso, drawing him closer so our chests collided. The blankets around us crumpled like paper, our movements sloppy and careless in execution.

How could I have known he'd kill himself in the morning? *(Been planning it for forever, it seems... Doctor's increased my dosage... Can't come tonight, sorry, I hate your new friends and the way they look at me.)* I kissed the wrists he'd soon split open—with the razors from my bathroom and whiskey afterglow. *(Hemingway, Plath, those hallucinations who called themselves artists, what are they famous for?)* I fucked him and didn't love him, and it was a terrible goodbye. *(Nothing I do, everything I don't, it's never enough, don't you know? Of course you don't, you beauty. I see more devils than vast hell can hold.)*

And as his blood seethed into the grass, just outside campus but far enough away to make us believe he was just off doing God knows what again for a few days (he always disappears, but he comes back), I think he thought—his last thought—about why the ground didn't turn to a golden powder beneath him. Why he wasn't swallowed up by the earth, like a pill dissolving on the tongue.

Thatcher was a prick like that.

He left no note. Just the outlines he'd made for the novel he talked about, the one that would've been magnificent, had I not written it. I did write it, though. What else was there to do? I had followed him out of the lecture hall, driven him to the river, stayed by his side fully knowing I didn't and would never understand. I wrote it, but it was horrid, mangled, and—with all due respect to the reviewers who claimed it as stupendous—very ugly in its completion.

I wrote it, and I got it published, and it was a book. The only one I'd ever write. My sole wound inflicted on the face of artistry.

Thatcher would've written it better. The dead always have something more poetic to say.

So do the lunatics. So do the lovers.

A Sunset or a Sunrise?

Fiction by George Nevgodovsky

"I knew Max would be proposing when, under a low, gray sky, my mother herded me to get a manicure. I'd never even stepped into a salon, never shown interest in anything remotely feminine growing up. Except for the sake of ring photos, I couldn't see any other reason why she'd take me now.

The stylist's name was Eva, a young woman with long, curly hair dyed a striking red-to-orange ombré. Eva had piercing eyes. Eva was cool. Eva intimidated me.

I glimpsed her nails—two-toned glossy pink and white extensions, sharp and bedazzled. On her hands they looked more like weapons than decoration.

"So what are you thinking?" Eva asked me. It took me a second to realize she was asking about the nails.

"Actually, I love the way you did yours."

"That makes it easy," she said, ceding a smile.

"How's Max been?" Mom asked from the seat beside me. I realized he must've seen her and Dad to get their permission. Max was as traditional as they get—lapsed Christian, engineer, with a face that was round and cheery and pale. My parents adored him, were probably over the moon when he asked.

"Oh, you know. Working lots." I wondered what Eva was thinking as she cleaned my cuticles. If she sensed anything hidden beneath the tones of my voice.

It took a while for Max and me to be okay again.

Maybe I never told my mother what happened because I didn't

want to shatter their illusion. To them he was perfect, someone who could never hurt me or step outside the bounds of a relationship, lie so effortlessly, lie over and over again. Maybe I didn't want to shatter the illusion for myself. Was it so bad to want things to stay the way they were? Wasn't this engagement his way of showing his commitment to our future?

When Eva was finished, she put her hands next to mine.

"We're twins," she said.

I looked down at our nails. What looked so natural on hers looked alien on mine. I tried picturing a diamond on my hand, catching the light.

Then I thought, Eva would've been picturing gouging Max's eyes out. She wouldn't take any shit. If she knew the truth, would she be disappointed in me?

"Are you happy?" Eva asked me. I wanted to tell her I didn't know. Ask her if I should say yes to Max.

"Yes. They look great."

"Max is going to love them," Mom chimed in.

On our way out I turned and saw Eva, saw her looking back at me, smiling almost sympathetically. Like she didn't envy the choice I had to make. With her fiery hair, from a distance, she looked like a sunset. Or maybe it was a sunrise.

And when I got into the car, watching the salon fade as fog bloomed on the windows, watching Eva's glow dim to an ember, I still couldn't decide which she resembled more.



Poems by ky perraun

Outsider Scribe

...for Lisa Anderson

Here, in this Catholic hospital, with its crucifix décor and daily contemplation, sparks kiss your temples and your tongue is tied to the tunes of Mass. Your words save you from oblivion, the chaplain agrees; you cease striking out and hurling screens at pavement. Your scarred arms hidden by long sleeves and regret, you present well. Perhaps a little harried, but by no means destructive. What do I know? They keep you here, behind locked doors, until 4 pm, when grounds privileges come into effect, and the offices are shut tight. I wish I could cure you of your waking nightmares, calm the urge to smash and shove your way into the mainstream. Like me, you are an outsider scribe, marginalized poet, cursed by madness. If only you would swallow the bitter medicine of your existence, accept that voices lie, thoughts deceive, and emotions can be fraudulent. Then, perhaps, you could walk with me through streets constructed for the well, and step lightly between the cracks.

Psychosis and its Aftermath

I fell to my knees in the glare of the interrogation light of high noon in hell. I was rocked by terrible visions and the putrid dialogue of generated voices, with their running commentary on my debauched soul. Nauseous, I climbed to the high wire of rebellion, refusing to choose the dictated, for which I suffered torment. The demons on the rice paper scroll manifest. The haunting of the wicked enduring. Such was my predicament, that I could not grasp the proffered hand, not until every last ounce of will was burned from me.

Then, trembling, compliance.

Docile, I was led to medication lineups and rehabilitative programs. Vacant, I let myself be filled with tested paradigms.

My own mind my nemesis, I adopted the stance of the lucid authors of recovery texts. Eventually, I reclaimed the intact parts of myself, and came into my own, mended; the scars of gold glinting on the jagged cracks of my once-shattered psyche.

Creator (after Yamouda Koun)

...for Tina

Do I find in my forays into meditation, sitting atop the soft cushion, sitz bones sinking into canvas-wrapped kapok, legs akimbo, spine straight, palms open and ready to receive grace, the true meaning of the tradition I was born into, the one with the crucified guys on the hill – two criminals, and one saviour? At family dinners, a stubborn aunt or two will sputter a prayer, thanking God, not the hosts, for the food, while I, concealing a mudra beneath the table, thank the calm nature of the cook for the ease of digestion. But, really, what's the difference? God is nothing if not calm, for He is everything and everyone, and, anyway, to thank all responsible for the feast – the farmers, the butchers, the clerks, the clouds, the rain, the pay cheque, would take too long, and the food would grow cold, while the rumble of our bellies drowned out the prayer.

Poems by Thistle Dunsmuir

Incompletion

There is a church in Barcelona
That has been under construction for a hundred years
And I wonder if it is still holy
In its incompletion.
Do its prayers,
Carried upwards from unfinished stone
Hold the same weight
To the universe?
I imagine its statues, hands trapped in marble
Stone eyes unopened
Awaiting their finishing touches.
I imagine old places, rough stone, broken corners
Joined to that which is new,
As though the limestone is a growing thing,
Sending forth leaves in all the places
Where time has carved scars.
Do the tourists line the streets
For the spectacle of incompletion?
Gaping at the way the old gives way to something new
As though each spot is a wound
Casting glances at the scar tissue on the stone.
Or is there something sacred
In this perennial change?
Are the cranes now a part of the shrine
Worshippers in their own right?
I imagine incompletion like a prayer
The sacredness of leaving doorways empty
Statues waiting to be discovered in hard stone
The promise of growth like a mountain
Whose cliffs are not done rising.
I can't help but wonder if something would be lost
If the builders ever laid down their tools.
I can't help but wonder if something would be lost
If I ever laid down mine.

Do Not Give My Demons Any Credit

There is a myth that suffering creates art,
Words wrung like blood from our veins
And lines of poetry scarred across our bodies.
We turn the victims into heroes,
And arrange them by how deep their wounds are —
As though the more they suffered,
The more it all meant.

I would like to reframe that:
The suffering is meaningless;
The healing creates art.

It is not how deep we fall
But the strength it takes to climb back up,
And every fragmented stanza
Is an attempt to get to our feet.

Healing creates art,
Not suffering.

Do not thank our pain
For the words we have spoken.
They were not its doing,
But ours.

Do not give my demons any credit;
They do not deserve a single accolade.

My therapist has sparked more poems
Than my bullies ever did.,
And I have never written a poem
While lying on my bathroom floor in agony—,
Only while getting back up again.

The Queen of All She Surveyed

Fiction by Helen Orr

Lottie cried. She was not the one who usually cried. Evelyn was the one most often cradled in Beabea's lap, gently rocking back and forth while Beabea stroked her back.

Beabea told them things. These two girls were her precious treasures. She rocked them in her rocking chair and told them who they were and who they would become.

When Evelyn wailed, "Lottie's being mean to me," Beabea stretched out her arms and took the hurt feelings into her lap and soothed their sting.

"You are queen of all you survey," whispered Beabea. She looked at Lottie over Evelyn's head and whispered loud enough for Lottie to hear, "We are each a queen of our own world, my pet."

The words brought a little comfort. Evelyn nestled into Beabea's wrinkled embrace, safe from torment. There was the real solace of home.

Beabea's arms were strong, but her back was bent from kneading the dough for bread and stirring homemade soup that she ladled into bowls for the girls on the coldest days. Then she told them stories of her own.

"I used to live in a big house, like this," Beabea said. "I lived with cats and dogs and children and friends and relations. There was always noise and teasing and eating. Oh, so much eating. I used to have to cook all the time to feed all those hungry mouths. Would you believe I had to cook a whole dinosaur one day, there were so many people to feed?"

Evelyn laughed. "Because you were the queen?"

"Of all I surveyed," said Beabea.

"But then you came here," said Evelyn.

Lottie listened but knew the stories were not exactly true.

"I did indeed," said Beabea. "One day, I looked out and all I could see was empty space, and so I had to come and find a place where there were people I could be queen of again."

"What happened?" asked Evelyn, who sat on Beabea's knee and rocked when lunch was finished. Her small hand stroked the grey hair that lay against Beabea's cheek.

"Well, some say there was a great sickness that killed the weak, the young, the old, and scrubbed the world clean. I think it just erased what it saw in front of it. The sickness came to all I surveyed and then I was alone."

"But then you found us," said Evelyn, who only wanted the happy ending to the story.

"Your Ma and Pa found me," said Beabea. "They came to my castle and asked if I could help tame the two wild beasts that lived in their great hall. 'We need a housekeeper. There is always so much to clean and they eat so much,' they said. 'As easy as pie,' I told them. 'Two monsters are nothing to what I have tamed before.'" And Beabea kissed the top of Evelyn's head and then winked at Lottie too.

"And now you're here," said Evelyn.

"And now I'm here," said Beabea.

"But you still haven't tamed Lottie."

A rare time, it was Lottie's turn. She nestled into the rhythm of Beabea's rocking.

Lottie missed their mother less than Evelyn did because when her mother came home from work, Lottie was no longer the ruler of the roost. But that day, it had been Pa who had found fault with Lottie, had told her not to be unkind. That did not happen often. Worse, she knew that she was wrong.

She had told her sister that Ma was never coming home, a secret hope and fear of Lottie herself. She was gone to school most days, which suited her fine, but Evelyn was home all day awaiting her mother's return. Lottie had been unkind and knew it. Her father's wrath and her mother's coldness were justified.

Beabea rocked back and forth with Lottie cradled in her lap, her forgiveness and understanding easing the cords that bound the unkind feelings to her heart.

"You're a strong-willed girl, Lottie. You must look outside the window, not dwell too much inside. You are queen of all you survey. This world with Ma and Pa and Evelyn and Beabea is too small for you."

Lottie's eyes grew heavy and her breathing slowed.

Beabea rocked some more. "I once had a girl like you. She flew, and I let her go, because I knew she needed more than what I had to give."

Lottie held on tightly to her words.

"Some day your Ma and Pa will let you go, and you'll know.

The time you had with them helped you grow. Look out the window and find your path."

"What about Evelyn?" whispered Lottie.

"She has a heart for home," said Beabea.

"Do I have to leave?" Lottie felt the tightening of her throat.

"A path leads both away and back," said Beabea.

"And you?" whispered Lottie.

"I've been and gone," said Beabea.

Lottie rocked in Beabea's chair as the last of the mourners left the house where they had grown up. Their parents had been gone for years. Evelyn's eyes were red, but she smiled and took the hands of the friends who had not really known Beabea. Not the way they had. Nor had they.

Their mother had been her little bird that had flown away; her husband, the one who sickness had stolen and left her in a tragic way. She could not have loved or been loved more. But it was funny how she'd never said.

The reading of the will confirmed that Beatrice Vincent had borne a babe out of wedlock and had had to let her go. A lifetime passed in a childless marriage before she found the babe who had become a mother to two hearts, Charlotte and Evelyn. The rocking of her chair became the new rhythm of her days.

Lottie got up from Beabea's chair and went to say goodbye to the visitors, her arm around her sister's waist.



Clarity, Drunk

Autofiction by Jack Barrie

"Keep calm and... *CARRY ON!*"

Uncle Dave had come upstairs to get my dad. There was much more drinking to be had, and to be fair to Dave (not really an uncle), my dad did have a habit of falling asleep in my room while his night was still young. Not this time, though.

Dad had come in as discreetly as his pissed legs would let him. He'd have woken me, but I was up reading a comic, having retired the idea of sleeping. The ceaseless middle-aged laughs from downstairs were loud enough to shake my walls, so I'd stopped trying.

I imagined that on his way up the two flights of thin stairs to my room and my sister's room, the man had some profound truth to impart, cooked up mid-evening and ready to be served in an elegant lecture to his only son. It seemed each time he ascended, that he was preparing to open up – to, for the first time in his life, show a bit of fucking vulnerability, maybe even show his son that that's an okay thing for a man to do. But each time, he'd arrive out of breath, stumped for something to say, standing centre stage under my room's big light, which would be off at 1am of course. No enlightenment.

And he'd linger like a newly spawned thing in some nowhere place. He had no reason, and could not conjure a reason, to be there, like my bedroom was the dentist's reception and he was contentedly toothless.

He glanced around, eyeing my things, taking in what sort of boy he had here, gathering pieces of a collage that told him who I was – comics, books, a little dusty statue of Treebeard from *The Lord of the Rings*, a partially deflated blow-up chair with vinyl flames across the armrests, a desk with felt-tip marks across the wood, a messy stack of CDs. *Ah*, he pegged that as his *in* with me, I imagined: music. But after a ten-second riffle through, I guess he realised that we must be very different people musically, and by proxy, in most other ways too.

He's dead now, but these moments have clung to me the way that things left unfinished cling to the mind. An itch remains. I wish I knew what thoughts he'd concocted and laid in order on similar nights to this one, on the way up the stairs. What would he have thought on the way down once he'd failed to deliver his fatherly wisdom?

He was a quiet man in the daytime. I'm wondering now if that was a choice like I always thought, or whether the man had a clogged pipe somewhere in there, a blockage that wouldn't let those kindnesses and honest feelings out into the world, and onto those of us that could really have used them. I saw as a kid that a drink would dislodge that blockage now and again, which comforts me in a blue way now, for at least those feelings *were* in there; he wasn't meat all the way through, void of that little soul pocket I assume at least most of us possess. This particular night I'm describing was the most I'd seen and would see out of him. I don't know what made this night special. It wasn't.

Mum and Dad had the neighbours round, some of the mums from the playground and a few of Dad's army mates too. It sounded like a good time from two flights up. Like I said, I would accept that I wouldn't be sleeping if there was ever a party, but

that was fine; it was the summer holidays, and at eleven years old, I had nowhere to be early the next day. Every time they had a night, he'd come up around 1am, and this night was no different. Up came Billy (or *Bullyboy!* as it was being pronounced then through the bannisters up towards my room by the hulking Uncle Dave).

After his CD rummage and once his breathing was back to normal, he paced up and down a bit. My room was only about four or five adult steps long.

"Y'alright, Dad?" I asked, polite, sterile.

"Aye. Tip top, lad. Tip... Top..."

Then a filler, "*Hhhooa dear.*" If he had a soundboard, that button would have worn away, I heard it so much.

He looked around some more, then went to my window, continuing to keep whatever he wanted to say swallowed.

"D'you need something?" I asked, which I feel bad about now, as I was really saying *please leave if there's nothing you need from me*, and I'd wager he knew I meant that.

He shook his head quickly – one twitch of the neck – and swung my window open clumsily, clattering it against the brick outside. The swimming voices of the party's smokers echoed off our neighbours' houses and around my room.

"I never told you this..." he said to the moon. And I realised that maybe tonight, maybe *this night*, he'd get it out, whatever it was, whatever it looked like.

"What?"

And a queasiness festered in me. Half of me, now spooked, hoped for a soppy whiskey-gush of *I do love ya's' and I know a've not been about a lot but...*; but the other half of me, the wiser half, the often rightly paranoid half expected a family-rattling secret to finally spill onto my carpet, where its stain would linger as a reminder for as long as we lived in that house. *Maybe I'm adopted. Maybe Dad's got another family in Majorca.* I'd suspected both before.

I was half right, but wrong about him – his character, I mean. He was faithful to us, and I'd doubted that, and I felt guilty for thinking so. But this was still a night of spillage; I just didn't foresee what he'd spill.

"You had a brother, y'know?"

The queasiness caught alight, petrol in my stomach, and now my efforts went to extinguishing it before he could notice any emotion on my face. No weakness here, hard as fuck, me.

"An older one... Should'a told you ages ago like... but... y'know..."

The floor was his, despite his stagger. I gripped my covers with one hand, and the bear that he'd have said I was too old for in the other. He wouldn't see it, his trailing gaze was aimed out at the night sky, which then was perfectly clear. The stars were



bright and sharp.

"Yer mum... y'know," he hiccupped through his aching reveal, "obviously had it worse than me... 'specially 'cuz I was away a lot at the time, y'know? Over in Ireland I was... pissin' it up most nights 'n' all."

He blinked slowly.

"Din't see her much, 'n' even less when we lost him, a'm ashamed t' say."

"Lost him?"

At this time in my life, my eleven-year-old self was doing everything he could to be a man, to shed any expression or temperament that he or others might see as juvenile. But that night I was an infant again, and so was he. Two grown or growing infants, alone in a room, no adults watching, judging. It was freeing, oddly. I felt light, despite the turmoil.

"Aye. Died not long before he were s'posed to be born."

Cold air from outside reached my toes.

"Should've told ye when you 'n' yer sister were younger. Dunno why we didn't, but yeah. His name was William."

His name. I wonder now if he was Billy because William had a sting to it. His own name, a scar.

"William," I said to no one. "William Barrie."

"William Robert Barrie," he added, seemingly focused on a single star now.

Robert was my grandfather's name. He was an equally cold man in the daytime. I wonder if he was ever uncorked like my father was this night.

"Wouldn't mention it t'yer mum, still a bit raw init."

"Can I not?" I asked, prodding what I knew would be a sensitive nerve, but I was eager to prove myself mature enough for such a conversation, despite me being under an England football duvet, half-hugging a baby blue teddy bear.

He frowned at first out into the aether, so I rephrased.

"I... I mean you two can talk to me... if you like... about things like that. You don't need to like, hide anything like..."

After a little consideration, to my surprise he nodded. It had been a stony and quiet upbringing under that roof. Who'd have known he'd receive that without barking at me? Without calling me wet or sneering me away? Not me. No. He just nodded.

After another silence, "If a'm honest I thought we'd be past it b'now, might sound bad that." His lip quivered, as did mine at that sight. "But a drink still feels... like... like a *wake*. Parties are still... goodbye parties. We 'aven't stepped back into the day to day yet, 'n' it's been years. Over a decade even, bloody 'ell."

I ignored a punctuating belch of his.

"I can't imagine," I said, the quiver making it to my throat. "I'm... really, very sorry, Dad."

I cried a bit but hid it well.

He looked away from the stars, to me.

"I used to be a laugh," he said, with wet red eyes and a smile that broke my heart, as the painting I held of my upbringing changed colour. "You'd've liked me."

He approached and put his hand on my England duvet. Then up came Uncle Dave like a wrecking ball on stilts, and my dad reaffixed his rock face, stern and unwavering.

"Oi-oi Jacky-boy!"

Dave ripped a deep burp and thumped my door open with a limp wrist. The stairs had taxed his breath too, no doubt; he wasn't the fittest of men.

"Hiya, Dave."

Dad was a heavy-jawed idol again, capable of only boozing and snoozing – the living, feeling person in him tucked away. It was nice to meet him though.

"Hhhooa dear."

Dave talked some shite about a punchbowl and some clothes pegs. I don't know; drunk speeches aren't worth remembering, or at least that's what I had thought.

"Keep calm and... *CARRY ON!*" he bellowed once my dad failed to return his serve of drunken drivel. He'd read it from a poster on my wall.

He tapped it in acknowledgement, like you would the chest of a friend that had bought you a drink in a loud club where anything verbal would be lost. But Dave needed stimulation, and our silence wasn't cutting it. So off my dad went, arm in arm with that globe of a man, oozing down the stairs and back into the kitchen, into the loud cloud of laughs and yelps of whatever the fuck.

"Keep calm and carry on!" Dave repeated. That was the evening's slogan now. I thought of how my parents would hear those words amongst the mess. Did they eye each other across the counter? Did they think of him?

William Robert.

I just hope they took comfort in sharing that secret together, even though they'd undoubtedly be better off if they talked about it.

And my room was cold. The window was still open. I left it that way and fell asleep in the end.

I hope he remembered that night, but we never spoke of it again.

How thick of me. That silence didn't have to be hereditary. But I have a boy now, and I make that same pilgrimage. The stairs knacker me. And I'm always stumped for something to say. I know I want to say something to him, to bond somehow, to show him that I lived a life and gathered some wisdom before he came along.

Did my grandfather do the same thing with my dad?

Maybe I'll have a drink. That might clarify things a bit, loosen me up.

"Hhhooa dear."

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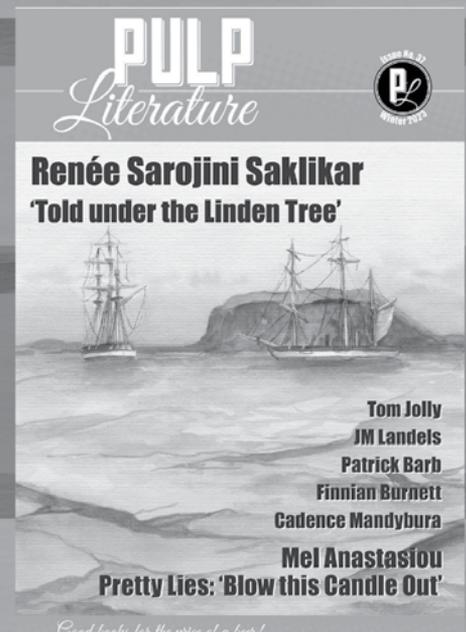
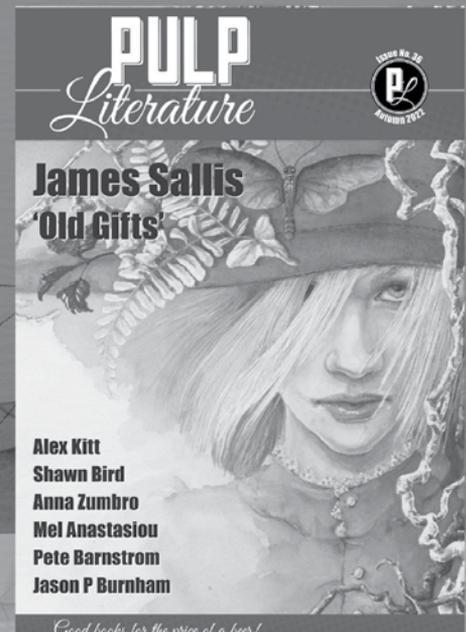
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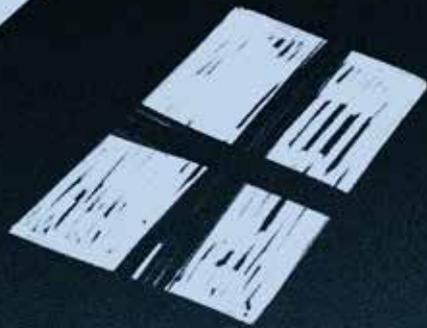
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